

## Communicating with a Non-Communicator By Jeanne Strauss, LCSW

Do you sometimes feel lonely in your marriage or partnership? Has conflict worn away the intimacy, creating a communication gap full of resentment and criticism? Has your busy schedule put the relationship on the back burner so long that the flame has gone out? You can do something about these issues even if you don't believe your spouse is willing to change. It only takes one of you to turn things around. Even if you are in a relationship with a "non-communicator", you can teach him or her how to communicate better (even if he or she doesn't want to learn).

How do you know if you are trying to communicate with someone who doesn't want to communicate? You will hear phrases like; "can't we just agree to disagree?", "just let it go, get over it", "you're so emotional", "what's there to talk about?", "I need space", "let's talk about this later". If the person you love is saying these things, they are feeling frustrated, exasperated, angry or unsafe and are unable to listen to your feelings or thoughts right then.

When patterns of conflict or complacency are deeply ingrained, you start with the same bad opening lines, or reply with the same defensive conditioned responses. And yet, you are dismayed to realize the conversation ended up in the same place it always ends up; conflict, criticism, communication gap. This is an indication that one or both of you has shut down emotionally and you are just going through the motions. Unfortunately that is a sure road to the end of a relationship. Communication must become a top priority for at least one of you in order for it to change.

When I work with couples who are in conflict or crisis, usually one is more able to start the change process than the other. Often, but not always, it is the woman. Women tend to be better relaters and are more tuned in to relationship and communication issues. When the couple is willing to attend sessions together, it is often the wife making the appointment and the husband being dragged into the office. Believe it or not, this works, though it takes a little work on the part of the therapist to get the husband to buy into the process. But even if he won't attend sessions, the wife can make an incredible amount of change in the relationship all by herself. He doesn't really want to be miserable. He will change his tune if she changes hers. Once he sees that her therapy is making things better at home, he'll support her attendance, in fact he'll make sure she goes to her sessions. He won't even realize that he is gradually beginning to change too.

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