

COUPLE TALK *Communicating with Your Partner*

What I Said vs. What You Heard

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Sometimes the hardest part in communicating is “hearing” what is actually said. Misunderstanding the meaning behind your partner’s message often fuels an argument. Howard Markman, Scott Stanley, and Susan Blumberg, authors of *Fighting for Your Marriage*, claim that “(w)hen what you say (or what you intended to say) is not the same as what your partner heard, then a *filter* is at work” (p. 92). In other words, filters affect what we hear and say, and most importantly how we interpret the conversation.

How we feel, what we think, what goes on around us, and our own personal experiences influence which filters interfere with what is said and heard. Here are a few filters that Markman and colleagues describe can affect “couple talk:”

- **Distractions.** Sometimes we do not give our full attention to the conversation. Both external (e.g., noise, driving a car, a bad phone connection) and internal (e.g., feeling sleepy, having other things on your mind) factors distract us from giving our partner our full attention. To avoid potential misunderstandings and arguments, make sure you and your partner are ready to listen and talk. When in doubt, ask your partner if they are ready; if they are not, schedule a time later when both of you can be attentive.

- **Emotional States.** Have you ever noticed that when you and/or your partner are in a bad mood whatever is said comes across negatively, no matter how positive either of you is trying to be? How you both feel during a conversation (e.g., angry, worried, sad) can influence how you interpret what is said and heard. Markman and colleagues suggest the best defense against this filter is to simply acknowledge to yourself and your partner that it exists (i.e., “I’ve had a bad day. It’s not anything you have done. I need time to settle down, and then we can talk.”).

- **Beliefs and Expectations.** People tend to look for or hear in others what they are expecting. For example, if you expect your partner to be angry with you, then s/he is more likely to sound angry to you, even if s/he is not. Sometimes, Markman and colleagues claim, these mental filters take the form of “mind reading” where we think we know why our partner said or did something, and judge him/her based on our assumptions. Being aware of this filter, entering a conversation with an open mind, and asking your partner questions for clarification can help prevent these misunderstandings.

Other possible filters that affect “couple talk” are *differences in communication styles* that are influenced by culture, how we were raised, and gender, as well as *self-protection* where we may not say what we really feel or need for fear of a negative reaction. Markman and colleagues emphasize that the best solution to dealing with these filters is being aware that they exist: “Get in the habit of ‘announcing your filter’ when you are aware that you have one” (p. 102).

Learn more about filters and other helpful strategies for strengthening your relationship by reading Markman, Stanley, and Blumberg’s (2001) *Fighting for Your Marriage* (Published by Jossey-Bass).

ACTIVITY

Markman and colleagues point out that “recognizing and acknowledging your filters will go a long way toward improving your communication and your relationship” (p. 103). Schedule talk time with your partner about the filters that influenced your “couple talk” during the last month. Make individual lists describing the filters that influenced each of you and share them. Discuss what you each could have said or done differently in your interactions to prevent/diffuse the problem(s).