

THE PROBLEM WITH COMMUNICATING



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It is Not What You Say But How You Say It

Whenever we communicate with someone, whether we do it face-to-face, by phone, or even through text (such as e-mail or a letter), we are dealing with a number of factors, foremost of which is the medium by which we choose to do so.

If **FACE –to-FACE** (physically present or by video phone such as Skype), how our communication is received and perceived depends more on “How We Say It” and not necessarily what we say. There has to be congruity of content and delivery. A study done several years ago at the University of Pennsylvania found that in face-to-face communication the contribution of each message delivery component was roughly as follows: ¹



Message Component	Percentage Contribution
Body Language	70
Voice Tone	23
Content (What was Said)	7



When we communicate sight unseen, strictly relying on audio presentation, our tone of voice can account for as much as Eighty Percent (80 percent) of how the message is received and perceived.

¹ University of Pennsylvania study, cited by Dr. Keith Olson (1984) , *Counseling Teenagers* : Group Books , Loveland Colorado

Meaningful Conversations have Depth

Intimate communication or conversations have a depth to them that comes from a place of Trust. Trust, in turn, is established over time and experience as we come to know our prospective partner. Healthy relationships progress through a series of stages or “Levels” of self-disclosure; which are: ²



Level of Guardedness	Level	Characteristics
Highly Guarded ↓ No Guard / Totally Open	Level 1	Cliché dialogue, formal pleasantries [talk about weather, sports, movies etc.]
	Level 2	Share opinions about such things as movies, interests etc.
	Level 3	Share feelings – emotions Share some [personal information
	Level 4 ³	Share deepest thoughts, fears, personal details, life history. Risk sharing deepest feelings for the other.

² H.Norman Wright (2010), *Marriage Works Course* : Light University , AACC, Forest , Virginia

³ Note: Wright (2010) posits that there is a Fifth Level wherein nothing is withheld from one’s spouse. Some marriage counselors – this author included – questions the wisdom of such total disclosure , in that it has been known to be detrimental to relationships, for example a prior affair that the current spouse is not prepared to be so forgiving about.

The intimate self-disclosure of Level 4 can only be achieved if there is a sense that one is safe to be so open. The environment that fosters such disclosure must be created or build. The steps toward that are:



1. Open the door to share – offer the invitation
 - a. Be prepared to be accepting of (not judge) what’s shared.
 - b. No hidden agenda.
 - c. No assumptions about the other person’s reactions. Set them aside.
2. Be willing to accept the invitation to talk – under the same terms.
3. Never withhold “love” (what gets shared is shared in the faith (belief) that it is confidential and not held against me)
 - >> Nor do you ever make “Love” a bargaining tool (negotiating tool) (Withholding sex and affection)

The Six Complications That Create Couple Communication Problems ⁴

Each time we share something with our partner, we are presented with the fact that what we intend to say, may not be what our spouse hears or interprets. Wright (2010, AACC Marriage Course) describes these phenomena as the *Six Messages of Communication*, which is:



1. What you meant to say
2. What you actually said
3. What your spouse actually hears
4. What your spouse *interprets/ perceives* as being what was said
5. What you spouse responds as a reply to what you said
6. What you then interpret as her / his response or understanding of what you said.

This can become quite a confusing back- and – forth exchange that eventually goes in full circle. The solution – or prevention – is **Active Listening**, which involves: ⁵

- a. Listening with focus , avoid distraction
- b. Do not prejudge (making assumptions/ judgments as soon as spouse starts to speak) or make judgments / prepare rebuttal while spouse is speaking

⁴ Ibid Wright

⁵ Ibid Wright

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- c. Wait until spouse is finished and then respond. First restate what you heard as well as what you felt as her / his emotions. Ask if your understanding is correct; for clarification if necessary.
- d. Respect each other's right to an opinion
- e. Be respectful; Avoid derogatory language and name calling.
- f. Stay focused on the issue, not on attacking your spouse.
- g. Be cognizant of Gender Differences :
 - a. Men:
 - i. Are more visual ; Less Verbal
 - ii. More logic driven. Often "linear" thinkers , i.e. A caused B
 - iii. Prefer to share facts not feelings
 - iv. Want to fix things
 - v. Are task oriented
 - b. Women
 - i. More verbal
 - ii. Share feelings
 - iii. Favor face-to-face conversation and sharing
 - iv. Often more compassionate – lenient – when it comes to disciplining for rule infractions
 - v. More "Team" oriented



BARRIERS TO GOOD COMMUNICATION

IN GENERAL - Regardless of Location or Setting, communication can fail because:



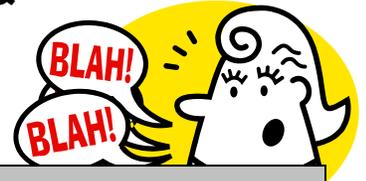
- Listener is not paying attention to what is being said. He / she are preoccupied by other distractions.
- Listener is being made to feel that what he / she have to say is not important (you are domineering or intimidating). Similarly-
- You may have the sense that what you have to say is being taken as unimportant ; Lastly
- There may be a lack of respect for one's opinions.

