

5 *Steps*
TO RECLAIM
YOUR VOICE
in
RELATIONSHIPS

ALISON COOK, Ph.D.

5 Steps to Reclaim Your Voice in Relationships

by Alison Cook, Ph.D.

Have you ever had these thoughts?

- I don't want to leave my marriage, but I wish my husband would stop working so much and spend more time with our family.
- I love my mom, but I wish she would stop guilt-tripping me.
- My friendship isn't terrible, but I feel like everything we do is on her terms. She doesn't listen to me.

Over the past two decades, I've worked with hundreds of women who value key relationships, but who can't figure out how to get certain things to change. It's not bad enough to leave; but it's also not the secure, loving relationship that you crave.

You get that no one is perfect. But, you are tired of feeling like a sidekick or doormat for other people. You want a voice. You just don't know how to make yourself heard.

You long for support and respect in your relationships, friends and loved ones who understand your fears and point you toward your strengths.

This unfulfilled longing usually shows up in my office as frustration with specific behaviors. For example, you might express your frustration with any number of the following:

- It's all about her. She doesn't even know what I think.
- He is glued to the screen; he never checks in to see how I'm doing.
- She has no clue how hard I work. All she does is criticize me.
- I am lifting all the weight, and he doesn't even see it.
- She takes out all of her anger on me.

Most women focus on these frustrating behaviors instead of identifying the deeper problem. However, that approach is like fighting a chronic cough, instead of taking time to heal from bronchitis. When it comes to your physical health, you don't only focus on fixing the symptoms, instead you work to identify the root issue so that your body stay healthy.

The same is true for relationships. You want the behavior to change, but more importantly, you want a healthier relationship. In order to achieve the latter, you have to identify the root of the problem and create a path toward health.

The problem is that many women focus only on the surface level issue. For example, you might:

- Keep listening to her problems, silently hoping she'll ask about you.
- Repeatedly ask him to turn the TV off.
- Remind your mom how hard you work.
- Tell him how hard parenting is and give him a list of chores.
- Hide or withdraw when she's angry.

In most cases, this strategy doesn't work at all. It leaves you frustrated, like you are constantly having to wipe a runny nose. You want a healthy, supportive relationship, not a chronic irritation.

Relationships between 2 adults, whether a friend, a family member or a spouse, are supposed to be mutually supportive. Your job is not to change the other person, or become their parent. Your job is to learn how to *make your voice heard*. Instead of putting up with feeling like a doormat, start focusing on identifying the patterns of behavior that you might be able to change.

I'll take it one step further: the reason to reclaim your voice in your relationships is not to push people away. The reason to reclaim your voice in your relationships is to create the possibility for the kind of connection you crave.

What if you could reclaim your voice with confidence?

What if you could reclaim your voice in a way that is good for the other person?

What if you could reclaim your voice, and say "Yes" to improving your relationships?

A Double Standard for Women

We tend to think of men who have a strong voice as decisive, confident, or good leaders. On the other hand, when a woman expresses what she needs with confidence, the response is often quite different. You can almost hear the murmuring behind her back:

"She's so needy."

"Why is she being high-maintenance?"

"What a b**ch!"

This double standard can make expressing want and needs more difficult for women. In fact, many women feel they have only two options when it comes to conflict in relationships:

- a. **Lash out and be perceived as critical or selfish.**
- b. **Ignore the issue and avoid any potential conflict**

Neither of these options works. The first option creates a “lose-lose” situation. You sound critical; they get defensive or fire back. You wind up in a toxic dance of angry exchanges. Even if you do get the behavior to change, the other person is not happy about it. And you haven’t gotten what you really need and want, which is a deeper, healthier bond with your friend or loved one.

The second option leads to long term, chronic problems. Instead of addressing the issues within your relationship, many women:

- **Triangulate by venting about the problem to friends**
- **Numb legitimate concerns with food, substances, or entertainment**

These actions aren’t healthy for you, and they further erode the intimacy of key relationships. The problems fester and come to the surface in even bigger ways over time. So, what is the solution?

Instead of ruminating about frustrating behaviors, start answering the following 2 questions:

1. **What is the deeper problem that this behavior is signaling?**
2. **What could your relationship look like if you got to the root of that problem together?**

It’s a subtle, but vital shift.

Addressing deeper issues that erode the health of your relationship takes the other person off the hot-seat. Instead of trying to change details about them, it forces you to dig deeper into what kind of relationship would serve BOTH of you better.

