

Help For Couples In Distress:

by Andrew Graham

“Where do you want to go to dinner?” “When is your dentist appointment?” “How much money is in our checking account?”

Many couples have mastered the art of communication when it comes to *logistics*. They can comfortably discuss what happened today and what is planned for tomorrow. They can plan vacations, home repair projects, and whose turn it is to drive for the carpool.

Yet, real communication can be a struggle for many couples.

Sensitive topics are

avoided. Thoughts and feelings are kept hidden, unexpressed because doing so is a risk. “Is she really listening?” “Does he really care about what I think?”

When couples seek out professional intervention, the motivation is often because they aren’t able to navigate the sensitive issues where emotions run high.

There’s Help!

One strategy used by Christian professional counselors in working with couples with relationship distress is the “Speaker-Listener Technique.” The technique comes from a bestselling book, *A Lasting Promise: The Christian Guide to Fighting for Your Marriage*. In that resource, the authors—a group of counseling professionals—provide the structure that helps many couples to work through the sensitive discussions that they’ve been avoiding.

The beauty of the technique is that professional training or guidance isn’t required to put it into practice.

The Ground Rules

It’s important to remember that only one person can speak at a time. You can’t listen to your spouse if you’re both talking at the same time. It’s important to establish the rule that *the Speaker has the floor*. Each person will take turns as the Speaker—but only one at a time. When one is the Speaker, the other is the Listener.

Discussions on sensitive issues can turn into monologues where one person

holds the floor for too long. Therefore, a second rule is to *share the floor*. The Speaker may need to express his/her views and emotions—but each needs to validate the other by allowing the same opportunity.

A third ground rule is that this technique is geared toward helping couples to talk about sensitive issues. At this point, there’s *no problem solving*. That’s another goal for another time.

It can be easy for couples to stray from the objective of the discussion. When using this strategy, it is important to *stay on topic*.

For the Speaker

Someone has to be the first Speaker—most often it is the person who has requested the discussion. As they share their views on the subject, it is important that they don’t make assumptions about the views or motives of their spouse but *speak for themselves*. This is best done by using “I statements” to reflect their point of view: “I feel stressed out about how much money we’ve been spending lately on eating out.”

The objective is to express thoughts and feelings in a way that is understood by the Listener. Just as a missionary needs to keep thoughts brief to allow a translator to work with manageable amounts of content, the Speaker needs to *talk in small chunks*—only a sentence or two at a time before stopping and giving the Listener the opportunity to reflect before assuming the role of the Speaker.

For the Listener

Too often during important conversations about sensitive issues, spouses talk past one another. While one is talking, the other isn’t adequately listening because they are busy preparing their response.

POSITIVE COMMUNICATION continued

➡(p7) spouse. It focuses on any resource that can be turned into an asset or strength.

Exceptional couples understand how their strengths and weaknesses help them become better people. While no spouse wants his or her mate to have shortcomings, none of us is perfect. Even if we're working to overcome our flaws, our partner is going to become frustrated with us from time to time. In such times, it's a mature spouse who can see the opportunity for growth.

Encouragement Through Listening

One of the greatest gifts you can give your spouse is the gift of listening. It can be an act of connection and care, but far too many people only hear themselves talking. Few listen. If you listen to your spouse, he or she feels, "I must be worth hearing." If you ignore your partner, his or her thought could be, "What I said wasn't important," or, "He doesn't care about me!" Here are some tips to help you become a better listener.

Stay focused. When someone else is talking, most of us are concerned about what we're going to say when the other person stops talking. This is a violation of Scripture because James 1:19 tells us to "be quick to hear, slow to speak" (NASB).

Watch your body language. When you communicate face to face with your spouse, your message is made up of three parts: content, which is only 7%; tone of voice, which is 38%; and nonverbal communication, which is 55%. What does this mean in your marriage? When your spouse shares with you, make sure your body language communicates openness and listen with your eyes because that's as important as listening with your ears.

Be aware of gender differences. How we listen needs to be tailored to the person speaking. Women tend to give more response and feedback while they're listening. Their responses aren't necessarily agreement; they usually mean, "I understand" or "I'm connecting with you." Men say less when they listen, and their feedback usually means, "I agree with you." A woman often learns that when she's listening to a man, he may not need as much feedback as a woman would. When she listens quietly to a man, he may respond with words like, "Thanks for really listening to me. It helps me keep my mind on track when I'm not interrupted." On the other hand, when a man listens to a woman, he may need to remind himself to give her verbal reassurance that she is being heard. ■

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MARITAL COMMUNICATION RESOURCES

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a Day in the Life of a Student

Hollie Kessen, Aurora, Indiana (senior, music)



14
years old

Age at which she chose GBS for her future college. She recalls making a journal entry about her intention while returning home from a revival service featuring Don Davison.



6:10 a.m. **Exercising**

Hollie and Maricka Herrer take an early morning walk before meeting their prayer group in the chapel.

7:30 a.m. **Practicing Flute**

After a quick breakfast, Hollie is off to Room 100 in the Music Hall for a couple hours of practice.

3
generations

of Kessens have attended GBS, including both parents and all of her siblings.



25
family pets

The Kessens have had 8 canaries, 7 fish, 2 dogs, and 8 cats. Hollie's favorite was her cat Junior.

10:00 a.m.
Enjoying a Favorite Class

This semester that class happens to be Piano Pedagogy taught by Dr. Jana Pop.



1:15 p.m.
Cleaning the Music Hall

Hollie's on-campus job includes emptying trash cans, dusting pianos and furniture, and cleaning the carpets and bathrooms.

3.99
grade point average

marred only by a single A-minus in English Composition.

6:00 p.m.
Practicing With Chamber Group

After supper, Hollie rehearses with members of her small chamber group.

7:00 p.m.
Studying in the Dorm

Hollie studies for about two hours before turning in around 9:30. She admits that some may find it a bit "weird" that she actually loves homework!

80%
of talking time

spent with friends discussing homework. Only 1% is spent talking about boys.



30+
hours of reading

during the summer to prepare for fall semester. Hollie wants to understand the material before she begins classes each fall.