

Six Steps for Holding a Courageous Conversation with Your Spouse

What are the most challenging conversations you might have with your spouse? How to manage conflicts over money, parenting, or household tasks? Whether or when to have children? What to do about a difficult child or other relative? Whether or not to accept a job offer that will require the family to move? How to resolve dissatisfactions with your sexual relationship, the amount of time you spend together, or the way you make decisions? How to address concerns about alcohol and other drugs, health and wellness, or time spent watching television? How to accommodate differences in regard to church participation, politics, or social issues?

You may assume that love will shield you from conflict, but after the honeymoon glow wears off, most couples discover that they are still two distinct individuals with different histories, habits, and preferences. People change over time, as well, and what was once quite satisfactory in a relationship may become uncomfortable for either or both persons. A pastoral counselor I know often says that whatever a couple is most reluctant to talk about is probably what they most need to discuss. Even a clumsy attempt to talk things through is better than ignoring a problem and hoping it will just go away. Intentional use of effective communication skills not only helps solve problems, but builds a bridge between the partners in a relationship. How you approach even minor conflicts sets a tone for your relationship and determines whether or not you create a safe space in which you both can thrive and grow. Follow these steps, based on research and experience (made popular in the mid-1970's by Thomas Gordon's *Parent Effectiveness Training*, and other publications) for the best possible outcome. If your spouse refuses to participate, or if you have difficulty with the process, see "WHAT IF?" at the end of this article.

1. Examine your thoughts and feelings with absolute honesty.

What events have triggered the need to talk, and what feelings are welling up in you? What are you thinking about your feelings and about the triggering events? Are your judgments accurate or colored by some previous events? Is this experience really the same as those that triggered similar feelings in the past? How do you contribute to the problem? Most important of all, *what do you want and need?* Recognize any desire to punish or shame the other person and the likely consequences if you let that desire control your behavior. Anger signals that something needs attention, but it is usually a secondary emotion resulting from fear, frustration, or loneliness. Letting anger drive your actions instead of choosing how to express your needs and feelings can damage the space between you. If necessary, work with a trusted counselor to sort out your feelings and needs.

2. State your feelings and needs without attacking.

Once you have clarified your thoughts and feelings, prepare a concise statement of your concern, starting with "I feel," briefly describing the triggering event, and concluding with a simple request. Avoid attacking and blaming, as much as you can. *Your spouse is **NOT** your enemy: the problem is, and you want to enlist your spouse in addressing the problem together.* In a healthy relationship, if one of you has a problem, you both do. When you state your request, you may reduce the likelihood of a defensive response by using the words, "Would you be willing to talk with me about this?"

3. Listen carefully to understand your spouse's point of view.

When you have completed your statement, STOP! Give your spouse time to process what you said. Sit in silence for a while, if necessary. After a bit, you might gently invite your spouse to tell you what he or she heard you say. If your spouse cannot do so, say, "Let me try again," calmly repeat your statement, and ask again what was heard. Do not give in to the impulse to "build your case" by adding more examples and details than necessary.

When your spouse can feed back your message accurately, then ask for his or her point of view. "I'd like to hear how you experience this. Would you be willing to talk with me about this? When would be a good time?" Remember that *your goal is not to prove who is right and who is wrong, but to increase understanding* and to develop a more mutually satisfying relationship that honors the uniqueness of both persons. Resist the temptation to interrupt or react. Try to see the other person's point of view. Make a mental note of questions you want to ask and further details that would help you understand, but wait until your spouse seems to have made a complete response before speaking. Nod reassuringly, in case your spouse is worried about your reaction. Express empathy, "That must be frustrating for you." You do not need to agree to understand a person's feelings. Ask if there is more he or she would like to say.

4. Feed back what you have heard.

Tell your spouse what you heard to confirm whether you have correctly understood his or her point of view. Invite correction in case you have misunderstood or missed a point. Express empathy, even if your perception is very different. Continue to share in this manner, taking turns speaking and listening, until you both are clear about each other's point of view. You may want to explore childhood or other past experiences that influence your current attitudes and behavior. *Do not try to solve the problem until you are confident you fully understand each other*, which may happen quickly or take days - even weeks.

