**Relationships**

Biggest problems in relationships?

Money? Children? Intimacy? Religion/politics?

How about **communication**—many of the other issues listed can be resolved if we can learn to communicate.

What is communication?

When we talk about communicating, we mean that when we have said something to someone else, that person understands it the same way we do. Oftentimes, we have breakdowns at this point because either as speakers we do not take the time to ensure that we are being understood correctly—just because a person says they understand you does not guarantee that person actually does. **Use of active listening skills is key**.

Ask: What did you hear me say? This is especially important if the other person seems to be reacting differently than we would have expected. As a listener, we can do this as well—once the speaker has stopped talking we might ask, Is this what you meant?--and then summarize what you heard. This would be especially helpful to do if the speaker’s message is arousing some negative feelings in us. Very often, arguments and problems in relationships start over messages that were misinterpreted.

Communication is also important in learning to establish healthy **boundaries** with others as well as **asserting our needs**.

So what are boundaries? These can be tricky to define but essentially they are guidelines for others to follow if they want to be in relationships with us. Think of someone who does not say anything when their partner ridicules them or insists on having things their way all the time. When we set boundaries, we are basically saying to the other person, “I do not like to be treated like that”. Sometimes, for boundaries to be effective there must be consequences for those behaviors. This could simply be telling the other person, “If you continue to treat me this way, we will no longer be friends”, or, “If you continue to talk to me like this I refuse to talk to you”. Most often we do not have to have drastic consequences, but sometimes that is what it takes.

Asserting needs is also a common problem. Often there is a mistaken belief that if the other person truly cares, the will know what we need. This typically leads to someone being disappointed. One area this is prevalent is in regards to intimacy where both partners have different ideas on what that should look like. Things break down when neither talks about it and then resentments build, or worse, if things are talked about and nothing seems to change. A good resource for this is: *The* Passionate Marriage: Keeping Love and Intimacy Alive in Committed Relationships by David Schnarch.

*The* Five Love Languages by Gary Chapman is another good resource. This book focuses primarily on how people perceive love differently than each other and the complications that arise from this. Misunderstandings often come from our differences in perspective. **If you can understand the perspective of the other person, their words and behaviors will make sense—from that perspective.**

John Bradshaw, a psychologist who specializes with working with families and the guilt and shame that is often a part of unhealthy families noted that—Hockey players hang out with hockey players and chess players hang out with chess players. Oftentimes we seek out partners and friends with people who think similarly to us and have similar backgrounds. This is a bad thing if we come from dysfunctional families where people did not communicate well or assert their needs in clear ways, then we are often left feeling frustrated and resentful because we did not get our needs met. But it can also be a good thing provided we come from healthy backgrounds where we learned good communication skills and are able to convey our needs to each other and get those needs met.

Many times I see couples who are on the threshold of divorce and hang onto resentments that the other was not trying until the threat of divorce. Sometimes this happens because **we are all reluctant to change until we have to make changes.** Other times it is that we do not know how to communicate our needs to others, or feel that we cannot. Or it might be that at different times in the relationship there has been more effort by one than the other. **The key is getting both partners working on common goals at the same time.** Learning how to speak and listen differently can be the biggest asset to making those changes, but we also have to be aware that **changes in behavior take time.**

Suggestions:

\*Making time for each other—write it on the calendar \*Challenge thinking that the other’s behavior was about you in some way \*If an argument seems to be starting, call timeout and return to the topic once things calm down—in the meantime ask yourself what was so upsetting \*Use active listening/speaking to further understand each other to head off problems before they get to a worse place \*Be assertive—don’t expect the other person to know what you are thinking or what you want. Be clear about it. \*Remember that the other person has a right to say no, but if it is a pattern then try to find out how to change it.