

How to Talk to Your Husband so He'll Really Listen

by
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On too many nights, Bob and Dawn would repeat the same scenario. He would come home late in the evening, exhausted from work. She would be tired from her long day at the office- and from shepherding their three young children to and from various day-care arrangements.

His first remark after coming through the door would invariably be some complaint-dinner was cold, the house messy, the kids wild. She, enraged, would insist that they sit down, right then and there, to talk things out. Waving her off, Bob would turn on the TV in the den. End of discussion.

Every couple experiences such communication meltdowns. But repeating them over and over can eventually undermine even the strongest marriage.

To prevent such unhealthy patterns, it helps to understand that men and women still have very different ideas about expressing emotion. Ideas they form as early as childhood.

Boys are taught to pay much less attention to feelings than girls are. For example, if a boy gets hurt or upset playing a game of kickball, he is expected to get out of the way and stop crying so the game can go on. If the same happens to a *girl*, the game will stop while everyone gathers around to help.

Around puberty, girls learn to express emotion in indirect ways, to read unspoken feelings from facial expressions and tone of voice. Boys, however, are oblivious to such strategies.

In short, women are groomed for the role of emotional manager in marriage, naturally assuming responsibility for the health of a relationship and for initiating discussions about problems that need working out. Men often say their wives have an uncanny ability to sense when they're troubled about something--well before the subject is actually broached. But they don't seem to do nearly as good a job for their wives--their radar is just not that finely tuned.

In numerous studies, women say good communication is one of the most important elements in a satisfying marriage, while their husbands rarely mention it. According to University of Texas psychologist Ted Huston, Ph.D., who conducted a study of 168 couples, "For wives, intimacy means talking things over, especially the relationship itself. But husbands, by and large, say, 'I want to do things with her, and all she wants to do is talk:.' "

Why are husbands so silent? Partly because men tend to be Pollyannas about their marriages, while women are more alert to trouble spots. In a Yale University study of 40 married men and 40 married women, for instance, men had a rosier view than women of just about every aspect of their relationships--lovemaking, finances, how well they listened to their partner.

Wives, too, tend to be more vocal about their grievances--including, their husbands' attempts to wriggle out of discussing problems. A University of California at Berkeley study of 156 couples who'd been married at least 15 years found that most wives don't mind plunging into a squabble if it means getting down to issues. Their husbands, however, find the prospect deeply unpleasant and something to avoid.

Physical responses can make these differences even deeper. When John Gottman, Ph.D., a University of Washington psychologist, monitored 79 couples' bodily responses while they discussed their disagreements, he found that even a fleeting expression of contempt--a sneer, a curled lip--by one spouse caused the other's heart rate to jump two or three beats per minute. When a husband showed contempt regularly, his wife was more prone to an array of stress-related health problems, from frequent colds to gastrointestinal disorders.

When couples disagree, there is often a mental as well as a physical subtext. Unspoken thoughts--which reveal a partner's true feelings, regardless of what he or she is actually saying--can sabotage a relationship. Say a woman has invited her mother to dinner. When her husband finds out, he says, with great annoyance, "We just *had* dinner with your mother."

Meanwhile he's really thinking, *She should concentrate more on me and the kids.*

His wife, sensing his irritation, feels a surge of anger herself. She says, defensively, "You know how lonely my mother is."

Her thought: *There he goes again, complaining. Nothing I ever do is right.*

Such silent judgments often trigger attacks. His next remark might be an angry criticism of his wife's failure to pay attention to him, while hers could be an attack on his complaining.

These attacks can lead to a pointless shouting match--or worse, stonewalling: a retreat into stony silence. And here again, gender differences are very revealing,

Stonewalling, in fact, is the male refuge of last resort: In his study, Gottman found that 85 percent of stonewalling was done by husbands. Going blank and withdrawing sends a powerful, unnerving message of icy distance and distaste--and by closing down communication, makes it impossible to work things out.

The reason men say they stonewall is to avoid "flooding," feeling overwhelmed by their partner's emotions and their own out-of-control feelings. A person who feels flooded can't think rationally. He falls back on primitive responses--he wants things to stop, or he wants to run, or do any thing to get the feelings to go away.

