



Two Communication Rules That Can Save Your Marriage - Even Before It Starts

Les and Leslie Parrott, [Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts](#)

All the important communication tools can be reduced to six basic skills. If you learn them and use them, you will be able to give more love to your spouse, and your marriage will become super-charged with positive energy.

They are:

- 1. Make “I” statements, not “you” statements.**
- 2. Practice reflective listening.**
- 3. Understand and accept the differences between men and women.**
- 4. Apologize when necessary.**
- 5. Power down and get offline.**
- 6. Communicate through touch.**

Here's a deeper dive into the top two of these six rules [all are covered at greater length [in the book](#)].

Make “I” Statements, Not “You” Statements

When you are upset with your partner or you feel hurt by him or her, your natural tendency is to attack: “You drive me crazy! You never ask my opinion when you decide something important!”

A “you” statement like this guarantees a relational barrier. Your partner has virtually no alternative but to feel blamed, accused, and criticized. It is extremely unlikely that he or she will say, “Yes, you are right. I can be very insensitive.”

Rather, his or her natural reaction will be defensive: “What do you mean? If you have an opinion, just say it. I can’t read your mind.”

And then what typically follows is a returned “you” statement: “You are the one that’s insensitive. Did you ever consider the pressure I’m under right now?”

Volleying “you” statements is a surefire way to spoil an evening. This scene would be completely different had “I” statements been used to report how you felt or how you experienced the situation: “I feel hurt and neglected when you don’t ask my opinion.”

Do you sense the difference? “I” statements dispense information to be understood rather than accusations to be defended. “I” statements are much more likely to elicit concern and caring from your partner: “I’m sorry, honey. I had no idea you were feeling that way.” “I” statements do not cause defensiveness, because they say nothing about how bad your spouse is.

There is no benefit to making your spouse feel attacked. Instead of saying, “You are so careless. How could you forget that we were going out tonight?” it would be better to say, “I feel hurt and a little scared when you forget things we plan together.” This allows you to express your feeling of being neglected, but you’re saying it without accusing your partner of intentionally hurting you.

In place of “You try to make me feel stupid by always correct- ing what I say,” say something like, “I feel very put down when you correct little things I say.” Begin your sentences with “I” rather than “you,” and you will save your marriage much misery.

Communication is not what you say, but what your partner understands by what you say. When you make “you” statements, all your partner hears is blame and criticism. “I” statements are much more effective, because they allow your message to be correctly heard and understood.

Practice Reflective Listening

A sage once said that the Lord gave us two ears and one mouth, and that ratio ought to tell us something. Good point. We often think about learning “good communication skills” as learning to express ourselves more clearly, getting our message across. In fact, however, 98 percent of good communication is listening.

If you can hear, you can listen — right? Wrong. Hearing is passive. Listening is actively interacting with a message by reflecting it back to the sender. Effective listening is a simple habit to develop, but it can be difficult to learn, because in situations where it is most important, we are usually more focused on what we are going to say next than we are on listening to the message being sent.

Consider this typical husband/wife interaction:

Wife: *(holding up a navy blue dress with a broad white collar)* Look at this! I just got this dress cleaned, and there's a gray stain all over the collar! I can't believe it. What am I going to do now? I was going to wear this dress tonight!

Husband: Oh, honey, I don't think anyone would even notice it. Besides, you could wear your yellow dress. It looks great.

The husband in this scenario was trying to be helpful, but he didn't listen. He was more concerned with solving the problem than with understanding his wife's emotions. He could have made any number of remarks that would have made his wife feel heard and understood, such as "I'm so sorry, I'd be furious too" or "I can't imagine how disappointed you are."

The point of reflective listening is to let your partner know that you have heard what they said and that you understand their message. By the way, reflective listening is a wonderful way to defuse a potential conflict. If your partner starts hurling "you" statements such as "You are always late," don't say, "I am not." Instead, genuinely express your understanding of his or her feelings by saying, "I know it upsets you when I'm late. It's got to be exasperating. I'll work on being on time in the future." Listen for the message underlying the actual words. "You are always late" means "I'm upset."

Many of the couples we teach reflective listening to complain that it feels awkward and sounds phony or even patronizing. That's why we lay a foundation with being warm, genuine, and empathetic. When reflective listening is grounded in these traits, it is never a robotic function; it comes from the heart. If you are listening deeply, and if you truly care, then what you reflect back to your partner will not be mechanical. Like any new skill, listening may feel awkward at first, but when you begin to experience the difference it makes in your marriage, the awkward feeling will abate quickly.

Remember, however, that true empathy in listening involves change. Unfortunately, some people may learn to listen well, but they fail to heed what they hear. If your partner is asking for a change in your behavior, seriously consider the request and then, if it seems reasonable, act on it.

Just as words without deeds are dead, so is listening without action.

One more thing on listening. If you are at a loss and can't seem to reflect your partner's message, do two things: (1) make sure you really want to accurately understand their message, and (2) say something like, "Tell me more about it" or "Help me understand what you mean." This safety-net technique works wonders.

Renowned Swiss counselor Dr. Paul Tournier has said, "It is impossible to

overemphasize the immense need we have to be really listened to, to be taken seriously, to be understood.... No one can develop freely in this world and find a full life without feeling understood by at least one person.”¹ When you offer your spouse the gift of listening, you are embodying what marriage was meant to be.

Be quick to listen [and] slow to speak. — James 1:19

Paul Tournier, *To Understand Each Other* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1967), 29.

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