

Spouses Can Communicate By Listening, Sharing, Talking

By Mary Boike

A lot more goes into a marriage than sharing a single name and bank account. People are looking for companionship, a special quality of living, intimacy, self-disclosure, reassurance from mates, freedom to "be," and the experience of self, the other and the union of the two. Each marriage is unique, as each combination of two people makes for a unique relationship. There are not fixed rules for living a marriage but there are tools which can be used to help make marriage a more positive experience.

Communication is one such tool. It is easy for a couple to feel a license to talk to each other in ways that they wouldn't to a friend. This is ironic in that spouses should be very best friends. For instance, with a friend you are careful to resolve conflict in a pleasant manner. You make sure you are smiling and understanding, and you give the other person plenty of eye contact and frequent head nods, to acknowledge that you're listening. You would not approach friends with an angry face, nor would you smirk or glare at them! Your

voice is tender, warm, affectionate and caring. You would not think of being cold, blaming, accusing or sarcastic. Even your body posture is relaxed, and physical distance between the two of you is reduced. You would not throw up your hands in disgust or make rude gestures. The whole context of the communication situation is different with a friend. How much more effective communication would be if a couple continued to treat each other with the consideration expended on a friend.

Effective communication also consists of listening to both what a spouse is saying and feeling. Often the feeling behind a statement is more important than what is actually being said. However, listening is not enough. The communication process must be carried one step further by expressing what you think you heard your mate say. At times you may also want to express how you think your spouse is feeling about the subject being discussed. We gain a sense of being understood when the feeling is accurately recognized. This allows any misconceptions to be cleared up and the

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Communication is expressing positive qualities in a spouse**

discussion to proceed on a better level of understanding. In addition to clarifying understanding, your actions show the other person that you care. This helps to make a person feel important and loved.

Another aspect of communication is sharing. All too often a couple will hesitate to express their feelings, thoughts, and desires with each other in the hopes of avoiding conflict and disagreement. The spouse is expected to magically discover what they are. This is often referred to as a hidden agenda. You have something you would like your spouse to know or to do but won't directly tell what it is. Instead, you let your spouse stumble around until he guesses the answer. Meanwhile, you remain distressed because it appears that your spouse is so insensitive. Without sharing

your thoughts and feelings your spouse has no ability to know where you're at on an issue or that you're unhappy about something. A spouse is not a mind-reader. For you to get what you need, you must tell your mate. Your willingness to be open and up front about your needs encourages your mate to do likewise. It promotes a supportive environment for growth.

In order for a spouse to share intimate feelings, there must be a feeling of psychological safety. Each person can provide this safety for the other by being accepting. Accepting means being nonevaluative or non-judgmental. This does not mean that you agree with everything your spouse says but only that you accept it as a valid point of view. You acknowledge that it is okay to have a point of view different

from your own.

Communication is also negotiating. Negotiation is a process of stating what each person is willing to do about an issue until each party feels comfortable with the final solution. This pre-recognizes the right of each person to have needs met and respected.

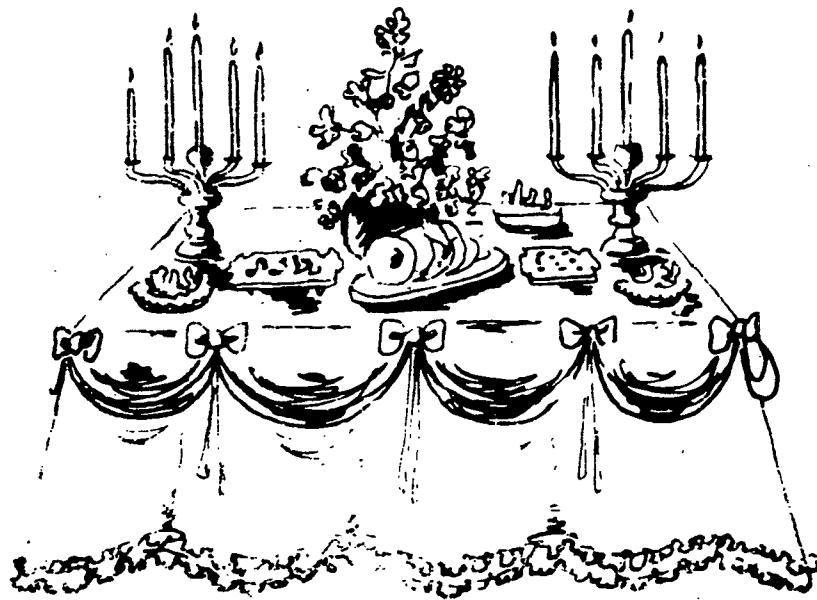
Communication means setting time for sharing and resolving conflict. In this way the emotional buildup of anger and resentment associated with unexpressed feelings, unmet needs or unresolved conflict is less likely to reach such unmanageable proportions.

Communication is useful not only when conflict arises but also for positive experiences. It should not be neglected as a way to promote growth and enhancement. Communication can be used to express positive qualities in the spouse. We all like to hear good things about ourselves and hear appreciation for the hundreds of little things we do, but we frequently forget to express this appreciation for the things we like about others, to them. Through communication you can share your own goals and desires for yourself or for

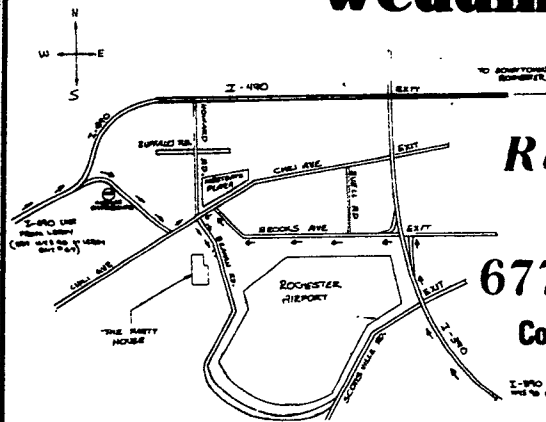
your marriage, family or career. You can share your feelings and how you are growing and changing. In turn, you might want to share how you would like your marriage to be changing so as to enhance growth as a couple. In this way you keep your marriage alive and growing.

Before marriage is a good time to evaluate your level of communication as a couple. How have you felt when discussing areas of conflict? Do you as a couple tend to focus only on negative issues? Does one person always initiate communication? Do you feel comfortable talking about sexuality, occupation, recreation, friends, child-rearing, size of family, finances, division of household responsibilities, religion and spirituality? Do you know your future spouse's expectations in these areas? If not, why? Some reflection on these questions will give you an estimate of how well you two communicate and may pinpoint areas needing attention. Developing good inter-spouse communication will enhance your relationship and help to keep it a rewarding experience throughout the coming years.

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