

Build a Better Marriage

Communication: The Art of Talking that Does not Fracture

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It is often said that good communication is a key for successful marriages. However, psychiatrist and marriage therapist Dr. David Schnarch says that there is not lack of communication in marriages. People are always communicating. It is how they are communicating that determines if they are drawing closer or pulling apart.

Couples are communicating even when they do not speak to each other. The silent treatment, turning away, a stare – these communicate powerfully. Telling you that you need to communicate is not enough to help you communicate well.

Intimacy in relationship requires good communication, communication which draws us closer and not fractures the union. However, it is easy to communicate in explosive and destructive words that make intimacy difficult on every level.

Today, we will look at three examples of couple communication in the Scripture. These are not all easily transferable to our setting because two of them are relations between kings and queens. None of us have the power inherent in a king. Such power placed the queen at a greater disadvantage. However, we can still see something of outcomes that happen as a result of their exchanges.

Michal and King David

2 Samuel 6:16-23 NIVO

¹⁶ As the ark of the LORD was entering the City of David, Michal daughter of Saul watched from a window. And when she saw King David leaping and dancing before the LORD, she despised him in her heart.

¹⁷ They brought the ark of the LORD and set it in its place inside the tent that David had pitched for it, and David sacrificed burnt offerings and fellowship offerings before the LORD. ¹⁸ After he had finished sacrificing the burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, he blessed the people in the name of the LORD Almighty.

¹⁹ Then he gave a loaf of bread, a cake of dates and a cake of raisins to each person in the whole crowd of Israelites, both men and women. And all the people went to their homes. ²⁰ When David returned home to bless his household, Michal daughter of Saul came out to meet him and said, "How the king of Israel has distinguished himself today, disrobing in the sight of the slave girls of his servants as any vulgar fellow would!"

²¹ David said to Michal, "It was before the LORD, who chose me rather than your father or anyone from his house when he appointed me ruler over the LORD's people Israel--I will celebrate before the LORD.

²² I will become even more undignified than this, and I will be humiliated in my own eyes. But by these slave girls you spoke of, I will be held in honor."

²³ And Michal daughter of Saul had no children to the day of her death.

David had danced before the ark of the covenant as he brought it into Jerusalem. He had danced in a linen tunic, which did not cover him so well. Queen Michal watched from a window in the palace and was horrified at seeing the king dancing around wearing so little, especially as there were many women around. When David got back to the palace she communicated her thoughts to him.

Michal chastised David for his actions. She communicated. But how did she communicate? Her words were accusing and caustic.

"How the king of Israel has distinguished himself today, disrobing in the sight of the slave girls of his servants as any vulgar fellow would!"

In comes the grenade. BOOM! Anytime you throw a grenade into the room, something gets broken.

David also communicates:

He will celebrate before the Lord.

He also retorts to her because she has set an edge to the conversation. He reminds her that He was chosen by the Lord, not Saul's house (she is Saul's daughter). He will be honored by the slave girls she mentioned. Michal has not honored David. David also communicated by his refusal to invite her to his bedroom from then on. This resulted in Saul's line having no royal children. David communicated both in words and in actions.

Michal is fortunate that David, a king who feared God, was her husband. If it had been one of the later kings, she likely would not have survived the day.

Michal felt dishonored by her husband. She communicated, but in a way that led to fracture, rather than intimacy. She would have done better if she had kept her thoughts to herself and be glad she was married to the king.

The reality is that she was not concerned for David. She was concerned for how it made her look. She was focused on her need, not his.

Esther and King Xerxes of Persia

Esther 8:3-8 NIVO

³ Esther again pleaded with the king, falling at his feet and weeping. She begged him to put an end to the evil plan of Haman the Agagite, which he had devised against the Jews.

⁴ Then the king extended the gold scepter to Esther and she arose and stood before him.

⁵ "If it pleases the king," she said, "and if he regards me with favor and thinks it the right thing to do, and if he is pleased with me, let an order be written overruling the dispatches that Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, devised and wrote to destroy the Jews in all the king's provinces.

⁶ For how can I bear to see disaster fall on my people? How can I bear to see the destruction of my family?"

