



I Can't Read Your Mind:

Please, Let Me Know You're Listening

This is the fourth in a series of articles about relationship communication – how it works, why it doesn't, and how to make it work in our relationships. Thank you for your feedback on my last article. Keep those e-mails and comments coming! I hope this article addresses some of the communication issues we all face.

by Philip Mulford

Silence.

I say something to my spouse and get no response. Just silence.

Maybe a change of facial expression or body language that I can't interpret, but no words. I wait. Maybe it's me, but I'm a strong believer that words are a big help when it comes to communication. I've never been very good at reading my wife's mind. Oh, there have been some exceptions, but on the whole I don't expect I will ever be proficient at reading her mind. Maybe I'm too demanding, but I need words.

Having said that, I admit - I often do the same thing.

I'll listen to her and then quietly think about what she has said. I'll operate on the premise that she knows I'm considering her words thoughtfully, that I'm not ignoring her, and that when I'm ready to respond, I'll respond. The odd thing is, often when I respond there's no obvious connection between my response and what she's just said. If she were privy to my thoughts, she'd see the clear connection, but I haven't put those thoughts into words. Meanwhile, as I'm responding, she's looking for the connection in what I'm saying to what she said – and it's not there. So she's not really listening to me. She's left to wonder what I thought about what she said. She's looking for the connection. Sometimes she'll even ask, "What's that got to do with what I was talking about?"

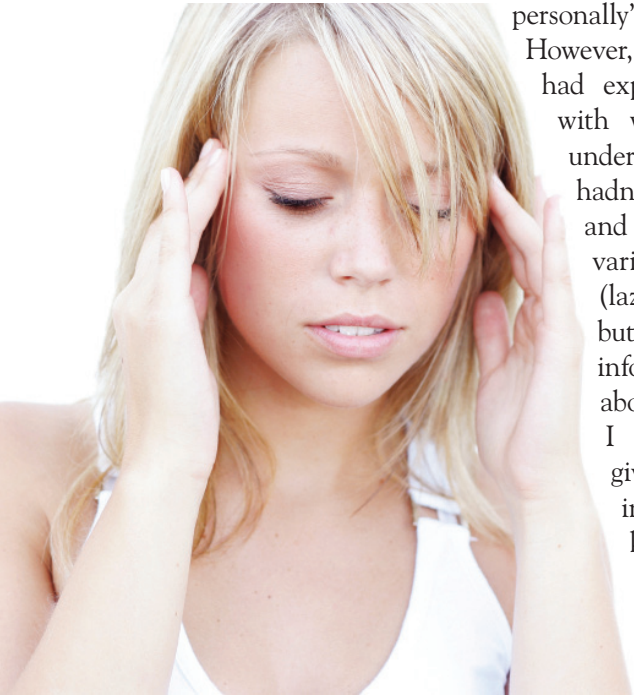
We do this weekly radio show together called Communication360. One week we were talking about the

"little things" that test our relationships. I found out on that show that if I left our bed unmade in the morning (which I often did) it made her feel unloved, taken for granted, as if she were my servant, like I didn't care about her. Who'd a thought? She admitted that she'd never really told me how it made her feel (ah, there it was, the defense I needed). I admit she had said things like, "Honey, you left the bed unmade" or "Should I make the bed or are you getting back in it?" (this after we'd dressed and were downstairs having breakfast). But I never connected those "hints" with how it made her feel until she actually told me how it made her feel on the show. She'd assumed all those years that somehow I knew how it made her feel; that I left our bed unmade to send an "I don't care about you" message. She'd assumed that I would "get" her hints; that I could read her mind.

I was shocked. I thought she was kidding. "You can't be serious," I scoffed. "Who cares whether the bed is made or not?" I asked in disbelief. Then something about the look in her eye and the way she wouldn't let it go made me realize she was serious (so I suppose it's not just the words that matter). But it was the words she shared with me that were so helpful.

Once I realized she was serious, that she meant her words, I was able to tell her that an unmade bed was in no way intended to be an indicator of my love for her. It was just an indicator of whether I'd made the bed or not. (The old, "Don't take it

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personally” approach.) However, because she had explained to me with words I could understand and hadn’t attacked me and called me a variety of things (lazy, a jerk, etc.), but had instead informed me about her feelings, I realized she’d given me insight into her—special knowledge of how I could communicate my love for her. I could have tried to

convince her that whether I made the bed or not shouldn’t bother her. I could have suggested (gently, of course) that if was so important to her that the bed be made, she could make it. Instead I took that information and said to myself, “I can do this.” There’s rarely been a day since then that I’ve left the bed unmade. And I hope on those few occasions that I leave it unmade she sees it as an unmade bed and nothing more. More importantly, I hope that every day she sees it made she feels loved.

Finding the words to express our feelings can be hard. For me it’s a real challenge. I often think that my feelings won’t matter or that I’m making too much of a situation, so I don’t even tune into them. Given the choice, I’d rather listen to my wife’s feelings than express my own. And generally speaking,

when encouraged, she’s pretty good about expressing her feelings. But as good as she is, and as reticent as I am, we both often participate in conversations that include breaks of silence where the other is left wondering. Now don’t get me wrong. Silence can be a wonderful thing. But when it comes to discussing the issues and decisions we all face as a couple, I find it reassuring and helpful to know that what I think matters enough to my wife for her to hear, understand, and consider it. Silence doesn’t serve in those instances nearly as well as words.

