

## Couples Communication? There's an App for That.



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Can phone apps actually improve communication skills for couples? On the face of it, the idea seems to be completely incongruent. A phone app to help couples improve their communication seems self-contradictory in its intended purpose. As a therapist, when I'm helping couples hone their communication skills, much of the focus in the beginning of treatment is listening to each other's thoughts and feelings, and includes learning how to use validation and empathy in their responses. We practice expressing appreciation and sincere apologies. Further along in treatment, we work on deeper issues: contempt; resentment; defensiveness; criticism; shutting down (having no voice); and so much more!

However, with the rapid advancement of technology and social media, the definition of "communication" is no longer person-to-person conversations, emails, and letters. Its definition has been expanded to include "Like" buttons, emoticons, emoji, tweets, etc. For many couples, text messaging alone has become their primary form of communication throughout the day.

Nevertheless, there are dozens upon dozens of phone apps claiming to help couples with communication—and they are being downloaded by hundreds of thousands (in some cases, millions) and the companies who created them have made millions of dollars from these products. With these numbers, certainly couples must be getting something out of these apps that they feel is of some benefit to their relationship. Do these apps actually work? I researched the top 15 or so "couple's

communication” apps to examine how they seem to be helping couples. The apps reviewed were: MyDarling, Couplete, Twyxt, Loving-CoupleEssential, Avocado, Couple, Duet, SimplyUs, BeCouply, Between, LoveByte, Tokii, Wunderlist, Love Maps, Expressing Needs, and Wunderlist.

For the most part, these apps seem to be for couples who are **not** in distress. From what I could surmise from reviewing the apps online, many of them seem to provide a unique type of private social media platform, created for just two people. With a few exceptions (see below) many of the apps have very similar—if not the same features. These include: private sharing of photos and videos; private texts which can be archived; synced calendars and to-do lists; real time locations; a shared timeline/digital scrapbook of pictures and memories; interactive ‘couples’ games; and some even have virtual kisses (touching the screen in the same place at the same time makes it vibrate).

Many of these features are useful in helping couples to have a private “place” to keep all of their treasured photos, videos, text conversations; and various ways to assist them in becoming more organized by syncing calendars, to-do lists, etc. To that end, I can see how these phone apps support modern day couples with certain types of “communication” by creating a place for them to consolidate several sources of information and memorabilia, and keep it all in a shared, private place.

### **The Exceptions**

I was pleasantly surprised to find a few apps that were developed based on the advice given by relationship experts, psychotherapists, and psychologists. At the top of the list are two apps created using research from the Gottman Institute: Love Maps and Expressing Needs. As per the app descriptions, “Dr. Gottman constructed the Love Map Exercise. This fun exercise has 87 questions to help couple develop a "Love Map" of their partner's world - their history, concerns, preferences and current issues.” I can see how this could help couples have new and interesting conversations with one another, while helping them to get to know each other on a deeper level. As the name suggests, the Expressing Needs app aims to help couples identify and share their needs with one another. They claim, “Once you know what your own needs are, stating them in a positive way with the help of this app gives your partner a chance to shine for you!” Neither app will solve problems for a couple who are already in crisis. On the other hand, both of them could be wonderful resources for stable couples who wish to enhance the depth of their relationship.

An honorable mention goes to TheIceBreak app (still in its Beta testing phase). It’s described as an app “focused on creating more meaningful talks and understanding your significant other better.” It includes a list of questions to exchange with one another. It also has a feature called “capture today’s moment;” in which each person takes and sends a picture of something that “amazed” them that day. There is a “stats” section, where the couple can rate their relationship satisfaction levels daily [Daily? Hmm...not sure about how well that’ll play out]. And a “vitals” section, a place for lists of couple-relevant information, like birthdays, special occasions, clothing preferences, and “ring size” [No pressure there at all...]. The Bonus with this app is that every time one of the partners completes one of the apps actions, they receive \$10 in “Icebreak coins.” If they earn \$500 in IceBreak coins, they will reimburse you 20% of your next date (up to \$20). To redeem this, the user needs to send in a receipt from a date (dinner, movies, etc.), and the company will give them the cash back in return. It will be interesting to see what the app developers ultimately create—and if it does what they claim it will.

## The Verdict?

After much review, it seems like some of these apps have the potential to help couples take a good relationship and make it better. Certainly, having an app that helps couples to stay in touch regularly, create shared memories, and become more organized and in sync with their needs (material, physical, or emotional) is great. However, in my opinion, couples who are having moderate to severe problems in their relationship should seek the help of a professional. Not only do many of these apps seem like they would likely NOT help a couple in distress, some of them have the potential to actually make a bad situation worse.

On a personal note, I don't think there will ever be a substitute for in person, face-to-face communication; with eye contact and the ability to see the person's facial expressions and body language. If you really want to show me that you're interested in hearing my thoughts and feelings, *put down your phone and talk to me.*

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