

## Communication in the Pressure Moments: Pt.1

### LWCC Marriage Ministries Email For June 2024

Wow, nearly the end of June already. I'll say no more. Let's get right into our topic for this month. Consider the following scenario:

You missed an appointment you'd been waiting on for months because the car is acting up again: you just got a call from your son's school about some behavioural issues: and – oh look - the dog just threw up on the carpet. ARGH! Anyone identify with that overwhelmed, stressed-out feeling???

Then, just to add to the moment, your spouse walks in looking serious and wants/needs to talk.

Let's hit the pause button here for a second! What do you think happens next? It's probably pretty safe to assume that you aren't in the best state of mind for a serious conversation right now, with the most important person in your life - right!!!

I'm sure most of us can identify, and I'm sure most of us can figure out what happens next. Why? Because most of us have been there, and fallen right into the ensuing conflict, on too many occasions.

So, let's see if we can dissect this one for a few moments, identify what's going on, and then see if we can find a way to not get tripped up again.

Getting right to the heart of the issue: first of all, in the heat of the moment, there are a combination of four communication issues we don't handle well in the ensuing moments.

#### **1. We lose control of our tone and body language:**

When you're stressed out, anxious, or overwhelmed, you're probably feeling a little amped up, which makes it harder to control the nuances of striking just the right tone, or aligning your non-verbal language with your verbal. Your words themselves might be innocuous enough, but your impatient tone, exasperated sigh, or defensively crossed arms send a prickly message - that, let's face it, you really didn't mean - but which certainly makes for your spouse shutting down or justifiably over-reacting.

#### **2. Our listening skills deteriorate:**

Communication isn't just about talking; the other side of the coin is being a good listener. And a major part of being a good listener is giving your full attention. That means avoiding not only external distractions like your phone, but also internal distractions like an overstimulated mind. Your partner is telling you about something that really is important to them right now; meanwhile, your mind is in a completely different place, maybe running through a to-do list or puzzling out a solution for the dilemma that's causing your own stress. They need - deserve - your undivided attention.

#### **3. We have a low capacity for empathy:**

When you're dealing with your own stuff mentally, it takes a lot of effort and intention to put that aside and respond empathetically to your spouse, especially if they're coming to you with issues that seem to be adding - inadvertently - to your own stress. Without empathy, we tend to criticize or judge, which can often add to what is rapidly becoming an out-of-control situation.

#### **4. We jump to conclusions:**

Stress, or a bad mood, can affect how we interpret the words and actions of our partner. When your mind feels cluttered and overstimulated, it can have a similar effect. Our spouse can make an innocent comment, and in response you get overly defensive, or assume they're not speaking with the best of intentions. Instead of really listening and seeing the whole picture, you've already decided why they said what they did. Unfortunately, jumping to conclusions and making assumptions about our spouse's intentions can often result in a situation blowing out of control.

#### **A realistic solution:**

When you're feeling stressed or overwhelmed, it's normal to feel like you're not at your best. That doesn't mean we can't strive to get better at handling our own emotions and working to improve our communication. Yes, we're going to get caught up in emotion from time to time, and our communication skills might suffer as a result. However, what can go a long way to preventing the situation from taking a negative, or even hostile turn, is to cultivate the self-awareness to know when this is happening, and be able to communicate that to our spouse. It might sound something like, "I'm sorry I snapped at you. I'm feeling very stressed out about ..... which I hadn't shared with you, and I'm just not in a great mindset to focus or talk right now. Can you please let me decompress for a few minutes and I'll come find you." This not only lets your partner know that you're not angry with them, it also gives them the opportunity to support you – bonus points if you can tell them what you need, whether that's a hug or some alone time!!!

It seems simple enough, but good communication is hard to master even under the best conditions. Throw in some mental and emotional hurdles, and things can get even more complicated. But the reality is, we're all going to face periods of stress or an occasional crisis. Understanding how that affects your communication, and figuring how to express it to your spouse, are the first two steps in preventing your marriage from taking the brunt of it.

As I said earlier, let's face it, we've all been there and fallen into this one. But hopefully this stimulates some thought and conversation that will help you to draw a line in the sand on this one for good. In fact, it has also stimulated the material for next month, where I want to explore what we could do to create a constant emotion and communication 'safety zone' in our relationship, that means that feeling stressed or overwhelmed from time to time, doesn't blind-side us, or cause us to walk on egg-shells skirting round some stuff for a period.

Till next month, blessings on you all from the Marriage Ministries team; Stan & Ronnie, John and Karen.

(Content adapted from Article from Dr's. Les & Leslie Parrott)