

How to Talk Through Tough Topics With Your Spouse

I'm a wordsmith. I hang on every word that is said. I'm a literal listener.

My wife, Susan, is not. She's a big picture person. She's intuitive and reads emotions. Because of our differing styles of communication and information processing, whenever Susan and I have a tough topic we need to address, we use what's been called the speaker-listener technique.

I'm not aware of its origin. Many family experts have used this technique over the years. Relationship expert and friend Dr. Gary Smalley also calls it "drive-thru communication" because you communicate kind of like you do when you're in a drive-thru. You give your order and the cashier repeats it back to you, "So that's two burgers, a fry and a coke." Then you either say, "That's right" or, if they don't hear it correctly, you repeat the order.

Susan and I have been married 26 years and still benefit greatly from using this speaker-listener technique, especially when we have a serious, sensitive, emotionally charged or tough topic to talk about. As I mentioned in *A Behind-the-Scenes Look at My Marriage*, Susan and I interrupt each other quite often. We don't always listen to each other well.

Instead of really hearing one another, we're just thinking about what we want to say next. So this tool helps us to slow the conversation down, forces us to really listen and understand what the other is thinking and feeling.

How it Works

Here's how the speaker-listener technique works:

1. Speaker has the floor. This ensures that only one person speaks at a time. Use any object such as a pencil or even the TV remote (but make sure the TV is off!) to designate who the current speaker is, that is, who has the floor.

2. Speaker speaks briefly. The speaker makes a statement or point. It's important to make it short so that the listener will really listen to what you're saying. Three or four sentences at a time is a good rule of thumb. The temptation, especially for those just starting to use this tool, is to give a long monologue or lecture out of fear that this will be your only opportunity to speak. But if you follow these rules, you'll have plenty of opportunity to speak. Also, when speaking, it's good to use "I" statements and talk how about you feel rather than accusing or focusing on the other person's actions. Here's a template that you can use: "In situation X, when you do Y, I feel Z."

3. Listener paraphrases. After the speaker makes their first point, the listener repeats it back or paraphrases what they heard so that the speaker knows the listener clearly understood. At this point, the listener should not refute what the speaker is saying or offer their opinion. If the speaker says something inflammatory or disagreeable, you must wait until you get the floor to state your response. And sighs, groans or other noises, or derogatory facial expressions are not allowed. If you disagree, you can state your case when you have the floor. It's also very important to be an active listener. That means that the listener is giving the speaker their full attention and looking them in the eyes, not reading your text messages or watching the TV.

4. Speaker affirms or corrects the paraphrase. After the listener paraphrases, the speaker affirms that they paraphrased correctly or politely corrects the listener's paraphrase.

5. Speaker and listener repeat steps 2, 3 and 4 above. The

speaker may keep the floor and repeat these steps several times until they have felt heard on their initial point.

6. Speaker and listener switch roles. When the speaker feels like they have been heard and understood on the points they are trying to make, the speaker and listener switch roles. The speaker should not fear giving up the floor. During the course of the conversation, the floor should change a number of times and both the husband and wife should have an opportunity to say everything they want.

Let me give you a very brief illustration. The spouse who has the floor says, "Honey, when you come home from work and immediately sit in front of the TV, it makes me feel like the TV is more important to you than I am." Then the other person repeats it back, "OK. So it bothers you when I come home and go right for the TV. It makes you feel unimportant." And the spouse who is the speaker says, "Exactly."

Remember, the focus initially should not be on conflict or topic resolution, it should be on good communication and hearing and understanding one another. After each person has felt completely heard and understood, a couple can then discuss a resolution using the same speaker-listener technique.

You can also read my blog on putting conflict to . for how to come to an agreeable resolution of an issue.

Have you ever tried the speaker-listener technique? How has it worked for you?

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