⁷ King Xerxes replied to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew, "Because Haman attacked the Jews, I have given his estate to Esther, and they have hanged him on the gallows.

⁸ Now write another decree in the king's name in behalf of the Jews as seems best to you, and seal it with the king's signet ring--for no document written in the king's name and sealed with his ring can be revoked."

Esther 5:11 The Law of the Persians would have the king put to death anyone who came to the inner court without being summoned by the king unless he extends his golden scepter. Esther comes before the king three times to plead her cause to the king to save her people from destruction. Notice her language. Esther approaches the king not with words that accuse or challenge, but with words that allow the king to choose his actions according to his heart. She says,

"If it pleases the king...if he regards me with favor... if it he thinks it is the right thing to do."

Such words do not lead to confrontation, but invites him to enter this thoughts into this matter. As a result, the king was willing to hear Esther's need.

Let's go a different direction. What if Esther took Michal's path. What if Esther came and said,

"I cannot believe that you made that horrible decree against my people! Don't you know that your decree will kill all my people and myself as well?"

In comes the grenade. BOOM! Anytime you throw a grenade into the room, something gets broken. If she had approached the king this way, she would not have made it out of the palace alive.

We need an example that is not about queens and kings and one that allows us to see a husband responding to his wife. We have that with Elkanah and Hannah, the parents of Samuel.

Elkanah and Hannah

1 Samuel 1:20-23 NIVO

²⁰ So in the course of time Hannah conceived and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel, saying, "Because I asked the LORD for him."

²¹ When the man Elkanah went up with all his family to offer the annual sacrifice to the LORD and to fulfill his vow,

²² Hannah did not go. She said to her husband, "After the boy is weaned, I will take him and present him before the LORD, and he will live there always."

²³ "Do what seems best to you," Elkanah her husband told her. "Stay here until you have weaned him; only may the LORD make good his word." So the woman stayed at home and nursed her son until she had weaned him.

Hannah had been given an answer to her prayer for a child when she was barren. Elkanah had another wife who had children, so it was not his burden. It was Hannah's burden. She had made a vow to give the child back to God for all of his days, and to keep him under a life-long Nazarite vow. This is how God gives Samuel, a godly prophet and priest in a day of darkness.

Hannah promised God that if He would give her a son, she would give him back to serve God all of his days. God allows her to conceive and give birth to a son. When Samuel is born, Hannah chooses to stay home to nurse Samuel instead of traveling to Shiloh for the annual worship with her husband. Let us notice how they communicated.

Hannah simply tells her husband, Elkanah what she is doing. I am keeping the boy with me until he is weaned. Then I will give him to the Lord. (This could be for several years.)

Elkanah is aware of Hannah's vow. He responds to her in a positive manner.

"Do what seems best to you."

Then, he adds a blessing:

"May the Lord keep his word."

(Literally, "May the Lord arise.") It is not certain if he means that God will use Samuel or that God will grant Hannah favor with more children for the one she gives to his service. However, it is a blessing, not a condemnation. It may be that Elkanah is saying this as a reminder to Hannah that she made an oath to the Lord. However, he chooses to take a positive path with his words and turns it into an appeal that God will keep his promise.

What if Elkanah responded:

You made a promise to God. You had better keep it! You said you would give Samuel to God for all of his days, but you are keeping some of those days to yourself!

Elkanah does not go that direction. He refuses to throw the grenade into the room.

Ideas for communicating without fracturing the relationship in times of friction

1. Understand the goal of communication:

The goal of communication is to build intimacy (drawing together) rather than distance (tearing apart).

Yes, communication is sharing ideas, thoughts, desires, etc. However, if your idea of communication is just getting something off your chest or telling him / her what you think, you are likely doing the latter. The idea is to build the relationship in closeness not disruption or hurt.

2. Use the Pause

Intentionally stop for a moment and choose to clear your emotional state before attempting to communicate so there is no unneeded damage.

Steven Covey, *The Seven Habits of Successful Families*, says to take a pause to displace emotional garbage that does not help the relationship. He tells of coming home from work and carrying the emotional state of stress, anger, anxiety, etc. from his work. As he approaches home he realizes that he must not take that emotional state into his conversations with his wife and children. So he pauses to get himself under emotional control so there will be no collateral damage. His emotional state does not have to damage the emotional state of his home. Often our children walk around with shrapnel wounds from bombs that went off at work, because we carried the explosion home with us.

