

Male Voice: Communication in your marriage. This is Stay Happily Married, Episode number 290.

Female Voice: Welcome to Stay Happily Married, your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and healthy marriage.

Scott Blair: I'm Scott Blair, and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Do you struggle with effective communication in your relationship? Advances in technology these days has allowed for several means of communication to be created and utilized. Back in the simpler days, you had to talk to someone face to face or over the phone, which allowed for more intimate conversations with each other. Today, we have texting, social media, and email. Through using these new instruments of communication, you lose that sense of intimacy with each other, which can cause translation to be lost between each other. How can we overcome our transgressions when it comes to communicating with each other in this day and age? Earning her Masters of Science in Marriage and Family Therapy, from East Carolina University, Mrs. Amanda Lis is a licensed marriage and family therapist at New Perspectives Therapy in Charlotte, North Carolina. She has experience working in private practice counseling, assessment, and managed care. Mrs. Lis is a member of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy. Her areas of special interest are in working with couples on issues like improving communication, conflict management, building trust, and increasing emotional intimacy. Mrs. Lis has worked with families, couples, and individuals on issues dealing with a variety of disorders as well as relationship problems. Welcome to the show, Amanda. I'm so glad that you could join us today.

Amanda Lis: Thank you for having me.

Scott Blair: Well communication seems to be an issue in any kind of setting, definitely the most talked about topic on this show. Whether it be with your spouse, at work, with a friend, it's definitely the number one issue. So what problems do you see that couples are experiencing in the relationships when communication with one another becomes a big issue for them?

Amanda Lis: Well people come to therapy for all sorts of specific issues, but it really seems like communicating with each other in a healthy and effective way about even small or large issues has become difficult or impossible for them. People have difficulty identifying how they feel about an issue and tend to start blaming or criticizing their spouse and forget to take responsibility for their role in the conflict. Using a win/lose attitude about arguments or issues also is a problem. Then they start to confuse thoughts and feelings. So they'll say something like, "I feel like you're not listening to me." But that's not really a feeling. It's a thought. Another problem that contributes to poor communication is not being able to empathize with your partner or put yourself in their shoes and really be able to truly listen to their partner's point of view.

Scott Blair: Yes. There's a lot of things there. What are some of the short and long-term negative effects that this type of behavior can have on the relationship?

Amanda Lis: Well people struggle to effectively share their feelings. They don't have good listening and empathy skills. It can lead to feeling alone in the relationship, not feeling heard or understood, and feeling that they are consistently failing at resolving their conflicts or arguments. They start to believe that they are not compatible, that they've grown apart or changed too much. Couples begin to assign negative or harmful personality traits or

biases towards each other, like their partner is lazy or mean, or they don't care, or they're selfish. When this happens, each person starts to assume that that is how their partner always is going to react or behave, which contributes to unhealthy communication patterns like resentment or anger and powerlessness and distancing. Another issue that we have now is, you know, people of course use email and text message and all sorts of electronic means of communication with our smart phones now. So that really makes it more difficult for people to see things like tone of voice or body language, and use those to discern a meaning. So they can kind of apply whatever message they think they heard rather than getting the real message. So that causes an issue also.

Scott Blair: I can't tell you how many small arguments I've been in over misinterpreted text messages. At what point in time do you see couples becoming aware that their inability to communicate effectively with each other is hurting their relationship?

Amanda Lis: This can occur at any time during the relationship life cycle. Most of the time, communication issues become more apparent during times of high stress or transition, such as after a job change or having a baby, change in roles or expectations, or even right after they get married, you know. For instance, think of all the changes they go through when they're getting married, like a high stress or financially taxing wedding. They may even be moving in together right after they get married. They have a huge change in identity from being single to being a married person. They think once they get married that these things will be easier, but that's not really the case.

Scott Blair: Okay, so major life events have a definite impact on communication at times. Do you see any other trends among couples having these issues? Like, is it mainly with newlyweds; or people that have been married longer, or step-families? Anything, other patterns you can identify?

Amanda Lis: Well life transitions can happen, you know, at any age really. They tend to play a big role in contributing to communication issues any time the couple is faced with making changes to establish patterns or expectations in a relationship. So newlyweds, of course after the honeymoon period kind of comes to a close, people who are launching children, people who have young children, any time a major career change happens, retirement, so thinking about those big life changing issues. Even a move to a different city can cause some problems with being able to resolve issues. Most people tend to have a clearly defined personal set of values or expectations about things like parenting, financial management, and marital roles. So when your partner doesn't share them, it can create conflict. Really every couple experiences these issues, but just some people are better able to manage it than others.

Scott Blair: Well what do you suggest that couples do to improve communication and also to help resolve those negative effects that we kind of touched on earlier?

Amanda Lis: Well the good thing is that there are a lot of solutions to resolve negative communication patterns. What works for one couple may not be the best solution for another, but I usually try to point out to couples that failure really just only means that you have an opportunity to learn from the situation. They should take time to revisit the argument or the issue and figure out what worked for them for a while, what didn't, and try something new the next time. I try to teach people to have compassion and patience with the process and each other while they're eliminating things like criticism and blame. The issues typically do not get this bad overnight, and they will not often resolve themselves that

quickly either. So trying to focus more on sharing their own feelings about an issue and how they can take personal responsibility for the change, since the only person you have the power to change is yourself.

Scott Blair: Okay. Of course, it's not an overnight solution. We can see that. I'd like to drill down on that a little deeper if you wouldn't mind. What are some of the specific items that you're teaching, helping couples to do, to learn, to help resolve these bad communication patterns they have?

Amanda Lis: Well, some key strategies for improving communication, not only as a couple but also with other people, even at work or with your family members, are being able to use the active listening process, developing empathy for the person you're talking with, and having an open mind with them, and then throwing out old assumptions and biases. The active listening process works in the speaker/listener format. So the speaker would use 'I' statements with feeling words to share a point of view, like, "I feel hurt when you didn't introduce me to your friends at that party." The speaker avoids using blaming or criticizing words like 'always' and 'never' and 'you', because those things tend to create feelings of defensiveness in the listener. The listener does not interrupt, defend, or try to persuade the speaker to another point of view. They just listen, and then they acknowledge the speaker's statements and work to empathize with some aspect of the feeling their partner shared. So they would use phrases like, "I see why you might have felt that way, or I get why you might have thought that." Apologies obviously never hurt either. Then you switch roles so that the speaker becomes the listener and vice versa. Throwing out old assumptions and biases is the other one that's very difficult for most people. These tend to be destructive because they allow someone to focus only on the behaviors that confirm