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Growing even closer through our communication

Introductory Reading

Today we can communicate faster, with more people, and in many more ways than ever before – mobile telephones, email and text messages, to name a few. Yet in spite of all our technology, we know **communication is more than just transmitting a message between one person and another – it's about understanding and building a close connection.** Good communication in marriage is essential. So what gets in the way – what makes us feel disconnected?

What are the things that make communication difficult for me and my partner?

Feeling disconnected?

There are many reasons for feeling disconnected from our partner, including:

- I. **Lack of time and energy.** Busyness and stress so fill most people's lives today that many couples complain they simply haven't got enough time for each other. Living in the fast lane also drains our emotional batteries. It's no wonder our relationships suffer.
- II. **Our differences.** Family backgrounds, experiences during childhood, personalities, value systems and religious beliefs all affect how we think and respond to situations. Our gender differences may also cause misunderstandings. Generally speaking, women like to express their feelings and men prefer to share information.
- III. **Styles of expression.** Some prefer to talk about facts and concrete realities, whereas others focus on concepts, ideas and possibilities. An introverted personality often prefers small groups and time alone, whereas extroverts get their energy from interaction with more people. Some like analysing situations before making decisions; others let their hearts rule.

God's design for couples

In the creation account we read that God makes humans 'in his image', as male and female.¹ We also read about His design for marriage: that two should leave their families, unite, and become one. A new unit is formed as we join our hearts, minds and bodies in marriage. God now sees us as 'one'. We are still individuals but somehow, together, we have become something new – a unique expression of the image of God.

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh. The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

Genesis 2:24–25

Communication helps us to get close to our partner – to build emotional intimacy and to experience and develop our 'oneness'. Busyness, stress and our differences can make communication difficult, even though that's not what we intend. **But the root of communication problems lies in the distortion of God's design.** We have an inner bent towards putting our own thoughts, feelings, desires and our lives at the centre of everything and before others. The Bible calls this sin. We also tend to hide our true selves from each other. This makes it difficult to get close to our partner.

How do I overcome my self-centredness and connect deeply with the thoughts, feelings and desires of my partner?

Good communication

We can build understanding and get closer to our partner by improving our communication skills. We can learn to be better listeners, to express ourselves more clearly, understand body language and the like, but at the end of the day these are only tools.

The heart of deep communication is about being transparent, which requires complete openness and trust.² There should be nothing to hide and no secrets to undermine the bond of trust. Transparent communication is free from shame, blame and fear. This level of sharing is a great challenge, but together – with God's help – we can work to see our communication become something that brings joy, closeness and new energy to our marriage.

This session looks at how we can develop a closer relationship through the way we communicate.



Ground rules

Remember the three simple ground rules to ensure the session is an enjoyable time of learning together:

1. Respect each other – Don't share anything that would embarrass your partner or others in the group.
2. Maintain personal boundaries – You can pass on any question you don't want to answer.
3. Be confidential – Whatever is said in the group stays in the group.

Group session

Feedback

- What insights or encouragements did you gain from your Couple Time?
- Was there anything in the Introductory Reading for this session about communication that prompted you to think about the subject in a new way? Explain.

A How are we communicating?

We all have different ways of communicating depending on our personalities and experiences. **As couples we tend to develop patterns of communication which can become habits, for good or bad.** Also, our modern way of life can squeeze out time for each other. If we want to grow a close relationship we need to be able to communicate well. This will mean dealing with those things that might prevent it happening.

Chris and Carol

Chris and Carol have had a long, hard day. At last the children are in bed and Carol settles down to watch the television

Chris: *(cheerfully)* I noticed that new people moved in across the road. Maybe we should invite them over for a drink tomorrow evening?

Carol: Mmm ... if you like.

Chris: Or we could invite them for dinner or a BBQ at the weekend? We could invite Brenda and Harry next door too – we haven't seen them for ages. It would be good to do something fun ... you know what they say about all work and no play ...

Carol: *(not really listening)* OK.

Chris: Sales are down again this month ... that's two bad months. People are getting nervous ... there's talk of redundancies. *(Pauses for a moment)* Carol, I don't think you're listening to me.

Carol: What?! *(reasonably gently)* Look, Chris, I'm trying to watch this. Can we talk about work later?

Chris: When does it finish? I've been wanting to talk to you all week ... I was hoping to get an early night tonight ... after all, this is Friday night!

He looks at her intently hoping she'll get the hint.

Carol: *(Glued to the TV and not even looking up)* OK – I'll see you later love.

Chris: Carol, that's not what I'm saying, I ...

