

Let's Stop Playing Games – Listening

By Denie & Dee Stemmler

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To help you decide if you want to read this article, we devised a quickie quiz:

1. What single word sums up three quarters of the messages on the Marriage Encounter Weekend?
2. What is the secret of staying in love?
3. What is the most difficult challenge of the M.E. Weekend?
4. When couples decide to give up on the dialogue, which element was missing or never present in the dialogue?

If you answered: 1. Listen, 2. Listening, 3. Listening, 4. Listening, then turn the page and go on to another article.

When Mark Twain was 16 years old, he thought his father was "the most ignorant ol' cuss I've ever met." By the time he was 21, Mark Twain was amazed at how much the old man had learned in a few short years.

Before our Weekend, I was one of the best listeners I knew. I could feed back to you the last eight words you said, no matter what I was doing when you said them

Dee would test my talent from time to time - "Are you listening to me?" "Yes dear, you said Mrs. Johnson was in again all morning to tell you about her daughter. " The voice floated out from behind the newspaper, which didn't flutter during the test. Listening prowess at its finest!

My experience has been the opposite of Mark Twain's. In the years since our Weekend, it's amazing how much *worse* I've gotten at listening. It seems the harder I try, the more I can see how hard it is to do. The fact that Mrs. Johnson was in all morning and she was griping a lot wasn't important. Dee's response was important: She's feeling pressured. Her morning was wasted. She's annoyed and frustrated. So, am I a better listener now because I hear the feelings? Nope.

I can never be the judge whether I'm a good listener. I am only a good listener when the listenee feels listened to! It doesn't make any difference if I can play Dee's words back to her, or if I can communicate that I have correctly read her nonverbally and guessed her feelings. She has to know I care. The newspaper has to at least flutter some.

My greatest discovery on our Weekend was how terrible I am as a listener. How excited I was to have the tool of dialogue as a forum for practicing my listening skills. For months I was a magnificent listener. I wanted to know everything about Dee. And after a while, she was much more inclined to reveal some pretty heavy feelings because she knew I wanted to know. There was a beautiful truth in those first few months: only when someone really is listening with full concentration and caring can we reveal with confidence who we really are.

I have found that most of the time outside of dialogue I hear Denie rather than practice the act of listening. I do this most often when all I want is information. This is how I listen after I've asked him a question like, "What do you want to watch on TV tonight?" or "How many 50p pieces do you have in your pockets?" when I'm gathering up school lunch money for the kids. His answers to my questions provide useful information for me to arrange and deal with the details of our everyday life, but this doesn't mean I'm practicing the act of listening.

Shortly after our Weekend, I realized that there is also something I do which I thought of as listening, but again is only hearing. I'm the kind of person who doesn't like to stop doing something once I've got it started. And over the years I've developed a habit of telling Denie, or the kids, or the neighbors: "I'm sorry to keep on doing this, but you keep right on talking. I'm listening to you and I am interested in what you're telling me." I could be doing anything from fixing a meal, to darning socks, to bathing the baby, to watching television.

Before our Weekend I thought this was a rather practical and somewhat loving way to get two things done at once. And I saw myself as being rather skilled at this kind of "listening." But what pulled me up short and made me realize that I wasn't even hearing, much less listening, came after our Weekend.

I found myself genuinely surprised by many of the feelings Denie was sharing with me. But it disturbed me even more to learn that Denie had shared many of these feelings months before in one of our "I'll work-you talk" sessions, and I hadn't heard him. I simply couldn't remember even the conversations Denie told me we had, much less the feelings he shared with me

In trying to understand all of this, it became clear to me that any time I am distracted or preoccupied I'm not capable of truly listening. I can hear but there is no way I can really absorb and retain what is being said.

Since then I've discovered a few more barriers in myself to real listening to Denie One of the barriers occurs when we are having a disagreement At these times I practice a selective/defensive sort of listening I'll pay close attention to what Denie is saying-not because I want to experience him-, but, rather, because I'm convinced my solution is best.

In these situations I'm waiting for the right moment to jump into the flow of words and show Denie how what he just said proves my point. Or else I'm listening with a certain amount of self righteousness bubbling inside of me-my answer or comeback is ready, and I'm waiting to lay out my justification to Denie. In either event, I don't listen, I hear. In fact, I hear only what I want to hear.

I've been told that when I am truly listening, it not only takes my total focus, it has to be the only thing I intend to do. Just listen-full stop. If I'm listening to find a way to persuade Dee of my point, then I'm not listening because I want to experience her.

Actually, I was confused about this for quite a while. If I am to become a great listener, must I perish the thought of ever making a point again? One of my greatest joys in life is in presenting my point of view. I mean, this quest to become a great listener is really tough.

