

“What Did I Say!?”

It seems inevitable that marriage is made up of two individuals with different communication styles and ways of managing conflict. When faced with a disagreement, often there is one party who wants to hash it out until there is a solution, while the other takes a slower approach and prefers to have time alone to process the situation and settle the matter later.

Much of the communication styles and patterns we learn come from the family in which we grew up. Families may communicate loudly or quietly, aggressively or passively. Most families have at least some degree of unhealthy communication patterns that we carry over into our own marriages. Having grown up in different families, no matter how similar, marriage partners will have developed various ways of communicating that carry with them certain assumptions about the meanings of words, mannerisms, voice inflections, facial expressions, and other non-verbal elements.

Most conflicts in marriage come from mistaken assumptions about these meanings and the messages they seem to convey. Just think, how many times have you had an argument with your partner, only to later discover that the two of you were talking about two entirely different things or that there was a mistaken assumption about what was intended? Avoiding these kinds of miscommunications can save many frustrations and deepen understanding.

One way to begin identifying your own communication patterns is to think about the patterns in your own family. You may want to ask your partner to help identify those patterns he or she has seen in your family and listen with an open mind to the response. Even if you do not agree with what your partner identifies as a harmful communication style, if he or she sees it that way, you need to understand why. Take turns doing this so both of you can have a clear understanding of what each of you sees as problem areas. Avoid being defensive, keeping in mind that your goal is to build productive patterns in your own marriage.

The next step is to talk about your own differences in communication and your preferences when it comes to solving problems. What do you do that keeps your partner from feeling free to be open about concerns, fears, frustrations and problems? A spouse who is more withdrawn can feel threatened when a partner insists that the conversation not end without a solution. One who is predisposed to keep talking until the problem is solved can feel rejected and frustrated when the other spouse wants time away to think. Without an understanding of what you each need from the other, false assumptions about meanings and hurt feelings are sure to follow. Be prepared to compromise how you handle difficult conversations and focus on understanding what your spouse needs from you during those times.

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