

The Heart of Relationships

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When it comes to relationships, the words we say and how we say them matter. Statements like, "I love you" said with tenderness and "I'm sorry" said with remorse build or repair connection. Statements like, "You're a worthless piece of shit" and "It's your fault the dishwasher quit working" lead to or widen disconnection. The intention behind the words we speak is more important than what we say. In order to have quality connection with others, we must speak from our hearts rather than our heads.

Marshall Rosenberg, the founder of *Nonviolent Communication*, has created a basic model to help us build our communication skills. His model has us expressing ourselves honestly using "I" statements that provide a description of what we see and hear without interpretations or evaluations, the feeling we have in reaction to the action/inaction/statement, an acknowledgment of the underlying need that is or isn't being met, and a specific request. The basic format is: "When **I** see/hear _____, **I** feel _____, because I have a need for _____. Would you be willing to _____?"

What makes this work is that in Rosenberg's model, statements are made **without** criticism, insults, blame, put downs, diagnoses, evaluations, or judgments. The brilliance of this model lies in accepting the fact that all of us have basic universal needs that when met lead us to feel happy, optimistic, peaceful, loving, playful, energetic, relaxed, grateful and other sorts of feel good feelings. When these needs aren't met, we feel a variety of not so pleasant feelings such as sadness, discouragement, anxiety, fear, frustration, resentment, anger, confusion, embarrassment, and hurt. These universal needs not only include basic survival oriented needs such as air, water, food, and safety, but also needs such as information, clarity, physical affection, warmth and caring, autonomy, individuality, authenticity, honesty, respect, humor, excitement, passion, harmony, peace, beauty and inspiration.

According to Rosenberg, most of our behavior stems from strategies to get our needs met. Unfortunately, most of us learned early on to use criticism, insults, blame, put downs, diagnoses, evaluations, and judgments to get what we want, even when these strategies fail over and over. Rosenberg's model offers a more effective strategy to get our needs met.

But even when we understand nonviolent communication skills, relationships are challenging. Sue Johnson, a counseling psychologist who has done a lot of research on couples, argues that this difficulty is in part due to the fact that we are hard-wired to bond emotionally with significant others. In other words, not only are love, connection, warmth and caring, intimacy, acceptance and being seen, heard and responded to needs that we all have, they are absolutely necessary for our survival. This is obvious with infants. In order to survive, infants need an emotional bond with a responsive significant other. Infants who do not experience loving connections die, even if their physical needs of food, water and clean diapers are taken care of.

Sue Johnson argues that this primal need for a secure emotional connection never goes away. What this means is that in order to feel safe and secure, we need to feel attached to others. We need to trust that we can depend on someone to be there for us when we need them: to help us when we are in a jam, take us to the hospital, cry on their shoulder when we are down and celebrate our victories when things go well. We need to know that they have our backs. And we need to know that they value and appreciate us. This need for secure attachment is so deeply embedded in us that our limbic brain actually codes downed connection lines as a threat to the system. Disconnection literally feels traumatic.

And when we sense disconnection from our significant other, our communication tools go out the window. We turn to judgment, criticism, blame, barking out orders and ultimatums and all the other communication don'ts that are all but guaranteed to generate conflict. Usually this conflict is a variation of the "blame game" or "the pursue/withdraw dance." And once the conflict gets going, it's hard to stop.

According to Sue Johnson, fighting is often a coded way of saying, "I love you and I'm scared that our connection is being threatened." This means that ironically, the "blame game" and the "pursue/withdraw dance" are strategies, albeit ones that are almost guaranteed to fail, to repair the bond and maintain the relationship.

Even though it's hard to stop a fight once it gets started, remembering that that the real source of conflict is the fear that there is a disconnection and that one or both of you are afraid that the cord between you is being threatened can help bring an end to the fighting. Once the two of you have calmed down, you can use Rosenberg's communication template to express your core feelings and request the changes you'd like to see your partner make.