Ironically, we’ve all been trained to process our conversations the way I’ve described – with breaks of silence. We’ll listen and then silently digest what we’ve heard. The picture of the thoughtful, contemplative, wise individual who considers carefully what he or she hears before saying anything is appealing. But that picture assumes we understand what we just heard. As we cogitate silently, we invest ourselves in our own interpretation of what we heard. But two things can happen that cause communication breakdowns when we interact this way: 1. We may interpret what we heard incorrectly. 2. The speaker will want to know if you understood what he or she said. (This occurs even though the speaker has been trained to assume the listener understands.)

Unfortunately, these breakdowns don’t show themselves in easily remedied ways. They instead generally lead to arguments. If we misunderstood what the speaker said, we may find ourselves in the argument that goes, “But you said...!” Followed by, “But that’s not what I meant!” That argument is often more heated than necessary because of the emotional and mental investment the listener has made in listening and considering a response – not to mention the fact that the listener is being told he or she is wrong.

One way to eliminate this from our discussions is to accept the fact that no matter how long we’ve known each other, we cannot read each other’s minds. Despite the sense of pleasure

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that comes from feeling like our spouse “knows us” so well that we don’t even have to speak, I think there’s a stronger sense of love, honor, and respect that comes from not presuming to know what our spouse means, thinks, feels, or wants. So, since your spouse can’t read your mind, instead of silently ruminating over what you assume was meant while your spouse waits in anticipation, you can simply tell your spouse what you heard your spouse say. Then ask your spouse for confirmation. That’ll serve you both well in a couple of ways. Your spouse will know he or she has been heard and, more importantly, been understood. If it turns out you misunderstood, your spouse can clarify what was meant. Your spouse can then more easily accept your silent pondering knowing he or she has been heard and understood. It’ll also give you the chance to build into your thought process your spouse’s concerns. It’s amazing how powerful using your own mouth to say what you’ve heard can be in helping you understand, especially when you totally disagree with your spouse’s point of view. Just remember, this isn’t an opportunity to evaluate, judge, agree, or disagree with what your spouse said. Rather it’s an opportunity to express, for both of you, your understanding of your spouse’s words and, if necessary, receive clarification if he or she feels misunderstood.

Be prepared, several things may happen when you try this. 1. Instead of saying what you heard, you may find yourself saying, “I agree ...” and then move directly into your response. Remember this isn’t the time to evaluate: in fact, determining whether you agree or disagree gets in the way of understanding. If you don’t say what you heard, then neither you nor your spouse will know whether you understand (you’ll both be assuming) or, for that matter, what it is you’re agreeing with. 2. You may find yourself saying, “I understand ...” without actually saying what you heard. If you don’t say what you heard and seek confirmation of your understanding from your spouse, then

Don’t get discouraged. You can keep it as simple as repeating what your spouse says at first and as you get more practice you may feel more comfortable summarizing. Some people refer to this process as “Active Listening” or “Attentive Listening.” Keep in mind, your goal is not to be a parrot, but to achieve understanding. In fact, mere “parroting” can often be perceived as being dismissive. Listen to your spouse. And then listen to yourself as you tell your spouse what you’ve heard. Take it in. Understand it. Accept it as your spouse’s unique point of view. Build it into your consideration of the issue at hand.

Then add another piece. Try thinking out loud. Put your thoughts into words. Don’t leave your spouse trying to read your mind. Speak your thoughts. Include your spouse in your thoughts – the pros and the cons. We all tend to mentally process our thoughts independently and then only share our conclusions - once again expecting our spouse to know all the thoughts, feelings, and considerations that went into those conclusions. Unwrap them. Share them as they come to you. The feeling of intimate connection your spouse will feel to you as you open yourself up to your spouse will serve your relationship in powerful and wonderful ways.

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what exactly did you understand? Once again, instead of understanding, you’re left with your assumption. 3. You may find yourself mixing your attempt to affirm understanding with your own response. For example, you may sound like this, “I heard you say ... But I think...” As soon as you find yourself talking in the first person “I” you know you’re no longer describing what you heard.

Once a practicing attorney, Philip founded Mulford Mediation in 1990 and has mediated professionally for over 21 years. With offices in Fairfax and Warrenton, VA, Philip specializes in marriage, family, divorce, and family business mediation and communication. Philip may be reached at pmulford@mulfordmediation.com or at 540-341-4615. For more information about Mulford Mediation, please visit www.mulfordmediation.com. In addition, Philip and his wife, Lisa, are the creators and co-hosts of a weekly radio talk show called Communication360 where the topic is relationship communication. The show, with over 170,000 listeners per month, is available on the internet at www.webtalkradio.net. All shows are archived and can be listened to on demand or downloaded. For more information about Communication360, please visit www.C360today.com.

