

Reflective Article

Can't we just talk to each other?

Supporting Couples to Improve their Communication

By Brendan O'Shaughnessy



Introduction

Pat: I don't know many times I have tried to explain to Chris how I feel. When I can't get through, I find myself getting angry and, to my shame, say things that I know will hurt just to get a reaction.

Chris: I try to listen but feel blamed from the off. When I try to defend myself, Pat gets angry and I just shut down. Pat will say hurtful to me and even though I know I will regret it later, shout and hurt back.

Pat & Chris: We just don't seem to be able to get out of this pattern and it is getting worse. If we can't improve our communication, this relationship will not last.

As a therapist working with couples for 28 years, a constant theme in the work is that of communication. Often, this is explicitly named as the presenting issue as in the example above but can also become the focus of therapy after an immediate crisis is dealt with. So, how do we help couples with the challenge of improving how they communicate? In this article, I will propose that helping them to communicate with each other, might be an alternative to talking at them or with them.

Prevalence of communications issues

At a time when we have more information and means of interacting with each other, the prevalence of communication issues seems to be increasing. For example, in 2013, lifestyle website *YourTango.com* polled 100 mental health professionals and found that communication problems were cited as the most common factor that leads to divorce (65 percent), followed by couples' inability to resolve conflict (43 percent). So, when couples come to us for support with communication, what can we do to help?

For couples therapists, traditional approaches include activities such as; normalising, education and modelling.

Normalising



Every couple is unique, but it is nice for them to hear that other couples are struggling with the same issues. At some point in the initial session, it is important to let the couple know

that while their issues are unique to them, many other (if not all) couples, share various communication difficulties.

Education



Having normalised the couples experience, another step may be to educate them on the various styles of communications and the impact these have on their relationship. John Gottman, Professor Emeritus from the University of Washington, a researcher focussing on couples' behaviours for over 40 years, has suggested that there are four types of communication problems that can lead to divorce:

- Criticism of partners personality
- Contempt
- Defensiveness
- Stonewalling (the refusal to communicate at all)

More information on these communication problems can be found here; http://www.acouplesplace.com/Gottmans_Four_Horsemen_are_Divorce_Predictors.html. Explaining these concepts and raising awareness of the complexities of communications can become a steppingstone to new opportunities.

Modelling



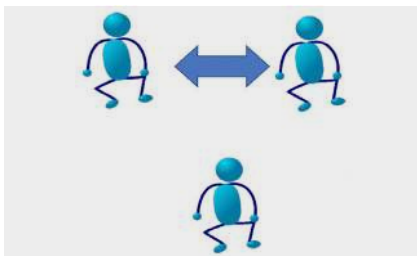
Another possible approach is to model a more respectful style of communication. Doing so with one of the couple and having the other observe how this results in more positive engagement, can raise awareness and offer alternatives to the way they have been communicating with each other.

Issues with the above approaches

Reflecting on the images accompanying the approaches above, we notice however that;

- The therapist is working hard (arrow direction in the normalising condition).
- The couple are being talked to and at (arrow direction in the educating condition).
- The couple are not communicating with each other (the absence of an arrow between the members of the couple).

An additional approach



Some time ago, I was lucky enough to receive training from renowned Gestalt therapist and author Joseph Zinkler. In that programme, Zinkler introduced the concept of helping families and couples to talk to each other and means by which therapists can actively encourage and support them this activity (see diagram, left). As a result, and over many years, couples themselves have helped me to develop a way of doing this that works for them and me. The following are the main steps involved.

1. Introducing the concept: When a couple identifies that their

interpersonal communication is a relationship difficulty, I tentatively introduce a tool for them to improve this aspect of their relationship, one which they can adopt and adapt as a basic model to suit themselves. If interested, I will explain that there is a structure to improving communication which will feel awkward in the beginning and encourage them to *fake it 'til they make it*, until they learn how to use the structure on their own. Often, initial awkwardness stems from their feeling self-conscious when using this method in front of me, but that is OK and will wear off in time.

2. Structure and seating: The structure involves setting up a system of deliberately communicating with each other and to do so in a structured way. The couple is invited to move their chairs around to face each other. This often involves a lot of giggling to hide the nervousness of having to look at each other.

3. Body language and eye contact: I sometimes tell the story of the client who had their legs thrown out in front of them, their arm over the back of the chair, staring up at the ceiling and saying "I am listening" before noting the importance of looking at each other in the eye. Raising awareness that our communication is not just verbal and for each of them to take responsibility for their non-verbal messages.

4. Listening and talking: The idea is for one person to talk and for the other to listen. The person who is talking is invited to help the other person understand what is going on

for them, without blaming. This is highlighted as one of the more difficult parts of this exercise. It is explained that conversations that start with “I feel bad because you ...” are going to lose the listener in defensiveness after the first sentence. For the person who is listening, their challenge is to be curious about what the other person is telling them about themselves while trying to avoid thinking about answers, solutions, becoming defensive, etc.

5. Feedback: The person talking, has 5 to 10 minutes to help the listener to understand them better. Then the listener is invited to tell them what they heard. No interpretations, no analysis, just what they heard. This can vary between being an affirming experience to hear your partner “get you” to highlighting just how difficult their communication habits have become. Mainly (often due to defensiveness), the listener will struggle to remember what was said or miss the important emotional content.

