

52 LESSONS
FOR
BETTER COMMUNICATION

HELP TO TALK LESS DUMB

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The cast of characters often inspiring my lessons:



The proper picture



The realistic picture

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the one who has helped me become the person I am (even though I still have a lot of room to grow). I prayed for years to have a solid mentor and that prayer never came to be (or so I thought). I recently realized God didn't give me one because He had that covered; He was guiding me all along. Thanks to Him for helping me learn all of these lessons and to be able to share them with others. Hopefully they'll make the world a little bit better.

*Everyone should be quick to listen,
slow to speak and slow to become angry.
James 1:19*

Introduction

People suck... is that too honest to start my book? People suck... not you. I need to be careful. I don't want to start my book on communication with miscommunication – that'd be a genius move (that's sarcasm). You're great (that's not). If you want to grow as a person, that's a really good sign. When I claim people suck, I mean other people. I'm sure you can think of a few examples. In general, I'd say there are three categories of people:

1. People who suck.
2. People who potentially suck (more evidence is needed to confirm).
3. Good people who have sucky moments.

You might be thinking, "This guy is negative. He's definitely a number two," (I just giggled when I realized what I wrote there). My goal, however, is to be factual. Even the best people have sucky moments. Overall, ***I think people want to feel acceptance and love, but our selfish nature, bad habits, and lack of wisdom can get in the way.*** See? I'm not so negative. I think people want to be good... but they can suck. There's a balance.

One of the benefits of recognizing that people can do something sucky is I'm not surprised when it happens: "Don't worry; it's okay. I assumed you'd be dumb." Having this as my expectation, I can be more patient, which helps me be a better person – again, there's positive.

So what makes someone suck/sucky? My immediate thought is a litterer (I hate litter) or people who don't recycle (*WALL-E* was prophetic with how garbage will take over our world). Beyond a few basic actions, ***what separates a good person from a sucky one is communication.*** For instance, being polite appears to be a dying art. When I was a kid (the 80s were a great time to grow up), I remember even our garbage cans were polite. Do you remember how they used to say, "Thank you" on them? Now, they're more likely to look good. It's like most people today; they look good, but they lack politeness (and are full of garbage... can I say that?).

Even more than non thank you people, what drives me crazy are those who don't say hi. Maybe it's because I grew up in a small town, but if there's just you and another person on the street, you should say hi – it's polite. When I'm jogging at night I purposefully say hi to people I pass since I don't want to seem threatening, but maybe half of them say anything back. I've even tried complimenting them like "Mmm, you look delicious," as I make Hannibal Lecter lip gestures, and they just walk away faster – so weird. (Hopefully you'll recognize the sarcasm in that; I'm weird, not creepy (written while maniacally laughing (especially since I have brackets within brackets, which I'm not sure is grammatically allowed (oh, I'm a nerd bad boy (is that a thing?)))))). When I walk my daughter to school and I'm about to pass someone coming the other way, I always look at their eyes ready to say hi if there's eye contact, but I get ignored. I mean, come on. When someone's looking at you, you know they're looking at you. You have to be deliberately not looking at a time like this, and I'm so stupid I'll do this with the same people every day hoping for a different result: "Is today the day you say hi? Nope." (Or maybe I'm not stupid for doing the same thing every day; I'm insane). I like to call what we have the Dyson Culture: it sucks, but it looks cool with the technology. Was that a Eureka moment? Get it? Vacuum humor – biting like a Shark.

One of the main reasons people are so Dyson today is we've forgotten what it means to be kind to our neighbor; we've forgotten the Golden Rule: "Do to others whatever you would like them to do to you." (Mat 7:12a), which is highly connected to us having terrible communication skills: "I'm screaming at you because that's what I want you to do to me... oh, wait." Bad communication is everywhere. As a psychotherapist, I'll meet with other therapists at various events (talk about rocking parties) and it's amazing how terrible these professionals of communication can be in everyday life at communicating whether starting a conversation or keeping it going. It's like they don't know how to have conversations with people who are in an equal power position as them or they

simply don't have communication skills beyond asking, "And how does that make you feel?" Coincidentally, this is a question for people who don't have good communication skills. I wonder how that makes people who use that question feel? They probably think I'm a number two, but a number one on my previous list.

What we need to understand is that, on one hand, communication is very simple. We listen with our ears and eyes and we speak with our mouth and body (especially your hands if you're Italian). Since we have two ears and two eyes and only one mouth it suggests we should be using our mouth a lot less. Unfortunately, using our mouth (or keyboard) is so much easier and it can "feel" right in the moment. Why try to understand someone else's point when it's easier just to spout the first thing that comes to our mind: (jerk) "I think it, so I say it." (me) "And no social filter is what makes you a jerk. I have a faulty filter, so I'm just an occasional jerk. Not full time like you." This is why ***self-control becomes one of the most important things we can practice in communication.*** You might think something, but that doesn't give you a right to say it.

On the other hand, ***as simple as communication might be, it's also very complex,*** which is why I can write a book called *52 Lessons for Better Communication*, and there's still more lessons to be learned. It's like singing. On some level, we can all sing, but it's only the people who practice and are open to advice from those more experienced who end up really good at it. Even then, some people are better created for being muzzel testers. For instance, no matter how much I practice and learn about singing, I'll only be good for singing in a large choir where my individual voice isn't heard. It's not an insult; it's just a fact. The same thing happens with communication. There's always going to be the Wayne Gretzky of communication and the guy who can only make it to the minors, but compared to the average person, they're both excellent. Whatever level we can achieve, being the best communicator we can be is worth it because it will help life be better for us and those around us.

As far as communicators go, I like to see it as six categories:

- 1) The bad communicator who couldn't care less about improving.
- 2) The bad communicator who is open to learning and growing.
- 3) The mostly trained communicator, but doesn't care about growing because they're good enough in their own eyes.
- 4) The mostly trained communicator who is still working at growing.

- 5) The cocky communicator who looks down on others for not being like them.
- 6) The snobby communicator who is over the top on rules for communicating and too nitpicky about the words used. (Too many rules doesn't make you better. It makes you impossible to please.)

I'm clearly a fan of the second and fourth category because the third can be challenging and the other three are impossible to help. ***You can only help those who are open to it.*** As a therapist, I know I'm only as good as my client. Similarly, this book will only be helpful for people who want help.

Being arrogant with your communication abilities is foolish because ***there's so much room for misunderstanding in communication***, especially since it's not just about you. For instance, the cover of this book is meant to be a play on the classic, see no evil, hear no evil, and speak no evil, but let's be honest; I really just wanted an excuse to use pictures of my daughters. I'm going beyond the annoying parent who wants to show you pictures of their kids on social media or their phone. I win... at being annoying.

The very act of communicating is difficult because the meaning of the words can change depending on the people involved (e.g. talking to my guy friends is different than talking to my wife), the tone (e.g. sarcasm can be joking or demeaning), and the volume (e.g. fear can make it softer or louder). Words can even mean different things to different people. For instance, I teach ***you don't find a soul mate (the popular idea); you make one (the smarter idea)***. We make a soul mate over years of being together and working on things like communication to grow closer together. There is also the problem where some people are more direct in what they say (i.e. they can be too blunt) while others are more "read between the lines," (i.e. terrible communicators) while others disappear. When we communicate there is a lot of room for error, especially when emotions make us say and hear things wrong: "But it feels like..." Yes, ***but is that a true feeling or is that your brain twisting things?*** Our brains lie to us all the time, especially since feelings can be liars; they can be helpful guides, but they can easily mislead us. Even more frustrating is when listeners make the conversation all about themselves instead of helping the other person feel understood. ***The number one rule of listening is help the other person feel understood***, but most of us suck at that: (listener) "So what you're saying is nothing I do is good enough." (speaker) "I just said I'm struggling right now. How is that about you?" (listener) "If you're not happy, I must not be a very good partner... like how I'm

twisting your sharing into an attack against me even though that wasn't your intention."

Fun Aside: Making it about us is an act of pride, which falls under the worst of the Seven Deadly Sins. See? That's a very fun aside.

Communication is particularly important in marriage (shocker). In fact, as a therapist, when I ask a couple what has brought them to see me they typically say something about improving communication. That's when I reply, "Sorry, did you say something," which is hilarious... to me. (I have pride issues, so that works out.) Ultimately, developing and maintaining good communication skills can save your marriage (not a bad motivator). Even more, we want people to share with us because ***the more you share, the more attached you become.*** That means if we want friends, we'll want people to share with us because that will help them attach to us. That also means ***one of the best ways to help people want to be in our lives is to learn how to be a good listener.***

In my first 52 Lessons book, *52 Lessons for a Better Relationship*, I shared a lesson on the 10 mistakes we can make when listening. Since there's only a 3.151492% chance you've read it (or maybe that number is from somewhere else), it'd be helpful to consider that now as a way to demonstrate how listening and communication can be harder than we realize. Since I refuse to duplicate lessons between books, here's a summary of what that lesson on listening mistakes taught:

- 1) **We make assumptions:** It's always wise to double check what we've heard in case we heard it wrong or the person presented it poorly. For instance, "I'm going to kill him," is very different than "I'm going to kill him... in his sleep tonight by overdose with the drugs I picked up on my way home from the lawyer to make sure the will was in order." One of the most damaging assumptions is assuming the worst of someone else like "You're trying to hurt me." Assuming the worst hurts the assumer: "I can't trust you to love me properly." It also hurts the original speaker if they weren't trying to be hurtful: "Why would you think I was so mean?" The odds are, however, if the other person isn't hurt or you're not in a fight, they're not trying to hurt you, so if something feels hurtful, you should double check (we'll look at this more later).
- 2) **We listen for words to throw back into the other person's face:** Whether in the moment or in the future, this person is looking for ammo to use against the other (i.e. they're being a jerk). Using it against someone in

the future often starts with a phrase like: “Remember (number) of years ago when you...” That’s a dangerous start to a sentence. I have no idea which gender tends to do this (smirking to myself because everyone knows that one).

- 3) **We try to fix:** When people share their feelings, they don’t want anything solved. They want to be affirmed, helped to feel cared about, and maybe share a laugh. When it comes to listening, we’re better off trying to relax and be present for the other person. Unless people ask for your advice, it’s best to keep it to yourself because the person sharing will likely feel controlled or that you’re implying they’re too dumb to see the simple answer. This is a particular problem for guys and moms who are naturally protectors and providers who want to help.
- 4) **Too logical:** When someone’s being emotional, it’s common to hear someone else say something like “Calm down,” “Relax,” “You’re overreacting,” and “This isn’t a big deal.” Even if the person saying these things is trying to be helpful, it will cause the emotional person to get angry: “Don’t tell me to relax! This is a big deal. I’m not stupid!” or if they’re scared, this will likely push them over the edge: “It’s not a big deal? Oh no, I must be crazy (and panic attack).” Telling an emotional person to calm down might be a logical response, but affirming people is normally the better route (affirming listener): “This is scary. Good thing you’re so brave.”
- 5) **We make the speaker feel stupid:** Top options in this category include eye rolling, correcting, demanding an example (e.g. “When have I done that?”), or disagreeing with the other person. These reactions will likely cause the guy... I mean “person” (but often the guy) to shut down or lash out. When people share something, they want to be understood and validated. They don’t want to feel interrogated, be asked a question they can’t answer in the heat of the moment, or made to feel like they’re weak or stupid for feeling what they feel no matter how silly it might seem to the listener. Answering these demands is particularly hard for guys because we tend to struggle with words in heated moments and remembering examples because we’re quicker to let things go, stuff things down, and/or we have terrible memories.
- 6) **We look distant or not engaged:** When people share something, they want to feel like they’re a priority and what they have to say matters. This means if you want to anger the person talking to you, go on your phone,

pretend to fall asleep, or act like you're too good to listen (e.g. think of an obnoxious teenager).

