

# A COMMUNICATION TUNE-UP for Your Marriage

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**E**very marriage has them. And although for the most part you have learned to deal with them, from time to time they can cause anger, hurt, resentment, and a disconnect from your spouse. If left unaddressed, they can even grow into the feeling that your spouse doesn't love you anymore.

What are they? They are those issues in your marriage that cause defensiveness and disagreement between you and your spouse. You know what they are for your marriage. They can run the gamut from leaving the bath towel on the floor to disciplining the children. And although these particular issues in and of themselves may not rise to the level of ending the marriage, they will limit the richness and depth of your relationship with your spouse. Slowly, over time, quietly, patiently, they begin to take a shape that has



nothing to do with the towel or the children's discipline.

At first they may be tolerated with hope for change. You "may write them off" as behaviors learned from your spouse's family. Maybe your spouse will grow out of them. Then you may begin to quietly resent being treated the way your spouse is treating you. Maybe your spouse leaves dishes on the counter instead of rinsing them off and putting them in the dishwasher – as if your spouse expects you to clean up. It's no big deal every once in a while. Then you begin to realize it's all the time. You may even start to keep track, "That's the third morning this week I've come down in the morning to find dirty dishes on the kitchen counter."

Finally you decide you have to say something to your spouse or

the issue will drive you crazy, but you don't want to argue. So you put it off. You offer yourself a justification; your spouse has been extremely busy at work you tell yourself. But then you test that theory and discover it happens even during the holidays when your spouse takes a few days off from work. At some point you may even conclude that the reason for your spouse's behavior and unacceptable treatment of you must be because your spouse doesn't care about you. Left to fester, you may even conclude that your spouse doesn't love you.

Consider something. Throughout the entire process have you once shared your perspective with your

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*...have you actually found the time to sit down with your spouse and discuss your concerns?*

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spouse? OK, you did suggest on at least one occasion that it'd be nice if your spouse put the dirty dishes in the dishwasher, but that was one morning as your spouse was walking out the door heading for work. Making that suggestion had an unintended consequence; it allowed you to expect

your spouse to change. In turn, that allowed you to feel even more entitled to the feelings

of being taken for granted.

But have you actually found the time to sit down with your spouse and discuss your concerns? Of course that can be a challenge what with the children, work, meals, laundry, extracurricular activities, commuting, after hours responsibilities, etc. There's often nothing left at the end of a day. Have you found the time to assess your contribution? Or do you assume that whatever you're doing is fine and you should continue without adjustment – your marriage would be great if only your spouse would make a few "little" changes. You really don't

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want to sound petty. You wish your spouse could read your mind. In fact, you may expect your spouse to read your mind. And that's another part of the problem. Isn't that what love means; especially after all the years you've been together?

Can you imagine what your marriage would be like if you knew that no matter what the issue, whether your spouse agreed with you or not, you could discuss and explore the issue with love, respect and understanding. The stressful worry about when and if to bring up a touchy subject would be gone.

Do you remember the desire to understand and please your spouse when you first started dating and during the earlier years of your marriage? You wanted to know your spouse. You encouraged your spouse to express his or

her opinion, even if it differed from yours. Or you kept your opinion to yourself in deference to your spouse. You wanted to show your spouse love in terms he or she would understand.

Why does your spouse's opinion on a certain subject now rub you the wrong way? Why can't you approach every conversation, even the difficult ones, with the same desire to understand rather than arguing about who is right? Why do you spend less time considering how your spouse would like to be loved and more time reading a book or watching TV? What happened? How can you continue in creating the marriage you envisioned?

One of the best ways to pursue the marriage of your dreams is to tune up your communication process by recognizing and incorporating the following:

1. You don't like being told what to do. Neither does your spouse. You can stop telling your spouse what to do, how to think, and how to behave immediately.
2. Neither you nor your spouse is capable of reading the other's mind. Assuming that your spouse can read your mind creates expectations that will only be fulfilled by chance.
3. Unfulfilled expectations, even those based on assumptions, will leave you unhappy.
4. The communication process you have learned is assumption-based.
5. You can replace the assumption-based process with an understanding-based process.
6. When you replace assumptions with understanding, you will eliminate much of the emotionally destructive consequences of unfulfilled expectations.



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7. Understanding-based communication does not require agreement. In fact, agreement gets in the way of understanding. You and your spouse are unique individuals – there's no reason you should think the same way about anything.
8. Sharing information with an understanding-based communication process will allow you to honor, respect, and love your spouse while being honored, respected, and loved by your spouse.
9. Understanding-based communication allows both you and your spouse to participate in and be a part of the process of living your lives together.
10. The decisions that come out of your understanding-based communication will meet the needs of you and your spouse because those needs will have been conveyed and understood by each of you and incorporated in your decision.

It's not easy to replace your well-learned and habitual process of assumption-based communication. But once you do, then, no matter how inconsequential or how important, no matter how easy or how challenging, every communication with your spouse will express your love for the other in a way that will deepen and enrich your relationship far beyond what either of you could have ever imagined. By changing your understanding of communication and then changing the way you communicate, you can transform your marriage into the supportive and loving relationship you and your spouse intended when you each said, "I do."



*Philip Mulford is a full-time, professional mediator. With offices in Fairfax and Warrenton, VA, Mulford Mediation provides mediation services to families and businesses resolving over 90% of the hundreds of cases he mediates. In November of 2006, Mulford launched a national Internet Radio talk show, Divorce Mediation: Myths & Facts on the VoiceAmerica network, voice.voiceamerica.com. Shows are available on demand or live every Thursday at 2 pm. Mulford also offers communication consulting to families and businesses and gives continuing legal education seminars to attorneys on mediation. A graduate of Duke University ('79) and the University of Virginia School of Law ('82), Mulford lives with his wife and two sons in Warrenton, VA.*

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