

Relationship & Marital Enrichment Education

Annual Family Life Electronic Seminar Series ♦ April 3 - 14, 2006

Module 7*

Commitment and Communication in Healthy Relationships

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1. Skills for Healthy Couples

Hello. Welcome to our presentation about commitment and communication in healthy relationships. I am Angela Wiley, an Assistant Professor and Extension Specialist at the University of Illinois.

And I'm Wally Goddard, professor and family life specialist with the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service.

There are a number of important skills that practitioners can teach to support healthy couple relationships. Examples include skills for handling stress, skills for financial management, and skills for dealing with conflicts. We will spend some time in this unit focusing on the content for teaching two critical skills for strong couples: skills for building and maintaining commitment and skills for effective communication. We will touch on conflict management skills when addressing communication.

2. Relationship Skills

First, let's give some thought to the notion of "relationship skills." In the common way of thinking, skills are abilities that we learn. In our modern world, it is a common understanding that lovers should be "made for each other," that intimate relationships are matters of destiny. This may be true in fairy tales, but in most of our real lives, successful relationships require some work! As depicted in the core concept "Choose," in the National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Model or NERMAN we must help learners consider that relationships involve intentional work, including skill-building.

We will talk about some of the skills that strong couples may want to have in their relationship toolbox, and we proceed under the assumption that professionals can educate and empower couples to attain and maintain these skills. We include commitment as a relationship skill because we believe that the abilities necessary to make and keep commitments must be learned, practiced, and refined just like those for effective couple communication or any other relationship skill.

3. Keep in Mind

We also recognize that skills are not all that a healthy couple needs. In fact, the skills that we will discuss are not only skills but also have other elements in them.

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For example, commitment can be cultivated and is thus a skill but it also probably has a strong thread of temperament or personality in it (some people crave novelty while others value safety). It may also have an element of life philosophy in it (some people believe in commitment as an article of faith).

Likewise, communication involves a set of skills, but it is also a personal style or personality issue. Some people are naturally more extroverted and expressive whereas others are more introverted.

It is also the case that you can have a full tool box and not use a single tool when you need them most. Even if you “Choose” to learn skills, you must also “Choose” to use them. Learners must be motivated to apply the skills they learn.

4. Relationship Work Ethic

Sotile & Sotile (1998) discuss the importance of developing a strong relationship work ethic because good, intimate relationships take a willingness to continually find the time and energy to work on them.

Professionals will have to work to build an understanding among their adult learners that relationship work is like other work: it requires resolve, understanding, acceptance, and a willingness to be creative at times.

5. Abuse is not OK!

One important domain of the NERMEN model, “care for self,” addresses the importance of developing skills for physical and emotional wellness. When we teach couples education, we must take care to help learners recognize that self-care is also important. It is important to preface our efforts with a statement that we are not trying to support remaining in a dangerous or abusive relationship in an effort to “fix” it.

Authors of the book, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, point out that most happy couples occasionally experience distress. Healthy couples usually know how to repair damage in a way that keeps them together and happy. However, any physical abuse should not be ignored. Additionally, repeated occurrences of behaviors such as nasty criticism or contempt, or aggressive defensiveness are some important signs that a relationship may need help. We seek professional help when symptoms of physical illness occur, and we should also seek assistance when symptoms of “illness” occur in our relationships.

We can not in good conscious educate people to remain in and try to fix relationships when there has been physical harm or repeated emotional violence. I always have a referral list that I pass out at my programs on couple relationships. This list includes a domestic violence hotline number, local contact information for counselors and clergy who specialize in couple interventions, and a list of excellent books and on-line resources for couples.

6. Commitment forms a foundation for a healthy relationship

Angela: If there is not abuse, commitment can form the foundation of a strong, connected couple. Now, Wally will tell us more about how to strengthen commitment for healthy relationships.

Wally: Thank you, Angela. We are going to explore the knowledge and skills essential to understanding and teaching about commitment in healthy relationships. Let’s start by thinking about why commitment is important.

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7. Why is commitment important?

According to research, commitment to the relationship is related to the quality of the relationship (See Clements and Swensen, 2000). It makes sense that people who commit themselves to a relationship are more likely to find rewards than those who invest sporadically or half-heartedly. We will never build a substantial bank balance unless we are committed to make regular deposits. The concept of commitment is tied to the area of the NERMEN Conceptual Framework called "Choose". Commitment is about making choices to invest in a relationship.

