

Talking Points: Notice Your Communication Style and the Power of Your Words

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"Because even the smallest of words can be the ones to hurt you, or save you." – [Natsuki Takaya](#)

Remember that saying from our childhood: "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me." Do any of us actually believe this old adage? Of course not. We all know how powerful words can be, and we have experienced for ourselves that words can be used to hurt or to uplift, to shock or to love.

Most of us can remember a time or two when someone's words hurt us deeply. Perhaps we can also remember when we've hurt someone we cared about with our words. A time when our words came out unfiltered in a moment of anger, and then, when we saw their impact on the recipient, filled us with shame and regret.

Since we know our words have impact, it behooves us to pay more attention to them, especially when we're talking with our spouses! Some words, for example, have emotional impact. Think of the words "home", or "family" or "divorce". The very words themselves conjure up specific emotions.

Sometimes it's not the words that count but the way we say the words that matters. Remember when we were kids and our moms made us say we were sorry to our siblings when we really didn't want to? Remember the way we used to say "sorry" with that insincere tone of voice? We said the right thing, but our tone of voice gave us away. Think about the different tones we could use with a simple sentence like, "Can you take out the garbage?" Our delivery can be hurtful or kind.

When we're not careful, the way we speak can actually get in the way of effective communication, and many of us have picked up some bad habits along the way that we're not even aware of. One very common and unhelpful communication habit is what I call preaching, or telling someone what we think

they should do.

Preaching is often offered under the guise of helping, making it difficult to notice when we're doing it. But if we're not careful with the way we give advice, the people we give advice to can end up feeling unloved and disrespected. It helps to remember how we felt the last time someone gave us advice or told us what they thought we should do! A good rule of thumb is that before we offer any advice, however wise it may be, we make sure that our partners feel heard.

Another common thing people do is praising with criticism. This is when we compliment someone, but add a criticism at the end. For example, we might praise our daughter for getting a great report card, but ask her, in the same sentence, "what happened with algebra?" This, of course, cancels out the compliment altogether!

It's more effective when we can separate the criticism and the compliment – at least into two sentences, but preferably with time in between to allow the good of the compliment to really sink in! Current research shows that healthy relationships flourish when there is a 5 to 1 ratio of compliments to criticisms. This is an area we can all work on!

If some of these things sound familiar, join the club! The hope is that when we become more aware, we can reduce the number of times we allow ourselves to slip into these ineffective ways of communicating.

Here's a challenge that can help you to notice your communication style and the power of your words: Make a goal to stop yourself from making any negative or critical comments to your partner for one week. Be mindful of what you are saying and the power of your words. I guarantee that if you make a goal like this, you will quickly notice how often you want to be critical! Or how often negative things will want to spill forth from your mouth!

A note of caution – there will be a learning curve! This is a process of developing awareness and restraint and it happens gradually over time. First, you'll notice the critical or negative comment just after you say it! But don't be discouraged because if you keep at it, you'll start to notice it just as you are saying it! And then, with practice, you'll catch yourself just before you say it and you will decide not to! This is what real growth and spiritual progress looks like.

Remember that all growth requires three things: A decision, a commitment to persevere, and lots of practice! Being careful with our words is definitely a spiritual practice!

Spiritual Practice

1. Make a goal to refrain from making any critical comments to your partner for one week. Notice how often you're tempted to be critical, and note your progress as you practice refraining.
2. When you feel you've made adequate progress, try making a goal to compliment your spouse every day for one week!

*This article is adapted from Debby's book, *Small Steps to Bigger Love*, which is available through HSA Publications and on Amazon.*