

Can We Talk? Improving Couples' Communication¹

Eboni J. Baugh and Deborah Humphries²

In this segment of the Florida Marriage Preparation series, couples are encouraged to look at the importance of learning and practicing the relationship skill of listening—as well as expressing thoughts and feelings. Other related publications include the following:

- *Couples Considering Parenthood*
- *Couples Considering A Blended Family*
- *So You are Getting Married in Florida!*
- *Your Money Matters*
- *Conflict Management and Resolution—Can We Agree?*

Overview

Committed couples care about and consistently work at the quality of their relationship. They realize that effective communication is important in strengthening their relationship. Couples who have healthy marriages love and respect each other and use many methods to communicate that to each other.

Communication is the Key

Communication is the key to a strong, healthy relationship. On so many levels, communication allows partners to exchange messages about love and other emotions. Effective communication requires practicing the skills of listening and the expression of thoughts and feelings. It is much more than talking, as communication consists of verbal messages (what you say), contextual issues (how you say it), emotional tone (why you say it), and even non-verbal cues (what you don't say).

Listening

Listening is the single most important communication skill as it is the best way to understand your partner. A good listener does more than just hear words; they interpret emotions, behaviors, and respond appropriately. But, how does one become a good listener?

A good listener pays attention to his/her partner's words AND feelings, the action of which sends a clear message: "You are important to me." It shows caring and increases the likelihood that your partner will continue sharing their feelings. When listening to

1. This document is FCS2178, one of a series of the Florida Marriage Preparation series, from the Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Original publication date November 2001. Reviewed October 2006. Revised December 2009; January 2010. Visit the EDIS Web site at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.

2. Original written by Deborah Humphries, M.S., extension agent, Taylor County Cooperative Extension Service; revised by Eboni Baugh (2009/10), assistant professor, Department of Family Youth and Community Sciences; Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences; University of Florida; Gainesville 32611.

your partner, encourage them to talk about what they find important. In the event that you do not agree with their statements, continue to listen without judgment or placing blame. Remember that good listening does not include defensiveness; therefore, do not use this as an opportunity to attack your partner. Good listening can be the key to defusing current and preventing future problems that could arise in a couple's relationship.

Listening requires that you pay attention to the tone of voice, facial expression, eye contact, and physical gestures of your partner. It is important to focus on nonverbal examples of feelings as well as the spoken words. It is easy to be careless and assume that you know what the other person means. Some pretend to listen while doing something else, while others clearly display that they have zoned-out mentally. In order to break these habits, you cannot focus on what to say next or make comparisons to what your partner said in the past. Give them your full attention and take time to think before you respond.

It may be difficult to change poor listening habits, but it is possible. Improving communication is worth the effort as listening to your partner is probably the best way to show care and concern.

Habits We Have That Prevent Good Listening

As Listeners

Prior habits and behaviors are common barriers to good listening. Too often as listeners we concentrate on the response we will give—instead of concentrating on the message we are getting. Our habit of thinking of a response or jumping to conclusions turns off our ability to hear the intended message.

Judgmental behavior takes this poor habit a step further, presenting another roadblock to good listening. A quick response of anger or making fun of what is being said can block out hearing the real message.

As Speakers

Using negative words, phrases, and body language often causes misinterpretations and discourages good listening. When speaking, it is important to use positive (or neutral) words, phrases, and body language to encourage open and attentive listeners.

Habits to Encourage Good Listening

Clear Self-expression

Many assume that their partner knows their needs, feelings, and opinions even though they've never actually been verbalized. All too often, that's just not the case: having the expectation that your partner can read your mind sets both of you up for negative results—hurt, disappointment, misunderstandings. Do you want to avoid this common communication mistake? If so, the solution is simple: *State your thoughts as clearly, honestly, and positively as you can.*

Don't avoid talking about something because you are afraid of what your partner will think. Focus on how something is affecting you. Try not to blame or criticize your partner while you are expressing yourself. Don't use statements like *"Unlike you, I..."*, or *"It is because of you that..."*—such statements will undermine any efforts at healthy communication.

Using "I" Messages

An effective way to talk to your partner is through "I" messages—statements that describe your feelings and tell how you are affected by your partner's behavior. "I" messages can express emotions in a way that is not threatening as they focus on the speaker's feelings and not blaming the partner.

