

Can You Hear Me

Now?

Like bad cell phone reception, relationships can have moments when there is a disconnection between the sender and the receiver. No matter how many times you repeat yourself or how loudly you speak, you just can't get through to the person on the other end of the line. How often have you felt misunderstood even when you thought you were clearly expressing yourself?

This taps into one of the key elements of attachment: *responsiveness*. When your partner is responsive, you feel seen, heard, and understood. The other person "gets you" even if they do not like or agree with your point of view. This skill relies on empathy—the ability to put yourself into another person's shoes and see the world through his or her eyes. Responsiveness, along with access to your partner (a second key element), creates a feeling of safety and security in a relationship. That is why we may become highly anxious or angry when a disconnection in the communication line occurs. In other words, it is frustrating when your call gets dropped.

One common example of this is when you are trying to express yourself to your partner, but he or she does not seem to understand. You keep repeating yourself, but it is as if they cannot even hear what you are saying. The problem may actually lie at *either* end of the communication line. As the sender, you are responsible for two parts: what you say, and how you say it. Let's first examine what you are saying. Are you being specific and direct about what you want? One of the most common faux pas I see in relationships is a reliance on mind reading. If you adhere to the belief: "If you really loved me you would know what I want or what I'm thinking," you will remain trapped in a vicious cycle of feeling frustrated and unloved. Marriage does not magically give your partner—in this case, the receiver—the gift of clairvoyance. Conversely, you cannot be a mind reader either (but we'll get to that point later). Being indirect—including being passive-aggressive—will cloud your message, like when your phone line starts to break up. Take some time to hone in on what you really want to say so that what you are trying to communicate is not lost in a bunch of unnecessary verbiage. Write it down, and practice saying it out loud if this makes delivering your message easier.

Assuming your message is specific and direct, think about *how* are you saying it. The most effective messages are those that are said in a calm voice. If you are already anxious or angry, take a time-out to regain your composure before you speak. If you are on the offensive, more likely than not, your partner will go on the defensive and you will end up fighting. Remember that once the fight-or-flight mechanism kicks in, your ability to problem-solve and negotiate decreases; you and your partner are unlikely to find a resolution until you are both calm and solution-focused.

Now what happens if you have a clear signal, but your partner does not?

Your message is specific and direct and said in a calm manner, but it is still not getting through. In this case, the problem likely lies with the receiver. Is your partner open and receptive to listening and meeting your needs? Did you catch him or her on a bad day when attentions are focused on other things such as work? Is what you are saying triggering your partner's own anxieties, making it difficult for him or her to listen?

Even when you are being specific, direct, and calm, and your partner is open to listening, it is possible that the message still does not reach the receiver loud and clear. This stems from differences in perception and meaning. In this case, it is likely that you will both need to ask follow-up questions and rephrase what you have said or heard to ensure that the message is understood. (For those of you who would like some additional reading on how to do this well, I recommend a technique called the Imago Dialogue, which is explained in the book, "Receiving Love: Transform Your Relationship by Letting Yourself Be Loved" by Harville Hendrix, Ph.D. and Helen Lakelly Hunt, Ph.D.)

As we touched on earlier, when you—the sender—play the role of the mind reader, you can create a responsiveness problem as well. For example, what if you make some kind of nice gesture that you think is caring, yet the response from your partner is negative or nonexistent? Where did the communication lines get crossed? Certain behaviors that are meaningful or supportive to you may not necessarily come across in the same way to your partner. The easiest solution to this dilemma is to find out what is important to your partner. You will be much more effective with your time and energy when you choose to do things that are meaningful and appreciated by the other person.

Remember that being responsive means that you understand the other person's worldview even when it is not something that you like or value. Keep in mind that there are three entities in your relationship: you, your spouse, and your relationship. In order for your relationship to survive and thrive, its needs must take precedence over the needs of each individual. Loving someone requires being selfless at times (which is then, hopefully, returned in kind).

The goal (what it is you are trying to communicate) is not usually the problem; it is the strategy (the means of delivery and/or receipt) that gets people into trouble in their relationships. If your cell phone provider continually allows static on the line or drops calls, you will likely change phone plans. You may need to do the same with your relationship—you can keep your number (a.k.a., your partner)—but you will need to make or receive calls in a different way. Do not get too frustrated when the lines get crossed. They can be uncrossed with the right tools. Everyone can learn to be good communicators and to be responsive in a relationship. You just need to find the right plan to meet your needs! DEBORAH ANDERSON PHD