



HEALTHQUEST

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FOCUSING ON MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES AND CONCERNS.

TALKING: ONE WAY TO ENHANCE A RELATIONSHIP

Laurel and David have been married six months. Laurel is still caught up in the euphoria of romantic love. In fact, she tends to have unreal expectations of marriage. Because they have such a close relationship, Laurel thinks David should know all the little things that are important to her, such as her favourite songs, and chocolates on Valentine's Day. Laurel fails to realize that David is not a mind reader.

Brenda and Frank have been together twenty years. Brenda often says to her closest friend, "Frank and I don't seem to be on the same wavelength anymore." And if you ask Frank about their relationship, he'd probably admit, "We just can't communicate." Their breakdown in communication has not occurred overnight; it has been a subtle drifting apart over the years. The fact that Brenda and Frank have been so busy with the responsibilities of their careers and child rearing, the relationship has not received the attention it deserves.

Research shows that couples who know how to talk out their concerns are less likely to have a breakdown in their relationship.

EAP counsellor Graham Summerhayes points out, however, that it is important to realize that there are different levels of communication. For instance, a couple may be able to communicate their day-to-day concerns such as paying the bills or looking after the children. But they are more likely to have a successful relationship if they can also communicate on a deeper level. This can simply mean "Letting each other know

they are appreciated, loved, and valued," says Summerhayes.

BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION

A root of the communication problems of many couples is "...the unspoken expectations they have of each other." says EAP counsellor Terry Cheng. David, in the scenario above, does not know of Laurel's expectations, because they have not been discussed.

Similarly, Brenda and Frank have never discussed the fact that their expectations have changed over the twenty years they've lived together. It is important for them to talk about these changes and redefine their relationship to meet present expectations.

Many people do not feel safe enough to express pain and difficulties to their partners. Others avoid discussing important issues, because they fear that they may lose a measure of control. And still others feel threatened by differences of opinion.

Cheng points out that another significant barrier to communication is the fact that men and women typically express themselves differently. She explains, "Some men have a difficult time expressing their feelings. Our society have taught and expected men to be more rational and logical in their conversations, while women tend to be more expressive."

WAYS TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATION

What can couples do to improve communication with each other? Here are suggestions that you might consider from EAP counsellors Graham

Summerhayes and Terry Cheng:

▲ **LEARN TO ACCEPT YOUR DIFFERENCES.**

This involves the realization that often what is gained from talking it out is an understanding of your partner, instead of agreement on an issue. If a person feels threatened by differences of opinion, he or she will usually close the book on a subject without discussion. When this happens, part of a person is not accessible, alienation will result. Then, the couple feels that they do not know each other or perhaps, even understand each other.

▲ **TALK IT OUT FROM A POSITION OF EQUALITY.**

This simply means that one of the partners should not be in command and assume the attitude of "I know what is best - you do what I say."

▲ **DON'T START BLAMING.**

Blaming is an aggressive style of communication and will close the avenues of communication, instead of opening them.

▲ **RESPECT YOUR PARTNER'S NEED FOR PRIVACY.**

Sometimes people hold back a little when communication. In other words, they are not as sharing as their partner. It is important to realize that what is at issue here is not honesty. Usually, it is simply a need for privacy. People have different comfort levels for intimacy - this is normal. For example, it is important for people to understand that it is normal to have different levels of comfort with intimacy.

▲ **BE AN ATTENTIVE LISTENER.**

Many of us do not listen to our partner's problems because we feel we have to accept the burden of solving them. We must realize that what most people want, is to be heard and understood, so that their pain and hurt can be acknowledged.

▲ **RECOGNIZE THE FACT THAT YOU CANNOT BE ALL THINGS TO ALL PEOPLE.**

In other words, there may be times when you or your partner may have to turn to friends for the support you need. For instance, a woman who is grieving over her mother's death may find that her husband does not want to talk about her loss, because it brings back painful memories of his mother's death.

▲ **GIVE POSITIVE VERBAL STROKES TO EACH OTHER.**

Instead of pointing out your spouse's faults, try

complimenting him or her. Everyone has strengths and everyone likes to be validated.

▲ **WATCH YOUR NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION.**

For example, a person who reads the newspaper or watches TV while his partner is trying to talk is conveying the message: "I'm not interested in what you are saying at this moment. My needs are different at this time."

After you try out a few of the above suggestions, you could find the results encouraging enough to want to go on to learn more! If you are still asking, "What else can I do for us?" or "How can things get even better?" we can show the methods you can apply, in order to improve the each of your communication skills. Contact any one of our counsellors if you would like to take these steps, that could lead to a more harmonious, and loving relationship.

If you have any questions about this topic, or if you wish to discuss a personal situation you may be experiencing, we invite you to contact your EAP counsellors to arrange a telephone or in-person counselling session.

All contact between you and your counsellor is completely confidential.

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