- 7) **We need to get *our* point across:** Some people are terrible for interrupting or needing to get the last word. Instead, we need to listen *first*. Talking often amps up the conflict or shuts the other person down, which leads to division in the relationship and possible resentment.
- 8) **We take every word as Gospel truth:** When people are angry, we exaggerate. (e.g. “You always...” and “You never...”) and say threats or other things we don't mean (e.g. “I'm going to knock your block off” – an '80s reference that doesn't make a lot of sense: “Is this a LEGO thing? Because it's weird.”) When we listen, we need to filter out the garbage to figure out what the point the person is actually trying to make.
- 9) **We take things personally:** If we're listening, it's not about us. Our focus should be on helping the other person feel understood. That being said, if we love someone, we'll protect them from hurting us, so if things get too heated, we'll take a five minute break.
- 10) **We defend ourselves:** When people are angry, they don't care **why** you did something; they're upset and want you **to care**. Excuses do the opposite of helping the person feel cared about. If there's been a misunderstanding, you can ask permission to explain yourself, “Can I tell you why I did that?” because at least then the other person still has the power in the situation. If they're not ready in that moment to hear you, you can always ask again later when they've calmed down.

To summarize our listening mistakes in one sentence (summarizing our point into one sentence is a great tool), I'd say the biggest problem with our communication as a culture is we make it about us. So, what is a good listener? Simply put: ***A good listener is someone who helps the other person feel heard and validated. And what's a good communicator? Someone who can both appropriately listen and share, which we'll go over in this book.***

As a parent, learning to deal with communication is incredibly important because what we teach at a young age will likely stick. For instance, I want to teach my girls that if they're angry, they should simply name it: “I'm angry at you!” instead of “I don't want to be your sister anymore!” Sometimes they'll say something like “I'm never playing with you again.” Lying isn't normally a great communication tool

(shocking). In those moments I'm guessing they're trying to hurt the other person because they're hurt. As the saying goes, "Hurt people, hurt people."

Unfortunately, hurt people don't have a right to hurt people and that kind of behavior should be stopped. Thus, I need to help them learn not to do that now while they're young and more impressionable instead of waiting and trying to break it when they're teenagers. I also want to teach my girls to go to their room and get their emotion out privately (e.g. scream in their pillow, punch the bed, or smash pillows on the bed) because I don't want them to hurt anyone or bottle things up. ***Emotions are a gift we need to experience, but we should never hurt others in our emotion.*** Of course, the best way to teach my girls to be good communicators is to role model it myself. (Ugh, that sounds like a lot of work). On the plus side, ***if I role model and discipline well now, in the long run I should have an easier time as a parent (on top of having a better marriage).***

You want to know who the best communicators are? Not pastors (like therapists they're usually terrible one on one outside of work). Not teachers (they're usually awkward when they're with peers and not talking about school stuff). Not super smart people like lawyers and doctors (intelligence can often be a hindrance to communication skills). The best communicators are improv actors. Not only are they supposed to be very knowledgeable about a lot of things to help their creativity, they follow what's arguably the most important rule in communication, "Yes and." "Yes and" is all about accepting what the person has given you and going with it. It's the opposite of shooting someone down or correcting them. It's never defending yourself or worrying how you look. It's helping the other person feel validated and adding to it, especially if someone says something dumb and the moment is a little awkward. The right add-on line can take an awkward moment and make it hilarious. Plus, how do you reduce someone's anger? Help them feel heard and understood. How do you do that? Not by telling them how to fix their problem or correcting anything they say even if what they say is "You suck!" You "Yes, and" And how do you "Yes, and" someone who says, "You suck"? (me) "I've been saying that for years (validate them). What'd I do this time?"

"Yes, and" in conversation doesn't mean we can't disagree with someone. It just means we affirm the speaker first in order to help them feel heard. For instance, I'm an ordained pastor. What's an ordained pastor? Someone who is ordained, but there isn't a church who wants them – it's not a great title. As a reject pastor (that's a more honest title), if someone tells me they're atheist, I could say, "Well, that makes you stupid," but I'm guessing the response wouldn't be: "That's a great point. Tell me about Jesus." Instead, I'd want to go with something like "An

atheist? That's a strong stance. What led you to that position?" ***If you want people to listen to you, you need to listen to them first.*** In a situation like this they'll likely say it's because of the evil and suffering in the world. If that's the case, I'd want to go with "That makes sense. It's strange to think a loving God could sit back and watch the world be so terrible." See how I affirm, and then I can add something to it like "What's funny is the reason you don't believe there's a God is the same reason I believe there is one. I need to believe there's something good out there and there's hope for something better to come, especially because people can be very Dyson." ***If you can help the other person feel understood and safe (i.e. you help them feel you don't see them as an idiot), they're more likely to listen to you.***

A common mistake is people will simply say, "I understand," but this rarely helps the other person feel understood: "If you understood me then you'd agree with me." What's more likely to help the other person feel understood is if you say something like

- 1) So is that like (analogy)?
- 2) So are you saying (a variation of what they just said)?
- 3) I'm guessing what you're telling me is (one sentence summary).

Another helpful lesson in my book, *52 Lessons for a Better Relationship*, looks at the 14 types of words to help you feel loved. The idea with this exercise is to consider what the top three are for you to feel loved and what helps your partner. I once worked with a couple where the woman mostly cared about *Engaging Words*, and her husband was like, "Uhhhhhhh?" He wasn't good with words. Fortunately, I was able to help him see that what he did there was actually helpful because he asked a question... kind of. What's crazy is he didn't realize a question can help a person feel cared about. From that simple lesson he realized he needed to start asking her questions (preferably better than "Uhhhh?"), and she was able to realize that to him "Uhhhhh?" was sometimes all he could offer. If you're wondering, her husband's job wasn't a professional communicator. (What? No way!) On the plus side, at least he knew not to ask, "And how does that make you feel?" because that's an even worse question than "Uhhhhh?"... kind of.

The 14 Types of Words to Help You Feel Loved

- 1) ***Appreciation:*** People often value receiving a follow up thank you text or letter to go beyond the moment's obligatory thank you. A follow up shows that what was done mattered enough to be remembered.
- 2) ***Apology:*** A good apology shows you care (we'll look at this later).
- 3) ***Dreaming/Planning Words:*** This is all about imagining a different kind of world like "If we could afford to go anywhere in the world, where would it be?" "If we could afford it, what job would you want to do around the house?" and "What would you do if I used your pillow as toilet paper?" (This last one is probably a bad option.)
- 4) ***Emotional Sharing/Dump:*** Women tend to be better at venting and sharing feelings than men, but it's valuable for everyone to get things off our chest. It can also build connection with the listener (if they actually want to be the listener and they don't feel attacked). Being the listener of someone emotionally sharing can also be very beneficial as you feel trusted enough for the person to share deeper things.
- 5) ***Encouraging Words:*** I'm guessing you're smart enough to know what these are. (See what I did there? I defined it by giving you encouragement – genius.)
- 6) ***Engaging Words:*** These can be good questions, observations, helpful statements, and sharing to encourage others to feel safe enough to share in return whether to start or continue a conversation.
Tip: A simple trick for knowing how to ask an engaging question is to take one word the speaker just said and focus on it whether adding an idea to it or asking to define it. For instance, if the person mentions a word like "home," you can ask, "What does home look like for you?" Maybe they mention they'd like a friend; you can ask, "What's the difference between a friend and an acquaintance?" in order to help them flush out what they mean.
- 8) ***Fact Sharing:*** These are safe things to share since they can't be argued against: "This was in the news today..."
- 9) ***Joking & Story Sharing:*** Being silly, clever, or sharing fun stories can be a great way to build connection (especially if you want to avoid sharing feelings).

- 10) **Greeting/Goodbye/Good night:** How we leave and return can make a big difference for how the rest of the day goes.
- 11) **I Love You:** Some people need this like a goodbye or saved for more special occasions. Other people are like me and follow the idea of “Don’t say you love me; show it.”
- 12) **Praise & Compliments:** These are words that affirm our strengths and accomplishments.
- 13) **Reminiscing:** There’s power in remembering stories whether at random or from looking at old photos. This is one of the reasons double dates are better than just the couple having date night because there’s a new audience who helps the couple reminisce together as they share about their experiences.
- 14) **Positivity:** Sometimes we just need to be near someone who is positive and sounds cheerful to feel better. Occasionally, being near a negative person can make it easier to be positive if their behavior reminds us to do the opposite: “Ew, I don’t want to be like that.” In general, however, a smile and friendliness can go a long way.

I’m sure you’re thinking I’ve just filled this introduction with a whole lot of information (because I have). You’re also likely thinking the author must really be into this communication stuff (because I am). I find it fascinating, especially since I really hate conflict (because I’m a wuss) and knowing how to communicate better can be a great way to reduce it (yea!) I still have things to learn, but I’m getting a little less Dyson every day. The real challenge is using what I’ve learned, which is now the same problem you’ll have – congratulations. With a little luck, you too can learn how to talk less dumb.

Side Note: The lessons in this book have been written over the last couple years and occasionally the order is a little different, but I did my best to point out the ages of my daughters to make sure there wasn’t any confusion for the stories used. This will also explain why in part of the book I mention I have two kids and then three. I didn’t forget I had three; I didn’t have three yet.

May the lessons in this book help you grow into the communicator that you and those around you want you to become in order to make your life be as good as possible (and may you not get as frustrated as I can get when you start to realize how terrible most people are at communication).

*A gentle answer deflects anger,
but harsh words make tempers flare.*

Pro 15:1

*Avoiding a fight is a mark of honor;
only fools insist on quarreling.*

Pro 20:3

*Starting a quarrel is like opening a floodgate,
so stop before a dispute breaks out.*

Pro 17:14



Lesson 1

The 5 Conflict Styles

Life was made to be simple: Work to be able to eat and drink, eat and drink, connect with others, and rest – that’s basically it. Life is so simple there are only three primary colours, seven basic facial expressions, and even four types of chromosomes (metacentric, submetacentric, acrocentric, and telocentric). Where did I learn that last impressive fact? *The Magic School Bus Rides Again*. Nothing like learning smart sounding things from a kid’s show. Similarly, communication can be broken down into a simple format. No, I didn’t learn that from a kid’s show. I figured that out through thousands of hours of talking with people as a therapist. Life experience is often the best teacher. So what is this simple format? Communication can be broken down into five basic categories, which are rooted in the four anger styles (i.e. aggressive, passive aggressive, passive, and assertive). I apologize for starting this lesson off sounding like math class: “So are there nine communication styles? I’m confused.” Nope, just five:

1. Desperate Attacker
2. Desperate Defender
3. Hider
4. Cold & Condescending
5. Healthy Communicator

When I discuss this topic with people in therapy sessions they’ll want to jump to the Healthy Communicator’s category, but in order to better understand what healthy looks like, it’s best to start by seeing what unhealthy is. This is particularly helpful when most of us regularly see the unhealthy categories and not realize how unhealthy they are. ***When all you see is unhealthy, you start to think that’s normal.*** Thus, in this lesson we’re going to start by pointing out how people typically suck. No offence to anyone who finds they’re in one of these categories (which is everyone). What’s fun about the unhealthy styles is there will be at least one you’ll know well and a good chance you’ll recognize times you’ve been in all four. Not only does being healthy take some learning, it’s a lot of work to break lifelong habits, which is why even though I can teach this, I still end up in the unhealthy categories a lot of the time. The bonus is I can at least recognize where I went wrong, apologize, and strive for better next time.

Please Note: A good summary of the Healthy Communicator is found in the final lesson.

So what do these categories look like?

