

Keys To Marital Communication

Introduction. If you were to poll all the married couples in America, you would find inevitably that communication breakdown is considered the number one problem in the destruction of all marriages, occurring long before irreconcilable differences or adultery.

There are a lot of marriages that have been killed because of ineffective communication. We hear comments like, "We are just on different wavelengths," "I cannot get him to listen to me," or "She just does not understand." Fortunately, the Bible teaches and life verifies that good communication is not automatic. It is a skill -- a very precious skill that must be developed. The Bible tells us how to develop that skill and dramatically improve our marriage (Proverbs 25:11).

I. *Timing*

- A. Everyone has heard the expression that timing is everything (Ecclesiastes 3:1, 7, 17; 8:5-6). There is a lot of truth to that, but nowhere is that more true than when it comes to communication. Any communicator knows that the message needs to hit at just the right time (Proverbs 15:23). There's not a single stand-up comedian who has not practiced his or her act over and over again trying to deliver that punchline at just the right moment. A suspense novelist knows how to build the drama to the point where you are captivated and cannot put the book down. A good preacher knows to get people while their eyes are open. Every communicator looks at timing. And in a marriage, the timing of communication is essential. You may be ready to communicate something to your mate, but are they ready to receive it?
- B. For example, if your mate has worked hard all day long, if he or she has been out in the heat of the day, and walks in ragged and drenched with sweat, it is probably not a good idea to meet them at the door and stare them in the eye and say, "We have got a problem." They are thinking, "Everything I have done today has turned into a problem. I do not want another one. I feel like walking out." You do not drop a bombshell on your mate when they are tired, frustrated, going to bed, or walking out the door. You do not bring something up when they are engrossed in something that is demanding their full attention. Bad timing equals fireworks.

II. *Planning*

- A. If you want to be effective in your communication; if you want your communication to be persuasive, think about what you are going to say (Proverbs 16:23). Do not shoot from the lips. Husbands and wives

are commanded to live with one another in an understanding way (1 Peter 3:7). The word "understanding" means knowledge. I need to have knowledge about my mate. There is no place where this is more applicable than knowing how to speak to our mates.

- B. Husbands and wives need to plan how they will introduce a subject to their spouses. That is so critical. So many times we short-circuit meaningful communication by broaching the subject in a negative way because we are frustrated for some reason. How many times have you found that to be true in your marriage? If you are concerned about how the house looks, the way to broach the subject is not to walk in and say, "Why does this place always look like a pig sty?" Or if you look at your mate and say, "Is your mother always like that?" Or if in the heat of an argument say, "Do what you want because you never listen to me anyway." From that point forward you have destroyed any opportunity for constructive, meaningful conversation.

III. **Focusing**

- A. You need to focus on your mate to communicate effectively. There is not a one of us who does not nourish and cherish his own body (Ephesians 5:28-29). I am supposed to care for my mate like I care for my own body. In order for your words to be beneficial to your listeners, it must address their needs (Ephesians 4:29). That is the key to get people to listen to you. If you start with their needs, their hurts, their goals, and their interests, you will guarantee an audience.
- B. Before you bring up a subject in a conversation with your mate, ask yourself if this relates to what your mate needs. If you want to really communicate, get your mate to listen, get your children to listen, or get anybody to listen, you have got to talk about something that threatens them, something they value, or something that is unique to them.
 1. You can threaten your mate, and I will guarantee you will get their attention, but you will be destroying the relationship.
 2. You can be unique. You can dye your hair and put tattoos all over your body, and your mate will notice, but it will not do anything to build your relationship.
 3. Communication flows when you show interest in your spouse's needs, goals, and what they value. Communication is blocked when you care only for yourself (Philippians 2:4, 20-21). You want to make them better, not make your life easier!

