

Please Listen to What I am Saying and Not to what You are Hearing.

Two o'clock one morning a wife wakes up her husband and says to him, "Honey, it's hot in here." He turns his head towards her and says "Yes, I know," and goes back to sleep. When they wake up hours later to get ready to go to work, the wife says to her husband, "Honey why didn't you put on the fan last night?" He responds by saying "you did not tell me to do that." She says "Yes I did." An argument ensues leading to the wife shouting "You never listen to me." Literally, she did not ask him to turn on the fan although that was the message intended. This is a far too common way of communicating. Individuals have an assumption that their partners will always understand the message intended, and this is wrong.

It is imperative for us to appreciate that even when both know the dictionary definition of the words being used, it is wrong to assume that the one listening will get the full message intended. This means our thinking would be impacted by our life experiences and these experiences will change the definition of words in our minds.

This also means that the words we use when we speak are determined by our core belief system—our values, world view, and self-image. In other words, how we interpret what we hear is unique to our deep, personal life experiences. And what we hear is not always what is being said. Perhaps another way to illustrate this is how people define the difference in temperatures in various countries. For example, a Canadian visits Nassau during our "winter" time when the temperature is 60 degrees. We boastfully tell the tourist to make sure to use a sweater because it is "cold." When the tourist experiences the "cold" whether she is pleasantly surprised of the warmth and exclaims "This is not winter." "Winter" for Bahamians means something different to Canadians.

Here's a key point. After the tourist experiences a Bahamian winter, he or she will then have a new definition of the word winter and will understand what it means when she hears a Bahamian speak again. This is because we filter what we hear through our own life experiences. We base our interpretation on our own definition and meaning of words and not the definition and meaning of the words of the speaker.

This brings me to something I must emphasize. Never assume that your romantic partner gets the message you intended each time you speak. Yes, your partner will be able to write down word for word what you said but still might not have gotten the message intended. Then what must we do? Take the time to clarify what is being said before entering a discussion or argument. It is best to restate to the person in your own words what they are saying. If you are not understanding what was said, then the person giving the request should take the time to clarify. It is important not to argue.

The language of each one of us is uniquely patterned but it does not come with a set of instructions for understanding. Persons must be patient to take the time to learn their partner's language—the meaning and purpose of words and phrases of partner. I've had clients who would respond to a question from a partner with the words "It's Okay." The word "okay" has a connotation of mediocrity or not the best. But that is not always true. For some people it is their language of norm for expression of satisfaction. For example, I asked a client "On a scale of 1 to 10 what is okay? Consider one is very bad and ten is the best." The client said nine. That shocked his wife. She thought he meant about as two or three. The answer created a relief and started the relationship on a positive track.

The bottom line is that individuals in romantic relationships should develop the skill to listen to what is not being said. Clinical Psychologist Dr. Tony Humphreys, in his article entitled "*Please hear what I am not saying*" writes: "The greatest gift you can give to another is an unconditional acceptance of his or her unique presence. Another wonderful gift that brings hope is to **hear** what a person is not saying or what a person is not doing. The reality is that we all wear masks – masks that hide the truth of our individuality and of the deep hurts that we have experienced. The number of masks that we create depends on the frequency, duration, and intensity of the hurts experienced. Masks are

defensive creations against having to re-experience the traumas of emotional abandonment, sexual violation, of ‘not being good enough’, ‘of having to prove myself all of the time’, of living under a tyranny of ‘shoulds’, ‘have tos’, of ‘having to do everything perfectly.’”

An important point Dr. Humphreys make in his article is that we wear masks due to our experiences, joyful or painful. These experience impacts the choice of words and we create in our own mind new definitions and intention of those words, but the speaker may not be cognizant of that. Therefore, be patient with each other and never assuming that you know what your partner is saying. This also means that the listener would be hearing based on his or her experiences.

In many marriages one of the biggest complaint by a spouse is that one’s spouse is not listening to what the other is saying. No, the partner is not saying that his or her spouse is deaf. It means that one is not understanding what is being said. It also means that the speaker is expecting the listener to read between the lines. This is wrong. To make sure one “understands,” the listener must assume that he or she does not know the message intended by the speaker. Therefore, as stated earlier, the listening would ask a question like “Are you saying you want me to come home earlier tonight?” Or make a statement like “I am hearing you saying that you want me home earlier tonight.” The speaker must be patient with the listener because he or she is not a mind reader and cannot know what the thought or intention is.

Now you should have a deeper understanding of what it means to listen with understanding, compassion and acceptance. This is one of the most important tools to learn in a marriage. It might take years to learn this skill, so it is important to be patient with each other.

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