

The following article was written by Steve Barrett, an American Legion lifetime member (Chapter 201), a member of the VFW (Post 9143), and a Clinical Social Worker at the Atlanta VA Medical Center. He works primarily with Vietnam veterans, and Steve is a Vietnam veteran himself. He was stationed in the Central Highlands in 1967. Steve is also a retired military social worker.

Couple Communication

By Steve Barrett, LCSW, BCD

Communication is one of the most powerful forces impacting the quality of a couple's relationship; and the use of effective communication is a key factor in helping couples solve problems and increase intimacy. It is through communication that a relationship either grows or is destroyed.

Communication is actually multi-dimensional. It includes what we say (content dimension-verbal messages), how we say it (contextual dimension), why we say it (emotional tone), and even what we don't say (nonverbal cues). Couples that I work with at the Atlanta VA, sometimes report that 'we don't communicate'. However, when one spouse sits with arms crossed and a frowning expression, that is communication; albeit ineffective communication. It has been estimated that 75% of communication is actually nonverbal. Our nonverbal messages frequently convey what we truly feel and think. Think of a time when you were trying to talk with someone, but they were sighing and frequently looking away. It was probably very frustrating. How we communicate non-verbally may enhance or lower the effectiveness of our communication with others.

How we 'listen' is also important in determining the effectiveness of our communication with others. In fact, active listening is probably the single most important communication skill. Veterans tell me all the time that they are listening to their spouse. However, when I ask the veteran to describe the 'listening' experience, it may be something like this: The veteran is in the kitchen cooking a meal and hears his/her spouse talking; the television is on; and the dog is barking and demanding attention. It will come as no surprise that this 'listening' scenario is a recipe for failure, particularly if the spouse is trying to discuss something important. A good listener needs to 'hear' more than just words. A good (active) listener pays attention, interprets emotions and behaviors, and then responds appropriately. Listening requires that you pay attention to the tone of voice, facial expressions, eye contact, and physical gestures of your spouse. Listening is enhanced by making eye contact with your spouse, making facial expressions, or nodding while your spouse is talking. If you have ever been on a panel to interview potential employees, think of the applicant who did not make eye contact with the panel. Most likely, that applicant was not hired.

Certain elements of communication are important to consider during couples communication.

- Refrain from offering unsolicited advice, comments, or criticism that stops your spouse's expression of ideas. For example: a spouse comes home from a frustrating day at work and they want to talk about their day. The other spouse, however, offers unsolicited suggestions, it may deprive the first spouse from being able to process their day. Frequently, couples just want to talk about their day without getting suggestions about how to do something differently.

- The timing of communication is also important. Timing includes allowing adequate time to complete your communication. For example, don't start an important conversation as you walk out the door. Timing also includes being aware of your emotional state and your spouse's emotional state before you initiate communication with him or her. If you or your spouse is angry, sad or even intoxicated, it probably is not the best time to initiate a conversation about important issues.
- Consider your tone of voice. Your tone of voice is going to 'make or break' your communication. Think of the sentence "I like you." You can change the entire meaning of this simple statement by changing your tone of voice. You can make it sound sarcastic, angry, or even intimate. Frequently, our feelings are expressed in our tone of voice.
- Focus communication on current positive efforts to make changes rather than digging up the past. If you point out your spouse's ineffective way of communicating, "skeletons in the closet" are formed. Unhappy couples frequently defensively search for the other's negative message. Instead focus on the most positive possible interpretation of your spouse's communication and avoid discounting or denying your spouse's feelings.

Some techniques are very helpful in facilitating effective communication. One such technique is the use of "I" messages. "I" messages are statements that describe your feelings about a situation and how you are affected by your spouse's behavior. "I" messages are very different from "you" messages. "You" messages place blame and judge the other person based on their behavior. "You" messages often trigger defensiveness or hostility in your partner, and tend to increase conflict. Think of the message: "you left the toilet seat up, and our dog is drinking from the toilet." Instead reframe the message: "I am concerned when the toilet seat is left up because our dog drinks from the toilet. Please close the toilet seat when you are through using it." I frequently suggest we be aware of the pronouns we use. Think of using "I" "me" "my" "our" and "us."

Another example of an effective way to communicate is by demonstrating "caring behaviors." Most couples make big decisions in their lives regarding mortgage payments, taking a vacation, or disciplining children. It is often, however, the small caring activities that make or break the relationship. Some 'caring behaviors' are:

- Hugging your spouse
- Bringing home a flower
- Planning a weekend outing
- Serving dinner by candlelight
- Touching your spouse while you are riding in the car

Remember that effective communication is not a battle. Couples need to approach each other from a position of equality. You and your spouse bring unique gifts to your relationship. By identifying and valuing your differences, you both can learn to work better together. Consider this concept as the foundation of your relationship: "Love is like playing the piano. First you must learn to play by the rules, and then you must forget the rules, and play from the heart (anonymous)."