8. Understanding commitment

We all understand the idea of commitment on some level. It means that we pledge, promise, or obligate ourselves to something or someone. Some people have suggested that America's high rates of divorce are related to our low levels of commitment. Rather than being committed to a cause or person, we may be increasingly committed to ourselves (Baumeister, 1991; Bellah et al., 1985; Cherlin, 2002)

9. The challenges of commitment

One of the ironies of relationships is that it is usually necessary to make a commitment in order to reap benefits. A farmer does not get a good harvest unless he or she has cared for crops through bad weather, pests, and droughts. A student will not get a college degree without making a commitment to learn and study through sickness, poor teachers, and difficult assignments.

10. Defining commitment

Commitment in intimate relationships is said to have three parts or dimensions (Adams & Jones, 1999). One of the challenges in strengthening commitment is that people may be committed to a relationship for very different reasons. Each person has a different combination of reasons for commitment--or lack of commitment--to a relationship. Let's talk about the three bases for commitment.

11. Commitment as attraction

The first dimension is commitment as an attraction. This be called the "want to" dimension because a person is drawn toward the partner. Some people are committed to a relationship because of the rewards and satisfactions of the relationship. Such people may experience not only satisfaction in their relationship but also be held to the relationship by love and closeness.

12. Commitment as a moral obligation

A second dimension of commitment is moral obligation. This can be called "ought to" kind of commitment. Some people stay in a relationship even when it is unhappy because they see it as a vow, an obligation, or a duty. For many people, commitment to marriage is a part of their religious or family values.

13. Commitment as constraint

There is a third basis for commitment: constraint. This can be called the "have to" kind of commitment. Some people stay in a relationship because of the children, because of social consequences of divorce, or because of financial limitations. Some stay in a relationship simply because getting out seems too risky.

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14. Many different ways of being committed

Since commitment has multiple dimensions, it functions differently in different relationships. Some people stay in a relationship because of the many rewards. Some stay out of obligation. Some stay because they can't see a good way to get out. Many who are committed to a relationship stay for some combination of the reasons we've described.

15. How can we encourage commitment?

Apart from a definition of commitment, many of us are interested in ways to maintain commitment. What can people do to maintain commitment in marriage? In the journal *Family Relations*, I have described the commitment practices that make a relationship more likely to endure. Let's discuss each of the practices.

16. Make the relationship primary.

With many demands on our time, sometimes our marriages only get small fragments of leftover time and energy. This is likely to leave the relationship starved and empty. In contrast, when decisions must be made about how we use our time and energy, the effect on the relationship should be considered.

17. Make couple time a priority.

John Gottman (Gottman & Silver, 1999) has observed that it is not as much the trips to Hawaii that assure the strength of a relationship as much as the common, shared, regular activities. Some couples work in the yard together. Some cook together. Bill Doherty (1997) describes taking time every day with his wife Leah to just talk for fifteen minutes. Usually right after dinner they send the children to play while they share with each other. They did not use the time to solve relationship problems or to deal with conflicts. They used it to connect.

18. Set limits on intrusions.

For commitment to thrive, a couple must be willing to set some boundaries. For example, a couple might decide that they will not invite a member of the extended family to come live with them unless they have discussed it together and have come to agreement. Some couples agree not to talk with anyone outside the relationship about their marriage problems unless that person is a friend of the relationship—that is, someone who wants to help them succeed as a couple. Some couples decide that both partners will avoid going out to dinner or spending time alone with someone who could be a threat to the relationship. Some couples agree to carefully monitor their feelings of attraction to others outside the relationship so that they won't allow outside attractions to grow.

19. Build rituals of connection.

Each couple can design rituals of connection that will sustain relationship commitment. Some couples worship together or take classes together and share their discoveries with each other. Some couples take time for hugging, walking, running, or other exercising. Any activity that helps a couple to feel close can strengthen and support commitment. For many couples it takes years to find the right activities that both partners enjoy.

20. Repairing commitment

The activities listed above are primarily preventive—they are intended to keep commitment from eroding. But there are also ways of supporting commitment for those who are uncertain of the future of their relationship. In those cases where a person wants to strengthen a non-abusive relationship and wants your suggestions for doing that, you might recommend ideas like the following. If commitment is primarily about attraction for them, as a marriage educator, you might invite them to think about the best times in their relationship. If commitment is largely based on moral obligation you might invite them to think about the promises they have made. If their commitment is based on constraint, you might invite them to think about the effects of relationship failure on their family and friends. Or you could invite them to think about the challenges they would face if they divorce—and maybe even reflect on difficulties faced by friends who have divorced. Of course there are some destructive relationships that need to end. But most relationships probably need a tune-up rather than a trade-in.

