

Making Sure You Are Talking About The Same Thing

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

A pattern of communication difficulties I often see in working with couples is one that I call “communicating on different levels”. In a classic conflict over taking out the trash, the discussion deteriorates quickly from exchanging information about the task of taking out the trash to involve sniper shots about about the inadequacies in the romantic relationship. One spouse is actually discussing the logistical issues of taking out the trash, while the other person is making indirect comments about relationship qualities and marital satisfaction. Typically they don’t know that they are not talking about the same thing. As they become flooded with frustration and uncomfortable emotion they become confused about how talking about something so simple as taking out the trash can lead to a big, ugly argument, with residual hurt feelings and ill will for days. Because they are indirectly talking about relationship issues, they are often unaware that the conflict really doesn’t have much to do with the trash.

To the spouse who is angry about the other one not taking out the trash, the act of not remembering it is “trash day” means that his/her spouse is not considerate of her time and energy, her feelings, or does not think of her at all. For the complaining spouse, the act of not taking out the trash comes to be an indication that she is not important and not loved. Instead of telling the other spouse that she doesn’t feel loved she complains about how it makes more work for her or inconveniences her. It might come out in dirty fight tactics like passive aggression or sarcasm.

In the ongoing discussion s/he may never verbalize anything recognizable about the relationship. S/he may not be aware that s/he has attached certain relationship meaning to partner behavior. When the spouse once again neglects the trash, it is not a logistics issue about getting up early enough, remembering what day is trash collection day, or what constitutes a “full enough trash can”, it is even more of an issue of not being important and loved. The importance of that task becomes intensified with each new event because the complainer believes that s/he has told the other person how she feels and that he just doesn’t care.

Much of the time, even though the discussion has deteriorated to a point of raised voices and perhaps tears, the couple may still think that they are talking about the trash. At this point, they cannot problem solve about either issue. They are not on the same page.

How do you know if you are not talking about the same issue? One major clue is when you have an emotional response to a situation or conflict that is out of proportion to the conflict or issue identified. Another clue is that when the issue is a simple, easily resolved issue that never gets resolved, you are not problem solving on the same issue.

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