

Communication

The most powerful communication skill available to us is empathy. Strangely, it is a skill so rarely used yet so badly needed in marital and family life.

What is empathy? Very simply, it is the ability to let another person know that you fully understand what it is that they are feeling or saying to you. It is the ability to *communicate understanding*. It is necessary in all family relationships whether it is between mother and child, spouse to spouse, or sibling to sibling.

Now most of you reading this probably think you are very good at understanding what your partner or children say or reveal to you. This is probably true but what you are not very good at is in *communicating this understanding*. It is one thing to understand what someone is trying to say to you, it is an entirely different thing to be able to communicate this understanding back to them.

The reason we are not very good at this is because we assume that understanding what a family member is trying to say is sufficient and that there is no real need to *show that we understand*. Because we are listening we assume that this is sufficient. It is not. Listening to someone is only one part of the empathic response. The second part is letting them know that you understand. When the second part does not happen it leaves a huge gap in the communication process.

Let me give you an everyday example: You're sitting down at dinner with the family and the conversation switches to the issue of time-keeping. In the midst of this your 13 year old son accuses you of being much too strict about the times he is supposed to be home, particularly over the summer, and he expresses irritation and some hurt about your not trusting him. Now, if you are like most mothers in that situation, you would respond with an explanation and rationale for why things are the way they are. You might begin by saying "We have been through this before, the reason I want you in by...." Now this may need to be said, but the conversation would be greatly enhanced if you could communicate understanding of his thoughts and feelings prior to offering your own explanations.

A good rule of thumb for family disagreements is to assume that you have not earned the right to defend yourself until you have communicated an understanding of the complaint made against you! It takes considerable personal strength to be able to receive a complaint, accusation, or attack without having to first defend oneself. The compassionate person can side-step the accusation in order to show understanding to the accuser.

So, in this example, a mother who is using accurate empathy says to her son something like

"If I have the gist of what you are saying, you are annoyed and even a bit hurt by what you consider to be my overly strict attitude to your coming home and you feel this is particularly so over the summer when, I suppose with the longer evenings and holidays, you feel it is not necessary. You would like me to be more flexible with things, I am sure. Is that it? Have I understood what you were saying?"

Now this kind of a response is entirely different to a response where the mother is on the defensive. It is called accurate empathy because it is focused on an accurate understanding of the other person's feelings. The power of accurate empathy is that it leaves the other person feeling understood.

In all walks of life, there is nothing so simply pleasing that to feel understood by someone. A shop assistant sympathises with how hard it is to handle kids when shopping; your child gives you a hug and says "thanks for everything"; your partner brings you in a cup of coffee recognising you have a hard day; an friend listens to your troubles sympathetically.

We all like to receive this, but how often do we give it? It is the exceptional person who does this regularly. It is particularly difficult if you feel under attack. However, it is when one is under attack that one needs most to use it.

The single greatest tragedy in any person's life is the loss of empathy – that is the loss of someone who understands them. Every person needs someone who can give them this. It is the healing balm for trauma and distress.

The most damaging emotional trauma for a child is uncomforted trauma – that is to experience a trauma or distress that goes un-empathised and uncomforted. Empathy is what keeps any child feeling loved and understood, what allows a spouse to feel they are connected to their partner, what heals hurt, and it is what lubricates intimate conversation. It is both a skill and an attitude.

Think of someone in your family and really tune into what it must be like to be in their shoes. Get a feel for their emotional life, their fears and worries, their hopes and aspirations. Then see if you might not, tonight, try to let that person know that you have some feeling for what it is like to be them. You could begin it with a sentence like "You know I was thinking about you today and I realised...." Give them the simple gift of being understood. It is worth a hundred red roses.