

Episode 001 Transcript

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Communication that (Actually) Works

Meredith: Hey there and welcome to episode number one of the Simply Great Relationships podcast! We're so excited, so excited! I'm Meredith Silversmith, this is Marina Voron, and we are super, super excited to bring you our first episode. Make sure you stay with us until the very end because we got a great bonus for you and we're gonna tell you how to get it.

Marina: So today, we're going to talk about the first thing that always comes up when client call us, when clients email us, when clients talk to us, which is communication.

Meredith: Yes, communication.

Marina: Right, that's everybody's favorite word when they come to therapy, when they come for coaching. It's "Something's off with our communication," and it's a really easy thing for couples to self-identify because something really feels off. You know, when communication is not going great, it's really easy to recognize that feeling. Like, "This is not us."

Meredith: Right, "I'm not being understood," or "I don't get where my partner is coming from," or "I don't know why they would even say that." When you're having feelings like that, that's a really good sign that something's a little funky there.

Marina: And why we choose the partners we choose is because we like communicating with each other. We like that feeling that we get and that communication creates the connection between partners so when that goes awry, that's when other things in the relationship also start to fall apart because when the communication dwindles, our sense of connection also dwindles because that's really the foundation on which that sense of connection is built.

Meredith: That makes a lot of sense, and if you think about what people say when they first get together, it's like, "He just gets me."

Marina: Of course.

Meredith: "He just gets me, we just get each other, and it's just great." So, communication's



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really, really, really key. I think what we have found in our work with couples is it's not so much what you say, it's how you say it which sounds really simple, but in actuality, it gets very complex.

Marina: Yeah, I definitely agree. I mean, I think people are always a little weary when I say that and I'm like, "It's the way you package things," right? You can say something that's really hard to say but you can say it in a nice and empathic way and it's going to have a totally, totally different result than if you're saying it in a way that's harsh or critical or undermining because the way you send it is going to be the way it's received, and that's where, you know, a lot of couples, I know you know this and I know you see this, would be like, "Well that's not what I meant when I said this".

Meredith: Right.

Marina: And a lot of communication, it's like the message we send versus the message the other person receives, and when there's a mismatch there, that in itself is a grounds for a lot of conflict when the message you're intending to send, your partner hears the critical tone or that insulting part but not the actual thing you're trying to say.

Meredith: Right, absolutely. That's really, really important and I think what happens, I just know what I always hear when we talk about this for the first time with new couples, it's "What am I supposed to do, not say how I feel?". Right? I hear that a lot.

Marina: Not at all.

Meredith: Not what I'm saying. Not what we're saying. You're absolutely supposed to share how you feel. The key piece is there's a way to say it where your partner's going to be able to hear it. That's the difference, right? So, if I'm really mad and I say, "Well I'm pissed and you suck!".

Marina: Yup.

Meredith: Your partner's not gonna hear that very kindly. They're not going to come back to me and say, "Oh wow, I'm so sorry that you feel that way. I'm sorry that I made you so mad." They're gonna get really angry and defensive and they're going to react that way.

Marina: Because what they hear is that "You suck."

Meredith: Right.

Marina: They hear that attacking critical comment, not the "I'm having a hard time."

Meredith: Right, right. So what we really want to share with you today, and in a little bit we're going to get there, is how to do this and what to do to be able to communicate better with your partner, to be heard more clearly and to feel understood because at the end of the day, that's the point, right? The point of communication is to share some of your world with somebody else and to feel like they get it and that's what we really, really find to be a key piece in the couples we work with. So, we wanted to share it with you.



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Marina: Yeah, and that's really the foundational piece, I believe. So much of relationship enhancement and getting couples to where they want to be is that really solid foundation of communication because once you have that safe, effective, supportive communication down, you can really talk about anything because you know the message you're intending to send is the message your partner's going to receive and it's going to feel much better and much safer and that's why it's literally about such small changes in language that have such big outcomes and when I tell people that, they're like, "What? No way!", and I'm like, "Really!". It's such tiny things. It's changing "You" to "I."

