

The Number One Reason Couples End Up In Therapy

More than any other reason, people come to me for help because of this one problem. If you guessed “Communication,” you’re right!

It’s the most common issue that drives a wedge between people. Not feeling heard and understood turns an otherwise healthy relationship in to a barren wasteland of loneliness for one or both partners.

The problem is rooted in the first six to nine months of the relationship, when you bring your best face to the relationship. You know what I mean. You ask questions, and make sure you’re familiar with all your partner’s preferences. You learn their history in all aspects of their life, personal, educational, professional, spiritual; and you make it a point to understand what makes them tick. It’s delicious discovery session of the most interesting person in the world to you at that time. (link to Trading Fantasy)

Over-communicating?

We ask about everything because we *need* that information to connect with the other person. It’s not possible to form a close, tight bond with another until we’ve explored all the nooks and crannies of their personality, their behavior, and their hopes and dreams. Hopefully this process is mutual.

Before long, though, that exploration ends. It’s like following an out-of-date GPS map. You only travel the roads that were there when you first started exploring this wonderful person in your life. Psychologist John Gottman’s “Love Map” coursework advises couples to keep their maps updated for long-term happiness. <http://www.gottman.com/about-gottman-method-couples-therapy/>

Unfortunately, we often don’t even know that any new pathways exist. And why is that?

“We’re So Close, We Don’t Have To Talk”

Think about it. At the beginning of the relationship, you are spending focused time exclusively establishing the bond. You go to nice restaurants, you plan outings you both enjoy, you create space for exploration and fun.

Somewhere along the way, you just stop asking and learning. It’s not an abrupt change. It just...happens. How ironic that the communication breakdown actually reflects a *closer* bond between two people! What do I mean by that?

As you build one shared life around each other, you naturally incorporate the day-to-day activities of committed couples. That might include sharing responsibilities around one home, raising children together, attending appointments, and splitting up obligations to the extended families. Your life together includes less time focusing on each other, and more time looking out upon a shared journey. Not a bad thing at all!

The problem comes when we stop asking questions.

Maybe it’s because we’re crunched for time, maybe it’s because we assume we already know the answers. Maybe you’ve agreed on something in the past and you are still following a code of

conduct between you that doesn't serve either of you anymore. But you never know it, because that door of communication is closed.

The outcome is that our communication starts to freeze. Unfortunately, this is the time when either one or both partners starts feeling undervalued and misunderstood.

I saw how easily miscommunication happens via an innocent mistake over cookies.

When my husband and I started dating, I saw he liked cookies. Whenever the opportunity arose, he'd have one. They were usually chocolate chip; imagine that, the most popular cookie in North America! So of course I assumed he liked chocolate chip cookies and I started baking them regularly. One day, years later, he surprised me by telling me he didn't really like chocolate chip. He was just eating mine to be nice. What he really liked was sugar cookies! Who knew?

I had just assumed he liked chocolate chip, because that's what he ate in public. (Who doesn't? They're common.) But he never said anything, and I never asked. Innocently enough, we both fell into a pattern. Thankfully, he broke it by pointing out his truth. I made the simple switch and we're both happy.

Imagine the consequences of miscommunication over more serious subjects!

So how do you begin communicating when you've let a lot of water run by under the bridge?

It's never too late.

Just start asking! Yes, even about the little things. Now, I don't mean you have to start a huge discussion about every minor detail, but you could show that you don't take things for granted by checking in with your partner about options every now and again. Warning: If you ask and reevaluate things too often, your life will become intolerably inefficient, and you'll drive your partner crazy.

Still, make sure you share what is important to you, and why it's important to you. For example, if it's a dream of yours to take your family to the summer place you went as a kid, mention it before your partner gets too deep into planning this summer's vacation.

Even a dirty dish left in the sink can be interpreted as a sign of disrespect or just a simple mistake. Don't let the steam build up over details you never talk about. If it's important to you, bring it out in the open without anger or accusation. It's likely, your partner didn't even know how you felt.

Second, set aside time to connect, even if it's for a short while. You could say, "Honey, I really need to discuss switching Johnny's soccer carpool schedule to accommodate my new project at work. Do you have time now, or can we talk at dinner?" Give a short explanation of the topic and some choices for the time and place where the conversation will occur. Easy enough, right?

So what's stopping you?

The Vulnerability Issue

Many times, a partner may feel really uncomfortable asking or telling their partner of (sometimes) years, some new piece of information. Correcting or sharing pieces of the puzzle that are important, may feel like your exposing your underbelly. It just feels vulnerable to talk about things you never discussed before.

For example, you might feel bad that you don't fit the other's image of you. In some weird way, you may even feel like you're letting your partner down. On the other side, your partner could feel some guilt over not noticing or caring about something that's important to you. Either way, it can be awkward. But don't avoid it just because you're uncomfortable with conflict.

The Conversation Healthy Couples Have

Many couples get together one or two times each year to share goals. They put a date on their calendar to communicate hopes and dreams for the coming year. Both people share what they hope to accomplish, individually and as a couple. It doesn't have to be a big deal. A conversation about the future can take place casually (in the car, or over dinner, for example) just as easily as on a weekend get-away.

Whether this conversation is planned or impromptu, shifting from the hustle of every day life, and setting the mutual intention to "get real" about bigger issues, brings intimacy and strength into a relationship. It's surprising how long lasting the benefits of this one conversation can be. Goal setting creates genuine connection that honors both partners.

Squeezing in Time to Talk

Take some time to shift your focus from the daily tasks and routines that dominate life. Go ahead and bring things up with your partner – the sooner the better. And when your partner tries to communicate with you, but you aren't in a state where you're open to have a conversation, don't shut that person out. Chances are, they are not nagging or complaining, but just need some validation that they are heard. Acknowledge that you want to talk about it, and then schedule a time to be fully present with the other person.

Conversations matter. Nurture an environment that's conducive to communication before the silence looms so large you have to see a counselor to help you break the ice.