

Four Communication Firecrackers

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Late one fall evening while my sons and some neighborhood boys were busy burning leaves, a creative idea flashed into my sometimes-immature male mind: Why not throw firecrackers into the fire to see what happens?

I went into the house, found our unused Fourth of July firecrackers, filled my pockets, and nonchalantly walked back outside. The boys were throwing acorns into the fire and watching them explode. As they'd turn away to find more acorns, I'd slip a firecracker into the fire.

Of course, it made a much better explosion than the acorns. The boys thought the acorns were creating the spectacle, which only motivated them to scour the ground for more acorns. As the fire intensified with each explosion, I had fun watching the boys' reactions.

I admit it wasn't a smart parental move. (My wife was not pleased.) But later as I was thinking about the scenario, I realized there's a connection between those firecrackers and marriage—one I see happen with dozens of couples in my work as a counselor.

Many couples argue like that burning leaf pile. There's a conflict (fire) between them. Then they throw in some communication firecrackers, which serve only to spread and intensify the conflict by putting their spouse on the defensive.

Firecracker #1: Threats

John and Sara were blending two families and had established certain rules for the children. One rule was that food and drink must stay out of the living room.

One day Sara came home from work to find John and his son drinking sodas as they put together a desk in the living room. Sara was infuriated. She yelled, "If you can't respect me instead of favoring your kids, then I want out."

In the heat of a discussion, one or both partners may say, "If you ever ... then I'll ..." (fill in the blanks). Or maybe one will say, "Don't you ever say (or do) that again or I'll leave (or divorce) you." We rarely resolve anything when one or both partners act out of a threatening posture.

Better Choice: Sara would have had better success by pulling John aside and simply asking for clarification. Did he forget? Did he change his mind? She could then follow up with a concise feeling statement such as, "I felt betrayed when I saw you in the room drinking after we'd decided not to. Is that what you meant to communicate?" Then she would have discovered John simply forgot their conversation and was caught up in the moment working with his son.

Instead of threats, a preferable approach is inquiry. Genuinely seeking to understand what the other person is feeling or doing, and why, is a great way to de-escalate an argument.

Firecracker #2: Name Calling

Jennifer and Kyle were locked in an ongoing argument about money. Kyle was upset over the excessive amounts Jennifer spent on the children.

Late one night as the discussion was escalating, Kyle said, "You're just like your mother. She spoiled you, and now you're spoiling our kids."

Kyle identified a negative trait or behavior of his mother-in-law and called his wife that name. If his attempt was to force Jennifer to see the "error of her ways" and repent, he failed miserably. Instead, he put Jennifer on the defensive—not only for herself, but for her mother!

Other common phrases include: "That's just stupid!" "That's silly!" "Don't be ridiculous!" When one partner spits out these statements, it's the same as calling the other "stupid," "silly," or "ridiculous." It degrades that person's character. Those kinds of statements are cruel.

Better Choice: Keep the main thing the main thing. If the problem is money, keep the conversation on money. Resist the temptation to make it personal. Kyle could have said, “Honey, I want the kids to have everything you want. I just get nervous when I look at the checkbook. Can we come up with a plan so we don’t have this argument again?” Recognize the feeling and communicate it. Commit not to use profanity or call your spouse names.

Firecracker #3: Blame

Julie and Steve sat in my office arguing over household responsibilities.

“You make me so mad when you come home and just watch TV,” Julie said.

“Well, you frustrate me every time you gripe and complain about all I don’t do.”

“I’m tired of all your excuses to be lazy,” Julie threw back.

Can you see where this was headed?

Of all the things I hear in my office, blame is the most common. If allowed, most couples would use the entire counseling session just blaming each other for their problems. The most frequent statement I hear is, “You make me so mad!”

I don’t dispute that often we feel angry in response to our mate’s actions. But it’s inaccurate to say, “You make me so angry.” Your emotions are in your control—not somebody else’s.

A great way to know if you’re placing blame is to watch how often you put the word you at the beginning of your sentences. For example, “You don’t listen to me when I’m talking.” While that statement may be true, it’s a blaming phrase and will quickly be seen as an aggressive move. And your spouse will respond in kind.

Better Choice: A more effective way to communicate is to use “I feel” statements: “I feel unheard.” “I feel disrespected when you interrupt.” “I need you to listen and try to understand what I’m feeling.” Spouses feel much less defensive with this communication technique.

Don’t manipulate the “I feel” into a blaming statement, though: “I feel you are a jerk” won’t elicit a positive response.

Firecracker #4: Exaggerations

Fred and Helen were in my office. Through tears she stated, “He never wants to cuddle and talk. All he ever wants is sex.”

“That’s not true!” Fred responded. “Yesterday we talked for almost an hour. You’re just never satisfied.”

“But you always go back to your old ways once you get what you want,” Helen cried.

This firecracker is the easiest to lob into the fire of conflict. While such words as always, never, and every time may seem harmless on the surface, their impact on an argument is deadly. As soon as you say, “You never let me finish a sentence,” or “You always say that,” your spouse is thinking of an exception. Rarely, if ever, is an exaggeration true.

Better Choice: Another way to phrase that thought would be, “I feel cut off when you don’t let me finish my thoughts.”

Focus on the here and now rather than connecting today’s disagreement to past problems. If there’s an existing pattern and you need to make that connection, pick one instance rather than saying “always” or “every time.”

Self-control implies that we don’t have to speak everything we think. The art of conflict resolution isn’t so much about proving our point, but using tools that work rather than throwing in firecrackers that explode.