A woman in her early fifties writes of her husband: “I would like to share my innermost spiritual feelings with him, but I can’t. It leaves a great void in my life.”

A woman in her late twenties comments of her husband: “He doesn’t share his thoughts.” As his wife, she says, “I find it’s difficult to feel close to him.”

By contrast, a husband in his late forties reports that he and his wife usually work together on problems, but whether they work together or individually, each is able to progress, secure in the other’s support.

What makes the difference in these situations? Communication.

The quality of the communication between husbands and wives, no matter how long they have been married, can be a key to determining whether couples suffer through or savor their marriage relationships.

Since a husband and wife usually come into marriage with dissimilar backgrounds and perspectives, differences of opinion are almost inevitable, and conflict is difficult to avoid. Whether couples resolve their conflicts or not can depend on how well they communicate. When their communication is designed to build each other, or at least not to tear down, the marriage can grow in healthy ways. But when communication is negative or nonexistent, the growth of the relationship can be stunted.

Priesthood leaders, marriage counselors, and others who help married couples resolve difficulties have long recognized these truths. Declared President Spencer W. Kimball during a general conference session on 6 April 1972: “In my experience I find that in a large number of marital cases, the problem is lack of communication; the wires are down, the poles are burned, husbands and wives are jangling, and there is static where there should be peace. There is growing disgust and hate where there should be love and harmony.” (Ensign, July 1972, p. 38.)

One LDS marriage counselor has written: “Effective communication is more than just ‘talking,’ it is the type of interaction that gets the job done: solves problems, builds self-esteem, enhances the relationships, relays important messages, reinforces mutual respect, and helps bond the couple together as an effective unit.”

Talk about Happiness!
By Edwin O. Haroldsen and Barry L. Johnson

A woman in her early fifties writes of her husband: “I would like to share my innermost spiritual feelings with him, but I can’t. It leaves a great void in my life.”

A woman in her late twenties comments of her husband: “He doesn’t share his thoughts.” As his wife, she says, “I find it’s difficult to feel close to him.”

By contrast, a husband in his late forties reports that he and his wife usually work together on problems, but whether they work together or individually, each is able to progress, secure in the other’s support.

What makes the difference in these situations? Communication.

The quality of the communication between husbands and wives, no matter how long they have been married, can be a key to determining whether couples suffer through or savor their marriage relationships.

Since a husband and wife usually come into marriage with dissimilar backgrounds and perspectives, differences of opinion are almost inevitable, and conflict is difficult to avoid. Whether couples resolve their conflicts or not can depend on how well they communicate. When their communication is designed to build each other, or at least not to tear down, the marriage can grow in healthy ways. But when communication is negative or nonexistent, the growth of the relationship can be stunted.

Priesthood leaders, marriage counselors, and others who help married couples resolve difficulties have long recognized these truths. Declared President Spencer W. Kimball during a general conference session on 6 April 1972: “In my experience I find that in a large number of marital cases, the problem is lack of communication; the wires are down, the poles are burned, husbands and wives are jangling, and there is static where there should be peace. There is growing disgust and hate where there should be love and harmony.” (Ensign, July 1972, p. 38.)

One LDS marriage counselor has written: “Effective communication is more than just ‘talking,’ it is the type of interaction that gets the job done: solves problems, builds self-esteem, enhances the relationships, relays important messages, reinforces mutual respect, and helps bond the couple together as an effective unit.”

Talk about Happiness!
By Edwin O. Haroldsen and Barry L. Johnson

A woman in her early fifties writes of her husband: “I would like to share my innermost spiritual feelings with him, but I can’t. It leaves a great void in my life.”

A woman in her late twenties comments of her husband: “He doesn’t share his thoughts.” As his wife, she says, “I find it’s difficult to feel close to him.”

By contrast, a husband in his late forties reports that he and his wife usually work together on problems, but whether they work together or individually, each is able to progress, secure in the other’s support.

What makes the difference in these situations? Communication.

The quality of the communication between husbands and wives, no matter how long they have been married, can be a key to determining whether couples suffer through or savor their marriage relationships.

Since a husband and wife usually come into marriage with dissimilar backgrounds and perspectives, differences of opinion are almost inevitable, and conflict is difficult to avoid. Whether couples resolve their conflicts or not can depend on how well they communicate. When their communication is designed to build each other, or at least not to tear down, the marriage can grow in healthy ways. But when communication is negative or nonexistent, the growth of the relationship can be stunted.