Meredith: Yeah. Literally changing "You" to "I." And I think, so one of the key things we wanted to share with you is that making these small changes. Yes, you're going to have big outcomes but probably bigger than you're even thinking. So, you're going to actually build your emotional intimacy and closeness by communicating better and people don't often realize that that's something that's happening that they are, that they're related. So, the way that we talk, the way we communicate, even about something simple like dinner or "What are we doing this weekend?", or "I had a really stressful day at work," and how your partner responds that all of those types of conversations lead into how close you feel emotionally and how supported you feel and then that in turn leads to your physical intimacy.

Marina: Of course. I mean, your relationship has to feel like a good, positive, sexy place for the good, positive, sexy things to happen and that, of course, starts with communication. That's why communication is such a foundational step. It's very hard to have that intimacy, those good feelings, that closeness, even the hugging, the holding, the small fun activities when you feel like, "I'm being attacked by my partner because they're calling me a jerk", when really they're really stressed out about work and are just reaching out for some support.

Meredith: Right. So that's like a big motivator to do this the right way, right? So, we do want to throw out to you some don'ts. Just these four qualities of communication and will throw out credit to our relationship guru, John Gottman. He's a relationship researcher who's done a tremendous amount of research over the past thirty years on what works and what doesn't. So some of the things that we'll share come from him which means that we know that it works. So that's pretty important.

Marina: And we also know that it works because we've been witness to it working with couples that we work with. So, it's not just like, "We read this in the book, this is really something both of us do everyday," and it's also something both of us do everyday in our everyday life with our partners, so we can really vouch for this.

Meredith: Yes, definitely, and I think we'll maybe talk a little more about that where we share what to do. We will share a little bit of insight from our marriages and what we've found that works and what doesn't because we've been there too, we've been there too.

Marina: We like to be our own guinea pigs.

Meredith: Yes, definitely. So the four things that we want to not do, the first being "criticism." So criticism is when I talk about something my partner did wrong, something my partner did badly. Some negative statement about my partner that would be a criticism.



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Marina: Yeah, and to add on to that, it's also I think a really sneaky way criticism gets in that people don't realize is that really extreme language. That "You always," "You never," because that really boxes your partner into a fixed characteristic which may not be true. Nobody always or nevers most things, and it just doesn't feel good to hear those that. Like, "You never remembered to do that." So, I think that's a really sneaky one but I see that one a lot and that's a good one to watch out for.

Meredith: Yeah, and what criticism tends to invite to the party is defensiveness. So, if I criticize my partner, they're probably going to be defensive and they're going to want to say, "Right, so if you tell me you never remember my birthday," I'm going to say, "I absolutely do! I remembered your birthday last year, I remembered your birthday four years ago", and I'm building a case, right? I'm being defensive. So, when I'm defensive, it makes my partner feel like, "I'm not taking any accountability for the fact that they have a concern and that they were hurt in some way."

Marina: Yeah, and what that tends to do is like, you have a little criticism, a little defensiveness comes out and you usually, when you serve up defensiveness, you like to serve it up with a side of criticism also and that's what really helps escalate, and if you can relate to that sort of tit for tat, your arguments are really going to like, "Well, you never remember my birthday", "Well that's fine. You never remember our anniversary!", "Oh well, you never remember when we first started dating," you know. That tit for tat that really gets you so far away from the origin of that discussion. That's defensiveness, right? Defensiveness is, "It's not me, it's you."

Meredith: Right, or "It's not just me, it's also you." I hear a lot of that but you know what? That's a really good point. That's when you get... you know you're having an issue with this if, at the end of the fight, you don't even remember how it started. If you don't remember how it started, you went way off track, which is alright! Look, it happens! We see so many couples who experience this. We've experienced this in the past, or what we're saying is there's a way to do it differently and a way to not have knock down drag out fights, which to be honest is really nice.

Marina: Yeah, and not to kind of waste your good energy on this tit for tat BS that goes nowhere.

