

FAMILY & CONSUMER *sciences*

Marriage Enrichment: *Communication in Marriage*

If love is the heartbeat of a marriage, communication is its lifeblood. Many research studies of family strengths found communication to be a common thread in keeping family relationships strong and viable. A marriage will be made or broken to the degree a couple learns and practices effective communication skills, a challenging task indeed.

The majority of conflict situations in a relationship can be traced to communication breakdown. Poor communication is the surest sign of unhappiness in marriage and the greatest predictor of marital trouble. Regular expression of appreciation and affection is characteristic of healthy, quality marriages. That is why couples would be wise to set aside a few times each week for a 20- to 30-minute *communication date*. Each partner can express positive feelings toward the other, and within a positive atmosphere can learn to deal with the issues and challenges of life in general and of marriage in particular.

What is Communication?

Communication is the process by which one person receives messages from another. It is the sharing of messages, ideas, attitudes, and feelings resulting in a degree of understanding between a sender and a receiver. Various *avenues of communication*, both verbal and nonverbal, come into play. The *ability to express oneself* as clearly as possible is very important, but perhaps more critical to the communication process is the *ability to listen effectively*. Learning a few principles and practicing some of the skills in these three areas can help

prevent some of the communication breakdowns common in marriage.

Avenues of Communication

Whether or not it is realized, communication is going on all the time. A person can speak volumes without ever opening his mouth. Conversely, the person who talks a lot may not necessarily be an effective communicator. We all communicate by using a variety of delivery methods, including:

Verbal delivery—These are the words used to send a verbal message. Words represent meanings given to objects, thoughts, and feelings. Different people may give different meanings to the same words. Only about 11 percent of the impact of a message is determined by the words used.

Vocal delivery—This includes tone of voice, accent given to particular words, intonation, and length and frequency of pause used to deliver a particular verbal message. Approximately 34 percent of a message's impact is determined by vocal delivery.

Facial Expression—An old cliché says that a picture is worth a thousand words, and that certainly holds true in communication. The face often reflects the sender's emotions or feelings. The expression can be pleasant, angry, happy or sad, confused, annoyed, demanding, controlling, loving, etc. Regardless of the sender's words, the expression is more likely to reveal the true meaning of the message. A full 55 percent of a message's impact is determined by facial expression.

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Touching—Appropriate physical contact has the power to convey feelings of warmth and love. Within a marriage, gentle touches, holding hands, kissing, hugging, cuddling, massaging, and sexual intimacy are important ways of communicating tenderness, love, care, and appreciation.

Gesturing—Hand and arm movements often serve as key methods of delivering a message. Gestures can be emphatic, soothing, rude, powerful, or patronizing. When used along with verbal delivery they can give additional meaning to a message.

Body Movement—Things such as scratching, crossing arms or legs, and posture can send additional non-verbal messages to another person. Such manipulations might be perceived, accurately or not, as nervousness, boredom, disinterest, closed-mindedness, or rudeness.

Head movement—Moving the head to indicate agreement or disagreement gives immediate feedback to the other person who then knows where the other stands on the issue.

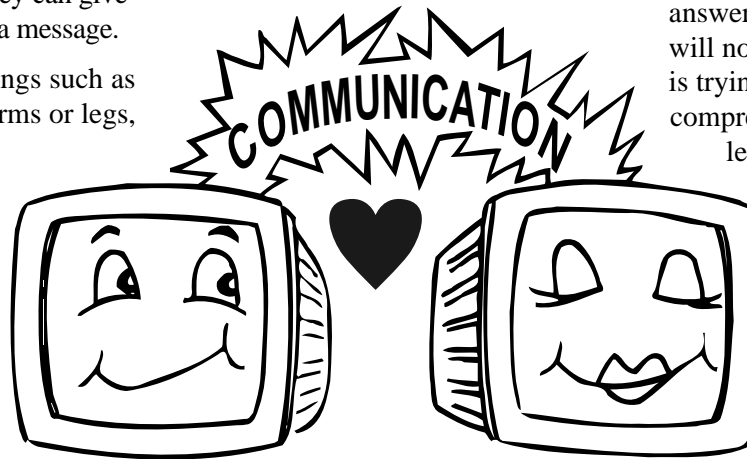
Areas of Communication Breakdown

Try as hard as you will, you will not always be able to communicate effectively in your marriage. Accept that fact. Then work at applying the tools and skills just discussed to help minimize communication breakdown.

