Strengthening Your Couple Communication Skills

Susan Heitler, Ph.D.

Life can be lonely when it's a story of just one person. With two, there's a sense of completeness.

So what does a partner in marriage bring? A partner means there's someone to share all aspects of the business of living—someone to help with earning a living, cleaning the house, cooking meals, and rearing children. Marriage partnership can bring you a perpetual playmate, a pal to do things with, a sexual partner, and a partner at social events. Creating children especially takes the two of you. During difficult times, a partner is there to help when you're ill and to talk over situations that provoke emotional distress.

It's no wonder, therefore, why statistics indicate that people who are happily married experience more of all of life's goodies. They feel more satisfied, including with their sexual life, and they earn more money, are physically healthier with fewer ailments, and even live longer. Good deal!

What enables couples to keep their relationships, before and after marriage, happy and strong? A key factor is strong communication skills.

Benefits of Communicating

When people say, "We have a great relationship," what they're talking about is how they feel when they talk with each other. They mean, "I feel positive toward that person when we interact. I send and receive positive vibes with them."

A great relationship also means good communication in the sense that when differences arise, the partners can talk through their dilemma cooperatively. Differences don't become barriers; they become opportunities to find win-win understandings and solutions.

Making decisions together in a win-win way requires strong collaborative communication skills. Both partners need to be able to talk in a way that when they say things, their partner wants to listen—and when their partner says things, they want to hear them.

Strong communication skills enable couples not only to have fun and share their love, but also to deal with the difficult issues they inevitably will face as they proceed as partners in the business of living.

Your Tone of Voice

The tone of voice you use conveys whether you feel positive or negative about something and how intense that feeling is. Positivity in tone of voice, in words, and in actions (such as hugs and smiles) encourages the flow of open communication. Positivity enables partners to feel more relaxed with each other, which helps them to feel comfortable saying what's on their minds and eager to be responsive to each other's concerns.

Successful couples convey lots of positivity. They often use phrases such as:

- I agree that…
- What a good idea!
- I like that you…
- Thanks so much for….

They smile, and their voice has a smile in it.

In addition to conveying a consistently positive attitude of "I like you," "I agree with you," or "I care about what you say to me" in their tone of voice, successful marriage partners also control the intensity of their emotions. If they do feel a negative emotion like alarm, concern, anxiety, or even irritation, they stay in a calm emotional state, explaining the feeling in words rather than expressing themselves by speaking louder or faster.

Marriage is for grownups. Children often get upset, expressing their emotions by crying, shouting, whining, or getting mad. The ability to stay in a calm and positive emotional state—even in the face of difficult situations—is a hallmark of maturity.

In sum, relationships feel positive to the extent that the couple communicates positive feelings. Every negative emotional tone is like rust on the car: corrosive and not helpful. Relationships feel positive to the extent that the partners can discuss all their differences in a calm mode without overpowering each other via emotional escalations.

Making Decisions As a Couple

Marriage partners are, in a sense, yoked together. Couples, therefore, need skills for making decisions cooperatively. If they can choose together when to turn left and when to turn right, neither of them will feel compromised, dominated, or controlled by the other. Instead, each shared decision just enhances their loving partnership.

To make shared decisions, couples notice when one of them wants one thing and the other wants another. As soon as they see themselves preferring different plans of action, they switch from launching a tug of war over their preferred solutions to exploring the concerns that underlie each of their preferences.

As they come to understand their own and their partner's underlying concerns, they can look for a solution. They can make a plan of action responsive to all the concerns of both of them.

Case in point, let's take a look at Louise and Chad, recently engaged. They are discussing where they want to live after marrying. Louise wants to move to Montana; Chad likes living in Arkansas, where they both live now. Chad, realizing they are beginning to argue over the issue, switches into win-win mode and asks Louise what about Montana appeals to her. This question changes the discussion from a struggle over who will get their way to an exploration of both of their underlying concerns.