- 1. Desperate Attacker (An aggressive approach):** These people follow the idea that the best defense is a good offense. They're like injured dogs. Even the nicest dogs when they're injured and/or scared will get aggressive. If someone gets too close, the dog will growl, snap, and even bite. Similarly, people will get louder, start to use insults and threats, and if they're pushed too far, they'll get violent. ***What's important to remember is a Desperate Attacker doesn't want to be this person; they're just scared and dealing with hurt.*** These people tend to be very in the moment and have a hard time thinking beyond what's happening right now even though their actions might lead to really bad repercussions.
- 2. Desperate Defender (A passive approach):** These people follow the idea that the best defense is a good defense. They're like desperate salesmen. They try too hard, apologize too quickly, and can be annoying. How do I know that? This is my main category – it's fun. If people in this category say something dumb, we try to dig ourselves out of the hole, which makes it worse. A popular move for this category is to walk on eggshells. This is like being in a constant state of fear: "Are you okay? Can I do anything for you? Please just be happy. I'm scared of conflict/disappointing people/getting in trouble. Please just be okay." The worst part about this category is defenders are always defending what they did, which is really frustrating to the other person: "Of course you have an excuse." Defending makes it about us when it's not supposed to be. It also makes the other person feel like they're being told they're wrong for thinking that way. This naturally causes the original speaker to, in-turn, defend their own position, so now you have two parties defending their own side, which is no different than countries at war: (country 1) "You're bad! (Kills people)" (country 2) "No, you are! (Kills people)." (country 1) "No, you are! (Kills more people)." What's important to know is eventually a Desperate Defender can snap and become a Desperate Attacker whether at others or themselves.
- 3. Hider (A passive approach):** Hiders hide (shocking, I know). They'll do whatever they can to avoid people, feelings, conflict, and/or situations.

They bury their head in the sand, which is dangerous because if you ever bury your head, you're going to get kicked in the butt. Hiders are procrastinators who bottle up their feelings, which means they need some type of addiction to help them keep it stuffed down whether by drinking, smoking, shopping, screen time, being busy, having an affair, or whatever other unhealthy tool helps them avoid what they need to face. This naturally leads to them being at risk of lying because the truth can cause conflict. The important thing to recognize with Hiders is their behavior is caused by fear, especially their silence. They don't want to make you feel brushed off. They're just too scared to face something. This type of silence can be classified as stonewalling, but ***it's emotionally shutting down out of fear and not meant to be mean*** even though it's often interpreted that way. Like Desperate Defenders, Hiders can snap and have a very Desperate Attacker moment, but it's to go back into hiding.

- 4. Cold & Condescending (The passive aggressive approach):** These people are awesome... in their own brains: "I'm not yelling, so I'm better than you." You can recognize these people by their eye rolls and sighs of disgust: "Of course you'd say that," or "I knew you'd yell because you're crazy." You know what makes people crazy? Cold & Condescending treatment. When someone treats you with contempt, constant criticism, rude or sassy behavior, the silent treatment (i.e. shutting you out emotionally to punish, which is the meaner version of stonewalling because it's about power and not fear), it can crush the soul of even the most confident person over time. Ever wonder how nice guys can end up with a broken hand because they punched a wall? They're most likely in a relationship with someone who crushes their soul and they snapped. Cold & Condescending people will drive others to do things they'd normally never do and then the Cold & Condescending person will use it against them in the future. Cold & Condescending behavior can sometimes be as simple as getting in the last word, giving a jab comment, a demeaning comment (e.g. "You're not going to wear that are you?"), or a "joke" with a hidden message (so it's not a real joke). People who are in the other categories can do these simpler things, so it's good to recognize whether the behavior is a one off or a sign they're actually in this category.

Please Note: Anyone who's a narcissist is in this category, but not everyone in this category is a narcissist.

The other tricky thing about Cold & Condescending people is sometimes they think they're better than you and other times it "feels" like they think they're better than you, but it's more of a guarded behavior. The big difference is if they snap, (passive aggressive people will eventually explode just like a passive person), the Cold & Condescending person who thinks they're superior will be like "Know your place!" whereas the guarded person uses Cold & Condescending behaviors as a way to gain control over people to reduce their own anxiety and/or to drag others down to their level. Either way, it's about power and control (and it sucks).

Bonus Thought: In stereotypical Canadian relationships, husbands end up Hiders and Desperate Defenders while wives typically end up Desperate Attackers (e.g. they end up nagging because they're desperate to feel heard and helped) and Cold & Condescending. This isn't meant to be a criticism against women; it's simply the pattern I see. It also makes sense women end up here when they're typically better with words and have higher standards for things like social etiquette, cleanliness, and fashion rules. They're expectations are typically above the normal guy. On top this, they often end up with resentment from feeling neglected and forced to do more of the family planning, which can make them feel like a single parent instead of being with a partner.

Healthy Communicators (Assertive): Yes, we're finally in the Healthy Communicators category... and I'm going to leave it without any explanation. Why? Because that's what this book (and my weekly blog) is about.

This week may you consider when you go into the different unhealthy categories.

Lesson 2

Words Mean Very Little

(The Frivolity of Words Pt 1)

One of the most important things we can learn about communication is words mean very little – is that a strange thing to claim in a book specifically on communication? You know how we might hold onto words someone said to us from our childhood or something our spouse said when they were angry? Yeah, those are all things we should've thrown in the garbage a long time ago. Unfortunately, our brain likes to hold onto things to torture us. ***The big thing is recognizing what's true and what's a lie.*** When I was about eight, out of frustration my dad yelled, "You're lazy and useless!" Or maybe he didn't? Our memories can warp things over time to be meaner to us and/or to make someone sound worse. Let's, however, assume he did say that. Was it true or a lie? In this case, he wasn't far off. I had been lazy that day and I generally tried getting out of work in order to play with my toys (a child who tries to get out of work? Crazy, I know). Did my dad present himself properly? Absolutely not, and he'd be mortified if he knew that's one of the only specific things I remember him saying to me. Traumatic moments, however, tend to stick with us more, so we can learn from them. Whether that moment contributed to me being a workaholic is up for debate, but either way, I shouldn't let that moment haunt me. It was a true statement, and in the end, I grew. I have since proven I have an excellent work ethic, and if my dad was alive, he'd be very proud. If he wasn't proud? He would be dealing with his own issues and that wouldn't be my problem. ***If something is a lie, let it go. If something is true and you don't like it, change it or learn to accept it. Truth isn't offensive; it's just facts.***

When I was twenty my older brother started dating a girl, which was a big deal because this was the first girlfriend either of us had (we were too busy being Casa Novas to commit... yes). They started saying I love you pretty quick (a rookie mistake), and I remember her saying it to him a day short of their month-a-versary. The next day she broke up with him (not the best way to celebrate a month-a-versary). Similarly I was told by a youth pastor that he loved me (in a brotherly love kind of way) and he soon backstabbed me harder than anyone else has in my life. Fortunately, I learned to protect myself from people like him, so I haven't been as blindsided since. Ultimately, both of these situations taught me words mean very little while also leaving me scared of the words, "I love you,": (person)

“I love you,” (me) “Oh shoot, you’re about to screw me over.” (person) “Why would I do that?” (me) “That’s what saying ‘I love you’ means, isn’t it?” (person) “I think you’re damaged.” (me) “You nailed it... which is why I’m making up this random conversation in the middle of a lesson.” Considering people get married and publically declare their undying love and commitment to each other only for 50% of those marriages to last, words mean very little.

Of course, when I claim words mean very little, I’m not saying we should have no problem lying to each other. ***We should be doing our best to be as appropriately honest as we can (being too honest makes you a jerk).*** I’ll work with parents and they’ll tell me their kids lie to them or spouses will wonder why their partner lies. There are three main reasons people lie:

1. ***Fear:*** It can be a fear of hurting someone (i.e. they’re caring) or fear of getting in trouble (i.e. they’re selfish), but the result is the same, a lie. At least this category means if you address the fear you have a chance of preventing the fear leading to a lie in the future even if it’s as simple as teaching someone ***a good person faces the repercussions of their mistakes.***
2. ***Manipulation:*** This is the main reason lying can be so terrible. It’s hurting someone for your own gain like the dirty car salesmen wanting a sale at any cost.
3. ***Love:*** Sometimes we need to lie. When my young kids show me something they drew, I’ll be very complimentary, but that picture is going into the recycling as soon as they walk away. Sometimes we lie because the truth can make you a jerk. We need to remember the goal. If my goal is “The loving thing is to say...” then great, but if it’s “I’m being selfish,” then it’s bad.

What makes lying trickier is some people lie to you, so there’s a chance the lie is easy to detect while others lie to themselves, so they fully believe what they’re saying. In those situations, they’re selling their story with perfect “truth” in their eyes, which makes it impossible to see the “lie” beyond logic proving them wrong.

Words are also frivolous because they can be interpreted differently, which recently got me in trouble:

Wife: Why’d you send our daughter into see me when I was putting the baby down?

Me: I didn’t.

Wife: Yes, you did. I heard you. You told her where I was.

Me: Yeah, [daughter] asked where you were, and I told her you were with the baby.

Wife: See? You sent her to me.

Me: No, I told her where you were. She should've known to leave you alone because you've told her not to bug you when you're putting the baby down.

So who's right in this situation? My wife thinks she is. I think I am, and there's no convincing either of us otherwise. ***Perspective is definitely more powerful than words.***

The best argument for words meaning very little is people saying, "I'm fine": (me) "When you say you're fine, do you mean you're fine, fine, fine or fine?"

Translation: "Are you actually fine, do you want space, are you processing something, or are you angry and I'm going to get in trouble later?" Silence can be just as confusing. Silence can mean the person is content, upset, thinking about something serious or random, or they could be punishing you. ***Communication is so much more than words.*** To understand someone we need to be considering:

- 1) ***Tone:*** Tone can have a huge influence on what's being said.
- 2) ***Intention:*** It's always good to consider the intention: Is that person trying to hurt me or did that come out wrong?
- 3) ***Their energy:*** The right positive energy can help some people get away with saying anything. For instance, Ricky Gervais gets away with saying some outlandish things because he has such a playfulness to him.
- 4) ***What We Know About Them:*** My friends know I'm sarcastic and I won't use jokes to give hidden messages. A joke should be a joke. Who the person is has a big influence on what they're trying to say, especially if they like to joke.
- 5) ***The Emotional State:*** Emotions like anger and fear make us dumb. People regularly say things they shouldn't because of emotion.
- 6) ***The Physical State:*** When our body needs something like food or sleep, it can get pretty nasty as social filters disappear when our body is off.
- 7) ***Our Own Fear:*** Fears get in the way of how we speak and listen. For instance, people with a fear of conflict can struggle not to over think simple situations: "Is this the start of a conflict... I should say something

dumb to make it worse... wait, do I say something dumb or smart here?" I have a fear of repercussions, which takes fear of conflict to a whole new level. Yea, me.

Because communication is already so complicated, we need to remove any risk of the whole "read between the lines" idea. Good communicators never do this. **Say what you mean and preferably with a social filter, so it's said with kindness.** I find women tend to be more "read between the lines," but it's often fueled by the goal of not appearing rude. Unfortunately, this causes them to be what they're trying to avoid – rude. I find married men rarely to be "read between the lines" because we're waaaayyy too lazy for that. We also don't want to have to read between the lines from other people. We already struggle to listen to what's actually said. Why would we want to try to go even deeper? (wife with tone) "I'm fine." (husband) "Great. Let me know if that changes."

This week may you consider how frivolous words can be.

Lesson 3

Going Further about Words

(The Frivolity of Words Pt 2)

The best thing about words is they can lead to some funny moments. The other day my just-turned-four year old asked for some “raw toast.” That’s one way to ask for bread. Even funnier was my other daughter. A few months ago before my wife gave birth to our third, my oldest daughter very confidently announced, “I know babies come out your bum.” She was close... but very wrong. My wife needing a c-section told her that the baby would be taken out with instruments (she was trying not to be graphic). That same daughter replied, “They’re going to take the baby out with a guitar?” I tried to tell her guitar music is powerful, so you need to be careful what you listen to, but my wife shut that down. Something about not scarring her? Moms. It’s great how innocence and language can team up to create very funny situations.