The reaction is biological: Flooding occurs when a person's heart rate rises at least eight beats per minute above his or her resting rate. Muscles tense; it can seem hard to breathe. There is a swamp of toxic feelings, a wash of fear and anger that seems inescapable. Once flooded, men secrete more adrenaline into their blood-streams, and take longer to recover from its effects, than do women.

Because men are so susceptible to flooding, they may become overly vigilant and on guard against emotional assault. If a husband is in such a state, even a mild rebuke can unleash flooding. Small issues become major battles; feelings are hurt continually. With time, the husband may start to see any and all problems in the marriage as severe and impossible to fix, since the flooding sabotages any attempt to work things out.

Gottman discovered that if a man is able to successfully stonewall--and avoid the flooding stage altogether--his heartbeat actually goes down by about ten beats per minute, bringing a sense of relief. Predictably, his wife will have the opposite reaction: Once a husband stonewalls, *her* heart rate shoots up to levels of high distress.

So while wives are compelled, both by biology and childhood experience, to air differences and resolve disagreements, their husbands dodge these discussions for fear they will escalate into heated arguments.

Given this great divide, what can couples do to protect their love? Quite a lot, actually. Simple moves such as keeping discussions on track and empathizing with your partner can keep feelings from boiling over (see "15 Ways to Defuse Tensions," *below*). As the emotional managers of a marriage, women *do* have a greater burden: No matter what feelings a husband's behaviour may trigger, a wife needs to keep her reaction from overwhelming her.

One strategy to enhance communication is not to concentrate so much on specific issues--such as child-rearing, sex, money, or housework--but rather to work on strengthening your relationship as a couple. That way, you'll improve your chances of working things out when conflicts arise. *

15 Ways to Diffuse Tensions

FOR HUSBANDS:

1. Don't see every complaint as an attack. When your wife brings up a grievance, try to think of it as an act of love--she's working to keep the relationship on course.
2. Pay attention. Even when she's angry or distraught, realize that her emotions are underliners, indicating how strongly this matters to her strongly this matters to her.
3. Refrain from offering a solution early on. She needs you to acknowledge her feelings, not dismiss them by quickly making suggestions.
4. Listen actively. Let her know that what she's saying is registering. And even if you don't agree with her, acknowledge the emotions she's expressing.

FOR WIVES:

5. Tone it down. Husbands say their wives are too intense in voicing complaints. Turn down the volume on your anger, and avoid expressing contempt or disgust.

6. Complain without attacking. Offer a short, specific grievance with no threats or insults. For example: "When you didn't call to say you were going to be late for our dinner, I felt unappreciated and angry. I wish you'd let me know."

7. Challenge your thoughts. Distorted thinking is the cause of much marital conflict. If you feel, in the heat of the moment, that your husband doesn't care about your needs, remind yourself of things he's done that are, in fact, thoughtful. This opens the door to a workable outcome.

8. Reassure him. Put your complaints in the larger context of your affection for him. Tell him this upsets you so much because you care about him and your relationship.

FOR BOTH:

9. Learn to soothe yourself. The ability to hear and speak clearly and focus on the real issues dissolves during emotional peaks. Learn a relaxation method, such as meditation or deep breathing, that works for you.

10. Take time-outs. When things get too heated, or at the first sign of flooding, spend at least 20 minutes apart before continuing the discussion.

11. Stay optimistic. Believing your partner is flawed in some unchangeable way is guaranteed to shut down communication. A more optimistic view attributes a bad moment to temporary circumstances, leaving open the possibility for change.

12. Listen for the main message. When a partner can hear past the anger and respond to a grievance--even in the heat of an argument--it's a healing moment. Even in the worst arguments it's possible to purposely edit what you hear, ignoring the hostile parts to get at what's really being said.

13. Avoid defensiveness. Try not to immediately rebut what your partner is saying, reacting to it as though it were an attack rather than an attempt to restore equilibrium. Remember that your partner's negative emotion is a plea for attention.

14. Take responsibility. If you do see you are in the wrong, apologize or resolve to do things differently in the future.

15. Show some appreciation. When there is no fight going on, tell your partner how much you love and appreciate him. Voice some praise, give compliments. Affection builds, emotional capital that will see you through your disagreements.