



CLIFFSNOTES ON COMMUNICATION

■ by Kathy Krentkowski, MA, LCPC, LMHC

The most common problem that brings couples into counseling is unproductive communication. It's not so much that people do not talk. Rather, people talk at one another, and there is an absence of true listening. Many times the true content and meaning of what is being said gets lost and no one searches to find it.

How well are you communicating?

Healthy communication consists of talking and listening. This requires the need to fill two roles:

1. The Speaker – What do we want the other person to hear and know?
2. The Listener – Are we listening to understand what is being said?

When working to communicate well, it is best to pick one role and stick to it. You cannot speak and listen at the same time.

The Speaker

The speaker begins the conversation. A good way to begin is by asking the person you want to speak with if it is a good time to talk. This shows you honor their time and invites them to talk, rather than demanding they talk. If it is not a good time, ask when would be.

"Honey, is this a good time to talk with you about our budget?" (If not), "When would be a good time?"

The speaker speaks for themselves, not others or the population at large. Try to communicate your thoughts and feelings by using "I" statements.

"I feel confused as to why we seem to be running out of money. We set an amount for entertainment and you have been going over that. I think you are not sticking to the budget."

The Listener

The listener has the important task to give understanding. In order to do this you will need to temporarily put your own thoughts and feelings to the side so you can commit to listen and really hear what the speaker is saying. This may take, literally, an act of God. Perhaps David needed help listening when he prayed, "Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips! (Psalm 141:3). Listening occurs through mirroring, checking, curiosity, validating, and empathizing.

Mirroring: Once you have heard the speaker share with you their thoughts and feelings, respond by letting them know what it is that you heard, and then check it out to see if you're correct.

"Let me see if I heard you correctly. What you're saying is we are running out of money and you think it is related to me not sticking to the budget. Is that right?"

Checking: Checking for accuracy is very important. When you mirror what you are hearing, you allow the other person to hear their own words come out of your mouth. They can then let you know if you heard them correctly, or if they need to clarify. The task of mirroring is to work to get as accurate of a picture as possible. If the speaker needs to add or correct you, they can do so.

"Yes, that's most of it. I think you are spending too much on entertainment, more than what we agreed on. I don't think it's all your fault, but this is one area where I have seen a problem."



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Curiosity: After the speaker has let you know that, yes, in fact, what you have heard is what they are saying, become curious of their perspective by asking if there is more they would like to say. Remember, you are listening to understand, not to judge what you are hearing as “right” or “wrong”. Becoming curious will help you avoid the mistake of responding before really hearing and understanding. King Solomon shared his wisdom in the proverb, “If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame” (Proverbs 18:13).

“Is there more you want to say about that?”

Once you have listened, try summarizing, just to be sure you have a clear line of communication.

“So if I have heard you right, you are concerned that we are running out of money. You think we are not sticking to our budget, specifically, that I am spending too much on my entertainment and not sticking to what we agreed on. Did I get it all?”

Validate: The next step is to let the speaker know that what they are saying makes sense. This is a tough step because sometimes it seems absolutely implausible that anyone would think or feel the way they do! If, however, you remember that each person is unique with individual thoughts and feelings that matter, then you can honor them by letting them know that you can see where they are coming from. You do not have to agree with someone in order to validate their perspective. Validating can be done in many ways:

“I can see where you are coming from.” “I see your point and it makes sense.” “I get it.”

Empathy: If you are able to empathize, then you are able to imagine what the other person is feeling.

“You must feel frustrated with me.” Check to see if you’re right. *“Is that right?”*

The speaker will confirm or correct. And they may choose to say more.

“Yes, and I feel scared because I fear we won’t be able to pay our bills and this will continue to be a problem for us.”

If you have no idea how they feel, ask them.

Finally, once a line of communication has been established, and the speaker feels heard and understood, the listener can ask, *“May I share my perspective?”*

Communicating this way is like playing a game. You take turns and see where it goes. Each role is needed, and you switch parts until you feel you have come to some understanding. The relationship is the winner. The reward is feeling safe in your relationship to talk about difficult issues, greater understanding, and often respect and feelings of closeness in your relationship. ■



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