Marriage Lab: Sharpening Your Communication Skills

Debbie Marks, MS, LMFT - Saturday, Oct. 24, 2015

**Goal #1:** Learn that conflict in marriage is normal and helps us grow through the stages of marriage.

**Goal #2:** Learn that we can minimize conflict by spending time building a strong relationship and working to accept and embrace differences.

**Goal #3:** Learn that we can mitigate conflict by avoiding hurtful stances and using great listening and communication skills.

**Goal #4:** Commit to keeping your marriage growing by discussing the follow-up questions as a couple or small group or pursuing other recommended resources.

A few scriptures to ponder and discuss:

Philippians 4:8-9  Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

James 1:19-20  My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.

Ephesians 4:29-32  Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.
5 Stages of Marriage, by Michele Weiner-Davis (author of Divorce Busting)

As a long-time observer of relationships, I can tell you that, like children, marriages go through different developmental stages and predictable crises. But because people are unfamiliar with the normal hills and valleys of marriage, these predictable transitional periods are often misunderstood, causing over-reactions. Those who manage to weather these universal stormy periods usually come out the other side with greater love and commitment to their spouses. That's why I want to offer you a Marriage Map.

Stage One—Passion prevails

Head over heels in love, you can't believe how lucky you are to have met your lover. Much to your amazement, you have so much in common: you enjoy the same hobbies, music, restaurants, and movies. You can finish each other’s sentences. When you pick up the phone to call your partner, he or she is already on the line calling you. When little annoying things pop up, they’re dismissed and overlooked.

At no other time in your relationship is your feeling of wellbeing and physical desire for each other as intense as it is during this romantic period. The newness and excitement of the relationship stimulates the production of chemicals in your bodies that increase energy, positive attitudes, and heighten sexuality and sensuality. While in this naturally produced state of euphoria, you decide to commit to spending the rest of their lives together. And marry, you do. But soon, your joy gives way to an inevitable earth-shattering awakening; marriage isn't at all what you expected it to be.

Stage Two—What was I thinking?

In some ways, stage two is the most difficult because it is here that you experience the biggest fall. After all, how many miles is it from bliss to disillusionment? Millions! For starters, reality sets in. The little things start to bother you. You realize that your spouse has stinky breath in the morning, spends way too long on the toilet, leaves magazines and letters strewn on the kitchen counter, and never wraps food properly before it's put in the refrigerator.

Although you once thought you and your spouse were kindred spirits, you now realize that there are many, many differences between you. You're confused. You argue about everything. When you remind yourself you made a life-long commitment, you start to understand the real meaning of eternity.

Ironically, it is in the midst of feeling at odds with your once kindred spirit that you are faced with making all sorts of life-altering decisions, such as whether and when to have children, where to live, who will support the family, who will handle the bills, how to spend your free time, how in-laws fit
into your lives, and who will do the cooking. Just at the time when a team spirit would have come in mighty handy, spouses often start to feel like opponents. So they spend the next decade or so trying to get their partners to change, which triggers stage three.

**Stage Three—Everything would be great if you’d change**

In this stage of marriage, most people believe there are two ways of looking at things—your spouse's way and your way (also known as the Right Way). And rather than brainstorm creative solutions, couples often battle tenaciously to get their partners to admit they’re wrong. That’s because every point of disagreement is an opportunity to define the marriage. Over time, both partners dig in their heels deeper and deeper.

Now is the time when many people come to a fork in the marital road. Three choices become apparent. Convinced they’ve tried everything, some people give up. They tell themselves they’ve fallen out of love or married the wrong person and they divorce. Other people resign themselves to the status quo and decide to lead separate lives. But there are still others who decide that it's time to begin to investigate healthier and more satisfying ways of interacting. Although the latter option requires a major leap of faith, those who take this leap are the fortunate ones because the best of marriage is yet to come.

**Stage Four—That's just the way he/she is**

In stage four, we finally come to terms with the fact that we are never going to see eye-to-eye with our partners about everything and we have to figure out what we must do to live more peaceably. We look to others for suggestions: religious counsel, close friends and family, marital therapy, self-help books, or relationship seminars. Those of us who are more private look inward and seek solutions there.

