

Communication in One Lesson

"I really wanted to work in a seminar or some counseling before our wedding," said Diana. "We could use some help with our communication, like learning to fight fair and dealing with those issues we tiptoe around. The closer it gets to our wedding, the more I wish we had made this a priority. Wedding planning has put more of a strain on our relationship than I expected. But our wedding is only a month away. Is there anything we can do now?"

Diana is not alone. I routinely get calls like hers, especially at this time of year. Yes, ideally, you would get started earlier. But there is still time to pick up some essential tools. When time is tight and the pressure is rising, here are the three keys to improving your relationship immediately.

1) Start with a Loving Attitude.

Your attitude is more important than the words you use. When tensions start to rise, take a moment to go inward and do an attitude check. Are you rehearsing your grievances? Are you throwing up a wall with your body language? You may find you are looking away, tensing up, and closing yourself up.

Instead, relax your body, look your partner in the eye, and approach him with an open heart. Prepare to discover him at his best, make it safe for him to be who he really is, and offer unconditional support. Remember that you're talking to someone you love!

2) Try 110% Listening

This means that when your fiancé speaks, you are focused on understanding him and nothing else. You may interrupt; in fact, you should interrupt if you lose track of what he's saying or get confused. Otherwise, no interruptions allowed! When he finishes a sentence, don't start to speak immediately. Allow a pause. The pause gives room for him to allow vague thoughts to crystallize. When words come easily, he's telling you something he's already sure of. When words don't come so easily, he's describing insights that are emerging. In other words, he's growing. This is where intimacy deepens and without the pause, the opportunity may be lost.

When he's really finished, show him you understand what he said, both his words and his feelings. If you haven't quite understood, let him correct you and keep trying until you get it right.

3) Speak in I-Messages

When it's your turn to speak, use I-Messages. This simply means that you make your point by describing your own experience. Yes, you may have to talk about other people to tell the whole story. If you're upset with your partner, you will have to describe what he did in order to make yourself understood. But as much as possible, focus on the "I's" and avoid the "You's." When we hear a "You" coming at us, we tend to feel attacked. When someone is describing their own experience, we tend to empathize with them, especially if it's someone we love!

For example:

Do: When I found out you hadn't made your guest list, I felt frustrated and like the whole thing is falling on my shoulders.

Don't: You didn't even make your guest list? What were you thinking?

Can you feel the difference? An I-Message greatly increases your odds of getting a positive response.

You may be asking yourself: But how can this work if my fiancé isn't following the same rules? Well, you could show him this article and then you would both have the same information! It certainly does help if both people are working with the same guidelines.

However, even if you're trying these tips on your own, you will see your interaction improve. People have a tendency to mirror each other. If you raise your voice, the other person will get louder. If you interrupt, he or she will feel like they have to interrupt you to be heard. If you approach your fiancé with a loving attitude, give him 110% listening, and speak in I-messages, he will naturally tend to follow your lead.

You may also be wondering why I'm not talking about problem-solving or coming up with a compromise. The reason is that trying to come up with a solution too soon has a boomerang effect. The harder you drive toward a solution, the less you feel understood. However, if you really feel understood, you'll both feel more flexible and creative and then solutions appear much more easily. What it comes down to is this: More than a beautiful wedding or making sure the work is shared 50/50, what we all need most is someone to understand us. After all, isn't that why you're getting married in the first place?

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