

Family Answer Book Marriage

How to Talk So He'll Listen and Listen So He'll Talk

By Paul W. Schenk, Psy.D.

When you have a conversation with your husband, do you often feel as if he doesn't hear a word you say? Maybe that's because when you talk he's *looking*, not *listening*. Sounds strange, right? Emily thought so too the first few times she and her husband, Harry, came to see me for counseling. Their problem? When Emily spoke, Harry tuned out. At least that's how Emily saw it. As proof, she offered this anecdote: A few days before our initial session, she had asked Harry to get a can of spray paint from the basement. He went downstairs and returned a few minutes later carrying a tape measure. As he walked past her toward another part of the house, Emily asked, "Where are you going?" Harry told her he was going to fix something in another room. She looked at him in angry disbelief. Once again he'd forgotten to fulfill one of her requests. This type of behavior had been occurring for a while, and Emily was clearly frustrated.

Harry and Emily's problem isn't unusual. In fact, it's fairly common. If you're like most people, you probably can recall times when your spouse forgot to relay a phone message or pick up a carton of milk on his way home as you'd asked. An occasional goof can be excused or overlooked, but if these slip-ups seem frequent, you might begin to feel ignored, unimportant, unloved and resentful. Part of you wonders if he's doing this on purpose. Odds are he's not. It's

simply a case of miscommunication.

Too often couples who don't communicate well never stop to consider what's truly causing the breakdown. When things don't go as planned, it's normal to make assumptions about what went wrong. But that can get you into trouble! Just because an assumption is logical doesn't mean it's true. Jim and Sandra, another couple I counseled, fell into this trap. While away on business, Jim promised to call home from his hotel at about 9:00 P.M., after a dinner meeting. When he hadn't called by 10:00, Sandra figured he'd forgotten. To her, that meant she wasn't important to him. Angry and hurt, she called Jim on his cell phone and let him have it. Turns out, the restaurant hadn't been able to seat Jim's group until well after their reser-

vation time, and he was still there. He had been so focused on the meeting that he hadn't noticed the time. Jim apologized, but the damage had already been done. All because Sandra made a faulty assumption.

What's Your Language Style?

Each of us has his own way of communicating. Most people use a mix of three language styles: visual, auditory and kinesthetic. However, some of us rely heavily on just one of the three. Visual people file away information in their brain according to mental pic-

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If you want your husband to really tune in when you talk, learn to speak his language.

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“Couples communicate better when they're ‘bilingual.’”



“Using different words may be all it takes to steer clear of petty arguments.”

Your spouse forgot to call? Don't play the blame game. It may just be a communication mix-up.

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tures. They have an easier time remembering what they see than what they hear. To get their point across, they'll use phrases such as, "Do you *see* what I mean?" Auditory thinkers, on the other hand, store and retrieve information with word cues. They have no problem expressing themselves verbally and are attentive listeners. Then

tors have no clue about the other's style. Take Harry and Emily. As I spent more time with them, I learned that Harry had a good visual memory but a lousy auditory one. He could recall detailed scenes from a movie, but not the name of the film. He could

there are the touchy-feely, kinesthetic folks who tend to communicate more through feelings, intuition and movement. They use lots of gestures during conversations and often talk about trying to get a "feel" for something.

Problems crop up when two different types of communica-

give good directions using landmarks, but not street names. Emily, however, was a strong auditory thinker. I explained to her that this difference between them was the cause of their clashes. His strong style was her weak one, and vice versa. When they talked, it was as if each were speaking a foreign language.

When Emily asked Harry to retrieve the spray paint that day, he had every intention of doing it. But he'd become distracted when he saw the tape measure, which reminded him of a repair job he'd been meaning to do. If Emily had known that he was more of a picture person than a word person, she could have phrased her request a better way: "Please *look* for that can of red spray paint in the basement. When you *find* it, bring it upstairs." Just think, a different word here and an

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alternative phrase there may be all it takes to steer clear of many misunderstandings and hurt feelings.

Becoming "Bilingual"

The trick is figuring out your individual styles and becoming fluent in your spouse's language. An easy way to accomplish this is to tape record one of your mealtime talks. Later, make three columns on a piece of paper labeled VISUAL, AUDITORY and KINESTHETIC. Have your spouse do the same. Then play the tape. As you listen to your part of the conversation, jot down any words you hear that indicate one of the three styles. (See "The Language of Love," right.) If you have a lot more words in one column than the others, it suggests that you naturally use this style of thinking about the world and may find it harder to understand people who use a different style.

If you and your husband have been speaking in different tongues, there is a solution that can help you improve communication. Think about the three-step process your brain goes through when you study a foreign language. First, you think of what you

want to say in English. Then you do a mental translation. Finally, you say the resulting sentence. Fortunately, making the translation from, say, visual speak to auditory speak is much easier than mastering French or Italian. Here, you need only to learn certain words and phrases. For example, "I

see what you mean" becomes "I *hear* what you're saying." Using new words to express yourself can seem awkward at first, and it may take practice before these internal translations happen naturally. But once you see how much closer your marriage is, you'll be glad you became "bilingual." **FC**

The Language of Love

To have better communication with your spouse, first you have to recognize your particular styles. The key is to pay attention to the words and phrases both of you use every day. Check out the list below for words that signal the kind of communicators you and your husband really are.

Visual

If you have a natural preference for thinking about the world in a visual manner, it will be reflected in the words you use when you speak. For example:

- Please *look* at me when I talk to you.
- I can't get a *clear picture* of what you mean.
- *Show* me.
- Do you *see* what I am saying?

Auditory

Conversely, if you are the type of person who tends to rely more on what you hear, the words you normally use when you talk will reflect this preference.

- How does that *sound* to you?
- Are you *listening* to what I'm saying?
- I don't like the *tone* of your *voice*.
- *Tell* me more.

Kinesthetic

Some people think about experiences with a focus on feelings, touch and movement. Here are some examples of how their language shows up in conversations.

- I don't have a good *feeling* about that.
- I can't get a *grip* on what you're saying.
- *Walk* me through that.
- What does your *gut* tell you?