

Avoid Fruitless Arguments in Your Marriage With These 8 Counseling Tips

“Honey, we need to talk.” How does that work out for you? Do you end up in a screaming match? Does one of you clam up and walk away? Do you say things you later regret?

It's a rare person indeed who goes into marriage knowing how to communicate in a healthy way. We asked couples where they wanted help in their relationship, and communication was clearly the Number One issue. Communication is a learned skill, and avoiding these mistakes in communicating with your spouse will get you a lot closer to the goals you're after.

Doing your homework before trying to communicate will help prevent some of these mistakes. But here are some specific land mines to watch out for when it's time for “Honey, we need to talk.”

8 Mistakes to Avoid

1. Reacting out of Emotional Volatility

Beginning a conversation when you're ready to boil over with anger, frustration, sarcasm, or desperation is almost certain to elicit defensiveness in your spouse. The walls between you will only become thicker.

Learn to own your own emotions; no one, not even your spouse, can make you feel any certain way. Discover healthy ways to deal with your feelings that don't involve taking it out on your spouse. Cry with a friend. Go for a run. Spend some time in prayer. Let your emotional temperature cool off before trying to work toward a solution with your spouse.

2. Don't Consider the Setting

Presenting a stack of overdue bills when your spouse walks in the door after a long day at work, or expressing how unhappy you are with your sex life as you're getting into bed at night – those scenarios are only going to make things worse.

Give careful thought to when and where your spouse will be most able to hear you and respond clearly. If it's a difficult conversation you need to have, take extra care to plan accordingly. Arrange for childcare. Meet Saturday morning for coffee. Make sure your husband has had something to eat. Make sure you help your wife deal with any practical matters causing her stress. Do what you can to see that your spouse's frame of mind will be as clear and positive as possible.

3. Start with Blame and Criticism

Almost every troubled couple who writes to me says something like, "My spouse is doing this wrong, and I can't get them to change." Criticizing and blaming your spouse for your relationship problems will almost certainly cause their mind and heart to close.

Instead of saying "You always . . ." or "You never . . .", try something like, "I'm worried about our finances. I'd like us to work together to come up with a better financial plan." Or, "I miss the intimacy we had in the past. I don't want the walls between us to become even thicker. Can we work together to make our relationship better?" Focus on working on the problem, not criticizing the person.

4. Expect your Spouse to Read Your Mind

Even the most caring spouse cannot know all your thoughts and feelings. Expecting them to know what worries you, what hurts you, what you want and need – that sets you both up for disappointment.

Express clearly and succinctly how the issue is affecting you. Put simple words to your emotions; don't dump your feelings on your spouse, or blame them for how you feel. Own your own feelings. Describe the behaviors you see, and their results. If there's something you need or want from your spouse, ask for it clearly without demanding. Some problems can be solved simply by expressing to each other what you see, need, and want.

5. Think it's All About YOU

You're not the only one with thoughts, feelings, fears, worries, needs, desires, strengths, and weaknesses. Your spouse is not your slave or your master. Marriage is a partnership between two people, and how the issue affects one of you is just as important as how it affects the other.

To whatever degree you already know how the issue affects your spouse, think that through ahead of time. If your spouse is working long hours and the money is still not enough, you can express appreciation for how hard they are working and still talk through developing a better financial plan. If your spouse is having a hard time with their getting-older body, you can help reassure them how much you still care and also continue working to overcome the barriers to intimacy physically and otherwise.

6. Do All the Talking

Some spouses can listen to you vent, but the place for that is usually not with your marriage partner. If you primarily need to talk tell your spouse that up front, but don't expect simply venting to lead to a solution. You may do better letting off steam to a trusted Christian friend, or in prayer to God.

To communicate well in marriage demands much more listening than talking. If you tend to talk more, work hard to shut up

and listen to what your spouse has to say. Listen to not only the words, but the feelings behind the words. Listen intently without trying to frame a comeback in your own mind. Ask questions if you need to. Listening and asking questions like this may help your spouse understand their own thoughts and feelings better than they could on their own.

7. Demand to be Right

A critical nagging wife or a controlling angry husband makes for a miserable one-sided marriage – and no chance at decent communication. Trying to communicate in order to get your way will result in resentment and emotional distance. Even if you do get your way on an issue your relationship will be damaged.

Work hard to see yourself as standing side-by-side with your spouse, working together to solve a problem. Your spouse is not the enemy. Instead you're together addressing the bank account, the parenting problem, the health challenge, the intimacy obstacle, etc. It's not about who's right; it's about finding a solution. And if you struggle to see things from that perspective, spend some time in prayer first.

8. Fail to Seek Understanding

Seek first to understand, then to be understood. There's no communication challenge that cannot be made better by understanding. If you both are people of good will, seeking understanding will put you and your spouse on the same side. Sometimes one or both of you will need to compromise, but that's not the ideal outcome. Usually there's another solution that solves the deeper problem. Seeking to understand your spouse is the only way to get there.

You have the choice to seek understanding instead of seeking to be right. It takes listening, really listening, to your spouse. And it takes being willing to share from your own open heart in a way that feels vulnerable. Go into any

communication seeking to understand and you'll come out ahead.

See how many of these mistakes you can avoid the next time you have something to communicate about with your spouse.

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