



Understanding Builds Marriages

One of the greatest difficulties of being a human is that we never can 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. **We usually are only partly right about what our partner is experiencing.** That is why it is so important to draw out your partner's point of view. A good listener has a big advantage in marriage.

For example, if a wife were to interrupt her cooking and scurrying to sigh to her husband, "I am so tired." he may think he knows why she is tired. He may believe that her tiredness is from staying up too late at night. Or he may believe that it is from new demands at her job. If, based on his idea of the problem, he gives advice, he probably will offend his wife. "Why don't you lie down and take a short rest." His counsel may be well-intended but not welcome. Most adults don't want advice when they have not asked for it.

What might the husband do differently? **When your partner expresses pain, offer support rather than advice.** The husband 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. He might say:

"Sounds like you feel overwhelmed."

"Tell me more, dear."

"You've had a rotten day?"

Any effort on his part to open the door for her to tell 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 give advice or tell her about your experience.

Validate her emotions. "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.

All of these suggestions are more difficult to do if you feel that your partner is attacking you. For ideas on dealing with that situation, see the unit on conflict in marriage.

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.

Applications:

Think about the times that your partner has shared pain, disappointment or frustration. What are your usual responses? Most 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."

Plan a helpful response to use next time your partner shares pain with you.

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