

Love on the Rocks: Should I Stay or Should I Go?

Daniel Benveniste

People often enter marriages, live in them and leave them in the same way – not communicating. Yet, each couple has it's own way of avoiding communication.

She's quiet. He feels ignored and not listened to. In response, he yells and gets angry. She gets scared and becomes quiet. He feels ignored and not listened to. He yells again and she becomes quieter.

He wants to breathe and do things on his own. But when he does, she feels lonely and demands more attention. This frightens him and makes him want to retreat all the more.

She gets hysterical when he ignores her. When he ignores her, she gets hysterical.

He doesn't trust her and she can't relax with him. So she had an affair. Now he doesn't trust her even more, which leaves her more interested in getting away.

A Woman Speaking with a Therapist in the First Session:

Woman: I've always been quiet and my husband's always been yelling and getting angry. Now we don't communicate, so I want a divorce. It's over. I'm sick of all this.

Therapist: Why don't you try to work things out?

Woman: We can't.

Therapist: Why not?

Woman: Because I'm quiet and he's always yelling and getting angry.

Therapist: Well, it seems to me that staying in the marriage quietly sounds almost as bad as leaving the marriage quietly. Let me see if I can help you speak up and help your husband to say what it is that he is trying to say. People often yell when they don't feel heard. Meanwhile you can't hear what your husband is trying to tell you when he is yelling at you. Let's see if we can open up some genuine communication here. I'd like you and your husband to meet with me in our next session so that we might be able to clean up the communication a bit.

Another Woman Speaking with a Therapist:

Woman: My husband never listens. He doesn't consider me. I'm always last on his list. He's always going out with his friends and he never talks about his feelings.

Therapist: And did you tell him about all this?

Woman: Why should I have to tell him? He should just know. It's obvious. But, yes, I told him once. And he just ignored me, as usual.

Therapist: You're being outspoken with me today but I know that you are usually fairly quiet and mild in your disposition. Is that the way you are in your marriage?

Woman: Yes

Therapist: Did you ever consider the possibility that he doesn't listen or consider you because you are so quiet and he's just not getting your message?

Woman: No, but I also don't want to have to work that hard to communicate. He should just know.

Every marriage must run a gauntlet of trials and tribulations. Developmental issues are often formidable enough but in addition to these there are also problems related to substance abuse, raging tempers, dark depressions, control games, domestic violence, affairs, irresponsibility, unmanageable anxiety, secrets, depleted sexuality, different values, arguments over raising the children, arguments over money, differences in sexual desire and interest, conflicts over the management of the house, physical illness, psychological problems and on and on it goes.

Marriage is not for the faint of heart. It requires confrontation with the spouse and confrontation with oneself. In marital relationships one spouse will often criticize the other to avoid looking at his/her own problems or to avoid the threat of increasing intimacy. Intimacy is threatening in that it requires greater and greater levels of vulnerability and emotional openness, which may awaken old hurts, anxieties about self-esteem, as well as conflicts from early childhood. Consequently, while the members of a couple often complain about the lack of openness or intimacy, one often discovers that one or both members are seemingly working quite hard to turn the other one off. A couple that knows how to turn each other off can learn how to turn each other on but it requires the courage to look at oneself, empathy to understand the perspective of the other and a desire to communicate that is greater than the desire to just 'win' an argument.

Members of a couple need to know when they are ready to talk and when they are not. There is usually little value in pursuing a screaming match as neither are truly listening in moments such as these. Couples need to learn how to call a time out and later return to the negotiation table ready to listen and share. It is often useful, after one member has stated his/her point of view, for the other to repeat it and check to see if the message was successfully communicated. We are often surprised to discover that there is a marked difference between what a person intended to say and what was actually said and a marked difference between what was actually said and what the other person, who was listening, understood.

To listen carefully, repeat what you heard and check it out with the other to see if what you heard is what the other intended to say is called 'active listening'. It is a useful skill in untangling all sorts of communication problems but it requires practice to develop competence in doing it well.

A Piece of a Couple's Therapy Session:

Wife: I don't like it when I come home from work and the house is a mess.

