

## **Relationship Communication Secret—No Ghost Stories Allowed**

Did you know half your relationship communication problems are products of your imagination? It's true! Under stress, your brain actually invents stories about how your partner's up to no good. In our family, we call them "ghost stories." You can end arguments with your partner faster—and with a lot less pain—if you learn to nip your storytelling in the bud.

When my stepdaughter Kristina was invited to her first slumber party, the first graders buzzed for a week about what it would be like to sleep away from family for first time. Who would be able to handle it? Who might crack under the pressure?

The morning after, my husband and I asked Kristina, "Well? Did anyone get scared? Or call their parents?"

"The only one who got scared was Diane."

"At her own party? Why?"

"She told us ghost stories. And then SHE was awake all night." Kristina rolled her eyes. "She thinks ghosts are real."

It's not just kids who scare themselves with their own ghost stories. Couples do it all the time. Nature designed the human mind to exaggerate problems in order to keep us safe in a dangerous world. Part of the brain is devoted to constantly scanning the environment for dangers. It's so good at its job that sometimes it sees dangers when they don't exist!

Paranoia worked very well in the jungle. But it doesn't work so well when your husband says, "You're the sweetest woman in the world," and you say, "What's that supposed to mean?"

Or when your husband gets upset because you bounced a check and you think: "I can't do the simplest thing right. I'm always causing trouble for him. I don't even know why he wants to be with me."

(Except that it plays out in your head a lot more chaotically than that. We tell ourselves stories so fast we hardly hear the words. Sometimes we just feel crummy and we don't know why.)

Now you're prepped to see any complaint by your husband as a sign that he doesn't want to be with you. You'll probably overreact at the slightest request or sign of discontent, and things will go south from there.

You'd be surprised how common the "You're going to leave me," horror story is. In my marriage counseling office, we solve many communication mysteries by discovering that one partner is afraid the other is thinking about divorce. Typically, the other person is shocked to hear this.

The sooner you catch yourself telling story, the sooner you can nip misunderstandings in the bud. Granted, it's tough to do that without help. When you're triggered, you can't think clearly enough to understand how you're telling stories. But when you're thinking clearly, you're not triggered and so ghost stories are not a problem. What to do?

One strategy I use with my clients is "capture and analyze." You capture your raw thoughts and feelings at the moment you're triggered. Once you've calmed down, you analyze them for patterns.

Here's a simple way to begin to do this on your own. Immediately following an argument, write a couple of paragraphs of "flow writing." That means you just spill, without regard for how you sound, if it's true, or whether your grammar is correct. What would you say to yourself as you're driving down the street or taking a shower? Get it down on paper.

Then later, look at each point and ask: What's the evidence for this? You might find that you don't actually know whether everything you've written is true, and you need to check some facts with your partner.

If you do this a few times, you'll start to see a pattern. The same kind of stories will pop up. With practice, you can gradually catch them sooner, so you don't overreact with your partner.

Don't scare yourself into a communication nightmare. You may have a genuine problem to work out, but you'll solve it faster and with a lot less stress, if you're working with facts, not fiction. And leave the ghost stories to the kids.

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