21. Hard decisions

When it comes to deciding which relationships should end, there are no easy answers. While it is clear that any relationship that is destroying either partner should end, in other situations it is less clear. Some people argue that any relationship that does not meet both partners' needs should end. That is a hard principle to apply to relationships since even the very best relationships entail some compromise and sacrifice. For any couple that is seriously considering parting, the best counsel is probably to consult a wise and respected counselor who shares the couple's values.

22. Reasonable expectations

Scott Stanley (Stanley, Markman & Whitton, 2002) has suggested that “practitioners might help couples by teaching them to battle the unrealistic idealizations” in their relationship. When we have a mindset that we are always in the market for a partner, the new people whom we see only at their best may seem more attractive than the partner with whom we have shared life's difficulties for years. When we compare our partners at their worst with co-workers at their best, the marriage is likely to suffer. Instead we can choose to see our partner—as John Gottman (1999) suggests—through rose-colored glasses. We can look for and celebrate the good times and good qualities we enjoy with our partner.

23. A metaphor for commitment

Bill Doherty (2001) has compared marriage to living in a place with cold winters: “I think of long-term marriage like I think about living in Minnesota. You move into marriage in the springtime of hope, but eventually arrive at the Minnesota winter with its cold and darkness. Many of us are tempted to give up and move south at this point. We go . . . for help. Some [friends or helpers] don't know how to help us cope with winter, and we get frostbite in their care. Other [friends] tell us that we are being personally victimized by winter, that we deserve better, that winter will never end, and that if we are true to ourselves we will leave our marriage and head south. The problem of course is that our next marriage will enter its own winter at some point. Do we just keep moving on, or do we make our stand now—with this person, in this season? That's the . . . question. A good [helper], a brave [friend], will help us to cling together as a couple, warming each other against the cold of winter, and to seek out whatever sunlight is still available while we wrestle with our pain and disillusionment. A good [helper], a brave [friend] will be the last one in the room to give up on our marriage, not the first one, knowing that the next springtime in Minnesota is all the more glorious for the winter that we endured together.

24. The weather usually gets better.

Linda Waite (Waite, et al., 2002) and colleagues found that “two out of three unhappily married adults who avoided divorce or separation ended up happily married five years later.” She reasoned that “one reason divorce is relatively high in our society is because now either person can leave, and we are more willing to leave than we used to be if we hit a bad patch. We’re less likely to work it through. But there’s evidence that dramatic turnarounds are commonplace. They’re the typical experience” (Waite, 2001, p. 21).

The advice to make decisions in daylight rather than darkness probably makes sense for marriage. If we decide whether we want a relationship to continue at a time when we are tired and the relationship is stressed, we are almost certain to end the relationship. If we choose instead to make our decisions when we are feeling safe and peaceful, we are more likely to make a decision that will serve us well over time.

25. Commitment is a choice.

Commitment in a relationship does not have to be left to chance. It can be a choice. John Gottman (1999), one of the world’s leaders in marriage research, has suggested things couples can do to strengthen their relationship. They can keep a list--or scrapbook--of great moments in the relationship. Each partner can work to stay aware of qualities and strengths in the person he or she loves. When there are problems, rather than conclude that the relationship is a sinking ship, they can see the trouble as a passing storm.

26. Building commitment

Stanley and his colleagues (1999) have described ways to cultivate commitment. “Most people seem to want a lifelong best friend in a mate. While for many couples this may come easily, the message for most couples is that it takes some work to nurture such a union. Constraint can lend stability, but it is dedication that can fuel a bonded, lifelong friendship. The good news is that the factors that underlie dedication are things about which people have choices. People can choose how they will handle the allure of alternatives. People can choose the priority they will place on their relationships. People can choose to nurture a positive, long-term vision for their relationship. And people can choose to think of commitment either as loss or gain”

27. Commitment options

One of the difficulties in commitment is that we often try very hard but experience no improvement in our relationship. This can be discouraging. The problem may be that effective commitment includes working hard AND working smart. When we are doing the wrong things, working harder at them won’t help. Sometimes we must learn new ways. One of the best ways to build commitment and strengthen a relationship is to fill it with positives. Gottman suggests that five positives for each negative is the magic ratio. It is the most important key to a healthy relationship.