Listening from the Heart

The words we say and how we say them matter. The same thing can be said for how we interpret the messages we get from others. While others are responsible for the words they speak and the body language they use, we are responsible for how we react and respond to them.

We tend to process what others say through filters. This is particularly true of how we hear our partners and family members. Some of these filters are based on past experiences with a particular person. For example, if at one point Sunita called Judy out on gaining weight, the next time Sunita asks Judy if she wants to go to the gym, Judy may remember Sunita's past comment and assume that Sunita is judgmental about her weight.

However, most of these filters are internalized from messages we got earlier in life. For example, if Sally's parents frequently criticized her for everything she did and never gave positive feedback, she may hear any feedback she gets through the filter of, "I'm not good enough." Similarly, if Drake's father beat him when he didn't do well in school or answered questions incorrectly, he may hear questions or comments through the filter of, "Bad things happen when I don't know the answer."

When we hear something that sounds like criticism that hooks into that old message, we often take it personally and feel like we have to either defend ourselves against it or, if that doesn't work, withdraw.

For example, one of the many things that trigger an argument between Brad and Carlos is that when Brad walks in and says, "How was your day?" Carlos automatically "reads between the lines" and hears: "You are worthless. You did nothing today. You didn't go to work. You didn't mow the lawn. You didn't work out the finances. You didn't fold the laundry. You're just a lazy bum." Carlos thinks to himself, "I was busy all day. I worked my butt off getting things organized, writing a resume, studying for the class, taking the dog to the vet and buying groceries, and let's Brad have it. "You are always taking my inventory and nothing I do is ever enough for you. F***k you." And the fight is on.

Key here is that Brad simply said, "How was your day?" Brad swears he was just trying to reach out, to connect, but Carlos heard it through the filters he's been struggling with for a long time. Because of those filters, Carlos made up a story about what Brad was thinking and responded as if the story was real.

But what if, instead of having a knee jerk reaction to the story he made up, Carlos was able to slow down, take a breath (or 5 or 10) and hear the question as an effort to connect, think to himself, "Brad really loves me. He wants to know about my day" instead of coming at Brad with both guns metaphorically blazing. Had he heard Brad through the filter of "he loves me," might have been able to respond compassionately and honestly. He might have said, "Wow! Thanks for asking. It was rough. I was so busy today. I spent hours trying to get things organized. And I feel guilty because I didn't get everything on the list done. I'm sorry about the lawn. But hey, I got you those chips you like at the grocery store!"

And even if he couldn't hear through a love-based filter, what if Carlos had been able to slow down, take a breath (or 5 or 10) (*slowing down and breathing are really important aspects of communication) and check out his story with Brad. "When I hear you ask, 'How was your day?' I think you are judging me and it hurts because I think that you don't think I am important." Brad might have been able to say, "No, I wasn't judging you. I wanted to connect with you and hear about your day." Either of these options would have been less likely to lead to a fight.

Just as it's important to **speak** without criticism, insults, blame, put downs, diagnoses, evaluations, or judgments, it's important to **listen** without assumptions, making up stories or reading between the lines. The first step is to recognize your filters. One way to do this is notice what you are thinking when you find yourself feeling defensive, wanting to beat yourself up, or wanting to withdraw. For example, if you notice that you get angry anytime you feel criticized, it would be helpful to slow down, note that you feel triggered, take a moment to sort out what specifically you are feeling angry about, and identify the story you're telling yourself about what happened, and check it out. It would also be helpful at some point to take some time to identify and challenge the underlying internalized negative beliefs that get triggered when you feel criticized so that some day you will no longer get hooked by criticism.

*To ask Regina a question, propose a column topic, read about her approach to counseling, or check out her books and other writing, go to: www.ReginaSewell.com . Her essay "Unequal Wedding" appears in **Untangling the Knot: Queer Voices on Marriage, Relationships, & Identity**, published by Ooligan Press.*

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