

Getting Connected, Staying Connected

Positive Communication and the Development of Emotional Intimacy

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Couples communicate best when communication is a cooperative, not a competitive, effort. This is No. 5 in a series of 20 NebGuides that focus on building and maintaining strong couple and family relationships written by a team of University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension Educators.

Men and Women Are Likely To Communicate Differently

A great deal has been written in recent years on the notion that men and women are likely to communicate differently from each other. Men, as the argument goes, are likely to be strong and silent. Women are socialized to be especially communicative, keenly aware of the thoughts and feelings of others. One woman, thinking about her strong and silent husband, told her female friend quite emphatically that, “If you want someone to talk to, marry a woman!” This just might be very true in this particular woman’s life, but many other women find sensitive, thoughtful and talkative husbands who are very capable of communicating positively.

The beauty of this situation is that couples are forced, from the very beginning, to learn how to communicate well: listen with empathy and talk clearly, honestly, and openly.

Individuals from Different Cultures Sometimes Communicate Differently

Socialization of children in early childhood can be quite different for boys and girls. This leads to the development of what could be called *boy culture* and *girl culture*, and confusion often does occur when the two cultures come in contact with each other and misunderstandings

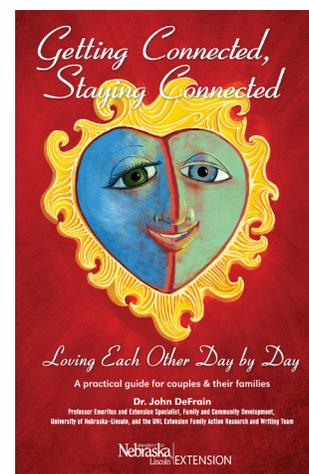
happen. How we grew up, and the world as it exists today, makes a tremendous difference in how we view the world.

Though people tend to marry others who are relatively similar in terms of culture — similar in education, ethnicity, social class, religion and spiritual values, and so forth — most relationships pair people who do bring somewhat different cultural backgrounds to the partnership. These family cultures brought to the marriage from our childhood backgrounds can be very different.

The best way to deal with these differences is not to treat them as problems but as fascinating opportunities. As one husband noted, “I’m delighted she is different from me in many ways. I always have to be on my toes because she looks at the world differently, and our different views strengthen us as a couple.”

Communication Is a Cooperative Effort

For communication to work really well, it needs to be a cooperative effort and not a competitive effort. The goal of communication for couples is a stronger, happier and more loving relationship. Competitive communication can be called a *zero-sum game*. My win and your loss sum to zero: 1-1 =



For more information about strong couple and family relationships, refer to the book *Getting Connected, Staying Connected*, which can be ordered online at amazon.com.

0. My “thrill of victory” plus your “agony of defeat” add up to nothing.

Cooperative communication, on the other hand, is a win-win process: $1 + 1 = 2$. We are not opposing forces trying to take something away from our adversary. Rather, we are on the same team: we work together as a team cooperatively, and we find a solution to the problems we face *together*. Sometimes our emotions get the better of us and we say and do things that we will regret later. In a discussion if we see this coming, it is important to back off until we can calm down and be loving toward each other again.

Strong families and happy couples do not treat differences of opinion as if they were reasons to go to war.

Building a Relationship Versus Telling Someone What to Do

Happy couples are very respectful toward each other. One important element of respect is demonstrating that you are equals in the relationship. Each individual’s opinion is valued; both individuals are of equal importance, both have equal power in the relationship. When the relationship is approached this way, it is likely to thrive. The partners are in a position to genuinely care for each other. To have a partnership in which one person is the boss and the other the follower, genuine love for each other is difficult to develop. Think about the situation this way: If your boss at work is genuinely bossy, you are not prone to like the person. We might “respect” or fear our boss, but if a boss acts in a condescending, pushy and bullish manner, good feelings toward this person are likely to diminish.

Nonverbal Communication and Self-Disclosure

A great deal of what we say to each other is said without words: Our body language gives messages to our partner that may not fit with the words of love we profess for each other. We may say we feel connected to our partner but our face or body will convey boredom, irritation, inattention, stress or the sense that we are overwhelmed by life.

In a loving relationship it is important to pay close attention to not only what people say but how they are really *feeling*. When partners communicate on a genuine feeling level, they understand each other well and are likely to feel empathy, concern and love for each other.

This is difficult to do because we learn very quickly as young children how to hide our feelings out of fear of being teased, picked on, or put down. Taking a defensive position in an intimate relationship is a recipe for disaster.

When we try to hide from our partner who we really are, our body language and the nonverbal cues that we exhibit convey the real message that we are trying to cover up.

When we come home from a long day at work or school or out in the community, it is common to ask each other: “What did you do today?” This is a reasonable way to begin a conversation with our partner or our children. But if we want genuine communication and understanding of each other, there is a more important follow-up question: “How do you feel about your day?” This focuses on how the day really went from an emotional standpoint and whether we like it or not, our lives are full of emotions that need to be recognized and honored.