We more readily forgive our spouses for their hard-headedness, and recognize that we aren't exactly easy to live with either. When disagreements occur, we make more of an effort to put ourselves in our partner's shoes. We recognize that, as with everything in life, we have to accept the good with the bad. Fights happen less frequently and when they occur, they're not as intense or as emotional as in the earlier years of marriage. And because we're smart enough to have reached this stage, we reap the benefits of the fifth and final stage.

**Stage Five—Together, at last**

It is really a tragedy that half of all couples who wed never get to stage five, when all the pain and hard work of the earlier stages really begins to pay off. Since you are no longer in a struggle to
define who you are and what the marriage should be, there is more peace and harmony. You start "liking" your spouse again.

By the time you reach stage five, you have a shared history. And although you'd both agree that marriage hasn't been easy, you feel proud that you’ve weathered the storms. You appreciate your partner’s sense of commitment to making your marriage last. You feel more secure about yourself as a person and you begin to appreciate the differences between you and your spouse. And what you don’t appreciate, you find greater acceptance for. If you have children, they’re older and more independent, allowing you to focus on your marriage again, like in the old days. And you start having “old day feelings” again. You have come full circle.

I’m certain that if more couples realized that there really is a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, they’d be more willing to tough it out through the downpour. The problem is, most people fool themselves into thinking that whatever stage they’re in at the moment is where they’ll be forever. But it’s important to remember that nothing lasts forever. There are seasons to everything in life, including marriage. The wiser and more mature you become, the more you realize this. The more you realize this, the more time you and your spouse spend hanging out in stage five. Together again, at last.

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Five Emotional Love Languages by Dr. Gary Chapman

Dr. Gary Chapman, Christian counselor and author of The Five Love Languages, writes about the importance of being able to express love to your spouse in a way that your spouse can understand. He calls this type of communication: using the five love languages.

Words of Affirmation. This is when you say how nice your spouse looks, or how great the dinner tasted. These words will also build your mate’s self-image and confidence.

Quality Time. Some spouses believe that being together, doing things together, and focusing in on one another is the best way to show love. If this is your partner’s love language, turn off the TV, set aside the iPhone, and give him/her some undivided attention.

Gifts. It’s universal in human cultures to give gifts. They don’t have to be expensive to send a powerful message of love. Spouses who forget a birthday or anniversary or who never give gifts to someone who truly enjoys gift giving will find themselves with a spouse who feels neglected and unloved.

Acts of Service. Discovering how you can best do something for your spouse will require time and creativity. These acts of service like vacuuming, dusting, hanging a bird feeder, or planting a garden need to be done with joy in order to be perceived as a gift of love.

Physical Touch. Sometimes just stroking your spouse’s back, holding hands, or a peck on the cheek will fulfill this need.

Speaking in your spouse’s love language probably won’t be natural for you. “We’re not talking comfort—we're talking love,” says Chapman. “Love is something we do for someone else. So often couples love one another but they aren’t connecting. They’re sincere, but sincerity isn’t enough.”

www.5lovelanguages.com has a free 30-question profile you can take.
Myers-Briggs personality types: how to figure out yours

Introvert (I) vs Extrovert (E). This trait focuses on where you get your energy from. In a nutshell, introverts recharge by spending time alone, extroverts recharge by being around other people.

- Introverts do like people, but feel drained after spending time in the company of others. This is not true for extroverts. While extroverts might feel tired after being out all night with people, they don’t feel drained. It’s important to understand the distinction between ‘tired’ and ‘drained’ in this particular context.
- Extroverts do get tired and need some alone time (everyone does!), but while time alone can relieve tiredness, it doesn’t make them ‘buzzy.’ They need to be around other people to feel ‘buzzy’.
- Introverts legitimately feel energized and ready to take on the world after they’ve had a few good hours where they haven’t had to talk to anyone!
- If you loathe small talk, you are almost certainly an introvert. If you do your best problem solving by musing and mulling things over in your head, then you’re almost certainly an introvert.
- If you find it hard to problem solve or you don’t really know what you think about something until you’ve had a chance to ‘talk things out’ with someone else, you’re likely an extrovert.
- Shyness does not equal introversion. Shyness is a social anxiety. There are many shy extroverts in this world!

Sensing (S) vs Intuition (N). This is all about how you like to process information. Intuitives are ‘big-picture’ thinkers. Sensers like details.