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28. Building commitment with positives

Gottman (1994) even provides a list of ways to put more positives in a relationship

Show interest.

Be affectionate.

Show you care.

Be appreciative.

Show your concern.

Be empathic.

Be accepting.

Joke around.

Share your joy.

Commitment is more than a white-knuckled resolve to hold on through tough times. It includes the willingness and goodness to strengthen the relationship with positives. In future e-seminars and in Extension curricula, you can expect to find more information about ways to strengthen relationships.

29. Using commitment in your couples education

Everything we have said about commitment may be helpful to you in your own relationships. It may also be useful as you select or design programs you will use in teaching marriage education. In the curriculum you are planning to use, is the principle of commitment taught in practical, engaging, and sensible ways? Also, as you work with couples and they share various challenges, you might consider commitment as part of a solution to many marital woes. Commitment makes a difference!

30. Conclusion

Those who are committed to investing in their marriage are likely to enjoy a relationship that gets better and better over time. While there are clearly relationships where two people are destroying each other and the relationship should end, most relationships would probably benefit from a little more commitment. I have learned more about growth, struggle, pain, and misunderstanding from 30 plus years of marriage with Nancy than I learned in all the rest of my life put together. I'm glad for those humbling and enlarging lessons. I can also say I have learned more about joy, trust, happiness, unselfishness, peace, and purposeful living from Nancy than from all the people I have ever known. Commitment is not always fun. But we only get to strong relationships by struggling through storms, droughts and pests. The harvest can be glorious.

Wally: Now my friend and colleague, Angela Wiley, will share some ideas about building communication skills with couples.

The Role of Communication in a Healthy Relationship

Angela Wiley

31. Once we have commitment, then what?

Thank you, Wally. Once couples have the essential commitment needed to work on a relationship, other skills are also necessary. Perhaps communication skills are among the most critical.

32. Couples Communication 101

There are many definitions of communication; we could spend all of our time on this and just scratch the surface of what is a complex field of study. Several understandings of communication orbit around the idea of meaningful connection. When animals communicate, they connect by sharing information or resources, seeking support or comfort, forming alliance, conveying emotion, or effecting some change in their environment. These aspects of communication are part of the core concepts "Know" and "Care" in the NERMEN model.

The connection that is established via communication does not have to be purposeful as long as one party understands a meaning from the other. For example, I might be very upset that my daughter is ill. You may read this in my expression or nonverbal cues even though I do not intend to communicate that to you.

While most animate creatures communicate, humans have developed elaborate verbal and nonverbal means for communication as well intricate rules for how this kind of connection is accomplished. Communication requires a set of common symbols from verbal and written to the rich set of paralinguistic and emotive markers that people use in their interactions.

Clearly, much communication is non-verbal. Take as an example, the simple phrase "aren't you beautiful." The tone and expression with which it is uttered matter tremendously. It might make me feel differently if my husband Bill says with a beaming smile and a catch in his voice "Aren't you beautiful" than if he sneers in an ugly moment "Aren't you beautiful." A lot of what we convey to others does doesn't come out in the words themselves.

33. Communication: Reality

Clearly, communication IS an important part of fundamental human interaction and successful intimate relationships. Many have argued that intimate relationships "impl[y] a series of interactions between two individuals known to each other . . ." (Hinde 1981, p. 2). In one study of couples, Barnett & Rivers (1996) found that both men and women agree that the emotional connection they share with their partner was what determined the quality of their relationships and whether they believed they had a good marriage or not. A positive emotional connection would include "having a partner who really talks to you, is a good listener, is a good friend, likes and appreciates you as a person, and does his or her share to make the relationship work" (Barnett & Rivers, 1996, p.190).

34. Communication: Myth

In their book, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, John Gottman and Nan Silver (1999) make a very important point. They argue that traditional approaches to strengthening marriages have relied on the common myth that communication and more specifically conflict resolution skills are the "royal road to romance and an enduring, happy marriage." (p. 8). Healthy relationships require much

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more than good communication and problem-solving skills as evidenced in other units of this seminar. However, couples are unlikely to thrive without these important foundational skills and a good work ethic to continue refining them over time. In this sense, communication generally, and communication in the interest of resolving conflicts, is but part of the larger couple system.

