

How to Have Healthy Conversations With Your Spouse

Last month, I blogged about how to better communicate with and listen to a spouse that has a very different communication style. But there's another aspect of communication that might make or break the health of a relationship between two people.

Healthy communication exists best when spouses are both developing the skill of an assertive communication style. [Tweet This]

Communication experts generally agree that we all gravitate towards one of four communication styles when we interact with another person:

1. Passive communication: This spouse tends to clam up, withdraw, and do all they can to avoid any confrontation. This can often lead to stress, anger, resentment, and bitterness in the passive person. For example, if finances are getting tight and stressful, the passive person will likely avoid the subject, change the subject, or overlook the subject, even when they see that a financial disaster is approaching.

2. Aggressive communication: This spouse tends to attack, control, and provoke others. This tends to raise everyone's stress levels, creating an atmosphere of fear and confrontation that seems, over time, to be insurmountable. And if unchecked, the aggressive person can become dangerous and destructive. In our earlier example, the aggressive spouse would see the financial stress and lash out at the family, blaming others, creating fear of financial ruin.

3. Passive-aggressive communication: This spouse tends to turn

agitation, anger, and frustration into a more confusing reaction by dealing with it very indirectly. Often the passive-aggressive person will respond with more subtlety or hints, while acting like nothing is wrong. They will pretend not to notice how something they did was troubling or pretend that any offense they've caused is more due to someone else's problem than theirs. Their real feelings will be masked by conflicting attitudes and actions.

Continuing the example of the financial problems, the passive-aggressive spouse, instead of addressing bad spending habits or overdue bills directly, would drop hints of frustration or unexpected snarky comments about purchases or payments, without being direct about what needs to be done to improve the situation.

4. Assertive communication: This spouse achieves a much healthier result than the others by starting with a clear understanding of what they feel, what they think, and what they want. The assertive person deals directly, honestly, and most importantly, *respectfully* with others about what they are thinking and feeling. To finish our example, the assertive spouse would identify the real financial issue, and directly and honestly address the issue, without being angry or demeaning or confusing to the other spouse. They would accept responsibility for any part they played and would then offer some clear solutions and say something like, "We need to make some changes, and we need to work together to get through this. Here is what I would suggest..." would be a typical type of response from a healthy, assertive person.

For much of my life, I was a more aggressive communicator, and it was not always appreciated by others, especially my wife, Susan. But I've worked hard over the years to be more of an assertive communicator, and it really is a much better form of communication and Susan appreciates it so much more!

Which type of communicator are you? How about your spouse?

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