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Are You a Communicator or a Lone Ranger?  
**Claire's Tips and Tools for Relationships That Work**  
**March 2005**  
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One thing marriage counseling has taught me is how much health at work and health at home are interdependent. It's hard to focus on work when you're not sure what's waiting for you at home. And you can't be fully present at home when you're mowed down at work.

That's why this month's newsletter brings you ideas for keeping stress down and productivity up on the job. That's a bonus not just for you, but for your family, too.

**Are You a Communicator or a Lone Ranger?**  
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When Carolyn went into the kitchen for a cup of coffee, she found Susan and Erica commiserating by the coffee pot.

"Three more weeks of this. I don't know if I can take it," said Susan.

"You're not kidding," agreed Erica. "They must think we're bionic or something.

"Yeah, this deadline is a killer," said Carolyn.

But on her way back to her office, she thought, "If you've got so much work to do, why are you hanging out in the kitchen? You spend more time there than in your office, if you ask me."

The next time she wanted coffee, she made sure the kitchen was empty, so she wouldn't be drawn into more time-wasting chatter.

Is Carolyn right? Is she busy cranking out work, while Susan and Erica just waste time?

Not quite. Carolyn may *look* more productive, but she actually isn't getting more done than Susan and Erica. All three women are out of balance in the emotional support department. And they're paying a price in lost productivity and higher stress.

All of us have a style of handling stress that we feel most comfortable with. It's our default style, the pattern we fall into naturally. We've grown to rely on our default style because it works for us. **But when we're under extra pressure, we can rely on it too much and get a boomerang effect.** We start to experience fewer of its advantages and more of its drawbacks.

Carolyn's default style is the **Lone Ranger**. The advantage of this style is independence. Not enough resources? Not a problem. Carolyn will make things happen. She'll take the initiative, do the research, and be accountable for the results. And, as we've seen, she doesn't waste time complaining!

But Carolyn does lose time in invisible ways. **Since she doesn't hear other people's stories, she**

**can feel like, "I'm the only one this is happening to."** She has to spend a certain amount of energy encouraging herself and fighting off her inner critic. That can really drain her energy. If she socialized more, her colleagues would do some of this for her. **And she may miss out on information, resources, or offers of help, because she's too far out of the loop.**

This means Carolyn should be more of a **Communicator** like Susan and Erica, right? Not quite. There is such a thing as too much communication. (Yes, a therapist did say that!) Sometimes Communicators need **"a little less talk and a lot more action."** Communicators are great at giving support to others, which can *feel* like action and disguise the fact that they're not moving things forward.

Communicating can also disguise the fear of taking action. After all, what is more threatening, giving others advice or taking that advice yourself? And over-processing can be wearing. People will avoid you if talking to you always means they have to "share."

At the end of the day, Carolyn found herself at her desk after everyone has gone home, thinking she didn't have nearly enough to show for the hours she put in. Maybe she should have hung out a little longer chatting with Susan and Erica. **Maybe a few laughs would have lightened her load and put some more wind in her sails.**

And maybe Susan and Erica should spend less time consoling each other for what they're not getting done, and just go do it.

What's your default style of handling stress? Think about the last time you were in a crunch. Did you hunker down or reach out?

Try this experiment. **If you think you're a Lone Ranger, take one small step in the direction of communication, say, meet a colleague for coffee, and see how it feels.** If you feel lighter, like things are more in perspective, you probably need some more of this.

**If you're a Communicator, decide in advance how much time you'll spend socializing during the day, and stick to it.** If you have more energy and get more done, you'll know you're on the right track.

We all need a bit of Lone Ranger and a bit of Communicator. If you feel like you're running out of steam, consider the possibility that you're relying too heavily on your default style. Get a little more balance and you'll get more done-and enjoy yourself a lot more along the way.

## **Your Questions**

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*Dear Claire,*

*I feel like my boyfriend has a very "tit for tat" attitude. For example, if I say I'm going to go shopping with my girlfriends, then he'll say, Well, then I get to go play video games with my friends.*

*Or if I want to buy something for the house, then he'll say he gets to buy something that costs the same. (We live together.)*

*We talk about marriage eventually, but I'm worried about this. Am I overreacting?*

*Delia*

Dear Delia,

I think you are wise to explore this. Being married means being a team. You need to feel that when you support your partner, it benefits you, too.

When your lives are entwined it's really hard to measure what each person is contributing. The 50/50 approach works for roommates, not married couples.

There's no way for me to know what your boyfriend is thinking just from a letter. But I would suggest you talk this issue over thoroughly, on your own or with a counselor. You definitely want to feel like a team when you take the step to get married.

I wish you the best,

Claire

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**Claire Hatch, LICSW, is a licensed counselor who helps people raise self-esteem and turn conflict to connection. She works with clients in her Seattle area office and by phone around the world. Claire gives seminars on how to settle conflicts, tame stress, and balance family and work.**

**Contact Information**

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email: [claire@clairehatch.com](mailto:claire@clairehatch.com)  
phone: 425 823-2273  
web: <http://www.clairehatch.com>  
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Claire Hatch, LICSW is a counselor and mediator who specializes in helping couples turn conflict to closeness. Based in Kirkland, Washington, Claire has been featured in Glamour and Seattle Bride magazines, and writes the "Relationship Guide" column for [www.byrecommendationonly.com](http://www.byrecommendationonly.com). A stimulating and entertaining presenter, she gives seminars and speeches on such topics as how to "Stop Arguments Before They Start." Visit [www.clairehatch.com](http://www.clairehatch.com) or contact Claire by email at: [claire@clairehatch.com](mailto:claire@clairehatch.com).

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