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Transforming Miscommunication Into True Intimacy

Life-tested wisdom on
improving communication
in marriage





Transforming Miscommunication Into True Intimacy

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Click on an article you'd like to read:

3 INTRODUCTION

Communication Problems? Join the Crowd.

By Kelli B. Trujillo

7 LEADER'S GUIDE

How to use "Transforming Miscommunication Into True Intimacy" for a group study

8 LET'S GIVE HIM SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT

7 ways to get beyond "yup" and "nope"

By Elaine Creasman

14 UNWANTED HELP

Can "helping" your spouse inadvertently communicate disrespect?

By Karen O'Connor

20 SILENT ARGUMENTS

Powerful choices that cut fights short (sometimes even before they begin)

By Melodee Martin Helms

27 WHY DOES MY SPOUSE MAKE ME SO ANGRY?

Four insights that changed my marriage

By Kathy Collard Miller

33 THREE CRITICAL WORDS

During a painful season of arguing, God challenged me to not give up.

By Jan Lazo-Davis

39 ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Articles, books, Bible studies, and online resources to help you further

Introduction



Communication Problems? Join the Crowd.

By Kelli B. Trujillo

Disagreement is inevitable.

Miscommunication is inevitable.

Tears will be shed. Words will be spoken and then sorely regretted. Anger, isolation, bitterness, and hurt will creep in.

It's inevitable. No matter how hard we try, two human beings just won't get along perfectly all the time. That guy who really "understood" you when you were dating—I mean, at a profound, deeply romantic level—will inevitably become the husband who's just said or done something so hurtful you're left reeling.



Transforming Miscommunication Into True Intimacy Communication Problems? Join the Crowd.

And you? That girlfriend who was so intentional about supporting your man will inevitably become the wife whose critical comments, "helpful suggestions," or manipulative maneuvers leave that man feeling deeply frustrated and discouraged.

True confession: I pout. When I'm wounded, and I—of course—know I'm absolutely, one hundred percent in the right, I pout. I fume. I dish out the silent treatment. Meanwhile, as I'm stewing in all my wounded-victim internal drama, my husband's go-to strategy is to sort of ignore my icy presence and wait until I "get over it" . . . which, of course, makes me more mad! Usually it takes me half a day or more to have the maturity to step back, look at the situation clearly, and see where I, too, was wrong in the situation.

What do you do? Yell? Cry? Play the victim? Manipulate? Guilt-trip? Control? Berate? Exasperate? Accuse? Sneer? Dish out the silent treatment? Fortify walls of defense that isolate you further from you husband?

Though it manifests itself in many different ways, ultimately most couples struggle with the same core challenge in our marriages: communication. It's *tough* to really "get" another human being—to connect, to listen, to be understood, to understand. Magnify these challenges with up-close-and-personal living conditions and pile on top all the stresses of work, money issues, and raising kids, and—KAPOW!—you've got a potentially explosive problem!

A quick glance at the women's magazines by the checkout counter at grocery stores across the country will reveal that, right alongside concerns about sex and body image, women are struggling in their efforts to communicate with the men in their lives. Christian couples aren't immune to this problem—we, too, can very easily slip into unhealthy communication patterns that leave us wounded, distant, bitter, alone.



Transforming Miscommunication Into True Intimacy Communication Problems? Join the Crowd.

Why? The reality of sin, for starters. We're self-centered and prideful beings, and we often can't clearly see when our ego is rearing its ugly head. But even beyond theological discussions of sin is a more practical matter: *We need better communication skills*. Often we may not realize our own communication shortcomings, but they loom large when we live full-time for a lifetime with another human being. Oh, and by the way, he has his own communication shortcomings and sin struggles. He also likely has a very different personality than you, may have a very different upbringing, and likely has very different felt needs when it comes to your marriage.

The great—no, let me say the *fantastic*—news is that our God is a God of new beginnings. God's grace-filled love blesses us with fresh starts, renewed hope, and the strength and courage to face our own failings and form new habits! Can I get an *amen*?

You can't change your husband (nor, truth be told, should you try), but you *can* transform your own attitudes, behaviors, and perspective regarding communication in your marriage. And, over time, that *will* impact your husband. As he feels appreciated, listened to, and blessed by your time together—and he senses that you really *get* him—patterns *will* change.

This TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN download is full of powerful, life-tested advice from women who have walked down the road of painful communication problems in marriage—and who now have some hard-won wisdom to share about transforming miscommunication into true intimacy. Be warned: The tips and insights these articles provide are not all easy to live out! They won't let you pout, they won't let you think you're always right, and they will absolutely challenge you to surrender your plan and choose God's instead.

Our hope is that this TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN download will help you take great strides in improving the communication in



Transforming Miscommunication Into True Intimacy Communication Problems? Join the Crowd.

your marriage. I certainly feel both convicted and inspired by these insights! Will you join me in taking action to foster healthy and loving communication in your marriage?

With God, all things can be made new!

Kelli B. Trujillo

Managing Editor, TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN downloads
Christianity Today

Leader's Guide

How to use “Transforming Miscommunication Into True Intimacy” for a group study



Transforming Miscommunication Into True Intimacy” can be used for individual or group study. If you intend to lead a group study, some simple suggestions follow.

1. **Make enough copies for everyone in the group to have her own guide.**
2. **Depending on the time you have dedicated to the study, you might consider distributing the guides before your group meets so everyone has a chance to read the material. Some articles are quite long and could take a while to get through.**
3. **Alternately, you might consider reading the articles together as a group—out loud—and plan on meeting multiple times.**
4. **Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting women to open up.**
5. **When working through the Reflect questions, be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It's important for women to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.**
6. **End the session in prayer.**



Let's Give Him Something to Talk About

7 ways to get beyond "yup" and "nope"

By Elaine Creasman

While we were dating and early in our marriage, Steve and I talked for hours, sometimes late into the night. As the years passed, however, he backed off. When we did talk, we ended up arguing, or it seemed he kept conversations superficial. I often wondered, *Why doesn't he talk to me anymore?*

Then I discovered, through trial and error, that I was engaging in conversation-stoppers such as being a bad listener, a conversation hog, and at times, a nag. So I began a quest to encourage meaningful communication with my husband once again. Here's what I learned.



