

Communication is NOT Key: Resolving Marital Conflict Through Connection

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There's a scene in the first *Harry Potter* movie in which Harry is flying on a broomstick through a cloud of winged keys, desperately trying to find the one that unlocks the door in front of him. If he doesn't find the right key, then he fails in saving the sorcerer's stone from falling into the wrong hands, thus allowing the evil Lord Voldemort to return to his full wizarding powers.

While we don't have the fate of the wizarding world resting on our shoulders, we do have our own keys to look for, like finding the key to a successful marriage. Pretty much everyone echoes the same thing: COMMUNICATION IS KEY. If you want a good marriage, then just learn to communicate effectively! Simple as that.

But, let me tell you something: you're chasing after the wrong key.

Don't get me wrong, a lot of issues could be sorted out if people just followed [suggested communication techniques](#) during tough conversations like the following:

- "I feel" statements and soft start-ups
- Focusing on the current issue
- Avoiding "always/never" statements
- Avoiding eye-rolling, criticizing character, and name-calling
- Avoiding tough topics when [flooded](#), hungry, angry, lonely, or tired

However, no matter how perfectly you stick to these healthy strategies, sometimes your spouse just doesn't respond in kind. In these instances, the issue may not be communication, but *disconnect*.

In his bestseller on marital relationships, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, marriage researcher John Gottman says, "fondness and admiration are two of the most crucial elements in a rewarding and long-lasting romance"—not merely communication (Gottman & Silver, 1999, p. 69).

Again, don't misunderstand—communication is important, and Gottman acknowledges as much. But, before you can resolve marital conflict through communication techniques, it's important to lay down a foundation of love.

How do you build love, especially when you sometimes don't even like your spouse, let alone love them? Take a time out from the constant negotiation and try connecting through love maps, attunement, dating, and even sex.

Love Maps and Dreams: Reintroduce Yourself

In his years of marital research, Gottman noticed that many couples get so wrapped up in life's routines that they lose track of the details of each other's lives. He suggests bringing each other up to speed by sitting down and asking each other questions: "What is your favorite TV show right now?" "Who is your best friend at work?" "What is something I do that makes you feel loved?" Gottman suggests making a game out of it, like playing 20 Questions.

If love maps help you understand how your spouse sees and experiences the world, then the next step is discussing the dreams that lie like buried treasure on your love maps. According to Gottman, 69% of all problems in a relationship are "unsolvable," meaning

they're manifestations of deeply held beliefs—flags on the map that alert you on where to dig for buried dreams.

For example, fighting about whose set of parents to visit over the holidays may have deeper dreams hidden. Perhaps you fear that visiting your in-laws too often will prevent your children from getting to know both sets of grandparents equally. In contrast, your spouse may feel like you haven't fully integrated into their family of origin and have a wall up—a "your family" versus "my family" mentality instead of embracing that you are all one family now.

These differences in belief—the boundary of wanting to split time equally versus the belief that you're all one family now—aren't bad. They're just different. Discover these deeper dreams and seek to connect by understanding what your spouse values without judging them.

Attune and Turn Towards: Making Bids for Connection

Emotional attunement, or turning towards each other, is another way to connect. When you focus on your partner, you start to notice cues that suggest your partner wants you to pay attention to them. Whether it's a sigh that tells you they might want help with the dishes or reaching for your hand during a movie, take those intimate moments to turn towards them and accept their bids for connection.

If you're fighting because your partner always seems to miss your bids for emotional connection, try two things: Notice your spouse's bids first and respond positively to them. Your love and attention may influence them to respond in kind over time. You can also try being more direct in your bids for attention. If your spouse missed your sidelong glance, speak up. Try saying "*Honey, my shoulders are a bit tight. Could you please massage them for five minutes?*"

Go on Dates: Remember your Friendship and Nurture Fondness

In his book *Beyond the Myth of Marital Happiness*, professor Dr. Blaine Fowers extols friendship as one of the key virtues needed to have a successful marriage. [Dating](#) is a great way to restore friendship because it reminds you of your initial attraction and courtship. If you can still fondly recall the start of your romance, then you have a foundation of love to work with!

If you're struggling to find something to talk about other than the kids, work, or your marital problems, then discuss the activity itself. Ask your spouse for help in painting

a more realistic tree. Comment on the ducks you're feeding by the pond. Point out Orion's Belt as you're stargazing. Gradually, you can move on to other topics, like reminiscing over how you first met, laughing over inside jokes, or sharing things you appreciate about each other.

If money is the issue you constantly argue about, then find a free or cheap date activity. If a lack of time for each other is the argument trigger, start by finding just ONE hour or ONE evening that you both have free. Establish a pattern of more regular dates from there.

If you can never agree on an activity, create a jar where you keep slips of paper with date ideas scribbled on them. Take turns drawing an idea from the jar. When the jar picks for you, neither spouse can be mad or feel like they're always "giving in" to the other, thus helping you avoid more arguing.

Have Sex: Keep the Romance Alive

[Having sex](#) releases oxytocin, the bonding hormone, which is a great way to connect with your spouse. While marital conflict outside of the bedroom can cause dwindling affection within, the reverse can also be true. Having a healthy sex life can improve communication and conflict resolution as you both feel loved and desired by each other.

If you've been practicing attuning to each other like Gottman suggests, your sex life should improve as you notice your spouse's bids for attention. Additionally, knowing each other through love maps and dreams can also create an emotional safe space for physical intimacy.

Sometimes sex itself is a source of marital conflict as couples struggle to get on the same page about frequency, technique, initiation, or refusal. If you're stuck on [low sexual frequency](#) or knowing how to initiate, try simply making out with each other. Not focusing on and stressing about whether you'll have sex can create a more relaxed environment where you end up moving into sex anyway.

Finally, while communication isn't likely to fix all of your problems in the bedroom, don't be afraid to [talk to each other about your sexual relationship](#). While this may feel uncomfortable at the start (especially if you are out of practice), it can really help you and your spouse or partner get on the same page and ensure that each of your needs are being met.

Conclusion

Once the foundation of mutual love and trust is re-established, you can revisit your conflicts and use good communication techniques to open a dialogue instead of an argument. Communication IS important, but it goes nowhere if one or both of you are feeling so disconnected that you may not even want to fix the problems you're fighting about. Connection is the key that lets communication in through the door to save your marriage.