- Intuitives will look at that information as a whole and are far more conceptual in nature. Sensers love getting into the nitty gritty of a situation or problem.
- Ask an Intuitive to do something and they’ll get it done, but don’t ask them how they got it done. They have a picture of how they did it in their heads but the thought of breaking down their process into steps for you will explode their brain.
- Sensers love following steps and creating processes.
- If you’re a Senser and someone wants you to do something for them, you need them to be very clear in their instructions and expectations. If you’re an Intuitive you’re better able to take a vague idea and turn it into reality.
- Sensers will remember the fine details about an event or a situation. They’ll remember lines from a movie. Intuitives’ memories of the same situation will be ‘vaguer’ and involve more general/high level impressions.
• Just because you like making lists doesn’t mean you are a Senser. That is more a Judging thing (see below).
• If you hate following instructions and would rather someone just show you how to do something, you are most likely an Intuitive.

Thinking (T) vs Feeling (F). This is about how you make decisions.

• Thinkers tend to be very black and white in their decision-making (taking hard facts into consideration rather than emotions). Feelers see the ‘shades of grey’ in every situation.
• Thinkers put more weight on objective principles and impersonal facts.
• Feelers put more weight on personal concerns and the people involved.
• Ultimately, Feelers don’t make a decision without considering the impact it will have on other people.
• Thinkers have a need to do things ‘right’ and be ‘right’. It’s not that they don’t value the feelings of others, but they value being ‘right’ more.

Judging (J) vs Perceiving (P) - This trait is mostly about how you interact with the world.

• Judgers need life to be ordered. They don’t like uncertainty. They like to lock plans away well in advance. Loose ends or lack of closure can make them feel anxious. In short, Judgers like to feel in control of life.
• For Judgers, the life of Perceivers can look chaotic. Time is a fluid concept for Perceivers. If you are always late and have no problems being late, then you are probably a Perceiver. If you don’t like being pinned down to a commitment or course of action, then you are probably a Perceiver. If you like to keep your options open, you are probably a Perceiver.
• Perceivers like the ability to be spontaneous and flexible.
• Judgers are also action takers. If something needs to be done, give it to a Judger.
• Perceivers might have lots of great ideas, but they’re less driven to bring those ideas to fruition.
• Don’t confuse a Judger’s need to be ‘in control’ of life with a need to be ‘organized’. Both Judgers and Perceivers can be organized. Judgers just don’t like people messing with their plans. Perceivers are more able to roll with the punches.

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Best guess for me:

Best guess for my spouse:
Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (found in divorces), by Dr. John Gottman

1. **Criticism**: Attacking your partner’s personality or character, usually with the intent of making someone right and someone wrong: Generalizations: “you always…” “you never…” “you’re the type of person who …” “why are you so …”

2. **Contempt**: Attacking your partner’s sense of self with the intention to insult or psychologically abuse him/her: a) Insults and name-calling: “bitch, bastard, wimp, fat, stupid, ugly, slob, lazy…” b) Hostile humor, sarcasm or mockery, or c) Body language & tone of voice: sneering, rolling your eyes, curling your upper lip...

3. **Defensiveness**: Seeing self as the victim, warding off a perceived attack: a) Making excuses (e.g., external circumstances beyond your control forced you to act in a certain way “It’s not my fault…” “I didn’t…” b) Cross-complaining: meeting your partner’s complaint or criticism with a complaint of your own, ignoring what your partner said, c) Disagreeing and then cross-complaining “That’s not true, you’re the one who …” “I did this because you did that…” d) Yes-butting: start off agreeing but end up disagreeing, e) Repeating yourself without paying attention to what the other person is saying, or f) Whining “It’s not fair.”

