

MAKING COMMUNICATION WORK IN MARRIAGE

The most common form of communication among distressed couples is *miscommunication*. As a psychotherapist, I bear witness to the great frustration partners experience with each other associated with missed opportunities and mixed messages. We take communication skills for granted, assuming they are acquired simultaneously with language skills. We expect what we say to have the intended impact on our partners. We also assume, often with great certainty that we know what our partner means when they communicate something to us, even if they deny our understanding as their intent. Communication can often be very complicated, and poor communication in a marriage takes a toll on the health of the relationship and the emotional energies of the couple.

A great deal of work has gone into studying the different ways men and women perceive events based on their different needs and natures. These differences are one of the factors leading to partners missing each other's message. Another factor has to do with the fact that we each come into marriage with distinct family histories and unique patterns of what we think is the "normal" and expected way to communicate, what is not OK to communicate, and varying sensitivities and hurts. For example, when Sara has something to say to Avi that's private and she wants to say it away from the kids, she'll ask, "Can I talk to you?" meaning she wishes to move to the privacy of their bedroom and talk. Avi, however, was accustomed to hearing "Can I talk to you?" while growing up inevitably meaning "You're in trouble." When Avi hears Sara ask "Can I talk to you?" he quickly develops a knot in his stomach and an attitude in his voice. He walks into the bedroom and assumes a "What do you want now?" posture. Sara keeps getting the message that she can't express herself to Avi and so her message usually comes out stronger than she intends. Inevitably both end up feeling unheard. We are already programmed to hear things and express things in a particular manner long before our partners came into our lives. Because these imprints are often formed unconsciously we assume our partner understands us and even think as we do and we are greatly frustrated when they don't.

Patterns of miscommunication can be changed. Much of the work involved in communicating more skillfully and positively involves becoming more conscious of the impact our words have on our partner. This requires careful listening and questioning on our part. If we say something we feel is emotionally neutral and it evokes a strong angry response from our partner, it is helpful to check in and ask, "What did you hear me say?" We may be surprised to hear our partner respond with something like "You're making me feel pressured" or "I hear you criticizing me." "Wow, that was not my intention!" may be your surprised response along with an explanation of what your intention actually was.

Take, for example, the night Sara, tired from her day at work, finished feeding her five children dinner and tackled a burned pot that had been soaking on the counter for a night. Avi, her husband, came into the kitchen, noticed the nowclean pot and said "You cleaned the pot." Sara had a quick internal response upon hearing Avi stress the word "you," thinking he was making a commentary on her cleaning abilities, or lack thereof. But before snapping back defensively at him, she asked him what he meant. He replied that he didn't think the pot could be cleaned and that his emphasis had been on the word "pot." This interchange could have easily spun into anger and hurt if not for Sara's careful checking in by asking "What do you mean?"

Communication is not easy. Communicating while feeling emotional is even harder. There are steps we can take to maximize our chances that communication will go well. First, SLOW IT DOWN. When you feel yourself starting to react emotionally to something your partner said, take stock of what you are feeling, identify the feeling, and then CHECK IN. Checking in means helping our partner clarify what he or she meant. We are basically asking, "Is this what you are intending to say?" We can also share the impact their words are having on us by saying something like "I am aware of feeling criticized and becoming defensive" or "I'm not feeling heard in this conversation."

Finally, practice EMPATHY. Empathy is the effort we make to feel our way into our partner's perspective. It means trying to understand not only the literal meaning of the words we are hearing but also the meaning behind what our partner is saying; it involves listening with the part of ourselves that knows our partner's background, history and vulnerabilities. Being able to listen compassionately and without judgments, actively and with understanding are the ingredients to empathetic listening. These three steps- slowing down our responses, checking in with our partner, and listening with empathy to what our partner is communicating-, go a long way in strengthening our marital relationship and infusing it with health.

Practicing positive communication skills with our partner ensures that our marital relationship remains strong and is filled with closeness and emotional safety. The rewards of being in a healthy relationship are huge, on our physical and emotional selves, on our partners, and so importantly on our children, who grow up in the space that exists between us and our partner.

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