Louise explains that she loves the wide open spaces of Montana and wants to someday live on a small ranch. Chad's concern is whether he will be able to find work outside of the state where he has always lived. Their solution is to agree that Chad will explore job openings in Montana. If a job there looks possible, then he'll be glad to move. A month of monitoring job postings in his field, and there it is—a perfect job for Chad and a move to the state Louise loves.

The Benefits of Cooperative Dialogue Skills

Let's unpack the words *cooperative* and *dialogue*.

Cooperative means partners are interacting as friends. They feel and act like they are on the same team, not playing against each other.

Dialogue is information-sharing, with the partners taking turns talking and listening.

In effective cooperative dialogue, no one gives long monologues. Partners alternate talking and listening, each of them building on what the other has just said. They have a similar amount of air time, and each speaking time is short.

When cooperative dialogue partners are on the listening end, they listen for what makes sense, for what they can learn from what they are hearing. Their frequent use of words like "yes" and "and" indicate that they are registering their partner's views into a shared information pool.

By contrast, antagonistic dialogue partners push away what they hear. They

ten for what's "wrong" with what their partner says. The word that indicates rection of what they are hearing is "but." But works like the backspace or lete key on a computer, negating and erasing what was just said.

With strong cooperative dialogue skills, couples can sustain their love roughout whatever challenges arise on their shared life pathway.

esponding When There Are Differences

All couples sometimes have different viewpoints. All couples, especially in e early years of marriage, discover areas where *his way* and *her way* differ. he challenge of becoming fully successful marriage partners is to be able to lk over each of those differences toward the goal of creating an *our way*—plan of action that truly works well for both partners. Differing viewpoints e especially likely to arise in the courtship, engagement, wedding planning, d first-year stages of a relationship, when couples are first making decisions gether. These decision points offer excellent opportunities to practice ilding *our way* solutions.

Let's take a simple example. In Louise's family, birthdays were a big deal, her expectation is that there will be a whole lot of fuss and specialness bout her birthday celebration. In Chad's family, by contrast, people at most ffered a pleasant "Happy birthday!" When Louise's birthday comes along, e's at risk for feeling disappointed if Chad handles her birthday the way his mily of origin would have—with words only. The initial irritation or hurt ouise would feel signals that she and Chad have a *his way/her way* conflict ey need to talk over. Their challenge is to create an *our way* responsive to oth of their concerns.

Louise and Chad's solution? Louise will become the choreographer of all eir birthday celebrations, hers and her husband's. Chad will be glad to join n on shopping trips to pick out presents and also offers to take out his banjo enhance their celebrations with music. This new *our way* to celebrate irthdays delights them both!

Understanding Indirect and Direct Communications

Indirect communication means hinting or acting out. For instance, if a artner or spouse feels disappointed, and says "Hmmm" with a frown on eir face, this would be hinting. Slamming a car door and pouting would be cting out feelings instead of saying them.

One difficulty with indirect communications is that the data they give is

insufficient. There is not enough information for the partner or spouse to be able to address the problem and prevent it from happening again. With indirect communication, whatever was a problem today is likely to be a problem tomorrow, the next week, and still in five years.

Saying directly one's concerns, by contrast, leads to solutions.

Here's an example. Louise says, "I'm feeling overwhelmed by cooking and also cleaning the kitchen after we eat. How would you feel about taking over kitchen cleanup?" Chad might then answer, "If it's okay with you that I nap right after dinner, when I always feel so sleepy, I'd be glad to clean the kitchen after I wake up."

Direct communication—putting into words one's feelings and explaining one's concerns—leads to mutual understanding. With understanding plus goodwill, problems get solved!

Provocative Words

The more that couples use the words *you, never, always, not, should,* or *shouldn't,* the more likely their communication will sound negative, critical, controlling, or otherwise off-putting. "*You never* ask what I want when... You are *not* paying attention to...*You should*..." all put a negative pall on the conversation and invite defensive responses.

