

Improving Communication with Your Partner by Val Long, Ph.D., HSPP

An important aspect of positive communication with a partner involves validation. Validation involves understanding and valuing another person. When couples talk to each other about difficult issues, communication can often go as follows:

You tell me how you feel. I tell you how I feel. You do not feel heard, so you tell me again how you feel with a little more emotion. I do not feel heard, so I tell you again how I feel with a little more emotion... and so on. The emotions involved in the communication escalate and the communication can become counterproductive.

As a society, we are often uncomfortable with intense emotions and, therefore, say things to try to talk a person out of those feelings. This approach can entail the use of “cheerleading,” which involves trying to make the other person feel good even when he doesn’t. However, not allowing a person to ‘have’ their feelings often leads to those feelings becoming more intense. Validating another person’s feelings, on the other hand, shows that you respect and value that person. This gives the other person the message that his feelings are okay.

Validation involves listening to another person with your full attention. This includes looking at him or her, not paying attention to any other activities such as the TV or a cell phone, and providing verbal and non-verbal cues that you are listening. It can include statements such as, “I understand you are upset because...” In order to validate another person’s feelings, it is not necessary that you understand *why* he feels the way he does or even that you agree with him. Rather, validation is acknowledging that the other person has the right to his opinion and his feelings. Consider the following example:

Parents, Jay and Kim, had their 12-year-old son, Tom, evaluated by a psychologist due concerns about his mood and behavioral problems. Tom is diagnosed with bipolar disorder and referred to a psychiatrist for a medication evaluation. Kim is relieved to finally know what is causing Tom’s mood difficulties and is eager to consider medication. Jay, on the other hand, does not believe that the diagnosis is valid and wants to wait to see if Tom’s difficulties subside as he matures. Kim expresses her concerns to Jay, telling him she is afraid that if they do not seek appropriate treatment for Tom, his problems will worsen. Non-validating responses to one another might include something like the following:

Jay: *“Don’t be ridiculous. Tom will be just fine. You always worry too much and overreact.”*

Kim: *“You never take anything seriously. You always put your head in the sand.”*

It is easy to imagine how this conversation may lead to an argument, with neither person feeling heard or understood. On the other hand, a validating response to one another might include something more like this:

Jay: *"I understand how concerned you are. You really want everything to be better for Tom."*

Kim: *"I really do. I understand that you really want things to be better for Tom, too, and that it is difficult for you to consider that he may need medication."*

Validation is important for both partners. It shows that each person respects the other enough to acknowledge his or her thoughts and feelings. This approach can go a long way toward keeping arguments in check and helping couples develop solutions to complex scenarios.

Another pattern of communication between partners involves one person repeatedly nagging the other in an effort to get him or her to do something or react in a certain manner. It is important to recognize that you cannot *make* another person act or think in a particular way. In fact, nagging is completely ineffective over the long term. In her book, *The ADHD Effect on Marriage (2010)*, Melissa Orlov writes, "Although it may seem counterintuitive, a nagging spouse will be much more successful if she stops nagging completely... Nagging puts your entire relationship at risk by changing the proportion of positive interactions to negative interactions heavily in favor of the negative" (pg. 65). Further, nagging suggests that the other person is not competent enough to do things on his or her own.

So, how does one help a partner to achieve his or her potential without nagging? Consistent with the approach of coaching, it is important to recognize that people must take ownership of their own lives. Terry Dickson, M.D., Director of the Behavioral Medicine Clinic of NW Michigan, offers the following tips for encouraging another person (read more at <http://chaddcoach.blogspot.com/2013/08/words-of-encouragement.html>):

- Be aware of what encourages you and do the same for others.
- Write your partner a note with words of encouragement.
- Always be specific when you offer praise.
- When you see positive changes in a person's life, affirm that person.
- If encouraging thoughts come to mind, share them.
- We all make mistakes, so look beyond fault. It may be an opportunity to realize there is much learning to be gained through failure.
- Remember that most people may not reach their full potential without someone believing in them and taking the time to tell them so.