

COMMUNICATION INSTEAD OF WIN/LOSE ARGUMENTS

Adapted from The First Years of Forever

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Couples in long-lasting happy marriages emphasize two important tips for communicating when disagreements or conflicts start to arise: reciprocity and *self-control*. Reciprocity calls for talking and listening. Self-control means keeping your cool.

Six Ways a Discussion Goes Wrong

Here are some of the ways the conversation may go wrong.

A War to Be Won: The disagreement becomes a war to be won – a power struggle. But the fact is that no one wins in an argument. Your goal should be to win by reaching an agreement or an understanding, while maintaining your good feelings for one another.

A Personal Rejection: The disagreement is taken as a personal rejection. Unfortunately, people often confuse rejection of their ideas with rejection of themselves.

A Change of Weapons: People change the subject and drag in other issues to use as weapons against their partners, instead of limiting the discussion to the original disagreement. As soon as one feels attacked and reacts with defensiveness, communication and loving intimacy are on the way out the door. If you want to avoid this and resolve the issue, agree ahead of time to discuss only the matter at hand.

Sweeping Generalizations: People, frustrated by their inability to make their point, resort to sweeping generalizations characterized by the use of these expressions: “You always...” and “You never...” These are “fighting words” and there is almost no adequate response to them. The temptation is to stoop to the same tactic and argue, “I do not.”

Shouting or Siberia: People sometimes respond to disagreements in even more inappropriate and childish ways. One wife complained, “I wish my husband could discuss a matter without shouting. He seems to think that talking loud and fast is the only way to communicate.” A husband commented, “My only option is to agree with my wife on every point. Otherwise she sends me to Siberia for weeks at a time.”

Yes, But...: People often pull out this prize communication stopper: “Yes, but...,” which simply escalates the argument. Once we recognize how thoroughly annoying and disheartening this reaction is, we can choose to learn other ways of responding when we disagree. Here’s how: Refuse to use those two words in combination again. Learn to make your point differently, beginning with a favorable response, such as “That’s an interesting way of looking at it. I hadn’t thought of it that way.” Or, “I see what you mean.” Move right on smoothly into your point, presented as a question, “Do you think that...?”

Eight Ways to Replace Arguments With Communication

Response, Not Reaction. Don’t interrupt. Listen carefully before you respond. Don’t react. Respond. Keep the discussion squarely on the issue at hand. You need to agree, long before disagreements arise, that you will limit any discussion to the present, leaving the past out of it, and limit the discussion to the one issue, refusing to allow side issues to enter in.

Disagreement, Not Disapproval. Acknowledge that you understand what your partner is saying, even though you disagree. Show him or her respect. Don’t let your disagreement of this issue sound like disapproval of your partner.

The Gift of Empathy. Make it a point to share your feelings, but not by criticizing your partner. Encourage your partner to share his feelings and respond to them lovingly.

Carefully Clarify. Carefully clarify what you are both saying so there can be no misunderstanding. Take turns doing this, with no interruptions.

Truthing in Love. Speak the truth in love. The original expression in the New Testament (Eph. 4:15) is literally “*truthing in love*,” maintaining truth in love, both with your speech and with your behavior. Honesty and love are needed, so speak the truth but speak it gently.

Say, “I Need You.” Be willing to show your vulnerable, needy side to your partner. Don’t be afraid to say, “I need you.” Sometimes we want to conceal our feelings to protect ourselves, but when you begin communicating, you learn the value of being honest, even about your own weaknesses. Real communication means revealing yourself even at the risk of rejection. When both are willing to do this, you are well on your way to building loving intimacy in your relationship.

Surprise and Disarm. Stop being defensive when the issue is a personal one. Surprise and disarm your partner by agreeing there is wrong on your side, since there always is (even if you don’t wish to admit it). Be specific. “I was wrong” can stop a fight and demonstrate to your partner how to admit wrong, too.

Apply the B-E-S-T. Apply the B-E-S-T principles in your communication. As you talk with each other, *bless* each other with your words; *edify* (or build up) your partner by what you say and by your interest in what your partner has to say; *share* openly and honestly; and *touch* affectionately while you talk. *Bless, edify, share and touch* – communicate the BEST to your mate.

