

Communication

You walk into a restaurant and you see two couples sitting at different tables. One couple are talking with each other in an engaging and enjoyable way and the other couple are sitting silently and looking at their food as they eat. Which couple would you say are the married couple?

You are taking a spin by the sea on a Sunday afternoon and you see two cars parked at a scenic lay-by. A couple are close to one car where she is standing on a wall smiling and he is taking a photograph of her against the scenery. By another car the man is taking a photograph while she sits inside reading a magazine. Which of the two couples is married?

Regretfully, you will be inclined to conclude that the non-communicative couples are the married ones. This is based on the assumption that couples who know each other get kind of bored and disinterested in each other and gradually reduce their communication.

What I find in couples work is that when couples say they have problems with communication the problem is more often a problem of *desire* than it is a problem of interpersonal skills. What tends to happen with couples is that they lose the *desire* to communicate and to make the efforts necessary to engage. The loss of this desire is, sadly, the real source of communication problems. It's not so much that a spouse cannot communicate with his/her partner, it's that they have lost interest in communicating in the first place.

Now, if you see that communication problems are really problems of desire you begin to approach them differently. If you ignore, for example, the fact that your husband does not have a great deal of interest in talking or listening to you, then every conversation will gradually turn into a conflict. He will deny the fact that he has no interest in you by just picking holes in your arguments and wear you down in such a way that you just leave him alone. He will suggest that the reason you end up fighting is because you are being unreasonable or defensive. You, on the other hand will also deny the fact that he has lost interest in communicating with you, and will keep trying to break through to him by arguing your point in response to his rejections or put-downs.

The problem is not that both of you are unable to communicate (because in every other area of your life you do this quite well) but that his interest in communicating is very low and your interest is very high and *both of you try to pretend that this is not the case*.

If you accepted this as the real problem then you, instead of trying to break through to him or break him down, would actually stop pursuing him. If he accepted this as the real problem he would, instead of arguing with you, admit that he has this need to withdraw from you. Now while this exposes the real harsh truth that most people are terrified of confronting, it does foster more honest communication.

This kind of communication might begin with you saying "I realise that you want to withdraw from me and are not that interested in what I have to say, and I realise also

that I pretend that this is not the case so I start going after you for some response. I must not do that any longer. I am very interested, however, in what you need and if what you need is for me to leave you alone?" Then, if he was being honest he might say "Yes you are right. I do withdraw from you all the time and just find I want you to back off. I therefore have lost a lot of interest in talking with you or understanding what you need. I prefer to lock myself away and just say whatever will make you leave me alone. I must stop doing that and be real." And you might say, then: "Okay, for now I will back off and accept what you say but you will have to deal with the real consequences of that."

Now that is real communication. It does not solve the problem but the couple are now talking about the true issue between them. What you would notice in such raw and transparent communication is that it takes away all the distracting issues that camouflage the real problem. Now the couple may fight or get hurt or be angry but they will be upset about the right thing!

What you communicate about is usually not the problem, the desire to communicate usually is!