

10 Secrets to Feeling Heard by Your Partner

- . *Pick the Right Time*

- . Sometimes you think you need to be heard the minute you have a thought or feeling. But your partner might be wrapped up in something else at the moment -- the game, fixing dinner, trying to go to sleep, working on something, or just not in the right mood right now. Use your experience to tell you what is definitely not the right time -- for example, "big process discussions" are seldom helpful right before bed -- or the minute your partner walks in the door. If you start talking -- and he or she isn't listening -- then ask, "Is there a better time to talk?" And, if you are the listener, play fair -- give your partner a reasonable alternative. Don't use sarcasm or stonewalling.

- . *Edit it Down*

- . Many times you start talking and you just get carried away. Your partner is losing interest, drifting off, his third eyeball is rolling into his cortex. Nothing is getting through. OK. Maybe you need to edit what you say. Try to limit your comments to relatively clear and short sentences. Pause, ask for feedback, wait for your partner. Don't get on a soap-box and hold the floor. Make it more give and take. Think about what is essential and try to focus on that. One way of editing it down is to agree with your partner that there might be a reasonable period to spend on the topic -- for example, "Can we spend about 10 minutes talking about this?" That helps you focus on the essentials and gives your listener a reasonable time-frame.

- . *Pause and Ask for Feedback*

- . Sometimes as a speaker you will go on and on, without pausing. Perhaps you think that you need to stay on your topic so that everything is heard -- or you fear that your partner will jump in

and take the floor and you won't ever get a chance to speak again. Slow it down, edit it down, and stop and ask for feedback. Make the communication two-way. If you feel your partner hasn't really heard what you are saying, then try asking, "Can you rephrase what I said?" Or, if you want your partner to help you think of things differently, you might say, "I wonder if I'm seeing things the right way here." Or, if you want problem-solving, you might say, "I wonder what I can do to make it work." Pause, reflect, ask for feedback.

- *Don't Catastrophize*
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Sometimes we think that the only way to get heard is to make everything sound awful. Sometimes that's a legitimate point of view, but if you make too many things sound awful you will lose your credibility. Try to keep things in perspective, try to stay with the facts, and try to keep things from unraveling. Keep your voice in a calm tone, don't get carried away. Slow it down, quiet it down. You will be heard more clearly with a softer tone. In fact, if you stand back and think it through, some of the things that you are talking about may be unpleasant, inconvenient, or simply a matter of opinion. But "awful" might be a bit extreme. Think it through and decide if it is really as awful as you think and feel it to be.

- *Don't Attack*
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Your listener is not likely to be a good audience if your discussion is a series of attacks and criticisms. Labeling your partner or over-generalizing ("You always do that") is going to be a turn-off. This doesn't mean you can't get your point across and assert yourself. It simply means that you need to communicate in a way that is not as hostile. Making suggestions for change ("It would be helpful if you cleaned up a bit more"), while giving credit for some positives ("I do appreciate your help with the shopping")

can get you more attention and cooperation than out-right attacks ("You are the most selfish person I have ever known").

- *Tell Your Partner if You Want to Solve Problems or If You Want to Share Feelings*

- My experience is that sometimes we just want to vent our feelings, have a sympathetic ear from our partner. That's OK, but your partner needs to know where you are going with it. For example, it may be that you might want to divide it up -- a few minutes of venting and sharing and then either drop the topic or go on to problem-solving. I've found that a lot of people just want to be heard and cared for. Ironically, I used to jump in with rationality and problem-solving very quickly until I realized that some of my patients (and friends) didn't want that. They just wanted to explore feelings and feel supported. So, like a lot of "men" (or people overly-committed to rationality and problem-solving) I had to learn to give time and space for feelings. I have to confess that I was like a lot of the guys. I was task-oriented, committed to rationality, and focused on problem-solving. So it required a lot of discipline for me to step back. As I spent a bit more time validating and listening and supporting, I found that the people I was helping were more willing to hear my rationality and problem-solving when we got around to it. And, much to my surprise, some didn't need a problem to be solved. They needed someone to care about the fact they had a problem.

- *Listening Is Not Agreeing*

- Sometimes we have the belief that the listener should agree with everything we say and be just as upset as we are. That's the only way to show that he or she is really listening. Wrong. Listening is hearing, understanding, reflecting, and processing information. I can listen to your thoughts and feelings without agreeing with your point of view. You and I are different people. It doesn't

mean I don't care for you if I don't agree with you. It means I am hearing you. But sometimes the speaker can attack the listener for not agreeing 100 percent. That seems unrealistic and unfair. We all need to accept the differences that make us unique. In fact, the differences can be opportunities for growth. When you talk to someone who understands you and cares about your feelings -- but doesn't agree with your interpretation of events -- it opens your mind to the fact that there is more than one way to think about things.

- . *Respect Advice*
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If you are turning to your partner for support and advice you are likely to get feedback -- probably some advice. Now, you might be unfortunate and get sarcasm and contempt -- the predictors of divorce. But let's assume that your partner is trying to do what he or she can to be supportive -- but it's not exactly what you want. Maybe the advice is not helpful, maybe it's irrational. But if you want to be heard, you have to be willing to respect the advice-giver. You don't have to take the advice or like the advice. But if you are playing to an audience that you then attack you won't have an audience the next time around. Think of advice or feedback as information -- take it or leave it. But don't hit the other person over the head with it.

- . *If You Describe a Problem, Describe a Solution*
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This may not be what you are ready for. As I said, you might just want to vent, share feelings, explore your thoughts. But I think it also makes sense -- some of the time -- to describe potential solutions if you describe potential problems. I actually love to jump to problem-solving (as I "admitted" earlier) but it may be premature with some people. But if you are a speaker you might consider this as an option -- describe a solution if you describe a problem. Your solution doesn't have to be an *order* to do

something. It can be tentative, reasonable, one of several possibilities. In fact, if you begin thinking of the problem as something to solve, you might begin feeling more empowered. But it's your call if you want to go there now -- later -- or never.

. *Validate the Validator*

One of the most helpful things that you can do as a speaker is to support the person who is supporting you. You don't want to be a downer and you don't want to act entitled to every minute of the other person's time. Think about it from their point of view. They are listening to you go on about something that is bothering you. Well, it may not be the most fun for them. But they are with you on this. Why not turn around and thank them for spending the time? Thank them for caring enough to listen and support you. Validate the validator.

Reference: Robert Leahy, PhD, Huffington Post, Posted 02/08/11