

Do you communicate effectively with your spouse? Understanding these three types of conversations can help you fortify your relationship.

# SPEAK, LISTEN, & LOVE



By Mark Ogletree

**A**s a marriage and family counselor, I often visit with couples to help them repair or strengthen their relationships. In one instance, I met with a woman who had been married to her husband for only a few months, and she told me that they were having major communication problems. After talking to her husband, I noticed that he was actually a skilled communicator—just not with his wife.

I have learned over the years that healthy communication affects both the heart and the mind. If we can communicate better—meaning more clearly and concisely—then we can forge deeper emotional connections, resolve conflicts, and strengthen the bonds in our marital relationship. Following are some ways that each of us can improve the quality of communication in our relationships.

### **Engage in Meaningful Conversations**

Dr. Douglas E. Brinley, a Church member who is a marriage and parenting specialist, wrote about three levels of communication in relationships: superficial, personal, and validating. In order for a deep bond to form between a husband and a wife, there needs to be a balance between all three.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Superficial**

Communication that falls in the superficial level is informative and

nonconfrontational, and it involves a low level of risk. Every married couple spends some time at this level as they coordinate schedules, discuss the weather, or comment on gas prices. Although this type of communication is necessary, individuals cannot become deeply connected and bound together if the majority of communication remains here.

Superficial communication can supplant deep and meaningful conversations. If couples tiptoe around deeper issues that should be discussed, they will never learn to resolve conflict or connect with each other. Couples bond as they discuss things that matter—not things that don't. I have seen many couples in my practice who have tried to preserve their relationship by keeping their communication at the superficial level. By avoiding the "weightier matters" (Matthew 23:23), they have actually destroyed their marriage.

#### **Personal**

During personal communication, you share your interests, dreams, passions, beliefs, and goals. You also are open to sharing your fears and inadequacies. Communicating all these issues in a Christlike manner is one way couples connect and strengthen the relationship. Elder Marvin J. Ashton (1915–1994) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, taught, "Communication is more than a sharing of words. It is the *wise* sharing of

emotions, feelings, and concerns. It is the sharing of oneself totally."<sup>2</sup>

You probably engaged in this level of communication as you were dating. This is the level where men and women fall in love with each other. As you continue to share what is important, you and your spouse will feel mutually appreciated, wanted, valued, and needed. As you learn to validate what your spouse shares—showing that what he or she says is important to you—you will progress to the next level of communication.

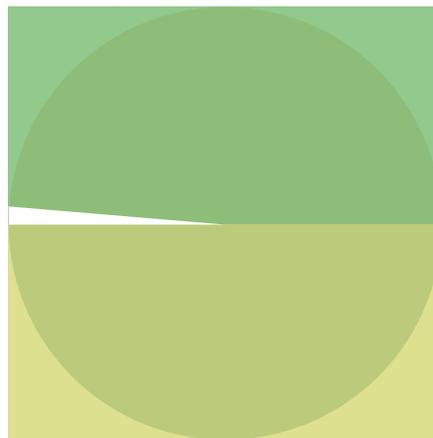
#### **Validating**

Husband and wife have a solemn responsibility to nurture and provide comfort to each other.<sup>3</sup> Marriage experts Sandra Blakeslee and Judith S. Wallerstein have written: "A marriage that does not provide nurturance and restorative comfort can die of emotional malnutrition."<sup>4</sup> Communication that validates is edifying, healing, nurturing, and complimentary. In this level of communication, we express praise and compliments to those we care about. Almost every relationship will thrive if there is a healthy dose of validation.

Validation begins with paying attention to what your spouse is saying and includes expressing ideas and thoughts that are edifying and healing. Look for the good in your spouse and tell him or her. If your spouse had a difficult day, you could validate

When I counsel with couples, I draw a circle on a white-board and ask them to make a pie chart based on how much time they spend in superficial, personal, and validating communication. Most couples whose marriages are in trouble spend close to 50 percent of their time in superficial communication and less than 5 percent of their time validating. A healthy balance is to have 25 percent of communication at the superficial level, 50 percent at the personal level, and 25 percent at the validating level.