Transforming Miscommunication Into True Intimacy

Let's Give Him Something to Talk About

1. Listening requires zipping my lips.

"Honey, you never tell me how you feel" I repeatedly complained to Steve.

Finally, one day he started to. But as soon as he mentioned his first feeling about a family conflict, I blew it by blurting, "You shouldn't feel that way."

"*That's* why I don't tell you how I feel," he said.

Conversation aborted.

I once saw a t-shirt that read: "I'm talking, and I can't shut up." I couldn't help but think, *That's me.*

The apostle James says we need to be "quick to listen, slow to speak" (James 1:19). When I put this advice into practice and don't make quick judgments or think about what I want to say next instead of listening to what he's saying now, Steve opens up more freely.

2. Letting him lead brings us closer.

My dissatisfaction with our communication came not so much from the fact that Steve didn't want to talk, but that he didn't talk about what I wanted to discuss. Often I'd muse mournfully, *My girlfriends think what I say is interesting; why doesn't my husband?*

He doesn't because he's not one of my girlfriends. Steve just can't get excited over hearing about people he doesn't know or about what happened at my women's Bible study like my girlfriends can.

But I still wanted to talk with him! In Ephesians 5:21, Paul says we're to "submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." For me, part of that submission means I adopt a "What do you want to talk about?" attitude. For instance, Steve loves sports. While I usually find sports boring, I love people, so I read about athletes and tell Steve about what I've read.

He also enjoys reading the newspaper, so I try to read it as often as I can. We discuss the stories, which often leads to conversations about how they relate to our lives.



Transforming Miscommunication Into True Intimacy

Let's Give Him Something to Talk About

I've also learned to let Steve decide when and where he wants to talk. While I crave face-to-face, intimate conversations, often he talks while he's doing tasks around the house or while we're on errands together. I've learned to say "yes" when he asks, "How would you like to help me with the yard work?" or "Will you go with me to the store?" because I know the task will also include conversation.

When I let Steve take the conversation reins, I was amazed to find he talked more, especially about his frustrations. He then felt more comfortable discussing what I want to. When I let Steve choose the topic, I get to know him better and I feel closer to him.

3. Good news keeps him talking.

I used to tell Steve immediately when something was broken, when the kids misbehaved, or when I was facing an emotional crisis. But focusing only on bad news in conversations is a downer, which is a *definite* conversation-stopper. If bad news must be told, a better way is to save it for an appropriate time, such as when Steve's not stressed or tired, and I'm no longer emotionally distraught. Humor is a good way to keep things positive. Steve and I share comic strips, which often help start conversations about family matters. If I find a funny Dave Barry column in the paper, I share it with him. I try to remember to tell him jokes I've heard. Or we discuss the funny things that have happened to our children or pets.

A funny movie can get us laughing and then talking. The other day I asked Steve, "What's the funniest movie you've ever seen?" Then we discussed lines from movies that made us laugh.

Who doesn't like talking if it's going to lead to laughter?



Transforming Miscommunication Into True Intimacy

Let's Give Him Something to Talk About

4. I can agree with him more often.

I'm not sure why, but I used to argue about everything with Steve—even when we were on the same side of an issue! I just couldn't agree with him. One day I read Proverbs 21:19: "It's better to live alone in the desert than with a quarrelsome, complaining wife." That was me.

So I got in front of the mirror and practiced saying two words: "You're right." While they've been the most difficult to say, when I do, they've made a huge difference in the way Steve opens up to me. Another great phrase is, "That's true," when he says something I agree with. I noticed those conversations last longer.

5. He prefers the condensed version.

Setting a time limit on conversations does wonders. "Honey, may I talk to you for 15 minutes?" takes the scariness out of those ominous "We need to talk" announcements.

If I'm talking about something heavy, many times Steve can't handle anything more than five minutes. I used to feel hurt and was convinced he didn't care about me when he'd say, "I've heard enough." Futilely, I'd try to press him to talk longer, with the wrong results. I've learned not to take it personally. He simply isn't able to process a lot of soul-baring at one time.

So, if there's an issue Steve has been unresponsive to in the past, I've learned to take such matters to a girlfriend first. Then I can better give the condensed, less emotional version, and he's able to stay longer in the conversation.

6. I'm his wife, not his mother.

"I learn so much from you, but I can't stand it when you try to be my teacher," Steve said to me one day. That insight caused me to repent of spending too much time attempting to change or mother my husband. Questions that start with, "Why did you . . . ?" or



Transforming Miscommunication Into True Intimacy

Let's Give Him Something to Talk About

"Why don't you . . . ?" remind him of his mother interrogating or nagging him.

Lately when I think of how I speak to my husband, I ask myself, *Would I say that to a close friend?* Often I realize I wouldn't. So I don't say it to my husband either.

7. Don't just think he's wonderful. Tell him.

I once heard someone say it takes 12 compliments to make up for one criticism. Recently I was challenged with these words: "People don't know how wonderful they are. Someone has to tell them." In marriage, that means I need to tell my husband about his wonderfulness.

Yes, it's okay to tell him what bothers me—but I don't have to tell him a thousand times. When I can't seem to find anything to praise about Steve, it's because I've let unforgiveness creep in. It's time to repent.

Even if I don't approve of some things he does, there are always many more things to appreciate. Too often I take for granted that Steve's a caring father and an excellent provider and money manager. He's an expert at fixing things, and he forgives me quickly when I've blown it. So I try genuinely to lavish on the praise. And I thank him for taking the time to talk to me—even if the conversation wasn't as long and deep as I'd wanted. These days Steve seeks me out for conversation, and I'm delighted that many times he's eager to talk. The most exciting thing for me is when Steve asks, "Can we talk?"

Elaine Creasman, a freelance writer, lives in Florida. This article was first published on TodaysChristianWoman.com in 2009.