Even in a discussion, there can be something that causes anger to rise up in one or both partners. How you approach that moment of anger determines if someone pulls the pin on the grenade.

“Let’s talk about this after a bit when I have a chance to calm down.”

“I’m too angry to talk right now, let me have some time to process my thoughts, please.”

“I need a pause. I am not at a point that I can talk about my feelings at this moment.”

3. Hold onto yourself.

Learn to keep your ‘self’ calm by not reacting to other’s emotions.

Dr. David Schnarch teaches the idea of holding onto yourself to couples who struggle in marriage. It is the idea that we can learn to maintain emotional calm in not reacting to emotional stress, especially the emotional stress of

others close to us. Not everyone handles this well. Yet, it is a learned behavior. It can be learned.

We lose our self when we allow our emotions to escalate out of control. We hold onto ourselves when we learn to calm ourselves down. We can refuse to climb the emotional ladder when our partner is reactive. We can remain nonreactive. We can learn to tolerate discomfort so we can grow and move forward.

“I see you are upset. Let me give you some time to yourself.”

“I would rather not have this conversation until we are both calm.”

I love you, but right now will not be a good time to talk. Let’s come back to this in a while.

It sounds like the pause, but here I am emphasizing our non-reaction to an emotionally stressful moment.

4. Refuse to pull the pin.

Hold your tongue and your heart.

A short, quick cutting word can lead to a wound that takes a long time to heal. In a heated moment you could easily destroy the potential to grow from a conflict if you choose to engage with hostility or critical speech. If you throw a dart, there will be blood.

Refusing to pull the pin means more than not speaking. You can give a silent glare that means, “I hope you die a horrible death” without ever saying a word. You can turn away and refuse to talk for days and all the while keep adding steam to the boiler. Such is not the goal.

If the ***two are to be one***, we must find a way to come together. It is called intimacy (not just physical, but emotional closeness). Friction is common when two people are together. It is what we do in the moments of friction that determine if we build intimacy or pull apart.

Speaking harsh retorts is pin pulling. Critical speech sets everyone on edge. It assigns shame. It casts judgment. It lands emotional and mental blows to the gut. Again, anytime you throw a grenade into the room, something gets broken.

5. Elevate to Blessing

Elevate your speech to place your partner in the best light.

Elevate, not in volume but in purpose. This is Esther's way of asking for a dramatic change in her husband's actions. It was a life and death matter of great concern to her. It was a result of the king's action. Yet, she approaches him to seek what he considers to be the best from his point of view and to what pleases him best. Her approach leaves the door open for him to respond in wisdom instead of reacting to her with an emotional response of anger for being accused.

It is also Elkanah's response to Hannah, seeking God's fulfillment of His promise to her with her faithfulness. It may be that Elkanah wanted to remind Hannah that she had made a pledge to the Lord. But he does it in such a way as to speak on the positive side of God's blessing and promise instead of placing her in a negative light of not wanting to let go of her baby. Both Esther and Elkanah chose to elevate their partner's position instead of finding a fault to accuse. Their response brought endearment instead of judgment.

There are often times when we need to talk about problems we have in the relationship. How we lead the conversation can keep the channel open. We do so by expressing value to our partner's opinion or input. Often this is done by leading with a non-threatening question that seeks for the partner to give their input when considering something for you.

What would you think about this?

I'd like to have your opinion on this.

I have concerns about something and I would like to have your thoughts on the matter.

Such approaches open doors of the heart, instead of striking out against the person.

If you start your conversation with "You..." you have already set the conversation on edge.

Summary:

- 1. The goal of communication is to build intimacy rather than distance.**
- 2. The Pause – take a moment to calm down.**
- 3. Hold onto yourself. Learn to keep your 'self' calm by not reacting to other's emotions.**
- 4. Refuse to pull the pin. Hold your tongue and your heart.**
- 5. Elevate to Blessing. Put your partner in the best light.**

