



Think Before You Speak

Unconditional love doesn't mean you get to say whatever you're thinking. Treat each other just as considerately as you would a friend.

by **DAPHNE DE MARNEFFE, PH.D.**

JOE, A MARRIED father of two, came to me for therapy because he was feeling stressed, and pressure at work was a big factor. He was the sole breadwinner in his family and acknowledged that he tended to be irritable when he got home, even though he admired his wife Carole's warm and loving nature. When he saw the messy kitchen or his son playing on the iPad instead of doing his homework, he

often blurted out a snarky comment. "I know I shouldn't take out my anxiety on Carole," he said with some embarrassment, "but home is where I feel I can finally let off a little steam."

Joe was facing a common emotional dilemma. When we're at home, we all want to relax, escape obligations from the outside world, and be our less-than-perfect self. Yet when we also relax our

standards for treating our partner with care and respect, we end up sabotaging the very haven we crave.

It's not easy to be on your best behavior after an exhausting day at work or at home with your kids, but it's not okay to react harshly to the one you love. Here are things to keep in mind that will help you take the high road and strengthen your relationship for years to come.

Remember the power of politeness.

Tact and respectful communication are a positive in every interaction. No matter whom you're talking to—the clerk at the DMV, your mother-in-law, or your partner—people are always more responsive when you treat them with consideration. Think about how natural it felt to be kind to your partner when you first met. Have you slid into bad habits without even noticing? We can all hear the difference between saying “Could you please finish the dishes?” and “Couldn't you at least do the dishes?” but we often give in to the impulse to be agitated in the moment. Just as skipping your workout one day makes it easier to give up on your exercise plan, casual rude comments can become “gateways” to larger ones. Treat respectful communication as a personal goal, and put in the effort to achieve it.

Practice gratitude.

Adding this ritual to your day is a hugely valuable “reset” when you find yourself reacting to your partner in a not-nice way: Pause for a few moments in the car after you drop the kids off at school or after you've slammed the door on your way to work and take five slow, calming breaths. Then reflect on five things you are truly grateful for in your life. Even if you have ongoing problems with your partner, there are still things that you appreciate (“She works hard to pay the bills”; “He's a good dad”). Saying unkind things can cause us to dwell on evidence that justifies our negative behavior. Bringing your blessings to mind restores a sense of proportion.

Be kind to yourself.

Sometimes the hardest thing of all is to give ourselves a break, and our short temper with loved ones flows from our discontentment with ourselves. In psychology, it's called projection. But when you find yourself criticizing your partner for the things you don't like about yourself, it's a lose-lose situation: You cause pain by being unpleasant, and you also avoid facing your own problems. Linda, a therapy client, informed me that she'd told her husband he was “boring,” a blanket comment about his character

that really stung. As we talked, she realized she was feeling uninspired and a bit boring herself and even worried he would lose interest in her. Think about what makes you impatient or insensitive with your partner, and consider if it might be something you secretly see in yourself. If so, be kinder to yourself and it'll be easier to be kind to your loved ones.

Understanding is at the heart of loving relationships.

I had a meeting with a couple in therapy during which the wife criticized her husband for liking sushi. Because she personally didn't like sushi, she'd decided there was something “wrong” with anyone's liking it. However, respecting differences is essential in any healthy relationship. What feels important to you might not feel important to your partner in the same way and vice versa, and insisting on sameness is a surefire road to snarkiness.



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Being considerate to your partner almost always involves trying to appreciate his or her perspective. Your husband may want to talk about the kids, and you may be too exhausted. You may want to vent about your day, but he may be too distracted. You may have tense disagreements about money. Recognizing the validity of his point of view, even if you disagree, helps give you more patience. It makes you less likely to say “Could you just stop talking?” and more able to say “Could we talk about your day after I've had a moment to rest?”

Through our sessions, Joe realized that giving himself permission to blurt out critical comments wasn't making him feel any better. As he understood his own emotions, he was able to voice them more sensitively to Carole. He apologized for having been harsh, then told her, “I end up getting tense if things feel chaotic when I walk in the door, even though I know you're doing a ton to keep everything on track here. I'm really going to make an effort not to take my stress out on you. If you could try to get the homework started or neaten the kitchen before I get home, that might help me feel calmer.” She heard where he was coming from, and said, “I'll make an effort to get the homework underway before you get home and tidy the kitchen as much as I can. But I need you to try to cut me some slack on the days when it doesn't work out that way.” He agreed that this was more than reasonable and thanked her.

One benefit of choosing your words thoughtfully is that it will help you address any underlying problems more effectively. And when you focus on kindness, your partner is likely to do the same. You'll end up being less stressed overall and feel even more at ease at home. ✕



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