

**Improving Marital Happiness Through  
Quality Time Together and Good Communication Skills  
By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

Being in a committed relationship is something that most people prize. Most people believe that they will marry and stay married. When you ask people what they want from their marriage, they list trust, love, respect, honesty, and faithfulness, among other attributes. The bottom line is that they just want "to be happy" in their 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 does it take for a marriage to be a happy one?

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 nurturance 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. Another of the missing pieces of this puzzle is that they have different communication agendas. They have different ways that they want to be shown love. Their ideas about what they want communicated are different. And there is great diversity in what "quality time together" means.

Attempts to solve the problem fail as one or both partners set out to fix the situation by giving to the partner what s/he wants from communication or time together. 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. The partner that has been complaining and trying to negotiate for change, feels more frustrated and angry when the other partner returns to his/her former behavior. The meaning often given for this return to old behavior is that s/he really does not 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. When conditions get to this point, couples engage in the types of problem solving behaviors that are virtually guaranteed to maintain the conflict and negative feelings. They often engage in destructive communication patterns 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. Practicing the same common courtesy with your partner that you would with a total stranger can go a long way to re-establish emotional neutrality, and pave the way for a return to personal "risk taking" in communicating and problem solving.

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 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.

Copyright 2009, Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D., <http://www.peggyferguson.com>  
Hubbard House Publishing, Stillwater, OK.