

3 Practical Tools for Improving Your Communication

by Harold & Bette Gillogly

What is a good marriage? Some people think a good marriage is one that stays the same through the years. But there is something desparately sedimentary about a marriage that does not change. How can a relationship not change one way or another when everything around us is changing so quickly? Our circumstances, friends, jobs, places we live, our children — these are all changes that cause inevitable conflict. Even we ourselves are in constant process of change. It is a real struggle to turn these challenges of life into growth points for our marriages. So, by definition, a good marriage IS a struggling marriage inhabited by struggling people.

The key to productive struggle is to struggle together as a team. The problems are going to be there. Did we think that two individuals could mesh without sparks? That life was going to hand us its challenges on marshmallows, instead of rocks? The question is not: "Will we have struggles?" The question is: "Are we willing to work together in our struggles?"

We all need help now and then, don't we? We all have times when we need an encouraging word. So we want to encourage you: Hang on...work together...make the struggles count!

We also want to encourage you with a few practical suggestions to help you in your struggles. Growth is a lot easier when we are learning to really communicate with one another; when we're learning how to be open with the one we love. So here are three

suggestions that will make a difference in your relationship, if you will both commit to do them.

The first suggestion is that you commit to completing communication cycles with your Beloved. This involves three simple steps. Step #1: the sender states his or her message. Step #2: the receiver feeds back what he/she thinks he heard. And Step #3: the sender either confirms the feedback as true or corrects it if it is wrong. When this cycle is completed, there will be no misunderstanding. Sounds pretty elementary, huh? But do you know what? Hardly any of us do this.

Let's talk about how this works out in everyday life. First, let's look at the way we often communicate. Tim: "Your sister just called. She and Henry want to come over tonight." What's he really trying to say in code? Helen has no idea, so she says, "Oh, good. Do you want to play Trivial Pursuit?" He replies, "Yeah, O.K." They both have just practiced the oldest marriage game in the world called 'I'm going to read your mind and react according to my assumptions.' As a result, they both (1) spend an evening doing what neither one wants to do but sacrificing what they really want because each thinks the other wants it. (You may have to read that again.) And (2) they each put another brick in the wall of misunderstanding being built between them.

Here's what that same scene would look like if they used a little skill and completed a true communication cycle. Tim: "Your sister just called. She

and Henry want to come over tonight." Helen: "Am I reading your tone of voice right? It doesn't sound like you want them to come over tonight. Right?" (No malice in her voice.) "Well," he replies, "I really was looking forward to watching that play-off game tonight. But I didn't want to appear selfish. If you want to see your sister, I don't want to keep you from it." "O.K.," Helen says, "I know Henry likes basketball too. You guys could watch the game, and Sis and I could talk in the other room. How does that sound?" Whatever way they work it out, they need to do it by being open with one another without trying to read each other's minds. Can you identify the tool they used to help themselves be open to one another? That's right, they completed their communication cycle — "Is that what you mean?"

Of course, you can't use this in every conversation. That would get cumbersome and tiring. But just think how it could help you understand what each other is really saying when there is ambiguity. How many misunderstandings would that save you from?

The second suggestion is that you commit to honesty with one another by "scoring your wants." This is another practical communication skill which can help keep you out of the pit of misunderstanding. Much of the time, we do not tell our wife or husband what we *really want* or what we *really feel* because we do not know how to express our feelings or wants without hurting the other or without starting an argument. So what

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happens? We just don't express them. We expect our mates to somehow second guess us, and we try to second guess our mates. What are the results? The very thing we were trying to avoid in the first place — misunderstandings and hurt feelings.

"Scoring your wants" won't solve all your problems, but it will help you be honest with one another in an agreeable and loving way.

Here is how it DOES NOT work. John and Cindy have planned a big evening out. John had an excruciatingly hard day, but he does not want to disappoint Cindy and he doesn't want her to get angry with him. So when he comes home from work, he hides his headache behind a brave smile and says, "Are you ready to go, Honey?" Meanwhile, at the homestead all day, the kids have been terrors, the garbage disposal broke and the dishwasher leaked all over the kitchen floor. Cindy does not want to spoil the evening for John and perhaps start an argument, so she says, "Sure thing. Let's go." You can guess how the evening progresses. Both are tired and

on edge, and it's down-hill all the way.

What if John had said when he came home, "Ready, Darling? Or should we take our scores first?" Cindy is so relieved, "Oh, Honey, I'm afraid my score is about a 4. It's been a disastrous day." "Well," John sighs, "mine's probably a 2. Do you want to go tomorrow night instead?" Somehow, taking your "scores" draws the sting out of your honesty and actually affords you a way to speak your mind without being contentious. Even if John had scored a 9 and Cindy a 3, at least they would know where they stood, and could decide the best course of action from there. "Scoring our wants" might just give us a tool that will help us "speak the truth in love."

The third suggestion is that you commit to openly expressing — that is, saying out loud — your appreciation and affection for one another. Did you know in studies done on the home, it is absolutely clear that "the outstanding characteristic of strong, healthy, happy families is that the members of those families freely express their appreciation and affection for each other?"* Did you pick-up on those key words — "Appreciation and affection"?

Do something with us right now, won't you? Put this article down for a few minutes and write out seven qualities about your mate that you appreciate. Know what you will have? You will have a whole week of "appreciation and affection" all ready to help strengthen and heal and bring happiness to your marriage. You can use one every day. "Honey, have I ever told you how much I appreciate the way you...?" "I just love it when you...."

God tells us again and again how powerful our words are. We tend to forget that, don't we?

Now, we know these three suggestions on sharpening your communication skills are not a panacea for your marriage — or ours. But they work. They work in a very practical way to make us more honest and loving in our communication with one another. And communication is the oil that makes all the moving parts of marriage work together smoothly. Obviously, the smoother we make the struggles, the easier the growth.

* *HOW TO HAVE A HAPPY MARRIAGE* by David and Vera Mace, Published by Abingdon Press, p. 74.

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