Building Better Communication Through Affirmation

by Jim Burns, Ph.D.

If you're looking for an easy way to improve communication in your marriage, I've got one for you – pay your spouse a *complement!* You'd be amazed at the number of counseling sessions I've had with married couples where both spouses are literally *starved for affirmation* from each other. That's really a shame because I'm convinced that affirming words have to power to bring healing to even the most "worn-out" marriage.

I'm told it takes nine affirming comments to make up for even one critical comment. If you are like most people, you owe your spouse a *boatload* of encouragement! Many people get in a very bad habit of neglecting to encourage their spouse. Sometimes we get so busy with life that we miss the major (and minor) opportunities to give our spouse the gift that keeps on giving: a genuine word of encouragement.

Affirming words have the power to bring healing to a worn out marriage. A daily dose of encouragement from you to your spouse is better than any monetary present you could give. Today, take the time to write a note or, better yet, look your spouse right in the eyes and give him/her a compliment. You will immediately see in his/her eyes what a big deal it is to receive affirmation and encouragement. Here is your homework: Look for ways to give at least one genuine, heartfelt word of praise to your spouse every day for the next week. If you need to write down what you will say, do it. Even in the midst of tension, take the time to give a word of encouragement. You will likely see an immediate appreciation and a softening that both of you will experience.

You may have heard the story about the gentleman who went to a marriage counselor to talk about divorcing his wife. The wise counselor said, "Before you do that, I want you to attempt something for me." "Are you willing to try?"

The man replied, "What have I got to lose?"

"Good, then I want you to spend the next month giving encouragement and affirmation to your wife. *Treat her like a goddess*. Bring her flowers and chocolates, and help her around the house. Tell her that you will do the dishes. Take her "honey-do" list and start working through it, beginning tonight."

The man took the advice and went straight home, where he brought his wife chocolates and flowers. He told her to sit down, and he fixed dinner. He complimented her for all her hard work and the wonderful job she had done with the kids. He took the honey-do list and got started immediately.

The next day the counselor decided to call the man to see how the first night went. He told the counselor all the wonderful things he had done for his wife. "Wow! What was her reaction?" the counselor asked.

Bill replied, "She said, `Oh, Bill we have so many problems and now on top of all that, you come home drunk!' "

A month later the counselor called Bill and asked if he had filed for divorce. "File for divorce? Why would I do that? I married a *goddess*!" The person who had changed was Bill because he started treating his wife with encouragement. Some people call it the self-fulfilling prophecy—you become what others believe you to be. Our job is to treat our spouse with kindness and encouragement and to constantly show affirmation. Most everyone will respond to this treatment in a positive way over time. But even if they don't, because of some pathology in their life, you will be a better person for giving the gift of encouragement.

Cathy and I have had to realize that our need for encouragement from each other is huge, but our love language is very different. If Cathy writes me a card with praise in it or she tells me she appreciates me, she has given me all I need to go on for weeks because I appreciate so much her words of affirmation.

I expected that to be true for Cathy as well. So, I would write her notes and whisper words of encouragement. I could see that she always appreciated affirmation but she responded most positively when I "encouraged" her by folding the laundry and doing the vacuuming. Basically, Cathy would rather have me help with the dishes than send her a love note while she is washing the dishes alone! Maybe it's time to find out your spouse's love language—the ways your spouse likes to be encouraged. The best way to do that is to ask them. But then, you probably already know the answer.

(Excerpted and adapted from the book *Creating an Intimate Marriage* by Jim Burns, Ph.D.)