

THE IMPORTANCE OF LISTENING



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Communication is the foundation of a strong relationship. There are a lot of pitfalls that go with communication, but there's also a lot of practical things that people can do that actually work to help.

It's important in every relationship, especially between partners and marriage, but also between parents and children. Any parent who has a teenager will know how tricky communication can be at

parents and children. Any parent who has a teenager will know how their communication can be at times with someone who's moody and doesn't want to communicate.

And the number one predictor of divorce today is the habitual avoidance of conflict. We like to imagine that couples who separate are arguing all the time and disagreeing with one another ... fighting and slamming doors and raising voices.

But what they do is they stop talking to one another and stop communicating. And they've been very silent homes prior to a divorce most of the time. The habitual avoidance and conflict, as ironic as that might sound, is actually the biggest predictor of divorce today. The people who are arguing a lot have a better chance of solving their problems.

Toxic arguing isn't healthy for relationships but fighting for something is better. Even when someone is eighty, they're still looking for something better. They're still wanting more out of their relationship.

If a person has had a really bad experience of conflict in relationships and family life, it can create a lot of fear and anxiety about going into new relationship. It's one of the reasons why couples fall into that pattern of not talking and not communicating. It's from the experience of what it's like to be ignored by someone. When they feel 'not heard', they feel angry. They feel frustrated. At other times people feel insecure or vulnerable.

Avoiding conflict isn't necessarily bad. It's important to say not all conflict is good and not all avoidance of conflict is good either. If that makes sense. You need to pick your battles. Some people are more argumentative than others, so sometimes it's reasonable to say, "Well, this is really important to you and it's actually not that important to me."

Every single communication is actually what the research and John Gottman refers to as an *emotional being*. Most of the communication that takes place in our homes on any given day is actually not difficult. It's pretty functional social talk like, "Can you pass the salt, or do you know where I put the car keys? Did you remember ringing mum back? What have you got on today?"

Every time we communicate on any level about any subject, we can do one of three things. We can turn towards the person that's communicating with us: we can turn away from them and ignore them, or we can turn against them. Every communication is important on every level, every day, not just the deeper, meaningful things and the tricky conversations.

But both people have to take responsibility. When we communicate the person who's raising the issue has to take some responsibility for how they approach the conversation and how they express themselves. Equally, the



person at the receiving end has responsibility for how they receive what's been said.



What the research tells us is that household chores are one of the top three things that couples argue about most in the first five years of marriage. In those really early stages, work out the balance between my time and your time, getting the chores done, going to work and visiting families ... balancing all of those things?

I guess the best advice is to treat it as an experiment and not to try and lock things down in stone too early in the relationship. Let's see if that works for a month and if it doesn't work we'll do something different. You can always come back and do things another way.

Listening is probably one of the most powerful things anyone can do in a relationship when it comes to communication. When we feel that we're being criticised, the natural human reaction is resistance. Defensiveness. We want to push back. We have an enate, defensiveness when we feel that we are under attack. The first thing we need to do is to resist our own 'defensive' reaction so that we can respond positively to difficult conversations.

The person who listens in any communication has the most power to influence. A person could be the best communicator in the world but if the other person doesn't want to listen, nothing is going to happen. Developing strong listening skills is really important and it's hard to do.

There are some simple things that any couple can do to develop their listening skills. The first thing is that criticism in a family is really a request for help. Karen (my wife) can say to me, "I can't believe you left your socks on the floor."

That seems to me like criticism. I feel defensive but what she's really doing is asking for help. She is saying, "You know what? I spent the whole day cleaning up. And five minutes after you come home your clothes are in the middle of the floor and I need your help to solve this."

So, the key criticism is actually a request to help so it softens the response. We react to the body language and the tone of voice, but we need to realise the other person is frustrated and trying to say something important.

Take this story, for example. It's about two little boys who are the most miserable children that you can ever imagine having as a parent. They fight and argue and break things. The parents have done everything to change their behaviour but with no success.

They tell their boys that Santa isn't going to visit this year because their behaviour has been so bad. Christmas morning and the two little boys wake up. Excitedly, they race downstairs to the Christmas tree. But there's only a pile of manure under the Christmas tree. The oldest son is heartbroken and

bursts into tears. He knows they've been very naughty siblings. But his little brother starts running around. He's excited. He goes into the backyard and the front yard. He looks in the kitchen, the laundry and all through the house.

The big brother says to him, "There are no presents this year. We've been so naughty."

But his little brother says, "With a pile of manure that big there's got to be a pony here somewhere!"

This gets down to the art of really good listening in a tough situation. Sometimes we're trying to communicate that what we're receiving is actually a pile of crap. We feel that we are getting a heap of manure. But the thing about that is that you can't have a pile of manure without a pony.

Almost always in our families when we feel that we're getting, a response or request, that seems unreasonable. It's not very nice. It's difficult to hear. Actually, the person is trying to say something positive, but they just don't have a very good way of expressing it. So, the art of really good listening is learning how to look for the pony.

This person is saying I can feel that defensive reaction inside of me and this doesn't feel very good, but there is a pony here somewhere. They're trying to say something positive.

If Karen says, "I can't believe you left your socks on the floor." I could respond by saying, "You really put some work into cleaning this room today. Good job."

The steam immediately comes out of the conversation.

A couple of other practical tips. Don't interrupt the other person. Interrupting is a sure-fire way of showing that you're not listening and you're more interested in pushing your view onto someone else. Being aware of our own body language is also important. Make sure you face the person, put the TV on mute, and give the other person your full attention.

Meanwhile, World Communications Day will be celebrated on Sunday. This year's theme is 'Listening with the ear of your heart'. In his message, Pope Francis speaks of the temptation to speak without listening, as well as the tendency to hear people speaking but not actually listen to them.

This article is an edited version of a Figuring out Families Focus Session podcast with marriage counsellor Derek Boylen. Titled Communications Part 1, it can be accessed at: majellan.media/focus-sessions/

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