

You can have a successful marriage by . . .

Solving the Problem Of Communication

Communication is the lifeblood of a marriage.¹ Without good communication, a marriage is likely to be unhappy, even if it does not dissolve.

For about two years, my wife worked away from home. She would leave on Monday morning and return on Friday evening. I called her each evening. Why? Not because I thought I had to keep track of everything she was doing, and not necessarily because I had something important to tell her. I called because of my love for her. I thought we needed to talk every day. In other words, the marriage needed it—our relationship needed it—because communication is the lifeblood of a marriage.

Communication is a challenge. The speaker frames the message out of his background, and the listener hears it based on his own experiences; if the backgrounds of the two are different, the message is likely to be misunderstood. When my family lived in Australia, we received strange looks if we asked for a napkin at the dinner table. To the Australian a “napkin” (or “nappie”) is a baby diaper. In requesting a napkin, we sent one message, but our Australian friends received another.

Likewise, communication is difficult in marriage. The husband and the wife were brought up in different households—in the equivalent of different cultures—and developed different communication habits. That is why they are likely to have difficulty understanding each other at times.

¹H. Norman Wright wrote, “If you came to me for premarital counseling and asked, ‘What is the most important issue of marriage that we need to be aware of?’ I would say, ‘Communication!’” (H. Norman Wright, *So You’re Getting Married* [Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 1985], 137).

How can a husband and a wife communicate effectively with one another? What are the requirements for good communication in a marriage?

A COMMITMENT TO COMMUNICATION

First, you must have a commitment to communication. Both husband and wife should realize that they must talk together if the marriage is to succeed.

Men need this advice since one of the chief complaints from wives is that their husbands do not communicate with them. A man may think that he talks enough; but if his wife feels the need for more conversation, he should do his best to meet that need.

A LOVING ATMOSPHERE

Second, you must establish the right atmosphere for proper communication. If a man or a woman lives in a hostile environment and is subject to constant criticism, when each word is likely to be subjected to a microscopic examination for minute flaws, communication is hindered. Such a person is unlikely to be eager to share private thoughts. What kind of environment is needed in the home to encourage communication?

(1) As a couple, you need to develop an accepting atmosphere, in which both parties know that they can express their feelings without fear of rejection.

(2) Your home should have a respectful atmosphere, in which each marriage partner accepts the other as a peer, as an equal, as an intelligent person whose thoughts and opinions are worthy of being heard.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF LISTENING SKILLS

Third, you should constantly work at improving your listening skills. How can you listen effectively? Listen for two things: for the *factual content* of what is said and for the *emotional content* of the words. You need to hear *what* is said (the factual content), but you need to listen for more than that: You need to hear *how* and *why* it is said (the emotional content). People communicate not only with the words they choose, but also with their tone of voice, the pauses between their words, and with “body language.” The true message of a statement is conveyed in the speaker’s face, hands, posture, and the whole body.

It is important to hear words and to understand them—to “comprehend the facts” and to know, as exactly as possible, what your wife or husband is saying.² However, if you hear only the words—even if you can repeat them verbatim—and yet pay no attention to the emotional content of the words, you may miss the most important part of the message!

Further, you need to listen sympathetically or empathetically. You should not only hear the emotional tone of the message but also respond in such a way that your mate knows that you share the emotion he or she is feeling.

Indeed, you should listen with your whole being:

(1) With your *ears*—to hear accurately what your loved one is saying.

(2) With your *eyes*—to see how your spouse is saying it. You should be watching to receive the visual cues which tell you the feeling behind what is said.

(3) With your *heart*—to allow yourself to share whatever your mate is feeling.

²For this reason, you should listen actively, asking questions to make sure you understand. Without interrupting the speaker, you can respond, “Did I hear you right? Did you say . . . ?” or “Now let me get this straight; you’re saying . . .”

(4) With your *hands*—to give reassurance of your love. It is good to touch or hold your spouse as she or he speaks.

(5) With your *mouth*—to provide feedback, so as to assure your mate of your concern.

ACCEPTING DIFFERENT COMMUNICATION STYLES

Fourth, you need to accept the fact that you and your mate probably have different communication styles. You have developed your own style of communication through the years, influenced by your gender, personality, education, and past experiences—and so has your spouse.


Your mate, for instance, may have come from a family in which everyone seems to shout at each other. Whether the family members are happy or sad, contented or angry, they speak loudly to one another. To others, it may sound

as if they are always mad. To them, the loudness means nothing; it is just their way of communicating. If that is your mate’s background, the tendency to shout should not surprise you. While your loved one should try to control that tendency, old habits are difficult to break. You may simply have to learn to accept your mate’s communication style.

In addition, problems are likely to arise in a marriage because of the fact that men and women have different communication styles. Women

generally prefer to talk about people and their problems and believe that communication should be used to share feelings. Men tend to talk about events—about politics and sports and the latest news—and believe that communication should be used to present facts and to solve problems. Men and women naturally communicate on different levels.

Once my wife was telling me about a problem she was having. I was listening and responding appropriately, I thought, by making sympathetic noises: “Uh-huh. Oh, my. Hmm.” To my amazement, she became upset, accusing me of failing



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to sympathize. "What did I do?" I asked. "I was listening. I couldn't do anything about the problem now, so what could I say?" She replied, "You don't have to do anything about it! I'm not asking you to do anything about it!" "What can I say then?" I asked. She said, "I'll tell you what you can say: You can say, 'Sharlotte, you do have a problem, don't you!'"