In all things, there is both good and bad. As wonderful as it is for language to be used for humor on purpose or by mistake, words can also lead to terrible moments. In January 2018, my sister went into surgery because she had an aggressive cancer lump that needed to be removed and we were all praying it hadn’t gone to her lymph nodes yet because that would most likely mean a bucket being kicked. It was a pretty scary situation for all of us. At the same time, my wife was pregnant with our first daughter, and we hadn’t told anyone the name yet. I had planned this very heartfelt moment, and it was perfect... in my head. Reality is often a different story. Minutes before my sister was rolled away in the bed for surgery I told her, Lori Rae, my daughter’s name would be Gracie Rae after her. I thought this would show how much she meant to my wife and I – the heartfelt moment – but that’s not what she heard. Moments before surgery my sister heard her brother proudly say, “I’m naming my first daughter after you because you’re going to die!” That was definitely not what I was going for... but now after knowing she’s fine, it’s pretty funny in a dark way. What’s crazy is my sister brought this up the other day and I had no recollection of it: (me) “Is that what happened? Oh man, my memory’s terrible.” Maybe my brain blocked it or just let it go like a dude, but my sister remembered it because traumatic events tend to stick with people, and that was pretty traumatic for her: “You’re being replaced.”

This leads to an important point: ***Communication is at high risk of misinterpretation because of three main levels:***

1. The person *speaking* needs to know what to say and how to say it in a clear way.
2. The person *listening* needs to hear what's actually said, and have enough understanding of the language and situation to interpret it properly, and not twist it to be a personal attack.
3. The person *listening* needs to remember what was actually said; unfortunately, memories are fickle and can be influenced by emotion. "But it felt like that's what you said," is a very dangerous statement.

It's amazing how often people screw up what they really want to say, especially in serious conversations. Sometimes we don't really know what we're trying to say, but we hope to figure it out as we're talking (i.e. external processing), and then we get lost on bunny trails that take us down paths we never intended to go (i.e. distractions that cause the original point to be lost). This is particularly bad in fights where you start with one issue and then defensiveness causes you to end up in a very different place you shouldn't have gone because it's a distraction from the real point and causes more anger. ***This is why it's really important in serious situations to have already processed what you want to say and say it in one sentence because it's easier to hear, digest, and respond to properly because there aren't any distractions (aka frivolous details). In order to get your one sentence, it can be helpful to focus on your goal for what you're sharing.*** Too often our sharing gets muddled with venting and a subconscious desire to hurt the other person. Because words mean little, however, we as listeners should be more patient with the sharer when they don't get out what they're trying to say, and be willing to give them some prompting to summarize their point: "So is this what you're trying to say (one sentence)?"

I should point out that words might mean very little, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't compliment each other. ***Kind people give kind words.*** What's unfortunate is we tend to brush off the compliments while holding onto the negatives. It's like our brain wants to believe the mean (and likely untrue) stuff more. What's dumb about that is heightened emotions tend to cause us to say stupid things whereas compliments aren't given in anger: (angry person) "You're the best!" (another angry person) "No, you're the best!" (angry person) "No, you are!" If someone says to me, "My partner told me they want a divorce," I always ask, "Were they angry or calm when they said it?" Saying it in anger is likely just a

threat to get the other person to back off (a very dangerous threat that will get the other person thinking they should prepare for divorce) whereas a calm person saying they want a divorce wants a divorce. Unlike mean words that typically get said out of emotion and/or payback, compliments are said out of a level head. Unless the compliment is from someone trying to use you (e.g. they want to boingy-boingy), the compliment is real and, therefore, should be accepted as truth unlike the mean words.

Tip: Compliments are a good reminder that we can easily get our point out in one clear sentence.

On the other end of compliments, I've found there are three types of abusers. Abuse is when one person attacks and the other just takes it in a feeling of weakness and helplessness whether there's a power difference (e.g. boss vs. worker) or they don't know how to stand up for themselves with someone at the same level as them (e.g. coworkers or spouses). A lot of people will tell me they were abused, but they were fighting. Fighting is two equal people doing mean things to each other whether yelling, eye rolls, digs, condescending looks, etc. The three types of abusers are:

1. **Desperate Attacker:** Loud, threatening, and insulting, this aggressive person is compensating for their insecurity. They're like an injured dog ready to growl, snap, or bite to protect themselves. This can be scary, but it's important to remember it's all fear based.
2. **Cold & Condescending from Fear Attacker:** This person can feel cruel and heartless, but it's also rooted in fear. This passive aggressive person acts like they're better than you, but they're very insecure and their talking down attitude and mental warfare is self protection.
3. **Cold & Condescending from Superiority Attacker:** This person can feel cruel and heartless because they are. This passive aggressive person acts like they're better than you because they actually see you as less than them. Their talking down attitude and mental warfare is to put you in your so-called place.
4. **Bonus: The Exploder:** Some people will argue that those who explode are abusive, but I'm not so sure. If they're exploding, that's a sign they've been bottling up hurt and/or stress and they lose their mind. Are they really abusers or someone who has been experiencing hurt and potential abuse themselves and then suddenly losing their minds? Quite often a

person exploding is a sign the other person has been in the Cold & Condescending Attack zones and something snapped.

Understanding these categories is helpful because it helps point out how frivolous words are. The first (and potentially second) attacker is based on fear and self protection, which means they're likely saying things that aren't fully true. It's defensive behavior. The third (and potentially second) attacker is more likely to use true words in their attacks, but they're just twisting true statements to sound hurtful: (attacker) "Chad, you have fat lady hips." (me) "Yup. That's true." (attacker) "And you have no real fashion sense." (me) "Yup, true again." (attacker) "Why aren't you getting upset?" (me) "You're stating true facts. Why would I be hurt?" The biggest problem with abusers is they'll say things we believe and we'll take the comments as a weapon to beat ourselves up. Thus, the biggest bully in an attack is actually the person being attacked because they're bullying themselves.

You can't bully someone who doesn't beat themselves up. If someone is bullying us, we should be finding a healthy way to "fight" back instead of fighting ourselves. This brings us back to the original point that we should be seeing the truth in compliments and second guessing what's said in hurt.

This week may you consider how to focus more on the compliments you've been given (maybe write them down) instead of believing hurtful things said in hurt.

Lesson 4

Even God's Not Worried about Words? (The Frivolity of Words Pt 3)

Over the last few lessons we've looked at how a wise person doesn't give words very much power because there's so much risk for misunderstandings between the speaker not finding the best words to share, the listener not hearing things properly, and our memories messing it up. To go a step further, ***when listening, it's wise to consider what the words are trying to convey***, what is the overall point?

How frivolous are words? Even God's not overly worried about them. It's written that He cares more about our hearts. In the story of David and Goliath, the prophet and judge at the time had this moment: "But the LORD said to Samuel, 'Don't judge by his appearance or height... The LORD doesn't see things the way you see them. ***People judge by outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.***' (1 Sam 16:7) It doesn't get much clearer than that. Maybe we should do the same – focus on the heart. This means looking at what the words are trying to convey because sometimes all that's there is "I'm hungry!" "I'm tired!" or "I'm stressed out and exploding with emotion that has nothing to do with you!"

What's great about knowing this is even if we do something that upsets others, if something is done with the right intention it's not sin. God knows if we were acting out of love and not selfishness and revenge, which is at the heart of sin. On the other end, this also means even if we give incredible gifts out of selfish intent, as Shania Twain sang, "That don't impress me much." I doubt God's a country fan (I assume He has better taste than that), but this moment falls in line with what the Bible says: "If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn't love others, I would have gained nothing." (1 Cor 13:3)

Arguably the best evidence that God's not overly concerned with words and more about the overall point is how the most important story in the Bible has inconsistencies. That's a big oops. The resurrection of Jesus is the most important story in the Bible since it's the foundation of Christianity. It's so important, it's directly in four Books, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John and discussed in many others. Even the birth of Jesus is only directly in two of them, Matthew and Luke.

The resurrection story is so important, yet all four books have surprisingly very different details. My wife claims the stories are different because men wrote them and we're terrible with something. It might have been details or listening. I don't know, but I'm sure it's one of them.

What's interesting about these differences is since the overall point is the same, Jesus rose from the dead, the story actually has more credibility. If detectives were investigating this event and the stories were identical, they'd assume it was faked. Even if two of the stories were the same, it would suggest they were made in collaboration and the truth would be in question. So how different are they? Let's take a quick look at them.

Matthew (Chapter 28): "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went out to visit the tomb." An earthquake moved the stone in front of the tomb and an angel sat on it freaking out the guards who "fell into a dead faint." The angel told the women Jesus had risen and gave them a message to tell the disciples. After the women left to do as they were told, Jesus met with them (pays to do what you're told). Women being the first to discover Jesus is the one consistent fact in all four stories, yet it's also very scandalous for the time since they were seen as less than men. To add to this, the stories make the disciples look terrible: "some of them doubted!" Meanwhile, the women believed. If the disciples were making up a story, you'd think they'd avoid being shown up.

What's interesting is this is the only book to mention the Roman guards who had been at the tomb and how they were paid a bribe to say the disciples stole the body. This is a laughable concept because how did some fishermen beat at least 16 battle hardened soldiers. What's crazy is admitting this not only ruined their reputation: "Did they use scary fish to beat you?" it put them at high risk of being put to death for not doing their job.

Mark (Chapter 16; includes a shorter and longer ending): In this version, "Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome" (I have no idea who she is) bought burial spices and went to the tomb to find the stone already rolled away (so no earthquake) and "they saw a young man clothed in a white robe sitting on the right side." Again, there's a message to share with the disciples, but it's a little different. Unlike the other stories, "The women fled from the tomb, trembling and bewildered, and they said nothing to anyone because they were too frightened." They, however, told: "Peter and his companions," but the men didn't believe them. Later, when two male followers told Peter and his companions they

met Jesus on the road, Peter and his companions didn't believe their message either. Jesus soon appeared to Peter and his companions and He "rebuked them for their stubborn unbelief." After that, Jesus went up to heaven and the disciples started telling others about him while performing miraculous signs.

Luke (Chapter 24): This time, "women" went to the tomb "taking the spices they had prepared." The stone was already rolled away and when they checked, the body was gone. "As they stood there puzzled, *two* men suddenly appeared to them, clothed in dazzling robes." They give a slightly different message, but the result was the same – the women rushed off to tell the disciples. This time it was added they told everyone along the way. It then lists it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and several other women: "But the story sounded like nonsense to the men, so they didn't believe it," which is another consistent in the four books – the men were dumb. Peter, however, ran to the tomb, saw it was empty and "went home again, wondering what had happened." What was to wonder about? Peter was not the sharpest tool.

Jesus meets with two of his followers, "But God kept them from recognizing him," and ends up scolding them, "You foolish people! [why don't you believe]?" Despite this rebuke, the two guys weren't offended. In fact they asked this stranger to be their friend. Apparently calling people foolish was acceptable in that culture – very different than today. The story ends with Jesus being taken up to heaven.

John (Chapter 20): This time it was so early in the morning it was still dark when Mary Magdalene found the tomb empty. She then runs to tell Peter and "the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved," and she exclaimed, "They have taken the Lord's body out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!" That's a very different experience. Peter and the other disciple then run to the tomb, saw the linen wrappings, believed, and went home. For some reason, they ignored Mary who was left crying outside the tomb, which doesn't make them look great. Suddenly, two angels inside the tomb asked her why she was crying and unfazed there were suddenly two men in the tomb, she replied because her Lord was taken away." After she was done crying, she turned to leave and was asked the same question by someone she thought was the gardener, but was Jesus. After she gives the same answer, He said her name, "Mary!" Suddenly realizing who it was, she called out "Teacher!" That's a strange title to use when He just rose from the dead. I haven't met any teachers who have done that. He then told her: "Go find my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my

God and your God.” In the next passage it mentions that even when everyone else had seen Jesus, the disciple, Thomas, denies that Jesus is alive. The book continues to another chapter, but this resurrection story ends with: “these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing in him you will have life by the power of his name.”

