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Question:

We're newlyweds. Communicating has been hard. When we fight I shut down. Can I learn to share my feelings?

Answer:

Learning to communicate how I'm feeling and what I'm thinking to my spouse can be very, very difficult. I know growing up in my family we handled conflict very differently than my wife's family did. So, you can imagine that as we were married, this was not easy.

I'll never forget the time—we maybe had been married a couple of months, maybe four or five months—and Erin and I were really learning how to do that. She has a much easier time sharing her feelings than I do. That's always been very hard for me.

So, this one time we got in some kind of a fight. I can't even remember, early in the morning—we just couldn't get anywhere. Kept kind of spinning around and around, it was miserable, you know how that feels.

So, she all of a sudden decides that she's going to leave—she's a nurse, and so she wants to go to the hospital—and we hadn't resolved anything. And in my family, you didn't do that. If you were upset with each other, you just kind of hung in there.

And so, she's literally leaving, but as she's leaving she makes some kind of snide remark, and it shuts the door. And so I'm thinking, "Now, wait a minute. That's not fair. You know, she's got the last word."



Now, she had asked me to do the laundry. And we lived in a third-floor apartment. And usually how we did our laundry was we put in this massive bag, this mesh bag, stuffed it all in there. And because we didn't want to carry it all the way down, we would just drop it over the side.

So, I'm thinking, "All right, she got the last word. It's hard enough for me to tell her how I really feel. So, I'm going to show her how I feel." Which was not a good idea, because what I decided was the best way to do that was maybe to, while I'm dropping the laundry over the side, what if I accidentally hit next to her? Then she could see that I'm not someone she should be messing with.

This is horrible. This isn't actually funny at all. And so, as she's walking out, I let it go, hoping that it would land right next her, and instead—this is why I would have never made in the military as a bombardier—because I literally clipped her. Didn't hit her full-on, which would have killed her probably, but I hit her enough to where it just shot her to the side, and she fell in the parking lot.

And then, she looked up, and of course, you know, I'm looking over the balcony watching this, and she started flying back up those stairs. I didn't know she could move that fast. And the only thing that came to my mind was that I needed to disappear, so I locked the door and kind of ran to the back. And I could hear her pounding on the door—I'm not an idiot, so I wasn't going to open that door. And finally she left and went to work.

But, I'll tell you that when she came home that night, we had one of the best conversations. Of course, I had all the laundry done, folded nice and neat and I had flowers for her to make up for what I had done.

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But when we were able to finally sit down and talk through what had gone on before she said what she did and I did what I did—and so it was great—but let me challenge you about two things. The way to learn how to share your feelings and your thoughts with your spouse, two things real quick. Number one is this: You have to be aware of what’s going on, how you actually feel.

In the beginning of our marriage my wife would ask me, “How do you feel?” And what do you think I would say? “Fine.” You know what “fine” means? “Feelings Inside Not Expressed.” I really had no idea what was going on. So, she had asked me, “We need to talk about these things.” I just had no idea what was going on for me.

So, number one is, spend some time educating yourself around feeling words, how do I even develop a vocabulary, an emotional vocabulary. There’s feeling lists. Just learn and pay attention to a new word every day, so that if somebody asks you what’s going on, you can begin to share that.

But, number two, and this is the key: You will not be willing to share your feelings if you don’t feel safe. I’m not talking about physically, of course, throwing laundry at my wife didn’t make her feel physically safe either—it made her feel very unsafe in that way—but I’m talking more emotionally.

When we try to work through our differences in ways that we’re yelling, screaming, withdrawing, shutting down, having negative beliefs, when we do those things it doesn’t feel safe, and when we don’t feel safe our hearts will close to each other, and then we’re going to disconnect. I’m not going to end up sharing how I feel to my wife, what I’m thinking, when my heart’s shut down.

Therefore, if you only had one thing to work on, if you really want to do this, do everything you can do to help create a safe relationship.

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What can you do to create safety? And then also what can your spouse do?

Something that Erin and I have asked each other as we've answered this question. It's more of a statement actually. "I feel safe when you..." Whatever that is. "I feel safe when you don't criticize me, you sit me down, you're not harsh. When you calmly talk to me"—whatever it is that you need to feel safe, understand that and be ready to share that with your spouse.

Again, if you don't feel safe during a conversation it's not going to happen. I don't care how many communication techniques you learn. I don't care how much language you learn in terms of how you're feeling. If you're not feeling safe, you won't do that.

That would be the best thing I can think of, if you want to learn to share your feeling. Understand what is going on inside of you. But then, how do I create a safe relationship for me and my spouse?

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