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Transforming Miscommunication Into True Intimacy

Let's Give Him Something to Talk About

Reflect

- Read **Proverbs 19:13; 21:9, 19; 27:15**. Ouch! *These are not complimentary words. Yet they reveal, at least from a husband's perspective, how frustrating and defeating marital communication problems can feel. Use your imagination to step into your husband's shoes; aim to zero in on his own personality, interpersonal needs, and conversation style. How might he finish this sentence? When it comes to communication, it really bothers me when my wife . . .*
- *How might he finish these sentences? I really enjoy talking to my wife when she . . . And, I like talking to my wife about . . .*
- *Which of Elaine's suggestions most challenges you and your communication patterns with your husband? Why?*



Unwanted Help

Can "helping" your spouse inadvertently communicate disrespect?

By Karen O'Connor

Sitting with my husband at a seminar on love and respect in marriage, I squirmed. Some of what I was hearing hit close to home. It seemed that what one spouse sees as "helpful," the other might consider disrespectful. I turned to Charles, wondering what he was thinking as he listened to the same message. The more I heard from the presenter, the clearer it became that I had some work to do.



Transforming Miscommunication Into True Intimacy

Unwanted Help

For example, that very week I had laid out his vitamins and prescription meds at breakfast every morning even though he's perfectly capable of doing it himself. In fact, he knows the routine better than I do. After all, they're *his* pills, not mine. But I assumed that unless I took charge he'd ignore or forget them. I also "suggested" what foods would help him lose weight and coaxed him into eating a salad each day. And I took over researching some facts he needed for a speech he was writing because I thought it would be faster if I did it myself.

Taking Care . . . or Taking Charge?

Some might see these actions as helpful—even loving—things to do for one's mate. But in my case, they weren't about help or love . . . or respect. They were about *control*: me trying to manage and direct my husband in matters that are his business. I thought my way was better, so I imposed it without giving thought to how it might affect him.

One time when I offered my point of view (without being asked) on a dilemma he faced with one of his grown children, Charles said in a firm tone, "You're treating me like a five-year-old. Please back off."

I was stunned—and hurt—until I realized he was right. He rarely steps into my space and takes over. He doesn't lay out my vitamins, tell me what to eat, or impose his will on my relationship with my children. In fact, he respects my abilities and often tells me how much he admires what I accomplish.

We returned home after the seminar, equipped with a book, pages of notes, and a commitment to talk about what it means to each of us to love and respect the other. That event occurred ten years ago. Our relationship has changed considerably since then—for the better.



Transforming Miscommunication Into True Intimacy

Unwanted Help

Charles now has a vitamin case and takes care of filling it or neglecting to do so, and I stay out of it. He voices his food choices. And when issues arise about his kids, I listen with interest but comment only if he asks for my opinion. Of course I slip now and again, but mostly I show love and gratitude for who he is and what he does, and our life together is much happier, easier, and pleasant.

When You Get Off Track

It's one thing to learn a new way to behave. It's quite another to practice it. Following the seminar, we joined six other couples once a month for prayer, discussions on topics related to marriage, and refreshments. These meetings made a huge difference to all of us. When things got rough at home, we knew we had a safe place to go where people would hear, love, and support us.

Here are some of the challenges couples encountered and the changes we made:

Old Behavior: Answering a question directed at our spouse.

New Behavior: Remaining silent while our mate replies and learning something new about him or her.

Old Behavior: Giving advice without being asked.

New Behavior: Listening with interest, trusting our mate to find his or her solution, and supporting that discovery.

Old Behavior: Explaining our partner's point of view *for* him or her.

New Behavior: Waiting eagerly to hear his or her viewpoint and encouraging it.



Transforming Miscommunication Into True Intimacy

Unwanted Help

Old Behavior: Making financial decisions without consulting our mate.

New Behavior: Presenting investment opportunities and talking them over as a couple.

In our group discussions, both husbands and wives admitted to feeling embarrassed, judged, put down, and angry when their spouses stepped into their zone and answered or made decisions without asking them.

One man I know quite well does everything for his wife, from driving to shopping to cooking, and then complains that she's not much of a partner. How can she be? The moment she lifts a finger, he steps in and tells her to relax; he'll take care of it. None of us deliberately sets out to diminish our husbands and wives, but this effect occurs over time when we keep our eyes focused on what they don't do well or fast enough to please us. Then, to make ourselves feel better, we claim we were "just trying to help."

The Difference Between Authentic Help and Manipulation

Everyone needs real help at times. If you're sick, you welcome a cup of hot soup and someone to fluff your pillow. If you're behind on a deadline at work, you could use a hand with typing or filing or mailing. If you have to be in two places at the same time, it's nice to know your spouse can step in and cover for you.

That kind of help goes with the territory of being married and is something we all treasure. But crashing our mates' boundaries and manipulating the outcome to our satisfaction in order to look good, deal with our emotions, or gain favor is something else. When we are anxious or uncertain about when to step in and when to step aside, we can pray for God's guidance. "For the LORD grants wisdom! From his mouth come knowledge and understanding" (Proverbs 2:6).



Transforming Miscommunication Into True Intimacy

Unwanted Help

True help includes humility and respect:

- ***Allowing our spouses to be who they are—created by God—flaws and all.*** My elderly friend Mabel told me years ago to bring my hurts and feelings to God *first*, then to "ask him to minister to both of you before you hurt one another with damaging words or regrettable actions." I have treasured that advice.
- ***Respecting their opinions even if different from ours.*** Barbara Jean told me she was married for nearly 50 years before she realized that her husband's point of view is as valid as hers. "At that moment I gave up my right to be right," she quipped.
- ***Permitting our mates to make mistakes without our interference.*** Hank and Joan agreed that a sense of humor has led to healthy respect even when one of them messed up. They laugh and forgive rather than punish and sulk.

The next time you wander into your spouse's territory, ask yourself if you are helping or hindering, respecting or disrespecting. And if you're not sure, ask. Your husband may be more than happy to tell you.