When I come home from work twenty minutes later than I promised to be, and my mind is racing. and the tension of the traffic is still inside me, and three little people and a big one all hug me and start simultaneously to tell me how things went today-I'm not a good listener. When I'm trying to complete a project by a specific deadline, and someone wants to chat, I'm not a good listener. When I'm in a meeting trying to reach a consensus with a group of people, and someone wanders off the point, I get annoyed and I'm not a good listener. When I want to make love and Dee needs to talk a while, I try hard to swallow my impatience, but at that time I'm not a good listener

In fact, 98% of the time, my head is cluttered with all kinds of stuff. Sometimes I think I'll never become a good listener, I'm not sure I could ever become clear headed enough to even be a good listener more than 2% of the time.

But that is exactly the beauty of dialogue, isn't it? If we are truly dialoguing it is the time when Dee and I both do our best to turn off the clutter in our heads and try our best to just listen to each other. Listen with rapt attention, with a hunger to know, with an earnest desire to experience each other on a deeper level. There have been times when we've done this very well and that has hooked us on dialogue.

So many times I've found myself wishing our dialogue was as good as it was for those first few months after our Weekend. In fact, we've discovered that our dialogue is meaningful for us only when we work our hardest at listening . . . when we make the decision to set aside all the distractions inside us. That's what made those early dialogues so good for us.

But to do this, we have to pick a time and a place most conducive to listening. If we're at the table where we have piles of work to do and the kids are wandering in and out, it's difficult for me to concentrate my full attention, imagination, and focus on Dee. In fact, it's sometimes equally difficult behind closed doors laying on our bed together. Distractions can be internal as well as external.

Good listening in dialogue can only happen when we make dialogue a key event in our day and routine . . . when we plan a time just to listen to each other, rather than just squeeze it in wherever we can find a convenient time in the day.

Often we find ourselves having long, dry spells. Dialogue isn't any good. We wonder why we bother. We're smart enough to know better, yet we're still flat' Nothing seems to work. It's a game we play.

This game is called "pretending to listen." It's very similar to the game we play outside the dialogue. There I've learned to flutter the newspaper a bit to give my pretend listening an air of authenticity. During the dialogue, I do all the right things but I don't concentrate very hard.

It's a killer game. If we don't catch ourselves and stop it, it will kill our dialogue. We've seen it kill the dialogue of hundreds of couples. It's one of the cruelest games of all. We're trying to fool each other into thinking that we're going to set aside this time especially to listen to each other-and then we don't make the effort to do it. We go through the motions of dialogue.

Listening is hard work, almost the hardest work of all. It takes an absolute commitment of my mind, my imagination, and my will power to experience my lover every way I can. Anything short of this can be token dialogue.

About 10 days ago, as I read Denie's letter to me on "How do I know when I'm enjoying myself? HDIFAT?" I heard something. It wasn't exactly in the words he specifically wrote, but what came through to me was just how difficult it is for him to enjoy something if I seem lukewarm toward it. What I confronted in myself, in reading his letter, was that I had been acting lukewarm toward some holiday plans he was excited about.

To me, the holiday was a long way off, and I couldn't see the sense in getting all excited about it. But in reading Denie's letter, I realized just how important this particular holiday was to him. It occurred to me that my apathetic approach might be causing him some pain and hurt, and he had been polite enough not to mention it. So I made him a silent promise that I might get more involved in planning the holiday.

I still don't /eel excited about the holiday, but I do feel closer to my husband because I tried to listen to him and respond to the needs I heard. What made it a good experience for me was that I discovered the need before he did and told him about it.

True listening is never done silently. It's very noisy, in fact. It's full of questions, interruptions, and confirmations. "Do you mean . ..?" "Here is what I heard . . . is that what you meant?" "I experienced that when . . . Is that what it was like for you?"

There is only one reason to work on listening this hard, love. Any other routine becomes self centered and results in defensive listening, debating, aggressive listening, or gamesmanship.

Tonight I didn't listen my best in our dialogue. But I did listen well enough to discover how I need to change. Like Mark Twain's relationship with his father, how much I truly listen to someone I love can be measured only by how much I am changing as a result of what I hear.

If I can't tell you how I am changing, then I am not working very hard at listening. (It's a good test to see how hard you really are listening to your partner in dialogue. Make a list of how you've changed this week. That tells you how hard you have been listening this week.) Anyhow, tonight I was griping about nearly everything before we started our dialogue. The first page of Dee's letter described how down she was feeling after having talked to several people with pessimistic outlooks earlier in the morning.

It had nothing to do with the topic we were writing on-but the very fresh memory of my own pessimism told me that what I chose to dwell on in my conversations was rather displeasing for Dee at this time. If I am to love this woman, I must work on developing a more optimistic perspective on things. That is how I need to change today. The ignorant ol' cuss is getting smarter every day!!