

5 Ways to Get Him to Listen

By Richard Nicastro, Ph.D.

How can you make effective communication a regular part of your marriage or relationship? What motivates someone to listen to another person?

Understanding these questions will help you work toward creating an atmosphere where effective communication is a regular part of your own marriage or relationship.

Communication is the bedrock of a healthy marriage or relationship. Through the process of communicating, you share your needs and discover what your partner needs. Such sharing creates a bridge between two separate individuals—a bridge that is the foundation of connection and intimacy. When you stop communicating (or when miscommunication becomes the norm) you remain two separate, isolated islands and your relationship will suffer.

Many marriage and relationship problems can be traced back to faulty communication patterns. Many marriage counselors stay in business because couples fail to use effective communication strategies. A commitment to better communication is the first step in strengthening your relationship—and keeping it strong. The next step is to use effective communication tools to build bridges of intimacy.

Relationship Help: 5 Communication Tools

1. Clear message, favorable outcome

Clearly communicating your needs is the foundation of effective communication and a healthy relationship. Marriage counselors often focus on improving a couple's communication skills; a breakdown in communication often leads to significant marriage and relationship problems.

Unfortunately, many couples have discovered that clearly communicating their needs, while necessary, doesn't always work out as planned. Unless, of course, you found that mythic creature, the *altruistic listener*--the kind of listener depicted in romance novels and films. The altruistic listener hears a message once and responds as you hoped. He's always responsive, is interested and concerned about *you* and therefore interested in what you have to say. (If you find such a person, you may want to grab on tightly and not let go.)

Most of us end up in a marriage or relationship with the *sluggish, self-absorbed listener (SSL)*. They really do mean well. But they're overworked, overextended, overwhelmed, and, like most of us, have their own emotional baggage to sort out. When communicating with an SSL, sometimes sending a clear message leads to a favorable outcome (what you hoped for); at other times, it doesn't. That's why other communication methods are often needed.

Relationship Rule: No matter who the listener is, you should never abandon the clear message principle.

2. A little appreciation goes a long way

Despite the complexities of the human mind, many of us respond like Golden Retrievers when it comes to receiving a little praise. In other words, when you make your husband feel good about something he's done, you increase the likelihood that he will repeat that behavior.

Parents do this all the time with children and you may already do this instinctively. For instance, your husband cuts the lawn and you say, "Wow, the lawn looks great!" In that simple statement

you showed gratitude for the job he did—and gratitude will make him feel appreciated (which, in turn, will make him more likely to mow the lawn next time...).

Compare this kind of appreciation to no feedback or saying something like, "Good thing you finally cut the lawn, it was looking like a jungle out there." In this instance, you're highlighting the negative—essentially the message is that he *should* cut the grass and his laziness made the grass look terrible. But when you comment on a job well done, you've made him feel appreciated, thereby reinforcing his grass-cutting behavior.

It's human nature to feel good about yourself when someone you care about shows gratitude for something you've done. You can never heap too much gratitude and thanks onto your spouse/partner—unless, of course, it's insincere. For many couples, danger lies in not showing *enough* appreciation because they've come to expect certain things from one another.

Relationship Rule: A little praise goes a long way in getting someone to listen.

3. Give a little, get a little

This is the carrot-at-the-end-of-the-stick communication. This type of "give and take" is a natural part of any relationship. This communication approach is effective for two reasons:

First, it shows your partner that you are a giving person and this may stir his/her own desire to give back (giving is often contagious);

Second, this type of communication underscores the importance of fairness and compromise in relationships. For example, saying, "I'm running out to buy us dinner, can you straighten up the house a little until I get back?" implies that it would only be fair that your partner do his part since you are taking the time and effort to get dinner.

You can rely more heavily on this approach when it's apparent that your spouse/partner needs some incentive (a nudge) to put on his/her best listening ears and get his sluggish self in high gear.

Relationship Rule: Each day, model the kind of behaviors you'd like to see more of from your partner.

4. You catch more flies with honey than vinegar

I cannot emphasize this point enough: The way in which you say something (how you package your message) can make all the difference in whether your words get through to your partner (and have the intended impact) or end up unheard, gathering dust in his mental spam-filter.

As the speaker, your top priority is to have your words heard, to prevent the listener from becoming defensive or tuning out. Ultimately, you want your message to *impact* the listener in such a way that s/he has been alerted of your needs and motivated to follow through and meet your needs.

Example of Vinegar:

"Can't you see I'm up to my elbows in this mess? Don't you think of anybody but yourself? At least take out the garbage!"

Example of Honey:

"Life is so much easier when you help out. Can you take out the garbage?"

It's usually best to use the honey approach or the appreciation approach when trying to get your message across to your spouse/partner.

Relationship Rule: The way you present your message has a dramatic impact on the listener (even more so than the specific content of your message).

5. The Reprimand (aka: The slap on the wrist)

If you're like most people, once in a while you will say and do something that is upsetting to your partner, and your partner will do the same (you're only human, after all); when this occurs it may be important to address the troubling issue—with the goal of stopping your partner from repeating the upsetting behavior.

But what if you've told him several times to stop a certain unwanted behavior (for example, to stop saying insensitive things about your mother), yet despite your best efforts, he continues on this insensitive path?

Hopefully it won't get to this point, but there will be times that you'll have to up the communication ante and be more forceful. In these instances, your partner may need to hear a firm, "I asked you not to make fun of my mother...it's inappropriate and cruel! Stop it already!" And you may find that you need to add something like, "If you continue to say hurtful things, I'll have no choice but to see you less." (Admittedly, that's harder to follow through on if you live together...)

As you can tell, The Reprimand packs an emotional punch to help get your point across.

It's best to use this approach when the other four communication methods described above fail to work (however, make sure you give them ample time).

Relationship Rule: Having to rely too heavily on The Reprimand may indicate the existence of underlying relationship problems that need to be addressed.

If you automatically rely on The Reprimand (when it isn't necessarily warranted) to get what you want, take a few deep breaths and slow down. Begin adding the other methods to your communication repertoire and practice them until they become a natural part of your marriage or relationship. In doing so, you may find that the doors of mutual, effective communication are starting to open, and intimacy is starting to deepen.

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Author Bio

Over the past fifteen years Richard Nicastro, Ph.D. has helped couples build stronger, more fulfilling marriages and relationships. Dr. Nicastro has lectured at several universities and now conducts workshops for couples on a wide range of issues. His relationship advice has appeared on television, radio and in national magazines. A member of the International Coach Federation, Dr. Nicastro is passionate about coaching and believes that healthy relationships can add meaning and fulfillment to our lives. His goal is to guide individuals and couples as they implement the skills that will allow their relationships to flourish.

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