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How To Make A Good Marriage Better

G. Hugh Allred

Nathan M. Smith

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How often do those of us who are married members of the Church ask ourselves: "How can we bring a greater degree of harmony, peace, and spirituality into our marriage? What is wrong?" The Lord has told us that if we are not one we are not his (D&C 38:27). This oneness, then, is an ideal we must strive for if we are to find joy with our partners and the full acceptance of Our Heavenly Father. From what we know about marriages in the Church it appears that many of us are not able to achieve a high degree of oneness and that others of us, when we do achieve this unity, are not able to maintain it. A great many of us are conscientiously searching for ways to improve our marriages and have concluded that it is usually a lack of knowledge and skill that prevent us from obtaining our righteous desires. This article is dedicated to helping you, as you earnestly seek to strengthen your marriage, obtain that degree of joy, happiness, and spirituality for which you long.

Striving for oneness in marriage is essentially the same as striving for effectiveness in any other endeavor, such as excelling in physics, medicine, government, and child rearing. God has left most of the how-to up to us. He has given us gospel principles to guide us as we search for answers to our questions. Many of us want—and ask—our Father in Heaven to tell us exactly what to do, even to the utmost detail, but out of respect for our free agency and our individuality he has left a good deal to us. Part of our growth results from our working on the how-to of our own salvation as we seek to acquire all knowledge (D&C 88:78, 79,118) with the help of the Holy Ghost (John 14:26). Our challenge, if we are to grow in our marriage relationship and become more Christ-like, is to become truly one and thereby, obtain Eternal life—creating our own family in the hereafter and living in God's presence.

As we search for answers to the how-to, then, we must be aware that one of the first essential steps is for us to have a clear understanding of what oneness and its opposites are like. We will suggest ways of graphically looking at the marriage relationship that can help you acquire a clear image of oneness and its opposites.

All marital interaction is, in reality, communicative interaction. In other words, communication in marriage can be defined as all behavior that occurs between husband and wife. Apparently, then, there is no such thing as a husband and wife's not communicating, not interacting with each other. A husband and wife are continually influencing each other through their communication: in fact, there is no way for them not to influence each other. One of the best ways we can use to bring about a oneness in marriage is to remember that all of our interaction is communicative interaction.

In what follows, we provide you with information you can use as a mental map to help you identify where you are at any given time in your marriage relationship, what you want, and where you need to go in your communication with your spouse to bring about a greater degree of oneness. We also provide suggested phrases to help achieve this goal. (These guidelines can also be applied to your relationships with your children to help you achieve oneness with them.)

The Vertical Model

The vertical model is one way of viewing destructive relationships in marriage that are the opposite of those that indicate oneness. This model concerns itself with those relationships that are of Babylon, that are identified in the scriptures as unrighteous (see Revelations 17:5, Alma 4:6-13, 3 Nephi 6:10-15, D&C 121:37-39). Such relationships are the opposite of those described in Moroni 7:45 and are characterized by action against or away from the spouse, and includes striving to appear superior or inferior; competing for favored positions; avoiding open and congruent, and exhibiting dishonest, greedy, critical and one-upmanship behaviors. A sampling of vertical personality traits indicates tendencies to be dogmatic, preachy, cold, abrupt, quick-tempered, judging, patronizing, and coercive. The communication of a spouse with this type of personality may be characterized by hinting, sarcasm, ridicule, humiliation, and dishonesty.

To visualize the vertical relationship, imagine a society in which all people are on pedestals. The pedestal symbolizes the worth of the individual. In the vertical relationship each person has a hammer and chisel and is busily chipping away at the pedestal of each of his fellows, attempting to increase the relative height of his own stature. So, it is in many of our marriages.

The consequences of vertical movement may include, on the part of both partners low self-esteem, fear, suspicion of others, stunted spiritual growth, cliques and divisions, complex and subtle social transactions, alienation, loneliness, misery, apathy, chronic fatigue, headaches, neck aches, stomach problems, heart problems, other psychosomatic complaints, and emotional illness. If we are to avoid such consequences, we must become sensitive to vertical communication so that we can know immediately...
when we or our spouse are acting vertically; then we can take effective action to diminish such destructive behavior and work on increasing the constructive.

Vertical Communication in Marriage

To help couples recognize vertical communication, we follow a model developed by G. Hugh Allred. This model is divided into four categories. (1) Solicits attention, (2) bosses/punishes, (3) creates/maintains distance, and (4) surrenders. For each category we describe the behavior and the feelings felt by the spouse subjected to the behavior.

