

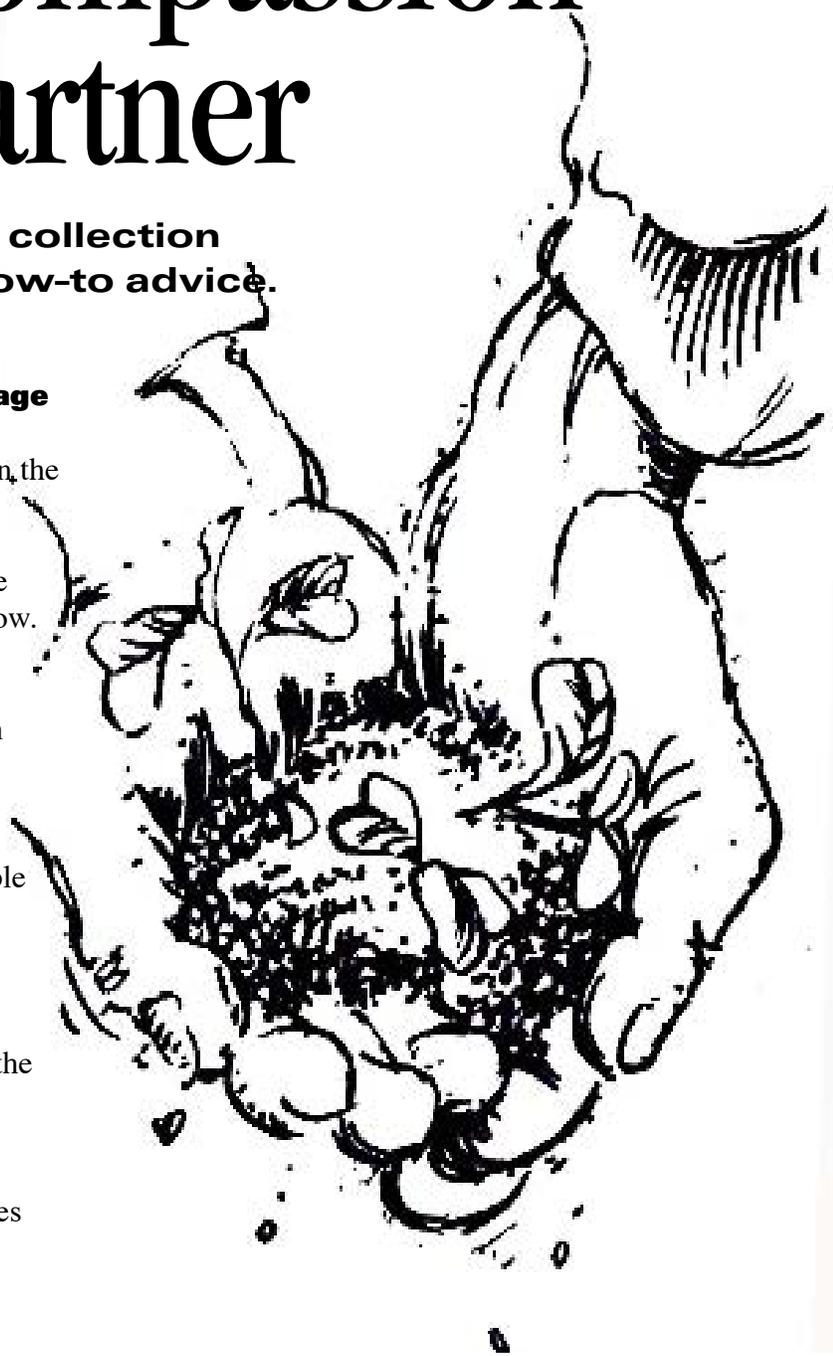


Understand: Cultivate Compassion for Your Partner

Get ready to garden with this collection of tips, plans, and practical how-to advice.

