

## Relationships

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### Part II: Communication

By Jennifer C. Kaplan, Ph.D., MACP

John Gottman (1999), whose research has provided valuable empirical data on not just how unhealthy relationships fail but also how healthy relationships succeed, has debunked one of the most common beliefs about what makes marriage work: good communication skills. What he found is that good communication is not the most crucial aspect of a healthy relationship; emotional intelligence is. However, as we all know, good communication certainly helps to promote healthy, stable relationships. While emotional intelligence was the focus on Part I on this series on relationships, communication is the focus of Part II.

Let's begin with some fundamentals about communication:

- Communication is a transmission of information from one person to another.
- Communication is a function of two events:
  - 1) The sending out of a message,
  - 2) The receipt of that message.
- Effective communication occurs when the message sent is the same message that is received.

The above is nothing you don't already know, but it's often helpful to remember these fundamentals the next time there is a breakdown in your communication with your partner or anyone else.

### **The Sending Out of a Message**

#### The Cue to Listen

As the sender, it is your job to command the attention of your audience, be it one person or many, so that your audience receives your message. The presentation of your message is as important to a recipient as the message because the presentation is what cues your recipient to listen.

Sometimes a simple in-breath is enough to command your partner's full attention. Sometimes it takes a lot more. If your first cue to your partner to grab his or her attention is to yell your partner's name with a harsh tone, your partner is not going to be as receptive to your message as he or she would were you to call out your partner's name with a loud but warm tone of voice. John Gottman (1999) refers to such an attempt at grabbing your partner's attention as the "harsh startup". He reports, "96 percent of the time you can predict the outcome of a conversation based on the first three minutes of the fifteen-minute interaction! A harsh startup simply dooms you to failure." (Gottman, 1999, p. 27) It's important to initiate communication with your partner with love and kindness, especially if the content is going to be difficult for your partner to receive. Bring mindfulness to your startups so that you can ensure the receipt of your partner's full, receptive attention. If you are communicating with your partner while feeling upset or irritated,

slow down and take some deep breaths before you initiate communication to avoid the harsh startup, or perhaps wait until later to communicate with your partner.

*Experiential Exercise:*

*Think about the last time you tried to get the attention of your spouse/partner/mate/significant other or a close friend. What did you do? What did it take to get that person's attention? What does it take in general to get that person's attention, a little or a lot? Does it depend on the situation, and if so, in which situations do you more easily get your partner's attention and in which don't you? How does your partner's responses to your bids for his or her attention affect your communication overall? Is there something more you can do to ensure that you receive your partner's attention when you bid for it? What is the effect on you of your partner's response time to your cue for his or her attention?*

*The next time you make a bid for your partner's attention, imagine that your message is an actual tangible gift to give to your intended recipient. What can you do to make sure that your present is as attractive and inviting as possible? Perhaps you could wrap it in a way that entices your recipient using his or her favorite colors or paper. Perhaps you could put a beautiful bow on it. Perhaps you could present it as it is if your recipient appreciates directness. Use your creativity, but don't forget that receiving your partner's full attention is a function not just of your efforts but of knowing your partner so that you can be effective in your efforts.*

The Message Itself

As the sender of a message, assuming that you now have your audience's attention, how do you get your message across so that your audience hears exactly what you intend? This is the million-dollar question because there is only so much you can do, and in the end, whether or not your message came across loud and clear is not entirely in your control. Ever played the telephone game? You can say whatever you want, but as that message is communicated to each additional person, the probability that your message will return as it went out decreases. Ever played the telephone game with a small group? It's amazing how even a small group can't get it right. With two people, it's obviously easier, but you're still playing the telephone game.

*Experiential Exercise:*

*To illustrate this point, imagine that your partner is not particularly fluent in English. What can you do on your end to ensure that your message is received as you intended? Think about all the ways you can help to transmit your message as clearly as possible.*

*Some ideas that come to my mind are speaking slowly, annunciating all of your syllables, choosing simple words that will be easily understood, defining certain words, giving examples, pausing frequently to make sure that your recipient is following, tracking your partner's facial cues for a blank stare or looks of confusion and/or frustration, or asking every so often if your recipient is understanding what you are saying or needs any clarification. Perhaps you came up with other ideas as well.*

As the sender of a message, it's important to be aware that communication happens nonverbally as well as verbally. In other words, what you verbally say isn't all that your recipient is hearing. Your message comes with tone of voice, facial expressions, hand gestures, movements, mood,

emotions, energy, etc. Focus not just on what you are saying with your mouth but also what you are saying with your body. Strive for congruence in your communication to avoid double messages. (An example of a double message is saying "yes" verbally while shaking your head "no".) If you or your partner notices double messages or incongruence in your communication, use such moments as opportunities for self-reflection and personal growth.

## **The Receipt of a Message**

### Offering Your Full Attention

As the recipient of a message, you should want to be and should ideally be all ears when your loved one wants your attention as your loved one should ideally be all ears when you want his or her attention. Unfortunately for our partner, that doesn't always happen at the exact moment your attention is requested. When you are not all ears, your awareness of the fact that you are not all ears is a great opportunity for you to do some internal investigation. Try the following experiential exercise and incorporate what you learn from it into future communications with your partner.

