



## **Communicating in Marriage**

According to Transactional Analysis, we communicate from three positions (roles):

- Parent;
- Child; and
- Adult.

Parent (P) – communicates in nurturing or critical ways with their husband/wife, sometimes using this position as a power-and-control mechanism to guard against insecurities and advance their agenda (my way or the highway). Sometimes falls victim to all or nothing thinking and may eventually feel isolated and alone.

Child (C) – communicates obediently or rebelliously, treating their husband/wife like their parent in order to get their spouse to do for them what they can't (or won't) do for themselves. Sometimes communicates as a means of power-and-control to guard against insecurities and advance their own agenda (my way or the highway). Frequently falls victim to co-dependence and may eventually feel isolated and alone.

Adult (A) – takes into account personal communication and interpretation patterns so they can correct distorted assumptions and heal from unresolved emotional wounds (everyone has them). Able to calmly communicate through vulnerable issues without overreacting so they can better connect with their husband/wife and stop having the same argument over and over again.

### **How do You Come Across?**

Thinking about how your communication looks to your husband/wife can help develop personal, emotional self-regulation so that you feel in control of your thoughts/emotions and aren't dependent upon your husband/wife's response to validate what you think and how you feel. People communicating with a constant need for validation will eventually fall into patterns of feeling and communicating like a rebellious child or a rejecting parent and will respond by:

Assuming to know exactly what the other person is going to say and not giving their husband/wife the option to investigate how, what, and why they think, feel, and say the things they do. When this happens, personal emotional development and marital intimacy is stunted.

According to John Gottman's research (also in Emotionally Focused Therapy), harmful interactions eventually deteriorate the quality of a marriage. Couples who allow these "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" to become rooted in their marriage not only report higher levels of marital conflict, but are at increased risk of eventual divorce:

1. Criticism;
2. Contempt;
3. Defensiveness; and
4. Stonewalling.

### **Where to Begin?**

Demonstrating mature (Adult) communication stems from becoming emotionally mature as an individual. Begin by recognizing personal instances of trying to parent-over or push-against your husband/wife and work to identify internal emotional undercurrents contributing to these harmful interactions. Contributing factors sometimes include:

- Fear of failure (self-worth is wrapped up in outcomes);
- Desire to control everything so that you don't personally feel out of control;
- Desire to be seen well by others, regardless of emotional toll to husband/wife;
- Compensating for unresolved childhood rejection; or
- Emotional injury from some other previous relationships.

### **Developing Healthy Communication**

1. If you're not in a good frame-of-mind, don't bring it up.
2. Use "I" statements. Speak for yourself, identify what you like and don't like, and try to identify why you feel that way. Your husband/wife is much more likely to compassionately understand what you're trying to say when you're able to speak calmly and remain emotionally open. Focus on yourself and don't criticize accusatorily. Even if you're right in your accusation, your husband/wife isn't likely to listen. Assassinating someone's character doesn't usually lead to a genuine apology but it will deteriorate trust in the relationship.
3. Learn to complain without blaming. Learn to speak on your own behalf without being a bull-dozer that pushes everyone else aside. Clear a path toward greater understanding, not one that simply minimizes your role in problems.
4. Describe problematic situations without evaluating or judging your husband/wife's intentions. Believe it or not, our assumptions about other people's assumptions aren't always right. Recognize that just because something bothered you doesn't mean your spouse meant to emotionally wound you.
5. Be polite and appreciative. 'Keep it about what it's about.' Drawing attention to your husband/wife's positive qualities and mentioning your appreciation for their thoughtfulness (regardless of how it turned out) can go a long way in maintaining safety in conversation.

Please note: all situations are different and this is not intended to be a substitute for professional counseling.

6. Don't store it up. As individuals, we're responsible for appropriately processing and communicating our own thoughts and emotions. Don't look for situations where you can ambush your spouse and regurgitate past wrongs you're holding onto (recall the rebellious child & rejecting parent). Remember the cliché, 'when someone gets historical, someone's going to become hysterical.'

7. Start slow. When you begin speaking with your husband/wife, start at the beginning of what you're trying to say (providing appropriate framework), speak slow so it makes sense, make sure you're calm, and make sure your tone matches your calm emotional state. If your tone or language is too forceful (even on accident), acknowledge it and start over using something to the effect of, 'that didn't come out the way I intended' or 'that might have sounded too harsh and that's now how I feel, can I start over?'

8. Be aware of non-verbal communication. Most responses are based on our interpretation of our husband/wife's non-verbal communication. Grimacing facial gestures, eye rolling, looking shocked/surprised, using big hand motions, etc., speak "louder" than words. Work to maintain self-control so that your entire body is communicating calmly, not just your voice.

9. Turn toward your husband/wife. Marital arguments frequently erupt from the first few words that are spoken. When it starts bad it usually ends even worse. As your husband/wife begins talking, acknowledge them, turn toward them, affirm them, smile, or physically touch them (when appropriate). This helps the conversation remain calm and helps keep both husband's and wife's insecurities at bay, eventually helping develop greater trust and deeper relational intimacy.

10. Recognize shifting roles. Human beings are complex and are capable of thinking and feeling contradictory things simultaneously. If, during conversation, you sense yourself suddenly wanting to respond harshly to your husband/wife, then evaluate your role because you may have shifted from interpreting as an Adult and begun interpreting as a Parent or Child. When this happens, try to return to your emotionally mature starting point and later explore why the shift occurred (sometimes because a spouse unknowingly touched an insecurity). If needed, take a break from the discussion and work on this individually, but make sure you communicate this with your spouse so they don't think you're blaming them for your needed break in conversation.

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