The spouse who solicits attention does so through demands for undue attention. He seeks attention at the expense of the other, monopolizes any conversation, and seldom, if ever, seeks feedback. Other characteristics include bragging and monopolizing the other by keeping him engaged in giving service to him. His verbal and nonverbal communication are characterized by:

- "See what I've done."
- "Only I could have done it so well."
- Wearing makeup that sets her apart.
- Parading his/her accomplishments.
- Entering meetings late.
- Telling shocking stories.
- Keeping his/her spouse waiting.
- Talking continually.

The spouse who bosses or punishes characteristically communicates by lecturing, preaching, giving orders, talking down to the other, faultfinding, being sarcastic, ridiculing, talking angrily, whining and crying. His goal is to find his place by being superior through control of the other. His verbal and nonverbal communications are characterized by:

- "You always overspend our budget."
- "You couldn't be on time if you tried."
- "Why is this house such a mess?"
- "I've told you at least..."
- Pointing a finger.
- Shaking a fist.
- Pounding a table.
- Making unreasonable demands.
- Lying.
- Holding his head high in the air and then marching away.
- Being stubborn.

The spouse who creates/maintains distance finds it very difficult to develop and maintain a close interpersonal relationship. He exhibits vertical behavior through talking in an aloof or disinterested manner, talking incongruently, intellectualizing, talking like a robot, talking evasively. This behavior is often a response to the boss/punish interaction discussed earlier. In the following short dialogue both husband and wife are interacting vertically.

H: this is the second roast this week that you have overcooked. When are you ever going to learn how to cook a roast? (Punishes wife.)

W: I cooked it like the cookbook said to. (Creates distance by talking like a robot.)

The spouse who surrenders is often responding to a spouse who sets a pattern of bossing and punishing. (Surrendering is not to be confused with turning the other cheek (Matthew 5:39). Surrendering as used here is the strategy a frightened individual chooses in order to avoid responsibility in the relationship.) The spouse who "surrenders" gives up his own wants, desires, and wishes. He gives in with the attitude of you're right and I'm wrong, or I'll do whatever you say. This is exemplified in the following conversation between a wife who has set a pattern of giving in to a husband who continually uses family money for his own personal wants.

W: Can I have the money we set aside for the children's new shoes?

H: No. I have to use it for some fishing equipment that is on sale. (Bosses.)

W: But, we've planned....

H: I don't care what we planned. Don't be such a pest. (Bosses and punishes.)

W: Well, alright. (Surrenders.)

The Level Model

The level model, which reminds one of what he would expect in a Zion society from those who are righteous (see Moses 7:18,19; Galatians 5:16, 22-26; 2 Ne. 26:33; 4 Ne. 2,3,16; D&C 121:41-46), is a way of viewing constructive interpersonal behavior in the marriage relationship. The level marriage is characterized by openness and congruence, honesty, mutual respect, and consideration. In such a relationship, there is room for each individual because each has a place of respect. Each spouse has limitless opportunity to progress as rapidly as he chooses and as rapidly as he receives support and encouragement from his spouse. There is no need for one spouse to tear the other down. In addition, each person assumes responsibility for his own behavior and its possible influences on his loved one. The levelly oriented individual
measures his progress against his own previous performance or basic standards of excellence, not against the performance of his spouse. He is cooperative, not competitive.

Level behavior is exemplified by a husband and wife who are standing on a level plain, reaching out to each other and encouraging each other on to greater growth and happiness. Level behavior, because it is not competitive, is not threatening. Such movement with one's spouse fosters feelings of trust and increased love, simplified communication, rapid growth and development, zest for living, genuine concern for the other in the marriage, and an atmosphere of harmony and peace and, therefore, greater spirituality in the home.

Level Communication in Marriage

Level communication is defined as movement with and toward one's spouse. The personality traits of the individual who is moving levelly with his spouse include sincerity, warmth, friendliness, flexibility, and approachableness. He is also open and spontaneous, confident, consistent, and well-organized. His communication is characterized by nonpossessive warmth and respect, genuineness, and accurate empathy. It is free from demeaning critical comments. He negotiates for change in a respectful atmosphere. His words, eyes, tone of voice, and body posture are congruent. In this style of communicating, couples experience feelings of acceptance, belonging, positive self-worth, and peace.

In his book, HOW TO STRENGTHEN YOUR MARRIAGE AND FAMILY, Allred presents a model of level communication that includes five categories that will aid a husband and wife in determining the behavior they want to increase: (1) voices observations, (2) seeks meanings or understandings, (3) discusses alternatives and commits, (4) gives support, and (5) expresses emotions.

We recommend that these five categories be committed to memory along with several facilitating phrases that accompany each category.