"I don't like..." sneaks the *not* word in via *n't.* Beware! It's far better to say what you *would like* than to talk about *don't likes.* "I *don't like* when you come home late" is far less inviting than "I *would like* so much to be able to count on your coming home on time."

Complaints, criticism, disparagement, and blame all focus on the partner. They start with "you." In addition, the negativity of *not* and the guilt induction of *shoulds* and *shouldn'ts* make them all the more likely to invite defensive responses and hurt feelings.

The basic rule for keeping dialogue flowing smoothly is: *I can talk about myself, sharing my own thoughts and feelings, or ask about my partner's thoughts and feelings. It's not for me to say what I think my partner thinks, feels, or should do. To discuss my partner's perspectives, I need to ask good questions beginning with "How" or "What."*

Remember, instead of talking about what a partner or spouse is doing, ask good questions. "*What* happened that you were so late tonight?" or "*How* can you be sure this won't happen as a regular pattern? " *Why* is best to avoid. Too often, it conveys a sense of blame.

The basic rule of communication is like the basic rule of driving: I have to drive always in my lane. If I cross over the center line and start driving in the other lane, especially on a two-way road, I'm going to crash into you. That's how accidents happen.

What is the difference between the phrases, "I would like to …," and "I would like *you* to…"? The second version crosses the center line, telling the other person what to do. Crash ahead!

Being an Excellent Listener

Good listeners listen to learn, not to show what's wrong with what they are hearing. In addition, in their response, they begin by mentioning a word, phrase, or idea that they heard and explain what they are doing with this information.

For instance, if Louise says, "Look, there are a lot of clouds in the sky today," she would hope that Chad is going to respond with some kind of comment on what she has told him.

If Chad says, "Yes, that type of cloud probably means rain. I'll bring my raincoat," Louise feels fine. She knows Chad has heard what she said and is taking her comment seriously.

Good dialogue depends on these two core good listening skills: listening to learn rather than to negate, reject, or point out what was wrong in what was said; and responding by digesting aloud.

Good listeners catch the information balls tossed to them. If a receiver holds onto the ball forever, though, that's a monologue, which interferes with the flow of good dialogue. Likewise, if receivers ignore the balls that have been tossed their way, that's frustrating for their partner.

Good listeners avoid negating responses. If they listen in a negative way, focused on pointing out what's wrong with what a partner has said, they are likely to create a bumpy dialogue with a growing sense of frustration and irritation.

For example, if when Louise says, "There are a lot of clouds out there today," Chad replies, "No, there aren't really that many clouds," in response to this negating response, Louise is likely to feel nixed and irritated. Beware of negating!

If he really didn't see the clouds, Chad would be better off asking Louise what she means by "a lot of clouds." She could then explain, "We've had nothing but blue skies for weeks, so those little white puffs on the horizon look like a lot of clouds to me!"

When couples really do disagree with each other, how can they communicate effectively? There's an art to disagreeing. Instead of saying, "No, that's not right," find something in what was said that is possible to genuinely agree with. After expressing what makes sense in what was said, use the connecting words *and* or *and at the same time* to then add an alternative perspective. So if Louise says, "There are quite a few clouds up there today, and it's a gorgeous, sunny day," Chad's at risk for negating if he says, "No, there's actually a lot of sunshine." Instead of disagreeing, Chad would be better off agreeing and then adding his alternative view. "Yes, I can see a few clouds from my window, *and at the same time,* in the part of the world where I grew up, this would be considered a glorious day. So for me, it's bright sunshine."

What did Chad do that worked so well? He first agreed, and then he used the connective word *and*—or even better, *and at the same time.* If Chad had used *but*, he would have erased his earlier comment that had indicated agreement. In contrast, by agreeing, saying *and*, and then adding his alternative perspective, Chad could share quite contradictory information and yet kept the dialogue collaborative.

