

Relationship-Changing Attitudes Happen When Husbands Do This

When it comes to navigating that “ocean of emotion” in marriage, I [Robert] still have not become a certified “master diver”—not by a long shot. In fact, I still find my sinful default mode drives me back again and again to putting my own interests before Pam’s and other people. Overcoming this tendency is a daily struggle, but I see that “enemy” more clearly now for who he is.

One of the best strategies for learning to listen well in our marriage has come from Dr. John Gottman. He refers to the practice as “attunement.” The process is not rocket science, but its impact is powerful. Just as it takes a few regular adjustments to tune in your favorite radio station while on a car ride, listening well involves more than just not talking. The type of listening a wife really needs from her husband requires a focusing or tuning of self.

“He doesn’t listen to me.” That is not only one of the most common complaints Pam has had over the years in our marriage, but also one that we hear often about from other couples.

I [Pamela] have found that for most women, meaningful conversation is so important that they not only know how to converse with other people, they have the capacity to carry on mental conversations in their minds even when they are alone. There is a great need for conversational engagements that are authentic and meaningful.

This important practice is confirmed by research. Dr. John Gottman, a marriage specialist, further describes the process in *The Man’s Guide to Women*:

When men “attune” to their women, there is less fighting, more frequent (and better) sex, and both men and women no longer feel so alone. It is also the skill that leads to genuine emotional connection, which in turn leads to trust, which in turn leads to trust, which in turns leads to you giving women the number one thing they need and want. In other words, this is a big deal. ... In essence, “attunement” is learning how to hear and not react, but rather to understand, empathize and supportively respond. It comes when you choose instead of challenging a woman’s feelings as “not based on a fact,” to instead recognize that in a real sense for her the feeling is a “fact.”

Attunement requires some focus and attention. No, it doesn’t mean she is always right, but it does mean that you make a decision that living in right relationship with each other is more important than dueling over who is right. Your goal is oneness. Attuning is a skill and requires practice. However, the more you practice it, the better you become. The key is to keep practicing, starting today. Here are the steps to follow Gottman’s strategy:

A-TT-U-N-E – Listening with Your Third Ear

(A) Attend to the needs of your wife. When you provide focused attention to your wife, it also feels like affection. Remember, to her attention is affection.

(TT) Turn Toward your wife. Women desire face-to-face interactions. Men, on the other hand, tend to focus more on side-by-side relationships, such as playing golf or going fishing together with a friend. The result of such cultural grooming is that most men do not have a close male friend. Men struggle to break beyond having mere acquaintances, beyond only competing as buddies on a battlefield or golf course.

In her book, *The Friendships of Women*, Dee Brestin sizes up the situation quite well:

Studies indicate that men, like boys, do things together—Rotary, softball, hunting—but they do not often relate to each other as confidants. Men tend to be side by side, engrossed in an activity, whereas women will be face-to-face. Men may confuse quantity of time spent in the company of other men with intimacy. ... Most men not only find it difficult to make themselves vulnerable to each other, but they are often uncomfortable being together unless their attention can be centered on activity.

I [Robert] will never forget the scene. It was the last week of the school year, and Pam and I were visiting a Christian elementary school we were considering for our children. As we took a walking tour with the principal through each class, she warned us things might be a bit off-routine and relaxed.

When we arrived at the third-grade class, we noticed that the desks were arranged a bit unusually. The teacher explained, "Please excuse us." I told the kids that they could set up their desks any way they desired and this is the way they chose."

Scanning the arrangement, a light bulb went off over both my wife's head and mine. Interestingly enough, the desks were distinctly separated into two groups—boys and girls. No surprise, right? Well, what was most interesting was that all the guys had lined their desks up, you guessed it, side by side, one right alongside another. And the girls? Face-to-face and two by two. Pam, who had just begun reading Brestin's book, picked up on it right away. Even these third-graders exhibited the different manner in which males and females forge friendships—side by side and face-to-face, respectively.

So husband, listening the way your wife needs you to listen is going to be something different than just another few minutes of golf. She needs you to turn toward her physically and emotionally.

(U) Understand: It is important to ask questions about how or what she is feeling. Remember, as the Prayer of St. Francis, to seek to “understand,” not just be “understood.” That will require some time and consideration of not only what she thinks, but thinking more about how she must feel. This kind of attention is almost irresistible to her. While you may think of it merely as extra effort or work to listen so hard, she feels it as love, true love.

(N) Nondefensively listen. Remember to respond, don’t react, to what you hear. Even if she is upset, hear her clearly and hear her through. Listen and respond. If her words tap a frustration or negative emotion in you, don’t let it co-opt your equilibrium. Breathe and calm yourself down if you feel the urge to react or overreact to what you hear.

(E) Empathize. When you listen long enough that what you hear from your wife goes beyond a simple auditory processing and turns into an emotional understanding, then your third ear is fully engaged. That’s what she is looking for from you and sometimes desperately needs. You become the person who will listen to hear as will no one else, her friend and her spouse in those moments becomes her soul mate.

Gottman says, “Neurologists have found that the emotional part of the brain calms down as soon as it feels connected to another person and not alone.” Remember, the most important thing in these moments is not who is right or who is wrong, but more so about the two of you being in oneness as a couple.

A-TT-U-N-E is such a great tool that we recommend memorizing it and using it often. Tuning in to each other’s concerns and needs is when marriage is more than just a certificate or agreement; it is a practice and a lifestyle. It is one of the ways “these two shall become one.” {eo}

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