4. **Stonewalling**: Withdrawing from the relationship as a way to avoid conflict. Partners may think they are trying to be “neutral” but stonewalling conveys disapproval, icy distance, separation, disconnection, and/or smugness: a) Stony silence, b) Monosyllabic mutterings, c) Changing the subject, d) Removing yourself physically, or e) Silent treatment

**Remedies:**

a) Learn to make specific complaints and requests (when X happened, I felt Y, I want Z).
b) Conscious communication: Speaking the unarguable truth and listening generously.
c) Validate your partner (let your partner know what makes sense to you about what they are saying; let them know you understand what they are feeling, see through their eyes).
d) Shift to appreciation (five times as much positive feeling and interaction as negative).
e) Claim responsibility: “What can I learn from this?” and “What can I do about it?”
f) Re-write your inner script (replace thoughts of righteous indignation or innocent victimization with thoughts of appreciation and responsibility that are soothing & validating).
g) Practice getting undefended (allowing your partner’s utterances to be what they really are: just thoughts and puffs of air) and let go of the stories that you’re making up.

The Five Magic Hours (found in healthy marriages), by Dr. John Gottman

Dr. John Gottman, Ph.D., is a psychologist and leading relationship expert who has conducted studies of thousands of couples at his “Love Lab” at The Gottman Institute in Seattle for over 30 years.

In his book, The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work, Dr. Gottman describes a follow-up study of couples who had previously attended workshops at The Gottman Institute. During these workshops, researchers looked for what might distinguish couples whose marriages continued to improve from those whose marriages did not. They were surprised to find that couples whose relationships continued to be strong were devoting only an extra five hours a week to their marriages. Gottman calls these “The Magic Five Hours.”

Partings—when you part in the morning make sure you’ve learned about one thing happening in your partner’s day. Estimated time: 2 minutes per day x 5 working days equals 10 minutes per week.

Reunions—Spend 20 minutes at the end of each workday to reconnect and talk about your day. Such a conversation will reduce your stress at the end of the day. Estimated time: 20 minutes per day x 5 working days equals 1 hour, 40 minutes per week.

Admiration and Appreciation—Find some way every day to communicate genuine affection and appreciation toward your partner. Estimated time: 5 minutes per day x 7 days equals 35 minutes per week.

Affection—Kiss, hold, grab, and touch each other while you’re together. Be playful with each other. Make sure to kiss each other before going to sleep. A kiss can be a way to let go of any minor irritations that may have built up over the day. Estimated time: 5 minutes per day x 7 days equals 35 minutes per week

Weekly Date—Take at least two hours every week to stay connected in a low-pressure way. Use the time to talk to get to know each other even more, update each other about important issues, go out on a date, and enjoy being together. You can also use the time to work through any arguments or issues that may have come up. Estimated time: 2 hours per week.
**Imago Dialogue** by Dr. Harville Hendrix

There are three basic steps to achieving healthy communication that will really strengthen your dialogue with your partner, according to marriage therapist Dr. Harville Hendrix. This is known as the Imago technique.

“Couples are able to create stronger relationships by first becoming more aware of just how deeply interconnected you are,” Harville says. By offering you a chance to recognize the unconscious agenda each partner brings to the relationship, both of you can grow together in a creative, non-controlling, and healing way based in understanding each other's wants and needs.

Try this intentional dialogue exercise with your partner to work through any issues or disagreements that may be holding you back from a more intimate and fulfilling relationship.

**Step 1: Mirroring.** Listen to your partner without distorting his/her thoughts and feelings. Dr. Hendrix says the first step of an intentional dialogue is to mirror your partner and let him/her be heard without judgment. Follow this basic script with your partner.

**Mirroring Exercise**

Tell your partner the message you would like him/her to hear. The message should start with "I" and describe your feelings. (Example: "I feel hurt when you talk down to me.")

Your partner then mirrors your message. Example: "If I got it, you feel hurt when I talk down to you. Did I get it?"

If you feel your partner didn't understand your message, explain again and have him mirror you until the message is received.

Complete the message. If you were heard accurately, your partner says, "Is there more about that?" This helps you complete your feelings and prevents your partner from responding to incomplete messages.

When the message is completed, your partner then summarizes all of the message. (Example: "Let me see if I got that...")

He/she should check for accuracy with, "Did I get it all?"

When your message has been heard accurately, you can then move on to the next step.

**Step 2: Validating:** Why it's not enough just to listen to your partner.

It's not enough just to listen. You must learn to pay close attention in order to understand your partner's truth. "It's not enough just to be heard," says Dr. Harville Hendrix, "It's 'Do you see that I'm not crazy?"
Validating Exercise

Your partner does not have to agree with your argument to validate it.