This process may take time, but it will lead you to better results in the long run. It will help you pick the battles that are essential for a successful relationship. And, you’ll learn to set aside the ones that don’t really matter. Best of all, you’ll approach these conversations with clarity and confidence. Regardless of their response, you’ll have the satisfaction of knowing you spoke up for yourself.

I've boiled down this process to five steps. These are skills most women are not taught. But, if you can learn to master them, you'll be well on your way to getting what you want out of your relationships.

How to Reclaim Your Voice

Reclaiming your voice is the confident, consistent practice of speaking up for what you need and want in your relationships. Speaking up for yourself doesn't always mean getting loud. In fact, sometimes it sounds like a whisper. Proverbs 25:15 (NLT) says that "soft speech can break bones." Whether you tend to get loud or tend to speak softly makes no difference. What matters is that you learn to speak up for yourself.

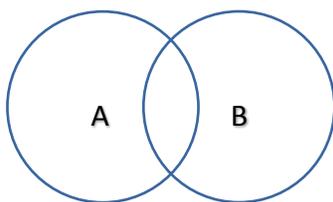
That sounds simple, but it is a skill most women aren't taught. You value your relationships, and many women fear losing them if you speak up. The truth is that you might. But, you might not. If the relationship is worth keeping, your speaking up for yourself will make it even stronger.

In the work of reclaiming your voice, patience is your friend. If you want real, lasting results, don't simply try to extinguish or suffer through a frustrating behavior. Instead, think through how you want your relationship to be better. Here are 5 steps to guide you.

1. See the Big Picture.

Relationships at their best honor your individuality AND the connection you have built together. It's learning how to say "yes" to yourself AND respect the autonomy of the other person.

People are complicated. Your needs and wants will never perfectly line up. Therefore, it is critical to learn how to keep the big picture in the forefront. Using a visual illustration, the big picture of a healthy relationship looks like the following:



In this diagram, you (Person A) and your friend or loved one (Person B) share interests that overlap, and you remain connected to each other on some level.

The overlapping area might include any number of shared interests and values such as:

- Delight in your children or nieces and nephews
- Love of the outdoors, art, or other activities
- A commitment to goals you are pursuing
- Ideas you enjoy discussing
- Beliefs that you hold

However, you also have a sense of autonomy. You each have your own interests outside of the overlapping area. You don't have to be on the same page about every single thing. Plus, you each enjoy other friendships, even as you might share a few. There's connection and intimacy, yet there's still space for individuality. Healthy relationships are characterized by the following statements:

- **We maximize our strengths and focus on the things we share in common.**
- **We encourage each other to pursue our individual God-given interests and talents.**
- **We don't agree on everything, but we respect our differences.**
- **We provide support for each other emotionally, spiritually, and/or physically.**

The details of how this plays out will look very different for every single relationship. For example, you might have a friend with whom you talk every single day. You share many overlapping interests, even as you each have your own lives. On the other hand, you might have a family member with whom you share only a love of your children. Your overlapping circle is important, but small.

Marriages look different from other marriages, too. For example, one couple might pray together every single night, while another couple might choose to pray separately. One couple might enjoy working together. Another couple might support each other in very different vocations. The goal isn't to achieve someone else's ideal. It's to determine what works best for your relationship.

This big picture is your benchmark. Don't mistake it for perfection. Instead, it's what it looks like when both of you are thriving. When you see the Big Picture, you can **Major in the Majors and Put the Minors in a Grace Pile.**

2. Observe patterns over time.

Observing patterns requires patience and self-control. Instead of staying in the weeds of the moment, you take a step back to look for trends over time. This process gives you clarity and perspective. You might ask yourself some of the following questions:

- **Has she ever listened to me? If so, what were the circumstances?**

- When did he start tuning out through TV/alcohol/work?
- Was there a time when she asked about my needs?
- I wonder why he stopped helping around the house. When did he stop?
- Has she always been this biting or mean? When did it start?

As you observe patterns, you shift from judgment and anger and move toward curiosity. Remember, if you go in to a conversation trying to stop a behavior, you're creating a lose-lose situation. On the other hand, if you go in with curiosity and big-picture perspective, you set up yourself up for the possibility of success.

