



## **10 Secrets to Getting Heard**

### **By: Robert Leahy, Ph.D.**

#### **1. Pick the Right Time**

Sometimes you think you need to be heard the minute you have a thought or feeling. But your partner might be wrapped up in something else at the moment - the game, fixing dinner, trying to go to sleep, working on something, or not feel ready to listen to you in that moment. Use your experience to tell you what is definitely not the right time -- for example, "big process discussions" are seldom helpful right before bed -- or the minute your partner walks in the door. If you start talking -- and he or she isn't listening -- then ask, "Is there a better time to talk?" And, if you are the listener, play fair -- give your partner a reasonable alternative. Don't use sarcasm or stonewalling.

#### **2. Edit it Down**

Sometimes you start talking and you get carried away. Your partner is losing interest and his/her attention is drifting off. Editing what you say and how you say it can help. Try to limit your comments to relatively clear and short sentences. Don't get on a soap-box and hold the floor. Think about what is essential and focus on it. Take time to pause, ask for feedback, and wait for your partner's response. One way of editing it down is to agree with your partner on a reasonable amount of time to spend on the topic -- for example, "Can we spend about 10 minutes talking about this?" Limiting the time helps you focus on the essentials and gives your partner a clear expectation of a time-frame for the conversation.

#### **3. Pause and Ask for Feedback**

Sometimes as a speaker you will go on and on, without pausing. Perhaps you think that you need to stay on your topic so that everything is heard -- or you fear that your partner will jump in and take the floor and you won't ever get a chance to speak again. Slow it down, edit it down, and stop and ask for feedback. Make the communication two-ways. If you feel your partner hasn't really heard what you are saying, then try asking, "Can you rephrase what I said?" Or, if you want your partner to help you think of things differently, you might say, "I wonder if I'm seeing things the right way here." Or, if you want problem-solving, you might say, "I wonder what I can do to make it work." Pause, reflect, ask for feedback.

#### **4. Don't Catastrophize**

Sometimes we think that the only way to get heard is to make everything sound awful. While it may represent a legitimate point of view, if you make too many things sound awful you will lose your credibility. Try to keep things in perspective, focus on the facts, maintain a calm voice, and don't get carried away. You will be heard more clearly with a softer tone. While some of the things that you are talking about may be unpleasant, inconvenient, or simply your opinion, making them seem "awful" might be a bit extreme. Think it through and decide if what you are talking about is really as awful as you think.

## **5. Don't Attack**

Your listener is not likely to stick with the conversation if your discussion turns into a series of attacks and criticisms. Labeling your partner (“Idiot,” “Moron,” “Big Baby”) or over-generalizing (“You always do that”) are definite ways to turn someone off. If you really want to be heard, you need to communicate in a way that is not hostile. Making suggestions for change (“It would be helpful if you cleaned up a bit more”), while giving credit for some positives (“I do appreciate your help with the shopping”) can get you more attention and cooperation than out-right attacks (“You are the most selfish person I have ever known”).

## **6. Tell Your Partner if You Want to Solve Problems or If You Want to Share Feelings**

Sometimes you just want to vent your feelings and be heard by the sympathetic ear of your partner. But in order for your partner to know what you need from the conversation, you have to tell him or her. For example, it may be that you might want to spend a few minutes venting about your concern. If you don't tell your partner what you need, he or she may quickly move into rational, problem-solving mode and totally miss your intention. For most partners, spending more time validating and listening and supporting first, will allow time and space for the problem-solving if it is needed or wanted.

## **7. Listening Is Not Agreeing**

Sometimes we have the belief that our partner should agree with everything we say and be just as upset as we are about an issue. We may lead them to believe this is the only way to show that he or she is really listening. But listening is really about hearing, understanding, reflecting, and processing information. Your partner can listen to your thoughts and feelings without agreeing with your point of view. It doesn't mean your partner doesn't care for you if he or she doesn't agree with you. That expectation is unrealistic and unfair. It is important to accept the differences that make you and your partner unique. In fact, the differences can be opportunities for growth. When you talk to someone who understands you and cares about your feelings -- but doesn't agree with your interpretation of events -- it opens your mind to the fact that there is more than one way to think about things.

## **8. Respect Advice**

If you are turning to your partner for support and conversation, you are likely to get feedback -- maybe even some advice. Sometimes the advice is not helpful, maybe it even seems irrational. But if you want to be heard, you have to be willing to respect the advice-giver. You don't have to act on the advice or like the advice. Think of advice or feedback as information -- take it or leave it. Always grant that your partner is trying to do what he or she can to be supportive by offering his or her thoughts.

## **9. If You Describe a Problem, Describe a Solution**

As noted earlier, there are times you just want to vent, share feelings, and explore what is on your mind with your partner. But if you are the one sharing, you might consider this as an option -- describe a solution if you describe a problem. Your solution doesn't have to be the only answer.

It can be tentative, reasonable, and one of several possibilities. In fact, if you begin thinking of the problem as something to solve once it is better understood, you might begin feeling more empowered to do something about it.

### **10. Validate the Validator**

One of the most helpful things that you can do as a speaker is to support the person who is supporting you. Think about it from their point of view. They care enough to listen to you vent about something that is bothering you. This is not always a pleasant experience, depending on the issue. But as long as they are continuing to support your need to be heard, thank them for spending time with you, and for caring enough to listen and for supporting you. Validate the validator.

### **Resources:**

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