Meredith: Yeah, for sure. The third is stone walling. So stone walling is the shutdown mode, right? So, when there's an argument or conflict going on and one person just sort of zones out, disengages in a not healthy way, doesn't respond, you know. You could be looking at your phone, staring out the window or just kind of like arms crossed just waiting for your partner to be done. That's another one. If we're seeing that, that means that there's a problem with communication.

Marina: Yeah, and that one, I see a lot in guys and I think John Gottman originally saw that one a lot more in guys and you know, the thing that's really hard with stone walling is that the other partner usually internalizes it as rejection or like, "This person is doing this to me on purpose", but later on, we're going to be talking about all these in a little bit more detail and we'll find out that stone walling is actually not something your partner's doing purposely to be a jerk. They're doing it because there's a lot going on for them physiologically. They're really overwhelmed and flooded.

Meredith: Yeah, so that's really important. The final one is contempt. So, contempt is your most significant issue. It looks like meanness. So that is your cursing, name calling, making fun of your partner, being sarcastic.



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Marina: The eye roll.

Meredith: The eye roll, yup, the eye roll.

Marina: This.

Meredith: What was that?

Marina: The dismissive...

Meredith: Oh, the dismissive wave, yes. And the "Ugh," any kind of deeply dismissive action or statement would fall under contempt.

Marina: Something that I think is extremely contemptuous is that any behavior that underlines like, "My time is too good for this." I think contempt, I always think of contempt as like criticizing from your pedestal. It's like really being critical but belittling and seeing your partner... You know relationships work because partners are on an equal playing field and contempt really makes it like, "Well, I'm here and my partner's here," and that's really damaging. Your relationship works because it's two equals. Not because there's somebody up here and somebody up here. That's a really hard one to bounce back from.

Meredith: Yeah, for sure. Definitely. So, those are the four signs of communication having a problem. So if you're noticing, if we're talking about this and you're like, "Oh, I do that," or "Oh, my husband does that," definitely keep listening because we're going to help you out with some tips. We should get that out of there.

Marina: Yeah, and you know, when you are able to communicate openly and in a way that feels supportive, again like we said before, it leads to feelings of closeness and feelings of intimacy and it just reduces the conflict and allows you to function like the loving, happy couple are, and again, like such small fixes. These are all fixes that are engrained in language. It's just about saying things a little bit differently. So, it's really about just a habit of saying things in a little bit of a different way and it's got a huge, huge pay off.

Meredith: Absolutely.

Marina: So, our top tips for communicating in a healthy way, I guess we'll talk a little bit about the tip and how we've kind of used them. So, the first one is being lovingly curious and this is something I really, really like to do and I really always like to encourage a lot of the couples... all the couples I work with to do it. So, what being lovingly curious is like, you know, sometimes when you're talking with your husband and you're not looking to actually get their answer. You're looking to just validate the thing you're thinking about in your head.

Meredith: Only a little bit. Just a little.

Marina: So, that's not really being curious. That's being like a detective or a lawyer and just looking for a justification of your own thoughts or hypothesis. Being lovingly curious is asking a question that opens you up to genuinely receiving information in an unbiased way, and a really



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big part of communication... of good communication is allowing your partner to tell their story. Not waiting for them, you know like, I notice couples do this a lot. They'll be like, "Ha! I knew you were going to say that!". Contempt, right? That doesn't feel good. To be lovingly curious is to go into a conversation being like, "I love you and I want to give you the platform and I'm really open to your story. So, with my husband, George and I, how we do this is, my husband's an architect, he has a high stress job and for a long time, our conversations would, he'd come to me, he'd talk to me about work stress and what was going on and I was just like, "Yup, yup, yup", like that. I knew he was going to say that, I knew he was going to say that, and I was just waiting to give him advice. You know, like, "I'm a therapist," I'm like, "I got this. Journal your feelings and write an action...", and I realized I wasn't curious. I was just waiting to validate the things I thought he'd say but I noticed in between those things that I was validating for myself, I was missing really large chunks of his story and I wasn't really making him feel as heard and as supported as he needed to because I wasn't being curious. I just wanted to validate what I wanted to hear and give him solutions and that made him feel dismissed, not supported, and when I shifted gears and said, "I'm going to give you the platform and I'm just going to very neutrally listen because I love you", it really shifted the way he was able to share what was going on for him and the way I was able to listen and give feedback.

