

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION IN A MARRIAGE



Early in our marriage we attended a one-day marriage seminar. There were a variety of couples there, some who had been married for 20 years or more, some just a few years, and one couple who were not yet married.

One of the exercises they asked us to do was a questionnaire which was designed to test how well we knew our spouse. After we had done the exercise they compared our marks. The couple who scored the highest were – you guessed – the engaged couple!

When we are 'in love', as I have said, we do seem to communicate quite naturally but as time goes on we need to make a deliberate commitment to work at it. It doesn't just happen by itself. It is a bit like rowing upstream. If you stop rowing you will drift backwards.

Perhaps you have 'drifted' and find there is some distance between you and your spouse, what do you do to draw close again? Without communication there can be no real relationship. Learning to communicate is like building a bridge between the two of you so that you can move towards each other.

LEVELS OF COMMUNICATION

Five different levels of communication have been identified. These levels move from shallow, surface levels of communications to the deep, meaningful level that enables you to enjoy a closeness and intimacy that God intended for marriage.

1.Cliché

This is when communication is reduced to the bare essentials, greetings or formalities. There may be requests to "pass the salt" or "who is picking up the kids?", but nothing is said that doesn't have to be said.

2.Reporting Facts

Here conversation takes place but it is conversation that is very safe and unthreatening. The couple will talk about events or people that are 'out there'.

3.Expressing Own Ideas and Opinions

This is beginning to go a little deeper as now the person is starting to open up about themselves – about what they think. Saying 'I don't think our daughter should dress like that' carries with it the note of disagreement, argument and even potential rejection.

4. Showing Feelings and Emotions

Our communication goes to a new level when we begin to express how we feel. Men find this particularly hard (I'm generalising) especially as often we are not even aware of the emotions within us. Eg. I was afraid you would 'reject me' or 'I feel inadequate' or 'I feel inferior or worthless'. This kind of vulnerability rarely results in the rejection from our spouse that we fear, rather it has the effect of producing a closeness and intimacy that we all crave, especially if our feelings are accepted by our spouse.

5. Moments of Complete Union and Sharing Ourselves without Reserve

The bible talks of being naked and unashamed. A relationship that has built up a deep level of trust and unconditional acceptance enable a couple to open up completely without reserve. If both parties are aiming to share at this level, then your relationship is bound to grow. We cannot live constantly at this deep and intense level but we can aim to have moments when we are completely and unreservedly open and vulnerable.

WHAT IS COMMUNICATION?

Effective communication has two main elements which are "speaking" and "listening". It sounds simple and straight forward but actually communication is a skill which takes practice if it is going to be effective. I have a poster on my wall which says this: 'I know you believe you understand what you think I said but I don't know if you realise that what you heard is not what I meant!!' Lets think through the process of speaking and listening. I have an idea in my head which I try to put into words but don't succeed entirely – you hear what you think I said, then you interpret it according to your own perspective. You then formulate a response which you try (somewhat unsuccessfully) to put into words – I then hear what I think you have said and give it my own interpretation.... and so on. In other words there is a lot of 'interference' that confuses and distorts the process. The other point I want to make is that communication is a two way process. It is not simply telling the other 'the facts'. So let's look at these two aspects more carefully:

1. Speaking

The scripture which sums up what should be our goal here is 'speaking the truth in love'. There are three elements to this verse:

- a) Speaking
- b) The truth
- c) In love.

a) Speaking

This again sounds so obvious. But we don't always do it! In other words, sometimes we don't speak. We don't tell our spouse what is going on inside of us. An action or word spoken by our spouse may annoy us intensely but instead of saying something we keep quiet because 'it'll cause a scene' or we withdraw into silence. Sometimes we play mind games where we expect our spouse to know something about us – just because 'they should know!'. So a spouse may feel unloved or uncared for because their partner hasn't shown concern for the problem you have at the moment, which you haven't actually taken time to talk about.

