

Recharging Relationships, Part II:

Responding with Enthusiasm When Your Partner Shares Good News: How "Active Constructive" Communication Will Energize Your Relationship

This is the second of a three-part series on improving our close relationships, whether with spouses, other adults or with children.

Part 1 was on MEANINGFUL APOLOGIES. To download that article, go to www.contracostamenscenter.com and click on "Articles."

Robert is reading the newspaper when his wife Ellen comes bounding into the house at dinner time. "I had such a great day at work," she exclaims. "I got promoted to executive VP."

Robert looks up briefly and comments, "That's good honey." He then goes right back to reading the newspaper.

Ellen knows Robert is a major Warriors' fan and sees he is completely engrossed in his sports section, so she goes off to change her clothes. Later at dinner she lets him know she was disappointed at his reaction. Robert is surprised, and defends himself by saying "I told you I was happy for you. What more did you want?"

Many couples know this dance. Robert is confused how Ellen could feel so upset with him and he feels she is too demanding. Ellen is frustrated that Robert seems so clueless about her desire for more engagement with him.

How can we understand and find a way out of this dilemma?

"RESPONDING TO EACH OTHERS' JOY": A KEY FACTOR IN COUPLES' HAPPINESS

Groundbreaking research from Sonja Lyubomirsky, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology at UC Riverside, shows there is great importance in how couples respond to each other when one person is sharing positive news or a subject of personal interest.

Dr. Lyubormirsky's research showed that couples were significantly happier in their relationship if their partners **ACTIVELY AND CONSTRUCTIVELY** responded to them when they shared something that interested them, moved them or brought them joy.

In fact, she found that how couples respond to each others' joy has a GREATER impact on strengthening the couple's bond than effective conflict communication!

So let's apply Dr. Lyubormirsky's research to Robert and Ellen:

According to Dr. Lyubormirsky's research, we can classify Robert's reaction based on two levels of responses:

- 1) whether it is ACTIVE or PASSIVE, and
- 2) whether it is CONSTRUCTIVE or DESTRUCTIVE.

THE GOAL IS TO BE "ACTIVE AND CONSTRUCTIVE" IN RESPONSE.

Responses that are both ACTIVE (Animated or engaged, showing strong interest and inviting more conversation) and CONSTRUCTIVE (send a supportive message) do the most to promote a deepening of closeness and happiness with the relationship.

PASSIVE responses are much less emotionally expressive, and cut off rather than promote further conversation or interaction. DESTRUCTIVE responses show negative feeling and throw cold water on the partner's positive sharing.

So here are four possible ways Robert could have responded:

ACTIVE AND CONSTRUCTIVE

"That's fantastic! You really deserve that. You're such an asset to the company. I'm proud of you. How did they tell you? (Puts down the paper and invites her to share more).

PASSIVE AND CONSTRUCTIVE

"That's good, honey." (then goes back to reading the paper.)

PASSIVE AND DESTRUCTIVE

"Hmmm. I bet you won't like being a leader but you'll find out. (returns to the paper)

ACTIVE AND DESTRUCTIVE

"Oh boy . . . here we go; they're just gonna get more hours out of you. I don't want you accepting it. It'll just be more of the same BS. (Waits for her response to his challenge)

Now back to the story. Why would Robert's actual response be considered PASSIVE/CONSTRUCTIVE?

It was CONSTRUCTIVE in that what Robert said was supportive; however, it was PASSIVE in that he was showing little positive emotion to go along with his words, and he paid attention for only a moment before going back to his newspaper.

So Ellen is disappointed and Robert feels confused and misunderstood. He was aware of being constructive but unaware of the impact of his being passive. Unfortunately, the net result is more distance and bad feelings between them.

Here are ways to foster ACTIVE/CONSTRUCTIVE responses to a partner's joy:

1. Give your full attention to your partner when you are responding to the good news. If you are reading the paper or doing the dishes, take a pause and stop what you are doing and respond directly with positive words and questions of interest.
2. It's not just WHAT you say that counts but also HOW you say it. We know from communication research that the words themselves make up ONLY 7% of the impact of what we communicate. The other 93% is conveyed by tone of voice, facial expressions and body language.

Be conscious of giving a positive emotional reaction: positive tone, facial expression and eye contact.

3. "The 24 Hour Rule": Tune into your negative feelings. If you have concerns about your partner's good news, save that to express 24 hours later. Don't be a wet blanket in the moment.

eg., The next day... "I was thinking that your promotion is fantastic, but I realized I have some concern that I'll have less time with you because you'll be working more hours. What's your take on that?"

4. The best measure of whether your reaction was effective is that your partner gets more energized and wants to share more about their experience. If your partner, by contrast, gets suddenly quiet or shifts into doing something else, that's a sign that you haven't responded in an ACTIVE/CONSTRUCTIVE way.
5. If you see that your partner is responding in a negative way, that may be the signal to do damage control and try to repair the connection. It's never too late to say "Whoops, I guess what I said wasn't what you were looking for. Can I give it another try?"