

## **DO THE #1 THING IN A CONVERSATION THAT ACCORDING TO RESEARCH CAN MOST HELP YOUR RELATIONSHIP.**

### **During Conflict, How Do You Sound in Your Marriage?**

When the two of you first met, your conversations were carried along with a tone of love and respect toward each other that made your relationship meaningful.

#### **Research on Tone in Marriage**

After studying two thousand couples for twenty years a researcher said in the book, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*, "Most couples . . . over the years, really wanted just two things from their marriage—**love and respect**" (p. 18). Elsewhere we read, "In our study of long-term marriages we recruited couples from a wide range of backgrounds who had been married twenty to forty years to the same partner. Despite the wide differences in occupations, lifestyles, and the details of their day-to-day lives, I sense a remarkable similarity **in the tone of their conversations**. No matter what style of marriage they have adopted, their discussions, for the most part, are carried along by a strong undercurrent of two basic ingredients: **love and respect**" (p. 61).

I predict you had this tone early in the relationship. But this raises the question: Is that tone of love and respect still present? When you talk to your spouse, do you sound loving and respectful? I am not saying they deserve to be talked to this way in light of something they may have done that deeply hurt you. I am only saying that the research reveals that when you sound hostile and contemptuous toward whom your spouse is as a human being, your spouse will not hear your deepest heart, not long term. This may not be fair but it is a fact.

#### **Gender Vulnerabilities**

Is this attitude and tone of love and respect really the key? The Bible said the same two thousand years ago in Ephesians 5:33, which is the summary verse to the greatest treatise in the Bible on marriage. There God commands the husband to love and the wife to respect. However, the Bible highlights a gender difference. Generally speaking, wives need love and husbands need respect.

Along with you, I wondered why, especially since wives need R.E.S.P.E.C.T. and few wives feel R.E.S.P.E.C.T. for their husbands.

Also, I knew everyone needed love and respect equally, so why is the husband commanded to love and the wife commanded to respect? Is this an antiquated worldview?

I found something fascinating. I asked seven thousand people this question: "When you are in a conflict with your spouse, do you feel unloved or disrespected?" Eighty-three percent of the husbands said they felt disrespected. Seventy-two percent of the wives said they felt unloved.

#### **True Need and Felt Need**

Stunning! Though everyone needs love and respect equally, the felt need differs among husbands and wives during conflicts. This was statistically significant.

Doesn't a husband need L.O.V.E.? Absolutely, but apparently during conflict most husbands are assured of their wives' love. Women love to love. Ask Harry, "Does your wife love you?" He'll reply, "Yes." Then ask, "Does she like you?" He'll answer, "No, not today." If the wife is listening she's apt to chime in, "He's right. I love him a ton, but right now I don't like him nor feel any respect for him. He forgot my birthday and told me he cannot make our daughter's piano recital. I am hurt and mad. He doesn't deserve my respect. He hasn't earned it."

Doesn't a wife need R.E.S.P.E.C.T.? Absolutely, but no movie ends with the hero embracing the rescued damsel and declaring, "I want to respect you the rest of my life." Furthermore, there's not one card in the whole card industry from a husband to a wife that says, "Baby, I really respect you on our anniversary!"

What's my point? Generally speaking, most wives "hear" the unloving tones coming from their husbands. She knows that she cares (all research reports the female is the caregiver and this finding is off the charts) but she wonders, does he care as much as she does? Many wives have said to me, "I wonder if he loves me as much as I love him." A wife can feel insecure about his love and filters his actions and reactions through the love grid. One of the most commonly asked questions of a wife toward her husband is, "Do you love me?" Or a common request is, "Tell me that you love me." In conflict she interprets anger, harshness, or stonewalling as unloving. She "hears" it that way. The topic at hand is secondary to the fact that she is now feeling unloved. She won't hear much else of what the husband is trying to say. Even if she feels disrespected week after week she'll eventually land on love as her foundational need by exclaiming, "How can you say that you love me and treat me disrespectfully?"

In the same way, most husbands "hear" the disrespectful tones coming from the wives, and when they do, they won't hear much else of what the wives are trying to say, even if the wife is expressing her love. In fact, some men get irritated while hearing her say, "I am saying these things because I love you." He is apt to say, "I know you love me" but still shut down in hurt and anger. He filters her criticism as disrespect for who he is as a human and he pulls back emotionally. No husband feels fond feelings of love and affection toward a wife he feels despises who he is as a human being, even though he knows she loves him.

Are you newly married and wanting to make sure the marriage starts off on the right foot, are you eight years into the marriage and wanting to refresh the relationship, or are you in crisis and wanting to deal with the breakdown of trust? What I know is if your tone sounds hostile and contemptuous, no matter how justified you are in what you say, you will prevent good things from happening in the relationship. You will stall any forward progress. I am not saying your spouse will respond to a loving and respectful tone; I am only saying they will not respond to your hostile and contemptuous tone.

### **This Works!**

Though there is no absolute guarantee, I have seen good things happen again and again from the right tone while addressing issues. This is the case with a newlywed or a victim of adultery. This is never fair to the innocent but it is required for future success.

Even if you feel your spouse is 90 percent to blame for the marital tensions, I have found that when you move forward on your 10 percent, and determine to sound loving and respectful, something miraculous begins to happen. Most guilty parties start to soften and respond more positively. The removal of a hostile and contemptuous tone works wonders.

**Today's Question: Do you sound loving and respectful when upset or does your spouse hear hostility and contempt in your voice?**

**Today's Action: Before speaking ask yourself, "Is that which I'm about to say (my conversational tone) going to sound loving and respectful to my spouse?"**

-Dr. Emerson Eggerichs