Poor Quality Communication—This is where the sensitivities and emotions of sender and receiver, you

and your partner, enter the picture. If your timing is bad for a particular discussion, or if emotions are so intense as to get in the way, you cannot expect good quality communication. Recognizing emotions, naming them, and sharing them using “I” statements can help enhance your communication.

Faulty Communication—When only part of the message comes through, you and your partner can expect something similar to network trouble on your television. Faulty communication occurs



when other things get in the way, such as distractions or preoccupations. Trying to discuss something important when your spouse is watching the Super Bowl or reading the newspaper results in incomplete, ineffective communication. Eliminating distractions, setting aside special times for communicating, and being sensitive to the other’s needs of the moment will go a long way in eliminating faulty communication.

Misunderstanding—When you put your own projections or perceptions into the message your spouse is sending, you tend to evaluate or judge. When the message can be interpreted in more than one way, as most messages can, there is a

good chance you will come up with the wrong perception at least part of the time. This is where reflection, or paraphrasing, the message back to your partner can be extremely helpful. If you perceived or interpreted the wrong message, reflection will allow your partner to clarify the exact meaning.

Non-comprehension—When you and your partner are on different wavelengths, comprehension will be minimal. If you ask how work went today, and your spouse answers in computer jargon, you will not understand all of what she is trying to tell you; this is non-comprehension. Different wavelengths may occur because of different interests, different ways of looking at things, or different education or expertise in an area. Patience and extra care in expressing yourself clearly can clear the way for better understanding and comprehension.

Expressing Yourself Clearly

Many tools that can be used to deliver a message. Using the following tools effectively is a matter of learning and practice. They will allow you to express yourself more clearly.

Recognize your own emotions.

When you are angry, do you know it? Many people have been socialized to ignore, suppress, or deny their emotions; this seems to be especially true of men in our culture. Your emotions largely define who you are, and the ability to identify internal emotions is important to your overall well-being. Feeling is different from

thinking, wanting, sensing, and acting; emotions have more to do with the heart than with the head. To communicate *you* to your marriage partner you must be aware of your own emotions.

Label your emotions. Giving a name to your feelings helps you communicate them better. Words that may describe feelings include: angry, frustrated, fearful, inadequate, loving, hateful, resentful, depressed, optimistic, calm, guilty, ashamed, jealous, unappreciated, victimized, pensive, nervous, confused, hopeful, cheery, serene, lonely, rejected, quiet, or disconnected. You can probably name more.

Share your feelings. When you communicate with your partner on a feeling level, you remove many of the risks of being misunderstood. Feelings are neither good nor bad; they are just feelings. Sharing the feelings you have identified and named allows your partner to know what is going on inside of you, and he or she will be less likely to misinterpret your meaning.

Use “I” statements. A good way to share your feelings is by using “I” statements. “I” statements describe thoughts, ideas, attitudes, or feelings in the first person singular. Such statements carry ownership and responsibility for what is experienced; they are less likely to provoke resistance or resentment. “You” statements, on the other hand, often results in blaming, conflict, and fighting rather than addressing the issue at hand.

Express negative emotions in a healthy way. Blowing off steam without regard to time, place, and circumstance can be extremely

harmful to a relationship. There are times when you have to express negative emotions, but there are healthy ways of doing it.

