

CONVERSATION CRUTCH FOR COUPLES

Most couples come to me (and other therapists, I presume) complaining of communication problems. What they mean is that they fight nastily, can't listen to a point of view without eye-rolling, interrupting, defining, defending and being generally miserable.

A couple of things:

- This is called reciprocal escalation, when Spouse A matches the intensity of Spouse B, and adds just a bit more to keep the crisis progressing upwards until someone "cuts off" and both wait for the next opportunity to conflict.
- People conflict for a reason, usually not very apparent. Mostly it is to win or to defend or to defeat the other loved person. It might be that Fine Husband wishes to refine Lovely Wife so that she is more of what he wants. And Lovely Wife may do the same thing.
- No one interrupts the escalation and that is why it keeps on going. A simple tension interruption done less than 3 times will probably result in immediate de-escalation in most crises. For example, "Can I rub your feet as we shriek at each other" would be a funny interruption.
- In conflict one may quit or abdicate because the Distancer knows that she or he will defeat the other by withdrawal. Distancers always have more power than Pursuers. This is called the "Distancer-Pursuer Synchronicity" and the theory is that Pursuers exhaust themselves in correcting, challenging, informing (etc., etc.) while the Distancer goes to Starbucks, writes notes in a journal and generally relaxes.

- "Benevolent disinterest" is a great interruptor of escalation. Benevolence means that one cares about the other. Caring juxtaposed with disinterest means that one does not care to escalate the conflict into a crisis. Some call this a non-anxious presence.

There is lot know about conflict and there is lots on the "Tools" section addressing this. Read more if you wish.

What I want to give you is a "Communication Crutch" that is so simple as to be simplistic if it wasn't profound.

Here is the crutch:

Brad and Lilly have been married for more than 12 years and describe themselves as "weary warriors." They are worn down with the continual fights and with the solutions that don't work. So, I listen to the litany of hurts and harms and then suggest a crutch that might just work for them.

One says: *"I feel blank because of blank." (Stop)*

And the other responds: *"Tell me about it." (Stop)*

That's it. Nothing more. No problems are to be solved though the couple might resolve some stuff by accident.

An example:

Lonely Lilly begins: *"I feel hurt because you roll your eyes whenever we talk to about nuclear physics"* (or parenting or whatever -- the topic is not relevant -- it is just a trigger to incite the conflict). And then she stops. Less than 20 or so words. Quiet. Both are stunned for a moment. There is no shouting or defending. One feeling statement (hurt) and one behaviour (eye rolling) and the experience is said. It is out there, clearly and simply.

Burdened Brad responds: *"Tell me about it."* Wow! 4 permission-giving words. Simply agreeing to listen without over-thinking and lots of benevolent disinterest. Just listening non-reactively. Simple. Again -- both are stunned by the silence.

Here is the genius of the crutch: just saying one's experience without judgement, interruption, evaluation, empathy statements and (horrid) solution-suggesting is immensely freeing to both partners. It is calming. In speaking Lilly represents herself only; and without needing to mind-read Brad or attack him. She just talks her experience to the non-interrupting Brad who is looking increasingly less like the enemy.

Of course Brad has a few things to say about the whole thing but his first task is to listen. It is so wonderfully easy not having to criticise. It is also so painfully difficult because for 12 years he has been on the attack.

Then they switch. And they will switch many times in the course of 30 minutes or so. So Brad says, *"I feel lonely most of the time. Like you don't love me. When I come home you are on the phone and have the evening booked solid with your work."* (Stop.)

He said his complaint in a few words and he stopped. Lilly is gobsmacked. He has *never* (she thinks) stopped a complaint in less than 20 minutes. He looks expectantly to Lilly and she says, *"Tell me about it"* and he smiles. Within 3 or 4 minutes he says "done" and he is. It didn't take hours. He didn't have to over-talk and argue.

What happened here is that Brad was able to separate his emotion and his thinking about what hurts him. Speaking succinctly proved easy to Brad when there was a structure that would allow him to speak simply. Even he was amazed.

And then we switch again, and then again.

Q & A clients often ask:

- "Do I have to carry on the conversation that my spouse initiated?" No. You speak about what is on your mind to say. It can be an entirely different subject.
- "Does it have to be a conflict issue?" No. Communication is not about correcting conflict. It is about expressing emotions and behaviours. You could begin with *"I feel excited because we have never had a communication crutch before."* (Stop.)

- "It doesn't seem that we solve any problems... but we feel better together." Yes, communication is not about correcting conflict (see above).
- "What if I am busy in the kitchen and she comes in and announces, *"I feel blank because blank."* Your response is to make a quick date. "How about 8 pm tonight after we get the kids in bed."
- "This seems so structured and disjunctive. I don't like being stuck in formulas." Well, you can always go back to what doesn't work. You will always have your killer instinct and dry ammo if you get tired of being reasonable.
- "So what about the problems we need to solve?" About 70% of problems between couples are unsolvable (say John and Julie Gottman — you can look them up). This crutch but you enables you to interrupt your escalation and place yourself in a position to solve the 30%. It also helps you to adjust your emotions to the 70%. That's way better than what you have been doing.

That's all I have to say about this. We can talk more if you would like to visit with me or email me. I would love to be one of those persons who actually helps you with your couple communication. Peace to you and your marriage.