Husband: You're always telling me I'm a bad person.

Wife: I'm not telling you you're a bad person. I'm saying the house is a mess.

Husband: Why do you hate me so much?

Wife: I don't hate you. You're just driving me crazy.

Husband: You're crazy.

Therapist: Let's see if we can back up a bit. You said you don't like it when you come home and the house is a mess.

Wife: Right.

Therapist: And you said you feel that she is calling you a bad person.

Husband: She is. I didn't clean up enough for her.

Wife: You didn't clean up at all!

Husband: Neither did you!

Wife: I was at work all day!

Husband: There you go again, kicking me in the gut.

Therapist: How did she kick you in the gut?

Husband: She's always telling me she's working and I'm not. I hate not having a job. I feel like a failure. My father would call me a "bum", if he knew – "a good for nothing bum".

Wife: You're not a bum. You're a hard worker and you provided well for this family for years and you got laid off with the rest of the workers for no fault of your own. I don't hold it against you but I also don't want to come home to you acting like a depressed little boy either.

Husband: There you go again. Attacking me.

Therapist: On the one hand you (the husband) feel she attacks you the way your father criticized you. On the other hand you (the wife) admire your husband's work history and recognize that he was laid off for no fault of his own. But it's also difficult for you (the wife) to see him depressed.

Wife: Yes, my mother was often depressed and left the house a mess and my father hated that and I used to run home after school to clean the house before my father would get home so he wouldn't yell at her and then he got mad at me because I was staying up late to do my homework and had difficulty waking up in the morning.

Husband: She's a hard worker.

Wife: He is too.

Therapist: You both admire the hard working spirit of the other but you both carry the critical voices of your parents on your shoulders and when there is a crisis such as unemployment those internal messages get so loud it becomes difficult to hear the actual messages that each of you are sending.

Husband: You're right. I'm having a hard time being unemployed .

Therapist: It's often much harder than working.

Husband: Yes, and she's right. I neglect the house but I hate washing dishes and cleaning the toilet.

Wife: Really? I just love it.

Husband: Okay, okay. I just admitted you're right but if you want my cooperation don't get facetious with me.

Wife: It's a deal.

In couple's therapy we often discover that just beneath the surface of mundane problems there are a host of vulnerabilities, personal conflicts, old hurts, painful memories, anxieties, self-esteem problems, messages from childhood and old fears. To confront one's spouse often involves confronting oneself. Many people prefer to avoid confronting conflicts in their marriage for fear of what they might discover within the other and

within themselves. They have a fantasy of unspoken marital bliss and so they avoid speaking or avoid speaking about what matters. When frustrated or unsatisfied they prefer to remain quiet and hope things will change on their own somehow. They are presented with three choices: 1) Stay unsatisfied in the marriage with the conflict avoided and the problems beneath it remaining unconscious. 2) Leave the marriage with the conflict avoided and the problems remaining unconscious. Or 3) Work on the marriage, confront the conflict, deal with the problems and in doing so make the unconscious conscious – discover one’s own role in the conflict as it is based in one’s own past and one’s own personality.

It takes two to tango and two to communicate but only one to break the communication. In coming to terms with marital problems, it is often useful to recognize that each member enters the marriage with ‘baggage’ from early childhood, adolescence and previous love relations. It has been said that when two people go to bed together there are always at least six people there. The two members of the marital couple and the voices of their two parents. But there are also the voices we have internalized derived from past loves, siblings, close friends and other important people in our lives. Good communication between members in the marital couple often requires that they become aware of some of the ‘voices’ or ‘messages’ of the past that get activated in the conflicts of the marital relationship.

Part of developing marital intimacy means becoming aware of one’s own coping strategies, those of the other and the ways in which those coping strategies work and do not work in the search for solutions to day-to-day problems within the marriage. Another aspect of marital intimacy includes confronting and learning to live with different values. If the values are too different, the relationship will not have a chance but no two people have the exact same values, likes and dislikes. Intimacy means not only sharing what is held in common but it also means living with the differences.

**The author now lives and works in Bellevue, Washington.
Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to:**

E-MAIL – daniel.benveniste@gmail.com