



**The Center for
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*Psychological Science
with Proven Results*

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State of the Union Meeting

In many cases, couples let their relationship go on “autopilot,” and have conflict in reactive, unproductive ways. One key element of assertive communication is to connect proactively about how the relationship is going, rather than waiting to do so reactively until after they’ve experienced some problematic issue. By keeping ahead of issues – even small ones – couples can develop a kind of pressure relief valve that can prevent resentments from building up and festering over time.

The main goal of the State of the Union (SOU) meeting is for both partners to better *understand (NOT necessarily agree with) each other's' experience of their relationship*. The idea is to hold a brief (it can be as quick as 5 minutes to start out) regular weekly meeting in which both partners clearly communicate to each other their own thoughts. While it will be important to circle back, problem-solve and accept each others' influence down the line, **it's critical that you and your partner actively listen to each other and put aside “fixes” during the SOU meeting.**

The brass tacks of the SOU meeting involve clarifying to each other your own honest perspectives about the current state of your union/relationship by telling your partner your answers to the following three questions IN THIS ORDER:

1. What is something that's going well in our relationship?
2. What is something I'm having difficulty with in our relationship?
3. What is something that you (i.e. you're telling your partner about what s/he has done) have done recently that helped me to feel loved/cared for/connected?

Here's what NOT to do during the SOU:

- Bring up issues from further back than a week or so – focus on the current state of your union!
- Try to “fix” the issues discussed or to set goals to do anything differently (yet)
- Get defensive, make excuses, or invalidate each other – just listen and work to understand
- Skip telling each other about the middle point above regarding difficulties you're having, no matter how small they might seem

Many people – especially partners in a relationship who either have high levels of conflict or who actively avoid any conflict at all – find the prospect of using this technique to be pretty daunting. But remember that Einstein's definition of insanity was trying the same thing over and over while expecting a different result. Most couples find the SOU to be anxiety-provoking, formulaic, or even a bit messy the first three or four times, but by the fifth time, they're usually looking forward to it. Give yourselves at least six hours to reflect after the SOU meeting before you discuss changes or fixes to make related to issues discussed in the meeting. A wealth of research in this area shows that couples who regularly communicate proactively and respectfully about their feelings in the relationship tend to have the highest levels of satisfaction and lower levels of damaging/unproductive conflict.