Meredith: Yeah, that's great, and I think that something that always stands out to me about being lovingly curious is simply instead of asking questions that, we call them leading questions, right? So, if you feel like you know where the story is going or you feel like you know what needs to happen, you might ask questions to get certain answers to move things in the direction you want to go. So, rather than doing that, you can ask open-ended questions. "Tell me more about that," "Can you help me understand that better?". Ask questions that there's no right or wrong answer. There's hundreds of different answers. You know, something to really open the space and show your partner that you are truly there to hear what they have to share, and that's really key.

Marina: Yeah.

Meredith: The next one is actually one of my favorites. I talk about it everyday for like ten times a day with the couples that I see in every session, always. "I" statements. So, you may have heard of "I" statements. I feel like there's a bit of a clicheness to them but they are so powerful it's unbelievable. So, "I" statements are when instead of talking about your partner and what they did wrong or what they didn't do, you talk about yourself. "I," "How I feel," "How I was affected," "How it would help me if you did this," you know, "How I experienced this." So, talking about yourself instead of your partner. People tend to have a hard time with this. They're like, "But how am I going to tell them what they did wrong if I'm talking about me?". So, I will help you with that right now. So, an example. This is probably an example a lot of people can relate to. My husband Tom and I, we struggle a bit with division of labor when it comes to the laundry, so I tend to be the one who does the laundry, and I will be going from the bedroom to the basement, from the bedroom to the basement grabbing laundry in the giant hamper shlepping it downstairs, doing a load, bringing the load up. This whole back and forth, and he's sitting on the couch watching T.V. and I walk by a couple of times and eventually it'll lead to a conversation. So there was a time in the past I'll admit where I might have said, "Tom, you never help me with the laundry."

Marina: Ooohh.



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Meredith: Yup, I know. "You never help me with the laundry. You're sitting here watching T.V. I'm busting my ass going back and forth da da da da, and it's really unfair, etc., etc.". So, what do we think that would invite from Tom?

Marina: Probably a little defensiveness.

Meredith: Just a little bit, right? Defensiveness. "We'd go back and forth but I do this, I'm responsible for the garbage and you're responsible for the... ". Not constructive, right? Not the point. Not the outcome that I wanted.

Marina: No.

Meredith: So, using "I" statements, I've learned to say "Hey, babe," or as I say to my couples all the time, "Hey, honey, babe, darling, sweetheart," like, whatever affectionate name you want to throw in, just throw it in. "Hey, babe. I'm feeling kind of frustrated because I feel like I keep going back and forth and bringing the laundry down and bringing the laundry up, and it would really help me if you could help me with that. If you could grab a bin and bring it downstairs, or if you could do this it would really help me not feel so overwhelmed. Guess what that invited.

Marina: What did that invite?

Meredith: He's like, "Sure! Sure, no problem!". Magical!

Marina: I wonder if that's because he didn't feel criticized or attacked.

Meredith: I would imagine.

Marina: He felt like you invited him to collaborate.

Meredith, Yeah! And I talked about my feelings, right? I talked about what I needed, how I was feeling and asked for what I needed. "It would really help me if you could get involved." "Sure, no problem." So, that's just one example but I'm telling you speaking about yourself, your needs, your feelings rather than labeling your partner's behavior is a game changer.

