

LANGUAGE

Words That Wound

It's been said a million times: Communication is the key to a healthy relationship. But new research may shut everyone up once and for all.

Brant Burleson, Ph.D., and Wayne Denton, M.D., have found that stellar discussion skills can actually do more harm than good in ailing relationships.

In their study, published in the *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 30 content couples and 30 distressed pairs completed exercises to show how accurately they interpret their spouses' remarks, predict the impact of their own words, express their feelings and process social cues—an ability known as interpersonal cognitive complexity.

Burleson, a communications professor at Purdue University, and Denton, a Wake Forest University psychiatrist, found that communication skills in and of themselves don't make or break a marriage, and men's skills don't seem to matter much at all. What's important is how women use their skills, and whether their relationship is calm or conflict-ridden.

In peaceful couples, the stronger a wife's verbal skills, the more her spouse liked her. But in rockier relationships, well-spoken wives used their talent for "language and psychology to inflict pain," addressing their husbands with especially wounding words.

Good language skills, then, can make bad marriages worse. Says Burleson: "Talking isn't always a panacea."—Amanda Druckman

COUPLES

The Science of a Good Marriage

If anyone understands the chemistry of a good marriage, it's John Gottman, Ph.D. Over the past 27 years, Gottman has become a pioneer of relationship research, interviewing almost 700 couples, recording their interactions and monitoring their heart rate and stress levels in his "Love Lab"—an apartment outfitted with video cameras and sensors. The co-director of the Seattle Marital and Family Institute (with wife and fellow psychologist Julie, also a Ph.D.), Gottman has compiled his well-studied strategies for beating breakups in a new book, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* (Crown, 1999).

"At the heart of my program," writes Gottman, a University of Washington psychology professor, "is the simple truth that happy marriages are based on deep friendship. By this I mean a mutual respect for each other's company," plus an intimate knowledge of each other's quirks, likes and dislikes. This explains his surprising finding that frequent fighting is not a sign of a bad marriage (unless, of course, it becomes physical abuse). Because while all couples argue, it is the spouses who are friends first who have the advantage.

Amicable partners are less combative during shouting matches than spouses who don't understand each other. And couples who don't respect or have little connection with one another engage in "negative sentiment override"—they interpret statements

more pessimistically and take comments more personally than other pairs, leading to dissatisfaction.

Spouses who are friends also make more "repair attempts" during a spat; they say or do things—like make a silly face or bring up a private joke—that keeps anger from escalating out of control. The key point, Gottman reports, is that partners who know each other better know best what will relieve tension in sticky situations—so the fighting stops and the marriage goes on (perhaps) happily ever after.—C.C.



MARRIAGE

For Love or Money

Men who make money can't wait to marry. But well-to-do women are in no such hurry.

Working women are 50% more likely to move in with their partner and 15% less likely to marry than women who lack a stable employment history, says Marin Clarkberg, Ph.D., of Cornell University's Employment and Family Careers

Institute. Men with money, however, are only 13% more likely to live with their partner before marriage but 26% more likely to get hitched than men who earn an average salary.

Clarkberg examined data of high-schoolers surveyed over 14 years on their job history, income and views on marriage. She notes that men feel ready to wed once they reach a high standard of living because they know they can fulfill the traditional role of breadwinner.

But financially secure women prefer cohabitation, says Clarkberg, so they can focus on their careers without juggling domestic duties. "For women, marriage often entails hanging up the briefcase at the door," she says. "Their housework goes up, and if there are children, the woman tends to become the primary caretaker." But "cohabiting couples are usually more egalitarian"—so women can devote themselves to both their partner and their job.—Torri Barco