Review — Guiding Principles for Marriage

- Seek the light: More truth will be found in the light than the darkness.
- Notice your feelings: If we dwell on tense and angry feelings, those feelings will grow.
- Speak from peace: Thinking peaceful thoughts prepares us to share ourselves in a helpful way and move our relationships forward.
- Weed your own garden: We are responsible for changing ourselves rather than our partners.
- Manage expectations: Roses come with thorns. Rather than waste time resenting the thorns, enjoy the rose.
- When your soul speaks, take great notes: Focusing on good feelings and experiences can increase their power in our lives.



Cultivating compassion for your partner

Gardening can be both rewarding and challenging. At times each of us will get sunburned, poked by thorns, and bitten by bugs. During these difficult and painful times, we can be gardening partners who compassionately respond to each other's pains rather than scold our partner for not using sunscreen or being more careful. We can be gardeners in whose gentle hands our partners heal and grow strong.

There are four keys to cultivating compassion and understanding:

- Getting to know your spouse— and continuing to learn about him or her
- Listening and responding effectively to your spouse
- Seeing the world through your spouse's eyes
- Expressing acceptance and forgiveness

1. Learning about our partner is a never-ending process

One of the greatest difficulties in building relationships is that we cannot see within the heart, mind, and experience of another person. This is especially problematic in marriage where, based on years of experience, we think we know our partner.

Relationship expert Scott Stanley talks about the difference between “knowing” our spouse and “no-ing” our spouse. He points out that many couples spend too much time telling each other “no” (e.g., “No, I don't want to do that,” “No, you don't know what you're talking about,” “No, you don't know how I feel,” etc.) and not enough time getting to “know” them.

Knowing your partner well is vital for a strong friendship, and John Gottman, one of the world's foremost marriage researchers, believes that friendship is the key to a lasting marriage. He explains, “The simple truth is that happy marriages are based on a deep friendship. By this I mean a mutual respect for and enjoyment of each other's company. Couples in happy marriages tend to know each other intimately—they are well versed in each other's likes, dislikes, personality quirks, hopes, and dreams. They have abiding regard for each other, and they express this fondness, not just in the big ways, but in little ways day in and day out” (pp. 19-20).

Reflection:

- Test your knowledge of your partner by answering the following “true or false” questions that have been adapted from John Gottman's book, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*.

How Well Do You Know Your Partner?

1. I can name my partner's best friends.
2. I know my partner's favorite type of music.
3. I know my partner's favorite movie.
4. I know my partner's most stressful childhood event.
5. I know my partner's most embarrassing moment.
6. I know what my partner would do if he/she won the lottery.
7. I know what my partner's ideal job would be.
8. I know my partner's ideal place to live.
9. I know the things that currently cause my partner stress.
10. I know the names of the people that have irritated my partner recently.

11. I know some of my partner's life dreams.
12. I am very familiar with my partner's religious beliefs.
13. I know my partner's favorite and least favorite relatives.
14. I feel like my partner knows me pretty well.
15. I know what strengthens trust with my partner.
16. I know what undermines trust with my partner.

If you were able to answer true to more than half of the questions, you know your partner pretty well. If not, take some time to talk about these things with your partner. It will help your friendship and your commitment to your partner to grow. Share the answers on your list with your partner and enjoy the conversation that will follow.

- Plan a time each day when you and your partner will talk for 10 to 15 minutes. If you don't schedule the time and the place, it will not happen. Small talk is about connecting with your partner. It is your opportunity to discuss your hopes and dreams or whatever you would like on a daily basis. If you do this consistently, you will find that your relationship will grow because you are putting energy into connecting with and learning about your partner.
- Additional exercises you can use to get to know your partner better appear in the Teaching Resources section at the end of this lesson guide.

Build Connection Rituals

Rituals are things that we get in the habit of doing. They usually have some special meaning and significance for us. In a marriage we should get in the habit of connecting with our partner frequently and in a variety of ways (spiritually, emotionally, and physically).

Here are just a few ideas for rituals that you and your partner may want to use in order to stay connected and know each other better.