Marina: Mmmhmm. And to go along with that, so you use your "I" statements, you express your feelings. The really important thing to do also is when your partner does that, to listen to those feelings and validate them. So, a lot of times I hear in session, "Your feelings are wrong," and it really bothers me. It's like hurtful to me for the person because feelings can't be wrong. Your feelings are your real feelings in the moment whenever you're feeling them. And to validate a feeling, you don't have to agree with it. This is, I think, a really, really key thing. Validating is understanding, not agreeing. You can have completely different feelings on an issue but validating is really, really key. Really, really important, And what validating looks like is just, "I understand in this situation, this is how you feel and your feelings are totally appropriate. I totally get why you would feel that way", right? And how this comes up with me and George is again, both of us work a lot. We have really stressful jobs and we both do a lot and we don't always see eye to eye on how we should spend the weekends especially when it's soccer season which seems to be all the time. So if we're talking about, you know, George will say, "Well, this is a really important thing for me. This is something I really enjoy. This is my way of



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decompression". I used to say, "Well, no it's not. It can't be", right? Because it's not my way of decompression, but when I started shifting to, "I totally get that. I know that it's really important for you to relax and I totally get that this is your way of decompressing". The conversation really shifted and we were really able to come to a place of having a dialogue and having compromises as opposed to butting heads on how we spend Saturday morning whether it's watching soccer or taking our dog to the park. I was able to empathize with his feelings and say like, "I understand this is really important for you. I may not agree with that. That may not be my way of decompressing but I totally get where your feeling is coming from."

Meredith: Yeah. That's a really, really big one. I think that the fact that understanding does not equal agreement is a huge shift for a lot of people because I find that comes up all the time when we're teaching this for the first time to a couple. You're just saying like the way I break it down, you're just saying that "Given your experience, given how you saw that situation, given how you heard that, given how you interpreted what I said, I can understand why you would feel the way you feel." It's not saying, "Yeah, that's how I said it," "Yeah, that's what actually happened," it's saying, "Given your experience, that makes sense to me."

Marina: Yeah. I mean, what I say to my couples, I'm a little more like crass sometimes. I'm like, "It's telling your partner you're not crazy," right? "It's telling your partner, you make sense." Because another thing that really, really grinds my gears is when partners call each other crazy. I think it's such an insensitive and insulting and contemptuous thing to say and validating and saying "I get where your feelings come from" is really giving your partner peace of mind that you're not gaslighting them and they are not crazy. You're saying, "I get where you're coming from on this."

Meredith: Absolutely. And our final tip which is really important is dealing with flooding. So, emotional flooding is when we get so overwhelmed with emotion whether it's anger, sadness, frustration, that we switch into fighter flight mode, right? So, it's not always super tangible, right? Not everyone is really, really good at identifying it in themselves but when you get flooded, I will say it's like when that you cross over into the point of no return.

Marina: Yeah.

Meredith: So, I think we could really pinpoint that feeling where we're in an argument and we feel it building. I know for me, I feel it in my body and I'll feel pressure in my chest and I'll feel I'll get hot and I'll actually feel it increasing until it crosses that point.

Maria: I'll feel that tension in my shoulders and I'm like, "Ugh." Like, it's so uncomfortable.

Meredith: Yeah. Until you cross the line, right? Until something in your body switches and you know essentially we lose control.

Marina: Mm hmm!

Meredith: When you get flooded, you lose control. The rational, decision-making, logical part of your brain shuts down and survival part of your brain kicks on. So we get really, really reactive. We say things that are really hurtful. We're not able to take in information in a constructive way. There's



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There's basically no point to continuing a conversation at that point.

Marina: And it can be really damaging to continue having a conversation at that point.

Meredith: Absolutely. So, once you identify where your flooding point is, it's really key to pause the conversation. Take a break for at least 20 minutes and do something to calm down.

Marina: What are some of your favorite things for the "calm down"?

Meredith: Well I think what's really important is that you need to do something that engages your mind in something else. So, you can't go in the room and shut the door and think about everything that you just said.

Marina: And when we like huff and puff and be like hmmm this is the injustice that was served.

Meredith: Yeah, you can't do that. I think reading and watching T.V are really, really good because it's really hard to read a book and keep maintaining those thoughts.

Marina: Yeah, oh, that's a good one! I really like to listen to a progressive muscle relaxation. Like a guided one, or like a guided meditation off of Youtube because I find, it's also really hard to focus and do that and still ruminate on the fight.

