

Honey, Let's Talk

Effective Communication Works Miracles

If there is one basic ingredient that can greatly enhance a marriage relationship, even through tough times, it is effective, loving communication. How are your communication skills? That is, how do you communicate your feelings, requests, or ideas to your mate? Psychologist Deborah Tanner writes: "Talking is the major way we establish, maintain, monitor and adjust our relationships." People who are in love discover that the way they communicate with their partners is crucial to either keeping them close or pulling them apart.

PREACHER OR LOVER

There are at least two ways of describing how couples talk: "preacher" or "lover." In a romantic relationship, partners who "preach" are those who talk "to" their mates. They are more often, like preachers or teachers, giving instructions and directing, but not necessarily creating the mood for a reciprocal response. Their partners must listen, agree, and obey and may feel more like a child than an equal adult partner in the relationship. The "preacher" often generates the most conflicts in a relationship. Preaching is excellent behind the church pulpit, but not when sharing with a romantic partner. So get down from the "pulpit" and sit beside your partner.

In a romantic relationship a partner who communicates like a "lover" talks "with," not "to" his or her mate. Lovers listen, avoid giving instructions, engender the partner's response, and value her opinions. Lovers are not opinionated. They are humble and teachable. Lovers listen with their ears and their hearts. In marital therapy, I have noted that one of the challenges couples face is not what they tell me as their therapist, rather it is that one or both of them feel that the other partner is always "preaching" to them, creating a roadblock to intimacy. I would simply ask the question: "Who is the preacher in the relationship?" One of them would quickly respond, pointing the finger, "he is" or "she is." They seem to know, without having me define it, what the question means. It is as though someone has finally brought clarity to how they felt for a long time. It is common for partners to swing back and forth between a "preacher" and a "lover." When they want to have their way and flex their authoritarian muscles, they assume the preacher's role. When they selfishly want something special from their partners, they are "lovers." This Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde behavior is seldom seen by others outside the relationship and can be very confusing and painful to victims of "preaching."

In a romantic relationship, victims of "preaching" often feel they are being treated like immature, unintelligent children. "Preachers" make it very difficult to resolve conflicts in a relationship. They set up stumbling blocks to effective resolutions of differences.

In the book "Empowering Couples," Psychologist Dr. David Olsen presents five stumbling blocks regarding conflict resolution. They are (*italics supplied*):

1. One person ends up feeling responsible for the problem. (*"Preachers" are good at making their partners feel guilty.*)
2. I go out of my way to avoid conflict with my partner. (*In response to the preaching, the partner may withdraw or avoid sharing.*)
3. Differences never seem to get resolved. (*Since "preachers" are not good listeners, the couple seldom, if ever, comes to a mutual agreement.*)
4. We have different ideas about the best way to solve disagreements. (*The "preacher's" opinions are always right.*)
5. We have serious disputes over unimportant issues. (*Trivial matters often dominate arguments when there are "preachers" around.*)

WHO'S TALKING THE MOST?

During the courting years, men and women spend lots of time talking with each other. After they get married, conversation declines sharply. Both become involved in other things that take up more time. The truth is the decline in conversation is usually noticeable among husbands more than wives. Dr. Willard Harley in his book "His Needs Her Needs" states, "I rarely have a man ask me 'Why isn't my wife talking to me?' But I often hear, 'Why isn't my husband talking to me?' from women. Men do not seem to have a great need for conversation with their wives as women do with their husbands." Is this really true?

Men find it easy to talk to women when they date because they want to make a lasting impression. Men seem to know just how to captivate women's hearts. However, after the wedding day, the eagerness to discover, share, and romanticize through conversation turns into small talk; for example, "Pick up the children after school," "Is the dinner ready?" "Take out the trash."

