



UNseminary



THE POWER OF

THE RIGHT KIND OF LISTENING

FOR STRUGGLING SPOUSES

BY TONI NIEUWHOF



Today's article is by Toni Nieuwhof. Toni is a family law mediator, former divorce attorney, author, speaker and co-host of the [Smart Family Podcast](#). She has been married to Carey Nieuwhof for over 30 years. Carey is a best-selling leadership author, speaker, podcaster, former attorney, and church planter. Toni has just released [Before You Split](#); a book that offers a way forward for people in struggling marriages. Toni helps people see their future options more clearly, while also sharing solutions that transformed her marriage with Carey that bad to this good.

As a church leader, I'm sure you've heard from people whose marriages have benefited from the extra margin in their lifestyle, and from others who are on the brink of giving up. I bet you've met with at least one couple and concluded, "it'll take a miracle."

We're all witnessing the changes in employment, schooling, lifestyle, health relationships and finances brought about during this past almost year and a half since "COVID" became an everyday word. How well-positioned couples are to re-negotiate important decisions, sometimes while coping with grief, becomes critical in this context.

Pastors are by no means exempt.

So, how about you? Chances are, you've been navigating disappointments, losses and grief in your leadership and at home.

[Recent research from the Barna Group reported that stress has been hitting pastors to the point where 29% are considering leaving full-time ministry.](#)

How do you navigate the tension of marriage after a global crisis has left your stress level at an all-time high?

NOT A MARRIAGE ISSUE...A HUMAN ISSUE

As a church leader, you've probably seen all the dysfunctional tactics that trip spouses up. Not actively listening to each other. Being controlling. Arguing as if to say, "I'm always right". Treating an issue as if it's binary – his solution or hers, with no other options.

One person acts as if it's their right to have veto power.

Commonly, it's easier to recognize unhealthy communication patterns when they're not our own. What I'm talking about today is an issue we all share to some extent – leader or not. It's a human issue. People tend to get attached to their perspective or opinion. So attached to the *ends* that the *means* in terms of communication tactics feel justified, even when they're not.

How do you interrupt that downward spiral for the husband and wife who are intent on winning an argument. On changing their spouse's mind?

Experts are saying one of the keys is how we listen.

THAT POWER IS FOUND IN THE RIGHT KIND OF LISTENING.

Whether through others in your church or through your own personal experience, you know that influencing your partner or changing their mind is no small feat.

When your people are caught up in trying to change each other's minds, how do you help? Try guiding them through these three steps: admitting it; reflecting on 'why'; and applying the right kind of listening.

1. ADMITTING THAT THEY HAVE AN AGENDA

People get married and turn a blind eye to the views or qualities of their spouse that are less-than-ideal. They think, "That's okay, because we're in love and I'll be able to sway them over to my view. They're already showing some hints of change."

But then after settling into married life for a few years, their desire to change their spouse may become more pressing. And perhaps not-so-secret:

- "You're not making time for "us" a priority"
- "Our sex life isn't working for me, but that doesn't seem to bother you"
- "We need help, but you won't see a counsellor."

These are not theoretical problems with textbook solutions. They're real problems with complex solutions.

For example, I've had a friend ask me recently, "What can I do about my spouse's weight problem? It's been getting worse, but it's a touchy subject, so I'm afraid to open the conversation. It's affecting our sex life...the problem seems to be getting worse, not better."

Even helping people to recognize and be honest about their desire to change their spouse's views, beliefs or behaviours by admitting it to themselves, whether or not they confess it to their spouse, is a first necessary step of self-awareness.

Next comes step two: ask a spouse to reflect on their motivations for desiring their spouse to change their mind.

2. CHECK YOUR MOTIVES BY ASKING “WHY?”

The second step is to reflect on the following:

The ‘why’ of wanting your spouse to change is complicated. There are times you have a desire for change in your spouse that is altruistic. You want them to take a chance on applying to that Master’s program, not because there will be lifestyle benefits for you (actually, you’ll make sacrifices), but because you want something *for* them. You may believe that for your partner to move past their fears to take on a challenging program would be life-giving.

On the other hand, sometimes you want your spouse to change their mind because their behaviour reflects on you. Not so altruistic. You want your spouse to decide to start giving away some of their several-years-old clothing. You want them to ditch the ‘lazy pants’ and become more fashion-conscious.