35. Emotional Communication

I will focus on emotional communication, that is, the creation of relationship-relevant meaning within a couple. Emotional communication is like the circulatory system of a relationship. It allows meaning and sentiment to flow between partners. It is the system for paying attention to each other. In the words of John Gottman (2001), "Maybe it's not the depth of intimacy in conversations that matters. Maybe it doesn't even matter whether couples agree or disagree. Maybe the important thing is *how* these people pay attention to each other," *The Relationship Cure*, p. 28.

36. Basic cycle of intimacy

Reis and Shaver argued in 1988 that intimacy begins when a partner shares or communicates something personal and important to them and the other partner responds in an encouraging way. In this sense, an initial basic cycle of intimacy involves a bid or a reach (often tentative) and a loving response.

37. Everyday interactions

Recently, researchers have begun to understand that the mundane everyday repeated interactions that couples have are at least as important as their intensely intimate sharing times and their conflicts. In the book *The Relationship Cure*, Gottman and DeClaire (2001) talk about the basic units of emotional communication during everyday as well as more special interactions- they call these the bid and the response. Based on their research, these authors can predict relationship outcomes by observing the bid-response patterns in a couple's everyday interactions.

38. Bid and Response Dance

The bid is the way a person expresses "I want to feel connected to you," although it may have an endless variety of forms and content. That is, bids are often not a literal request for attention and connection but may be ostensibly about something else. For example, I might say to my husband "Honey, I had a bad day today." On the surface, this is a statement of fact. It provides my husband with information. We'll come back to this bid in a moment.

The response is how the other person handles a bid. Besides the specific content, a response can communicate that the respondent is paying attention to and cares about the bidder. Intimate partners generally expect their bids to be met with understanding and empathy. For example in the bid above, if my husband Bill simply responded "Thanks for the information," I would be greatly disappointed and probably irritated. I expect him to respond to my underlying need for his support and attention. Something like "Oh, I'm sorry, honey. What happened?"

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39. Many options for bidding

Human communication is remarkably rich. When I want to connect with another person, I have many options for couching that bid. It may be verbal or nonverbal. I might prefer to make my bid nonverbally, for example with a touch (maybe playful or flirty), a facial expression (I could smile, roll my eyes, or cock my eyebrow), or a sound (I might laugh or sigh or snort). If I chose to connect by verbal means, the form might be a question, a simple statement of fact (as I perceive it), an explicit invitation, or a fragment of a thought or feeling I am having. Many times, I will give my bid an emotional overtone using my tone of voice, my word choice, or my expression.

40. Successful communication

How can we connect with our partner in ways that enrich our relationship? There are many elements of successful communication. I only have time to highlight a few that many researchers and practitioners agree are predictive of relationships that work:

- Keep it clear
- Keep it soft
- Keep it positive
- Keep it open
- Learn to handle conflicts in healthy ways

41. Keep it clear

Let's begin with "keep it clear." It is important that bids be clear. I have already noted that bids like other elements of human communication can be quite subtle. And they can be subtle for different reasons.

For example

- I am confused about what I feel and want and so do not bid clearly,
- I am not skilled at communication and don't know how to frame my bid
- I don't want to be direct to save face if you refuse me
- I have let things build up to the point that I may want to connect with you but I am not able to get past my anger when I bid

Gottman's research shows that those who are able to be clear about their underlying need for connection (an important function if the bid regardless of its form and content) are more likely to experience the relationship they want.

42. Keep it soft

Partners who master the ability to bid "softly," that is in ways that are positive or at least neutral rather than highly aggressive, contemptuous, insulting, etc are more likely to get a positive rather than a negative response. Wally spoke earlier about building commitment with positives and gave some clear examples. Those who use gentle humor in their bids and liberally sprinkle it throughout their interactions are more likely to have quality relationships that last. When most of a couple's interactions can be characterized as having a soft-start up and using humor, their connection is generally strong even if they also are high in conflicts. It is likely that their solid foundation helps them hang on when times are tough.

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43. Response direction

There are three basic types of responses to bids. Partners can:

- Turn toward the bidder (this is the positive response)
- Turn against (this is the actively negative response)
- Turn away (this often involves ignoring the bidder, abruptly changing the topic or acting pre-occupied)

44. Relationship environment

In her book *The Truth about Love*, Pat Love (2001) observes that “[i]n most case, intimacy can only occur within the context of safety.” She says that if I long for intimacy, “the key most likely will lie in [my] ability to create a safe environment” (p.189-90). In part how we bid and how we respond to bids creates the emotional environment of our relationship. For example, being mostly attentive, optimistic, and uncritical in our couple interactions is likely to create a safe environment where intimacy can flourish.