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Reflect

- *Karen's struggle is a common one. Many of us can easily slip into control, manipulation, or mothering our husband—and we don't even realize it! Where did you see yourself in Karen's article? What's a specific example of something you've said or done recently to "help" your husband but that might have been received in another way?*
- *We all desire respect—we want to be taken seriously, affirmed, and viewed with confidence. What kinds of behaviors (actions, words, demeanor) from others communicate to you a sense of respect and affirmation? How might your husband answer this question?*
- *Reflect on **Matthew 22:37–40**. How does this principle of love speak to the way you can treat your husband? How do you need to better communicate respect and affirmation? In what ways do your communication patterns need to change?*



Silent Arguments

Powerful choices that cut fights short
(sometimes even before they begin)

By Melodee Martin Helms

My husband, Alvin, and I have been married so long that we hardly argue. What's the point when I can recite both parts in my head and eliminate the aggravation? Rather than stepping into unnecessary conflict, instead I can play out the argument in my head. Twenty-two years into our marriage, when we boil down an argument, the simmering essence remains the same: my tone of voice.

The imaginary conflict goes something like this: I snarl, "Okay, *fine*." He says my tone of voice poisons my words.

This logic launches me into defensive mode. Thus, a silent argument is born.



Transforming Miscommunication Into True Intimacy

Silent Arguments

These are the final moments of our typical argument:

Me: Words matter more than tone.

Him: Wrong. Your tone of voice says everything.

Me: Not true. I *agreed* with you.

Him: You didn't mean it.

Me: I said it though. That counts.

Him: How would you like it if I spoke to you in that sarcastic tone?

Me: That is not the point.

Him: It is the point.

Me: Fine.

(Cue the silent treatment.)

See? Would that fight have been worth it? Nope. Rather than fall into familiar patterns of painful conflict, we can choose a different way. Over the years, I've turned to several remedies that resolve—or cut short—unnecessary arguments. Here are some choices that really make a difference.

Give Up and Win

Why argue when you'll reach the same impasse for the umpteenth time? Your husband may never comprehend the beauty of saving money by spending money. He accounts for every penny while you possess only a vague inkling of the checkbook balance.

On some points, we may never agree. So here's my rule—if he cares the most, he wins. If something matters more to me, I win. Confronted with a stalemate, let the other win. Drop the rope and the tug-of-war ends. *Choose to lose.*



Transforming Miscommunication Into True Intimacy

Silent Arguments

Bickering Will Get You Nowhere

Has pestering your spouse with complaints achieved results? Nagging works no magic here. Despite my nudges, my husband's priorities differ from mine. For instance, he sees no reason to wash dishes right after dinner. This bugs me. I prefer to work before playing.

So what? When my husband volunteers to tidy up, he cleans according to his schedule. Why bicker over a personality trait? A spouse under attack will retreat . . . and then you'll be the one standing in the kitchen, picking crud off the forks with your fingernail. *Choose peace.*

Place the Blame?

Some of us keep score. I can tell you when I was wrong (April 12, 1988) and when he was wrong (let me check my spreadsheet). I excel at finding fault and assigning blame. Such skill might satisfy my inner score-keeper, but placing blame never results in marital intimacy. A husband clobbered with "just the facts" won't respond with a loving embrace. Who would?

Instead of tallying up points, defuse the situation with these words: "You could be right," or if you dare, "You're probably right." Get out the smelling salts if you utter, "You are right." Even if he was wrong, let grudges go. *Choose to forgive.*

The Silent Treatment

I grew up in a family where adults buried conflict. No one ever modeled for me how to respond to discord with mature love. I entered marriage utterly unskilled at resolving disagreements.

Early in our marriage, my husband and I drove to the train station to pick up his college buddy. My vague directions led us in circles. Finally, my husband grew exasperated. He hates to be lost and late. Aghast at his attitude, I pouted. Concerned his friend



Transforming Miscommunication Into True Intimacy

Silent Arguments

might observe our lack of marital bliss, my husband snapped at me: "Put on your happy face!"

Twenty-two years later I laugh at our conflict that day, but at the time my husband's harsh words stabbed my heart like a dirty fork. I offered a grim smile, served with a side of the Silent Treatment. I'd show *him!* My silence would break him.

Sure enough, given time, he cracked and apologized for hurting my feelings. I wept, and we tucked that untidy incident behind us without resolution.

Employing the Silent Treatment is like closing the refrigerator door on a slimy, elderly cabbage. Just because you close the door doesn't mean the vegetable isn't rotten. The stench lingers until you remove the oozing cabbage. Get rid of the stinky source of trouble and live happily ever after. Or at least until next Tuesday. *Choose to resolve differences.*

Absolute Absolutes

He never throws away his empty microwave popcorn bag. I never put away my shoes. Except when he *does* tuck the bag into the trash and when I *do* kick my shoes into the closet. Does everyone have those arguments? The always-never argument? He *never* talks to me. He *always* forgets my birthday. She *never* wants to make love. She *always* leaves the gas tank empty.

Nothing is that simple. Only a robot is "always" or "never" correct. In those irritating moments, choose careful words. You don't *always* do the right thing and he isn't *always* wrong. You'll never meet in the middle if you blockade the way with barricades of "always" and "never." *Choose to banish absolutes.*

Energy Conservation

My husband vowed to grow old with me. (Unless I continue to use "that" tone of voice. Ha ha!) We plan to become stooped and gray-



Transforming Miscommunication Into True Intimacy

Silent Arguments

haired together, with many decades ahead. However, time with our kids is short.

Our sweet children argue. Lacking perspective, they fail to grasp the pointlessness. Why do they care who sits by the window? We all arrive at the same time.

Our 16-year-old twin boys disagree often. They've reached that peculiar all-knowing age; the perfect time to write a parenting book.

If I say, "Please do your homework," one of them answers, "Why? When will I ever need to know how to find the volume of a cylinder?" If I say, "Get up now and shower," they mumble in unison, "But it's his turn to shower first." If I say, "Pick up that wet towel," they respond in chorus, "It's not mine."

I loathe arguing, but the children insist. They fill my dance card with their dizzying waltzes of circular arguments. At the end of the day, I'm exhausted.