3. Identify the impact of the pattern on you.

A dynamic is a pattern that occurs between 2 people. Their behavior is one part of that dynamic. What that behavior stirs up inside of you is the second part. It's often easier to focus on the other person. But, reclaiming your voice requires you to get clear about how their behavior impacts you specifically. For instance,

- I feel like she doesn't care when she interrupts me.
- I want to connect with him and talk about the day. When he disappears into the television, I feel shut out.
- When she doesn't show any interest in what I think, I feel invisible.
- When he ducks out of hard parenting challenges, I feel abandoned.
- Her jealousy of my other friendships creates tension. I feel like I have to hide parts of my life.

In this step, you're shifting from what annoys you about the other person to **what happens inside of you** as a result. It doesn't mean you're letting them off the hook. However, in order to speak up for yourself, you first have to understand how their behavior impacts YOU.

4. Get clear about what you'd like to experience instead.

Now it's time to create some clear statements about what you would like to see in your relationship instead. You're not clear until you can fill in the blanks of the following sentence:

When they _____, I feel _____.

This dynamic creates _____ in our relationship.

I long for _____ in our relationship.

Examples:

- When he disappears into the TV, I feel lonely. This dynamic creates distance in our relationship. I long for emotional connection in our relationship.
- When she criticizes my other friends, I feel angry. This dynamic creates tension in our relationship. I long for more freedom in our relationship.
- When he ignores my ideas, I feel invisible. This dynamic creates resentment in our relationship. I long for mutual respect in our relationship.

5. Negotiate.

Now that you have a better sense of the big picture and the change you would like to see, it's time to negotiate that change. It's time to reclaim your voice by having a courageous conversation.

Working out the details of a relationship is a bit of a dance. If you push too hard, you risk alienating the other person. If you don't ask for anything at all, you risk being a doormat. Reclaiming your voice is a process of learning how to get what you need and compromise on what you can. It requires negotiation.

When you negotiate well in relationships, you honor yourself, while simultaneously honoring the needs and wants of the other person. It's the art of creating a "win-win."

All relationships are negotiated whether you realize it or not. For example, couples typically negotiate when they are dating or newly engaged. You discuss where you will live, whether you want to have children, and whose parents will get you for the holidays. You also negotiated your relationship with your own parents as you became an adult. It might have been forceful, if you clearly staked out new ground for yourself. Or, it might have been subtle. Perhaps they laid out their expectations of you, and you never really got a say.

Friendships are negotiated as well. Early on, norms get established. Maybe a friend expected you to do all the work to maintain the relationship. Over time you realize that you are part of an arrangement you don't like.

The good news is this: relationships are re-negotiated all the time. It's never too late to get your needs out on the table.

Here are some guidelines to help that conversation go well:

Don't lead with your emotions.

Negotiation in any relationship works best when you are in charge of your emotions, not the other way around. For example, when you speak out of anger, you can do harm. On the other hand, when you speak *on behalf* of your anger, you have power.

Instead of leading with your emotions, turn them into your allies.¹ It's important to acknowledge emotions like anger and fear of rejection. These emotions are signals that need your care and attention. You might journal about them, talk with a counselor, or invite God in to your experience of these emotions. When you express curiosity toward what you feel, emotions tend to soften. They start to trust that you have what it takes to speak up on behalf of yourself.

When you prepare yourself emotionally, you reduce the risk of unruly emotions hijacking the conversation. Instead, your emotions will bring authority to what you are saying. They empower you to speak with courage, clarity, and confidence. Even if the other person's emotions get hot, you can stay in command of yours.

Prepare what you want to say.

When you are new to this type of conversation, it can be helpful to write out a script. When preparing, use the following principles:

- Affirm the good.
- State the change you would like to see in terms of what you want from the relationship (vs. as a criticism of them).
- Propose an alternative that might work for you both.
- Stay open to compromise on minors. Stick to your guns on majors.

For example, in the situations below, which of the following two communication options do you think would go over better with your friend or loved one?

Dealing with an Angry Spouse

Option 1: "I hate it when you get angry. It makes all of our lives miserable."

Option 2: "When you raise your voice, I feel terrified. I know you would never do anything to hurt me. But, I believe our relationship would be stronger if we learned how to manage our emotions in healthier ways. Would you be open to working on this part of our relationship with me? I can set up an appointment with a counselor."

Dealing with a Self-Centered Friend

Option 1: "You never listen to me!"