That was the best advice on listening I ever received. Like most men, I thought that when my wife complained, she was wanting me to solve her problem for her, to fix things. However, she was not looking for my solution to her problem. She was looking for a sympathetic ear, for someone who would simply listen and sympathetically acknowledge her difficulty. She wanted a loving voice to say, "You really do have a problem, don't you!" If she received that, she would feel better. The message would have been sent and received with satisfactory results.

Husbands need to recognize that their wives communicate differently, and they need to accept that difference. They must learn to hear what their wives say and to respond appropriately.

FOLLOWING THE RULES

When they get married, a couple must agree on the rules that will govern their discussions. The following common-sense rules, derived from biblical principles, may serve as a starting point for your own list.

Take Turns and Do Not Interrupt

Communication must not be one way only; both parties must participate. Children learn an important rule when they begin school: Take turns. One should talk, and then the other. Each should listen carefully while the other is talking.

Closely related to this rule is a crucial principle: Do not interrupt! No matter how long he or she takes to say something, even if you think you know what is going to be said, let your spouse finish before you speak.

Do Not Speak Hastily or Angrily

James said, "But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger" (James 1:19b). Proverbs 14:29 makes this valuable observation: "He who is slow to anger has great

understanding, but he who is quick-tempered exalts folly." This old advice is still good: Count to ten before you respond to something that makes you angry. Unless you carefully guard your lips, you may reply to your mate with angry words that are likely to wound and leave ugly scars.³ Good advice on this matter is given in the song "Angry Words":

Angry words! O let them never
From the tongue unbridled slip;
May the heart's best impulse ever
Check them ere they soil the lip.

Love is much too pure and holy,
Friendship is too sacred far,
For a moment's reckless folly
Thus to desolate and mar.

Angry words are lightly spoken,
Bitt' rest tho'ts are rashly stirred,
Brightest links of life are broken
By a single angry word.⁴

When a discussion becomes contentious, it may be wise to postpone the conversation until a later time. If you and your mate cannot agree on a matter, then make an appointment to discuss it at a specific time later.

Speak Encouraging Words

Paul told Christians to speak only that which edifies or builds up (Ephesians 4:29). The need to speak encouraging words is emphasized in Proverbs:

There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts
of a sword,
But the tongue of the wise brings healing
(12:18).

A soothing tongue is a tree of life,
But perversion in it crushes the spirit (15:4).

A man has joy in an apt answer,
And how delightful is a timely word (15:23)!

Like apples of gold in settings of silver
Is a word spoken in right circumstances
(25:11).

Both husband and wife must determine that the ultimate aim of their communication will be

³Another old saying warns, "Speak in haste, repent at leisure."

⁴H. R. Palmer, "Angry Words," *Songs of the Church*, comp. and ed. Alton H. Howard (West Monroe, La.: Howard Publishers, 1977).

for each of them to be encouraged. To make sure your communication is encouraging, obey the following three guidelines:

Never criticize your mate. Possibly, there is a place for constructive criticism, for suggesting ways that your mate can improve or do something better. However, what is seen as constructive criticism by the one who offers it may be experienced as destructive by the one who receives it. Therefore, a good rule (to which there may be exceptions) is never to criticize your mate! Criticism kills healthy communication.

Praise your mate. It is not enough merely to avoid destructive words; the Christian couple should make a habit of frequently praising and complimenting one another. For instance, the man should praise his wife's cooking and efforts to be attractive to him, and the wife might praise her husband's ability to work hard, to earn a living, or to make household repairs. Fortunate is the man whose wife is his greatest admirer.⁵

Express gratitude frequently. You cannot say "thank you" too often. Whatever your spouse does, even if it is viewed as a duty, you should be appreciative for it.

Choose Your Words Carefully

Two people should not assume that because they are married they are free to say whatever they like to one another, in any way they want to express it. The biblical admonition "Let your speech always be with grace, . . . seasoned with salt" (Colossians 4:6) applies to married people and their conversations. When you disagree, for instance, find a way to express your viewpoint that will help solve the problem rather than making it worse.

Make Sure the Time Is Right

Good communication takes place when both parties are relaxed, are not distracted, and can focus on the discussion. The wife may need to put off her complaints about her day until her husband has had time to recover from the strain of his day at work. If the husband has something important to discuss with his wife, he may need to wait until the children are in bed and they can

sit down together and talk about it. A couple may want to schedule times for conversation and communication. One possibility might be to set aside a time—when everyone has eaten something and rested for a moment—for family members to talk about whatever is on their minds.

CONCLUSION

It would be impossible always to live up to the standard suggested above. The tongue is difficult to control (see James 3:1–12). Nevertheless, every husband and wife should commit themselves to practicing the kind of communication skills described. Jesus said, "By your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned" (Matthew 12:37). A home may also stand or fall, be saved or lost, as it were—based on the words used in it.

Communication is a challenge, and understanding involves patience, insight, and effort. However, if a married couple learns to communicate effectively with one another, they will be on their way to solving other problems that may arise.

Coy Roper

Thoughts on Communication

"But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased."

(Hebrews 13:16; ASV)

"To say the right thing at the right time, keep still most of the time."

John W. Roper

"Communication is something so simple and difficult that we can never put it in simple words."

T. S. Matthews

"Communication works for those who work at it."

John Powell

"We are healed of a suffering only by expressing it to the full."

Marcel Proust

"When people talk, listen completely. Most people never listen."

Ernest Hemingway

⁵My wife is an example; she often says, after I preach, "You're still my favorite preacher."