The key is to find a partner who is not afraid of self-disclosure, who sees the importance of letting others into their real world, and who honors and respects and appreciates the true feelings that others express. When we become more transparent about our lives and our feelings, other people are likely to be more transparent or open about themselves, and we soon learn that we are not all that different from each other: we can be happy, we can be sad, we can be angry, we can be bored, we can be engaged and connected to each other, we can feel disengaged and isolated. We’re all only human and humans share a common set of emotions that everyone feels at one time or another.

Listening: Why We Have Two Ears and One Mouth

Listening, really listening to each other with not only our heads but our hearts, is the key to positive communication.

Many people make the mistake of thinking that talking is the key to communication and so “they fill the sky with words.” In reality, sound relationships are built because both partners are good at listening to each other. This is done effectively by asking good questions and, even more important, asking good follow-up questions:

- “How are you doing?”
- “How do you feel about that?”
- “What are you going to do in response?”
- “Where can you find some answers?”
- “Are there people who understand what you’re going through and can help?”

A genuinely open conversation means that both people are talking precisely and honestly, focusing on not only facts but feelings, and focusing so that they can really hear and feel what the other person is trying to convey. When we listen to another person closely and with interest, we are paying them a great compliment: We are saying, “I care about you, I respect you, I want to understand you better and learn how you see the world, I want to get close to you.”

People who are poor listeners are not really listening at all. They are simply waiting for the person who is talking to be quiet so that they can have the stage again.

As the old saying goes, we were born with two ears and only one mouth.

Therefore, we should work twice as hard to listen rather than just talk. We might have even happier marriages if we had been born with 10 ears and one mouth.

Aggressive Communication and Assertive Communication

When we are trying to win an argument, we are likely to become aggressive in our communication style. Aggressive communication aims to put down, control, or hurt the other person. Aggressive communication simply does not work in an intimate, loving relationship. It always causes much more harm than good, and a great deal of careful effort must be invested in rebuilding the relationship after an aggressive outburst has occurred.

Assertive communication, on the other hand, focuses on expressing who you are and how you feel without attacking

the other person. The goal of assertive communication is not to win the argument. The goal of assertive communication is to find a way to live happily together while, at the same time, honoring the individual rights of our partner.

Aggressive communicators assume that life is a battle and they need to be prepared to fight and fight hard to win over their opponents, even if the opponent might be their partner or their children. Assertive communicators assume that life is a gift and we all need to find ways to cherish each other and help each other grow in ways that meet our individual needs while preserving the loving relationship we have with each other.

Why Avoidance Doesn't Work

When one partner relies on an aggressive communication style, it sometimes seems easier or safer to the partner to avoid conflict and cover up genuine feelings. This avoidance style of communication might have short-term benefits — conflicts may be avoided and glossed over for a while — but eventually the long-term consequences are likely to occur. When one partner, over time, is aggressive, and the other partner hides true feelings and who she/he really is and constantly gives in to the other, the one avoiding conflict is likely to disengage from the relationship emotionally. A disengaged marriage is a marriage that is failing and likely to end in divorce.

A Word on Positive Self-Talk

Everyone talks to themselves — sometimes out loud and sometimes only in their minds — and these conversations we have with ourselves can be positive, self-esteem building conversations or they can be times when we beat ourselves down.

Rather than wasting energy belittling ourselves, it is important to focus on the positive, emphasizing our strengths, and planning how we will use these strengths to work out difficulties we are facing in life. In sum, we all need to learn to talk with ourselves with the same amount of love and respect that we talk with our best friends.

What, Then, Have We Seen Here about Positive Communication and the Development of Emotional Intimacy?

Learning the art and science of positive communication can bridge differences and make sound intimate relationships likely. Keys to open, honest, and straightforward communication include the fact that we need to see communication as a cooperative effort rather than a competition between each other; that building an intimate and loving relationship is not about telling other people what to do, but instead focusing on the process of creating a bond with each other; that nonverbal communication sometimes sends important messages that we may not know we are sending, and that self-disclosure is essential if we are to communicate well with each other; that learning to talk clearly and calmly is important, but learning to listen with one's heart is absolutely essential; that aggression doesn't work in an intimate relationship, nor does avoiding issues; and that an assertive communication style for both partners ensures that each feels free to express personal feelings and beliefs while respecting and honoring the feelings and beliefs of her partner.

As the adage goes:

People forget what you say
They forget what you do
But they don't forget
How you make them feel.

For greater understanding of the topic in this publication, refer to *Getting Connected, Staying Connected: Loving One Another Day by Day* written by John DeFraim and the University of Nebraska–Lincoln Family Action Research and Writing Team. (2012). Bloomington, IN: iUniverse.

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