Other Frustrations

1. *Pretending you’re communicating when you’re merely attacking your spouse.*
2. *Not knowing how to express your feelings without putting the other down.*
3. *Stating your views as though they are the absolute truth.*
4. *Not hearing the message from your partner because you’re too busy figuring out what to say next.*
5. *Faking attention but not really listening.* You should establish eye contact, think while listening, and not only concentrate on the words, but observe the nonverbal behavior of the speaker. All of this must be integrated into the meaning of the message.
6. *Trying to communicate when you have two different goals for the conversation.* For example, when a wife pours out her problem to her husband, she may not be looking for an instant solution. Her husband, who views himself as a problem solver, gives her a quick way to handle the problem, and then becomes frustrated when she does not appreciate his brilliant solution. She’s equally frustrated because she needed just to talk with him about it and to feel his support and understanding. It’s best to know the initial purpose of the conversation. The one who is being approached should be sensitive to the other’s needs and goals for the conversation. If necessary, ask in a tactful way. Body language, tone of voice and facial expressions will tell you a great deal. Usually the wife will be more relationally oriented, and the husband more data-oriented.
7. *Husband and wife communicate differently, and this can lead to misunderstandings and mutual exasperation.* Men are usually more linear in their thinking, moving from a to b to c, while a woman can surround the subject from nine directions. And she is usually more concerned with people issues. Women will sometimes repeat the same thing several times to their husbands because to share it you have to say it several times. Men do the same thing, but they say it to three different people. One significant difference to keep in mind is the way men and women use the words *want* and *need*. Women don’t mind saying, “I need,” and may say it often. Men do not. To express need makes many men uncomfortable. When they say anything, it’s usually “I want.” Wives need to remember that men have needs, whether or not they are willing to express them.
8. *Cultural differences and personality differences also take their toll on patience.* Differing backgrounds inevitably cause friction and disagreements. Adaptation will be necessary and will be inevitable when two people love each other.

Learning to Fight the Biblical Way

Ephesians 4:25-32 offers seven rules for having a good fight. These rules will allow you to carry on normal, natural, disagreeable times without breaking with Scripture.

1. **Keep it honest.** Be committed to honesty and mutual respect.
2. **Keep it under control.** Make sure your weapons are not deadly.
3. **Keep it timed right.** Agree together that the time is right to talk.
4. **Keep it positive.** Be ready with a positive solution right after taking a swing.
5. **Keep it tactful.** Watch your words and guard your tongue.
6. **Keep it private.** Don't swing at your mate in public. When you swing in public, your malice is showing.
7. **Keep it cleaned up.** When it's all over, help clean up the mess.

Owning the Problem

"Owning the problem" means that I approach the problem with the attitude that the problem exists because of the way I feel and not because the other person is bad or defective. I accept the responsibility for finding a problem in my relationship with my spouse.

Owning the problem is a non-condemning way of expressing your inability to accept your spouse's behavior. But acceptance does not mean that you never have a problem with your spouse's behavior.

What to Do When You Own the Problem

In order to deal with the problem use the technique of "*requesting*." When mutual respect and caring has been established between two people, a respectful request is one way to deal with the problem. It is important that the request is framed in such a way as to make it sound like a respectful request.

Aspects of a respectful request would include stating your (legitimate) need and then making a request. For example, "I don't mind you going fishing on Saturday, but I'd like some time with you, too. Would you be able to be home by 2:00?" In this situation, the need is to spend time together, and the request is that the fishing trip be completed by 2:00.

"*Direct sending*" is a communication technique which allows you to express your feelings about a behavior. Moralizing and judging the behavior will lead to conflict. The expression of your feelings in a nonjudgmental way is much less threatening and you are more likely to be heard.

The direct sending of feelings is done in the form of "I" messages. An "I" message is a report of the impact of the spouse's behavior on you. It is a report because it is not judging the behavior, but rather a way of sharing our feelings about the behavior. For example:

BEHAVIOR ("When")	EMOTION ("I feel")	IMPACT ("Because")
<i>Husband comes home late with no prior explanation. Wife says:</i>		
"When I don't know where you are..."	"I feel anxious..."	"because I'm afraid something has happened to you."
<i>Wife does not keep house neat. Husband says:</i>		
"When the house looks cluttered..."	"I feel annoyed..."	working harder at my job than you are at yours."

In neither case is the spouse accused of being a bad person. In both cases the problem is expressed as though the problem is his own.

