

The Purpose and Value of Communication in Long-Term Relationships

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Abstract

The evolutionary aspect of relationship communication, that is, the growing, dynamic element of one-on-one communication between couples as it specifically relates to the long-term relationship represents a small percentage of the overall body of communication research. This may seem surprising, considering that the quality and quantity of mutual communication over a period of time is one of the greatest determining factors of individual contentment, happiness, and wellbeing in relationships. This applies to all relationships but particularly to romantic relationships, which can often grow stale or boring over time if not nurtured and maintained. Communication plays a vital role not only in creating but also sustaining and enriching healthy relationships. From a long-term perspective, communication that is intentional, positive, nurturing and ongoing can help offset the indifferent familiarity that can often creep into even the most passionate relationships. This kind of healthy communication, if built into the foundation of a relationship, can also go a long way to preventing the relationship from crumbling. There are numerous ways in which intentional communication can not only help prevent relationships from decreasing in significance, worth and value, but can also help establish new significance in the relationship as it grows and matures over time.

Countless self-help articles and books have been written on the topic of maintaining relationships over time, and how to keep romance alive. However, at

present, over 50% of marriages in the United States end in divorce. Many marriages and long-term relationships have ended with the divorce decrees or breakup talks citing irreconcilable differences, “it’s just not working,” or “we grew apart” as the reasons for termination. While for some couples, certainly, separation is the best and often only healthy option, it is plausible to suggest that the majority of relationships that end unhappily could be saved if both individuals had been willing and able to implement positive communication practices leading to a better understanding of themselves and each other. Similarly, many relationships that do not end, but instead continue to the emotional and mental detriment of one or both members could be vastly improved by implementing these same communication practices. Communication that is open, honest, positive, challenging and affirming, while incredibly vital to the health of a long-term relationship, is often infrequently and ineffectively taught, and difficult to practice.

This being the case, perhaps it is not surprising that many couples are at a distinct communication disadvantage. When a relationship first begins, many couples jump the hurdles of the initial communication challenges with zeal and enthusiasm; the passion with which they approach the new relationship is motivation enough for them to overcome the issues at first. Some communication issues, however, remain unaddressed and unresolved in young relationships and these often compound as the relationship matures. As time wears on, the mundane routine of everyday life often begins to take a toll. The same activities that once brought the couple joy and excitement, such as going out to dinner together,

meeting with friends, sharing important milestones, and in-depth conversations, as well as other activities that accentuate and solidify their identity as a couple, cease to be as exciting or meaningful.

One reason for this is that, as time passes, relationship uncertainty is reduced. This uncertainty will be discussed later in further detail. Another reason is the increase of familiarity. As two individuals who are romantically involved spend more and more time together, their traits, habits, preferences, idiosyncrasies and defining qualities become less of intriguing mysteries and more of known facts of life to the other individual. Traits or habits that at first may have been considered “cute” or charming can eventually become irritating or tiresome. It has been said that familiarity breeds contempt, but all too often, in long-term relationships, familiarity breeds indifference. While impatience, frustration, and arguments are part and parcel of any relationship, romantic or otherwise, indifference is avoidable. However, many couples find their relationships with a more severe diagnosis than indifference, hanging tenuously, overwhelmed by stress or threatened by ongoing arguments and an inability to find common ground.

Reducing Relationship Uncertainty

In the early stages of a relationship, a primary concern is reducing relationship uncertainty. In a study on the impacts of everyday expressions of commitment, Weigel, Brown and O’Riordan (2011) state, “relational uncertainty arises when people are unable to anticipate or explain another’s behavior.”

Uncertainty about a relationship implies the “getting-to-know-you” stage. In the

first few social encounters between two acquaintances, the amount of uncertainty directly correlates to the amount of communication necessary to reduce that uncertainty; people must talk in order to get to know each other. Weigel's study, a survey of couples in dating relationships conducted over a period of four months, indicated that relational uncertainty plays a key role in the expression of commitment between two individuals by influencing what type and how much communication occurred in the surveyed relationships. Uncertainty can be both good and bad. While it may serve as a useful platform for conversation between two people who have just met, it takes on a different characteristic later on in the relationship and, if not reduced, can become a wedge. If a relationship is to be stable, the level of relational uncertainty between the two individuals must be low. Weigel's same study indicated that a high level of uncertainty in relationships was negatively associated with the partner's perception of relationship quality over a period of time. However, it is worth noting that some level of uncertainty can be beneficial to a relationship, serving to keep curiosity kindled and maintain some amount of mystery to be unpacked and explored over time. In long-term relationships, a delicate balance must be struck; while too much uncertainty regarding the other individual can result in shutting out, shutting down, or emotional or physical separation, the right amount of uncertainty can lend a healthy equilibrium of intrigue.

While it may not be the original intent, self-disclosure is the primary means of reducing uncertainty in the beginning stages of a romantic relationship.