When I reconnect with my husband, I long for peace. After interacting with contrary children, time with my calm husband shimmers like an oasis. So why pick a fight with the man who trips over my shoes on a regular basis? I'd rather love him than bicker with him. Occasions do pop up that frustrate me, of course. And when they do, now I just argue in my head.

Me: You haven't been home on time for more than a month!

Him: Work's been crazy.

Me: Well, I'm going crazy with the kids.

Him: You wanted to be a stay-at-home mother.

Me: Before I knew I'd *never get a break!*

Him: I'm doing the best I can.

Me: Yes, you are.

Him: What do you mean by that?



Transforming Miscommunication Into True Intimacy

Silent Arguments

Me: Nothing.

Him: Watch your tone.

Me: What tone?

Him: You know what tone.

Me: Fine.

See? I avoided all the drama and was reminded of how futile that fight would have been.

However, sometimes, a silent, one-woman argument isn't enough. We require a real discussion to solve problems and iron out differences. Usually, I cry and he's clear-headed, but we say what must be said.

Twenty-two years into my marriage, though, I know the difference between a smelly cabbage and my stinky attitude . . . and when I'm the odorous one, a conversation in my head works wonders.

Melodee Martin Helms is a freelance writer. She has been married 22 years and has 4 children. This article was first published on TodaysChristianWoman.com in 2010.



Transforming Miscommunication Into True Intimacy

Silent Arguments

Reflect

- *Think of some specific conflicts or misunderstandings you've recently had with your husband. Evaluate them: Were they worth the fight? Or were they dumb and predictable? Was the heartache worth it and the discussion necessary—or should the conflict have been entirely avoided? Explain.*
- *Melodee highlights several choices she is learning to make that can nip conflict in the bud. Which of her choices do you think is the most challenging to put into practice? Why?*
- *Which would be most helpful in short-circuiting conflict-patterns in your marriage? Why?*



Why Does My Spouse Make Me So Angry?

Four insights that changed my marriage

By Kathy Collard Miller

I muttered to myself, "If only Larry would be the man I expected, I wouldn't be so angry. It's his fault." We'd been married seven years and I feared our marriage wouldn't survive. I pleaded with God to change Larry—to make him work less and not be so interested in his flying hobby. Every time he flew without me, my anger increased. I repeated over and over, "It's all his fault!"

But then God began to change my perspective and as a result, he brought healing and joy into our marriage. If your spouse makes you "so angry," you might want to consider the insights God gave me.



Transforming Miscommunication Into True Intimacy

Why Does My Spouse Make Me So Angry?

1. I'm responsible for my anger

For most of my life, I'd blamed others for my anger. "If only they wouldn't do . . ." or "If only they would do . . ." But God began to show me verses like Ephesians 4:29, 31–32. "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths . . . Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another" (NIV). Paul used verbs that were commands, which meant I could choose to obey. My anger was *not* outside of my control.

None of those verses say, "If your spouse treats you right, do not let any unwholesome talk . . ." or "If your spouse meets your needs, be kind and compassionate." There were no possible justifications. I was responsible for my reactions and if I claimed to be a Christian, I had the Holy Spirit's power to be patient as a fruit of the Spirit (**Galatians 5:22–23**). As a result, I began to hold myself accountable.

Taking responsibility for my anger meant humbling myself and asking forgiveness from God and Larry. Though extremely difficult in the beginning, I was more motivated to recognize when I started to become angry in order to avoid needing to ask forgiveness. Learning to catch myself confirmed that I could choose to be angry—or not!

2. My spouse is not a reflection of me

When Larry and I were with others, my mind rumbled, *Why did he say that? or I can't believe he did that!* Even though he was directing his actions toward others, I felt angry. If he was gruff with someone, I felt bad and would step in to make things better. If he seemed unconcerned about someone's situation, I went overboard asking them about it. It seemed like I spent a lot of thought and energy trying to make up for what I believed he lacked. And I felt angry because it seemed to put me in a bad light.



Transforming Miscommunication Into True Intimacy

Why Does My Spouse Make Me So Angry?

Then I began to question, *Why am I feeling angry when he didn't even do those things to me?* I was acting as though he was a direct reflection of me and I took it personally. When he didn't "perform" the way I thought he should and other people seemed unhappy, I felt like they judged me. After all, I criticized other wives for not controlling their husbands. I thought getting angry at Larry would motivate him to change—and thus would protect my image.

But James 1:19–20 says: "My dear brothers and sisters: You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. Human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires." My anger doesn't create righteousness in myself or anyone else, especially my husband. What a relief that I shouldn't try to be Larry's Holy Spirit! God wasn't holding me responsible for Larry's behavior and even if other people were, they were wrong. Larry is responsible for himself and not a reflection of me. I could be patient because I no longer had to change Larry to protect my image.

3. Anger is an ineffective diversionary tactic

Through biblical counseling, I learned that anger is often a means of taking the focus off myself. When we were making decisions about our new house, I suggested we put in cement on the side of the house to store the trash bins. Larry replied gruffly, "Why would you think that?" The message I "heard" was, *Kathy, you're so stupid to think that.*

Although I wasn't in touch with my inner humiliation, I actually felt like, *Oh, no. Now everyone will know that I'm stupid and I've been trying to hide that for a long time.* I reacted in anger hoping to point to Larry's lack of kindness so that my stupidity wouldn't be noticed.



Transforming Miscommunication Into True Intimacy

Why Does My Spouse Make Me So Angry?

Of course, I wasn't aware of my inner motives. Wasn't I just getting angry because Larry was insensitive? But as I observed my reactions, I saw that my anger came from a false belief. When Larry worked long hours, I felt like his "message" to me was: *You're not important to me and I don't love you anymore.* Through his seeming rejection, I felt like a big finger pointed out my own unworthiness and valuelessness. I reacted in anger so that I could point the finger back onto him and say, *Look at my horrible husband who works so many hours. This isn't about my worth and value, it's about him being so unloving.*

Over time, I became more patient because I believed the truth: My worth and value had nothing to do with him. I'm worthwhile, valuable, and loved because God loves me so much he sent Jesus to die on the cross for me. Whether or not Larry worked long hours or not had no bearing on that. Proverbs 15:1 helped to heal our marriage: "A gentle answer deflects anger, but harsh words make tempers flare." I could respond in gentleness, without finger pointing, because I believed the truth about myself. Then Larry was more responsive to my ideas as I explained them calmly.

