

Marriage Communication 101

by

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Preface

This booklet is designed for husbands and wives or engaged couples to read together and discuss in one evening. It will take about forty minutes to read aloud, but as ideas come up, a couple should feel free to discuss with each other what they are thinking. It will be helpful for those who have conflict and for those looking forward to marriage who want to know how to handle conflict when it arises.

I Can't Get His Attention!

Do you ever wonder why a conversation on an important topic never really gets off the ground? Do you have a problem you want to solve with your spouse's help, but can't get him or her to really listen?

Usually the reason these conversations don't go anywhere is that the husband or wife involved has not agreed to give attention to the problem. A wife, for example, who starts talking before she has her husband's ear, is doing a disservice to both the topic and the relationship. Most people have one track minds. If they are reading, watching TV or working on a project, they do not easily focus on a new topic.

Set An Appointment

If you are the one who wants to talk, request your spouse's attention. Then tell him or her you would like to set a time to talk. Ask, "Is now a good time? Or when would work better for you?"

How Do I Get Him To Listen?

For example, a wife might say, during a TV commercial or when the TV is turned off, "I have a problem concerning our children which I would like to discuss with you. When would be a convenient time?" The husband may brush it off by saying "Oh no, not again," or "What is it now?" Answers like those do not indicate a real commitment to work through the problem together to a satisfactory solution.

Commitment To Talk

A real decision to work on the problem might sound something like this, “O.K. when this show is over, I’ll work on it with you,” or “Right after the kids are in bed, we’ll talk about it.” This kind of agreement indicates a commitment. You know where you stand and can plan on your problem-solving session.

Don’t *Always* Wait

There are circumstances that demand immediate action. If the house is on fire or there has been an accident, of course common sense tells you to demand attention - NOW!

Any normal person will be on his feet with the words, “The house is on fire!” So setting appointments is for important discussions that *can* wait. Don’t wait too long, however. Most family matters should be brought up before the day is over.

Issue Versus Relationship

Never allow an *issue* to stand in the way of the relationship. In fact, the relationship can be strengthened by recognizing that the problem on which you are working will never be allowed to put a wedge between you. In the heat of the discussion, it may be necessary to name the issue and declare it to be in second place to your relationship. It might sound like this, “Although we differ on the use of our money and we have a lot of financial decisions to make, I will not let it build a wall between us.” On occasion it might be necessary

to say, “For now I’m out of ideas on this subject,” or “I’m getting too hot under the collar to continue,” or “I need a break; let’s come back to this later.”

It is good to know that you can sit down to a pleasant meal or go to bed with utter confidence that your marriage is intact even while working on a problem. In fact, it can become stronger and you are growing as people in the decision making process. This is far better than burying your feelings or neglecting to solve problems that need attention.

Short Accounts

Keeping short accounts is better than letting problems pile up. Couples who develop a pattern of not sharing problems or a style of silence and clamming up are likely to have a volcano of anger erupt some day. It is better to deal with problems while they are still small ones, rather than let the “molehills turn into mountains.” So the term, “keeping short accounts,” in the marriage is keeping up to date on what needs to be said to your spouse.

Having both a mother and father for each family is a divine plan that acts as a checks and balance system where each will have areas of awareness and expertise that the other does not have. The gifts or talents of the marriage partners will compliment each other.

Ground Rules

When the time for the appointment arrives, there are several things to keep in mind. It is wise to share your feelings by giving an “I” message rather than any kind of judgment. For example, you might say, “I’m feeling concerned about how the children seem to be neglecting their chores,” rather than “You never get these kids to help around here.”

Feelings Are Worth Sharing

If you feel a need to share feelings, it is important that you do. Many marriages run into problems because a wife feels like she is not understood at all. Or she feels lonely or rejected or un-cherished. A wise woman will share these feelings with her husband because he is the only one who is in a position to hear these feelings in a way that is helpful. He is in the capacity to *do* something about the situation if there is anything to be done. Sometimes there is nothing to be done but listening. The husband probably also feels this need for concentrated listening by the wife with *no* interrupting, judging or advice giving.