45. Keep it positive

Let’s turn to keeping it positive. The amount of positive affect partners show one another, especially during conflict situations, is highly predictive of happy and stable relationships (Gottman, et al., 1998). Individuals who are positive care about how their partner’s day went and how they are feeling, and try to make their partner feel good about themselves. They try to be romantic and fun with their partner. When having disagreements they are patient and understanding with their spouse and cooperative when resolving the dispute.

It is important to stress that a positive response does not always mean saying “yes” or agreeing. But it does mean responding in an attentive way that is respectful of the other’s basic need for connection.

46. The more, the merrier

Gottman reports greater success in relationships where there is more positive bidding and more positive responding. And a bidder who gets a positive response is more likely to bid again than one who does not. It is clearly a case where more is better (as long as it is positive).

Those who are more attentive or mindful in their relationships are likely to have more success than those who simply allow life to flow unheeded around them. Attentiveness to our own needs allows us to know when we need to bid for our partner’s attention. Mindfulness of our partner’s needs means that we are more likely to frame our own bids positively and clearly and also respond by turning toward when our loved one makes a bid for connection.

47. Keep it open

Now for “keeping it open.” When driving my car, a “dead end” sign influences me to avoid the street where it is planted. I know that if I turn there, I will not be able to make any further progress until I turn around and come back out. The same is true in intimate relationships. Create an expectation of an open street in your relationship by having a history of positive, clear bids and “turning toward” responses. Such a constructive history sets the stage for future success. Harriet Lerner (2002) talks about having an authentic voice in our most important intimate relationships in her book *The Dance of Connection*. She argues that a crucial part of having an authentic voice is “openly shar[ing] competence as well as problems and vulnerability” (p.3). Her long-term clinical practice suggests that truly intimate

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communication entails that we fully listen to our partner and ask clarifying questions in a way that allows us to KNOW her or him more deeply. We also state our own feelings and thoughts, even when those differ from our partner.

48. Power-sharing

Being open is also associated with sharing power in a relationship. Power dynamics are often played out in communicative interactions. Gottman's longitudinal data indicate that men are especially prone to not easily accepting influence from their wives and that this tendency is associated with relationship instability. Clinician Harriet Lerner observes that women tend to be most unhappy in relationships where they feel unable to influence their partners (*Dance of Connection*, p. 9). It is important for couples to feel comfortable and practice mutual influence.

49. Aggressive honesty

When we teach couples to be open, we want to stress the importance of not using honesty as an excuse to hurt the other person. Rose Franzblau once wrote "Honesty without compassion and understanding is not honesty, but subtle hostility" [in *New York Post*, 1966]. We want individuals to be thoughtful and honest with themselves about their motives for honesty with their partner. Honest, loving communication should be framed positively. For example, without contemptuousness or blame.

50. Conflicts

How can we keep conflicts healthy? Conflicts are specific cases of communication within a relationship. Researchers and practitioners have given a great deal of attention to the clashes that occur in couple relationships. Clearly conflict is common in intimate couples and can be a sign of a healthy relationship while utter lack of disagreement may signal trouble (Gottman, 1999; Gottman, Carrere, Swanson, & Coan, 2000; Gottman, Coan, Carrere & Swanson, 1998; Stanley, Bradbury, & Markman, 2000). A powerful claim emerged from researchers that "a lasting marriage results from a couple's ability to resolve the conflicts that are inevitable in any relationship," (Gottman, 1994).

51. Conflicts, Part II

In the past decade many professionals have begun to pay less attention to conflict and more attention to the everyday interactions of couples. Based on subsequent research and clinical experience, Gottman began to argue that everyday interaction patterns often prove to be practice runs for how a couple will interact when the chips are down and a conflict emerges.

When conflicts occur, bidders and respondents must use the same basic skills outlined above. Ideally, they must reach and respond rather than avoiding the issue. They should strive to keep bids and responses positive

Harriet Lerner observed about her own marriage "Our marriage is definitely more intimate because we *can* fight. When we fight well, we emerge from the fray with a deeper knowledge of ourselves and the other" (2001, p.145) What seems to matter most for emotional and relationship well-being for couples is not *whether* they argue, but rather *how* they argue and resolve their differences. Conflicts can be opportunities for learning more and increasing intimacy.

