

CRUCIAL COMMUNICATION TIPS FOR LOVING WELL

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1) BEGIN WITHIN – WHAT’S IT ABOUT FOR YOU?

Any time you have a positive response or negative reaction to something your partner has done, take some time to figure out what it is about for you. Why made an experience so fulfilling? What was distressing about the latest incident that upset you? We are not always aware of why something made us happy or unhappy. It has a lot to do with what that experience represents. We have underlying longings and anxieties that move through us like an under stream. We attach these themes to the experiences of our lives. In the most recent incident that upset you, what was the underlying theme? What did you conclude about you, your partner and the relationship? What is the narrative you are gathering evidence for?

If it was distressing, are you feeling unappreciated, taken-for-granted? Are you concerned about being betrayed or abandoned? Do you wonder if you deserve the love you desire? Do you wonder if there is something wrong with you? Is there a lack of reciprocity or fairness in your relationship? Do you feel that your needs or feelings are being dismissed? Are you being accused of being a bully or a nag? Are you nervous about approaching your partner for sex? Do you feel overwhelmed by your partner’s emotions, or lonely and uncared for? You get the idea – find the underlying theme.

2) LEARN ABOUT HOW YOUR PARTNER’S EXPERIENCE- HOW DO THEY SEE THINGS?

Human beings are story-making creatures – we construct narratives to make sense of our lives. While there may be elements of truth in the narratives we create, we miss things. We also misinterpret things. You always want to check in to see if what you are concluding has anything to do with what your partner is intending. Even when we get along well and believe we know this other person well, any two people in a relationship will experience life from a different place. We have different subjective worlds.

Curiosity is a powerful relationship skill. If you really want to understand someone, you have to become deeply curious about how things work over there in their world. You have to leave your “I know what that means” perspective and travel over there without agenda or conclusion to find out what things mean “over there.” What are your partner’s intentions when they act in a way that upsets you? What were their intentions? How do they define things? What is the formative history behind who they are and why they see things a certain way? If you are mystified by why your partner is upset about something, ask some questions. What happened for them in this situation? What were they experiencing or concluding? What did it touch into in their expectations or history? St. Francis once recommended that the wise person, “seeks to understand before seeking to be understood.” Asking sincere questions from a truly curious, non-critical stance will transform your relationship and deepen your intimacy.

3) SEPARATE OUT INTENTION FROM IMPACT

Many upsets in a couple’s life are created by *unintentionally* hurting or disappointing the beloved. Give your partner the benefit of the doubt when you feel hurt or disappointed. Move to curiosity. You are still learning about each other. As different people, either of you may do something with good intentions that did not land well with your partner. That does not prove bad intentions, or that the

recipient was ungrateful, or ridiculous. It means you are different. Ask some questions and learn something. Sometimes one of you will fail to do something that was important to the other. Try not to immediately become defensive, hurt, or offended. If you are the one who is upset, do some inner inquiry before you accuse a partner of intentionally or insensitively hurting you. This may be echoing into some sensitive area of your history. Go back down the time track and wonder where you have felt like this before. Is the past still influencing the present? Can you separate then from now?

4) GET CLEAR ON WHAT YOU WANT BEFORE YOU BRING UP A COMPLAINT

If you have a complaint, do not bring it up until you have thought about what you wanted instead. Pair complaints with solutions and requests, but make sure it is a request not a demand. Nobody likes demands. You know it's a demand (even if asked nicely) if there is a negative consequence on its way if you say "no." If a request is not responded to, shift into a learning conversation. Check your impulse to start an argument or enter into a power struggle. Re-read the points above, and in particular go into a learning conversation. What is your partner, thinking, feeling, anticipating, concerned about? What is there history with this request? What is the history in the relationship that would lead up to their resistance? When you get more information, you will be able to move forward to a mutually beneficial solution. If you stay in a learning conversation, at some point, the two of you will understand each other better. You will deepen the connection and the compassion. Refuse to get stuck in a power struggle, where there is only one solution for how something can be fulfilled. Two people willing to be creative can find solutions that address real underlying needs in ways that neither person could ever find alone.

5) SPEAK FOR YOURSELF, USE NEUTRAL, NON-JUDGMENTAL DESCRIPTIONS, AVOID ASSIGNING INTENTION

If you use the following protocol, you will reduce defensiveness. Describe behaviors or situations in neutral terms – avoid inferring intention, or attaching negative evaluations. Particularly avoid statements like, "I know exactly why you did that!" Sometimes it helps to imagine that you are describing something to someone from another planet, who know nothing about anything here on earth.

Speak for yourself, in "I" language. "What I saw/heard was _____. When that happened, I felt _____. I started thinking that _____. (It would be helpful to check in with your partner here and ask about this). What I really needed/wanted/was hoping for was _____. Would that be possible?" (This is the beginning of a back and forth – a learning and creating conversation).

Avoid saying, "You always/never (it's too global and evokes defense) _____. Avoid labelling or diagnosing, "that because you are _____. Avoid demanding "You had better _____ or I will (consequence or punishment) _____." Describing complaints in neutral terms, without implying intention, without blaming or shaming, will reduce defensiveness.

It is also OK to say what can live with and can't live with, but speak for yourself. Ex: "I can't continue to live with you while I watch the amount of alcohol you consume." Or, "I am trying hard to recover from this affair, but if it happens again, I won't be able to regain the trust. If I discover that you are lying to me about your involvement with another woman, it's over."