So do speak – tell your spouse what you are thinking and feeling. Be as vulnerable as you can be.

b) The Truth

We often do speak but don't speak the truth. Especially in conflict situations when we are trying to win an argument or prove a point. We can easily resort to exaggeration, which will exasperate our partner who knows what you are saying is not entirely true. In this regard it is important to avoid using global statements like 'always', 'never' which again antagonise because they are almost never true. 'You are always late' or 'you never tidy up after yourself' will get angry responses in which your spouse will tell you of times they were not late or they did tidy up.

Other ways we don't speak the truth is when we tell little 'white' lies. John and Mary had a problem in this regard. John was angry with Mary because he said "she never did what she said she would". When we explored this area, we discovered that when John asked Mary to do something, she would say 'yes' but actually what she was thinking was "I'll do it if I get time" – or "it's not that important so I'll have to do all these other things first". John had the expectation of having these things completed and was resentful when they were not. Mary had to learn to say what she was thinking not what she thought John wanted to hear!

Speaking the truth involves speaking about what you know is true. We can sometimes make statements which we think are true but actually are just our interpretation of events. For example in John and Mary's case when Mary did not do what John had asked. John would exclaim "you don't love me do you" or "you just don't care about me" which Mary refuted angrily. Imputing motives will antagonise. To speak the truth it is better to speak what you know is true. So John would have done better to say 'I feel hurt when you don't do as I ask, because it seems to me that you don't care about me.' He is now speaking about himself rather than imputing motives to what Mary did or didn't do.

Another important aspect about speaking the truth is being "congruent". We convey

what we are saying in our words but also in our tone of voice and our body language.

We are told that only 7% of what we convey is vocal, 55% is non-vocal (ie: our body language) and 38% is our tone of voice. To be congruent is to be saying the same things with our words, body language and tone of voice. When couples come to see me for counselling the way they sit on the couch opposite speaks volumes about how they are feeling towards each other. When they first come in they usually cross their legs away from each other and face slightly away. Sometimes they will have their arms placed defensively across their body and have their hands in front of their mouth. Your partner will even unconsciously pick up what you are saying in your body language and tone of voice. We can of course misinterpret what our partner is saying in their body language so if you pick up incongruencies or contradictions then you must ask before jumping to conclusions. So your spouse might be frowning from a headache rather than because they are unhappy or irritated ! Be aware of the overall message you are conveying. If there are contradictions, then you need to ask yourself am I telling my spouse the truth?

c) In Love

Of course it is possible to speak the absolute truth but to do it in a way that is cutting and hurtful. 'Your breath stinks' may be a 100% true statement but will not help your relationship. 'I was embarrassed by your behaviour last night because after you had a few drinks you began to get loud and aggressive with our guests', is much more constructive than 'you got drunk last night and made a real idiot of yourself!'

To speak in love is to say things (the truth) in a way that will help NOT hurt your partner. The truth can be used as a 'weapon' against your partner. Much rather use it 'in love' which is with the motive of assisting your partner to understand what you are thinking and feeling.

Finally, as we seek to 'speak the truth in love', there is a very helpful tool which can improve our ability to convey our thoughts and feelings to our spouse. This is what has been called word pictures (Smalley and Trent). For example, John might have described how he felt about his relationship with Mary and the children in this way. "I feel like I'm standing outside the house where it is cold, wet and windy. The door is closed and as I look in the window I can see you (Mary) and the children sitting around the fire, talking, laughing and having fun."

Mary on the other hand, may say that the way she sees this relationship is "it's like I am standing in a line holding hands with the children, we are all looking toward you, waiting for you to turn towards us but you are some distance away with your back to us and you are absorbed with your own things that you have in your hands".

These 'word pictures' can convey a depth of feeling and thought that we may otherwise

struggle to describe.

