

10 COMMANDMENTS FOR HEALTHY MARITAL COMMUNICATION

Learning to communicate can improve your marriage

by Victor M. Parachin

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Marie and Jim have been married a mere three years but the emotional distance between them is wide. Various events and issues continue to widen that gap.

For example, at a recent social gathering, Marie felt Jim “abandoned” her at a party. She was hurt by his lack of attention. Rather than speak with him about her feelings, she withdrew further from him, giving Jim the silent treatment for several weeks. While Jim knew his wife was angry about something, he didn’t understand the source of her anger. Nor did he ask Marie about it or seek any clarification.

Clearly, that couple’s system of communication does not work. It merely produces a lot of stress, tension and anxiety between them. There are better ways to communicate, keeping a marriage lively and loving. Here are “ten commandments” for healthy marital communication:

1. Adopt a learner’s posture.

That advice is offered by authors Richard and Mary Strauss. “Once Mary and I realize there is tension between us, the most important thing is not to make the other person understand our point of view—not to win the argument. Instead, the important thing is to learn something valuable that will help us become what God wants us to be,” says Richard Strauss.

When the goal is learning from the conflict, the marriage is strengthened and the conflict is more easily resolved. The Strausses recommend that couples frequently offer a prayer like this: “Lord, help me to have a teachable spirit. Relieve me of my defensiveness, self-righteousness and anger, and help me learn something that will cause me to grow.”

2. Avoid ‘kitchen sink’ conversations.

Dan is standing at the breakfast table, too upset to eat, wondering what his wife wants from him. Sandy stands on the other side of the table, feeling her temples throb, wondering what he wants. Neither can remember how they went from talking about a new refrigerator to arguing about money to shouting about who is most financially irresponsible.

Dan and Sandy have unwittingly engaged in a “kitchen sink” conversation where one problem leads to another. They start out talking about one issue and wind up arguing about another. Whenever one partner responds to a spouse’s concern or complaint by using a negative retort, the discussion rapidly escalates into an argument.

Clear and honest communication means staying with one subject and not bringing other issues into the conversation.

3. Communicate rather than criticize.

Consider this exhortation from St. Paul: “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up . . .” (Eph. 4:29).

Couples can be certain they are communicating and not criticizing when they begin their conversations this way: “I feel hurt when ...,” “I worry that . . .,” “I’m confused about ...,” rather than saying: “You’re always late . . .,” “You’re just like your father/mother ...,” “You never call ...,” “You don’t care about anybody but yourself.”

The statements in the first series are called “I statements.” They are healthy because they do not pronounce judgment on the other person and they open the door to dialogue.

The second series are “you statements.” They are ineffective because they attack and blame.

Couples who communicate effectively use “I statements” rather than “you statements” in their discussions.

4. Never nag.

Nagging diminishes all parties, the one scolding and the one being scolded. Here is good advice from Karen Blaisure, a psychologist at Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo: “Equals make requests, not demands or accusations.”

Rather than nagging and attacking and saying, “Are you blind? Can’t you see those stacks of laundry?” Dr. Blaisure recommends speaking in this more specific, less hostile way: “I want us to take turns with the laundry.”

5. Conduct an examination of conscience.

Before responding or reacting to something your spouse says, question yourself and your motives. When a disagreement surfaces, prayerfully examine yourself by asking questions such as these:

- Am I being too defensive?
- What does my spouse want me to understand that I may not be understanding right; now?
- Am I acting in a childish way?
- Are there ways I am misunderstanding or misinterpreting what my spouse is saying?

- Do I have a hidden agenda in this discussion?
- If I were in his/her position, how would I feel?
- What is a spiritual approach to this issue?

By raising such questions of yourself, you ensure greater purity of thought and response when there is a difference of opinion.

6. Think before you speak.

Every couple should reflect on this insight from Blaise Pascal, a 17th-century French philosopher: “Cold words freeze people, and hot words scorch them, and bitter words make them bitter, and wrathful words make them wrathful. Kind Words ... soothe, and quiet, and comfort the hearer.”

Behind his observation is the knowledge that our words can be weapons to destroy or tools to create. Our words can inspire or injure, heal or hurt. The lesson for couples: Think before you speak. Your comments can repair or ruin a marriage. Be guided by these words from Scripture: “He who guards his lips guards his life, but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin” (Prov. 13:3).

7. Remove the ‘weeds’ from your relationship.

Healthy couples face painful feelings openly and promptly. Couples who do not remove the thorny issues early sabotage their relationship. Dr. Mark Goulston, assistant clinical professor at the University of California’s Neuropsychiatric Institute, routinely advises couples to make it a habit to face painful feelings head-on.

“If you want to keep a garden looking good, you have to remove the weeds,” he notes. “The same truth holds for relationships. There are always disappointments and minor hurts that can accumulate and eat away at the loving spirit.” To keep minor hurts from piling up and accumulating, couples must find the courage to talk about them.

8. Practice the fine art of compromise.

Clyde Matthews of Hampton, N.Y., has been married to Florence for more than half a century. He says that conflict and disagreement are inevitable. However, when tensions emerge, “compromise is the key.”

“When we can’t agree, my wife and I stop the conversation and move away from each other for a bit,” he says. “After we cool off, it’s much easier to compromise.”

There is great wisdom in Matthews’ insight. Very few marital decisions have to be made immediately and decisively. Healthy couples know when to back off, cool off and navigate their way to a satisfying compromise.

9. Apply the therapy of laughter.

Whenever there is a heated debate or major conflict, try to defuse some of the negative energy by finding something humorous in the incident.

“Happy couples laugh a lot. They’re able to see the ridiculousness in tense situations and defuse them. Unhappy couples reserve laughter for everyone but their mate,” notes Michele Weiner-Davis, a marriage and family therapist and author.

10. Be an active, engaged listener.

Listen with your eyes, your ears, your body. When there is a conflict or difference of opinion, one partner should be allowed to speak without interruption or interjection. The other partner should be actively listening to what is being said. If the listener speaks, it should be only a brief sentence seeking clarification.

Family therapists Don Dinkmeyer and Jon Carlson advise, “Listen closely to what your partner is communicating. Practice active listening by listening to the feelings expressed and communicating back to your partner what you’ve heard about his or her goals, beliefs, priorities, feelings or values to confirm that you understand exactly what is being said. Get the whole message.”

Finally, couples should remember to continuously fine tune their communication skills. Doing so will enhance a good marriage and stabilize a rocky one. Effective communication can mean the difference between a lasting, quality relationship and a lifeless marriage or even a divorce.

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