Find The Glory In Your Marital Story

– John Gottman encourages couples to recall the positive history of their relationship as a way to bond with one another. As a therapist, one of the authors of this curriculum has met with many couples who seem to have forgotten the reasons they got married in the first place or why they even liked each other. One of the most powerful interventions he uses to get these couples thinking positively is to have them tell him the story of how they met, fell in love, and decided to get married. Usually by the time they are done, their hearts have changed, they have softened, and they have a renewed desire to preserve and strengthen their relationship. Even if you are not having trouble in your marriage, sharing stories of your love and courtship with one another and with others will help you stay connected and committed to one another.

Five-Minute Connections – Families today are very busy, and couples often have little time to spend with one another. When quantity time is not available, John Gottman recommends making five-minute connections with your partner as often as you can. Here's how:

Cuddle at the most important time of day. Set the alarm five minutes early and cuddle with your partner in the morning. It can help keep you feeling close all day long.

Before you leave in the morning, ask your partner if anything special is going on that day. This lets your partner know that you are interested in them and care what's going on in their life. If something special was going on for your partner, check in with them during the day or in the evening.

Share what you like about each other. Do this daily and do it frequently. Look for excuses to praise your partner. Don't take each other for granted. Your partner will know they are loved and they will be more willing to work through any differences you may have.

Do small acts of kindness for one another. Send your partner a card or e-mail just to say you love him or her, bring home a special treat, or do a 5-minute chore that your partner usually does. The kindness you show to your partner will almost always be returned, and serving your partner will strengthen your marriage bond.

Talk about the stresses of your day. Spend 5 minutes when you get home from work talking with your partner about the stressful things you may have experienced that day. Don't attack your partner with it; just share it with him or her. If you get the stress out of the way first, you will be able to enjoy the rest of the evening together.



Share Intimacy. – Plan romantic and intimate times with your partner. Spontaneity is great, but planning a date or other romantic event with your partner can be just as much fun as the date itself, and it creates something to look forward to.

Share Spirituality. – Shared religious or spiritual activities are a wonderful way to grow together as a couple. The way you express your spirituality is up to you, but you may want to consider praying, reading inspiring religious books, attending church services, and celebrating religious holidays together.

- Additional suggestions for connection rituals appear at the end of this lesson guide.

2. Listening helps us understand our partner's experience

When we talk with our partners, it's important to listen carefully to what they have to say. Even when we have known our spouse for many years, we usually are only partly right about what he or she is experiencing. That is why it is so important to draw out your partner's point of view and, when he or she is frustrated, to listen past the edge in your partner's voice.

Listening and responding to a partner's strong emotions

A good listener has a big advantage in marriage. For example, if a wife were to interrupt her evening routine to sigh to her husband, "I am so tired," he may think he knows why she is tired. He may believe that her tiredness comes from staying up too late at night or from new demands at her job. If he offers her unsolicited advice—such as "Why don't you lie down and take a short rest?"—he may be missing the mark. His counsel may be well-intended but not welcome.

What might this husband do differently?

When his partner expresses tiredness, pain, or any other emotion, this husband could offer support rather than advice. He may be tempted to impose his own meanings on his wife's experience by trying to figure things out. Instead he could simply respond to the message she has already given. For example, he might say:

- "Sounds like you feel overwhelmed. Is there anything I can do to help?"
- "Tell me more, dear."
- "You've had a rotten day?"

Any effort on his part to open the door for her to tell him more will probably be helpful. She might say, "Everything went wrong at work today." Or "I'm worn out when I get home from work." Or "I guess I feel pretty lonely." Even with this additional information, a husband is wise to keep listening. Nodding and listening may encourage her to keep sharing. Keep the focus on what she is feeling rather than giving advice or telling her about your experience.

As the conversation continues, this husband might do the following things to continue listening to and supporting his spouse.