A spouse may voice his observations about relationships, events, places, and facts, and give feedback. This must be done, as with all level responses, in a context of respect, warmth, sincerity, and empathy; otherwise the communication is classified in one of the vertical categories. Facilitating level phrases include:

- "As I recall, it was..."
- "I could be wrong, but to me it..."
- "It seems to me that..."
- "I could be wrong, but it appears to me as though you are treating me as an inferior when..."
- "It appears to me that I am better able to understand your need when..."

A spouse who seeks meanings or understanding asks questions, tries to clarify or understand, and guesses about meanings. Facilitating phrases include:

- "Let me see if I understand what you want..."
- "You are asking for..."
- "Please, tell me why you get so upset with me?"
- "How did you feel when that happened?"
- "Do I understand? This is what I think you want..."
- "Let me see if I understand. You believe that..."

A spouse who discusses alternatives and commits himself to action is willing to be actively responsible in improving the marriage relationship. Discussion can include advantages and disadvantages as husband and wife negotiate and commit to an alternative. Facilitating phrases include:

- "How might I respond to help you feel better about..."
- "Which of these ways do you feel is best?"
- "What do you see as possibilities available to us?"
- "Which alternative do you prefer?"
- "I prefer to..."
- "Do you think we should also consider..."

A spouse gives support through empathic statements, acceptance of others' feelings, paraphrasing others' feelings (reflecting), and making encouraging statements. The following phrases tend to facilitate level communication by giving support:

- "Please tell me more."
- "And it made you angry and upset."
- "That was courteous of you."
- "I find I can discuss almost anything with you."
- "That's great."

In the last category, number five, a spouse expresses his emotions, including his negative feelings (this, of course, is done in a respectful, friendly manner), about the relationship, places and things. Phrases that facilitate this type of level communication include:

- "When you say that, I feel..."
- "I feel very hurt when..."
- "I feel good when I think you appreciate the..."
- "I am afraid to express my feelings to you when I think you might reject me."
- "I feel my help is really appreciated when..."

Each of the above five level categories-- (1) voices observations, (2) seeks meanings, (3) seeks alternatives/commits, (4) gives support, (5) expresses emotions--contributes to peace and harmony in interpersonal relationships. The categories are most effective when they are used as interactive, intertwining parts of the interpersonal relationship.

In the dialogue that follows, the husband and wife demonstrate the use of level communication techniques to work themselves out of vertical interaction.

H: Listen, I know a roast that's tough when I see it. Especially when the knife just about jumps out of my hand as I try to cut it. (Bosses.)
W: I prepared this especially for you, and I think you're totally ungrateful, just ungrateful. (Punishes.)

H: What do you mean, ungrateful? All we're talking about is whether the meat is tough or not, and anyone can see it's tough. (Punishes.)

W: Listen, it's just that you don't know how to cut, and probably you've got a knife that isn't sharp. You know that you should use a sharp knife to carve a roast. (BosSES.)

H: Hey, what are we so upset about? (Seeks meaning.)

W: I'm upset because you're just being rude. (Punishes.) I've worked all day trying to please you, and there's just no pleasing you. (Punishes.)

H: I'm upset because I thought I'd have a tender roast. I came home starved as could be, and I guess the roast just isn't what I expected. (Discloses emotions.) I'm sorry if I flew off the handle. (Gives support.)

W: Well, I'm sorry I got upset too. (Gives support.) But you don't know how I feel. I've worked on this all day, and I did it especially for you. (Gives support.) If it hadn't been special, just for you, it probably wouldn't have upset me so much. (Discloses emotions.)

H: You mean special for me, and I didn't even appreciate it? (Discloses emotions.) I don't know if it's tough or not. (Voices observations.) I suppose that's not important, and maybe our tastes are different. (Gives support.)

W: Memorizing the few definitions and phrases we have given in the five level categories and recognizing the vertical and level ways of communicating by analyzing the accompanying dialogue can help you learn and apply level communication patterns. If you have vertical tendencies, you will have moments of frustration as you attempt to change to level behavior. But your earnest and courageous efforts to change will be well rewarded with greater peace and spirituality in your home. If you want to behave levelly but find that in actual practice you fight against it, you may have faulty convictions regarding the need to behave vertically in order to be worthwhile in marriage. If you seek the assistance of your bishop and a competent marriage counselor who is close to our Heavenly Father, you will be better able to work through this difficulty to achieve oneness with your spouse.

As you work to improve your marital communication, your children will also benefit from the progress you and your spouse make. The parent's marital relationship tends to be the model children imitate as they relate to one another and others outside of the family, including their own marital partners. The Lord has cautioned us that our sins can influence the behavior of our children to the third and fourth generations (Exodus 20:5). We have a great opportunity—and responsibility—to diminish our sins and increase our righteous behaviors and, thereby, pass on to our children, as they imitate our righteous communication, a spiritual heritage of happiness, joy, and peace.

SOURCES

