

RELATIONSHIP SUCCESS

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Helping You Create Create and Cultivate the Relationships You Want

Communication: How We Lose It — AND How to Get it Back!

Most couples who come to me for help define their problem in terms of communication:

- *"We don't communicate well."*
- *"Our communication has broken down."*
- *"Our problem is lack of communication."*

I used to dismiss this as a simplistic attempt to diagnose a highly complex human problem. But the longer I work with couples and their problems (almost 20 years now!), the more I agree with their assessment.

Although we marriage therapists may draw on a lot of theories to help us understand and explain the difficulties of marital relations, in fact what we all do in our various ways is help couples to understand each other. Since communication is so central to good relationships between intimate partners, let's look at what communication is, why it breaks down and how to improve it.

The purpose of communication.

Unless were asleep or dead were always sending signals that have some meaning (communicating) to those around us, through words, behavior, gestures, voice tone and volume, and facial expressions. Frequently were not aware were communicating or how our signals are being interpreted:

John has deep wrinkles in his brow, and they're even deeper tonight because he is worried about a job review coming up in the morning. His deeply furrowed brow signals to Mary, his wife, that he is angry, probably with her because she didn't have sex with him last night. And so she gets busy fixing his favorite meal to make up for it. He observes her busyness and thinks, "She doesn't care how I feel about this review; in fact, she's totally disinterested in me!" He

goes into the living room without speaking to her and buries himself in the paper. Mary thinks, "Boy, he is really mad!" They both go to bed without talking, each feeling lonely and uncared-for.

A bad case of mixed signals! Yet this kind of unconscious communication happens among couples all the time.

Of Webster's many definitions of "communication," I think the exchanging of information or messages is the one that best describes what should be happening in relationships. Only I would advocate for conscious communication (or the conscious sharing of information) because some variation of John and Mary's exchange is what happens when were unconscious. If only John and Mary had consciously shared their thoughts and feelings, a very different outcome might have occurred:

John comes home from work and greets his wife, who notices his brow is more deeply furrowed than usual. She asks him, "You look like you might be upset. Is there something wrong?" John tells her he is worried about his job review in the morning. She listens sympathetically, then confesses, "I thought you might be mad because we didn't have sex last night." He answers, "I was a little disappointed then, but I'm fine now. We have many more nights for that."

The barriers to communication.

Why weren't John and Mary as direct and clear in the first scenario as they were in the second? Why don't we all communicate so clearly, especially when were sharing information about our feelings, reactions and desires?

Some of the obstacles to communication are:

- You may not be aware of what you feel or what you want.
- You may have a belief that if your partner

really loved you and was tuned into you, you wouldn't have to communicate; she'd just know.

- You may fear that if you expose yourself and share your real feelings and wants, you'll get hurt (or worse).
- Your self-centeredness and defensiveness to your partner's point of view makes you believe yours is the only reality.

These barriers to communication are so deeply imbedded in our instinctive natures that even the best of us communicators frequently stumbles over them. And many of us need a guide (such as a marriage therapist) to help us over these hurdles - someone who can help us to feel safe, to see what needs to be expressed and to learn how to communicate.

The roles of sender and receiver in couples communication.

When we complain that our partner won't communicate or when we say we want better communication with our partner, what we usually mean is we want to be heard and we want our partner to listen. Careful listening is one of the important skills we need to develop in couples communication, where there is a sender and a receiver of information. A lot of attention has been paid to the responsibility of the receiver, or the role of listening, in the literature on marriage therapy, perhaps because the need to be heard and understood is such a fundamental human need. I've discussed the responsibility of listening in previous articles when I described Imago Therapy's Couples Dialogue. This process emphasizes the receiving skills of mirroring, validation and empathy before responding. However, I believe sending skills are equally as important as receiving skills, so I'm devoting the rest of this article to the role of sender.

How to responsibly express your feelings and needs to your partner.

One of the ways you learn about your emotional needs in your relationship with your partner is when you don't get what you want. And not getting what you want stirs frustration (from mild to intense). Therefore, often a negative emotion, such as frustration or pain, fuels your attempt to communicate with your partner, which can get you off to a bad start. Frustration generally triggers a primitive part of our brain and causes us to react in some pretty belligerent, coercive or manipulative ways (criticizing, blaming, accusing, attacking, shaming, guilt-inducing, etc.). In the heat of frustration, your old brain

identifies your partner as someone dangerous, an enemy or your persecutor that you need to protect yourself from or punish. Add to your reaction the feelings of loss and betrayal (because, after all, you selected your mate to love and protect you, not to frustrate or hurt you), and you get a pretty volatile mix of emotions. It's no wonder that when couples communicate, it sometimes ends up feeling like war!

What follows are some ideas about how the message-sender can lessen the possibility of war and increase the possibility of dialogue:

- Calm yourself before you express your feelings. Remember that your reason for

Conflict and distress are growth trying to happen!

communicating is to share information with him about you so that he can learn more about you and so that you can ultimately get his cooperation. It is not communication if it's your aim to teach him a lesson, punish him or make him hurt like you hurt.

- Think through your frustration before telling your partner how you feel. When did your frustration start? What did your partner do or say that triggered your reaction? And is the current trigger the real issue or a byproduct of another frustration? E.g., Donald got upset when Sally told him she was going to visit her sister for a weekend. After he thought about it, he decided his reaction to her news was a symptom of a persistent feeling of neglect since the birth of their daughter. What other feelings does your partner's behavior trigger in you besides anger? Anger is a secondary emotion, a reaction to some emotional pain or fear; so what is the primary emotion? Christine hates it when her husband gets angry with other drivers. Upon reflection she realized that his reaction also triggered a fear in her that his aggression might cause him to take risks that might endanger them. Could your current reaction to your partner reflect any painful or frustrating feelings left over from experiences in previous relationships? On further reflection Christine remembered that she used to fear for her safety when she drove with her father, an alcoholic who was prone to explosions of anger when drinking. And lastly, define what you want from your partner instead. What would you like for him to change

about his behavior? And be specific rather than global in defining what you want. Global requests like "I'd like you to be more affectionate." can be confusing, overwhelming and not indicative of what you really want. What feels like affection to you? A more operational request might be, "Before we part in the morning, it would make my day if you gave me a warm hug and said, 'Have a good day!'"

- Make an appointment when you want to discuss something serious with her or when you want to say something controversial. This gives your partner a chance to prepare herself to listen non-defensively and to choose a time when she can give you her undivided attention. It is also in your interest to do this, because if you have such a discussion when she's unprepared she will likely feel attacked. Then she will not only not listen, she'll probably attack back, and war begins!
- Stick to one topic, issue or problem at a time. Resist the temptation to dump all your frustrations at once because finally, at last, you have your partner's attention!
- Too much information or too many problems at one time will overload and discourage your partner, and at some point he will stop listening, or worse.
- Speak calmly and unthreateningly, in an information giving way. Share all the information you've previously thought through: the trigger behavior, the primary and secondary feelings it evokes in you, what and if it reminds you of anything from past relationships, and what you want (giving several very specific examples of what you want).
- Ask your partner for their response and also ask them if there's anything you can do that will help them to feel better. Also, ask them if they can do what you're asking. Listen with interest to their reactions and try to give them the kind of cooperation you're asking of them. If your partner feels you also care about his feelings and needs, he'll be more likely to be respectful of your feelings and wants.

If you do all the above and get off track or if communication breaks down because feelings get too intense, come back later and try again after feelings have cooled down. To either give up or escalate the communication because it didn't work the first time is to sabotage your relationship. Keep trying. You and your partner have a lifetime to perfect your communication!

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