In order to validate your message, your spouse needs to use the right language. Your partner should use sentences like this: "You make sense because..." or "I can see what you're saying...." Using the phrase, "makes sense" may be helpful—it tells you that your partner doesn't think your feelings are crazy.

Your partner must make certain that you feel validated before moving on. If you do, move on to the next step.

Step 3: Empathizing: Once the feeling is expressed, it's time to put yourself in your partner's shoes.

The next big step in the dialoguing process is for your partner to empathize with your expressed feelings. "Figure out the feeling, and go to that place with him or her," Dr. Hendrix says. "Step into that place with them and they will know you exist for them in that moment. That's a connection."

Empathy Exercise

Your partner can start the empathy exercise with a statement such as, "I can imagine that you might be feeling..." or "I can see you are feeling...."

Since it's impossible to know exactly what a person feels, your partner should check for accuracy. He should ask "Is that what you're feeling?" If he didn't understand the feeling, you should readdress the message.

If you share new feelings with you partner upon reiteration, he/she must mirror those feelings. (For example, "Is there more about that feeling?")

When you are finished with your intentional dialogue, reverse roles. You are now the receiver of your partner's feelings and should start with the mirroring exercise. With practice, you and your partner can continue to create the marriage of your dreams.
Follow-Up Discussion Questions:

Referring to the scriptures on the first page, which of the principles do you or your spouse exhibit well? What one principle is your greatest challenge personally? Share with your spouse your commitment to pray and work on improving in that area.

Referring to the stages of marriage, which stage of marriage are you currently in? What will you need to do to work through that stage well? Discuss with your spouse how you plan to help this happen. Pray.

Referring to the love languages, what ways are you speaking each other’s language well and what ways do you need to speak differently? How will you do that? Commit to loving your spouse in some small way every day.

Referring to your personalities, what part of your spouse’s personality is most difficult for you to accept and embrace? Why? What can you and your spouse do to help this trait become a strength instead of a weakness in your relationship? What do you appreciate about your spouse’s personality? In what ways do you complement or balance each other? Affirm why you chose each other and how you are good for each other. Commit to do a better job of accepting and embracing differences and working through them to a solution.

Referring to the ‘four horsemen,’ which of the ‘horsemen’ creep into your relationship most frequently? Admit to your spouse that you have allowed this and ask them to forgive you for your part in that hurtful pattern. Talk about what each of you can and will do instead. Which remedies will you focus on first? Promise each other that you will reach out for help if it continues.

Referring to the Five Magic Hours, what are you doing well? How will you intentionally spend time together? When is the best time?

Watch “It’s Not About The Nail” on YouTube. What do you observe and relate to? How does that humorous example model the dialogue above? The hardest part of listening is putting aside your own feelings temporarily to show how much you wish to understand the other person first. (THEN they can hopefully hear all your great ideas and solutions!)

Pick an easy topic to discuss and practice the dialogue instructions. How did it feel? What was hard? What did you and your spouse do well? Where did you (almost) get stuck? Pick another easy topic a different day and try it again. Keep practicing until you can use it on a harder topic. Whoever is feeling more emotional about the issue will need to be the “sender” or “talker/teacher” first, while the other person is the “receiver” or “listener/learner.”
From the Old Testament book of Nehemiah:

1:3 They said to me, “Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.”

2:4 The king said to me, “What is it you want?” Then I prayed to the God of heaven, 5 and I answered the king, “If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my ancestors are buried so that I can rebuild it.” 6 Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, “How long will your journey take, and when will you get back?” It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time.

4:7 But when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the people of Ashdod heard that the repairs to Jerusalem’s walls had gone ahead and that the gaps were being closed, they were very angry. 8 They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it. 9 But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat. 10 Meanwhile, the people in Judah said, “The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall.” 11 Also our enemies said, “Before they know it or see us, we will be right there among them and will kill them and put an end to the work.” 12 Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over, “Wherever you turn, they will attack us.” 13 Therefore I stationed some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families, with their swords, spears and bows. 14 After I looked things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, “Don’t be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your families, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes.”

For Discussion: What in your marriage might be broken down? What rubble is getting in the way of repair work? What outside influences seem to conspire against you? What principles of repair do you see in Nehemiah? Where can you get help and reinforcements? What will you do to see the repair through? Keep your strength up?