

The importance of communication

While successful human relationships seem to involve a lot of C-words – co-operation, consideration, and several more intimate ones – communication is the biggest.

Without continuing communication, a couple's relationship will wither and die. So it is well worth putting in a little work to keep communication channels open, even when the last thing you feel like is talking to your partner.

A Relationships Australia study has found that 83 percent of people considered it important to have a partner with whom they could have a satisfying relationship. But 70 percent of people said the two biggest negative aspects were not enough time together and lack of communication.

When people come to counselling one of the first things they say is that communication has broken down. What they really mean is that they feel their partner hasn't heard them.

They are getting nowhere and a stand-off has developed. When communication breaks down, the "coupleness" starts disappearing from the relationship, and one partner may give up. This is tragic, because most of the time people want to save their relationship.

Some people are better than others at communication. If you have grown up in a household where people communicated well and everyone felt valued, then you have learned the skills of communication and you won't settle for anything else.

Other people may have grown up in a household where communication wasn't good, and where they experienced a lot of anger, frustration and isolation. These people haven't had the chance to learn good communication skills, but they want to have better relationships than the ones they grew up with.

Communication is about self-worth and the ability to trust the quality of your relationship. Sometimes people develop their own "stories", so that a simple comment from a partner is loaded with meaning for the listener.

For example, if he comes home and comments that the kids have left toys all over the floor, she immediately construes that as criticism of her, and feels that he doesn't understand her and support her.

But next door in another household, the husband makes the same comment to his wife about the kids' toys and she responds by agreeing and telling him she's had a lousy day so would he mind helping her clean them up a bit later? Same situation, totally different response.

The difference is that the one household's communication is working, while in the other communication has broken down and the wife feels isolated. Some external assistance may be helpful to shift and re-focus things.

Men can be reluctant to undertake counselling because they see it as hanging out the dirty washing in public. And while women tend to be talkers who need to talk about their feelings, for men the prospect of talking about problems for an hour with a third person can be agony.

But keeping up the positive communication is vital for a successful relationship.

It's worth taking the time and keeping things on track by noticing the glitches and gaps and attending to them, by yourselves or with the assistance of a counsellor when that may help.

Survival tips

- Don't assume you know everything about your partner. Listen to what they say and expect that your partner will also listen to what you say; so say what's on your mind.
- Don't ignore "broken record" issues – if your partner keeps bringing an issue up, it's because they feel you are not listening to them
- Remember to enjoy some light-hearted chat about your day and his/her day – it keeps the lines of communication open
- If you are having difficulty being heard, or your partner is shutting down on you, seek professional help. Your relationship is too important to risk losing.