- **Validate her emotions.** Some validating responses might include, "I can see why you would feel that way," or "No wonder you feel bad," or "I don't know how you have tolerated it this long." When a partner feels strong emotions, it is a good time to listen and support. As the emotions lessen, it may be helpful to ask your partner how you can help: "Do you want me to just listen or would you like me to help you brainstorm solutions?"
- **Express affection.** Tell your partner "I'm sorry you're going through this. I love you." Understanding and the support it conveys are very healing. In fact, there is

hardly anything a marriage partner can do regularly that will build a relationship as much as being understanding.

- **Respond to the need.** If your spouse says that she or he needs someone to help prepare dinner, move from words to actions.

Because the pain of others makes us uncomfortable, it is natural that we respond to pain with advice, distraction or other efforts to minimize the pain. Unfortunately this prevents the person with the pain from figuring out their feelings and healing from the inside. While it may not be natural or easy for us to respond to pain with understanding and compassion, it can be learned. And it can make a big difference for each partner and for the relationship.

Reflection:

- Think about the times that your partner has shared pain, disappointment or frustration with you. What are your usual responses? Many of us automatically say unhelpful things. Notice if you find yourself using any of the following UNHELPFUL responses:
 - Giving advice: "What you need to do is . . ."
 - Talking about your own feelings and experiences instead of theirs: "That same thing happened to me. . ."
 - Making their pain seem unimportant: "Everyone suffers. What makes you so special?"



Maybe you sometimes have used good listening skills. See if you have used (or are ready to try) some of the following HELPFUL ways of showing understanding:

- Acknowledge your partner's feelings: "I can see that you feel strongly about this."
- Invite more discussion: "I would like to understand. Please tell me more."
- Acknowledge that your partner's pain is real for him or her: "You must feel awful."

■ Listening in order to understand is difficult. It takes time and patience. During the coming weeks, try to notice when your partner has strong feelings about something. Instead of giving advice or telling about your experiences, try using the helpful ways to show understanding listed below. Practice pre-living the experience so it comes more naturally when an opportunity presents itself.

Key Point: By truly listening to our partners and responding effectively to what they tell us, we encourage our marriages to grow.

Listening and responding to a partner's hopes for the future.

Part of understanding our spouse is to honor his or her hopes and dreams, even if we don't always share them or they don't seem realistic. For example, if finances are tight and our spouse says, "It sure would be fun to go to Hawaii," we may respond in a variety of ways. One way is to angrily or disbelievably say, "With what money?" This type of response does not honor our spouse's dream. Our spouse is probably keenly aware that our finances would not allow us to travel to Hawaii, but he or she was inviting us to dream with them anyway.

Some responses that would honor our spouse's statement about going to Hawaii might be, "That sure would be fun. Let's try and figure out a way that we can go someday." Or "That will be fun when we can go. For now shall we look at pictures of Hawaii on the Web or go out for a Hawaiian dinner?"

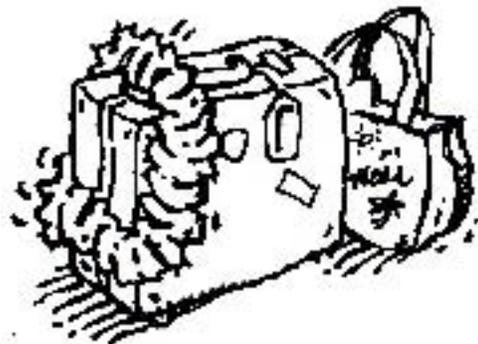
We honor our spouse's hopes and dreams by being willing to listen to those dreams, understand them, and incorporate our spouse's preferences into our actions. Understanding partners work to incorporate each other's dreams into their marriage relationship. They are also willing and flexible enough to change as they grow and develop individually and as a couple.

It is true that some couples have a stable marriage even when their hopes and dreams aren't completely in sync (e.g., they have different levels of religiosity, they have different preferences for where they would like to live, etc.). But it is also true that the more shared hopes and dreams you have and the more you seek to understand one another the more meaningful, rich, and fulfilling your relationship will be.

Reflection:

What is one of your spouse's hopes or dreams that you can honor simply by being willing to talk to him or her about it?