Priesthood leaders, marriage counselors, and others who help married couples resolve difficulties have long recognized these truths. Declared President Spencer W. Kimball during a general conference session on 6 April 1972: “In my experience I find that in a large number of marital cases, the problem is lack of communication; the wires are down, the poles are burned, husbands and wives are jangling, and there is static where there should be peace. There is growing disgust and hate where there should be love and harmony.” (Ensign, July 1972, p. 38.)

One LDS marriage counselor has written: “Effective communication is more than just ‘talking,’ it is the type of interaction that gets the job done: solves problems, builds self-esteem, enhances the relationships, relays important messages, reinforces mutual respect, and helps bond the couple together as an effective unit.”
What the experts know from experience has been reconfirmed in a survey we took of married Latter-day Saints throughout the United States. The survey was supported by Brigham Young University’s College of Family, Home and Social Sciences.

Approximately one thousand Latter-day Saints were invited to participate in the survey, and 728 individuals returned questionnaires. These participants responded to the 114 statements that make up a nationally recognized marital satisfaction inventory titled Enrich. They indicated how strongly they agreed or disagreed with each of the statements, which are related to several dimensions of marital happiness: spouse’s personality, couple communication, conflict resolution, money management, use of leisure time, physical relationship, individuals’ attitudes about marital and family roles, attitudes toward religion, marital cohesion or “togetherness,” couple adaptability, satisfaction with children in the marriage, relationships with family and friends, and overall happiness.

Breakdowns in Couple Talk

Unfortunately, LDS couples are not immune to failures in communication that occur among married people. The BYU survey found that numerous wives in particular often said they are not able to share their feelings with their husbands. When we asked our survey group what traits they liked least about their spouses, the wives’ most frequent answer included words like “communication,” “feeling,” “talk,” and “listen.”

A 39-year-old wife wrote, “My spouse figures silence on touchy issues is the way to avoid conflict. I feel it is better to get it out in the open. He thinks that nothing said means the problem will go away. I figure it will just fester.”

**Better Talk, Better Marriage**

We found in our research that communication influenced couples’ happiness more than the other aspects of marriage we studied in this particular survey. That is, the more that Latter-day Saint couples were satisfied with their talking to each other, the happier they were.

Those who scored high in communication also scored high in several other aspects of marriage strongly related to happiness. These include marital cohesion (closeness, togetherness) and also satisfaction with the spouse’s personality, with the spouse’s feelings about religion, with the way marital conflicts are resolved, with management of money, with the physical relationship, with how leisure time is spent, and with relationships to children, family, and friends.

Couples who had been married in a temple scored higher in communication and overall marital satisfaction than those who had not; they also scored higher in eight of the eleven other dimensions of marital happiness we examined in our study.

This link between good communication and happiness in marriage should not be surprising. How can two people be happy as a couple if they don’t settle—and perhaps bury—their differences? And how can they settle their differences of opinion, for example, on spending the family income or disciplining the children, unless they talk?

**When Couples Don’t Communicate**
Our survey drew responses from many Latter-day Saints who said they were happily married, but there were those at the other end of the spectrum who said they were very unhappy. Comments of the unhappy spouses suggested that while communication is not their only problem, in many cases the two marriage partners do not really talk to each other. Hence, they have no way to resolve the differences and misunderstandings that divide them.

Among the questions that many couples may need to resolve is this one: how much independence, or how much togetherness does each person need in the relationship? There are some married individuals who usually do just what they want, with little, if any, concern for joint husband-wife activities; they may be so deeply involved in activities with others that their mates feel completely left out. On the other hand, there are couples who do almost everything together.

When a husband and wife do not agree on the desired mix of shared activities, at least one spouse is probably unhappy. For example, a 59-year-old husband who participated in our survey said of his wife, “She fails to recognize my needs. She is as selfish with me as she is unselfish with her family.” A 48-year-old woman wrote that “my husband spends most of his free time watching or playing ball games of one sort or another. I cannot even remember the last time we talked about anything.”

Even when couples are doing things together, the two spouses may differ in their needs and wants regarding physical and psychological intimacy or closeness. This, too, is a problem that requires clear communication to solve.

The urgent need for husbands and wives to talk about their difficulties is underscored by the experience of one middle-aged woman who responded to our survey. She had only recently learned the cause of a long-standing problem in her physical relationship with her husband; the problem had resulted from a disagreement over something else earlier in their marriage. She had spoken unkindly to her husband—just one sentence. “He took it personally, and withdrew more and more thereafter. It was only this summer that he told me what I had said. Unfortunately, I had forgotten it as soon as I said it. His withdrawal has caused me to feel unwanted, rejected, and worthless.”