4. Anger can stem from fear

When Larry chose his jobs and flying hobby over me, I panicked, *Will we get a divorce? Is he really working or does he have a mistress? What will I do if I'm alone with two kids?* Fear prompted my anger in order to force him to reassure me that those horrible things wouldn't occur or weren't true. When he didn't give me all the examples of love I longed for, I tried to get them by nagging and complaining, rarely acknowledging his loving actions.

It seems obvious to me now but at the time I didn't see that I wasn't trusting God. I thought God needed my help to change Larry. But I was saying through my anger, *God, I'm afraid, and you're not protecting me, so I'll take matters into my own hands. I'll force him to meet my needs.*



Transforming Miscommunication Into True Intimacy

Why Does My Spouse Make Me So Angry?

Facing my anger as distrust of God helped me revisit an old favorite Scripture, which took on a deeper meaning for my marriage. Proverbs 3:5-6 says, "Trust in the LORD with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take." That inspired me to think, *Even if the worst possible thing happens and we get a divorce, God, I trust you to provide for me according to your will. I don't need to force what I think I need. You know best. You can meet my needs any way you like.*

Since Larry was no longer responsible for my security, I didn't pressure him and I became more positive. When he changed jobs and took a cut in pay, he no longer had as much money to fly. He was home more. I realized that God had changed the circumstances without any help from me, and my trust in him grew.

Little by little, as I became less angry and God continued to work, our relationship improved. Amazingly, Larry wanted to spend more time with me since I wasn't the angry, demanding wife from whom he'd tried to escape.

Of course, there are no guarantees that if we change, so will our spouse. But even if he or she doesn't, we'll still be walking closer to the Lord and that's actually what making changes is all about.

As I look back at how God has used these insights, I'm amazed and so grateful. Insights like these are the principles Larry and I rely on in the Lord's strength to keep the joy and intimacy in our marriage even now that we've been married almost 40 years. Currently as Larry and I care for his 92-year-old mother who has dementia, I can easily slip back into the old lies because of the frustrations that care-giving brings. But then the Lord reminds me of the truths I learned long ago: I'm still valuable, important, and loved even though we must be more centered on care-giving than on an abundance of attention on our marriage.



Transforming Miscommunication Into True Intimacy

Why Does My Spouse Make Me So Angry?

When I react in anger or irritation, I know I'm believing the old lies. Surrendering to God's will and these truths bring me back to trusting God and enjoying my wonderful husband.

Kathy Collard Miller is a popular women's conference speaker and author. This article was first published on **Today's Christian Woman.com** in 2009. www.KathyCollardMiller.com

Reflect

- *Could you relate to Kathy's experience? In what ways? Why do you think it's so natural to blame our anger on the other party?*
- *Think of a specific, recent example of a time you felt angry (frustrated, irritated, tense, bitter) toward your husband. Try to dissect the experience from an objective point of view: What did your husband say or do that was wrong? Now—be as brutally honest as possible—what did you do (think, feel, say, not-say)—that wasn't right? What are you responsible for?*
- *Read **Proverbs 15:1**; **Ephesians 4:29–32**; and **James 1:19–20**. Which specific words, phrases, or ideas most challenge you in your communication patterns with your husband? (Remember, you can't change your spouse—but you can take charge of your own mind-set and behavior!)*
- *Review **Proverbs 3:5–6**. Kathy connected her anger toward her husband to a realization that she needed to grow in her trust of God. She thought: God, I'm afraid, and you're not protecting me, so I'll take matters into my own hands. I'll force him to meet my needs. How could a personal choice to grow in your trust in God and reliance upon him help you deal with anger and frustration in your marriage?*



Three Critical Words

During a painful season of arguing,
God challenged me not to give up.

By Jan Lazo-Davis

Why are stairs harder to climb after we fight? I asked myself, dragging one foot after the other, using the banister to pull myself up.

Hurtful words, spoken by my husband in anger, rotated in my mind. Was I really not humble? Was I only out for myself? Was I truly trying to "diss" him?

Reaching the top, I hesitated before entering the bedroom. Was he asleep, or waiting? Time to find out as I anxiously turned the handle.

Trying not to sigh too long or loud, I was relieved to hear his gentle snores. A simple change of clothing in the dark and I was ready to climb into bed, but our argument kept playing over and over like some bad copy of a B movie, making sleep impossible.



Transforming Miscommunication Into True Intimacy

Three Critical Words

The nagging question, which rarely left my mind during these days of arguing, came once again. *Should I leave him?*

Temptation was strong as I considered my options.

Finding myself praying instead of sleeping, I pleaded silently, *God, what's happening to us? I don't know how much more of this fighting I can take.*

A gentle suggestion came into my mind: *Love never fails.*

Remembering Our Vows

Those three words brought back memories of years before, standing at the wedding altar, saying those same words to this man. I read **I Corinthians 13** to him after my vows. Verse 8 started with "Love never fails" (NIV). At the time my friends asked me why I wanted to read what everyone else read at their wedding. Why couldn't I be different? they questioned.

No eloquent answers came then, but *now* I understood. God knew I'd need those words written on my heart to remember tonight as I struggled with the "for worse" part of marriage.

I nodded in the dark. *Love never fails. Not even now.* I inhaled deeply and felt a sense of peace. I'd made my decision. I would continue to love my husband with God's help. I slept and awoke to another day, believing it would be different.

But at breakfast, only the forks against our plates broke the silence. I wanted to speak, to make things better, but I wasn't sure what to say. So I decided to wait and prayed silently.

Finally my husband said, "I wish we hadn't argued last night. I hate it when we argue. Are you all right?"

"I hate it when we argue too," I said as a thought entered my mind, *Isn't he sorry for those awful things he said—which we both know aren't true?* Then I mentally backed up. *What were those words God reminded me of last night?*



Transforming Miscommunication Into True Intimacy

Three Critical Words

A flash-prayer, my way of quickly lifting words up to God, came to mind: *Lord, teach me how to live the words you gave me last night: love never fails.*

Finally I said, "I'm all right today. Before I fell asleep last night, God brought a Scripture to my mind. Remember our wedding vows? God reminded me of the passage I read to you from 1 Corinthians 13. It said, 'Love never fails.' So I lay in bed and prayed for us and our fighting. God helped me fall in love with you all over again last night as I remembered our wedding day." I was quiet for a moment, then I said, "And I still love you."

"We need to stop the arguing," he said. "The damage to our love and our marriage is too great." After some silence, he continued, "And I still love you." He stood and put his breakfast plate in the sink. "I'm going to get ready for work." As he walked from the room, he called back, "You can pray for that, too. Things are a pain at work right now."

"Okay, I'll pray," I told him as I headed toward the sink with my breakfast plate.

Be an Avider?

Well, not exactly an apology, but at least he hurts from the arguments like I do. I opened my Bible for quiet time before I started my workday.

"Lord," I pleaded out loud, "I've asked you to teach me how to live 'Love never fails.' Will you also teach us both how to stop arguments before they escalate?" We had tried adopting a hand gesture and the word *calm* as a signal to stop arguments from escalating. But when an argument began to escalate, the one making a point usually *wanted* to keep arguing. "What do we try next, Lord? Please give me wisdom," I prayed.

Opening my Bible, I searched the concordance for arguing and fighting. Then I turned to Proverbs 20:3 to read, "Avoiding a fight is a mark of honor; only fools insist on quarreling."



Transforming Miscommunication Into True Intimacy

Three Critical Words

I realized I needed to calm down before an argument escalated. Refusing to argue, but calmly discussing, might work. Once an argument gets going, it's too easy for both of us to continue, which leads to thoughts of calling it quits. I needed to put more effort into avoiding the damaging pattern of arguing *before* a fight starts.

Humbled by my thoughts of leaving my marriage, I thanked God for the blessing of falling in love again. I wondered if my husband felt the same way about me. How many marriages are indeed loveless, where divorce seems a valid alternative? Even in my own life, there are times where I say things, I don't apologize, and yet I move on, trying to cope from day to day.

At least we were both trying in our own way. I prayed that we'd never get to the point where we were no longer trying. I asked God for help so I'd always be willing to climb the stairs to be with my husband—no matter how difficult those stairs seemed.

Sometimes Apologies Are In Disguise

Later that afternoon, while I was at work, a colorful bouquet of flowers was delivered. The card said, "You're right. Love never fails. I love you!" As I arranged them, I knew we were both working toward a happy ending.

Suddenly a new thought struck me: *Wait! Is this his way of apologizing? Have I missed something all these years?* I remembered our fathers. His would fix something in the house or mow the yard, something my mother-in-law wanted done. My father brought home flowers after a bad argument. I once heard my mom tease my father by saying, "Should I start an argument so you'll bring me flowers?"

How do I apologize for my own words? I pondered that until I got home, then realized the groceries I'd just purchased, arranged on the kitchen counter, said it loudly: his favorite meal. Steaks seasoned and ready to cook, potatoes baking in the oven.



Transforming Miscommunication Into True Intimacy

Three Critical Words

Our messages to each other were obvious when I looked for them. I had expected him to verbally say, "I'm sorry." Instead, he had given me flowers with a card validating my insight from God the night before. In return, I had prepared a nice dinner for him. I had never considered that an apology could be expressed without words. Yet over the years of our marriage, he'd made my heart sing with flowers.

How many years had it taken me to figure this out? Too many, I realized. "Lord," I prayed, "please help me understand non-verbal apologies and give them in return. And please fill my heart with forgiveness so I keep my own part of our arguments from escalating."

My thoughts during dinner were not formed enough to share, but his raving over the steak and potatoes made me feel he'd accepted my apology for my part of our argument. Later that night I journaled my thoughts to recount my new insights.

We'd argue again, but I felt my mind open to a new level of understanding "love never fails." I believed we would succeed. Arguments might harm our marriage, but apologies, even when unspoken, would heal and preserve it.

Jan Lazo-Davis is a freelance writer from Leawood, Kansas. She and her husband, Dan, have been married 32 years. This article, originally titled "Arguing Again," was first published on TodaysChristianWoman.com in 2012.



Transforming Miscommunication Into True Intimacy

Three Critical Words

Reflect

- *What Scripture passages were read at your wedding? Why did you select those particular Bible verses? Or what vows or promises do you remember? How do those Bible verses and declarations of love challenge you today?*
- *Read **Proverbs 20:3** and **1 Corinthians 13:4–8**. Consider your own patterns of conflict or miscommunication in your marriage. Which traits of God-honoring love (in 1 Corinthians 13) could be most useful in helping you avoid fights and conflict? Be specific.*
- *What does "Love never fails" mean to you in your current situation? How might God be inspiring you to not give up? What next step can you take to move things in a different direction in your marital communication?*



Additional Resources

Articles, books, and Bible studies to help you further

Articles

Activating God's Word in Your Marriage—*We learned that Scripture could change our marriage if we let it.*

By Lisa Cowman, available from TodaysChristianWoman.com

Building Intimacy in Marriage—*Fighting our tendency to hide from each other*

By Dr. Dan Allender, available from TodaysChristianWoman.com

Go Ahead. Get Closer—*With these 8 easy habits of the heart*

By Les and Leslie Parrott, available from TodaysChristianWoman.com

Glory without Limits—*Resist division in your marriage.*

By Tim Savage, available from TodaysChristianWoman.com



Transforming Miscommunication Into True Intimacy

Additional Resources

Healthy Conflict?—*6 habits to make arguments work for you*

By Gary J. Oliver, available from TodaysChristianWoman.com

Information Versus Emotion—*My spouse can't offer me what I need unless I communicate clearly.*

