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February 2010

life advice

Listen to Your Spouse with Your Heart

Listening isn't the easiest thing to do, but it can if you follow a few simple steps.

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Fortunately, no special tools are required for you to listen with your heart.

Your spouse is upset with you.

"I want to talk with you," he says. "I'm really upset over how you rushed through our date night yesterday. It's supposed to be our special time."

Before your husband even finishes his sentence, you're apologizing: "Yes, I know, I'm sorry, I realized later it wasn't a nice thing to do but I was so worried about getting home to the kids and ready for work, what could I do?" And you're on to the next thing.

Later, your spouse asks, "Why didn't you talk to me before buying that gym membership? I have a friend who could have gotten us half off. We can't afford to waste money like that!"

Immediately you say, "I know, I should have, but I was overloaded and trying to do everything at once and I was doing the best I could." And you're off and running.

You don't understand why your supposed beloved is cool to you the next day. You take responsibility for the things you do that inconvenience or hurt your spouse, so what's going on? Aren't apologies good enough? Do people just love to hold grudges?

Well, the truth of it is, apologies aren't good enough. *Apologies are only as good as the behavioral changes that follow them.* And it's less that people love to hold grudges, more that people—including your spouse—hold on to their hurt until it has been expressed and resolved or healed.

"Great," you say. "So when did I become the family shrink? I have enough on my plate already!"

It's not about becoming the family shrink, it's about giving your spouse the space to express himself enough and in a

way that allows him to feel *truly heard*.

There is a world of difference between listening with your ears and listening with your heart in a way that makes the other person feel heard. We live in hurried times, where so much emphasis is put on deadlines and schedules that too little time is accorded to the human need for expression. Yet listening with your heart doesn't take much time, and it makes a tremendous difference in the quality of your relationship.

So how do you listen with your heart?

1. Don't start off by apologizing. "Huh?" you say, completely confused. "I thought apologizing if you did something hurtful was the right thing to do!" It is, but it's not the right place to *start*. The right place to start is by listening.

2. Stop whatever you are doing, and really listen to your spouse. Listen with your eyes, as well as your ears. Look at your spouse as he tells you how he feels about the way you hurt or inconvenienced him. Don't fidget, text, tweet or file your nails at the same time. Give your spouse your complete and undivided attention.

3. Resist the temptation to defend yourself. This is a hard one for most of us! You like to think of yourself as a good person and when you've hurt your spouse, it's usually not deliberate. So there's a natural tendency to jump in with your explanations, excuses, defenses and rationalizations. Resist, resist, resist.

4. Acknowledge what your spouse feels. "It was really uncomfortable for you to be rushed like that." Or, "you felt really ignored, like I wasn't paying any attention to your needs." Or "it felt like I didn't value your opinion" are all examples of acknowledging what your husband says to you about his feelings.

"Ouch!" you say. "That could really hurt!" Certainly, if you haven't been truly listening to your spouse for a long time, it could hurt. There might be piles and piles of resentful feelings built up. If, however, you listen to your spouse as soon as something comes up, there won't be much "else." And it is important that your spouse have the opportunity to really speak his piece.

6. Apologize. Now is the time to apologize, graciously and honestly. You still don't need to defend or justify. The apology is sufficient.

7. Make amends and/or change your future behavior. An apology has no value unless it is backed up with action. Amends are often the most powerful way to apologize.

This whole process can take less than five minutes, yet makes the difference between a thriving relationship and a stultifying one. Give yourself the benefit of being who you truly are: one who listens, one who cares, one who *hears*.

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