Sometimes, your desire is attached to an outcome that will improve your spouse’s well-being, objectively speaking. An example? You want your spouse to become more committed to eating nutritious food instead of crappy carbs. But at other times, the connection between your desire and your spouse’s actual well-being is more tenuous. For instance? You want your spouse to purchase a status-symbol car. Or, your partner actually lost enough weight to satisfy the doctor, but you’re looking for more.

These few checkpoints will help you explore this question of ‘why?’:

1. What are your motives?
2. Is this something you desire *for* them, or something you want *from* them?
3. Will this change improve their well-being or yours or both? Is your assessment a matter of personal preference or opinion?
4. Are you at risk of interfering with their ability to make up their own mind about what they value or desire? In trying to change their mind, are you being controlling?

Take some reflective time on your own to explore the ‘why’ question.

At times, the best thing you can do is to drop your agenda to change your spouse’s mind. Or perhaps for your particular issue, engaging a process where you both examine and adjust your expectations may be helpful.¹

¹Nieuwhof T. *Before You Split: Find What You Really Want for the Future of Your Marriage*. (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 2021) Chpt 3. See also the accompanying Accountability Plan under “Resources on my website: <https://toninieuwhof.com/resources/accountability-plan/>

Perhaps this is the ideal time to seek advice from a wise mentor or a professional counsellor.

Keep in mind that marriage experts say it's normal for happily married couples to live with some unresolved differences.²

So, let's say you admit you have an agenda to influence your spouse, and you've examined 'why' and you believe (and perhaps you've consulted with someone wise who agrees) that this is a matter you shouldn't drop. Which approach is more likely to have a positive influence?

3. RE-THINK HOW YOU LISTEN TO YOUR SPOUSE

Which approaches are proven to be effective? Alternatively, what approaches are counterproductive?

What does the science have to say?

To answer these questions, I recommend organizational psychologist Adam Grant's recent book, *Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know*. He outlines the approaches that tend to cause people to dig in their heels versus the ones that invite people to move toward changing their minds.

It's not the emotional force, sheer logic or sincerity of our arguments that make a difference. It's the *right kind of listening* that motivates change.³

To separate the common truths from the myths about what works according to Grant, here's a high-level view of the right kind of listening:

1. The approaches of a preacher, a prosecutor or a politician are common, but doomed, communication strategies between married people. You already know this. The proselytizing you might have tried or the cross-examining you've engaged in only seemed to move you and your spouse further apart on the issue. You've probably had experience with political- style lobbying completely shutting down the conversation;
2. No surprise that the bottom line of the approach he advocates is grounded in caring and respect. This sounds like, "I'll respect you regardless of the choice you make, and you're free to make whatever choice you think is best."⁴

²Gottman J, Silver N. *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* (New York: Harmony, 2015) at 250-259

³Grant, A. *Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know*. (New York: Viking, 2021) 143-160

⁴Where a spouse's choice has to do with serious or safety matters (such as a tendency to become violent while drinking, for example) this statement may need to be qualified, obviously. Always be alert to the potential need to help an at-risk spouse develop a safety plan.

3. To influence your spouse to change their mind, learn more about motivational interviewing and influential listening. The key character qualities that ground these particular styles of listening are curiosity and humility. Focus on asking 'why' and listening with respect, without a controlling mindset, a pre-determined agenda, or believing you know all there is to know about your partner. Your spouse is being influenced by an ever-changing world, just as you are.
4. The process of motivational interviewing involves three key techniques:
 - Ask open-ended questions;
 - Engage in reflective listening;
 - Affirm the person's desire and ability to change.
5. In the end, how you handle your desire to change your spouse's mind is up to you. What means to an end are justified? What kind of person do you want to be? Grant reminds us, "When we succeed in changing someone's mind, we shouldn't only ask whether we're proud of what we've achieved. We should also ask whether we're proud of how we've achieved it."

It's common for spouses to make assumptions about each other that leave little room for curiosity or celebrating their actual growth over time. Cynicism, skepticism and disrespect creep in. The more you can shed light on the approaches that strip away human dignity, the more space there is for the light of Christ to move in.