Conclusion: The overall message in all four books is the same, Jesus rose from the dead. It was also consistent that the disciples, those closest to Jesus, were disappointing while the women showed them up. This means for the disciples to promote this version of the story, they were being honest (and very humble) or they were such manipulators, they’d risk looking like failures to promote a story that later had them all killed, but that wouldn’t make a lot of sense.

This week may we consider that if God isn’t so worried about what’s actually said as He is about the intention behind it, maybe we should follow His example.

Why Aren't You Sharing with Me?

A common problem in communication is someone not sharing. From my experience, there are seven basic reasons why this happens.

1. ***Punishment:*** Not sharing as punishment makes the person mean. I used to be bad for this as I thought not talking to show my anger was better than yelling, but it's a power move that's mean. If this is suspected, it's good to ask, "Are you not talking to me to prove something or do you need space?" or "Are you not talking to me because you don't want to say something you'll regret or is it to get me to realize you're upset," or "Are you processing something or wanting me to ask how you're doing?" It's good to ask a question like this with two options in order to not assume the worst of the other person and to open the door to dealing with the situation: "You need space? Okay, so we'll talk tomorrow." "You want me to know you're upset? Okay, I'm glad I asked... now what?"
2. ***Misguided:*** Some people consider it strength to be "stoic" and not talk to their partner, but they're what I like to call dumb-dumbs. Being guarded (another word for stoic) isn't positive; it creates distance. It takes more strength to be vulnerable and share our heart than to shut it down.
3. ***Nothing to Say:*** Sometimes people don't share because they need a good question or lead to stimulate their brain enough to get them to have something to say. That's often what small talk tries to do – it's to find something that stimulates better sharing.

Tip: Some people hate small talk, but it's valuable. It's like foreplay; you need to warm up before getting deeper. Even as a therapist I need some warm up with clients. Some people get stuck on small talk because they're afraid to share more or that's all they're looking for because there's less risk of conflict and/or they're relaxed and content.

4. ***Don't Know How to Share:*** Sometimes people don't share because they don't know how. I was blessed with a mom who trained me to share about my day and now my wife gets the benefit. That being written, I was recently out with a group of buddies, the first time in a year, and I went to share a story only to realize I'd forgotten how. It's like riding a bike. You might

always remember how to ride a bike, but it doesn't mean you're as good as you once were if you're out of practice.

5. **Relaxed:** Sometimes when someone says they're fine they really mean they're fine – they're content and don't have a need or desire to talk. Why ruin the moment? After all, some moments are better spent in silence like when you're staring at the stars or a bonfire.
6. **Shut Down:** People can shut down because they're worn out socially, the environment is over stimulating, or they felt so attacked their brain has given up. If this is the case, the last thing we should do is attack them for not sharing because that will reinforce the shut down and make us look unsafe.
7. **Scared:** Many times people don't say anything because there's fear. It can be the fear of judgement or criticism like saying the wrong thing or sharing something that will be used against them later.

This last idea, being scared, is something we should look more into because it connects to the idea of trust and safety. Trust and safety in communication is about knowing we'll be given the benefit of the doubt and anything that seems off will be double checked. If trust and safety is on a scale of 0 to 10 with 10 being the most we trust someone to hear what we're saying and not use it against us and 0 meaning we're screwed with anything we say or do, there's a huge difference in how we can hear each other. For instance, I know if my wife and I are in a bad spot (it can happen because we're human) and we're at a 2 or 3 (the common numbers I hear as a therapist from couples), even if I say a great joke, I'm screwed because she'll hear an insult. Meanwhile, if we're in a good spot and at an 8, I can say a joke that doesn't work and I'm fine because she knows I'm not trying to hurt her; it just came out wrong. Working at having an 8 for trust is well worth it because that's when you feel loved.

Tip: We should never be 10 because then we get cocky and not have enough of a social filter.

I should note if we feel trust and safety at a 2-3 with our partner, it's almost guaranteed our partner feels the same with us. There's never one good one. Both people will be low. For instance, if I feel trust and safety with my wife at a 2-3, it's guaranteed she's feeling the same with me. Even if I'm on my best behavior, it won't matter. If I'm low on trust and safety for her, she'll have the same for me.

Unfortunately, trust and safety is something both people need to be working on for it to grow.

Typically when a spouse complains their partner doesn't share very much it's fear based. ***If someone isn't sharing, there's a good chance they're afraid of you specifically or people in general.*** For instance, I'm supposed to be a professional communicator, but when it comes to talking to celebrities, authority figures, or angry women I get tongue tied. In these situations, the fear is less about the person and more about the position. If our spouse is specifically afraid of us, the good news is we have the power to fix that as we become nicer and/or better listeners. Sometimes, however, the fear is based on transference from another relationship and it's not really about us. For instance, if the person has parents who never listened or they dated/married someone before you who was mean, our partner might still be healing their overall ability to trust. I've been with my wife for almost 18 years and I'll still have the odd moment where I need to remind her that I'm not her sister growing up. She lived with her sister for over 25 years, so that mentality is pretty engrained. If I get angry at her for treating me like her sister, I'll only add to the mistrust: (wife) "See? You're no different." Ultimately, I need to be safe enough to help remind her with my actions that I'm different than a teenage girl who might borrow her clothes and not return them if I want any hope of reducing this.

The problem is most times when someone doesn't share, our brain will tell us that it's because the person doesn't like us, but as the above list proves, that's not the case; it didn't even make the list. If someone doesn't like you, there'd be a reason like they think you screwed them over in some way or you remind them of someone else who did. In most cases, when someone isn't sharing, there's a bump that needs to be pushed over. For instance, ***sometimes the other person isn't sharing because you're not asking a good question or giving space to talk.*** My wife comes from a family of ADD and they just talk. Even if no one's listening, they'll talk. In my family, I was raised where you didn't talk unless you were addressed. It was a big transition for my wife to realize she needed to ask me questions and/or let there be silence if she wanted me to share. Sometimes I try to just share with her now, but I've overall become even more only talk when asked because I know with ADD she's easily distracted or hyper-focused on something else and she might not be in the right headspace to listen.

To improve the chance of sharing, we can try to find a better environment (e.g. a quiet space), a better time of day (e.g. some people are more likely to share at the

end of the day), include a certain friend or maybe even some type of witness like a therapist, or try doing a mindless activity together and see if that opens the door to sharing. I find guys are more likely to share walking beside each other, driving in a car, or working on a project together because the focus is on the activity and conversation is allowed to sprout if the moment presents itself.

I should also point out some people aren't meant to share a lot. I once heard a daughter complain her dad didn't share with her. This is tricky because he's the parent. Parents shouldn't be using their children as their venting partner and there should be limited sharing to externally process a problem. Even now at 44 and a trained professional, my mom never uses me as her sounding board, which I understand. I'm her child. I'm not her equal. She's more liberal with my sister, but girls have a different connection than with boys. Unfortunately, for this daughter wanting her dad to share more, women tend to find stronger connection in heartfelt conversations, but guys typically bond more through joking and doing things together with conversation being a side piece. ***Sometimes, if we want connection with someone like our parents or kids, we need to adjust our expectations for how we should connect.***

Tip: If you know someone who doesn't really share; it might be helpful to ask if it's a safety thing or if they're more of a listener. Oddly enough, even if the person is a listener, this question, will likely get them sharing.

This week may you consider how you can help build trust in order to encourage others to share more with you.

Lesson 6

5 Ways to Support Someone

One of the most common complaints I hear from people is they want to feel supported. Makes sense doesn't it? It's good to feel supported... but what does that mean? What's interesting is the people most adamant that they want to feel supported (e.g. young people wanting more supportive parents or spouses wanting to have more supportive partners) typically have no idea what that even means. Their initial reaction is to say something that suggests they want to be told they're right... ummm, that's not support. This means the people being complained about don't have a chance: "You should just say I'm right." (other person) "So do you want me to lie and set you up for failure or should I disagree with you and have you resent me?" Having different opinions is healthy, but in our culture of "do what makes you happy," it's hard to have people disagree with us because aren't I allowed to do what I want and when I want? It's like ***we've confused support with being spoiled.***

Support is just that – a bonus. When I climb a tall ladder I'm supposed to have someone at the bottom holding it to help prevent it from tipping. My weight is on the ladder not the person holding the ladder. If it were, that person would now be my ladder/step stool. I don't *need* the person holding the ladder (I've proven that more often than my wife will ever know); they're a bonus. Without the support I'm still safe...ish. That's why I typically don't bother having anyone hold the ladder for me – I'm fine... ish. Yes, like a lot of passive people I hate asking for help. My wife says it's dumb that I'd rather put myself in danger than put someone out, and I'll admit, she's right... ish.

Last summer I was at an outdoor market... you know, the place most guys love to be dragged: "Oh good, a bunch of stuff I don't care about. I'm glad I'm here and not doing something I actually like doing." The one booth had a local author who wrote a children's book that promoted independence. Is that really an issue for kids? I wanted to ask her if this book was projecting her own issues or if she actually believes that's really an important lesson for children to hear: "Be independent. You don't need your parents... even though the current and projected housing market means you'll need to live with your parents for most of your life or you'll be living paycheck to paycheck struggling to pay the insane rent prices." I obviously didn't say anything. I have some social skills: "Can I make

you second guess something you're really proud of? Have a lovely day." It makes me sad that people have been so misled to believe we should be "independent" like that's some great accomplishment when really it's a sign of being too cowardly or arrogant to ask for help, especially when life is best in community. ***Being in community is how we find our value, purpose, connection. Independence is how we find loneliness, ignorance, selfishness, and health problems like early onset dementia.*** In community, we find support. By ourselves, we find unnecessary trouble.

It's healthy to want to feel supported because that means we're part of something bigger than ourselves. Unfortunately it's rare to find anyone who can really define what support means. I was recently challenged with defining it. I started by saying, "It basically means the person tells you you're right..." That's a joke... not a good one, but some things are just for me. Before we consider the categories I gave, let's consider what support is not: Advice. ***I don't know why, but the most common mistake people make when they're trying to be supportive is to tell the other person what to do (aka they're bossy).*** What's even dumber is some advice givers will get angry when the person doesn't take their advice. It's like we've been taught others following our advice is how we know they respect us, but that's not respect; that's obedience. ***Respect is treating someone as an equal.*** Coincidentally telling someone what to do is NOT treating them like an equal. It's saying, "I don't know the whole situation, but with my limited glimpse that's dripping in my own preconceived bias and my bias toward you, I can solve your complicated problem in a couple seconds – I'm that brilliant." ***Giving advice is also a bad choice because it typically feels like criticism:*** "Take my advice because you're too dumb to do this on your own." Unfortunately, advice is often the go-to for a lot of listeners.

As someone who wants to be helpful, I've had to curb my arrogant, solve-your-problem when it's none of my business part of my brain. As a guy, trying to fix people's problems is pretty natural just like it is for mom's because it's a provider and protector thing: "I want to help; do what I tell you." I've found the best way to curb this problem is to replace advice with questions: "When they did (thing), do you think they were trying to (option 1) or (option 2)." These types of questions take effort on my part unlike "How does that make you feel?" which is a garbage question: "Here's a question that has little value beyond letting me not really pay attention." These two option questions also mean I'm not assuming the worst of the other party while helping the person sharing process the situation for themselves, which should be the main goal for the listener.

So what does real support look like?

