

COUPLES' COMMUNICATION

In the twenty years I've been a couples' therapist, when clients call in for their initial consultation, they usually mention poor communication. They complain that their partner doesn't know how to communicate, won't communicate, won't respond to their communication, has poor communication skills, has a long history of poor communication, comes from a family of poor communicators... As I listen, I'm translating. To me it's all code for the fact that people *always communicate*; they just may not like the communication they're getting. And they're hurt, frustrated, feel stuck, hopeless, angry, scared.

You know the basics of indirect communication: when someone has their arms crossed, they are protecting themselves. When someone won't make eye contact or keeps their shades on, they don't want to be seen. "I'll call you" means "Don't hold your breath", and "Let's be friends" means "I'm not attracted to you sexually".

Undeniably, there's plenty of poor communication out there. But when couples get twisted up, it's usually because of the *meaning* they assign to the communication they perceive, the assumptions they make, and the feelings that ensue.

Here is an example of one couple I worked with recently. When he tells her something with good intent, but without putting flowers around it, based on her experience in her family of origin, she tends to feel criticized. In turn, when she rolls her eyes, he feels disrespected. Now they're both hurt and angry, and don't know how to move beyond it. This happens enough times that she is emotionally overwhelmed, she ups the ante and threatens to move out... repeatedly. (When people can't settle themselves down emotionally, they choose escape as the only way to decrease their stress. This partly accounts for our high divorce rate.) He feels despair, and eventually shuts down. Good news is, this is not terminal. What he was actually unconsciously communicating, it turns out, was that he felt shut out of the parenting process. After becoming aware of their dynamic, they now have much more effective communication skills, and can work as a team rather than as opponents.

Accusing your mate of being 'too controlling': there's a loaded comment. Let me tell you, we *all* want to control something. It just looks different in everybody. What do you perceive is being taken away from you? What are you not standing up for? What is it that *you* want to control, and why? What will it bring you? Try and communicate that cleanly. You'll be much better received. It's challenging, I know.

Successful communication is often about speaking in a way that the other can receive your message. Sometimes it's about telling someone what they need to hear, so that their visceral system can settle down and they can take in what you tell them after that: "I'm not leaving you, and I'd like to go out with the guys one night soon". "I'm not betraying you. I would be happy to go golfing with you next week, and today I want to go on a ride with my cycling club." "I'm so overwhelmed and in so much pain right now, that I want to leave. I'm not leaving the relationship. I just need some time to settle myself down, alone. I'll check back with you in a few hours."

Absolutely, positively never use the words 'always' or 'never', because they only add fuel to the fire of a disagreement. "You always (do this aggravating thing)!" "You never (do anything right)!" It only puts the other person on the defensive.

Along those lines, *don't make them wrong*. When you make someone wrong, you push them away, you invite them to be defensive, to make you wrong back. It is never productive. Tempting, yes. Easy to do, even without using words, very. Good communication, not! When you make somebody wrong, it is actually information about you. You have been triggered somehow. I invite you to be curious about that.

And using the word 'but' negates everything that came before it in the sentence. Use the word 'and' instead. As in: "You're beautiful, you're sexy, *and* I can't see you tonight". It just feels better to the person on the other end. Try it.

Remember: every communication has the power to bring people closer together or push them farther apart. So ask yourself, before you open your mouth, what impact your communication might have.

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