Before the wedding day the husband seems to know just how to turn his wife on with his installments of gentle, sweet and assuring words. However, within months after "I do," it begins to feel that the words were just that, "installments," that the husband intended to last a lifetime of marriage. It's as though he is saying "no need to make any more sweet talk. I said enough." Soon his conversation becomes more and more instructional. For some men, the emphasis is no longer on unconditional, reciprocal love, but on obedience and submission. It was as though captivating the heart of his bride was just a "project" that he did his best to complete. After the wedding day he simply moves onto another project: the new house, the car, career, etc. His conversation needs to be warm and alluring. Unfortunately, without romantic and caring conversation, the wife may (unknowingly) emotionally pull away from her husband. Like a deer, thirsty for cool flowing waters, she finds her self attracted to the voice of another caring man who seems to understand her needs. Soon there is an emotional entanglement and she gets all the blame for bringing problems into the marriage. In her partner's mind it is obvious—she is the one having the "affair," not him. In fact he is just as guilty. He started having the "affair" first when he began putting more time in cleaning the car and staying out with the boys. Now, with no romantic conversation between them, the "sweet talker" has become the cold and distant "preacher."

LISTENERS

A prerequisite for being a good talker is being a good listener. A challenge in romantic relationships is that "preachers" seldom listen. Rather, they must be listened to. "Preachers" might "hear" what their partners are saying, but they are not tuned to them. Their brain cells are preoccupied with the need to control and instruct. "Lovers" are usually great listeners. They not only listen with their ears, but they also listen with their hearts. This is why when "lovers" talk they get a warm response, even though they do not know all the answers to their partners' inquiries, concerns, or questions. Social workers Michael and Marlene Nikolich, in their article "Are You Listening?" compare listening and hearing this way: "If I'm **hearing**, it's what **I** get out of it. If I'm **listening**, it's what **you** get out of it." They further explain: "Being listened to is perhaps more important than any other single factor in a good marriage. . . . Listening is not only avoiding interruptions and letting the other say what he wants to say. Listening is more than paying attention. Actually, it's being attentive to the other person. *Stay close to the person and touch.* A touch can show the other person that I'm really present in this conversation."

So why are the "preachers" preaching? Shouldn't they be listening? Conversation is a two-way street. Each person engaged in the conversation is to feel that his or her opinions and ideas are valuable.

Here are examples of what "preachers" say and the messages their partners might be getting:

1. "**Who is wearing the pants around this house?**" The message given: "Since I am the man, your opinions are not as valuable and important as mine are."
2. "**Marriage is a private affair.**" The message given: "Whatever happens in marriage, no matter how life-threatening, keep it a secret."
3. "**God made women to be the weaker vessel.**" The message given: "Because a woman is not as

physically strong as a man, he should be the one in control. Therefore the weaker a woman, the stronger the man should be."

4. **"Whom do you think you are?"** The message given: "I Am better than you."
5. **"You never make sense."** The message given: "Women are more intelligent than men, therefore what you are saying will never be meaningful."

SELF EVALUATION

How well do you communicate with your partner? Are you happy and comfortable in the way you communicate with each other? Here is a short quiz from "Empowering Couples" to assist you in discussing with your partner. Keep in mind that both of you must have an open, objective, and nonjudgmental attitude.

To respond to the statements choose one of the following:

1 - Strongly disagree 2 - Disagree 3-Undecided 4- Agree 5-Strongly Agree

1. We are good at sharing positive and negative feelings with each other _____
2. My partner is very good at listening. _____
3. We let each other know our preferences and ideas. _____
4. We can easily talk about problems in our relationship. _____
5. My partner really understands me. _____

Here are a few more questions to help you evaluate how you communicate in your relationship. Answer the questions as honestly as you can by using "Yes" or "No":

1. When my partner talks, he or she can know by my body language.
2. I take the time to listen to my partner's ideas and opinions.
3. Little arguments escalate into ugly fights with accusations, criticisms, name calling, or bringing up past hurts.
4. My partner seems to view my words or actions more negatively than I mean them to be.
5. I hold back from telling my partner when I really think and feel.
6. When we argue, one of us withdraws; that is, one doesn't want to talk about it anymore or leaves the scene.

MAKE A DIFFERENCE TODAY

Dear reader, if you really want a long-lasting, loving relationship, start listening to your partner with your ears and your hearts. Stop being a "preacher" and become a "lover" in your conversations. Take the time each week to share, go on dates, play, and pray together.

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