BARRIERS IN MARRIAGE & FAMILY SETTINGS

- ✍ Fear to confront behavior that is annoying , troubling or unacceptable because -
 - ✍ Don't want to hurt feelings.
 - ✍ Don't want to deal with the other person's anger.
 - ✍ Other person tends to make big things out of small things
 - ✍ Other person is intimidating – may even become violent



TEN DISTORTED WAYS OF THINKING & TALKING THAT TRIGGER CONFLICT



The Distortion	Description	Example
<p>1. All-or-Nothing Thinking</p>	<p>You see the situation or the other person (spouse, co-worker) in terms of 'Absolutes': this is called Black-and White / Good –and Bad thinking or 'splitting'. You slot people into categories with no room for shades of grey.</p>	<p>You are upset if your spouse does not spend 100% of his or her 'free' time with you. Any disputes or conflict leads you to assume the relationship is over.</p>
<p>2. Overgeneralization</p>	<p>Current problems or current behavior is seen as a repeating, never ending pattern that causes you frustration, conflict and / or defeatist attitude</p>	<p>You find yourself making comments like :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✍ He / she always do that. ✍ There he /she go again!
<p>3. Mental Filtering</p>	<p>Good qualities are ignored and negative qualities or behaviors are your focus and are mentally catalogued. Each conflict only serves to reinforce a biased negative view</p>	<p>You find yourself making comments like :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✍ This is the tenth time you've done this. ✍ You keep doing this over and over.
<p>4. Discounting the Positives</p>	<p>Positive behaviors or considerate , thoughtful caring acts are dismissed on the assumption that there is a hidden agenda or ulterior motive</p>	<p>Spouse or other person's behavior is assumed to be manipulative.</p>

The Distortion	Description	Example
<p>5. Jumping to Conclusions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✍ Mind Reading ✍ Fortune-Telling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✍ You make assumptions about what the other person’s motives, feelings, and behaviors or future (anticipated) behavior. ✍ You make projections of how the other person is going to react or behave ; or ✍ Assume or project what the other person is going to say without waiting to get all the facts ✍ You react – blurt out a comment or accusation – without all the facts.
<p>6. Magnification / exaggeration ; and Minimization</p>	<p>You blow the other person’s faults or failings way out proportion while minimizing your own ; or while also minimizing your partner’s (or other person’s) good qualities</p>	<p>Comments are made such as :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✍ Well that was stupid; ✍ You always do the most stupidest thing (magnification + generalization).
<p>7. Emotional Reasoning</p>	<p>You reason (assume) that your feelings are also those that your partner (or other person involved) is feeling. You may also rationalize that your feelings (emotions) justify your reaction or behavior.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ You're a loser and you're making me feel a loser ✓ You're making me angry (crazy, nuts)
<p>8. Should Statements</p>	<p>These are statements spoken or mental self-talk of what people should and should not do or feel; and/or self-directed statements of what you yourself should or should not do or feel.</p> <p>They are hot buttons to because they sound controlling and they deny the other person's right to their feelings.</p> <p>Self-directed “Should Statement” are often sources of guilt and shame,</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ You shouldn't feel that way. ✓ You should (must) smarten up. ✓ I should (must) be a better husband / wife ✓ I shouldn't feel this way.
<p>9. Labeling</p>	<p>These are negative or demeaning character slurs intended to hurt.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ You b...h ✓ You a...hole

The Distortion	Description	Example
10. Blaming and Blame Shifting	This is laying blame for conflict on the other party; or shifting blame from oneself to the other person	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ This is all your fault. ✓ I wouldn't have gotten angry if you hadn't done that.

Adopted from: "Feeling Good Together" by David Burns, MD (2006) Broadway Books, NY

SOME SUGGESTIONS if you feel you never get a fair chance to voice your opinions or feelings, and / or feel you need to improve your overall communication.

1. Use an egg timer or stop watch so that each of you gets equal time.
2. Use the "Talking Stick" concept. This can be a walking staff or cane. The person who holds the stick has the floor. When finished he or she must lay the stick on the floor or table, or pass it to their spouse.
3. Tape Record or Video your conversations for critique.
4. Purchase self-help books on couple's communication. Here are some recommendations:
 - a. Beck, Aaron (1988), Love is Never Enough : Harper Collins , New York, NY
 - b. Burns, David (2008), Feeling Good Together : Broadway Books, New York, NY
 - c. Chapman, Gary (1992,1995), The Five Love Languages : Northfield Publishing , Chicago, IL
 - d. Gillham, Bill & Anabel (1995), He Said, She Said : Harvest House Publishers, Eugene , Oregon
 - e. Wright, H. Norman (2000), Communication , Key To Your Marriage : Regal Books, Ventura , CA