"I" messages are very different from a "you" message. "You" messages place blame and judge the other person based on their behavior. "You" messages often trigger defensiveness or hostility your partner and tend to increase conflict. Think about how you feel when you hear *"You always..."* or *"You never..."*

The Mechanics of "I" Messages

"I" messages let your partner know how you feel and why you feel that way. "I" messages have three parts:

1. a statement about the speaker's feelings
2. a statement about the behavior that caused the feeling
3. the reason for the speaker's feelings

Practice Using "I" Statements

"I get upset when you criticize my parents because my parents are so important to me."

This "I" statement follows the three steps we mentioned:

1. It describes the feeling: "I get upset"
2. It describes the behavior: "when you criticize my parents"
3. It identifies the reason: "because my parents are so important to me."

Different Communication Styles

As stated earlier, communication plays a very important role in partners being satisfied in their marriage. If you would like better communication with your partner, it's good to understand some of the differences in communication styles.

Expressive

One partner may be more expressive. Expressive people like to share emotions and feelings. They look for real-time feedback or responses.

Task- or Fact-oriented

Another partner might seldom talk about feelings, and may use facts instead of emotions, as in: "I feel that I'm not making enough money." This person is looking for acceptance of his/her point of view, not emotions.

When Opposites Attract

These opposite styles might attract each other initially—and, over time, they may have difficulties dealing with what's going on in the relationship as the relationship becomes more complicated.

Getting to the Heart of the Matter

It is important to try to understand each other's communication style and respond accordingly. To accomplish this, couples should realize that there are no secrets to communication. You get better with practice, practice, practice.

Communicating details about our internal lives is a basic part of an intimate relationship. Speaking and listening at this level is a way to feel connected.

Learning and Practicing New Habits

Effective communication isn't easy. Teaching and learning new communication skills take patience, patience, patience, as well as practice, practice, practice.

Taking the time to talk is important. Your relationship provides a safe place to share feelings, thoughts, fears, dreams, and hopes. Make a special effort to find time to talk to your partner more frequently.

In tough times, people feel overwhelmed with worries and responsibilities. Time together as a couple is often the last thing on our minds as we deal with the hassles of daily life. Although you may be busy, stressed, and worried, take the time to focus on your partners' needs and spend quality time together without interruption. Even a few minutes a day talking about what has occurred can be a relief from stress. Be thoughtful by considering whether those difficult or problem-solving discussions could be reserved for other times when you and your partner are not tired or distracted.

You may need to be the one who starts conversations. It is worth it to be the one who initiates conversations. You can find many ways to open the door for communication if you are sensitive to changes in your partner's feelings and needs.

Taking the time to listen keeps the lines of communication open and improves your relationship.

Finding Time to Talk

- Spend time talking with limited interruptions.
- Make a date to talk to your partner.
- Plan at least one routine family time each week.
- Notice those times when your partner seems to have something he/she needs to talk about.
- Talk instead of watching TV.
- Talk when you take a walk together.
- Talk while you work together on household chores.
- Talk in the car while traveling to activities.

Summing It Up

In good times and bad, couples need each other. Good communication does not mean that your family won't have any problems, or that your partner will always like what you have to say. Good communication means the chances of solving problems are much higher if you and your partner can express yourselves openly and freely with each other.

References

- Hansen, Gary, 1986. *Effective family communication*. Cooperative Extension Service, University of Kentucky. Lexington. H.E. 7-120. 6 pp.
- Jolly, Colleen, (reviser) 1998. *Improving family communication*. Cooperative Extension Service, Iowa State University. Ames. PM-1200. 2 pp.
- Smith, Suzanna and Joe Pergola. 1993. (Revised 2005) *Can we talk?* Cooperative Extension Service, IFAS, University of Florida. Gainesville. 26 pp.
- Rooks-Weir, Evelyn and Joe Pergola. 1992. *Heart to heart: Strengthening families*. Cooperative Extension, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Gainesville. 52 pp.

Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences. 1997. *Teening-Up*. Cooperative Extension Service, IFAS, University of Florida, Gainesville. 184 pp.