Key Point: We feel loved and valued when our spouse cares enough to explore our hopes and dreams with us.



3. Understanding grows when we see through our partner's eyes

Encouraging your partner to speak is an act of generosity. It is a gift of your attention and interest. You are granting that your spouse has something worthwhile to say. Granting the legitimacy of your partner's point of view is a precious gift at any time.

—John Gottman

Most of us are keenly aware of our own wants, needs, hopes, dreams, fears, and desires. However, we usually are much less attuned to our partner's wants, needs, hopes, dreams, fears, and desires. We find it difficult to truly “walk a mile in their shoes.” To do this takes skill, but more importantly it takes willingness. It is much like Steve Covey's recommendation to “seek first to understand . . . then to be understood.”

Covey tells the story of his wife's unreasonable love for Frigidaire appliances. He could never understand it. Nor could he dissuade her. It was not until he was willing to let her explore her feelings about Frigidaire that they discovered the reason for her loyalty. As a young girl Sandra's father was a school teacher and operated an appliance store. During a time of economic difficulty, the Frigidaire company was willing to finance her father's inventory. That allowed him to stay in business. It made a big difference for her family. (1997, p. 205)

Once Covey allowed his wife to speak openly about her feelings and himself to understand his wife's family history with Frigidaire appliances, he was able to see more clearly through her eyes.

Consider the following story that has been adapted from Haim Ginott's *Between Parent and Child*:

Understanding Burnt Toast

Scenario 1 – It's a busy morning as a young couple with a new baby struggles to get ready for the day. It is one of those mornings when everything seems to go wrong. The telephone rings, the baby cries, and the toast that the wife was preparing for breakfast gets burnt. Imagine that her husband rushes over to the toaster and says: “Good grief! When will you ever learn to make toast?”

Put yourself in the place of the wife who has been criticized for burning the toast.

- How might you react? (Would you throw the toast at your spouse? Would you shout, “Well then fix your own toast?” Would you be so upset you'd feel like crying or shouting a rude comment in return?)
- What would your spouse's words make you feel toward him or her? (Anger, hate, resentment?)
- Would it be emotionally easy for you to fix another batch of toast at that moment? (Some might respond with something like, “Only if I could put some poison in it!”)
- And when you went your way for the day, would it be easy to concentrate on other tasks? (Would the whole day be ruined?)



Scenario 2 – Now let’s replay the scene again. Suppose that the situation is the same - the toast is burnt but this time the husband, upon seeing the burnt toast, gets the loaf of bread and says calmly to his wife, “Let me show you, honey, how to make toast.”

Put yourself in the place of the wife once again. How might you react to scenario 2? Would you feel worse than the first scenario because now it seems that your spouse is treating you like you are stupid?

Scenario 3 – Let’s replay the busy morning scene one last time. Everything is still the same, but the husband says, “Gee, honey, it’s been a rough morning for you--the baby, the phone, and now the toast.”

Put yourself in the place of the wife one last time.

How might you react to scenario 3? Would you drop dead from shock? Would you feel wonderful and loved? Would you feel so good that you’d want to hug and kiss your spouse?

Was your reaction different in the third scenario than in the first two? If so, why? What would make the difference? The morning was still crazy. The baby was still crying and the toast was still burnt.

In the third scenario you may be thinking that all those other things wouldn’t matter that much. You might feel grateful that your spouse didn’t criticize you—that he or she was with you, not against you. And you’d probably find it much easier to concentrate on other tasks throughout the rest of the day.

Walking in the shoes of your partner—even for a few moments—means admitting that your partner’s view might be reasonable and understandable. Allowing ourselves to see from our partner’s perspective dispels past misunderstandings, enabling trust and compassion to flourish.

Reflection:

Describe a time when someone was willing to “see things through your eyes.” What effect did this have on your relationship with that person?

Key Point: Giving the gift of understanding to our spouse is as refreshing and vital as cool water is to a parched plant.