She concluded that “honest communication, without fear of reprisal,” is essential in marriage. “Most problems can be solved if both partners feel their opinion is respected and they try to understand the other’s point of view.”

But how can a husband and wife who are hardly on speaking terms learn to understand each other’s point of view?

**Improving Couple Talk**

Marriage counselors have found that there are some specific things you can do to improve your couple communication and thus the handling of conflicts and differences.

First, ask yourself if the words you use and the things you do affecting your spouse are actually kind and thoughtful. We found in our survey that people really do appreciate kindness and pure, Christlike love from their companions; this point came out strongly when we asked what qualities they liked least and liked most in their marriage partners. The need to be considerate and sensitive
probably cannot be exaggerated, for the merest hint of a spouse’s disinterest or disapproval can sometimes make the partner feel insecure and defensive.

The General Authorities have often spoken of the vital need for couples to communicate—and communicate in kindness. Elder Marvin J. Ashton of the Quorum of the Twelve, quoting author John Powell, acknowledged that “the genius of communication is the ability to be both totally honest and totally kind at the same time.” (John Powell, as quoted in Ensign, May 1988, p. 64.)

The late Elder Theodore M. Burton of the Seventy said: “Couples interested only in themselves don’t communicate. Lack of communication then becomes a major stumbling block in developing true love.” (Ensign, May 1979, p. 73.)

And Elder Russell M. Nelson of the Quorum of the Twelve said: “Taking time to talk is essential to keep lines of communication intact. If marriage is a prime relationship in life, it deserves prime time! Yet less important appointments are often given priority, leaving only leftover moments for listening to precious partners.” (Ensign, May 1991, p. 23.)

Research findings suggest that marriages are happier when spouses share their feelings and when husbands can read their wives’ nonverbal cues. However, some experts say that the sharing of honest feelings can be carried too far. Two psychologists concluded that “talking about one’s feelings does not necessarily refer to spilling out everything. For the average couple, selective disclosure of feelings seems more beneficial to marital harmony than indiscriminate catharsis.”

It helps to talk to your spouse like the friend that he or she is. One research team used words like friendly, relaxed, open, and attentive to characterize the communication of happily married couples; the researchers said this friendly style is by far the most significant factor in the effectiveness of that communication.

Some marriage experts have suggested a “two-question rule” in talking with a frustrated spouse. For example, when a husband comes home from work and speaks of a hard day, a wise wife might ask a couple of questions about it, then listen to the answers rather than immediately launching into her own list of complaints. Similarly, a husband who sees that his wife is struggling would be wise to ask questions and listen to her answers rather than assuming that his problems are more pressing. Spouses who do this convey an important unspoken message: “I care about you. You are important to me.”

Comments from the married couples we surveyed reinforce the importance of sending the message that you care. A woman commented that spouses should “learn to focus on … good characteristics and verbally express love and appreciation. It … really works.”

Marriage, we are taught, “is ordained of God unto man.” (D&C 49:15.) It can be a source of joy both on earth and in eternity. But it is impossible to imagine that a marriage might endure or function in eternity if loving, open communication is not part of it. For those who desire eternal blessings, it is of great value to make the effort to improve communication with their wife or husband.
Building Better Communication

Here are some suggestions to help you improve your “couple talk.”

1. When you want to talk about concerns and problems with your spouse, pick a comfortable setting, one free of distractions or interruptions. Choose a place where the two of you can be alone.

2. Talk face to face, close enough to touch each other and with enough light to see each other’s features clearly.

3. Express your thoughts and feelings by using “I” messages rather than “you” messages (blaming and criticizing statements). Try “I feel unimportant when I don’t get to explain the problem” instead of “You never listen to me!”

4. Keep your comments brief—no more than two sentences.

5. Don’t put your spouse on the defensive. Express negative feelings in a respectful manner, such as, “When I am criticized, I feel angry and hurt.” Say how you want the burgers cooked rather than criticizing after they’re done. Accentuate the positive.

6. Don’t hide your feelings behind intellectual jargon. Instead, be kindly straightforward about what you really feel and think.

7. Make requests clear and respectful: “I’d like you to put gas in the car this morning. Do you have time to do that?”

8. Do not try to be a mind reader. The only way to find out what your spouse thinks or feels is to ask.

9. Do not blame, demean, or accuse. Focus on the problem rather than criticizing. Use the no-fault approach: “I’m uncomfortable/unhappy with this situation. Let’s talk about what we can do to change it.”

10. Remember that listening, controlling anger, and using the appropriate tone of voice all contribute to good communication. Nagging, conversational discourtesies, and sullen silence detract from it.


Notes:

