

What You Don't Know About Communication Can Kill Your Marriage

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Most people want to be in a committed and happy marriage. They can even list characteristics of the relationship and personalities of the partners that "should" make for a happy marriage.

But what does that really mean? Many couples that come in for counseling say they have love, respect, honesty, commitment, and faithfulness (as well as other positive characteristics), but that one or both are just not happy. What makes for a happy marriage?

Much of the time, one primary characteristic that is missing is that of meaningful interaction. Although couples are engaged in all kinds of interaction throughout their normal day, being actively engaged in nurturing or maintaining their relationship is not something that happens a lot. When both parties are feeling important, loved, and secure in the relationship, active attention to the relationship may not feel important. It becomes more important as one or both partners do not "feel" loved or important to the other. The need for active engagement and nurture of the relationship is apparent when a partner complains that they "do not communicate" and do not spend enough "quality" time together.

They often already know the problem and presumably how to fix it, but cannot seem to get started with enacting their solution. One of the stumbling blocks to being able to effectively bridge the gap and nurture the relationship is that each individual has made some attempts in his or her own individual way, but felt discouraged when it did not receive the desired response or effect. Each has different communication goals and expectations. They have different ways that they want to be shown love. Their ideas about what they want communicated are different. "Quality time together" means different things to different people.

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Unfortunately, while it seems logical that giving the partner what you want would resolve the problem, it does not. Since the partners want something other than what is being given, they stay frustrated. They are frustrated not only about still not getting what they are wanting but also about trying and not having their efforts recognized by the partner.

Sometimes partners repeatedly tell the other what they want or need to feel loved, appreciated, and important, and the partner will make some brief attempts to comply. When one partner has been trying to communicate his/her needs in an appropriate way and is "rewarded" for the effort with a return to the partner's old behavior, s/he feels more frustrated and angry. To the partner doing the requesting, this means that s/he doesn't care.

The more conflicted that couples become over relationship needs, the more difficult it becomes to solve problems, to neutralize or recover from negative events, and to generate positive feelings and positive assumptions about relationship events. Once the situation has reached this point, couples are most likely to use the exact communication behaviors that guarantee that no change will occur. They often engage in destructive communication patterns (e.g., [dirty fight tactics](#)) where the arguing [escalates](#) to a point of anger and verbal violence or to where one partner repeatedly tries to engage and the other repeatedly avoids engagement and conflict.

Sometimes in order to break out of the negative cycle of conflict and pain, couples must return to the basics, with a step back out of the militarized zone, into basic communication and working on simply being "nice" to each other. Civility and common courtesy toward one's partner can assist in re-establishing at least a neutral emotional tone for your interaction and create an environment conducive to "letting down one's guard and willingness to level with each other.

Simple, basic communication behaviors such as moving from "You" messages to ["I" messages](#) can change the whole tone of conversations, reduce defensiveness, and improve the ability to actually "hear" what the other person is saying. Use of active listening and asking clarifying questions also helps to bridge the emotional chasm and restore civility.

As the pervasive mood of hostility and negativity begins to lift, setting aside a regular time for couple communication and nurturing the relationship can be very effective in restoring those positive feelings and marital happiness. Communication exercises such as

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a [Couple's Feelings Meeting](#) or [The Honey Jar](#), a couple's conversation starter, can assist couples with getting into a habit of talking and sharing with each other. When couples are talking and sharing, they are more likely to feel connected, loved, and important to each other. When they feel these positive feelings, they are better able to handle and resolve the inevitable conflicts that arise. When partners can communicate and problem solve, and can resolve emotional relationship differences (including defining "quality time together"), they can be happy in their marriage.



"The Honey Jar" is a conversation starter for couples. It consists of 250 sentence stems, each one serving as an open-ended prompt to generate discussion. The Honey Jar is more than a jar of sentence stems. The Honey Jar was field tested by real couples for therapeutic value. It can assist couples in restoring a sense of self-confidence in re-establishing their connection and commitment. As couples use their time, attention and willingness to take risks with each other, a close, loving connection can re-emerge.

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