

Breaking Destructive Communication Cycles in Marriage

Before trying to uncover motivations, it's beneficial to examine how couples respond to each other when they feel stuck in their communication. Typically, people move in one of two directions at the point of difficulty – avoiding communication or forcing communication. The following questions can help determine *who is doing what and how they feel* during the struggle:

1. What do you do when you don't feel heard? For example some people argue, while others choose to be silent.
2. How do you feel when problems are left unresolved? Is it unbearable or are you more relieved to just not be arguing anymore?
3. Which are you more afraid of, having chronic problems that compromise your long-term happiness, or any conflict in general that disrupts your daily peace?

As you get a better sense of what a couple experiences during difficult conversations, you will also start to hear how they interpret why these conflicts arise. Oftentimes, you'll hear couples say things like, "we're not even having the same conversation", or "we're getting stuck in the details, and I'm sick of debating", or even "he's just mean" and "she's just manipulative." While these things may be happening, they're not the cause, but merely descriptions of what their interactions look and feel like. The following questions can help determine *what's really motivating each person* during the struggle:

1. What will being understood provide for you? Why is that so important? What will happen if you can't attain it? What do you fear will happen if an argument can't be resolved?
2. What makes arguing painful for you? Do you feel out of control? Do you feel hated? Do you feel hopeless?
3. What do you believe is your responsibility when you can't get on the same page with your spouse? Do you need to keep the peace so everyone is happy? Or, do you need to get them to see the problem at any cost to avoid problems in the future?

As you get deeper into the feelings and goals behind a person's responses, both controlling pain and gaining satisfaction in marriage will come into view. In addition, because of sin, people believe they are able to attain both of these goals by their own efforts apart from God. To anchor this reality in the truth of Scripture, James 4:2 says "You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you

do not ask.” In our pride and self-centeredness we think we know best and we ignore our need for God’s grace. Thankfully, “[God] gives more grace. Therefore it says, ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble’”(Jas. 4:6). This clarifies that when couples humble themselves before God and receive his grace, they will access the ability to listen and speak well to each other because they’re now listening and speaking to God. To break through destructive communication cycles, couples need the Lord’s gracious help. You can point them to him by inviting and challenging them in the following ways:

Invite couples to entrust their fear of pain and desire for satisfaction to Jesus.

The Bible tells us explicitly that Jesus knows our suffering and provides comfort, as well as desires to give us a kingdom that truly satisfies our deepest needs. To help couples grapple with and rest in these promises, ask them to meditate on relevant scripture verses and go deeper with them by asking questions like the following:

1. What do you hear God speaking to you through these passages?
2. Do they bring comfort and hope? If not, why not?
3. What’s missing or seems irrelevant to the problem you're facing?
4. What keeps you from telling God about your fear or disappointment?

Once you get a better idea of how couples struggle to listen and speak to God, encourage them to ask God boldly for help to communicate faithfully with their spouse.

Challenge them to put their faith into action by moving toward their spouse and refusing to avoid or force communication.

Couples need to seek the Lord for supernatural strength to resist their natural inclination and instead take risks to love. Try asking questions like the following to encourage couples to do this:

1. Will you accept pain as an unavoidable part of a genuine relationship by staying engaged even when it hurts?* Are you unsure that the Holy Spirit will comfort you and help you to share that comfort when communicating with your spouse becomes painful (2Cor. 1:3-5)? How could the fact that Jesus suffered and stayed engaged with your sin to rescue you from the wrath of the Father (Eph. 2:1-7) affect how you respond to your spouse?"
2. Will you accept that satisfaction in a relationship will never be gained with an unwilling participant? Are you unsure that the Holy Spirit will satisfy you if you humbly put the desires of your spouse over your own even when feeling disappointed and unfulfilled (Phil. 2:3)? Jesus “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped” (Phil. 2:6) but instead “humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a

cross” (Phil. 2:8) in order to invite you to know him, worship him, and be satisfied by his love forever. How does knowing this impact you?

Jesus never avoids and he never forces. He is as gentle as a lamb and as bold as a lion. Only he can do both perfectly, but by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, couples can grow and change to both invite and challenge their spouse in marriage. As couples understand that they can entrust themselves and their spouse to God fully for protection and provision, they can rest in all they already have in Christ, and fervently seek to know him more and become more like him together as one.

*This question is asked in the context of couples' communication tendency to avoid or force and is never used in the context of causing harm or abuse to another person.