Volunteering information about oneself, whether positive, negative, damaging or uplifting, is often how individuals in a relationship gain a clearer understanding of each other, and attempt to convey an accurate representation of themselves. In the early stages, both parties maintain generally positive self-disclosure, creating the most desirable version of who they are for the other person to perceive. This is natural. However, as times goes on and external stresses are introduced, the couple begins to experience various facets of life together, seeing each other at best and worst. As this process continues, self-disclosure becomes less intentional as well as less and less necessary. Observing how an individual behaves in and reacts to certain situations is often more telling than verbal self-disclosure. Purposeful self-disclosure is an important tool of ongoing relationships because it takes time and experience to get to know another person. The ability to understand each other and work through disagreements often depends upon honest and genuine self-disclosure.

Conflict Resolution

Communication also plays a vital role in working out differences and the resolution of conflict in long-term relationships. In heterosexual relationships, this is when communication differences between genders often become especially evident. With books like "Men are Like Waffles – Women are Like Spaghetti," and "You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation," the radically different communication styles of men and women is no small area of study, discussion or debate (Hyde). Most couples that have been married or in a monogamous relationship for a moderately long period of time will most likely learn

to adjust and accommodate their significant other's unique communication style. This requires patience, sacrifice, and a willingness to ask questions as well as answer questions. Ideally, couples who remain in long-term relationships should work to understand their significant other's style of communication as well as their own. Knowing their spouse or significant other's particular communication struggles and deficits allows the other individual to consider this in their own communication and, when necessary, overcompensate to account for those shortfalls.

Deepening and Enriching the Relationship

As a relationship progresses, communication helps to establish the couple's unique identity. A couple's identity is built over time and specific attention given to spending time together, participating in shared hobbies, and discussion of things that make the couple its own individual entity contribute greatly to the happiness and longevity of a relationship. Much like a plant with roots, a relationship must be deepened and enriched. One extremely important aspect of this deepening and enriching process consists of building up and affirming the opposite individual in the relationship. In the study of communication in relationships, whether short or long-term, we see that words can either be tools with which to build, or weapons with which to attack. In many relationships that meet untimely ends, a careful retrospective study of the flow of the communication in the relationship, from casual conversation to distraught arguments, would almost certainly reveal words being thrown back and forth as weapons. Many psychologists and communication experts cite the difference between "I-language" and "you-language" and this is an

extremely important concept in the communication of a relationship. “I-language” is a way of communicating that deals with the speaker’s own perception of a problem or issue, whereas “you-language” attacks the opposite partner, attaching blame and accusation to the expression of the issue. It is essential that individuals in long-term relationships use communication with intentionality, as a tool rather than a weapon.

The Positive Power of Silence

Much like words can be either tools or weapons, silence can also be either harmful or beneficial to a relationship. Figuratively, silence can serve as a bridge or a wall. Numerous scientific journal articles recount the negative impacts of silence on a relationship, while psychologists and religious instructors recommend the benefits of silence and meditation. Similar to striking a helpful balance when it comes to relational uncertainty, a “happy medium” of silence and healthy distance in relationships is beneficial to short and long-term health and stability. For introverted individuals, spending time alone or in silence is often easier than for extroverted individuals, however, taking some agreed-upon time away from a significant other is vital. Some individuals in close romantic relationships have expressed feelings of being “smothered” by the other individual, which, over time, can cause the partner feeling smothered to harbor resentment and bitterness toward the other. While in the early stages of a relationship, as two individuals are still growing accustomed to being around each other, they often feel the need to fill the silence with endless conversation (reducing uncertainty). But as a relationship grows and matures, a comfortable silence often descends. Sadly, in many long-term relationships, the silence becomes stony, cold and uncaring,

characterized more accurately as a wall, difficult and awkward to scale and damaging to both individuals. However, if monitored, recognized and appreciated for what it is: a contented silence of camaraderie, rather than a mutual ignoring, this silence can serve as a bridge, easy to cross, between the two.

Conclusions

Couples who communicate intentionally from the beginning of their relationship and make it a point to reduce uncertainty, work out differences, deepen and enrich the relationship, build up and affirm each other, and let silence be a bridge rather than a wall are in a positive and advantaged position to live out life together with contentment, love, mutual respect, admiration and anticipation, with a bond that is not only deeper than but deepened by everyday frustrations, the pain and stress of raising a family, careers, the loss of loved ones, relocations, identity crises, financial struggles and spiritual hardships. Through these six areas of verbal and nonverbal communication, as well as many others, the evolution of communication in a relationship is seen over time. Familiarity, close proximity, shared activities, and the lessening of relational uncertainty serve at once two purposes: first, by natural order of events, they cause some aspects of the relationship that held meaning and significance in the early stages to decrease. This is a byproduct of the natural progression of the relationship and an increase in familiarity. At the same time however, if given focused attention and committed effort, these same factors can be used as communication tools to create new and different aspects of significance in the relationship as years progress and the

individuals grow and mature along with the living, growing entity that is the long-term romantic relationship.

References

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