

COUPLE TALK *Communicating with Your Partner*

Listen to Learn

Ted G. Futris, Ph.D., Family Life State Specialist

When talking with your partner, do you *listen to learn*? In other words, do you listen for what is useful in what your partner says in order to absorb the information? Or, do you *listen to reject* by listening primarily for what is wrong or needs revision in what your mate is saying.

Listening to Reject. If you listen to reject, then you risk neither partner feeling heard. Instead, issues you are discussing may get lost by perpetual disagreement.

Len: *"I'd like to get the grass cut today."*

Linda: *"The grass doesn't need cutting. It looks fine. Let's go to the mall."*

Len: *"Going to the mall is a bad idea. We'll buy things we don't need and can't afford. Besides, I'd like to get the grass cut today."*

Linda: *"Do it tomorrow. It's not that long yet."*

Len: *"I can't do it tomorrow; it's going to rain."*

Linda: *"It seems like everything I tell you, you tell me I'm wrong."*

Listening to Learn. Being a good listener requires an open mind and a genuine interest in what your mate is saying. If your partner seems to be saying something that does not make sense to you, before pointing out what is wrong, try asking questions to clarify what is right, helpful, or interesting in what was said. The best time to add new information, concerns, or corrections to what your mate has said is after you have fully digested the points of agreement.

Gerald: *"I'd like to get the grass cut today."*

Gina: *"Why?"*

Gerald: *"It's supposed to rain tomorrow. I'm too tired to cut it after work during the week. If we leave it for too long the yard will be a mess."*

Gina: *"That's a problem, because I was hoping we could go shopping together today. Maybe while you do the lawn, I'll cook dinner, and we'll go the mall afterwards?"*

Gerald: *"I'd appreciate that. And then we wouldn't have to spend money at the mall for supper."*

But-ing Away Information. Also, be cautious of the "but." The word "but" erases whatever has just been said and implies that you are listening to reject (rather than learn from) what your mate is saying.

Len: *"I hope we can have a fun summer vacation this year."*

Linda: *"But we always enjoy our summers."*

Receiving Information. Rather than take away from the momentum of the dialogue, add to it with the word "and" or a variation with similar meaning. This will help the dialogue proceed smoothly, and make your partner feel heard and respected. As a result he or she will likely be in a better frame of mind for listening to your perspective.

Gerald: *"I hope we can have a fun summer vacation this year."*

Gina: *"Me too. I hope it will be as fun as the last two summers have been!"*

Healthy relationships and marriages entail a commitment to receive what your partner thinks, feels, values, and disapproves of with compassionate understanding. Like hugs, smiles, and sexual sharing, listening expresses love and enhances love.

Adapted from Dr. Susan's Heitler's 2003 article, "Listen to Learn" for Family Information Services, Minneapolis, MN.

HELPFUL RESOURCE



Dr. Susan Heitler, marriage educator and therapist, details the communication and conflict-resolution skills that happy couples use to deal with differences in her book and workbook titled, *The Power of Two* (www.heitler.com). Her step-by-step workbook provides brief explanations followed by fun practice exercises that can help you and your partner communicate smoothly.