

CONNECTED

how to avoid a 'brick-wall' relationship





- He says, “You don’t talk to me anymore!” She says, “You don’t listen when I do!”
- She says, “If I want to discuss something, you’re always too busy!” He says “If I want to discuss something, you’re always too tired!”
- He says, “Am I supposed to read your mind? I wish you’d tell me what’s going on!” She says, “What’s the point? You’ll never understand how I feel!”
- She says, “You’re a real disappointment as a husband!” He says, “Well, why didn’t you marry someone else?”

It’s not funny when people don’t connect ... when communication breaks down ... when couples who once talked about everything run out of things to say.

It’s not funny when one-time night-time lovers discover they’re no longer day-time friends ... when the marriage they all said was made in heaven becomes a silent, brooding stalemate made in hell ... when neither will make the first move, say the first word, break the deadlock.

It’s not funny when all around the country, in homes great and small, angry raised voices can be heard declaring:

“TALKING TO YOU IS LIKE TALKING TO A BRICK WALL”

The complaint is common enough – right? But what causes it? What are these communication ‘walls’ that so easily grow up between us? Where do they come from? How do they get there? And how can we get rid of them?

Well, we’ve picked some common complaints, talked to couples and counsellors, and pin-pointed some surprising answers. So grip the edge of your dining-room table, and read on ...

NOT SPEAKING:

“You don’t talk anymore!”

Does this sound familiar? Makes you wonder, eh. How many ‘brick walls’ are being built while people stay buried behind newspapers, glued to TV screens, hunched over computers, iPads and cellphones, behaving for all the world like they’ve taken vows of silence?

It really is alarming how little some couples say to each other in the course of a normal week. “*Never a dull moment with my husband,*” goes the old joke. “*It lasts all evening!*” But in truth, it’s nothing to laugh about.

And silence isn’t always golden ...

Failure to talk makes enemies out of old friends, and leads businesses to financial ruin ... countries to international strife and war ... and personal relationships down a dead-end street of frustration.

Of all the diseases that can kill your love – conflict, an affair, financial trauma, sexual problems – failure to talk easily tops the list. And it’s at the heart of everything else that goes wrong!

Fact: Most failed relationships don’t fail

because of some dramatic event – they just die quietly of neglect.

The no-talk disease is a silent killer. And it leads to ‘creeping separate-ness’ ... as this couple discovered: *“Andy and I were so in love when we got married. It was nothing for us to sit and talk for hours. When we weren’t speaking, there was a sense that we knew what the other was feeling.*

“It’s hard to know when we started to grow apart. Andy’s job became more and more demanding, and I had the kids to see to. But he would come home so tired he couldn’t even say hello – let alone tell me about his day or pretend to be interested in mine.

“I hated it. I longed to talk with him like we used to. Sometimes, after we’d made

Level 5 – cliché conversation.

Level 4 – reporting the facts.

Level 3 – my ideas and opinions.

Level 2 – my feelings and emotions.

Level 1 – peak communication.

How does it work? Well, something like this ...

She comes home from a school committee meeting, and he asks, “How was your evening?” She says, “Oh, it was okay.” This is **Level 5** – and for some couples, their big conversation of the day has just occurred.

But this man wants to talk. “Did the meeting go as well as you’d hoped?” And she responds with a **Level 4** statement: “Well, we got through all the business ...” But now she might go on with an idea or opinion (**Level 3**): “However, I really

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love, I would allow myself to believe that he still felt close to me. But as soon as I started sharing my heart he would fall asleep.

“Then a strange thing happened: I learnt to live without him. Oh, I washed his clothes and cooked and tried hard to be a wife – but, eventually, I slowly realised I didn’t love him any more.

“He must’ve sensed that because, incredibly, he now wanted to talk. However, it was too late – it was over ...”

But hang on! It’s not all gloom and doom. If two people can stop talking, they can surely choose to *start* talking again. And that means *quality* talk as well as *quantity*.

Experts reckon there are five different levels of communication:

think we’re making the wrong decision.”

“I guess that frustrates you,” he asks, getting into the area of feelings (**Level 2**). “Yes,” she admits. “I felt very uncomfortable. We should’ve had a lot more information.”

There’s real communication happening now – and providing she knows he’s listening and taking it on-board, things may move on to **Level 1**: total, open sharing with all defences down. “I’m actually feeling totally discouraged. Maybe I should resign and let someone else have a go ...?”

Level 1 communication can be hard work ... but it’s worth aiming for. It builds bridges between two people instead of brick walls.



