

Chapter 3: Hold the Communication!

Do these things first

If your communication has not been going well, stop! Nagging your spouse to talk, saying words in the heat of the moment you later regret, walking away feeling worse than before you tried to communicate—they aren't working.

You need a reset, a reboot. Trying to jump into a challenging conversation again before doing your homework will give the same results: a fight, hurt feelings, and a thicker wall between you.

Before trying to communicate, here's some homework you need to do.

Know Yourself

Get off your spouse for a moment and look at your own heart. Ask yourself some hard questions. What is it about the issue that's important to you? What is your own role in the problem? How is it affecting you? How is your spouse's response affecting you? What would you like to be different? What specifically do you want from your spouse? Understanding? Help? Something else?

Getting as clear as possible will allow you to frame your communication in a way that will get you closer to the result you want. Do some of the hard work yourself before trying to talk with your spouse. Even on the toughest issues that means thinking things through to the point where you understand it, something like this:

- Money issues are always contentious between you. When you find out later your spouse has spent money you hadn't budgeted, you feel afraid there won't be money for the priorities you agreed on. That fear leads you to struggle with resenting your spouse. You want the two of you to create a plan for your money together and stick to the plan.
- Your spouse's long hours at work leave you feeling lonely and less important. Their lack of energy for you when they come home only adds to this. You miss time together and are worried you will continue to grow farther apart. You want your spouse's schedule to affirm that you are a priority and to plan some regular times to be together.

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- The physical intimacy between you has been seriously lacking, and you are feeling frustrated, alienated, lonely, and even angry as a result. You don't want to lose the sexual part of your relationship. You want your spouse to understand how important sex is to you and to work together to overcome whatever may be preventing better and more frequent intimacy.

Thinking through how the issue affects you will help you express things much more clearly and enlist your spouse in working toward a solution.

Get Unemotional

You may have strong feelings that have reached the boiling point: anger, frustration, hurt, worry, fear. However, launching into a conversation when your emotions are heated will make your spouse even more defensive. They will likely respond by shutting down, getting angry, or raising the emotional temperature further still.

Before communicating, be honest with yourself about how you feel. Name your emotions. Cry or scream alone if you must, or with a girlfriend or buddy. Remember, no one else—not even your spouse—can make you feel any certain way. Own your emotions as your own.

Then set your emotions aside. Put your feelings into words, but let the temperature cool down. Learn to manage your feelings instead of allowing your feelings to manage you or dumping on your spouse. When you communicate with your spouse you will need to express your feelings in words but without the boiling-over, heated-up, out-of-control emotions.

“Better a patient person than a warrior, one with self-control than one who takes a city” (Prov. 16:32). Is it easy? No. But it's your job to just do it!

Know Your Spouse

Consider what you already know about your spouse. What about their personality, needs, brokenness, or strengths is coming into play? How much do they

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already understand about how this is affecting you? (Remember that simply saying something to your spouse in the past does not mean they understand.) What do you believe is important to them about this issue?

Is your spouse basically a person of goodwill who doesn't understand what this means to you? Does your spouse have different strengths in this area that you need to appreciate? Or are they actively seeking to destroy your relationship out of an evil heart? Remember, you and your spouse are both sinners, but your spouse's intentions do make a difference.

Put yourself in your spouse's shoes. Picture your proposed communication with them. In what setting are they most likely to truly hear you? How is your message likely to be received? Can you craft your message in a way that will make it easier for them to understand? Listen to yourself with your spouse's ears, and if necessary, adjust your proposed message.

Prepare Your Heart

Be honest with yourself: Is your heart open? If it's not, do not pass go until you deal with your own heart first. This is the first and most important key to better communication, as discussed earlier. Don't place on your spouse the responsibility for fixing you; only God can do that. Going into a challenging conversation with a closed heart will always result in further conflict.

Do some praying. Ask for God's perspective on the whole situation. Ask Him to prepare your own heart and your spouse's heart. Ask for His wisdom in knowing the most effective way to communicate with your spouse. Get to an open heart. Only then is it time to move forward.

Make a Plan

Using the work you've done in the previous steps, think through the most helpful way to express this issue to your spouse. Choose the time, place, and setting. Plan and write out your initial sentences if necessary. Make sure you begin by expressing your desire to make your relationship stronger.

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The bigger the issue, the more thoughtful your plan will need to be. You may be used to simply launching into a speech the moment your spouse comes within earshot or leaving subtle hints hoping they'll get the message. How's that been working out for you?

Planning communication times will make a big difference in your relationship. If there is something you believe needs to be talked about, you make the plan; don't wait for your spouse to do so.

Think of this as a skill you are learning. It will become much easier over time. While making your communication plan, keep the end goal in mind. The goal of communication should be to understand each other better. And that goal should inform every part of your communication.