¹ For more on how to turn emotions into your allies, check out my book with Kimberly Miller, MTh, LMFT, *Boundaries for Your Soul: How to Turn Your Overwhelming Thoughts and Feelings into Your Greatest Allies* (Thomas Nelson, 2018).

Option 2: "I appreciate your loyalty and our history together. But, I've noticed that when I don't share about what is going on in my life, our relationship feels distant to me. I'm learning how to speak up about what I feel. Are you open to hearing more from me?"

Dealing with a Critical Family Member

Option 1: [Suffer in silence, while saying nothing.]

Option 2: "I appreciate that you care about me. But, I am realizing how hard I already am on myself. What I need most is affirmation for what I'm doing right. Could we work together to bring more encouragement into our relationship?"

These steps won't magically solve all your relationship problems. You don't have control over how the other person responds. However, following these steps will help you learn to ask for what you need. And that process alone is incredibly empowering.

Speaking up for yourself a risk, but what do you have to lose? You might be able to negotiate real change in your relationships! And, if the other person can't meet you halfway, then it might be time to take a step back all together.

Remember: learning to reclaim your voice is a process. You may need to work on speaking up in this way for months. Many women enlist the help of a friend, mentor, or counselor. No matter how long it takes, the principles still stand. If you can learn to see the big picture and ask for the changes you desire, you'll stop feeling like a doormat. More importantly, you'll start negotiating the kind of relationships you were made for.

When Negotiation Isn't Possible

Negotiation only works when both people are open and willing to make changes. It requires a willingness to collaborate. If your friend or loved one is engaging any of the following behaviors, negotiation will not work:

- They refuse to change even after you repeatedly ask for what you want and need.
- They verbally berate or physically harm you.
- They twist the truth to make you feel crazy (gaslighting).

These actions create a toxic, abusive environment. This person is using tactics that are designed to shut you down or control you. In these cases, normal communication strategies will not work. Instead, you will need to reclaim your voice by setting firm boundaries with consequences.

Actions speak louder than words with toxic behaviors. I encourage you seek the help of a professional counselor to guide you through the process of setting boundaries with a toxic person in your life. Please check the Resources tab of my website for counseling and support groups: www.alisoncookphd.com/resources.

An Exercise to Help You Get Started

Reclaiming your voice requires confidence and vulnerability. It takes courage to step in to an established relationship and ask for change. Here are some questions to ask yourself as you get started.

1. When you consider the work of reclaiming your voice, what do you feel inside?

It might feel exciting, overwhelming, or even a bit frightening. Pay attention to what you feel without judgment. Write it down in your journal, and invite God into your honest experience.

2. Is there one relationship in particular where God might be nudging you to speak up for yourself in new ways?

3. Consider this relationship in light of the illustration of overlapping circles above. On a scale of 1 to 10, how true are each the following statements? (1 = not true at all; 10 = completely true)

- We maximize our strengths and focus on the things we share in common.
- We encourage each other to pursue our individual God-given interests and talents.
- We don't agree on everything, but we respect our differences.
- We provide support for each other emotionally, spiritually, and/or physically.

4. Notice the statement or statements that did not ring true for you. Now, work through the 5 steps of reclaiming your voice as it relates to that area.

As you understand the strengths of your relationship and your areas of growth, you will gain clarity. You stop "catastrophizing" the issues, slow down, and identify your specific challenges. You don't have to fix the problem right away. Sometimes, simply naming the issue can help bring more calm, allowing you time to think through how best to approach it.

Regardless where you are on this journey, remember these key points:

The more you understand what YOU want and need, the healthier your relationships will be.

As you communicate on behalf of what YOU need and desire, you will start reclaiming your voice.

I know you can do it! I'm honored that you read this material and allowed me to walk you through this important issue.

About Alison Cook

Alison Cook, M.A., Ph.D. is a counselor, speaker, and the co-author of *Boundaries for Your Soul: How to Turn Your Overwhelming Thoughts and Feelings into Your Greatest Allies*.

For over 15 years, Alison has helped women learn how to stand firm, develop confidence from the inside out, forge healthy relationships, and fully live out their God-given potential.



Each week, over 25,000 women receive Alison's email newsletter packed encouraging advice and helpful insights.

For more information about Alison, visit: www.AlisonCookPhD.com

For more information about *Boundaries for Your Soul*, visit: <https://amzn.to/3f9c4ev>