NOT HEARING:
“You never listen!”

The quickest way to shut down communication is to just stop listening. And we all do it ... so easily! We live in a world in which most people hear less than 20% of what's said to them. And it sounds crazy, but the closer we are to someone, the easier it is to not hear them.

John and Marama are near retirement. A few years ago, they found themselves drifting apart. In fact, things got so bad that Marama put her foot down: “We need to see a counsellor!”

“What I discovered,” says John, “was the importance of listening better. I often heard her with only half an ear. I was absorbed in other things – and impatient.

I had a habit of just walking out of the room while she was talking to me!”

“He was always in such a hurry,” agrees Marama. “I’d be trying to say something, but he’d be so busy with his own thoughts that he’d interrupt me.”

“Our counsellor spotted the problem immediately,” admits John. “So, in our sessions we had a stick. Whoever was holding it was free to talk – and the other two had to listen until *they* were given the stick.”

The stick-trick worked so well that, afterwards, when John cut in on her at home, Marama would grab a pencil and claim the floor! “We now know that one of the most loving gifts we can give to each other is the gift of listening.”

Listening means keeping your ears open ... keeping your eyes open ... and keeping your mouth firmly shut. It’s more than politely waiting for your turn to speak ... or working out what your next argument’s going to be. Listening means *concentrating* on what’s being said and *accepting* what’s being said – whether or not you agree with it, and without passing judgement.

Listening means letting your partner know that what he or she is saying is important, that you *are* interested, that you *are* trying to understand it from his or her point of view.

A couple of useful warnings:
(i) Does your partner never listen? Well, you may be the problem. If your comments are mainly sarcastic or critical – or just plain trivial – you’ve probably been tuned out. Practise saying things that are worth listening to.
(ii) Does your partner never shut up? Maybe he or she is compensating. Maybe

you stopped listening a long time ago ... and the more bored you look, the more you yawn, the louder and harder the talk becomes. Try *really* listening for a change. Try asking, “*What happened ...?*” “*How do you feel about ...?*” Try saying, “*I think you’re right ...*”

NOT EXPLAINING:

“You never told me that before!”

He married her in the hope that she would replace his best mate who’d been killed in a car crash. She married him in the hope that he would make a fuss of her and ‘baby’ her like her dad used to. He wanted a companion, an equal. She wanted a father-figure.

But neither of them thought to explain that. And 15 years later, when the ‘brick wall’ grew too heavy, their marriage simply collapsed.

used to” – but your husband expected you to stay home and keep house while he went off and earned a wage, “*like my mum and dad used to.*”

♥ Maybe you assumed your love would be taken for granted, without you having to talk about it all the time – but your partner needed to be told and told and told again.

It can be a rude shock – and sparks can fly – when these ‘cross-purposes’ finally show up ...

Something we overlook when we’re first ‘going out’ is this: we never saw our parents dating or courting – we’re not influenced by the way they did it – we have no model of “Mum and Dad at this stage in their lives” to look back on.

But once we marry and settle down, we’ve each got 15-to-25 years’ worth of memories: the way our parents treated

Feelings are the raw materials out of which relationships are made. And if you don’t know how your partner feels – her passions and longings, his dreams and fears – then you don’t know your partner.

It’s hard enough to meet someone else’s expectations when we know what they are – but it’s almost *impossible* when we’ve never been told.

Why did YOU get married? What were your great expectations? What needs did you hope your partner would meet?

- ♥ Maybe you got married for sex – but what your wife wanted was romance.
- ♥ Maybe you looked forward to moving off and being independent – “*just the two of us*” – but your husband intended to stay close to his family.
- ♥ Maybe you dreamed of working with him, side by side “*like my mum and dad*

each other, worked and played, fought and made up, showed their love.

And those memories can hugely influence the way *we* now behave ...

A young woman can suddenly become just like her mother – “*She changed overnight!*” A young man can start acting just like his father – “*He’s a chip off the old block!*” And each person naturally assumes that his/her model of marriage is the best.

Which explains how two people, very much in love, can wake up one morning to find that they no longer speak the same language.



Solution: You've got to think *back* ... you've got to think *hard* ... and you've got to *talk!* You've got to identify those 'great expectations' and get them out in the open. And where you find your dreams differ, you must be willing to compromise.

Fail to do that and you'll end up fighting a duel instead of singing a duet!

NOT CLARIFYING:

"Am I supposed to read your mind?"

