

**Family Living
Focus**

by
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**Couple's Communication -
A Gift To Last A Lifetime**

"I just wish you'd listen to me!"
How often have you said that to your spouse? Or vice versa? Communication is the cornerstone of any relationship, and listening is one aspect of communication!

Often times we think of communicating as telling - telling someone something either verbally or non-verbally. The message is one part of the communication equation - but there also exists the sender and the receiver.

It's these two components that tend to get us in trouble. Even after 16 years of marriage, my husband and I still need to re-group at times to be sure we understand each other. Keep in mind the sender and receiver are humans with emotions, pre-occupations, their own agenda, and their personal interpretation of what's being sent and received!

With the spirit of giving in the air, let's take a look at the gift of enriching your relationship by learning some basic communication skills.

I. Taking Responsibility

First, what about taking responsibility. One aspect of healthy communication is taking responsibility for your own needs, feelings, wants, and desires. "I" messages can be helpful in doing this. The advantage of taking personal responsibility for what needs to be communicated is that our partner

is less likely to be put on the defensive. We all know how poorly we react and respond when we feel we've been challenged. When a "you" statement is used, the speaker is often assuming the spouse knows what the other person is thinking, feeling or intending. "I" messages are more helpful.

In an "I" statement, you remark on the act or behavior, how you feel as a result, and the impact on you. So, it is ...

- description
- feelings
- consequences to you.

That's it. Here are a few examples:

"You" Statement: "You're late again! Why didn't you phone?"

"I" Statement: "When you come home late from work and don't phone, (act or behavior) I feel hurt because it seems I'm not as important as your job, and I feel scared because I don't know if you've been in an accident or you're alright (how you feel). As a result, I'm not sure whether to hold dinner or not, I don't know what to tell the kids, and I have trouble settling down for the evening (consequences to you)."

Which would you rather hear? The first is likely to put you on the defensive. The second, will hopefully help you to empathize with your spouse.

"You" Statement: "We never go out anymore. All you ever want

to do on weekends is watch TV or rent a video."

"I" Statement: "I've noticed we're spending more and more weekend time at home (act or behavior). This is frustrating to me (feeling) because I like to get out of the house and do things like walks, dancing, and exploring new places (consequences to you)."

Chances are, in the first example, your spouse would have been thinking about all of the times you didn't stay at home, times you did go out, instead of listening to your concerns. In the second, more information is provided, and your spouse is more likely to be understanding your concern(s).

"I" messages can also be used when you want to compliment or thank your spouse. For example, your spouse has just done something special for you: made your favorite meal, booked a weekend at your favorite get-away, thrown a birthday party. The "I" message compliment is more powerful.

"You" Message: "Thanks honey! You really put yourself out."

"I" Message: "When you made dinner for me last night, I was touched. I felt loved by you (feeling). It lets me know you care (consequences to you)."

At first, "I" messages, like most other communication techniques seem awkward - not what you're used to. Just remember that all communication styles are learned; there are not natural styles. With some practice, you can make this a method that works for you, and for your marriage.

(P.S. "I" messages aren't just for couples. They work with children and with other adults as well).

II. Listening To Understand

Of course, the second portion is listening to understand. Just as it's important to take some personal responsibility when you speak, it's also important to be responsible when you listen. You can choose to react, or you can choose to listen to understand what your

spouse is saying.

When you listen to understand, it means that instead of rehearsing your response as your partner speaks, you listen, trying to understand his/her perspective. This doesn't mean that you have to agree with your spouse. You just need to understand. (If you don't agree, you'll need to try using a conflict resolution strategy - after your partner feels understood.)

This is not easy for most of us to do. We're used to preparing our defense, or preparing for a debate.

When your partner has said what she or he needs to say, the best way to let him/her know you understand is to summarize in your own words. This is not parroting back, but using your own words, to let your partner know you understand. If you haven't quite got it right, your partner can clarify for you until you're both clear on what she/he is trying to say.

Some examples:

A: "I've got nothing to wear!"

B: "Yes you do ... you've got a closet full of clothes! You're always shopping."

A: "I'm always shopping? What about that pair of designer shoes you bought last week?"

B: "Oh yeah? Well at least I didn't ..."

This couple didn't get very far. Person B certainly has no idea what A was saying. They both just reacted. Let's try again.

A: "I've got nothing to wear!"

B: "Are you saying that you don't have anything you think is appropriate to wear to this wedding?"

A: "Yes, that's it. I'm feeling self conscious about this wedding, and I want to look my best."

Another example of listening to understand:

A: "When you come home late from work and don't phone, I feel hurt because it seems I'm not as important as your job, and I feel scared because I don't know if

you've been in an accident or you're alright. As a result, I'm not sure whether to hold dinner or not, I don't know what to tell the kids, and I have trouble settling down for the evening."

B: "It sounds like when I'm late and I don't phone, it creates some problems for you. You feel hurt and neglected, you're scared because you don't know what has happened to me, you don't know what to do with dinner, or tell the kids, and it ruins your evening. (Don't apologize yet, or defend yourself.)"

A: "Yeah, that's about it."

B: "I'm sorry, I never thought about how it impacts you. It's not easy for me either. Could we talk about this another time when we are both able to discuss it."

Person B chose not to defend him/herself, but instead listened to understand his/her partner. Chances are that person A smiled and breathed a sigh of relief when she/he realized their spouse understood what she/he was saying and feeling. They are wise to take a break until they are both ready to discuss the issue further.

Just like using "I" messages, listening to understand isn't easy. But give it a try. You'll notice a real impact on your relationship.

If you're interested in learning more, check with your community college, church, or family services. And here's to a gift to last a lifetime.



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