4. Acceptance and forgiveness help understanding to grow

Forgiveness and acceptance are essential parts of any significant long-term relationship. Blaine Fowers points out that if spouses cannot forgive and accept one another for weaknesses and mistakes, then hurt and disappointment will build up and damage the relationship.

In his book *Beyond the Myth of Marital Happiness*, Blaine Fowers shares a touching account of forgiveness and acceptance in the daily life of a couple:

One day a woman was visiting a friend of hers who had recently celebrated her fifty-fourth wedding anniversary. During their conversation the woman’s husband came into the house wearing his work boots. He left clods of dirt behind him on the spotless kitchen floor. The visitor expected that the wife would be upset as she commented, “his boots certainly do bring the dirt in.” As the wife got up to get the broom, she said with a smile, “Yes, but they bring him in too.”

Relationship expert Sam Bradley once said in a marriage workshop,

“I’m very neat. My wife is messy—never picks anything up. She doesn’t even notice the mess—it’s below her radar. I cured myself from my annoyance with her by imagining that

she had died and then asking myself, ‘If you could bring her back to life but she’d still be messy, leave clutter all over the house—5 pairs of shoes in the living room, would you still want her back? Yes, for sure!’ And, it cured me. Whenever I get annoyed with her mess, I rerun the script.” (“*Marriage Makeover*” workshop *Smart Marriages Conference, Reno, NV*)

Reflection:

Is there a habit, mannerism, or behavior that your spouse engages in that bothers you? What would it mean to your spouse and to your relationship if you chose to ignore this thing and accept your spouse the way he or she is?

Key Point: Accepting our spouse for who he or she is and being willing to overlook little things that annoy us is a precious gift.

Each of us can work toward a bountiful harvest

Additional lessons will provide many more ideas for developing a healthy marriage garden. You may find many more ways to build toward the garden of your dreams in these lessons.

Reflection:

For this week, what will you do to better understand your spouse? List one thing you would like to do. Make a specific plan and rehearse it in your mind—that is, pre-live the experience.

For example, you may decide to give the gift of compassion when your spouse is having a tough day, or you may decide to ask your spouse one new question each day to find out more about him or her. Picture specific things you will do. Imagine the likely response. Prepare yourself to handle any difficulties. In your mind, practice several times carrying out your plan.

Teaching Resources:

Teaching tips and teaching outline

Select the major points you want to emphasize. Build a session using the stories, exercises, and group discussion that your time allows.

Additional resources you might use:

Fowers, B. (2000). *Beyond the Myth of Marital Happiness*. New York: Wiley and Sons.

Gottman, J. (1999). *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Last*. New York: Three Rivers Press.

Gottman, J.M., Katz, L.F., & Hooven, C. (1997). *Meta-Emotion: How Families Communicate Emotionally*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Additional exercises for getting to know your partner

“Ask me a Question”

Although you may feel like you know your partner very well, you’d be surprised how much more there is to learn. You and your partner each think of one new question every day that you would like to know the answer to. When you and your partner talk, take turns asking each other the questions you have thought of. This should start some great, and occasionally even difficult, conversations. Be creative in developing meaningful questions and remember that you may not even know the answers about some of your partner’s basic preferences (e.g., favorite color, food, pet, time of year, music, movie, date, etc.).

“Confused in Colorado” – Dear Abby Game

Stephen Duncan, a professor at Brigham Young University, recommends choosing an advice column from your local newspaper, such as Ann Landers or Dear Abby, and reading the question but not the answer aloud to one another. Once you have read the question, take turns giving advice and your reasons for the advice. Do this without criticizing, insulting, or making fun of one another. This is a great way to communicate, get to know each other better, and understand how your partner may respond in different situations.



Additional suggestions for connection rituals

Happy Anniversary! – Anniversaries are a big deal. Remember them and make them special. In addition to the day you got married, you can also celebrate the anniversary of your first date, the first time you kissed your partner, or the time you knew you were in love. Be creative with the anniversaries you celebrate and the ways you celebrate them.

