

Marriage 201: More Ways to Improve Your Marriage

By: Autumn Schulze, MA, LMFT

So, you read Five Deceptively Simple Ways to Improve Your Marriage and you're ready for more? Now that you've finished the introductory course it's time for something more advanced! These techniques have the power to radically transform a marriage, but they require a healthy dose of humility and emotional discipline. This work requires you be willing to take a long, hard look at yourself, be the first one to make a change, and foster an attitude of acceptance. Each of these techniques requires a significant investment of time and emotional energy to master, so only a few will be presented in each article of the Marriage 200s series.

1. **Stop to really listen to and understand your spouse, before you take the time to figure out what you want to say in response.** It is human nature to want to be understood. As toddlers, we throw tantrums because we understand others and try to communicate in response long before others are able to understand us. There's nothing wrong with wanting to be understood, but if both parties in an interaction are so focused on being heard that they cannot stop and really listen to the other, then meaningful communication is impossible. So, the next time you and your spouse are in a debate, take a deep breath and remind yourself that you will lose nothing by taking the time to fully understand your spouse's point of view *before* you take the time to make sure you are fully understood in return. **In a marriage, no one wins a debate by having the better argument.** Conflict resolution is about mutual understanding and compromise. When your spouse is talking, stop rehearsing how you plan to respond silently in your head. Focus solely on trying to really understand what they're saying. Avoid the temptation to interpret their words in the worst possible way or based on your own fears and insecurities. When they finish, paraphrase what they said, using an opener like, "If I heard you accurately, you're saying..." or "If I'm understanding correctly, you want..." Let your spouse correct any misunderstandings or incomplete thoughts. Once you've demonstrated that you really understand what your spouse is saying, he or she should be much more willing to hear what you've got to say. But, if they try to jump to their next point, then just calmly let them know you'd like to have a chance to respond to what they just said.
2. **Let go of defensiveness.** In an argument, it is normal to feel attacked and unloved. So, it makes sense that our natural response is to go on the defensive – to defend our thoughts, feelings, and actions – while simultaneously attacking our partner's. When you're feeling attacked, remember that just because your partner is unhappy with you it, doesn't necessarily mean that you are wrong and in need of a defense. **Remember, too, that defensiveness breeds defensiveness.** If, when your spouse brings a complaint to your attention, you often respond with defensiveness, then they will most likely respond with defensiveness when you bring

- complaints against them. Then, nothing gets discussed or resolved. Instead, when your spouse puts a problem on the table, use the active listening techniques described above. Then, try to step back and evaluate whether or not they have a valid concern. If this self-evaluation brings to mind complaints you have against your spouse, write them down so they can be addressed later – but for now only deal with the issue at hand. If your spouse has a valid complaint, then say so – be clear about for what, exactly, you are taking responsibility. If you believe you are only part of the problem it's okay to say so, but take responsibility for what's yours.
3. **Stay calm.** So much marital strife could be prevented if people were better at not giving free reign to their emotions. Feelings are neither good nor bad, in and of themselves; it's what we do with them that makes the difference. It may feel next to impossible now, but with time and practice you can learn to respond calmly – even in the face of hostility and hatefulness. **Emotional discipline is a muscle that grows with use.** Once developed, you can choose to respond, not based upon your intense emotion, but based upon what logic and reason tell you is most likely to resolve the conflict. The first step is to realize when you're at the crossroads in an argument – that moment where you recognize both what you *want* to say and what you *ought* to say. Don't beat yourself up too much if, early on, you give in to the former. But, work hard to pursue the latter. If, even after great effort, you still feel incapable of reigning in your emotions, then it's probably time to set an appointment with a mental health professional. There are mental health issues that can contribute to overwhelming emotions and disproportionate emotional reactions, and treatment could be essential in helping you achieve this goal.
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