Please Just Hear Me

Deep in the heart of all human beings is a desire to be heard to their own complete satisfaction. Most people do not have this experience. This common condition, of not being satisfactorily heard, manifests itself in such sentences as, “Nobody understands me” or “There isn’t anybody who know what I’m going through.”

What's So Important About That?

There are times when a person's current topic may seem unimportant or not worthy of the time it takes to tell it. If a husband feels this way about his wife's problem, it is important for her to make it very clear that it is important to *her*. A wise man will relish the opportunity to hear his wife to her full satisfaction. This is his unique opportunity to be utterly manly in her eyes and to fill the spot that God intended in their marriage. The reverse is true. The wife *must* listen to what's important to *him*!

That's The Same Old Story!

Some subjects of a serious nature may come up again and again. A husband may think, "Haven't we exhausted that subject yet?" The answer is "No". If the wife brings it up again, it is because it is unfinished business in *her* mind, worthy to be brought up again.

An example of this is the story of Jim and Judy who moved from Kansas City to New York because of Jim's business transfer. They left close friends, church and community activities and had to start all over again in New York. Jim made a quick adjustment in the business world, but things went much slower for Judy who had to find a new dentist, doctor and friends. A year later she was still talking about the community she left in Kansas City. Jim began to feel great exasperation every time she wanted to express her feelings. What he did not realize was the fact that Judy was going through a real grief process in the loss of her old community situation. It was important for her to be able to express herself openly to a significant person - her husband, Jim.

Counselors To Each Other

The ideal is for husbands and wives to be counselors to each other. In encouraging Judy to talk out her grief and express herself with no fear of judgment, Jim helped her to work through her sadness and frustration. He even invited her to sit on his lap and cry while he held her close. Tears became an important lubricant to giving up the former life and accepting the new life. By this simple act of sharing the deep intimacy of Judy's grief, they became much closer and more expressive in their love. Jim also saved himself the monetary expense of having Judy go to a professional counselor to hear her feelings.

Caution!

In these important times of hearing and counseling a husband or wife, there are some key guidelines to follow. These sessions are usually not a time for advice giving. This is a strong human tendency, but few people want advice unless they ask for it, it is not a time for criticism and evaluation of "what she did wrong." Most people already know what they did wrong and don't need to be told.

Allow troubled persons to speak without interruption. When they are finished, say something like this: "I sense the deep pain you feel about this..." Then go on to try to express what you sense the feelings are, even though you may not think they are justified or even if they may be bad feelings towards you.

If a husband can learn to do this for his wife, it will be a source of great relief to her and she will have a new feeling of trust and cherishing in the relationship. These emotional communication encounters are sometimes hard work and take time but are worth it because of the increased bond of intimacy which will develop in the relationship.

Keep Trying

If the husband is not able to communicate right on target what the wife's feelings are, let neither be discouraged. Keep trying until you are on target. The wife might help him by saying, "That's something like it, but I really feel more like..." He might then continue to paraphrase what he thinks she is feeling until, with a big sigh, she says, "That's it. You've got it." Many people have never had that pleasure. Those who do often weep for joy at that moment of being heard and understood to their own satisfaction. It is close to a holy experience because it is God who understands us fully. A husband and wife relationship can strive toward that ideal.

Is It Worth It?

If this disciplined procedure sounds like too much time and energy investment, I would encourage a re-evaluation of priorities. The solidarity of the marriage should be at the top. The high regard and cherishing of husband and wife will have a spill-over effect on children in the family. Nothing will do as much for the emotional well being of the children as the solid relationship of the parents.

To see parents working on problem solving, comforting and supporting each other provides a model to follow. Seeing only unresolved conflict or arguing behind mysteriously locked doors provides children with no resources to solve their own conflicts, now or in the future marriage.