6. Role of the therapist: I explain in the beginning that my role is to support, observe and keep the structure in the beginning. As they become more accustomed to communicating in this new way, I may bring to their awareness the habits they exhibit that inhibit effective interpersonal communication. Zinkler says it best when describing the next step as having “the family talk to each other, promising them that they can turn to us for help or that we will (respectfully) interrupt them to tell them of our observations of their process”

When couples come to us requesting support with their interpersonal communication, we have a deeper responsibility than simply supporting them to talk and listen to each other.

(1994, p. xxix). A good example of this is a vague way of talking e.g. *one would feel, if they were in my position, that my life could be in some ways more something.* Without the choice of complaining, the speaker may find it difficult to express how they feel. If one of the couple is struggling, I will support them with questions to elicit what they are trying to express or name their difficulty in listening to what is being said. In the beginning, I find my main role is to remind the speaker that they are not allowed to blame if they want to be heard and understood.

7. Topics: After complaining in the beginning of therapy, that their partner never listens to them, one or both of the couple may struggle to know what to talk about when presented with the opportunity, because of not being able to blame. Others may start to talk about very deep feelings too soon. Supporting the couple to choose topics that are not too frivolous or too deep is one of the key roles of the therapist at this point.

8. Results: Couples have reported that having to concentrate on what they are communicating to each other and actually listening, is an exhausting but very rewarding

experience. The encounter of being heard, understood, and having this fed back is often described as *feeling amazing*. It reminds couples of when they first met and shared every thought. Another common theme is that the issues they originally brought to counselling now, do not appear to be that serious, or the cause of disharmony, now that they have found a way to reconnected with each other.

What could possibly go wrong?

Members of a couple often move at different speeds. This can partly be mediated by how strained their communication has become and how hurt each remains from the legacy of past arguments. Unsurprisingly, it is tempting for couples to try this at home, especially if they have had a good experience in-session. However, the following are some of the pitfalls, that need to be mentioned before trying this at home:

- i. **Who will organise it?** On several occasions, couples have left the therapeutic space to try this at home, only to report back that each was waiting for the other to initiate it. It seems this is a power play to establish whether the other person is interested. I have learned to work with couples to agree who will be responsible and how they will share this responsibility between them as a precursor to home trial.
- ii. **Where and when?** Given the busy lives that people lead, finding the time and place to have these conversations can be difficult. It is unwise to embark on this emotional exercise when one or both is tired after a long day.

However, even the effort required to make time for each other is a building block in recovering the experience of joy in the relationship.

iii. Interruptions: Texts, calls, WhatsApp messages, Instagram and Facebook post notifications and emails pings can not only interrupt these communications sessions but can lead to further rancour if they are one of the sources of discontent in the first place. The prospect of intrusion by children, family, neighbours, friends needs to be considered by the couple and how these will be dealt with in advance of trying this at home.

iv. Length of sessions and sharing of time: After years to not being heard, the temptation for a person prone to *flooding* is to grab the opportunity of being heard and hang on to it for as long as possible. For someone prone to *stonewall*, this can be an overwhelming experience and they will retreat into their safe place more than ever. Agreeing in advance that these sessions will not last for more than 30 to 40 minutes with each person getting time to speak and listen is an important convention to establish.

v. Planning communication sounds too structured? I have heard couples express their reservations that planning and working towards a style of communications sound like it is not spontaneous and free. However, it is offered as a tool for them to use when they have something important to share and they don't want

it to result in yet another argument. This also has a secondary benefit in that it provides a release of tensions and misunderstandings that can accumulate over time and result in full-blown arguments where legacy resentments and frustrations are aired. As the great philosopher, Roy Keane once said "Fail to prepare, prepare to fail" (Keane, 2002). Therefore, giving themselves the best chance for this technique to take hold by being well prepared and agreeing to the terms of the arrangement is important.

vi. But it should not be this hard: I tell couples that *happy ever after* is a myth and that relationships take work, even to the point of the mundane act of planning how not to fail at communicating. As M. Scott Peck observed the "problem is that the experience of falling in love is invariably temporary" (Peck, 1978, pg. 67). Of course, seeing your partner working with you to improve your relationship is greatly rewarding and can serve as a confirmation that they do in fact love you.

Conclusion

We can all operate on autopilot when communicating. Much of our effort is spent on trying to persuade, cajole, manipulate or influence others to get what we want. When this is affected in an intimate relationship, day-after-day, it can result in neither person listening and the death of effective interpersonal communication. When this happens, intimate connections are severed, and each partner can feel lost and bereft. Knowing each other well enough to know how to

trigger each other's vulnerabilities is then a way couples develop as a way to remain connected in the absence of intimacy. It generates a connection, but at an enormous cost to the relationship.

When couples come to us requesting support with their interpersonal communication, we have a deeper responsibility than simply supporting them to talk and listen to each other. It is an opportunity for them to inoculate against future damage and hopefully salve past injuries inflicted by hurtful words and deeds. Words have the ability to hurt and heal. Really listening to the one you love has no disadvantages. ☺

Brendan O'Shaughnessy

Brendan O'Shaughnessy is an IACP accredited counsellor/psychotherapist/supervisor in private practice. He worked part-time with the Cork Marriage Counselling Centre for the past 28 years and has a higher diploma in Counselling from UCC. Brendan has been on the board of various charities, including the National Domestic Violence Agency.

Brendan is now semi-retired from a multinational electronics company and can be contacted by email at brendanoshaughnessy@hotmail.com or www.brendanoshaughnessy.org

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