

Communication

If you have a problem in your relationship you may conclude that you have a communication problem. This may be because when you try to talk about something it ends up in a predictable argument followed by a withdrawal into silence. You may feel that your partner does not listen to you or understand you. Or else you will feel that you are unable to 'get through' to your partner and blame him for this.

Communication skills include what you might call 'transmitting' skills (being able to transmit your thoughts and feelings to your partner) and 'receiving' skills (being able to receive and acknowledge the other person's thoughts and feelings).

If you want to communicate with your partner you try to do a number of things. You want to 'receive' what is being said to you by trying to:

1. Listen to and understand what your partner feels and thinks,
2. Communicate to your partner that you understand what he/she feels.

Not only that, when you want to communicate you 'transmit' what you feel and think by trying to:

1. Express yourself openly and honestly.
2. While respecting your partner's feelings and integrity.

The conclusion most people come to is that, if communicating with their partner makes them feel bad, then they have a communication problem and that the solution to the problem is to learn better communication skills. This is not always a valid conclusion because there are two kinds of problems related to communication. The first is a skills problem and the second is a motivation problem:

1. Both partners want to communicate but have some skills deficits that create difficulty.
2. One or both partners have lost interest in communicating and resort to counter-communication that creates difficulty.

A Skills Problem:

With the first problem both people *want to* communicate but inadequate skills cause difficulties. Learning skills like these is often very helpful. They are easily learned by a motivated couple. For example, you may need to work on your listening skills. Poor listeners will often get defensive quickly because they are more focused on defending their own position than on understanding their partner's.

If you need to work on your transmitting skills you may, for example, need to learn how to 'think out loud' rather than thinking quietly and then just issuing a conclusion.

There are lots of communication skills that can be learned and used effectively by a motivated and interested couple.

A Motivation Problem:

The second problem is not caused by having poor communication skills but by having poor motivation. This problem is present when one or both of you have lost interest in communicating.

When someone loses interest in communicating they lose interest in trying to listen empathically to their partner's complaints. They make little effort to understand what their partner feels or thinks. They lose interest in what their partner has to say about most things and just shuts them out. They resort to what we call toxic-tactics – that is tactics that make communication impossible such as active displays of defensiveness, abuse, stone-walling, or contempt or passive displays such as withdrawal, distancing, submissiveness, or 'giving up'.

Not wanting to communicate can look like it's a communication skills problem when in reality it is a *motivation* problem. There is no motivation or desire to communicate. The walls are up, the gates are closed, and the other is treated as either an enemy or total stranger but rarely as a confidant or friend.

There is little point in teaching communication skills to someone who does not want to communicate. Love can never be coerced.

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