

Blocks to Successful Communication in Marriage

By Jim Burns, Ph.D.

The trait that is most closely linked to the success or failure of your marriage is your ability to communicate. Dr. John Gottman is one of the world's leading experts on marriage. He claims that he often can determine if a couple is on the road to divorce by observing them interact on an issue of conflict. Much of Dr. Gottman's findings center around the use of negativity as poor communication. In his excellent book, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, he writes about six poor habits of communication that are detrimental to building intimacy and developing healthy communication. (These poor habits will help you measure how you are doing with your spouse in this area. If you find yourself needing help, then I suggest you talk with someone about your communication. Remember, where there is no counsel, people fall; in the multitude of counselors, there is safety.)

Dr. Gottman's six poor communication habits are:

1. Harsh Start ups
2. The Four Horsemen: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, stonewalling
3. Flooding
4. Body Language
5. Failed Repair Attempts
6. Bad Memories

Let me explain in my own words the dynamics behind these habits of poor communication. I think, like me, you will see yourself in many of them.

1. Harsh Start Ups: Harsh start ups put the other person in the defensive before the conversation has a chance.

2. The Four Horsemen: Dr. Gottman claims that certain types of negativity are more lethal to your relationship. His four horsemen are 1) Criticism: Complaints are normal but criticism deals more with your spouse's character and personality. 2) Contempt: This is long simmering negative thoughts about your partner that turn into disrespect. 3) Defensiveness: As we discussed earlier in the chapter this approach rarely ever works and usually turns the conversation into a blame game. 4) Stonewalling: Eventually your partner tunes you out. Raymond wasn't willing to work at communication with Sylvia; he simply crawled into his cave and the conversation stopped for the time being.

3. Flooding: This happens when you or your spouse bombards the communication with negativity whether it is in the form of criticism, contempt, defensiveness or any other negative approach. Some people would call consistent nagging a form of flooding. One

man told me that when his wife starts flooding and nagging at him, he feels like she is taking her hand and just tapping on his chest until he blows up.

4. Body Language: Authorities tell us that good communication is more about body language than actual words. When a person shuts the other person out with their body language, usually the healthy communication is over. Literally sometimes their body language is evident that they have quit listening. It is too difficult to stay that intense.

5. Failed Repair Attempts: A repair attempt is when a couple puts the brakes on the tension in the relationship and deescalates the conversation. Obviously there are times with intense communication where a couple needs to take a timeout. In a relationship that isn't working, a failed repair attempt doesn't work at decreasing the tension or lowering the stress level. Constant failed repair attempts are like that stress fracture that just keeps getting worse.

6. Bad Memories: When a couple is consumed with negativity it not only affects their past but it can place danger on their future. In almost all cases there are very good and happy memories in every relationship but if things are too negative that they can't remember the good times, the relationship is deteriorating.

(Excerpted and adapted from [Creating an Intimate Marriage](#) by Jim Burns, Ph.D., published by Bethany House.)

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