

# Skills for Making Your Marriage Thrive

Any marriage counselor will tell you that one of the most common problems observed when couples come for help is poor communication skills. People get into trouble in their marriages because they have not developed their ability to listen and communicate.

## Barriers to Communication

These are a few of the things that prevent people from communicating effectively:

- Not knowing how to communicate properly
- Not taking the time to think through what you want to say
- Not taking the time to anticipate what your partner might be thinking and feeling
- Fear of revealing too much of yourself
- Fear of your partner's anger
- Not wanting to hurt your partner's feelings

## Empathy and Acceptance

People marry because they want to spend the rest of their lives with their partner. They have every hope of growing together and creating a relationship that makes them feel emotionally healthy. Two factors that are necessary for this to happen are empathy and acceptance on the part of both partners.

Empathy is the capacity to put oneself in another's shoes and understand how they view their reality, how they feel about things.

Demonstrating empathy and acceptance is critical to maintaining a strong relationship. Let's look next at some communication skills that enable you to create a climate of empathy, acceptance, and understanding. First we will explore a skill called Active Listening.

## Active Listening

Active listening is a way of communicating that creates the important climate of empathy, acceptance, and understanding.

- It is a two-step response to a statement made by your partner.
- It includes reflecting back what emotion you detected in the statement, and the reason for the emotion.

This is what active listening sounds like:

“Sounds like you're upset about what happened at work.”

“You're very annoyed by my lateness, aren't you?”

## ***Why Active Listening Is a Valuable Skill***

Active listening is a valuable skill because it demonstrates that you understand what your partner is saying and how he or she is feeling about it.

- Active listening means restating, in your own words, what the other person has said.
- It's a check on whether your understanding is correct.
- It demonstrates that you are listening and that you are interested and concerned.

Actively listening does *not* mean agreeing with the other person. The point is to demonstrate to your partner that you intend to hear and understand his or her point of view. This is good for your relationship for several reasons:

- When someone demonstrates that they want to understand what you are thinking and feeling, it feels good.
- It creates good feelings about the other person.
- Restating and checking understanding promotes better communication and fewer misunderstandings.

## ***More Active Listening Examples***

Here are some more examples of active listening:

*"You sound really stumped about how to solve this problem."*

*"It makes you angry when you find errors on Joey's homework."*

*"Sounds like you're really worried about Wendy."*

*"I get the feeling you're awfully busy right now."*

## **More Communication Skills**

Although our space is limited in this short newsletter, there are a few more communication skills that I must mention. These include asking open-ended questions, making summary statements to check understanding, and encouraging your partner to open up and elaborate by using neutral questions and phrases.

*Open-ended questions* begin with *what, why, how do, or tell me.*

- These questions get the other person to open up and elaborate on the topic.
- Asking these kinds of questions gets the other person involved by giving him or her a chance to tell what he or she thinks or knows.
- These questions are designed to encourage your partner to talk.
- They are useful when the other person is silent or reluctant to elaborate.
- They are also useful in dealing with negative emotions (such as anger or fear), since they help encourage the other person to vent feelings.

## **Summary Statements**

Summary statements sum up what you hear your partner saying.

- A summary statement enhances your partner's self-esteem by showing that you were listening carefully.
- It also helps you focus on facts, not emotions.
- It helps your partner clarify his or her own thinking by hearing your summary.
- Summary statements also help you deal with multiple disagreements so you can deal with them one by one.
- They help eliminate confusion by focusing on the relevant facts.
- Summary statements also help you separate the important issues from the trivial.

## **Neutral Questions and Phrases**

Neutral questions and phrases get your partner to open up and elaborate on the topic you are discussing.

- These questions are more focused than open-ended questions.
- They help your partner understand what you are interested in hearing more about.
- They further communication because they help you gain more information.
- When you ask these kinds of questions, you demonstrate to your partner that you are interested and that you are listening.

## **Business Skills for Marriages**

You might be surprised to hear that the same skills that help people succeed in business can also be used to build a better marriage. Like any business, a marriage is a partnership of people. Many of the skills that make businesses run successfully—planning, organizing, and setting goals—also can be applied to running your marriage successfully. These are some of the skills that will strengthen any marriage:

1. Create an overall vision of what you want your life to be like; consider all life areas.
2. Develop a long-range strategy.
3. Set short-term and long-term goals.
4. Plan the steps that will help you accomplish your goals.
5. Organize projects.
6. Manage projects.
7. Manage people.
8. Evaluate progress and results at regular intervals.
9. Revise goals as needed.

# Suggested Reading

Alberti and Emmons, *Your Perfect Right*. San Luis Obispo, CA: Impact Publishers, 1970.

Burley-Allen, Madelyn, *Managing Assertively: A Self-Teaching Guide* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition). New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, 1995.

Burley-Allen, Madelyn, *Listening: The Forgotten Skill* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition). New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, 1995.

Gordon, Thomas, *Leader Effectiveness Training*. New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell, 1986.

McKay, Matthew, Rogers, Peter and McKay, Judith. *When Anger Hurts: Quieting the Storm Within*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 1989.

Rosellini, Gayle and Worden, Mark, *Of Course You're Angry* (Second Edition). Center City, MN: Hazelden Foundation, 1997.

Staheli, Lana, *Affair-Proof Your Marriage: Understanding, Preventing and Surviving an Affair*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1995.

Tavris, Carol, *Anger: The Misunderstood Emotion*. New York: Touchstone, 1989.

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