52. Cautionary notes for conflicts

I educated couples that conflicts are normal but that 4 unhealthy relationship patterns sometimes emerge in conflict situations. Each occasionally occurs in healthy relationships, but when they become the norm, couples should be encouraged to seek professional support. In our work, we must be careful not to slide down the slippery slope from education and prevention to full-blown clinical/ therapeutic intervention. My goals with couples include to helping them self-identify and reach out for help as necessary. As I mentioned above, I come to each workshop armed with a list of local counselors, books, websites and other resources for couples who want to know more about getting outside help.

53. Escalation

When escalation occurs, something unpleasant starts, the intensity rises rapidly and pretty soon, everything is out of hand. This occurs when couples trade negative, hurtful responses back and forth, with each comment becoming more negative than the last and partners becoming defensive (Gottman & Silver, 1999; Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 1994). Learning to de-escalate is critical for the happiness and stability of relationships (Gottman, et al., 1998). There are several ways I can avoid this pattern. I can soften the tone of my voice; I can empathize or try to look at things from my husband's point of view; I can find a way to calm myself down; I can suggest a cooling off "time-out" but promise to return to issue later.

54. Avoidance or withdrawal

Avoidance or withdrawal is when one partner shows they are unwilling to start or continue an important discussion (Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 1994). This pattern is also called "stonewalling" (Gottman & Silver, 1999) and occurs when one partner just "checks out" of the conflict while the other remains or wants to remain engaged. Sometimes it happens when the avoider is feeling overwhelmed or flooded. This can be a serious problem if the engaged partner believes the withdrawer is avoiding THEM instead of understanding that most often the avoidance is of conflict itself. To prevent this pattern from fostering *chronic disconnection*, both partners must try to meet in the middle. The engaged one may need to back off a little bit and turn down the intensity. The withdrawing partner may have to stretch out of their comfort zone to stay more involved even if they are feeling overwhelmed or anxious. Both will need to work diligently to keep interactions positive.

55. Negative interpretation

Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg (1994) talk about the negative interpretation pattern where couples believe the worst instead of the best about each other. Such couples are definitely not "keeping it positive." They may engage in a harsh start-up bid based on a negative interpretation or assumption. They may turn against or away from their partner when responding to a bid. According to the U.S. legal system, even a suspected criminal is innocent until proven guilty. Partners who are prone to this might try entertaining a positive reason for the other's behaviors. When you think of some positive interpretations, let your partner know- your effort is likely to be appreciated.

56. Put downs

Ugly put-downs can be very destructive (Gottman & Silver, 1999; Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 1994). These can be plain or indirect but often involve sarcasm or insults. Just like sticks and stones, words CAN hurt us. Couples can avoid this by THINKING before they allow themselves to say things they may later regret.

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57. Teaching couples communication

When we teach learners about communication for healthy couples, we are planting seeds. We shouldn't lead them to expect whole life-pattern changes from limited contact workshops or miracle formulas for keeping conflicts under control with active listening props. Rather, we should work to give them some basic knowledge and introduce them to some skills that may encourage them to seek more information and develop further skills.

58. Basics of Communication

Let me summarize a few basics that I have discussed in this unit. Couples communication is not just about exchanging information or messages. Beyond the content of the messages exchanged, emotional connection occurs during the bid-response dance. A bid is essentially a request for attention and connection, however it is framed. How we structure and respond to these has implications for our intimacy.

Communication is not merely a matter of style or personal preference but entails a series of "skills" that can be developed, refined, practiced, and revisited as necessary. Couples can be encouraged to attend to their patterns, perhaps by using tracking records or journals, to facilitate deeper understanding of how they are bidding and responding.

59. Full circle: Relationship "skills"

Now, let's return to the concept of "relationship skills." Skills are abilities that we learn but also that we practice, improve, tailor to fit our relationship and perhaps re-learn over time. In our modern world, it is a common understanding that lovers should be "made for each other," that intimate relationships are matters of destiny. This may be true in fairy tales, but in most of our real lives, successful relationships require some work!

We have talked about some of the skills that strong couples may want to have in their relationship toolbox. We believe that professionals can educate and empower couples to attain and maintain these skills. These are an excellent investment that can return rich profit many times over to improve the quality and stability of a couple's relationship.

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