You add a big fat block to that 'brick wall' when you expect your partner to be a mind-reader. But we all do it, don't we? We're all experts at giving cloudy, unclear, mixed-up messages – and it's a miracle we understand each other as well as we do.

• *He gets mad because she's untidy and*

never puts things away. He doesn't mention it to her – just grumbles to himself. But then one day, he explodes – and she's got the cheek to look hurt!

See the problem? She's been letting him pick up after her for months, assuming it's okay. He's been fuming for months, assuming she's irresponsible. Trouble is, neither knows what the other is thinking.

- *She says, "Do you like my new dress?" He says, "I guess so – but it's not really your colour." She bursts into tears, vowing never to wear the stupid thing again – and he stands there wondering what he did wrong.*

If she'd only asked him what she really wanted to know – "Do you still find me attractive?" – his answer would most certainly have been "Yes!"

There's another common source of misunderstanding: **“the-things-we-say-when-we're-not-saying-anything”**. Believe it or not, words make up only 7% of human communication ... 38% is told by our tone of voice ... and (*wait for it*) a whopping 55% is passed on by our unspoken body language: facial expressions, slouching, eyes glued to TV, texting or checking emails, head buried in a book, slamming the door, the ‘silent treatment’, and so on.

And (to add to the confusion) our tone of voice and body-language often say the exact *opposite* of what our words say!

Suggestion:

1. Wherever possible, say what you mean and mean what you say.

None of us are good at unscrambling codes. How much better to say it straight ... clarify ... and clear the table of another ‘brick’.

NOT OPENING UP:

“You just don’t understand how I feel!”

He used to say they had a great marriage ... until the night she told him she was leaving. She’d found someone else with whom she could share her hopes and dreams. And her parting shot as she walked out the door was, *“We’ve been married for 12 years – and you still don’t know how I feel!”*

This kind of thing happens to too many couples, and it highlights an important

Good communication won’t happen when you’re rushing past each other on the way to the office or kitchen or bed. It won’t happen during the commercials. You’ve got to give your partner some of the best time in your day.

2. Double-check: *“Have I got you right?”* *“What did you just hear me say?”*
3. And don’t overlook the GOOD power of body-language. You can sometimes say lots more with a smile, a touch, a hug, a neck-massage, a kiss, or even shared tears – than you’ll ever say with words alone.

If you leave your partner to *guess* that you’ve got a thumping headache ... that you’re going to be home later than arranged ... that you’ve had a rotten day with the kids ... that you want to make love tonight ... that you’d like to do something or go somewhere different this weekend – there’s at least a 50% chance that he or she will miss your wave-length completely.

home-truth: **feelings are the raw materials out of which relationships are made.**

FEELINGS – not facts!

If you don’t know how your partner feels – her passions and longings, his dreams and fears – then you don’t know your partner. And there’s every chance a brick wall is being built right under your nose.

Why is this one so hard?

Well, some of us simply aren’t used to wearing our feelings so openly. The stiff-upper-lip tradition – *“big boys don’t cry”* – has taught men to hold their feelings tight inside, especially feelings like gentleness or fear. And many of us never saw our parents expressing their feelings – *“not in front of the children”* – feelings of affection or insecurity, for example.

But the main reason we hold them in is because **sharing feelings is risky**. It makes us vulnerable, exposing our real selves, and we can get hurt. So rather than take the risk, we close the door on that private inner arena ... and wear 'masks' to hide what's really going on inside.

Yes, those masks are sometimes appropriate – in the competitive world of business, for example. But in the intimacy of marriage, they can be disastrous. Why? Because feelings don't go away. They still lurk in the background, dominating our self-talk – those one-way conversations we have in our heads.

Buried feelings are time-bombs, tick-tick-ticking below the surface. And they can destroy relationships by making people distant, cold, bitter and even physically ill.

Solution:

1. Accept that it's normal, healthy, *okay* to have feelings – even strong ones.
2. Get them out in the open: learn to *talk* about how you feel inside, how you feel right now, how you feel about each other, and how you feel (not just *think*) about life.
3. Learn to *listen* to each other's feelings – without condemning (“*You shouldn't feel that way!*”) ... and without trying to fix them (“*Leave it to me – you'll soon feel better*”).

Feelings are fragile, and they need to be handled with care. Sharing them calls for a relaxed, trusting atmosphere ... time alone, just the two of you ... and patience. Some couples find they need to write their feelings out in a 'love-letter'. And others discover they're so out of practice that they really need third-party help.

Whatever the effort ... it's worth it.