5. Explore solutions.

When you are confident that you fully understand each other, demonstrate your commitment to the relationship by offering what you are willing to do: "Would it help if I...?" You might bring up a solution you have in mind: "Would you be willing to...?" You might ask your spouse to brainstorm with you, listing every idea either of you can come up with. Have fun with this, generating ideas in a spirit of goodwill, refraining from any negative reactions, and agreeing to revisit the list later to eliminate anything to which either of you object. Such free-wheeling brainstorming is magical, because even the most outlandish suggestion may trigger a workable solution! Again, this may take time, but *the process will have a greater impact on your relationship than whatever you finally agree to do.*

6. Plan.

Once you have had a chance to remove from the list any suggestion you feel will not work for you, choose one you can agree on and plan who will do what and when. Set a date to evaluate how the solution is working, to revisit and revise the plan if necessary, and to celebrate the progress you have made. Building a mutually satisfying relationship takes time and is never a completely finished project.

WHAT IF...

What if your spouse refuses to participate in the conversation, insists there is no problem, or otherwise blocks your efforts to talk about your concern? Please get yourself to a counselor, preferably one well-recommended and committed to saving relationships if at all possible. Do some reading and explore other resources to try to understand what is going on with your spouse. One wife, when told that her husband's behavior fit the pattern of a bipolar person, realized that his reactivity was not about her, but merely his way of coping. She adjusted her expectations, tried to avoid triggering him, and discovered that if she offered empathy instead of reacting to his outbursts, he recovered more quickly. Visit www.marriagelovepower.net and click on Best Practices Articles and Recommended Resources. Scroll down to the Ministering with Those in Crisis and Transition section for articles addressing infidelity, pornography and sexual addictions, domestic violence, and other relevant topics. In the Marriage Education and Enrichment section, find "Helping Individuals Transform Their Marriages" and other articles of interest. You can also search for these by topic or title at www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/intergenerational-family-ministries.

What if you and/or your spouse cannot manage your reactivity and find yourselves blaming and attacking each other? Some couples have such difficulty breaking out of communication patterns learned in their families of origin that they need coaching to engage in courageous conversations. Most marriage education and enrichment programs teach a process similar to that described above, and the most effective ones give couples the opportunity for guided practice so that they can learn how such dialogue feels. (See Upcoming Events and Training Opportunities posted at www.marriagelovepower.net and at www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/intergenerational-family-ministries). Under stress, most of us revert to the communication style learned in our formative years; but even then, with communication skills training, we can usually figure out why a conversation has gone wrong and how to redo it. Effective relationship counselors also teach these skills and coach couples in using them to talk about real issues in their relationship. In some cases, either or both parties may need help identifying and seeking help for troublesome traits, such as narcissism, bipolarity, depression, ADHD, or addiction. Learning about differences between male and female communication styles and reactions to stress may help as well.

Selected Resources - Reading List

Anger: Handling a Powerful Emotion in a Healthy Way by Gary Chapman (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 2007). The author states his belief that God designed human anger to motivate us to take action against injustice or wrongdoing. However, we often cause harm to others and ourselves by reacting without thinking through what has happened and how best to address our grievances – real or perceived. He offers a process for owning our anger and processing the situation to choose constructive, not destructive action. A study guide at the end provides suggestions for thirteen sessions.

Being Me, Loving You: A Practical Guide to Extraordinary Relationships by Marshall B Rosenberg, Ph.D. (Encinitas, CA: PuddleDancer Press, 2005). In this small book, Rosenberg illustrates how to apply the principles of nonviolent communication in intimate relationships by separating observations from feelings, tracing feelings to unmet needs, offering empathy, and making requests. He shows couples how to explore what they can do to enrich each other's lives.

Fighting for Your Marriage: A Deluxe Revised Edition of the Classic Best Seller for Enhancing Marriage and Preventing Divorce by Howard Markman, Scott Stanley, and Susan L. Blumberg (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2010). This book teaches effective skills for handling conflict and disagreements, explains the attitudes and behaviors that promote a healthy relationship, and shows couples how to enhance and protect their love. Straightforward and easy-to-understand content includes helpful exercises and suggestions for practice. This information is linked to Scripture and expressed with religious language in *A Lasting Promise: A Christian Guide to Fighting for Your Marriage* by Scott Stanley, Daniel Trathen, Savanna McCain, and Milt Bryan (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998).

Love to Stay: Sex, Grace, and Commitment by Adam Hamilton (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013). The author notes that marriage “has its ups and downs, its ebb and flow, and it requires perseverance, hard work and from time to time a bit of help.” He explores the little things (annoyances or habits) and the big things (emotional or physical abuse; addictions to drugs, alcohol or pornography; and infidelity) that can hurt marriages, offering strategies for dealing with them. Hamilton encourages people to take the long view and “...do love until you *feel* love. When it is difficult to feel love, the trick is to hold on to the knowledge that it will get better and to avoid doing anything stupid in the meantime.”

