

Communicating in the Pressure Moments Pt.3

- Creating an Emotion and Communication Safety Zone in your Marriage

LWCC Marriage Ministries Email For August 2024

Greetings once again from your Marriage Ministries Team. And yes, it's hard to believe another month has almost passed us by.

In our email two months ago, we considered a scenario where someone got caught off guard by their spouse approaching them with something important, but at the most inopportune time. From that we then looked at four communication issues we don't handle well in those challenging moments, and then considered one possible way of handling that moment better. Last month I took some time to outline a process to help those who find they don't handle those moments well, to clear the air as it were, and get some dialogue going about those egg-shell kind of moments most of us have experienced at some time or other.

Well done to those who used the material, had the hard conversations, and in some cases sought some coaching. So now let's delve a little deeper into how we might:

Create A COMMUNICATION SAFETY ZONE for our marriage:

Most couples don't realize how important it is for each of you to feel safe when communicating with one another. When first married most of us took it for granted that we'd simply always feel safe in our relationship, until one day we went to communicate with our spouse and got stunned by some over-the-top push-back or reaction, catching us completely unawares. If such a moment is not dealt with effectively straight away, it's not long before it happens again and we find ourselves editing our words carefully, or beginning to walk on eggshells around certain topics at certain times.

As mentioned over the past couple of months, it may simply be that we totally miss-read where our spouse was at when we approached them; and YES, their reaction is totally inappropriate, but if you don't get on top of this right away, it can become a habit that will plague your relationship for years or even decades to come. In fact, I know a couple, amongst others, to whom this was very much the case - you may have met them! I use their names by permission; Stan & Ronnie Beale. Certainly, last month's email set out some great steps for couples to get on top of those kind of awkward moments, once and for all, and to re-establish that all important communication safety zone that we all want to live in.

We define a "safety zone" in marriage as an atmosphere where you and your spouse can both be *understanding and be understood, and manage yourselves well in pressure moments, being able to speak what's on your mind safely*. When we don't feel emotionally safe, we're more likely to withdraw, or shy away from the conversation that needs to be had. This only adds to communication meltdowns and unhealthy habits!!! So let's see if we can find some further practical suggestions that you can implement, that will help in creating the best possible emotional and communication safety zone in your marriage.

Recognise the Moment:

There are so many things we do to make good communication difficult: as mentioned, we don't read the moment well in endeavouring to engage in an important conversation; conversely, we don't

communicate to our spouse that this is not the best moment, or that we are under a bit of mental or time pressure and need to park this conversation; or, we introduce a communication killer and mess the moment up by, reacting, huffing and puffing etc.. So often, egg-shell moments, or tense conversations could be avoided if we could just *recognise the moment*.

If you identify with this issue, then here's one suggestion some of you will recognise: it as a variation on an idea expressed in the Alpha Marriage Course. Decide together on an item: ie a tea towel, a soft toy, a glasses case, an ornament - it can be anything really. When you have something important to discuss, pick it up - always make it the same item - approach your spouse and ask them if it's convenient to talk. The moment they see you approaching them with that item in your hand, they know you have something important to talk to them about; they know immediately that you are only using this approach because of the difficulty you have both had in the past with communication issues, and you are simply playing your part in taking a constructive approach, albeit through the use of a gimmicky item in your hand, to communicate your intention to engage in a process to change old habits.

Taking the suggestion from last month, they now have a responsibility to play their part, and do two things: first of all, decide to take responsibility for their actions and emotions, and to thereby engage in the process you have just embarked on, and do so without reacting: without huffing and puffing.....etc.; secondly, decide to either, engage with you and listen to what you want to talk about, or respond by asking if you can hold off for an hour or two, or till after tea, or till bed time or the next day because..... and give a reason for parking the request. You can then agree to park the conversation, and agree together on a time to come back together and talk about the issue or matter you are concerned about. To contribute to the change you are both committed to, and to build a new level of trust in your endeavours to establish 'communication safety zones' in your relationship, it is then your spouse's responsibility to come back to you at the arranged time, and engage with you in the matter at hand.

Now, if this has been an issue for you, believe me when I say, we have seen many couples take this seemingly silly yet simple approach, and dramatically change their relationship in this area. Now let's look at a second issue that can also hugely impact breaking down the bad habits we've formed.

Create a safety zone by being a good listener:

Starting a serious or important conversation with the intention of focusing on, and listening to what your spouse is saying, will create more emotional safety for your spouse in communication, than anything else we know. Consider the following:

Listen to respond, not to react. (In other words, from last month, take responsibility for you - determine that you are not going to react, or introduce a 'conversation killer'):

Avoid interrupting your spouse while they're speaking:

Try not to spend so much energy formulating a response that you miss what they're really saying:

Engage in active listening; in other words, listen, then reflect back what you think you heard them say, to make sure you understand where they're coming from, and ask "is this what you meant"?

Actively practice empathy while you get to the root of the problem or issue: again, avoid the 'conversation killers', keep eye contact, and let your spouse know you are listening by an occasional nod, or touch to show you are following them.

So, why not try an exercise together; ask one another the questions below. Let each other express themselves without interruption. First, one share, then the other. Treat it as if you are gathering valuable information. In the process you will gain much understanding about how he/she thinks and feels in conflict moments, which will help you both feel safer and more open when you do have those challenging or difficult issues that need to be approached.

- Consider together what tends to make you nervous or uncomfortable in conversation?
- Are there certain topics or scenarios that make you feel shut-down, or find it difficult to continue to engage in the conversation?
- Is there a time of day when it might be better - or not better - to have in-depth discussions with you?
- How do you respond to feeling upset? Do you withdraw and self-protect, or do you feel a sense of urgency around solving problems? What would he/she like you to do in those moments to help you.

Congratulations on making it this far in reading and processing the material contained above. I apologise if it has been a bit lengthy, but I wanted to make sure that the sections and suggestions were covered off thoroughly and clearly, and in a manner that will hopefully help some of you experiment in 'creating a more effective communication safety zone in your relationship'. Yes, it will take a bit of practice, and once mastered, you certainly won't need to use the full processes suggested above, but I felt the important thing was to outline a format you might follow, and some questions you could use, to break the rut that so many have struggle with.

As always, we trust you find it helpful. If this series has helped, please send us some feedback. We'd love to hear from you. Till next month, Blessings on you all from Your Marriage Ministries Team: Stan & Ronnie: John & Karen