- 1) **Space:** Sometimes the best support we can offer someone feels like neglect: “I should be helping you.” (person) “Yeah, not bugging me would be great.” I find this is more commonly appreciated by men, which is one of the reasons we tend to offer space to our wives when that’s not what they want.
- 2) **Engaging:** Where men tend to like being given space, women typically prefer to be engaged and given an opportunity to share, especially when sharing is how they feel connection and allows them to process things. This is where questions become helpful instead of giving advice.
- 3) **Gestures:** Sometimes the best support is found through random gestures. For instance, this past week my wife and I received a meal from a couple at our church and another from a church representative (our church has a committee responsible for giving meals to people going through big changes like having a newborn). I have to say, this experience has given me a whole new appreciation for being part of a community. I should point out I’ve met a few people who hated that others gave them meals because they took it as an insult – they were nuts. I mention this because even in generosity we need to be careful the receiver is worth giving to.
- 4) **Distraction:** Sometimes the best support is helping someone not think about their problems. It can actually be more loving to help distract someone, especially if they’re an over thinker.
- 5) **Affirming:** Whether words or actions, support can be affirming the person: “This is a really hard spot,” or “Wow, I’m so sorry you’re going through this.” Affirming isn’t saying the person is right; it’s acknowledging what the person is experiencing and is meant to help them feel understood. This falls under the “Yes and” tool I mentioned in the introduction.

Tip: One of the greatest challenges for support people is to know what they’re supporting. For instance, are you more focused on supporting the person in the moment or are you more focused on supporting the relationship as a whole: “If you supported me, I would be able to quit my job and pursue my dream of being a dinosaur.” (spouse) “Because I support you, I won’t let you make a terrible decision and prevent me from resenting you because I get messed over while you have fun.” Of course, this kind of experience is very tricky because it can easily feel like control and stubbornness on both sides.

This week may you consider what it means to be supportive.

A Tip to Reduce the Feel of Criticism

I like to see myself as someone who reads situations well (like most people), yet it turns out I kind of suck at it (like most people). When I listen to others tell me about a fight they had I'm very good at guessing why the other person did what they did and what happened next. Considering I've been listening to people's stories of conflict every day for many years, I should be pretty good. When it comes to my own life, however, I'm still pretty terrible – stupid emotions; they really can blind us. I was reminded of this fact the other month. After a particularly difficult day during a difficult month I tried to be honest with my wife in hopes that it would lead to change and it led to... confusion. I told her how it felt like I was in a phase where no matter how hard I tried nothing was good enough for her since that month it seemed she had an endless stream of criticisms for me. After sharing this (I was looking at the ground like a “winner”), I looked up to see her face and she was staring at me. She wasn't angry or hurt; she was... confused, and not just because I'm a guy who just shared his feelings – she's used to that; she knows who she married. She was confused because she didn't know why I thought she had been critical. Even when I gave her specific examples that I thought were brilliantly obvious, she was confused. ***That means she is either great at pretending she's not critical or I was seeing something that wasn't there.*** This was such a strange moment for me because I had to wonder: “Could I have misread these situations? Am I not the genius at reading people that I want to think I am? Am I... normal?” That was a very weird thought.

Here's the problem: ***My wife was asking me to do things or change how I did them because she was trying to have clear communication while I was interpreting them as criticisms.*** I was taking something she wanted and twisted it to be personal. Maybe she wasn't presenting herself as well as she thought. Who knows? ***That's the problem with communication: It's based on interpretation.*** My guess is she was tired, and not presenting herself as well as she wanted on top of having an unusual amount of requests largely because, again, she was tired. Of course, that's just my interpretation, and I could be missing something (that wouldn't be a first).

After a few minutes of discussing my wife's confusion, she offered a great suggestion: “Why don't you write out a script for what I should say, so I don't

sound critical, and I'll follow it." She then added she wasn't being sarcastic (a smart move considering the situation), but I already knew that because that's how I read the situation (yea me; I got that one right). That being said, I appreciated her making sure I knew her intentions because I could see she really cared and was serious about this. In that moment I wasn't able to come up with very much (I'm terrible on the spot), but I promised to have a list of options for her by the weekend. It's always good to give timelines to make sure we follow through with what we offer.

The following is the list I came up with that I can now use as a teaching tool for others. Some people might be reading this and thinking that I must be controlling, but the truth is ***I'm more interested in how I can use language to prevent misinterpretations.*** It helps me learn how I can be better, which is important because I know I'm not perfect (but one day). Reflecting on this difficult experience I'm very grateful for it because it led to a new idea for me to address in order to reduce unnecessary hurt. You'll notice that there are a quite a number of different options. Some are better than others, and each one will need to be used carefully based on the situation and the person you're talking with, but it's nice to have options to prevent using the same line too often. Even the best line used too much will become a trigger to a fight.

1. Can I make a request? (Or: Can I ask a favor?)
3. You know what would be helpful?
4. Do you have any suggestions for how we can change (blank)?
5. Can I make a suggestion? (Or: Can I give a tip?)
6. You know what I'd really like in a situation like this?
7. What do you think about....?
8. I know I'm weird, but do you think you can (blank)?
9. When you do (blank), I assume you're trying to be helpful, but you know what would be even more helpful?
10. I had an idea; can I pass it by you?
11. Instead of (blank), can you please switch to (blank)?
12. You know how you're the greatest partner in the world? Can you start to (blank)?
13. You know how I always find a new challenge for you? I found a new one.

14. You know how you love when I ask you to do something so much you roll your eyes? Can you (blank)?
15. You know how I love to be a pain? Can you (blank)?
16. You know how I love to nag? I'm very excited because I have this new topic to nag you about.
17. Is there something we can do to help you remember to (blank)?
18. I know I'm guilty of (blank), but do you think you can (blank)?
19. Do you hate (blank) as much as I do?
20. You probably already know this, but I'm sharing it because it makes me feel better.
21. As a reminder, can you please (blank)?

I hope these options can be helpful for improving your ability to ask for changes.

Lesson 8

A Major Reason Our Society Terrifies Me

At what point did it become mandatory to have to like everyone and accept their ways of living? Over my career, I've met lots of people who don't like me and that's fine. You're allowed to not like me. I think you're making a mistake because (written playfully) I think I'm great, but I'm clearly biased. Frankly, if you think everyone needs to like you, you're either socially blind or very misguided (neither option is good). ***In this world where there are clearly bad people around, shouldn't we want a few people not to like us and/or disagree with us?*** Realistically, if bad people like you that could be a bad sign. If good people don't, we should double check what we're doing, but either way, good people can also disagree with each other. The difference is good people will accept that and not verbally beat you into compliance or backstab you and try to ruin your reputation (that's what makes a person bad). People who are belligerent, venomous, spiteful, revenge driven, emotionally controlling, or nasty in any way, those are the bad people who make the world worse.

What scares me is we live in a culture where the wrong people not liking you can destroy your life. When did "cancelling" people become a reality? This is another way of asking: When did we start encouraging spitefulness and being revenge driven? I miss the days when good people didn't have to walk on eggshells afraid of offending the wrong person. Apparently, if you appear not to like a specific group of people, you're the world's worst person and that group has permission to punish you with all the hateful revenge that group can muster. But how does hating someone who doesn't like you make any sense? (foolish person): "You don't like me? I'm going to be mean to you, so you have a good reason not to like me. That'll teach you!"

If there is conflict in your life or if someone doesn't like you, deal with it on your own. ***If you go on social media or in the news telling a sob story against someone else, you are a toxic person*** (cough... Prince Harry and Meghan Markel). And if you encourage that kind of hatred (cough... Oprah), you're just as bad. This is passive aggressive behavior and incredibly damaging. I call it "army building" since it's looking to gain people who agree with you in order to bully the

other person into submission. I used to be bad for it with my first girlfriend. After a problem, I'd go to all my friends, tell them my side of the story, they'd tell me I was right (obviously, they were my friends and they only heard my side), and then I'd go back to my girlfriend to say, "Everyone says I'm right." Meanwhile, she retorted, "But the youth pastor said I'm right." There's a brilliant fight. Can you see how this behavior sucks? (foolish person) "Everyone says you're right? Oh shoot, I must be wrong even though we have two very different perspectives of what happened." At the same time, it also messes with the other person's head: (foolish person) "Everyone doesn't like me? Who's everyone? Is it everyone in the world? How could I be so blind?" What's sad to me is I was 21 and talked to people who were 21 (i.e. we were immature), but my ex-girlfriend talked to a 40 something year old youth pastor who played into it. How come he didn't help her see that this type of behavior was wrong? The answer to that is simple: He was Dyson. Even grownups, leaders, and pastors can be toxic. From my experience, a lot of leaders are very passive aggressive themselves, which helped them get into power in the first place and a reason they're happy to throw someone else under the bus to save themselves.

So if I'm going to complain about this kind of behavior, I need to be ready to teach what should be happening. Here are a few basic rules our society should have to memorize and try to put into practice:

1. "Don't let evil conquer you, but conquer evil by doing good." (Rom 12:21)
2. "Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone." (Rom 12:18) This is important because "Joy fills hearts that are planning peace! (Pro 12:20b)

My favorite rule for dealing with conflict is actually a New Testament verse that quotes a Jewish proverb (a two-fer verse, so it has to be important).

3. "If your enemies are hungry, feed them./ If they are thirsty, give them something to drink./ In doing this, you will heap/ burning coals of shame on their heads (Rom 12: 20)

How much better would the world look if this was how we all lived? We could end the use of hate and revenge and replace it with kindness. That's the kind of world I want.

So what does this practically look like? This past week I had a really cool experience that could've gone very wrong. I was at a local park in a rougher area

with my two and four year olds along with my brother and his four and six year olds. While we were there, a group of four young people came around. I'm guessing it was a fourteen year old girl with her boyfriend and then an eleven and eight year old. I didn't see what happened, but at one point I could hear in the distance the eleven year old losing his mind swearing. Shortly after that he screamed, "You shouldn't hit people in the eye with a stick! You should say you're sorry!" as he punched the younger kid knocking him to the ground. He repeated this type of statement over and over with some extra swearing and the odd kick or punch to the smaller kid. Those two soon ended up in their group of four at a picnic table as the 14 year old girl joined the 11 year old with screaming and swearing. I finally relented and went over to say something because it had gone on long enough. Just before I spoke, a woman about 55 years old walking her dog very firmly told the four to take it somewhere else. Even at my current age if someone said this to me, I would simply say, "I'm sorry," and I would move; you know, like a decent person. I could even say sorry and after the person left, go back to what I was doing, and that would be fine because at least I showed respect to the person by having a gentle response. This group of four, however, went with the opposite of me. Both the potty mouth 11 year old boy and 14 year old girl started swearing at her (as you do). The woman, seemingly shocked by their response, amped it up and started yelling at them louder. Can you guess how the kids responded? Did they say, "Good point"? Nope. They started yelling louder. The woman now very flustered, started throwing in some insults. And how'd the kids respond? Did they apologize? Nope. They started including insults to go with their swearing at her. What's the woman going to do now? She can either walk away feeling weak or amp it up and try to save face. She went with threatening to call the cops – the trump card. This time the 14 year old boy piped in: "Go ahead; we're not doing anything illegal." Realizing she was out of threats, the woman started to walk away yelling as she left while the 11 and 14 year olds who had originally been screaming at her continued screaming at her. To be honest, this woman was a huge blessing to me because it set me up really well.

Now the question becomes can the therapist do better? I started by exclaiming, "Can I ask a question?" The four kids were quite confused by this and after a brief pause in their yelling, the 14 year old girl started whining, "She was being rude to us! She was being rude to us!" It was like I became a judge or she was justifying her actions for fear of another attack. My response? I went with replying, "You're right. She was being rude." This seemed to confuse the girl. I continued, "She was being very rude. Out of curiosity, would you say she was ruder than you or were you equally rude?" The 14 year old boy responded first, "Equally rude." The

girl then added, “But she was being really rude,” so I again agreed with her and repeated the question. This time the response from one of them was the classic, “She started it.” I again affirmed them, “Yes, she did, and it makes sense you were rude back because people are mirrors. If someone is rude to us, we’re likely going to be rude to them.” The 11 year old asked why the woman would even say anything. I told him that was a very good question, and then I pointed out that grownups get very protective of little kids. He then justified his actions by saying how the kids would hear those words eventually anyway, and I again affirmed him, “You’re right; they will, but we try to keep little kids away from it as long as we can.” When the 11 year old complained about being hit in the eye, I again affirmed him, “Yes, that would really hurt and you deserved an apology, but do you think if you punch someone and scream at them, they’ll want to apologize or will they be angry at you for hurting them?” At one point the eight year old said something, and I affirmed him as well, “Yes, and I’m guessing it would be very scary for you because you’re smaller than the other kids and you were getting attacked.” The conversation lasted about five minutes and the 14 year old boy really seemed to get what I was saying and appeared to be on my side as he helped encourage his friends to listen. Over the conversation, the group calmed down to a normal state, and sensing this, I thanked them for being respectful to me and I wished them a good day. A little while later when my group was leaving, I waved and shouted across the park to them, “Nice meeting you!” and they said it back to me... you know, like a mirror. I’m pretty sure I blew their minds that day, but there is a chance the story later changed to “That guy was such a loser.” Either way, it’s out of my hands and they’re allowed to think whatever they want, and it won’t affect me. Whether they like me or not doesn’t matter. Was I a good person who treated them with respect? Yes. That’s what matters.