Meredith: So, that's what really key, right? It's finding what works for you. It's finding the activity whether it's taking a walk around the block, going for a run, watching T.V., taking a shower, doing a mindfulness app or meditation, reading a book, listening to music, anything. As long as you are shifting your brain's focus from the argument to something else and you will feel your body calm down. Like you feel it happen. And after about 20 minutes, that's the average time it takes for us to calm down, you can go back to the conversation.

Marina: To the conversation, not to the fight.

Meredith: Right, that's right. Because you're coming from a calmer place so you should be able to start there.

Marina: And this is where it's really key to start with your "I" statement.

Meredith: Oh, yeah.

Marina: Not with a, "You got me so flooded."

Meredith: Yeah, yeah, yeah, definitely not. So, the key here is to identify when you're feeling flooded and then take a break of at least 20 minutes to do one of those things. Really important.

Marina: I agree. Super important because that's I think where couples really, really get to that very damaging place is when they're fighting when they're flooded and they don't realize that both of them are in survival mode with like claws out, you know?



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Meredith: Yeah, definitely. For sure. So, those are our tips we wanted to share with you and we don't want you to just listen to this and then go on your merry way. We want you to integrate it into your relationship today. So, to make that a little bit easier for you, we've put them all in a PDF that you can get. You can get it to download and have it with you and keep it on your phone, keep it on the fridge. I actually love when my couples put things on the fridge so that way they're seeing it all the time and it's staying very present. You can get it at our website at www.simplygreatrelationships.com/001, and you can get that download there.

Marina: Awesome, I'm going to definitely have my couples go and check those out and put those on the fridge because everybody frequents their fridge multiple times a day. I think it's a great place to have a visual reminder. So, let's talk about our takeaways from today's episode. I guess for me, the biggest takeaway, kind of like the core of all of this is you like your partner because you like the way you communicated. Maybe right now you don't like it but think about how much you've already invested in your relationship. Making these fixes is such a small investment with such a huge pay off because you liked each other and you like each other and your whole world is built on communication. So, I think if you just go into this with a mindset of, "Why I like my partner is because I like the way we communicate and I'm making a smaller investment for huge return." I think that's a really simple reminder to incorporate these things. So, that would be my biggest takeaway. What about you?

Meredith: Yeah, for sure. For me? I think it's just the realization that communication doesn't have to feel bad. I think a lot of people get stuck and just feeling like it becomes so the norm that you feel like, "Well, this is just how it is", "This is just how we talk", "This is just how we fight", "This is just what life is like", and it doesn't have to be. Like Marina said earlier, these are simple changes. These are small changes in the way that you phrase things, the tone that you use, things like that. That can have really significant outcomes. Ten fold, right? It trickles into every year of your relationship, so I think the main takeaway for me is just that you don't have to accept when communication feels bad. You can make small, small steps and changes to have really, really big outcome.

Marina: Yeah, and I love that. I love the concept of small investment, big reward. Like small change, big reward. Not the other way around because I think a lot of couples therapy and relationship tools and all those things feel so like, "You have to do these mammoth things and you have to have these giant production date nights and go on extravagant vacations and shower each other in gifts and flowers." No, like, all those things are nice, don't get me wrong, but it's such a small, small, small investment. You use language everyday and this is something that has a pay off in all the relationships in your life. Such small investment, such huge return. All your relationships enrich and become more communicative, feel better, feel more supportive when you incorporate some of these into them.

Meredith: Yeah, for sure.

Marina: So, that's all for today. We hope that you take these tips and start using them right away. We'd love for you to continue the conversation with us in our facebook group where we'll hook you up with more tips, tricks, some live streams, exclusively for our members. You can find our group at www.facebook.com/groups/simplygreatrelationships or you can click the link on our website www.simplygreatrelationships.com because we'd love to continue having the



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conversation with you and we'd love to hear how you're integrating this and how it's working out.

Meredith: Definitely. Awesome. Thanks for listening!

Marina: Bye!

Meredith: Bye!

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