Relationship Repair for Couples: A Customer Service Approach to Minimizing Conflict and Creating Lasting Love in Your Relationships by Dr. Stephanie Weiland Knarr, PhD, LCMFT (Omaha, NE: Heartland East Publishing, 2015). Dr. Knarr urges couples to model their relationship maintenance and repair practices after customer service counters found in most business establishments. When disappointed, hurt, or unhappy, husbands and wives need to receive attentive concern from each other. Making complaints may sound like a negative behavior, but in fact demonstrates commitment to the relationship and a desire to make it work. Dr. Knarr gives clear directions for expressing a complaint in a way less likely to trigger defensiveness, as well as providing helpful guidance for responding positively to grievances.

The Dance of Anger: A Woman’s Guide to Changing the Patterns of Intimate Relationships by Harriet Goldhor Lerner, Ph.D. (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1997). “Close relationships are akin to circular dances, in which the behavior of each partner provokes and maintains the behavior of the other.” (p. 12) This book helps the reader clarify her feelings, learn to communicate them effectively, and interrupt negative patterns in relationships, not only with her husband, but also with children, parents, and others.

The Power of Commitment: A Guide to Active, Lifelong Love by Scott M. Stanley (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass 2005). The author offers practical and spiritual guidance to help couples understand commitment, handle everyday pressures, deal with the pain of disappointment and unfulfilled hopes, overcome extramarital attractions, and transform “me versus you” to “we” thinking in order to experience the joy of lifelong devotion and loyalty.

Unbreakable: Forging a Marriage of Contentment and Delight by Charles Causey and Tony Miltenberger (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2014). This seven-session, Scripture-based, interactive guide for couples or groups of couples who want to strengthen and deepen their marriage

relationships is based on five core components of love (commitment, kindness, honesty, forgiveness, and sacrifice). The readings and exercises help each person focus on and take responsibility for his or her own attitudes and behavior, while offering opportunities for the couple to share insights and reflections with each other.

Venus on Fire, Mars on Ice: Hormonal Balance-The Key to Life, Love, and Energy by John Gray, Ph.D., (Coquitlan, BC: Mind Publishing, Inc., 2010). The author discusses how hormonal differences affect male and female behaviors and reactions to stress. While men tend to withdraw under stress, women become more anxious and driven. Increased levels of testosterone reduce stress in men, while women's stress is eased by increased levels of oxytocin. By understanding, accepting, and respecting these differences, couples can reduce tension and build more satisfying relationships.

Selected Resources - Organizations and Websites

Better Marriages, 502 No. Broad St., P.O. Box 21374, Winston-Salem, NC 27120, 336-724-1526, 800-634-8325, acme@bettermarriages.org, <http://www.bettermarriages.org>. Formerly known as the Association for Couples in Marriage Enrichment, this nonprofit, nonsectarian organization promotes enrichment opportunities and resources to “strengthen couple relationships and enhance personal growth, mutual fulfillment and family wellness.” Better Marriages focuses mainly on helping couples in good marriages achieve their full potential, offering a leadership training and certification program that trains couples for leading various kinds of events. Call the office or visit the website to find out about leader couples and events in your area, to review available resources, and to sign up for quarterly e-newsletters. Membership provides access to numerous helpful resources, including Virtual Marriage Enrichment groups, a quarterly e-newsletter, access to articles and webinars, and more.

Imago Relationships International, www.gettingtheloveyouwant.com. Based on the work of Harville Hendrix and Helen LaKelly Hunt, this program offers books, workshops, and curriculum materials featuring the IMAGO dialogue process, which helps couples share thoughts and feelings in a way that can heal and nurture relationships. This process works effectively in all relationships, but is especially helpful for developing intimacy that can help heal childhood wounds. Visit the website to locate trainers and events near you.

Non-Violent Communication, PuddleDancer Press, PO Box 231129, Encinitas, CA 92023-1129, 858-759-6963, www.nonviolentcommunication.com. Non-violent Communication programs, developed by Marshall Rosenberg in the 1960s, teach people a more effective way to communicate. Separating observation from evaluation, taking responsibility for our feelings, making requests instead of demands, and listening empathically are skills that can enhance any relationship. Visit the website to find instructors and classes, sign up for an e-newsletter and other free resources, read articles about NVC, and purchase books (including a basic text and companion workbook for group study and a variety of smaller books, including “Getting Past the Pain Between Us” and “We Can Work It Out.”

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