IV. **Listening**

- A. The trouble with so much of our communication is that many of us want a monologue instead of a dialogue. We want to be the one to

talk, like the fellow who said, "When I want my wife's opinion, I will give it to her." If I do not listen before I answer, it is to my shame (Proverbs 15:14; 18:13; John 7:51). Have you ever been so anxious to make a point that you had no idea what the person you were talking to just said? The Bible says we get into big trouble when we speak before we think. How many arguments do you suppose have started between couples by assumptions? Nobody listened, they just assumed. Or because one partner in the marriage only "half listened" and missed the point and then responded in a negative way?

- B. James 1:19 is a good verse to put on our refrigerator, bathroom mirror, or any place where we will notice it during the day. The reason that has to be commanded is because it is against our nature to listen. It is more natural to talk (Proverbs 16:32). Studies have shown that we only listen to about 20% of what is being said to us. The reason we only listen to 20% is because it takes a concentrated effort. God gave us an advantage with two ears and one mouth because He knew how hard it would be to listen.
- C. While we are talking about the ears and mouth, let me address these organs and how they relate to listening. The first place you listen is with the eyes. If you want to show your mate respect, or anybody for that matter, you must look at them and establish eye contact. You respond more to what you see from people than from what you actually hear from people. Studies have shown that only 7% of the way real communication occurs comes through actual words, and 43% of what we communicate is through the way we say it: volume, pace, voice inflection, and manner. So 50% of all the communication that occurs is through body language, posture, expressions, and gestures.

V. ***Encouraging***

- A. Speak to your mate positively (Proverbs 16:21, 24). An old saying goes, "I am never persuasive when I am abrasive." It is never good to say anything you want regardless of how the other person feels. What you say does have some impact. Some people use their "honesty" to whip others. They often describe themselves as "straight shooters" or that they "fire from the hip." They may say, "Well, that is just the way I am," but it is not an acceptable excuse, and it is a quick route to divorce court.
- B. Sarcasm shuts down communication because it demonstrates contempt for your spouse. The Bible clearly says that the more positive my words, the more effective and persuasive my communication becomes (Proverbs 12:25). Positiveness in speech is a mark of maturity and understanding. Couples would be much stronger

- if they are like Barnabas (Acts 4:36; 11:22-23), and speak words of edification (Romans 14:19; 1 Corinthians 8:1; 1 Thessalonians 5:11).
- C. Have you ever noticed that they build monuments to people who are criticized all of their lives, and yet you have never seen a monument built to a critic? Any fool can be a critic. Too many marriages are long on diagnosis and short on prescription. All couples do is rehash what has been going wrong ever since they got married. The spouse never wants to talk because the discussion never goes anywhere. It is essential that you get off the diagnosis and get on the prescription. Even when you and your mate are knee-deep in a problem that is really bad, move in a positive direction. Lay out the potential solutions to the problem and make a constructive decision.

VI. **Concluding**

- A. Conclude your conversation positively. I have noticed particularly with regard to disagreements that many couples just go around and around and around; they never stop. Couples need to reach a conclusion; it may be a final conclusion, or it may be just temporary, but reach a point in which you can both agree and end the conversation (Psalm 37:8; Ecclesiastes 7:8-9; Matthew 5:22; Ephesians 4:26).
- B. Conclusions produce contentment. Perhaps the biggest problem a married couple will ever face is an argument that lacks an end. By that I mean, when in one of their minds, the issue is settled, and in the other's mind, it is not settled. This is not the place to be vague. Be specific and tell your mate if an issue is not settled.
- C. When you conclude a major discussion, especially if it is a disagreement, reaffirm two ideals with your mate.
1. First, reaffirm your love for your mate. You may say, "I was angry in the last few minutes, but love is a choice, and I will tell you even though I may not be happy right now, I love you and I always will. I am committed to this marriage" (Genesis 29:20).
 2. Second, reaffirm an optimism that God can help you with your problems. You need to realize that you serve a God that is bigger than the problems you and your mate are having (Psalm 27:9).

Conclusion. I know some of you are thinking, particularly if you have had great stress and communication difficulties in your marriage, "Boy, I don't know. That is a lot of trouble. I don't know if it is worth it." I want to close by saying this, "The prize is worth the price." The relationship is worth the work it takes to develop effective communication.