#### *Experiential exercise:*

*Think about the last time your loved one tried to get your attention and you weren't readily able to pay attention to him/her:*

- *What prevented you from turning your attention to your loved one when your attention is requested by him/her?*
- *What was your internal experience (feelings, thoughts, associations, sounds, memories, judgments, etc.) in that moment that your attention was requested?*
- *What needed to happen in that moment in order for you to be able to turn your attention to your partner? If this situation occurs regularly in your relationship, then what needs to happen in general in order for you to turn your attention to your partner when he/she requests it?*
- *What can you do to communicate to your partner your experience in these moments when your attention is sought and you don't, can't, or won't give your partner your full attention such that in the future you do, can, or will?*

### Active Listening

Active listening is the listening to your partner in an engaged way. Ever notice how certain sounds, words, or gestures come out of you while you are listening to someone speak? "Mm-hmm", "yes", "ah", "oh", "ok", and "uh-huh" are some common things that seem to come out of our mouths sometimes when something somebody says resonates with us. Maybe you even nod your head in assent sometimes. These are naturally occurring expressions of our resonance with what is being said, and this happens quite naturally and spontaneously when we really listen. Think about the last time you weren't really listening to someone who was speaking to you. What did you do to act as if you were listening? You probably said "uh-huh" and "ok" a bunch of times until you got a sense that the conversation was coming to an end or that you could get off the phone. When we actively listen with our partners, we really are trying to hear them, we really are engaged with them, and we really are allowing what they say to permeate. As this occurs, we are responding to what they are saying with all kinds of cues, whether deliberate or unintentional. Active listening conveys that we are interested in receiving the messages our partners send us, that we care.

### *Couples Experiential Exercise*

*This exercise is the classic therapeutic exercise aimed at improving communication between partners. If you've never tried it, try it the next time you and partner have some free time to discuss a relationship issue with each other. If this exercise evokes intense emotions that make it difficult to stay calm and present, take a break and allow yourself an opportunity to feel these emotions, bringing your attention to your breath every so often to help bring relaxation to your experience of intense emotions. Let your partner know when you are ready to resume.*

### *Couples Active Listening Exercise:*

- Sit down with your partner and come to a decision about a relationship issue you'd like to discuss. Don't pick the oldest, biggest bone you have to pick with your partner, but pick something that is meaningful for both of you. Alternatively, each choose one issue and run through this exercise two times, one per each topic of discussion.
- Decide which one of you is going to be the speaker first. The other will obviously be the listener first. If you are often the one who initiates discussions in your relationship, try being a listener to start.
- If you are the speaker, your job is to speak as clearly as you can in brief segments, pausing after each segment. When you pause, you are to let the listener know in some way, verbal or non-verbal, that you are ready to hear from your listener. At this point, your listener will give you feedback. When your listener gives you feedback, you will listen, and then when your listener is finished offering you feedback, he or she will ask you, "Did I get that right?" In response, you the speaker will let the listener know that he or she either got it right, in which case you will continue with your next segment, or didn't get it right, in which case you will gladly repeat or rephrase what you'd said. Again, speak in small segments, pausing to allow your listener to offer you feedback after each segment. *It is your job as speaker to help your listener get it right*, so if your listener didn't quite get it right, repeat or rephrase what you said until your listener gets it right. Notice your level of patience, tolerance, and frustration for repeating or rephrasing as you do it, and if you do notice shifts, try reporting them to your listener without blame or judgment. You are the speaker until you have said everything you intended, needed, and wanted to say. At this point, let your listener know that you are finished speaking, that you are ready to switch roles.
- Note to speaker: Try to use "I" statements and feeling words as much as possible in order to stay focused on your truth. If what you're describing involves your partner's behavior, use the following statement filling in the appropriate words for "x" and "y": "When you do x, I feel y". Use feeling words for the "y". Instead of saying, "When you snap at me, I feel like yelling at the top of my lungs," say "When you snap at me, I feel angry." Notice the difference? Feelings words are words like sad, happy, angry, upset, frustrated, tense, confused, lost, scattered, fearful, irritated, glad, excited, etc.
- *If you are the listener, it is your job to listen as fully and completely as you can, allowing your partner to speak freely without interruption.* When your partner pauses and cues you to speak, you will tell your partner what you heard him or her say without responding to it until your partner is done speaking. Repeat back exactly what you heard as though you are a tape recorder of your partner, but feel free to use your own words. You

shouldn't be memorizing what your partner said; you should be listening with open ears. Don't worry about whether or not you are right or wrong. Focus your attention on receiving the message and remaining calm, especially if the message is difficult to hear. It is the speaker's job to tell you if you got it right or not and to help you get it right, and you can kindly remind the speaker of this if necessary. You are free to validate your partner's statements once you receive confirmation that you got the message correct. Let your partner know that you understand how your partner feels and appreciate the information he/she is sharing with you.

- When the speaker is ready to switch roles, then listener becomes speaker and speaker becomes listener. Stay with the topic of discussion that you agreed to discuss at the beginning of this exercise. Switch roles as many times as appropriate until the discussion comes to a natural place to stop.
- Discuss with each other what this exercise was like. Describe what you may have learned about yourself, your partner, and your communication. Acknowledge any reactions that surfaced and describe your understanding of what you were reacting to, again using "I" statements. Talk about the process of communicating at as slow of a pace as this exercise requires. Discuss how you can incorporate elements of this exercise into your day-to-day communication style.

Healthy communication may not make or break your relationship, but it will make your relationship function better. For more on communication, try reading "You Just Don't Understand" by Deborah Tannen, Ph.D., a book that discusses the differences between male and female communication styles. You might also try couples therapy.