This situation is a great example of how *people ultimately just want to feel understood and affirmed*. Here’s a summary of the toolset I used for calming the situation:

1. I spoke to them like my equals and not below me. This means avoiding statements as much as possible and using questions with two options to make them self-reflect. Is it “a” or “b”?
2. I tried to help them feel heard and understood by repeating a lot of what they said back to them.
3. I used “Yes and” to help them feel affirmed and add to what they gave me.

4. Any confrontation point was addressed with a question with two options:
Is it this or is it that?
5. I had quick one sentence points to answer their questions in order to help the focus be on them.

When people are angry, it's dangerous to try to insert yourself like I did. You have to be very careful because angry people are not themselves (i.e. they're dumb) and ready to attack anything that might even resemble a possible threat (e.g. the woman walking her dog). Fortunately, these young people were so desperate to feel understood, they responded well to me. For the record, if the woman hadn't said something first I would've opened with, "Can I ask a favor?" That way there'd be a good chance they'd feel respected as my equal and not bossed around. That being said, they probably wouldn't have been as accepting to me without the walker helping me appear understanding.

This week may you consider how you can help reduce conflict by showing love, which looks a lot like helping people feel heard and understood.

Lesson 9

Beware of the BUT

I've always been a "but" guy and never really knew it until recently. And yes, I meant it to be with one "t" because I'm talking about the "but" and not the "butt." I've never been a "butt" guy. Even when I was young and single, I wasn't a "butt" guy; I was more of "hot girl" guy. I didn't like being too specific. I was still superficial, but in a general way because it made me feel better about myself... and it gave me more options. (I needed as many as I could get).

When I was a teenager, my youth pastor told me to always watch for the "but" (again, one "t") because that was an indication that something important was about to be said. Jesus regularly said things like "You've heard it said, but..." and then he'd say something important. I am not Jesus. I am not as smart as Jesus or have the ability to tick people off so much they actually kill me like Jesus... although I can still make people pretty angry. When I say "but," it's not in the way Jesus did; I say it in a way that ruins anything good I might have just said. For instance, "That was really good, but..." or "You're such a good person, but..." I fortunately can't remember saying those exact statements, but I've definitely heard them. See? I can't help but say but. The buts are everywhere with me, but I'm not even trying to use but or butt, but I can't stop... ah, crap; there's another couple. To be clear, that's "crap" with one "p" and not two... wait, what?

Have you ever met someone with the case of the buts? Maybe you're like me and struggle with it yourself. It's really terrible. The worst is when you say "but" with an apology. The problem is it's so tempting, especially as a guy: "I'm sorry you were hurt, *but* (unwanted excuse)." The "but" makes the first part get thrown out the window. "I'm sorry you were angry at me, *but* it wasn't my fault" – apology erased. "I'm sorry you're bleeding, *but* I told you not to jump off a ramp with your bike" – all sense of care is nullified and the receiver is left feeling criticized. The "but" destroys any sense of kindness as it makes the apology a justification rather than a display of love. It makes the sentence all about us and not the other person who wants to feel affirmed and understood. Using a "but" is very hurtful because it makes the other person feel like they don't matter.

The other day I screwed up and my wife called me out on it. She was really hurt and she presented it in a fair way (I'll give her credit). The problem was I really didn't think I did anything that bad. She wanted me to be at an appointment with

her the next day that I forgot about. I was still able to go, but I'd need to bring my own car in order to leave early if it went late. In my mind, I was still going to be there, so no real problem. Of course I say there wasn't a problem because I was fine with how it worked out, but to my wife there was a problem – she felt unimportant. When I was in the shower, she came in the bathroom and reiterated her disappointment, and then left. She handled it quite well. She spoke to me in a very concise way that helped get her point across. She didn't put it into a question with two options like I teach, why? She doesn't read *my* lessons. I know! She's missing out on my brilliance. Apparently living with me, she has to listen to me enough... which I guess is fair.

Like any normal person, I hate being told I'm wrong, especially when I was. After my shower and having a chance to process the situation better, I went to the bedroom where she was getting ready for bed and I apologized. And yes, it was a real apology without a but. Like a good apology it was one sentence to summarize the problem: "I'm sorry I didn't remember the appointment tomorrow because that would make you feel like you weren't a priority and that I didn't care about you." When I said this, her whole body went "Ahhh," because in that moment I validated her feelings and helped her feel understood and loved (yea me). Now, if I just said I gave her the apology I could sound like a really great husband, but (yes, here's the but moment) I wasn't happy about it; I was seriously unhappy about it. I said those words while half out of the bedroom about to leave and I almost choked saying them (I'm not that good a person) and just as I got to the end of my apology where I wanted to say "but," I quickly left the room and went down the stairs where I quietly continued: "... but you made a big deal out of nothing like you always do!" Just like my wife went "Ahhh," because she felt better when I apologized, after I whispered this to myself, I went "Ahhh," because I felt better. I did not want to apologize, and like a kid being forced to say sorry, I did it, but I wasn't happy about it. I had to leave the room because I knew I'd explode if I didn't finish my sentence with my "but" statement – my terrible "but" statement that would've been unfair for my wife to hear. Fortunately, I can be honest because she won't read this (the one benefit of her not reading my lessons).

This experience points out five very important things:

1. A good apology acknowledges why the other person was hurt.
2. The apologizer doesn't want to feel like a screw up and will desperately want to say "but" in order to justify their action, but this is never wanted by the other person.

3. Sometimes we just need to say something to feel better and this is often best said by ourselves. Too many fights are exacerbated by people not recognizing that the thing we really want to say can feel just as good being said alone away from the person it can hurt.
4. By saying my “but” statement, I was kind to me. By *not* saying my “but” statement to my wife, I was kind to her. Saying it alone was incredibly difficult to do at the time, but it was worth it because by being kind to my wife, it was easier for her to be kind to me.
5. By not saying the “but” statement to the person I can be proud of myself. Plus, later when I’m out of the moment, I can realize what I wanted to say wasn’t that important after all even though at the time it felt like the most important thing in the world.

Tip: The only thing that is close to being as bad as saying a badly timed “but” is saying to someone, “I understand,” because that typically feels like a brush off as the “I understand” person then talks about what they want without really addressing what the other person actually said.

This week may you watch out for the “but.”

Lesson 10

Am I Okay vs. Are You Okay?

As someone who has been working with couples for almost two decades, it's always exciting to see something new that leaves me wondering, "How didn't I see that before?" I should point out that working with couples, the patterns don't vary all that much. Considering there are four anger styles and five conflict styles as discussed in the first lesson, there isn't a lot of variety as an observer. A lot of times it's like hearing a Christmas carol being redone. I know the basic song, but there are some slight variations that make it personal to the artist's style. The couple I was working with when I had my realization was a pretty standard couple and nothing special happened; something just clicked. All the wife in this couple wanted was for her husband to help her feel cared about (a universal problem in marriage), but the husband was more worried about winning her approval (another universal problem in marriage), which left her feeling dismissed and him criticized (a very common situation). For whatever reason, listening to the couple my brain reduced it to a simple problem: "Am I okay?" versus "Are you okay?" Like many husbands, he was essentially asking, "Am I okay?" (aka "Am I good enough?"), but what she needed was more of a mom approach from him because moms are known for asking, "Are you okay?" I find women typically have a stronger nurturing side, which helps them be more attentive of others even to their own detriment. For instance, five years ago I convinced my mom to join my family on a trip to Disney. My oldest was under two, so she was free for flights and admission – that's ideal. The trip ended up landing on the hottest couple days of the year – not ideal. With humidity, it hit fifty degrees – definitely not ideal. Despite being 72 years old at the time and walking around Disney (something that's hard for any age even in decent weather) she never once complained. Instead, she was quick to ask each of us, "Are you okay?" and not in the "I'm asking because I want you to ask me" kind of way. I know my mom is pretty special, but I can see my wife doing the same thing at that age. Moms are so good at caring for others. Men? Not so much. I definitely wasn't asking "Are you okay?" I just endured. Regardless of the reason, a lot of women are desperate for their husband to ask, "Are you okay?" in order to feel cared about and understood.

Unfortunately, when a woman wants to feel like the husband cares about her, it's hard for her to see that he's actually asking, "Am I okay?" because it feels like he's in a third category: "I don't care; you don't matter." This is often far from true

(unless the woman married a total jerk), but that's how it typically feels. When you're exhausted from caring about others and desperately want someone to show the same care to you, it makes sense that when you don't receive what you need from your partner, it feels like you're being dismissed. Women need to remember four things;

1. A normal guy grows up wanting to impress a woman/women. Biologically this makes sense because guys need to earn the right to procreate. We need to prove our worth: (guy showing off) "Trust me, you want my genes. They're pretty special. Look at how I can change diapers with my eyes closed while massaging your feet and changing the cat litter using my mouth to move the scoop."
2. A woman's approval is also something we're often used to having since many boys grow up with their mom's saying "You're so strong," "You're so smart," and as we get older that's what we're looking for in a partner, which is basically asking, "Am I okay? Do you approve?"
3. Men are bad at asking "Are you okay?" because we're often more easygoing, which can lead to us being thoughtless: "I'm fine; you should be, too."
4. If the woman in the guy's life is critical and/or nags a lot, it reinforces his concern of earning her approval. By saying women can be critical I'm not criticizing them. It's normal. For instance, if I don't dress appropriately, who gets judged, me or my wife? My wife. And who's most likely doing the judging? Women. It all comes together doesn't it? Women can be critical with their husbands because they're afraid of being criticized by other women. Typically the only guys who judge other guys' fashion choices are thinking, "How come I can't wear that?" or "My wife would kill me if I wore that."

Early in a relationship a lot of women are good at helping their guy feel approval, especially when the woman is willing to get jiggy with him: (guy) "You won't slap me if I try to touch you? You must really like me!" After a baby is born, however, this often becomes a drain on the relationship: (guy) "Am I okay?" (wife now mom) "I'm busy with the baby. Don't be another child I have to encourage."

This can be a very confusing switch for the guy because at one point he felt like he mattered, but now? This is when his own mom's importance returns: (his mom) "You are more than okay. You're amazing!" This idea was blatantly obvious on the more recent Disney trip I did with my family this past year (I might have an

obsession with Disney, and my mom might have an obsession with not wanting to hear me beg her to join). My daughters were five and my almost three (under three is free at the parks – free is my favorite price). My wife was so good at caring for their needs and my mom was so good at caring about *my* needs – it was the perfect combo. All the needy people were taken care of. Waiting in lines, while I was holding both of my daughters in my arms at the same time, my mom was soooooo good at asking, “Are you okay?” She was also excellent at asking my wife “Are you okay?” which helped my wife feel cared about, especially when she was often feeling forgotten by our kids (and me who was so focused on the kids). They were too busy fighting for my attention, their other grandma’s, and my sister’s when they wanted to mix it up (five adults to two kids is the only way to travel). Instead of feeling sorry for herself, my mom took on the role of caregiver in a different way as she cared for my wife and I, and it was incredible, especially since we were both pretty lousy at asking each other, “Are you okay?” My wife was better than me, but we were both too busy struggling with our own issues to have the energy or even thought to ask the other person, “Are you okay?” Or maybe we’re both a little too selfish. Either way, my mom was a great teacher of the importance of someone asking, “Are you okay?” and why sometimes married people need a third person to remind them we need to be careful not to forget our partner’s needs because we’re too wrapped up in our own.