Carol: *(Interrupting)* I'm sorry Chris. I just want a bit of time to wind down. Is that a problem? I've had people, meetings and decisions all day long and it's just nice to come home and switch off from everything. Would you mind making me a coffee while you're up, please? We can talk later, OK?

Chris doesn't reply but leaves quietly for the kitchen to make drinks. He returns and hands Carol a coffee. For a moment he hesitates as if to say something, but doesn't and then moves towards the door.

Chris: Don't wake me when you come up.

He leaves, closing the door behind him.

Carol: *(To herself.)* At last, some peace ...

She pushes away thoughts about the look of disappointment and hurt on Chris's face as he left, and tries to enjoy her TV programme.

1. What do you notice about Chris and Carol's communication – good and bad?
2. If this were a typical pattern of interaction, how would it affect their relationship? What could they do differently to improve communication?

Foundation Principle:

Good communication means making our marriage partner a priority.

A How are we communicating?

Take a moment by yourself to prepare for your Couple Time by thinking about how you communicate in your marriage.

Note three things that you want to talk to your partner about:

- i. an area where our communication is working well.
- ii. an area where some change might be helpful.
- iii. a practical idea to help me make regular time and energy for good communication.

In your Couple Time be prepared to talk about your answers and what you can do to help each other communicate better.

B Communicating at deeper levels

1. What do you think might make communication within a Christian marriage distinctive?

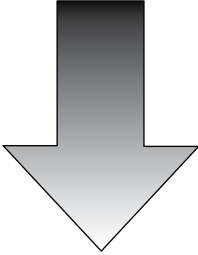
Creation design

*The heart that breaks open
can contain the whole
universe.*

Joanna Macy

In the creation account in Genesis we read that God makes marriage part of His design for human relationships. **His plan for marriage is a level of intimacy between husband and wife in which the two are so close that they are 'one'**.³ This requires open communication at deeper levels. The apostle Paul affirms the general principle in the New Testament to **open wide your hearts**.⁴

2. The following diagram⁵ (page 24) shows different levels of communication. Each level requires different degrees of openness (transparency) and of trust. Think of some examples of potential communication between Chris and Carol for each of the five levels.

Communication level	Degree of openness and trust increases moving through levels 1 to 5	Meaning
1. Cliché		Non-sharing
2. Fact		Sharing what you KNOW
3. Opinion		Sharing what you THINK
4. Emotion		Sharing what you FEEL
5. Transparency		Sharing WHO YOU ARE

3. Many marriages can 'tick over' from day to day with communication rarely going below level 3, like 'marriage business partners' getting on with all that needs to be done. This can lead to a shallow or unsatisfying relationship.

- What is the role of listening in reaching deeper levels of communication?

Don't knock the weather; nine-tenths of people couldn't start a conversation if it didn't change once in a while.

Kin Hubbard

The root of communication problems

Adam and Eve, the first couple, are described as being 'naked and without shame'.⁶ Then, in Genesis 3, Adam and Eve doubt God's loving provision for them. They disobey His instructions, giving in to temptation and eating the forbidden fruit. In this symbolic act God's authority is challenged and the whole created order is corrupted with far-reaching consequences. Enter: shame, blame and fear. They hide from God. They also hide from each other – **the openness that once existed between Adam and Eve turns to hiding behind coverings made of fig leaves.**

4. God intends couples to be 'naked and without shame'.

- What do you think this means for the way we communicate as a couple?
- Why do we tend to hide our true selves from each other?

Foundation Principle:

Good communication means growing in deeper understanding, which requires openness and trust.

B Communicating at deeper levels

- i. Think about the following statements and how they express your thoughts and feelings. Put your initials somewhere on the line to reflect how you see the issue.

	almost never	sometimes	often
I think we share goals & dreams freely with each other.	_____	_____	_____
I am able to express my feelings openly.	_____	_____	_____
I find misunderstandings tend to grow between us.	_____	_____	_____
I think we tend to avoid uncomfortable issues.	_____	_____	_____
I think I am able to express my needs to you.	_____	_____	_____

- ii. Now put your partner's initials somewhere to describe how *you think* your partner currently sees the issue.

In your Couple Time be prepared to talk to your partner and explain why you placed your initials where you did.

C Growing in trust and openness

Since the 'Fall' in Genesis 3, relationships have been corrupted by fear. We fear punishment from God because of our sin, so we hide from Him. Other kinds of fears affect our relationships with people – fear of rejection, fear of being hurt – and so we may hide from them.