WHY “I” MESSAGES

1. They show ownership of the problem.
2. They communicate honesty and openness.
3. They communicate to the spouse the effect of the behavior, which is far less threatening than the suggestion that something is bad about him.
4. They place a responsibility on the spouse for modifying his behavior and provide opportunities to be considerate of the needs and feelings of others.
5. They demonstrate respect for the spouse and at the same time show that your needs are important, too.
6. They provide a means for being honest. When you share your feelings, your spouse will be more willing to do so when he has a problem.
7. They tell your spouse how you *feel* which is less threatening than accusing him of causing those feelings.
8. They deal with actions or behavior, not his self-esteem. They do not attack personality or character. We have a right to question a spouse’s behavior. But we have no right to question him as a person or his worth as a creature made in God’s image.
9. They communicate trust – trust that the spouse will respond to negative feelings which change when his behavior is blocking the fulfillment of the other spouse’s needs.
10. They encourage the spouse to help with and share in the problem.
11. They provide a way for the spouse to know the limits of your acceptance.
12. They demonstrate that personal worth is not dependent on performance. Personal worth is not subject to cancellation with every misstep. A person with high self-esteem knows that his behavior does not always please, but knows that his spouse loves him.
13. They build high self-esteem by reinforcing positive behavior. Direct “I” messages should express acceptable behaviors as well. For example, “When I hear you set aside the requests of others in favor of my requests, I feel loved, because it makes me feel as if you’re willing to put me first.”

Communication Breakdown

We don’t always send our messages effectively. Instead of “I” messages we often send “you” messages. A “you” message results in communication breakdown because the use of “you” implies that the other person is wrong and the speaker is right. These include blaming, name-calling, sarcasm, and analyzing.

A “you” message is any message that conveys the idea that I am the normal one, I am right, and you are abnormal.

Problems to Watch

1. *Be careful not to send “you” messages.* Remember that “you” messages are the language of attack.
2. *Defensiveness.* It’s never pleasant to hear that you have made someone else unhappy. You will be tempted to defend yourself by denying the validity of what is being said or by counterattacking.
3. *Fear of anger.* Real feelings need to come out so you can deal with the real problems. Often the presenting problem is only the “tip of the iceberg.” The presenting problem is the problem that is offered as the cause of the problem. Sometimes it is the cause of the trouble, but the problem usually goes much deeper.
4. *Telling the other person how he feels.* Sometimes when an “I” message is sent, the listener does not listen, but tells the speaker that he does not feel that way. For example, suppose I tell you that I’m hurt because you treated me badly. Instead of listening to my feelings you say, “You don’t feel hurt. You’re really mad because you didn’t get your way.” Don’t do that. Listen to how I say I feel. Don’t correct me and tell me how I “really” feel.
5. *Rushing the process.* When feelings are hot the temptation is to unload them all at once. Unload slowly and pause between active listening and sending your own “I” message. If you rush in with your own “I” message, the other person will not feel that you have listened.

Roadblock Checklist

- Note the following roadblocks to good communication.
- Directing, ordering, commanding, such as, “You must have my breakfast ready by 6 AM.”
- Warning, threatening, admonishing, such as, “You had better get yourself home directly after work.”
- Moralizing, preaching, obliging, such as, “You should tithe regularly.”
- Persuading with logic, arguing, instructing, lecturing, such as, “Do you realize that well-bred people simply don’t do that?”
- Advising, recommending, providing answers or solutions, such as, “What I would do is tell the boss that he was unfair.”
- Evaluating, judging negatively, disapproving, blaming, name-calling, criticizing, such as, “You are bad!/lazy/not thinking straight/acting foolishly.”
- Praising, judging or evaluating positively, approving, such as, “You’re a good husband.” “I approve of...”
- Supporting, reassuring, excusing, sympathizing, such as, “It’s not so bad; things will look different tomorrow.”
- Diagnosing, psychoanalyzing, reading-in, offering insights, interpreting, such as, “What you need is to get your life straight with God!”
- much time on the phone with George?” Questioning, probing, cross-examining, prying, interrogating, such as, “Why do you always spend so
- Diverting, avoiding, bypassing, disagreeing, shifting, silence, such as, “Let’s not talk about it now.”
- Kidding, teasing, making light of, joking, using sarcasm, such as, “Why don’t you shoot the boss?”

Comparing, such as, “Why can’t you be like Martha’s husband?”

Here are twenty-one phrases that help turn down the heat of anger:

Please try to understand my point of view.
Wait, can I take that back?
You don’t have to solve this—it helps me just to talk to you.
This is important to me. Please listen.
I overreacted, I’m sorry.
I see you’re in a tough position.
I can see my part in this.
I hadn’t thought of it that way before.
I could be wrong.
Let’s agree to disagree on that.
This isn’t just your problem, it’s our problem.
I’m feeling unappreciated.
We’re getting off the subject.
You’ve convinced me.
Please keep talking to me.
I realize it’s not your fault.
That came out all wrong.
I see how I contributed to the problem.

What are we really fighting about?
How can I make things better?
I’m sorry.
I love you