My husband and I work hard to apply with each other the top quality communication skills we teach in marriage seminars. We talk to each other a lot, slow it down and listen carefully. Our three teenaged sons used to think this process ridiculously tedious. They jokingly referred to it as the "Mom and Dad review."

Later when they went away to college and careers, they came back and said they understood about the need for the “Mom and Dad review” because they saw people who didn’t listen and respect each other. They also saw some heartbreaking divorces among parents of their own peers.

Parents Are Teachers!

Parents teach by example and discussion and communication skills. Often domestic skills such as cooking and sewing and mechanical skills are taught, but many parents do not attempt to teach interpersonal skills for future marriages. Remember, children are learning from what you do - whether your example is good or bad! You are teaching them. Make it positive so the child will not repeat negative behavior.

Mind Reading

As two people live together in close proximity for a length of time, it is easy to start guessing or assuming what the other person thinks. It is useful to know your loved one’s preference in books, flowers or food. But in the area of feelings, don’t guess. Ask! Don’t assume you know his mind and don’t assume he knows yours. Many wives say, “He should know what I want,” or “If he doesn’t know by now, I’m not telling him.” The truth is, many husbands do not know their wives needs and they will never know unless they are told. Women tend to wish for men to know by instinct the little niceties that please them. The fact is that these romantic things that please wives do not come automatically. A man needs to learn how to be a loving husband and a wife needs to learn her role.

How Can I Learn?

There are two main ways a man can learn the skill involved in being loving, considerate, understanding and romantic. One is by having the privilege of growing up in a home where his father obviously loved his mother. Some have been blessed this way and others have not. The other way to learn is from a loving wife. Wives also can learn in the same two ways - from growing up with parents who loved each other or by being married to a husband who is willing to let her know what pleases him and how best to love him.

Suppose a woman has neither of these advantages. Perhaps her parents were divorced and her husband is not responsive to God's ways or her desires or wishes. Then she simply has a harder job to become the kind of wife God wants her to be.

There Is Hope!

Her task is *not* an impossible one! She must be sure her life is in turn with God and that she has a daily walk with Christ without being judgmental of a husband who may be out of fellowship with God. She can learn through scripture, reading books, other Christians *and* her husband. Although he may not be in fellowship with God's Spirit, God may still work through him in helping the wife to perfect her role as a wife. She can still try to please her husband, be loving and supportive and lean on him as a man.

Remember, Jesus worked as a carpenter. He no doubt used abrasives like sandpaper to rub the rough edges off his creations. He does the same kind of work today. He uses abrasive people in our lives to smooth off *our* rough edges.

A husband will be encouraged to behave in a manly way by a wife who leans on him and looks to him to fulfill his part in the marriage. The reverse is also true where a husband is following God and a wife is not.

The Other Side Of The Coin

Many couples are surprised to discover that the very traits that attracted them to each other turn out to be an annoyance. For example, orderliness may later appear to be obsessive concern for cleanliness and neatness. A friendly person may appear to be too talkative after a few years of marriage. A wife who one day said, "He is the strong, silent type," may someday say, "He never talks to me." It is important to discuss these differences and remember the part they played in the initial attraction.

Renewing Of Your Minds

Some husbands or wives may get to the point where they see nothing good in their partner. In that case, they have waited too long to expect simple solutions to their problems. However, the scripture speaks of the "renewing of our minds" (Romans 12:2). So it is possible to make a new start together. Learning to say, "I'm sorry," and "Please forgive me," should be common in the relationship. Keeping track of wrongs is not a Christ-like approach to marriage. Acceptance and unconditional love are the hallmarks of a good marriage.

Little Courtesies

It is important to thank your partner for the services performed for the home and family. Most couples forget this courtesy and then wonder why their children follow that pattern of taking things for granted. If either a husband or wife feels taken for granted, it is appropriate to say so. Without anger, remind each other of the many things that are done for the benefit of both. Earning money, doing housework, caring for children, walking the dog, paying the bills are all necessary tasks that can get dull because they seem to never end. Noticing what the other is doing and mentioning it and being thankful can brighten the day and lighten the load.