God reveals who He is – with total transparency – through Jesus. We do not need to fear punishment from God because He showed us His unconditional love by sending Jesus to die for us. His sacrifice dealt with sin and restored our damaged relationship with Himself. **The good news of the gospel is that it can set us free to live the way God intended as husband and wife.**

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

1 John 4:18

Once we are sure that God will not punish or reject us, we can respond by coming out of hiding. As we begin to trust Him more we will be able to increasingly open ourselves up to Him. This new pattern of communication with God can have a knock-on effect on our communication with our partner.

1. In what ways can a relationship of growing trust and openness with God affect the communication in our marriages?

Foundation Principle:

As we become more secure in God's unconditional love for us, we will be able to communicate more openly as a couple.

C Growing in trust and openness

- i. What could I say to my partner to affirm him/her? How much do I trust him/her? Write down something positive below.
- ii. How free do I feel to open myself up to God – how much do I trust Him?

In your Couple Time be prepared to talk about your answers and what you can do to help each other to grow in openness and trust in your communication, with God and with each other.

... And finally

Take a minute to review the Foundation Principles for the session.

Agree on a date for your diaries for your Couple Time. Make an hour for each other between group meetings to talk through and apply what is relevant to your lives.

Couple Time date:

Good communication is as stimulating as black coffee and just as hard to sleep after.

Anne Morrow Lindberg

Couple Time – 60 minutes

As you talk to each other remember the dos and don'ts of listening:

Don't	Do
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Interrupt.• Be distracted.• Criticise or blame – instead say how you feel.• Give unwanted advice.• Change the subject or tell your own story.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Listen actively – give your full attention.• Be sensitive to one another as you share your thoughts and feelings ... this is important.• Speak the truth in love.• Try to understand – from time to time check your understanding by 'feeding back' to your partner what you think he/she has said.• Be ready to apologise for any attitudes or behaviour that has caused your partner to feel marginalised or misunderstood.

If you didn't have time to complete the Couple Time preparation boxes during your group meeting then take a few minutes to fill them in now before you talk to your partner.

A How are we communicating?

Take turns reading out and expanding on your written answers to all three questions on page 23.

Identify a personal action point for you as an individual (a specific way to follow through with an action from any insights you gained from the discussion in the group and/or with your partner). These are intended to be helpful prompts for change if needed.

Personal action point:

Note: Be gentle with each other as you talk about deeper levels of communication. Make a point of affirming your love and acceptance for your partner at whatever level they try to express themselves. Encourage them with your gratitude when moving to a deeper level than you would normally communicate.

B Communicating at deeper levels

Each explain why you placed the initials where you did on page 25, and remember to highlight the things you are doing well.

Identify a personal action point to enable you to communicate at a deeper level, if appropriate.

Personal action point:

Look at Together Notes: Poor Listening/Good Listening (www.togetherinmarriage.com) for more on communication.

C Growing in our trust and openness

Talk about how you can grow in trust and openness in your relationship. Both share your answers to the first question on page 26 before moving on to the second question. Identify an action point if needed.

Personal action point:

Note: If you struggle with past experiences and how these affect your ability to trust your partner, you may consider talking to a trusted friend or counsellor.

At the next group meeting you will be asked to describe one way you are starting to communicate differently with your partner as a result of the session. Agree on one thing you would be prepared to share with the group from your Couple Time and write it down:

Before the next group meeting please complete the Introductory Reading for Session 2: **Finding unity through God's purpose and plan for marriage** (pages 31–33). God designed marriage and He has an exciting purpose and plan for it. Understanding God's plan for our marriages will enable us to find a commitment to a shared vision.

For further reading:

A Child No More, Mary Pytches (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1991)

Dying to Change, Mary Pytches (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1996)

For remarried couples

(optional additional questions)

For couples where either one – or both partners – have previously been married or in a long-term relationship.⁷

- i. Do you face any special challenges in establishing trust and openness with each other in the light of the previous relationship of either one – or both – partners? How do they affect you?
- ii. Agree on one thing you could do to support your partner as you face any challenges together.

Identify a personal action point, if needed.

Personal action point:

NOTES

1. Genesis 1:26–27.
2. Adapted from *Understanding: Communication I*, FamilyLife USA 'Weekend To Remember' conference manual, revised 1/04. Used with permission.
3. Genesis 2:24.
4. 2 Corinthians 6:11–13.
5. Based on table 'Why am I afraid to tell you who I am' by John Powell, FamilyLife USA 'Weekend to Remember' conference manual, revised 1/04. Used with permission.
6. Genesis 2:25.
7. Adapted from Question 3, Session 3, 'Making Your Remarriage Last', Group Publishing, Copyright © 2001 Jim Keller. Used with permission.