“I Love You” Codes. Develop subtle or indirect ways of letting your partner know you love them. For example, one of the authors of this curriculum and his wife will squeeze each other’s hand three times representing the words “I-Love-You.” They have also sent the same message to each other by winking, honking the car horn, or turning the porch light on and off three times.

Frequently Connect With Your Partner. Use brief phone calls or e-mails to connect with your partner throughout the day. Let them know you care about them or were just thinking about them.

Do Your Partner’s Favorite Thing. Let your partner know you care by doing one of their favorite things for them. It doesn’t have to be big. For example, bring home a card or their favorite treat.

Think “Partner First.” Although self-care is important, partner care cannot be ignored. Think about and do the things that will show your partner that he or she is your #1 priority. Losing yourself in serving your partner will help you better understand both your partner and yourself.

Have Marriage & Family Meetings. Businesses meet often to talk about profits, losses, and strategic planning. Marriages and families who are in the business of running smoothly and being emotionally profitable also need to meet frequently to talk about what’s going well and what things may need to change.

Additional stories:

I Was Different

One day I left the dinner table distraught over my husband's inability to understand my feelings. I was so tired of his insensitivity. I couldn't tell whether he was just dense or deliberately ignoring me. On top of that, he was so verbally inarticulate I began to doubt at times, how or why we ever got married. "If we had communicated this poorly before we were married," I thought, "how did we ever manage to utter and accept a proposal!" I stalked upstairs to sulk in the bedroom.

In a few minutes I heard a soft knock at the door. Of course I didn't answer, and turned my back as he pushed the half-closed door open. I could tell he was standing in the middle of the room. He began stuttering something incoherent: "I uh . . . Maybe we could. . . Would you. . . Could I . . . I mean. . . I wonder. . . Hon, I . . ."

I felt suddenly strange. In an instant I no longer was enjoying his predicament. Earlier, I thought I would relish his pitiful attempt to make up. But now I saw only a man who didn't know how to express his feelings very well struggling to express his feelings. I turned suddenly and interrupted him: I blurted out, "Jake, thank you. I feel bad too. I'm sorry."

I know that if the communication police had been there they would have criticized me for "letting him off the hook"—for not letting him stew in his own incompetence until he could spit it out. But I had a deeper feeling. It was to do right by him. It was a feeling to say what was in my heart in spite of him being unskilled at explaining himself to me.

What is interesting about this event is that from that day forward he began to be more verbal. He was still halting and unsure at times, but he tried harder. And, in a way, I was different.

I was less insistent that he "do or say it my way." I was less ready to take offense when he seemed oblivious to my concerns. I must have quit accusing him in my heart. I began looking for how I could make things better. It seems to me that he had so much more to say when I was less demanding that he say it. I probably changed more that day than he did—but we have both changed.

Honey, I'm Home (Also used in Nurture Lesson)

Julia had gotten home from work late and looked at the clock. Ouch. Her husband would be there any minute. He was a long-distance truck driver who was gone 3-4 days at a time. He was due back from his latest trip at 6:00 p.m. or so, and her tradition was to celebrate the beginning of several days together with a special dinner. She loved doing it. She would even light candles and use their only linen tablecloth.

But now she had only 15 minutes to start a meal and get everything else ready. At 6:15 pm she actually was relieved he still had not arrived. It gave her the chance to get the food going. Nevertheless, all too soon she heard the air brakes bleat as he brought the 18-wheeler to a stop in front of the house. She began biting her lip. She could imagine him taking off his boots in the utility room, hanging up his coat and calling out to her. She knew his face would fall when he saw the half-set table and no food.

The door opened, the boots were unlaced, and the coat was hung up. He called out: "Hey, Jenny." She automatically yelled back, "Hi, Hon." She inhaled in anticipation of his disappointed look as he glanced around the corner into the kitchen. He looked at the table. He gazed up at her, broke into a big smile and bellowed, "Well, it looks like I got home just in time to help!" All her fears dissolved.

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