

Communication

There are two kinds of problems related to communication in relationships. The first is a skills problem and the second is a motivation problem:

A Communication Skills Problem:

When you have a communication skills problem both people *want to* communicate but inadequate skills cause them difficulty. In this situation both partners are well-motivated but because of bad-habits or inadequate skills they keep getting into difficulty.

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). So, one or both partners might have deficiencies in their ability to ‘transmit’. This includes people who are too quiet or else too talkative. Alternatively, one or both parties may have problems in their ‘receiving’ skills. They may impulsively interrupt the other, have difficulties in listening, or are not able to tune-into what the other person is saying.

Learning communication 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 partners 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, contempt, withdrawal, distancing, submissiveness, or just giving up or giving in.

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.

We have an adage in couples counselling which suggests that you should “never pursue a distancer”. What this says, in effect, is that trying to get someone to communicate who does not want to communicate often drives them further away. For every step forward the emotional pursuer makes, the emotional distancer takes a step back.

If you are having some difficulty with communication in your relationship, consider how much of it is a skills problem and how much of it is a motivation problem.