

4 Spirit-Filled Startups for a Difficult Conversation With Your Spouse

Perhaps your spouse isn't picking up the hints you're dropping. Perhaps you find it necessary to set some new and difficult boundaries in your marriage. Perhaps you see some clues that make you wonder if your spouse's affections are being drawn elsewhere. You know you need to have a difficult conversation with your spouse, and you're struggling to know how to begin.

You can apply some principles of communication that will make it much more likely you will:

- Find out what you need to know from your spouse
- Be able to express what you need and want
- Move closer to a solution to the problem

I frequently have people write to me about their marriage challenges. Ignoring the problem or letting resentment and bitterness build up only makes things worse. One of the first steps is usually having that conversation you don't want to have. I find myself often recommending a similar template for beginning a difficult conversation.

Here are some of those principles. And following are some examples of what to say as you begin.

Making a Difficult Conversation Successful

1. **Choose the setting.** Time and place matter. Intentionally choose the setting that will allow your spouse to hear you most effectively. Don't try to talk when your spouse is tired, upset, angry, distracted or hungry. Plan a time such as Saturday morning over coffee or an evening

when the kids are occupied elsewhere.

2. **Affirm your desire to deepen the relationship.** Your default must be that your relationship is worth preserving. Your words and actions need to communicate that you are starting from the premise that you value your spouse and your marriage. Work to see that your heart is open.
3. **Seek first to understand.** Your feelings and needs are important. But if something is bothering you, your *first* task is to understand your spouse. Be curious, not critical. Specifically ask your spouse to help you understand their perspective on the circumstances or issue that is bothering you.
4. **Focus on a solution to the problem, not the person.** You're not attacking your spouse; you're attacking the problem and inviting your spouse to join you in finding a solution. Criticism, nagging, manipulation, the silent treatment or angry outbursts make a solution less likely. A focus on finding a solution helps take the pressure off each of you individually and works to strengthen the relationship.

This last point is so important, even when the issue is a big one. For example, if your spouse is addicted to porn or alcohol, the reason for your intervention is to move your marriage from the dysfunction to a place of healing and growth. If your spouse is having an affair, you are seeking to open the door to transparency and restoration. If you are setting some difficult boundaries, you are doing so in order to stop the deterioration and preserve the relationship.

Now here are a few examples.

Conversation Openers: You've planned the setting where you suspect your spouse will be most likely able to hear you. You've done your homework.

You're ready to broach the difficult topic. Here's what that could look like as you begin.

Honey, I'm grateful God brought you into my life. I'm glad He has blessed us with the home and children we have. And I want the next 10 years of our marriage to be even better than where we've already been. But I've noticed some things that really concern me, and I would like you to help me understand. You've spent more evenings away in the past few months than you have before. It seems you're much less willing to talk about what's going on at work and where you've been, and you seem much less interested in sex. I'm worried your affections are elsewhere. I'm worried I'm losing you. I need us to talk about what's going on so we can deal with whatever it is.

Sweetheart, I'm grateful for the years God has blessed us together. I'm grateful for our family, and for you as my husband. But I need to let you know that I will be doing things differently from now on. For my own well-being, I will not be responding to your criticism or demands. If you become angry or harsh or demand things be done your own way, I will leave the room. I'm not doing this to punish you, but for my own emotional and spiritual well-being. I hope we can talk together about how we can make our relationship better going forward, and if you would like to do that, I'm happy to have that conversation.

Honey, God blessed me when He gave me you. Through good times and not-so-good, we've made it 10 years! And I believe God wants the next 10 years of our marriage to be even better than the last. But I miss you. I miss the kinds of connections we had when we were first married. For the ways in which I've not been the kind of spouse you need, I'm sorry. Would you help me understand some of the things that are making intimacy and sex hard for you? I want to listen and hear you. And I want us to work together to make the next season of our marriage all that God wants it to be.

Such an opening statement will be only the beginning. But it can hopefully set you up to have a conversation that focuses on working toward a solution instead of lobbing criticisms at each other.

If you'd like a more detailed guide to understanding how to communicate more effectively with your spouse, check out our resource ***Dr. Carol's Guide to Healthy Communication in Marriage***.

Your Turn: What issue in your marriage have you been either avoiding or fighting about? When are you going to have that difficult conversation? Leave a comment below. {eoa}

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