Building Couple Understanding

The good news is that couples do not have to be mind-readers. They also don't need to be feelings-readers. They just need to ask good questions.

When Chad sees Louise's brow quiver, tears begin to form in her eyes, or a special sparkle in her eyes, he assumes there's an emotional thought that's come up for her. He reads these signs as invitations to ask Louise what she's thinking or feeling. "Louise, what are those tears about?" And if Louise says, "I'm feeling kind of sad," Chad expresses his interest by asking simply, "What about?" That kind of intimate dialogue, based on genuine interest and concern, builds mutual understanding.

Remember, good questions use the words *what* or *how*: "Sad about what?" or "How come?" By contrast, questions that begin with *Are you* or *Do you*, such as "Are you mad?" or "Do you feel mad at me?" are far less helpful.

Preventing Fights

When a pot begins to boil over on the stove, what is the logical thing to do? Take it off the stove. Similarly, when irritated or other hot feelings begin to bubble up to excessive levels of intensity, loving partners remove themselves from the situation so they can cool down.

It's generally most helpful for a couple to create a shared exit/reentry choreography during a time when they are talking together cooperatively rather than to wait to invent these routines after a problem has emerged. If one of them removes themselves from a situation that's getting too emotional without having first co-designed a shared exit/re-entry plan with their partner or spouse, the one who is left will be at risk for feeling walked out on or abandoned. However, once a couple has an agreed-upon plan for removing themselves from overheating situations; they have an insurance policy for preventing fights. This agreement could be as simple as: "When either of us begins to show signs of getting too hot, let's both simultaneously get up and walk in different directions, quiet ourselves down, and then return to finish our conversation once we can talk calmly and cooperatively again."

Heated conversations rarely lead to productive understanding or creative solutions. As people overheat, they can't think. Overheated minds are unable to take up new information. In addition, high intensity emotions prevent flexible thinking and problem solving. So, if a couple is aiming to find solutions to problems—not just to criticize, blame, or punish—when either of them begins to get irritated, it's time to disengage, calm down, and then come back when they both can talk calmly.

Supporting One Another Through Difficulties

There's a full skill set for being helpful when a partner or spouse has a problem. Compassion—having feelings of concern and a desire to help—is a nice starting point. The difficulty comes because men and women often have different ideas about what would really be helpful.

Men, when they're upset, generally want to be left alone. Women, when they're upset, more often want to be able to talk the problem over with someone. Men typically think they are being asked to figure out what to do about the problem. They're immediately solution oriented. Women, on the other hand, seek first to be heard and understood.

When Louise is feeling troubled by something at work, she is likely to want to talk with Chad, but she is not looking for Chad to give her a solution to her dilemma. She's looking for Chad to help her out by taking the role of sounding-board, not of solution-giver.

In Summary

Couples nowadays are very fortunate in that there are all types opportunities available for learning marriage communication skills. Befo heading out to a baseball field, it would be helpful to know how to bat, thro catch, where to run, and how to score. Someone about to build a house wo first learn how to use a hammer and nails.

Marriage is a particularly high-skills activity. People who enter marria without the requisite skill sets put themselves and their partner at risk emotional injuries. With the necessary communication skills, by contra marriage offers a pathway to a life filled with blessings. Learn and enjoy!

Susan Heitler, Ph.D., a Clinical Psychologist based in Denver, Colorado, specializes in helping couples build strong marriages. Dr. Heitler is author of a book on marriage therapy, *From Conflict to Resolution,* and a book on the skills for marriage success called *The Power of Two.* Her online Power of Two course offers a fun way for couples to learn these skills from the comfort of home. Dr. Heitler and her husband, married almost forty years, are proud parents of four adult children and nine grandchildren. Office contact information: 303-388-4211; drheitler@therapyhelp.com; www.TherapyHelp.com; www.po2.com; www.poweroftwo.org