And don't forget: words aren't the only way to communicate feelings. Think how much you can 'say' through a simple **touch**:

- an arm around the shoulder reassures, “*I'm with you all the way!*”
- a cheek-to-cheek snuggle declares, “*I love you, and I'm glad you're mine!*”
- a finger-tickle down the spine says, “*Want to have some fun?*”
- a gentle caress can be an invitation, “*Come and get me!*”
- an arm-in-arm walk around the block announces, “*We're enjoying life – together!*”

Smart couples don't just talk lots – they touch lots and hug lots, too.

NOT PLANNING:

“You never have time for me!”

You can say what you like about “a dog's life” – but many dogs have it rather good. They get talked to and patted, get their ears rubbed and their backs scratched. They get taken for walks in the park, and they get to play fun'n'games.

There are lots of people who would love to get that much attention from their partners!

The point is simply this: *good relationships don't just happen!* They're only as good as the time and effort and attention we give them. And if you don't put in ... you don't get out!

Listen to this confession from one man who left it too late, who came home to find his family had left:

“I wandered from room to room in a daze. They'd gone. They'd asked me over and over again to make time for them, but I was always too busy, too many

HOW GOOD ARE YOU AT THIS STUFF?

THE COMPLAINTS INVESTIGATED in this article are real enough – and there's lots more where they came from. But let's get personal for a moment: **what kind of communicator are you?**

Check back over each of the 'bricks' – and score yourself from 1 to 5:

- 1 = guilty all the time
- 2 = guilty much of the time
- 3 = not bad but could improve
- 4 = pretty good, rarely a problem
- 5 = not guilty, never a problem

Go on – see how you rate:

- “I don't talk to my partner” ()
- “I don't listen to my partner” ()
- “I don't share my hopes and expectations” ()
- “I leave my partner to guess what's on my mind” ()
- “I don't open up about my feelings” ()
- “I don't really have the time for my partner” ()

Then add them up, and consider this: if you score a total of

- 25 or more, you're a great communicator, and your partner's dead lucky.
- between 15-25, you've still got some learning to do.
- less than 15, oh-oh, you're heading for trouble.
- as low as 6, ouch – you badly need help!

Now, just for fun, take this a step further: you and your partner rate each other – and then compare scores!

commitments. Yet all I wanted as I stood in that empty house was them back again. I wanted to hear my son say, 'Will you play with me now, Daddy?' I wanted to tell my daughter, 'Yes, of course I remembered your birthday.' I wanted to take the phone that I'd never been able to resist and smash it. I wanted to tear my precious diary into small pieces. I wanted to tell them, 'You truly mattered to me more than any of this. Forgive me.' I just wanted to roll back the years and begin again ...”

Some wise person once observed, “The two most important times for any couple are the first five minutes in the morning and the last five minutes at night.” And that makes sense: the way we react to each other on waking, and the atmosphere that surrounds us as we go to sleep, can make all the difference.

And many relationships would be revolutionised by 10 minutes of meaningful conversation each day!

Suggestion:

1. Grab half an hour (at least) with your partner every evening – without fail.
2. Get the kids into bed, put your dinner-time back, turn off the TV, turn the phone off, make a coffee, go sit in the garden, wait until last thing at night – do whatever you have to do, whatever works for you.
3. This is *your* time – to share, talk about how the day went, have fun, tell jokes if you want.
4. Deal with problems if you have to, but don't get all heavy – just really communicate, one-on-one, and build up your relationship.

If you can't find time at night, get up a bit earlier each morning. Make toast and tea and have breakfast in bed. Grab that half-hour together – and start your day off well.

And don't stop there!

Go out for the night and have a pile of fun. Plan a weekend away without the kids. See your partner as a friend to be with – not just a wage-earner or housekeeper. You're married to someone who is unique and special, who has opinions, ideas, hopes, fears, achievements, failures. So get to know that someone. Plan to make time!

It won't happen when you're rushing past each other on the way to the office or kitchen or bed. It won't happen during the commercial breaks on TV. And it won't happen last thing at night when you're pooped.

Fact: If your relationship's important to you, it deserves some of the best time in your day – not the rag-ends when you've got nothing left to give!

One last thing: it's never too late to start! If you want something bad enough, you can find a way to make it happen. If you and your partner want to improve your communication – if you want to rediscover the lost art of conversation – you can do it!

You can start talking again and listening again. You can start forgiving again and loving again. You can pull that brick wall down and discover each other again.

So what are you waiting for ...? 🍇

KEEPERS OF THE VINE



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Thanks so much – John Cooney (founder)