Explain the impact of your partner's behavior or situation, but keep in mind that this is still about you. It doesn't mean that your partner did this to intentionally to hurt you. Remember that things work differently in their world. We all have sensitive egos, and in the nesting dolls of our inner selves we house Inner Children who have fears and longings. It is easy for those "kids" to get upset when things don't go the way they had hoped!

6) HAVE A GROUND RULE WHERE THE TWO OF YOU AGREE NOT TO CROSS-COMPLAIN, TALK OVER EACH OTHER, OR MAKE CASES FOR WHY THE OTHER IS WRONG. IT ALSO HELPS TO AVOID DOING A LONG MONOLOGUE (practice "small portions" and then let the partner respond), DON'T PONTIFICATE - TALK WITHOUT INTERRUPTION FOR AN EXTENDED PERIOD OF TIME WITHOUT GIVING YOUR PARTNER A CHANCE TO RESPOND

- Cross-complaining is when one person voices a complaint and the other person retorts with a complaint of their own, instead of addressing what the first partner brought up. This will get you no-where. Deal with one thing at a time.
- Talking over each other means that no-one is listening. It often begins when one person stops talking about their own experience and starts criticizing, accusing, blaming and shaming.
- Case-making is bringing up a long list of incidents to prove your point. It's usually a list of your partner's failures and only leads to defensiveness. It's OK to explain why something matters or the impact that something is having on you, but avoid the lengthy dissertation.
- If you get too wound up – take a break! For heaven's sake, don't argue into the night if you are tired or drunk. Go to bed! Nothing gets resolved when the two of you are emotionally flooded and your reactive brains are pumping threat chemicals.
- Make sure you return to the conversation later and resolve something when you are calmed down, or it become a conflict-avoidant strategy. Conflict avoidance erodes the trust and good feelings in a relationship just as much as ugly fights do.
- Some people can go on for a long time because they have a lot to say. If you just need to talk about your feelings for a while, say so in advance. Make sure they are your feelings. If you move into inferring motivation, criticizing or blaming them, they will stop listening. Revisit Point #2, clarify your assumptions and projections and let your partner respond.

7) LEARN TO LISTEN DEEPLY – BENEATH THE WORDS

When your partner is not doing a very good job with the suggestions above, it can be difficult to listen without becoming defensive. If you are on the receiving end of poor communication skills, ask your partner to shift away from telling you what you were thinking or feeling. Ask them to go back to talking about what *they* experienced and what *their* hopes and needs were. You can tell your partner you are having a hard time listening and ask them to speak differently. If they can't do this, try to discern what the real need is underneath their poor communication skills. Put on your translation ears and listen beneath the words. Ask your partner what they need here. What would make it better? They may not know. They may just be discharging. Try to hang onto yourself and extend some grace. Validating emotions goes a long way to calm people down, even when what they are saying is hurtful. You don't have to agree with their thinking or own what they are saying – just let them know you understand what they are feeling. People who can do this become master communicators (and possibly saints).

8) CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING AND WATCH OUT FOR ASSUMPTIONS AND PROJECTIONS

Check out your understanding of what your partner is trying to get across to you by reflecting back what you THINK you heard. Ask them if you've got it. If not, listen to what they correct... or add for clarification. What is a projection? That's what happens when something is going on *inside of you*, but you project it out onto your partner and fully believe they are thinking, feeling, or doing what you are projecting. Be aware that we are constantly assuming and projecting in relationships, particularly if we believe we know this person. People grow, they change, they start to conclude different things, want different things, have different needs. There is always more to learn. Stay curious.

9) MEMORY IS A MYSTERIOUS THING

Don't get stuck in a "what really happened" argument. People process things differently and any two people will have two different memories of an experience or conversation, what it meant, and its implications. Human beings also "confabulate." We inadvertently make up things to fill in the gaps of a memory, things that make perfect sense to us. Stay with curiosity before you tell the other person that they are "wrong." Don't get into a power struggle about differing memories. Stay focused on what you are trying to resolve.

10) SPEAK THE TRUTH FULLY – WITH KINDNESS

Kindness is an under-rated value in relationships. Consider it important in your day-to-day lives. Kindness is different from being "nice." People who are trying to be nice often avoid speaking difficult truths. They end up speaking the truth side-ways, or developing resentments or avoidances. For example, Becky didn't tell her husband Eric the truth about his bad breath. Instead, she just stopped having sex with him. Eric didn't understand what had happened, he just assumed she didn't love him anymore. These kinds of situations happen all the time when people can't speak the truth kindly. People who can't address confusions and disappointments openly, clearly, and kindly, become conflict avoiders. Their relationships become increasingly superficial and empty. As the pile of unresolved hurts and disappointments pile up, positive feelings erode. If this is you, what is your history around "bringing things up," and why (some Inner Self) believes it is a bad idea.

It is crucial that information pass back and forth between two people who are trying to build a meaningful life together. It is also possible to speak the truth with kindness, speaking about your own experience, offering your thoughts about resolutions, open to dialogue, making requests, not demands. The conversation may upset your partner initially, but if you can hold steady while their boat rocks, often they will steady themselves. If you have communicated clearly, truthfully, kindly, and your partner gets defensive, hold steady. Speak about your intention to grow and your commitment to an ever deepening process of creating meaning and fulfillment between the two of you.

ⁱ To learn more about your Inner Selves you can read my book entitled *Negotiating the Inner Peace Treaty*. To learn more about love, purchase *The Labyrinth of Love – The Path to a Soulful Relationship*.