

“What we have here is a failure to communicate.”

Communication is the most common presenting problem for couples in my practice. Yet, it is not the real problem for couples. Despite the fact they say they can't talk, they ultimately can't negotiate or create win-win decisions.

When you are in a tense, difficult or nasty discussion with your partner, the problem is not communication. The problem is how you handle your emotional reaction to your partner when they are in a place of being critical, blaming, whining, sarcastic, yelling, calling you names or being bossy or controlling.

If you handle your emotional reaction poorly enough, you are on the way to being at your worst. And when you are at your worst you're likely to bring out the worst in your partner. Let the fun and games begin.

You each are now triggering the other into negative loops. Interestingly, there's a part of each of you that knows what you're doing is stupid. But it's like you are falling out of a tree and you can't stop yourself. You really hope, in the middle of an argument, that somehow your partner is going to respond with their higher self. You hope that your partner is going to break their part in this negative communication loop.

But, ironically, they hope that you're going to break your ineffective ways of responding to them. And when you each hope that the other person is going to do better, you realize what a limited strategy that is.

“If only my partner would change.”

Here's how it breaks down. When you're in a bad discussion with your partner, communication is a problem. But it is not THE problem. THE problem is how you manage your painful emotional reaction that gets triggered by your partner.

When you feel bad, angry, hurt, disappointed, or frustrated, it's a reflex to believe that your partner should have treated you differently. Now if only they would act according to the standards we have set for them, then our life would be easier, better, more satisfying, etc... Right?

There is, in fact, a part of everybody who believes if only our partners will change, we will get relief from the pain or distress that we're in. And to some degree that's true. But when this belief becomes the basis for relationship change or relationship improvement, there's trouble.

The problem becomes more than, “We have a failure to communicate”. I don't think Benjamin Disraeli believed that the problem in relationships is communication when he stated, “It destroys one's nerves to be amiable every day to the same human being.”

So, why do we keep repeating these negative patterns, even though we know that, when we get started, it's going to lead nowhere?

Interestingly enough, we do this because of the way that our brain is designed.

Here's a simplified way of picturing how your brain works: an analogy given by psychiatrist Daniel Siegel. He says, "Take one hand, for example, your left. Hold it in front of you, place your thumb across the palm and wrap your fingers around the thumb". Now this is a very elegant, but over simplified way of looking at your brain.

Your fingers represent the part of your brain that's logical - it plans, it gossips, it wonders how to get rich, it finds it can read a map, etc. The fingers represent this part of your brain that is basically right behind your forehead. Now the thumb is embedded deep in your brain. For the technically-interested, it's called the limbic system.

This thumb embedded in the middle of your brain has one purpose and it does it very, very elegantly. This part of your brain will record and store painful, emotional and physical experiences. It then stays on the alert for anything that looks like a similar threat. When this elegant radar spots anything that looks like a familiar, painful experience it warns you by sending out a biochemical distress signal. This is what creates your anxiety, your fear, your tension, your jumpy stomach, your clenched teeth, or your eyes narrowed down, and it has all the signals of your being under threat.

This reaction coming from your thumb is a survival mechanism that has evolved over hundreds of thousands of years. When you feel emotional pain or threat, this emotional brain (your thumb) wants one thing and one thing only, and that's relief. And it tries to get relief, but the way it tries to get relief is not conducive to harmonious relationships. Your emotional brain responds to a threat by dominating it, and wanting to make it go away.

This is why we become bossy, we become controlling, we yell, we interrupt. We want our partners to stop causing us distress.

It may be normal, but it's not effective.

This way of communicating is normal. It's not, however, *effective*, and that's a big difference. It's a normal reaction to feeling threatened, or a normal reaction to pain, but it's *not effective*.

Further, if we are trying to talk our partner out of their bad communication behavior, or trying to dominate them so they will stop doing what they're doing, and then we find that doesn't work, a

natural next step is to withdraw. We shut down or go into a resentful accommodation in order to get relief. Again this is not *effective*, it is just normal.

It's very important to understand what's happening with this 'normal' communication that is really not effective. These ineffective patterns are variations of the classic "fight or flight" response.

Back to our analogy, the problem is that your survival brain, the thumb, is basically at odds with the thinking, logical, planning, wanting-to-have-better-relationships part of your brain. This is the biggest challenge we all face as part of a couple. We need to improve our reaction when we feel threatened. We need to improve our emotional reaction by managing our limbic brain.

Now, let's say that you've had your normal share of playground humiliation, classroom embarrassment, run-ins with bullies, and mistreatments from your family, teachers, coaches or just the larger social community. Those painful experiences that stood out are stored in your thumb, so to speak. And this memory is stored there so that when you approach any situation that resembles a previous distress that was stored, you begin to feel the unease or the tension. The greater the original pain, the more intense your distress.

Your emotional brain doesn't make a value judgment about the resemblance. It is just your silent sentry putting you on alert that something bad is about to happen. That's when it sends out all these physical signals: the tension, the jumpy stomach, etc.

Here's what's interesting. The newest research on the brain shows that the emotional brain is in the same region that processes physical pain. So, being insulted by your partner registers in your thumb just like the reaction you have when you hit your finger with a hammer! Whoever said, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me," didn't know how the brain actually processes pain.

Basically, when couples talk about their "buttons getting pushed", they're talking about this uncontrollable barrage of feelings caused by re-stimulating reactions that were stored in the brain. A big insight is that ineffective communication may not be due to faulty interpersonal communication. The ineffective communication patterns result from this natural response to avoid triggering the layers of emotional pain that get stored in our thumb.

What does this all mean?

It means that better communication is more than just learning better guidelines for how to communicate, or learning the logic behind those guidelines. If logic worked to change our emotional response and you were afraid of flying, then you would get on an airplane and learn that flying is 37 times safer than driving. And when the pilot told you that, then you would just sit back, relax and enjoy the flight. But it's not that simple, is it?

Some fears are so embedded in us that if we only focus on rules for better communication, this is like washing only the outside of a coffee cup and hoping that it's clean inside. We need to more

directly influence our emotional brain. Actually, my big breakthrough in my practice happened when I learned how to work directly with the emotional brain. That's when I could help couples rapidly improve how they talked to each other without triggering that thumb response.

Your emotional brain has evolved to protect you, and it's doing its job and doing it well. This means that your reaction has a protective function. It's a way of trying to get relief, even though it's not all that effective.

My original professional training often focused on changing how couples talked to each other in order to change the emotional reaction. Well, the approach worked. It worked just enough of the time that I thought this approach was the proper solution. When it didn't work, I thought, "Well, ok, what couples need then is more will power, or they need more motivation in order to change." But that was before I learned what the neuroscientists were discovering - how the different regions of the brain were processing information.

To bring this all home, fixing or building or creating a relationship takes time. You've got to keep working on it, and you've got to have the right tools and techniques in order to deal with both the emotional brain and the logical brain. (And by 'the right tools,' I mean don't tweeze your eyebrows with barbeque tongs.) Awareness is the key to realizing when you and your partner are triggering natural reactions in each other. It's critical to stop the negative loop cycle, and tune into what is driving the reactions in the first place.

I really do believe that at this point, we're just peeking into the future about the possibilities of accelerating personal growth. The potential is exciting and your dreams are now closer than you think.

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