
Guidelines for Couples' Communication

By Mickey Jett

Get Specific

Use videotalk. Describe what you are talking about so clearly that your partner could imagine seeing or hearing it on a videotape. If the person can't picture what you are saying or imagine hearing it, you aren't being specific enough to ensure your message will be heard. Are you talking in black or white? There is too much room for misinterpretation when you use vague words. Avoid giving your opinions, interpretations, or generalizations when you are having communication problems. They are invitations to misunderstandings and conflicts. The best communication technique at this time is start with "I" and then the feeling and what caused the feeling without blaming.

Avoid the Blame Game or Deciding Who Is Really Right

Relationships are either win/win or lose/lose. If either of you loses, you both lose, because the relationship suffers. Remember that commercial with Phil Jackson as a taxi cab driver (Phil Jackson is the coach of the Los Angeles Lakers basketball team). The couple gets in the cab and are arguing. He makes this one statement that needs to be added here. He says, "Remember, there is no 'I' in team." While it is tempting to get righteous or prove your partner wrong, it sets up a barrier to understanding and listening. Instead, imagine for a moment that there is another way of seeing the situation that might be different. Stop thinking in terms of a problem, but instead, think what is the solution.

Be Accountable for What You Say or Do

Each of us has a choice about what we say and do, no matter how we feel. Don't excuse your behavior or blame it on others or your childhood. It is OK and good to say, "maybe I am wrong" and "I apologize."

Stick with the Recent Past When You Talk about Problems

It is harder to change the past than the present and the future. People forget and disagree about what happened in the distant past. What usually happens in many of our arguments is there is an event that triggers an old issue or a hidden issue – money, communication, alcohol, in-laws housework are common conflict areas. Our memory may be reflecting on something from one year, two years or further back. Yet, the hurt and anger from that was never resolved. Just remember, it is not healthy for your relationship to bring up issues when what needs addressed at the moment is what just occurred. Yet, According to Stanley and Markman, most couples deal with issues in the context of events. That is, the only time an issue gets attention is when you are fighting about it. No wonder the problem cannot be solved. A couple needs to be able to discuss problems before problems can be solved. Also, stay out of the last year, or 5 years ago dance. Those things should be discussed in counseling if you don't know how to discuss them as a couple.

Acknowledge Your Partner's Feelings and Points of View

Listening to and acknowledging the other person's feelings and points of view can bypass many arguments and misunderstandings. Don't try to correct them or rebut their points of view or feelings. Just listen. Guys, listen, listen and listen. She is not always wanting you to fix it. Both the husband and wife need to see if they can understand what the other person is trying to communicate. You don't have to agree with what they are saying, but don't dismiss or minimize their feelings or tell them what is wrong with them for feeling that way. Just the other day I heard someone say, "She should just get over it." Well, emotionally, we are all wired a little different, and she obviously is not at a place to get over it yet. So, listen and listen again, then validate each others feelings.

Notice and Give Your Partner and Your Relationship Credit for the Good Stuff

It's all too easy to focus on the problems in relationships. Did your partner talk to you about something he or she would usually have avoided? Give them credit for that, even if you are upset about what they said. Did you two talk out something that you usually would have gotten stuck on? Mention it and acknowledge it to each other. Statements where you mention something you like about the other is like money in the bank. It is good to have money in the bank when it comes time to make a withdrawal.

Break Your Patterns

It takes two to tango, so start doing the fox trot and find out what happens. Change your part of any pattern that isn't working. So what if it is 80% of the others fault. If you change the 20% that you can change then I believe it will also have an effect on your partner. Remember: Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. You can change your part of the pattern and invite your partner to change.

For help call:
80th ASG Family Life Center
DSN 423-5653/5654