By Cecil Murphey, available on TodaysChristianWoman.com

Love is Not a Bargain—*There is no quid pro quo in selflessness.*

By Dr. Ken Crocker and Debbie Jansen, available from

TodaysChristianWoman.com

Out There, In Here—*Understanding marriage between extroverts and introverts*

By Cecil Murphey, available on TodaysChristianWoman.com

The Truth about Deception—*How manipulation sabotages marriage*

By Sherry Van Zante, available from TodaysChristianWoman.com

What Hill Am I Dying On?—*I knew the best way to make my marriage succeed. Or at least I thought I did.*

By Joanne Kraft, available from TodaysChristianWoman.com

Books

The 5 Love Languages by Gary Chapman (Northfield Press, 2010). Marriages may be made in heaven, but they must be nurtured here on earth. In this new paperback edition of Dr. Gary Chapman's bestselling book, *The Five Love Languages*, he explains how people communicate love in different ways, and shares the wonderful things that happen when men and women



Transforming Miscommunication Into True Intimacy

Additional Resources

learn to speak each other's language. Chapters are categorized by love language and each one ends with simple steps to express a specific language to your spouse and guide your marriage in the right direction.

As for Me and My House by Walter Wangerin Jr. (Thomas Nelson, 2001). "What can I expect from my marriage?" Engaged, newlywed, and long-time married couples will find gentle and caring answers in Walter Wangerin's classic. Offering an intimate portrait of his own 32-year marriage, he suggests six tasks for crafting a lifetime relationship: truthfulness and dependability, sharing the challenges of survival, talking and listening, sexuality, healing not hurting, and volunteering and giving.

Healing the Hurt in Your Marriage by Dr. Gary and Barbara Rosberg (Focus on the Family, 2004). Habitual avoidance of conflict is the number one predictor of divorce. Do you avoid conflict resolution because you don't know how to deal with it effectively? *Healing the Hurt in Your Marriage* provides you with an excellent examination of conflict and a practical step-by-step process for resolving it in a healthy manner.

I Love You More: How Everyday Problems Can Strengthen Your Marriage by Les and Leslie Parrott (Zondervan, 2005). Learn how marriages can thrive when couples use everyday difficulties to *strengthen* their relationships! Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott reveal the most common sources of marital discord; the fine line between obstacles and opportunities; the importance of accepting the two sides of sex and intimacy; and the five *not-so-easy* steps for solving problems.



Transforming Miscommunication Into True Intimacy

Additional Resources

Love & Respect by Dr. Emerson Eggerichs (Thomas Nelson, 2004). Communication between a husband and wife is often frustrated because of the vastly different ways in which men and women perceive love. Women are wired to need unconditional love and men need to feel unconditionally respected. This resource provides honest insight about how you can revitalize the love in your marriage.

Sacred Marriage by Gary L. Thomas (Zondervan, 2002). What if God designed marriage to make us holy more than to make us happy? Discover how the hardships of marriage can work to develop Christlike character—forgiveness, love, respect, perseverance—in each of you.

Thriving Despite a Difficult Marriage by Michael and Chuck Misja (NavPress, 2009). If your marriage is less than perfect and the "happily ever after" that was promised to you in childhood fairy tales is a distant dream, then *Thriving Despite a Difficult Marriage* will offer you hope. Christian psychologists, the Misja brothers, explain that faithfulness, not happiness, is God's desire for you. In your less than perfect marriage, you can still have meaning, purpose, endurance, and optimism.

When Love Dies: How to Save a Hopeless Marriage by Judy Bodmer (Thomas Nelson, 1999). Sitting in church pews every week are untold numbers of Christian women contemplating divorce. Some of them undoubtedly leave their husbands. Some of them will suffer in silence, pretending all is well. Judy Bodmer knows what they are feeling because she has been there herself. In *When Love Dies*, she shares from her own experience how forgiveness can turn a hopeless marriage around. *When Love Dies* is a women's guide to surviving a troubled marriage and ultimately to finding the love for which she's looking.



Transforming Miscommunication Into True Intimacy

Additional Resources

Bible Studies

Communication in Marriage—a six-session Bible study guide available from ChristianBibleStudies.com

Deepen Your Love—a resource to help you grow in intimacy and romance, available from TodaysChristianWoman.com

Finding Joy in the Difficulty of Marriage—a six-session Bible study guide available from ChristianBibleStudies.com

How to Be Happy in an Unhappy Marriage—a resource to help you find joy in your life despite marriage struggles, available from TodaysChristianWoman.com

Marriage: Strategies for Surviving the Hard Times—a resource providing tools to make it through painful seasons in your relationship, available from TodaysChristianWoman.com

Top 10 Things Your Husband Really Needs—a resource to help you get to you're your husband better, available from TodaysChristianWoman.com

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The screenshot shows the homepage of Today's Christian Woman. At the top, there's a navigation bar with 'MAGAZINE | BLOGS | STORE | FOLLOW US:' and social media icons for Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. A search bar is present with a 'SEARCH' button and a 'or browse' link. Below the navigation, there are category tabs: 'faith', 'marriage+sex', 'parenting', and 'church+ministry'. The main content area features a large article titled 'Single Minded' by Lori Smith, with a sub-headline 'What I learned when I stopped focusing on getting married'. Below this, there's a 'living beyond' section with the tagline 'Women putting God first in the grit of real life' and an article 'A Hope for Broken Marriages' by Dawn Zemke. To the right, there's a 'what i'm learning' section with the tagline 'Share what God has taught you' and an article 'What I'm Learning About ... Resting in God' by Monica Steely. Below these, there are four smaller article tiles: 'No Apology' under 'FAITH', 'Surprise Your Spouse!' under 'MARRIAGE + SEX', 'deeper faith' (Focus on spiritual practices) with sub-points 'Prayer', 'Bible Study', and 'Solitude', and 'PARENTING' and 'CHURCH + MINISTRY' sections at the bottom.

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Find encouragement and inspiration through stories of God using women who are living fearlessly for his kingdom.
- **What I'm Learning:**
Share what God is teaching you in the good times and the hard times. Together we can guide one another through the seasons of life.
- **Deeper Faith:**
Grow your most important relationship through spiritual practices.

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