**Unhealthy Communication**



**Healthy Communication**



him or her by listening and offering comfort. You could say, “I’m sorry you had a hard day; tell me more about what happened” or “What can I do to make the rest of your day better?” Perhaps you could say, “I can see why your day was so difficult, but I have confidence in your intelligence and work ethic. I know you will be able to solve that problem.” Statements such as these demonstrate that you have sympathy for your spouse’s distress and care about him or her. By verbally acknowledging your spouse’s emotions, fears, thoughts, or concerns, you are communicating validation and conveying appreciation, love, and respect.<sup>5</sup>

**Practice the Art of Listening**

The greatest communication skill is being an effective listener. One of the most charitable demonstrations in marriage is to truly focus on your spouse and listen to him or her—really listen—regardless of what we want to say. Being heard is akin to being loved; in fact, being listened to is one of the highest forms of respect and validation. By listening, we are saying to our spouse, “You matter to me, I love you, and what you have to say is important.”

In marriage the goal of listening should not be to acquire information but to gain understanding. To truly understand your spouse is to see an issue the way your spouse

sees it. Elder Russell M. Nelson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles taught that husbands and wives should “learn to listen, and listen to learn from one another.”<sup>6</sup> Effective listening helps us to set aside our own will and pride and connect soul-to-soul with our spouse.

Elder Joe J. Christensen, formerly of the Seventy, counseled: “Make the time to listen to your spouse; even schedule it regularly. Visit with each other and assess how you are doing as a marriage partner.”<sup>7</sup> Setting aside time to talk where there are no distractions will help to solve problems. Make sure to be positive, maintain a Christlike demeanor, and avoid interrupting your spouse when he or she is talking to you.

### Nonverbal Cues

Another aspect of communication that is sometimes overlooked is nonverbal communication. What you say and how you say it is important, but so is your body language. Do you look your spouse in the eye when she talks

to you? Do you roll your eyes when he tells you that he had a hard time at work? Does your facial expression show interest and sincerity, or does it display boredom and irritation? Do you express your love with physical affection? Sometimes a hug or a smile can convey your love more than words can. Regardless of the type of conversation—whether it’s about the latest news article or your life ambitions—positive body language can reinforce validation and strengthen your relationship.

### Emulate the Savior’s Communication

As you engage in meaningful conversations with your spouse, guide your actions and words by following the example of Jesus Christ. His communication with others radiated love, care, and concern. He spoke gently and loved purely. He showed compassion and granted forgiveness. He listened attentively and demonstrated charity. Likewise, if we want our relationships to improve, we must

learn to speak in positive ways that edify and build those around us.

When I meet with couples, I often ask them to analyze their communication patterns and improve upon them. As they have applied the principles of meaningful conversations in their relationships, I have seen changes toward a healthier marriage. Understanding your spouse, creating an environment that fosters open communication and expression, and demonstrating fondness and admiration are keys to a stronger relationship and a happier marriage. ■

*The author lives in Utah, USA.*

### NOTES

1. See Douglas E. Brinley and Mark D. Ogletree, *First Comes Love* (2002), 123–26.
2. Marvin J. Ashton, “Family Communications,” *Ensign*, May 1976, 52.
3. See “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2010, 129.
4. Sandra Blakeslee and Judith S. Wallerstein, *The Good Marriage: How and Why Love Lasts* (1995), 240.
5. See Douglas E. Brinley, *Strengthening Your Marriage and Family* (1994), 153–54.
6. Russell M. Nelson, “Listen to Learn,” *Ensign*, May 1991, 23.
7. Joe J. Christensen, “Marriage and the Great Plan of Happiness,” *Ensign*, May 1995, 64.
8. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph F. Smith* (1998), 23–24.

## IMPROVING YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH HEAVENLY FATHER

As you incorporate these communication principles in your marriage, you may also want to apply them to your relationship with Heavenly Father. Many people communicate with God at a superficial level. If you pray out of duty or use habitual phrases, you may find it difficult to connect with Heavenly Father and He will feel distant. Communicating with God is different from just talking to Him. President Joseph F. Smith (1838–1918) taught: “We do not have to cry unto him with many words. We do not have to weary him with long prayers. . . . Let the prayer come from the heart, let it not be in words that are worn into ruts in the beaten tracks of common

use, without thought or feeling in the use of those words.”<sup>8</sup> Do you share with your Heavenly Father your innermost beliefs, feelings, and desires? Have you shared with Him the secret ambitions that lie in your heart? Can you pour out your heart to Him? And do you practice listening for His responses?

Sincere words spoken in humble prayer will allow you to develop a deeper connection with Heavenly Father. Listening for and implementing His counsel will enrich and strengthen the relationship. As you express gratitude for specific blessings, live the gospel, and become more like Jesus Christ, you will demonstrate your love for Heavenly Father.