

COMMUNICATION

Almost every couple that attends for counselling says that one of their main problems is their inability to communicate. The ability to communicate in intimate relationships is assumed by most people to be a naturally bestowed gift and when it does not happen couples get upset with each other.

The truth is, however, that good communication is very rare. Most communication is in fact miscommunication. In fact I would venture to suggest that, in intimate relationships, communication is dysfunctional as often as it is functional.

Fascinating research on the bond between mothers and their children shows that in the mother infant interaction 70% of it is miscommunication. So a lot of the time the infant is looking puzzled and confused at the mother and is either trying to communicate something or else figure out what the mother wants – and vice versa. Some mother's see this and notice that the baby does not understand what is happening and so repair's the slight rupture in the bond. It and those mother's that repair the interaction that wind up being securely attached to their children. If the mother does not notice that things are not going well then they are more likely to be insecurely attached to their child. This is also the way it is with adult relationship.

Most communication includes repeated misunderstandings, inaccuracies, half-truths, and false inferences etc. The process of communication is not a case of getting it right the first, second, or even the third time, but having the sensitivity to repair, refine, adjust, and gradually mould the interaction into something meaningful.

We run into serious communication problems when we fail to realise this and assume that communication should be easy. And when it is not easy we get impatient with our partners or children. "It should not have to be this hard!" we exclaim to ourselves. "Most other people seem to be able to communicate just fine!" Not true. Inside the four walls of every home there is more miscommunication than accurate communication. We believe that what we say should fly like an arrow true to its target. When it doesn't we tend to blame the target for moving around so much! (For not listening or for being stupid).

Or if we are not giving out about how our family members receive what we say, we complain about the accuracy of the 'transmissions' being sent to us. ("You are making no sense", "I have no idea what you are on about!" "You are just talking rubbish", we argue.)

We tend to feel that *if we have to work at communicating with those close to us then there is something wrong*. We have this intuitive feeling that it should be easy! But we should not trust this feeling at all. Working at communication is counterintuitive! To be effective you have to do what you don't feel like doing! This applies to parents and children as much as to spouses.

I regularly see couples in their later years still trying to get this communication business right. They succeed when they understand that it does take patient work.

A rule of thumb we have for engaged couples is that UNDERSTANDING must always precede ADVICE. To earn the right to give someone advice you must first get their agreement that you understand them in the first place. 70% of the time you don't understand at all! 90% of the time you think you do! You don't have to be a sub-atomic physicist to understand that this discrepancy will create some atomic explosions.

You and your partner are stumbling around together and you have to continually learn each other's language. Intimacy is like cross-cultural relationships where you have to learn the meanings and nuances of your partner's emotional culture. It is indeed a lifetime process of learning.

So don't be hard on yourself if you feel "we can't communicate". It's when you, or your partner, do not want to communicate that you begin to have problems. So keep trying and don't give up.

Dr. O'Connor can be contacted at celticspirit@eircom.net or at 021-4275678