

COMMUNICATION IN MARRIAGE

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Married couples involved in home dialysis must deal not only with the technical procedures for the treatment of kidney failure, but also with the “emotional aspects of living with a chronic disease in a marital relationship.”¹ How do partners in a successful marriage handle this? They talk to each other.

Sounds easy, doesn't it? It's not. Meaningful conversation is not a few monosyllables during dinner or comments during TV commercials or a discussion about a new technical problem with the equipment. Meaningful conversation is telling your spouse where you are—intellectually, emotionally, and physically. When couples come to me for counseling, and begin to voice their complaints, they are astonished by their revelations. This astonishment signifies how very little they communicated. Just because two people live together doesn't guarantee that they'll be omniscient about each other's feelings—they must talk!

Spouses stop talking to each other about things that really bother them, and yet they can discuss “everything” with their counselor. What does the professional counselor do that encourages people to talk? Firstly, they can offer an objective outside opinion, and secondly, they are able to feel and communicate genuine acceptance of the other person. According to Dr. Thomas Gordon, “It is one of the simple but beautiful paradoxes of life: when a person feels that he is truly accepted by another, as he is, then he is freed to move from there and to begin to think about how he wants to change, how he wants to grow, how he can become different, how he can become more of what he is capable of being.”²

Unfortunately, most people believe that, if you accept the other person as he is, nothing will change. They believe that only through immediate confrontation and immediate change will the problem be resolved. The fact is

¹. Campbell, Jim & Campbell, Ann, “When It's All Got You Down, Some Problems You Were Afraid to Ask About,” *Renal News*, v. 7, Fall, 1975.

². Gordon, Thomas, *P.E.T.*, New American Library, N.Y., 1975, p. 31.

without acceptance there can be no communication, and without communication there can be no resolution of problems.

Husband comes home from work and wants to sleep. Wife wants him to do some work around the house. Husband avoids the confrontation by asking, "What's for dinner?" Wife's face is beet red as she walks out of the room.

Conveying nonacceptance turns people off, they stop talking. They learn it is more comfortable to keep their feelings and problems to themselves.³

Later husband and wife again try to resolve their differences. By this time, the wife is more relaxed. She has had the insight to see that she was not really angry about his not helping around the house at that particular moment. She was angry because sometimes she had to carry more than her share of the responsibilities. She tells her husband that she's especially tired, working alone makes her feel that their life style really has changed. She recognizes that his illness has imposed some limitations on them despite their concerted effort not to let it. She feels more responsible for the management of the household, and occasionally she feels overwhelmed!

Husband says he too feels overwhelmed. He is frequently tired and can't get to things as soon as he would like. He feels angry and frustrated. Perhaps instead of making a general statement about her husband's character the wife could give him a specific task to do. If he needs to get some rest before he can get started, he should tell her.

Acceptance opens people up. It frees them to share their feelings. "But of all the effects of acceptance," Dr. Gordon believes, "none is as important as the inner feeling of the person that he is loved. And in psychology we have only begun to realize the tremendous power of feeling loved. It can promote the growth of mind and body, and is probably the most effective therapeutic force we know for repairing both psychological and physical damage."⁴ But, just because you accept the other person, that doesn't mean

³. Op. Cit., Gordon.

⁴. Ibid., p. 33

that issues should go unresolved. Communication is the instrument used to solve the problems, but to communicate effectively you need special skills.

(1) Be aware of your communication style. How do you let your spouse know your feelings? Avoiding confrontations, complaining, blaming, accusing or ridiculing⁵ the other person is not going to help you get what you want from the relationship.

Just before husband leaves for work one morning, he sees a note on the kitchen table telling him that he has a doctor's appointment at 10:30 A.M. He is furious because today he must also attend several very important conferences at work. He awakens his wife to tell her that she was dumb to schedule an appointment without letting him know sooner. Wife answers that she's got better things to do than be his secretary, and from now on he can make his own appointments!

Another way the husband could have expressed his feelings might begin with: "This might seem like a low priority to you, but it's something that really bothers me. I know you're often busy, but when you make a doctor's appointment for me, please let me know at least two days in advance so I can plan my other activities to accommodate it."

In this response the wife's competence wasn't questioned. Consequently, she doesn't need to channel her energy to defend her ego against an onslaught of complaints and condemnations. Instead she can put her energy toward solving the problem with her husband.

(2) Determine an appropriate time for discussion.⁶ Husband comes home from work, obviously frazzled and says, "Boy, have I had a terrible day!" Wife answers, "If you think you had a bad day, wait till you hear about mine!"

An alternative response from wife might begin, "Gee, I'd really like to hear about your day, but let's wait until after dinner when things should be a little more relaxed around here."

⁵. Sherod, Miller, et al., *Alive and Aware: Improving Communication in Relationships*, Interpersonal Communications, 1975.

⁶. Ibid.

(3) Be alert to the non-verbal clues. We send messages by what we say and by what we don't say. Non-verbal messages are communicated through gestures, postures, facial expressions or by other behaviors.⁷ To understand them you must learn to read the unspoken language of the eyes, the articulation of the body, and the message beneath the words. Listen to learn when a hearty "I'm fine" is really expressing "I'm low now and need some encouragement." Learn to sense the pride of accomplishment or the pain of failure behind the seemingly casual description of some event.

Wife is sitting in the living room reading the evening paper. Husband has just come from an appointment with the doctor and proceeds to tell her that he has put his name on the cadaver list. He notices that his wife hasn't lifted her eyes from the newspaper. "Hey, are you listening to me or reading the paper?" he asks.

Guiltily, the wife looks up from the paper, "Don't be silly, of course I heard every word." "Forget it," answers the husband, "the paper is more important to you than I am. Go back to it."

The husband was right. His wife had not really heard what he said. He wanted to do more than just to let her know what he decided. He was looking for some reassurance that he had done the right thing, that someone cared about him and was really on his side.

(4) The importance of touch. Touching the other person—nothing erotic—just plain touching can express acceptance. Sitting close enough to feel each other's body, taking his/her hand, or holding each other during times of stress are all ways of communicating that you are really with the other person.

Finally, be sure you really understand what your spouse is saying before the discussion gets too far along. To check your understanding of what is being said repeat what you think you're hearing in your own words. At this point, it is important for the person sending the message to clarify any misunderstanding before the conversation goes on too far. Remember: you're merely trying to reiterate your partner's message. Don't send back a message of your own. Often times, what goes wrong in the communication

⁷ Op. Cit., Gordon.

process is that the person receiving the message misunderstands it, but no one is aware that a misunderstanding exists.⁸

I'd like to close by briefly summarizing the specific skills needed to foster meaningful conversation in a marital relationship.

- (1) Accept the other person as he/she is and convey that acceptance.
- (2) Be aware of your communication style and make appropriate changes when necessary.
- (3) Determine a suitable time to discuss the issue.
- (4) Don't forget the importance of touch. And finally, be sure that both you and your spouse are hearing the same message before the conversation gets too far along.

Remember: Solving problems requires meaningful talk between open people, and the key to fostering openness is acceptance.

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⁸. Op. Cit., Sherod