2.Active Listening

Now we come to the other vital and probably most neglected aspect of communication, that is hearing our partner. We are often so keen for our partner to hear and understand us that we neglect to listen to them. Listening is a skill that needs to be cultivated and learned. Again there are three aspects of this skill:

a) Concentration

b) Understanding

c) Empathy.

a)Concentration

When our children were small I can remember them pointing upwards with their chubby arms that reached just above their heads when an airliner flew overhead. We had long since tuned this noise out and no longer noticed until our inquisitive children drew our attention to it. We tune out unnecessary noises which can be useful but we also learn to turn each other out. To communicate we must make a deliberate and concerted effort to tune in. We call it active listening. Quite obviously, it is not passive. It does not happen by itself. We are not going to hear our spouse unless we concentrate on them and what they have to say. It means focussing to the exclusion of all else. Just like the satellite dish needs to be adjusted to receive the best signal, so we need to focus and give our full attention if we are to hear properly.

Turning to face our spouse and looking at them can help. Again just as for our satellite dish there are numerous other signals that can distract and confuse, which need to be shut out, so we need to get rid of all distractions, other noises that would keep us from hearing clearly. Listening is showing respect, honouring the other enough to demonstrate that what they have to say is more important than those other 'noises'.

So if we are to hear them there must be a time when you turn the TV off, or you put the book or newspaper down, or when you came home from work early, or you forgo the hobby or sporting activity or you go to bed later so that you can give your spouse your 100% attention.

My wife and I work together. So you could say we spend most of our time together. However, it is possible to be in the same building, even in the same room but not really communicating or connecting. We make a point of going out for coffee every week. It's a fixed appointment where we go to get away from all distractions so that we can talk and listen.

b)Understanding

The reason active listening is so important is because it is so easy to misunderstand each other. There are a number of big differences between the partners of any marriage. Firstly we all to some degree marry someone of a different cultural background. Our home backgrounds are different even if we have lived in the same community all our lives (which is not likely these days). The values, norms, standards that we have been taught very often will vary. The view of extended family, table manners, finance, roles, leisure time, attitude to qualifications and work, bed times, attitude to alcohol, beliefs etc., may be different and can cause misunderstandings. Both see their own understanding and background as being 'normal'.

Secondly, there are differences between men and women. For a long time, to say this, was considered politically incorrect, because it was assumed that this meant one was superior and the other inferior. The scriptures have the balance – we are equal in terms of worth but different in the way we think and function (and physically of course). These differences can and do cause confusion if they are not understood. Part of listening is understanding and accepting these differences. Below is a list of these gender differences. This is not the place to expand on each of these differences. Suffice to say active listening will help us know and understand our partner.

GENDER DIFFERENCES

MEN	WOMEN
Receive worth largely from work, success and career (significance)	Receive worth from relationships (security and love)
Want honour and respect	Want love verbalised
Goal oriented	People oriented
Love competitive sports	Interested in relationships
Want to feel competent	Not afraid to admit need help

Won't take advice – want to be in control	Want to help, to support, to rescue
Want to deal with problems in a solution focussed, logical rational manner	Want to talk about problems on an emotional level
Tend to withdraw into their 'caves' when stressed, to be alone and gain strength and inner calm	Tend to talk and share and want to feel supported when have problems
Men are literal (right brain dominant) and need to be told things (can't guess)	Woman are intuitive, (left and right brain balanced) emotional, know what people feel and need
Compartmentalise Can concentrate on only one thing at a time Summarise	No clear divisions Everything affects everything else Can do six things at once See whole picture
Observe things generally	See detail
Speak +/- 12 500 words a day	Speak +/- 26 000 words per day
Sex drive motivated chiefly by physical needs. Aroused by sight	Sex drive motivated chiefly by emotional needs Aroused by mood, 'atmosphere' or relationship
Not noticeably affected by hormone changes	Can be dramatically affected by hormone changes
Handle depression by externalising – blaming, become aggressive, angry	Internalise depression – take blame, guilt, shut down