

Communication:

Married people may think they communicate well with their partners, but psychologists have found that they don't always convey messages to their loved ones as well as they think -- and in some cases, the spouses communicate no better than strangers.

Most married people tend to think that they communicate well with their spouses and children. However, new research suggests that spouses are not quite as good as they think and in many cases communicate no better than they do with acquaintances or strangers. The research which was conducted at the University of Chicago, emphasised how because spouses are close, and spend a lot of time together, they tend to assume that because they are communicating a lot that they are communicating well. This tendency to overestimate how well we communicate with those we are close to has been termed the communication bias.

An amusing experiment was developed to illustrate this. What it showed was that if you were to sit back to back with your husband and was asked to figure out the meaning of his ambiguous phrases aimed at dropping hints, you would be no more successful than if you were to do this with a stranger. In addition, if you were to switch roles, you would be no better at getting your partner to pick up your hints than a stranger would!

A wife who says to her husband, 'it's getting hot in here,' as a hint for her husband to turn off the heating, may be surprised when he interprets her statement as a reference to the tension in the room, for example.

Although you would expect your husband to understand you better than a stranger, accuracy rates for spouses and strangers turned out to be identical. This result is striking because speakers were more confident that their spouse would understand them.

Some couples may indeed be on the same wavelength, but maybe not as much as they think. It would appear that in marriage people get rushed and preoccupied, and stop taking the perspective of the other person, precisely because the two of them are so close.

Communication problems arise when you assume that your partner has all the information you have, removing the need for a clear explanation. When people meet a stranger, they automatically provide more information because they don't have a "closeness bias" in that meeting.

In the same way, if you are listening you may wrongly assume that a comment or request from your spouse is based on knowledge that you have in common -- a mistake you would not make with a stranger.

Our problem in communicating with spouses is that we have an illusion of insight. Getting close to someone appears to create the illusion of understanding more than actual understanding. The understanding, 'What I know is different from what you know' is essential for effective communication to occur. It is necessary for giving directions, for teaching a class or just for having an ordinary

conversation. However, that insight can be elusive when the 'you' in question is a close friend or spouse.

For this reason, the smallest and most trivial of exchanges between spouses can cause a fight or disagreement because of the assumptions made. For example, your husband may say to you “Do you want to watch something on TV tonight?” You might respond with a curt “No, if you must know!” because you might have assumed his real question was “I want to watch a football game and I wanted to check were you using the TV” when he might have just been curious if there was a movie you could both watch.

Or you might, out of curiosity, shout to your partner in another room “What are you doing in there?” and he might respond defensively by saying “I am only checking my email, is that a problem? He might have assumed you were asking, “What are you doing drossing while I am cleaning up the kitchen?” I am sure you have countless examples of these kinds of errors in communication being made precisely because of your incorrect assumptions. The thing to remember is that, the assumptions you make are no more correct than you would make with a stranger. It is disconcerting but true. Now, you will likely respond by thinking that you are different. That you have your husband totally figured out. The research in this area shows that you don't really. Don't be so sure or so lazy!