Some things don't get noticed unless they are undone. For example, a scrubbed floor rarely commands comment, so if you've just knocked yourself out scrubbing it, don't hesitate to say, "Look at this clean floor. Doesn't it look great?" It is permissible to ask for positive comments. You may never get them unless you ask. Don't turn your expectations into a test of your partner's upbringing. Don't let good breeding be the measure of love. Ask for what you want and inform your partner, "It would really mean a lot to me if you would notice things I do, like this scrubbed floor and say "Wow!" without my even mentioning it."

Good News

The good news is that habits can change. Even *if* one person in the partnership makes an effort to be positive and say kind things, it will make a difference in the relationship. Don't get discouraged by expecting over-night changes in a relationship that has gone sour.

A Fishy Smell

Sometimes when there is a fishy smell in a house because of cooking, those in the house can't detect it. But when someone comes in from the outside, it is immediately apparent. That is the way it is sometimes with marriage. Since you are in it, you are unable to discern what's "fishy," although you may have a vague awareness that it has not been all you dreamed that it might be.

This is where an outsider can be of help. A marriage counselor may be able to detect what the problems are and equip you to solve them. A counselor will seek to help you deal with each other in ways that are healthier than past patterns.

How Do We Know When We Need A Counselor?

How do you know if you need help?

1. when the partnership cannot work out a problem to satisfactory solution
2. when the conflict between you leads to hurt or sadness
3. if you feel that for some reason you cannot tell your partner what you want to tell him or her.

As the need arises people elect to go to competent optometrists, dentists and interior decorators. These professional services are valuable because of the unique skills they provide. There are times in every home where there is a need for special repairmen to fix the washing machine, water softener and refrigerator. Those repairs do cost money but most people decide, when at all possible, it is worth it to have optimum functioning in their appliances.

A marriage should also have a change to function at its best. If special help is needed and sought on occasion, this is to the credit of the couple. It proves their marriage is a top priority in their lives.

How Do I Pick A Counselor?

Since God ordained marriage, it is wise to choose a marriage counselor who is known to follow Biblical principles in his or her counseling. If possible, check with pastors, friends and your physician to find such a counselor.

Commitment To Get Help When Needed

It would be wise at the beginning of marriage to make a commitment to get help when either of you sees the need. Remember that if your *partner* is concerned, even if you see no problem, there *is* a need to get some problem solving done.

Establish early the “open door policy” in bringing up problems at appropriate times. Then if you cannot solve them as a couple, seek help.

God set up marriage as an example to the world of the relationship between Christ and the church. Ephesians 5 speaks of the sacrificial love of husband and wife for each other. The world should be able to look at fine Christian marriages as an example of Christ’s love. The Church is not perfect, but we who are a part of the Church are in a constant process of being refined for Christ’s purposes. So it is with marriage, it is a life-long process to learn to love as we are meant to love within our marriage relationship. As in the Christian life, marriage is not always easy, but the commitment to both Christ and our partner is the life to which we are called.

Ruth, with her psychologist husband, Dr. Dennis Gibson, directs Wheaton Counseling Associates in Carol Stream, Illinois. They have three adult sons and six grandchildren. A former airline flight attendant, Ruth is the author of *Chipped Dishes, Zippers and Prayer* and *The Christmas Tree Ship*. She frequently speaks at women's meetings and couples' retreats with her husband. Together they have written *The Sandwich Years*, a book about caring for your aging parents, adult children and nourishing your marriage.

The Sandwich Years is available for purchase and immediate electronic download at:

<http://www.caring-for-your-aging-parents-adult-children-and-marriage.com>

For more information on Dennis and Ruth Gibson please visit:

<http://www.dennisgibson.com>

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