

## **Can Great Listening Save a Marriage?**

The first thing most people say when they sit down in my marriage counseling office is: "My husband (or wife) doesn't listen to me!" Many a relationship problem starts here. After all, if you don't feel listened to, then it's hard to feel important, special, and loved—all those good things that made you want to get married to begin with.

Does your husband complain you don't listen? Does your wife say you don't know what's important to her? That's a warning sign. Take the hint and brush up that most important of all relationship communication skills. It's the single most important thing you can do to make your partner feel closer to you.

You can find the how-to's of good listening anywhere, but it's the mindset that really counts. Here are three ideas for getting the mindset of a great listener and a great partner.

### **Less is More**

Great listening is more of a 'being' than a 'doing.' A 'being' mindset can be hard to enter into fully in our doing, doing, doing society. A lot of people feel at loose ends if they're "just listening." Like it's not enough. Even women wrestle with this and fall into the fix-it trap.

Consider the harsh reality that when you're an adult, you spend most of your time focusing on someone else's needs. It's easy to feel like you're just an instrument to get things done for other people. When someone turns the tables on you and gives full attention to your needs, it's refreshing. When that someone is your romantic partner, it's very powerful. It's like emotional food.

If you're scientifically minded, it might help to realize that the human brain actually works better with empathy. The reasoning and emotional centers of your brain are so intertwined that one doesn't work well without the other. If you feel like you're not doing enough, remember that the empathy you give your partner literally makes her think better.

So you want to think in terms of being with your partner in a soft, supportive manner. And then just track her. Just follow her wherever she goes, trying to

understand, laying aside any agendas of your own for the time being. It's really very simple.

### **Being Needs a Slow Touch**

When you're trying to get things done, speed is good. But emotions unfold in their own time and they won't be rushed. If your partner is talking about something sensitive, his fight or flight mechanism is triggered, if only a little, and it's job is to make him feel self-protective. As he talks to you, he'll test the waters and see how trusting he feels with you, then he'll tell you a little bit more, and then a bit more, until he gets to the heart of the issue. He may not even know what the heart of the issue is until it unfolds in the safety of your listening. He may not be doing this safety-testing consciously, but he'll be doing it.

Any sign of hurry or impatience will signal he's not safe, if only a little and will shut down the unfolding process. So don't multi-task, and don't have high hopes of accomplishing a lot of tasks if you've got some issues to resolve. If you don't get the dishes done, or the garage cleaned out but you resolve a thorny issue and feel closer to your partner, I'd say it was a successful weekend.

### **Buttons Will Be Pushed**

It's only to be expected that your partner will say things you disagree with or even that fire you up. Of course, you deserve to give your perspective, too. It's just that this isn't the moment. As a great listener, your first job is just to understand.

How to handle hot buttons is a big subject, but for the purposes of learning to be a better listener, just think: "Not now." Your job right now is to show understanding and empathy. As a great listener, you're going to feel those defensive reactions bubble up, and set them aside for later.

Since you're in the 'being' mindset, it will be a lot easier. You'll be in a more receptive, generous, and empathetic state of mind. Yes, you may have a different take on things but you don't have to pummel her with it immediately. You have the patience to hear her out completely first.

A partner who can get his buttons pushed, without reacting or retaliating is a gem.

Just today, I asked one of my new clients what first attracted her to her husband. She said, "We met at this party and he lit up when I spoke. He seemed to hang on my every word." As you might imagine, she was in my office because he wasn't doing that any more. If you're looking for the x-factor to rekindle your marriage, this just might be it.

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