- * Is the total environment right? Consider the time of day, distractions, noise, privacy, outside pressures, etc.
- * Are you in control of yourself? If your feelings are extremely intense and likely to get in the way of effective communication, you might be wise to vent some energy elsewhere, such as through exercise, before expressing yourself.
- * Is the other person receptive? Observe whether your partner is defensive, preoccupied with something else, or tired. Receptivity will determine *how* your message is interpreted.
- * Be careful and thoughtful. Use tact, love, and respect. Try not to say too much at once. Allow your partner time to absorb what you are saying.
- * Include yourself in the problem. Intense negative feelings are almost always the result of couple interaction rather than just the behavior of one or the other partner. Focusing on the issue rather than your partner’s behavior shows your partner that you are considerate of his or her feelings. Using “I” statements usually prevents one partner from attacking the other.

Speak affirmingly. Expressing criticism seems to be a lot easier than expressing appreciation. Your marriage will thrive, however, in an atmosphere where each

of you look for the positive things about the other, and comments on them sincerely and often.

The Importance of Listening

A study of persons of varied occupations showed that 70 percent of their waking moments were spent in communication. Of that 70 percent, 45 percent was spent in listening. Since listening is so important, poor listening is a major cause of miscommunication. The strength any relationship, including marriage, hinges on your ability to listen.

Effectively listening is not easy, but it is the only way you can truly understand what is said. Listening skills include particular ways of responding so that your partner feels her thoughts and feelings have been understood. Good listeners do not supply ready solutions; they only facilitate the “out-loud” thinking needed to understand and resolve problem areas. This requires the listener to assume a non-judgmental position, making it safe for the speaker to express what she is really feeling without fear of censorship, being made to feel foolish or guilty, or loss of confidentiality.

Any efforts to improve listening can work wonders in your marriage. It shows you are tuned in and interested. It also allows your partner to get beyond the surface and express the important inner thoughts and feelings of the moment.

The art of good listening also involves the ability to respond reflectively. Another word for reflecting is paraphrasing. When you listen carefully enough so that you can tell your partner what was just said in your own words, you

are paraphrasing. For example, a husband comes in from working on his car and says, "I just can't understand it. I thought I knew what the problem was." His wife says, "That's really discouraging." She refrains from giving her opinion or making a judgmental comment about what he said. He feels that she has heard him and understands his feelings. He is encouraged to say more. "Right; I put a lot of time into that car and now there's more money we'll have to spend." Her response is again reflective: "You're worried about the money that we'll have to spend getting it fixed."

WHAT'S SO HARD ABOUT LISTENING?

Poor listening skills lead to breakdown in communications. Here are six blocks to effective listening.

Distraction—Listener isn't focusing attention on the speaker.

Self-consciousness—Listener is concerned with own thoughts rather than what is being said.

Message Anxiety—Listener's fear about what may be said distorts what is actually said.

Length of Sender's Remarks

The longer the message, the greater opportunity for inattention

to detail, especially about the middle of the message. This is known as *leakage*.

We tend to be tailored longer messages to fit our own needs, that is, we reduce the differences between what we already know (or think we know) and what is being said, ignoring subtle differences. This is referred to as *rounding off*.

Past Reinforcement for Communication Patterns—Listener allows imperfectly transmitted messages to go by without challenge.

Hearing What We Expect to Hear—Listener fails to listen past the first part of the message because he or she "knows" what is going to be said.

The 'Halo' Effect—Listener evaluates or judges what is said according to very simplified categories of agree/disagree, like/don't like, good/bad.

Reflection is a skill that takes some practice. It is not easy to do at first, because it takes concentration and a good deal of effort to keep from giving your own opinions about what your partner is saying. It is important to remember that while it may feel awkward and phony at first, this feeling fades as you practice and get better at it.

Conclusion:

The quality of any relationship, including marriage, is determined by how effective the communication between the individuals is. Good communication skills can be learned and practiced to strengthen the bond between marriage partners and to resolve the problems and conflicts which may arise in the relationship. Commitment to improved communication, and a lot of work at communicating, will make it happen.

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