One of the main reasons a normal guy uses, “Am I okay?” and not “I don’t care; you don’t matter,” is it follows “If I’m okay, can we have sex?” or more likely “If I’m okay, does that mean we don’t have to fight?” Sometimes the guy breaks and it switches to “I know I’m not okay in your eyes, so I might as well drink,” or “I know I’m not okay, so I’m going to hide from you in order to avoid being yelled at, criticized, or seeing the dirty looks.”

The “I don’t care, you don’t matter,” does exist, but I find it more the mindset of a resentful woman, but even then it’s more “You don’t care about me, so I don’t care about you,” or “I’m tired of doing everything; I can’t let you matter anymore. I’m too burnt out.” For both genders it can look like “You don’t ask ‘Are you okay?’ but this person at work does so screw you; I’m getting closer to them than I should.” This option is very dangerous in marriage, but I would say it’s more likely to *feel* this way than to actually *be* this way. At least at first... eventually loneliness can make people snap because an opportunity arises and they’re: “I don’t care because I’m too hurt to realize I’m doing something wrong,” or “I don’t care because I deserve to feel cared about.” This “I don’t care,” position is normally from snapping under pressure... or they’re a selfish, entitled, emotionally cruel jerk.

Tip: Probably the worst thing we can do to make our partners feel the “I don’t care,” is being on our phone even if it’s while in front of a TV. There’s a feeling of “I’d rather be somewhere else than with you,” when we’re on our phone.

The “I don’t care; you don’t matter,” option is what people are likely to feel outside of the home largely because people don’t care. For instance, my wife recently got stuck calling government services and they accidentally disconnected her six times and then she’d have to call back waiting up to an hour each time. They didn’t care. I’ve had similar frustrations calling Bell, but instead of disconnecting me, they bounced me to another area and then another area and another and another. I once got bounced six times before I finally was given the help I needed, which I was told should’ve been handled with the first person I talked to. Oddly enough, that was the one time I wasn’t asked if I wanted to do a survey after my service. I wonder why?

Because the world is so full of people who are “I don’t care; you don’t matter,” we all the more need to be offering the “Are you okay?” to our loved ones.

Conclusion: We need to find the balance of “Am I okay?” and “Are you okay?” Neither side is better. They are just different, and they both have their value, which is why we need to be considering our own needs as well as others in a healthy balance.

This week may you consider how you can appropriately ask “Am I okay?” and “Are you okay?”

But a tiny spark can set a great forest on fire. And among all the parts of the body, the tongue is a flame of fire... It can set your whole life on fire...

Jam 3:5b-6

*Too much talk leads to sin.
Be sensible and keep your mouth shut.*

Pro 10:19

*The tongue can bring death or life;
those who love to talk will reap the consequences.*

Pro 18:21



The Different Kinds of Rude

(Rude, Pt 1)

My wife is scheduled to have a c-section for our third daughter January 31, 2024. Am I excited? Good question. Last week my wife told me the baby moved into the head down ready for delivery position, so she could essentially be born at any time, and within a few hours of hearing that I had a sty develop in my eye, which I get when my stress levels get too high. Coincidence? Doubtful. Fun fact, two years ago I did a wedding for a bride named Daisy who told me she was unplanned, so she was literally an “oops-a-daisy” (a title her family somehow missed). For the record, our baby is not an oops. She’s more proof I’m whipped. This was a “husband was happy with two, but the wife wanted a third” situation – hence my whipped-ness: “Yes, Dear (and panicking inside).” On the plus side, at least I can take comfort knowing the third is always the best. Yes, I’m the third in my family, so no bias there (said while wiping the dripping sarcasm from my mouth).

Some people might consider what I just wrote as rude, but I’d say it’s honest with a side goal to be amusing. ***That’s the problem with communication; it is highly affected by the interpretation and perspective of the listener, which is challenging because people suck... I mean they can suck... I mean they can be less than ideal (aka the nice way of saying “People suck”).***

About a month ago I was at a large work Christmas party through my mother-in-law. At one point, we were in a gym waiting to see an acrobatic show (I wasn’t exaggerating when I wrote “large work Christmas party”). When my daughters were settled on the floor waiting for the show enjoying snacks and hot chocolate, I said to my wife and mother-in-law also enjoying snacks and hot chocolate, “I’m going to get some hot chocolate.” My mother-in-law’s response was to point to a booth and say, “It’s over there.” Now we were in a gym with a stage at one end and at the other were two 12 foot tall tents with giant signs saying, “Free Hot Chocolate.” The only other thing in that room were people who were all less than 12 feet tall – makes it kind of obvious where the hot chocolate is. We even entered walking past both booths – makes it even more obvious. And only a few minutes prior, I helped my girls get their hot chocolates from one of the 12 foot booths with giant signs saying “Free Hot Chocolate” – is there a step beyond

obvious? There was no way I wouldn't know where to find the hot chocolate – my memory isn't that bad. When my mother-in-law said, "It's over there," my response was to laugh while saying, "You mean where there's a giant sign that says, "Free Hot Chocolate?" I thought my lighthearted sarcasm was pretty obvious, but my wife quickly snapped, "That was rude," but was it? I was trying to be funny and make light of a simple moment. My mother-in-law was trying to be helpful... or maybe she was just saying the first thing to come to her mind because, really, what do you say to someone like me announcing they're going to get hot chocolate? "Don't wet your pants!" Arguably that'd be a pretty funny saying to use whenever someone says something to you: (cashier) "Have a nice day," (me) "Don't wet your pants." Or (friend) "I booked my vacation," (me) "Don't wet your pants." It's good advice no one really wants to hear.

What's interesting is my wife accusing me of being rude felt to me like she was being rude. *It's interesting how we often become (or are doing) what we accuse others of doing like being rude, controlling, and manipulating.* Of course, I'm glad my wife said something instead of holding onto it: "My husband is so rude... I'll use that in five years when he won't remember it and we're having a fight." Because she said something, I was able to apologize and reaffirm what I had intended: "Sorry, I was trying to be funny, but I guess it came out wrong." And no, I didn't point out to my wife that I thought she had been rude because... well, it's not worth it: (wife) "You're being rude," (me) "No, you are," (wife) "No, you are," (me) "No, you are... and now all the people around us staring are being rude." Healthy people need to pick their battles, especially when you're in public. It also helps I'm not a woman, so I won't bring this up in the future – was that rude? Like a typical guy, I won't bring it up because I'll forget about it... or I guess I'll use it for teaching a lesson like this... so I guess I'm like half girl half guy?

The other week I was at Home Depot, and as I entered the checkout line the guy in front of me was picking up his stuff to leave while apologizing to the cashier. After he left, I asked her what had happened, and she said she hates when people ask her why she looks so bored. I guess he tried making a joke about it and she snapped at him. In this situation, she thought he was being rude, but who's really the one being rude: the guy who tried breaking the ice with an innocent joke or her response to him? I gave her some pleasantries afraid of being attacked myself (she clearly wasn't afraid to snap at customers), but I was thinking, "Um, maybe *he's* not the problem. Maybe *you* need to stop having resting bored face and try smiling. And maybe while working on that you can try being less of a jerk to customers you're giving a receipt to that allows them to do a survey commenting on the

service.” Sometimes we need to correct rude behavior, but sometimes it’s not our place (that’s her boss’s problem).

At the heart of rude behavior is this sense of judgement and disgust: “You’re less than me” (aka Cold & Condescending) It can also be the reverse: “I think you think you’re better than me, so I’m looking down on you for looking down on me.” That’s a weird moment, but it happens surprisingly often. ***What I’ve recently realized is that what is perceived as rude behavior can be less judgement and disgust and more something else.*** Here are some examples of what I mean:

1. ***A sign the social filter is down:*** Lower social filters can be from hunger, tiredness, or simply because filters tend to be lower at home... or the person’s very Dyson.
2. ***Distracted:*** People can be accused of being rude because they’re distracted thinking of something else or doing something while the other person is trying to talk to them. Not paying attention to someone can be rude or it can be a sign the talker is trying to talk at a bad time.
3. ***In a rush:*** When people are in a rush, their focus is elsewhere.
4. ***Scared:*** Sometimes when people are “shy” or defending themselves, they end up looking rude when it’s more fear coming out.
5. ***Warning to back off:*** Likely connected to fear, rude behavior can be a warning that the person is about to explode and they need you to back off in order to calm themselves down.
6. ***Meanness:*** Sometimes people are rude as an attempt to knock someone else down.
7. ***Socially oblivious:*** People (aka me) can be accused of being rude when that’s the farthest thing from their goal – they’re trying to connect with humor or some type of sharing. When someone is oblivious, it’s easy for the other person to end up being rude as they judge the oblivious person.

This week may we all consider if we’re coming across rude and/or misreading someone’s behavior.

How to Handle Rude Behavior (Rude, Pt 2)

Last time we looked at how rude behavior is rooted in disgust: “I’m better than you in some way and you should know that.” We also noted that sometimes what appears to be rude behavior isn’t true rude behavior because it’s actually rooted in fear or distraction. Since we can’t control other people’s behavior (I wish we could), we need to learn how to control our own with proper responses. When we’re given what looks like rude behavior, we have seven basic options:

1. Yell at them for being rude.
2. Be rude back, which might include telling them they’re being rude.
3. Hold onto it for later as ammunition in a fight or to justify our own bad behavior.
4. Take it and feel hurt/weak about it.
5. Accept it as them having a bad moment and let it go.
6. Double check what they’re trying to do with a good question in the moment.
7. Double check what they’re trying to do with a good question later when things are in a better spot (i.e. when people are angry, they’re not in the right headspace to listen or answer questions).

Side Note: When I wrote the first option, “Yell at them,” I kind of laughed because of how foolish that seems... and then it hit me: “I do that.” My three year old is particularly good at being sassy and when she doesn’t get what she wants, she’ll happily move into pushing and hitting – it’s awesome. Those are some behaviors I definitely don’t want to treat in the fourth option, “Take it.” I need to “Squash it.” Sometimes yelling in a stern way (not in the lack of self control way) is the right response. As a parent, it’s my job to raise my kids to be good people who are contributing members of society who preferably aren’t being regularly arrested for assault. ***I need to discipline my child now, so she can develop self-discipline when she’s older.*** My role isn’t to make her life “easier”; it’s to make her better because then her life will be better in the long run.

Based on the above seven options, when it comes to dealing with people who aren't my kids, the first four are terrible... unless the goal is to be a terrible person; then they're great. Currently that's not on my to-do list, but we'll see what happens as I get older and face three teenage daughters. Doing one of the bottom three options is the best choice, and which one I recommend depends on the situation. Sometimes my wife will appear rude to me and I go with option five, "Accept it" because it's not worth addressing. Why? Because I know her. I know I married a very reactive woman who is very direct with me. Her directness is a combination of her feeling safe enough with me (yea?) and because I'm an extension of her, so how I act reflects her, which means she wants to keep me trying to live up to her standards (nothing like trying to live up to impossible woman standards; as a guy, mine are waaaaay lower).

When it comes to responding to rudeness, sometimes we should go with option five, "Accept it" because "This isn't worth my energy or time," "That's a person having a bad day," or "There's someone I'll avoid in the future." When it comes to closer connections, however, asking a question about rudeness can be important in order to reduce unnecessary hurt while also helping the other person see how they're coming across. Pointing out the behavior in a gentle way (i.e. only with questions and never with statements) isn't about correcting the other person as much as it is trying to prevent it from happening again. As someone who regularly says stupid things, I'm very grateful when people double check what my intention was when they're not sure. This actually increases the sense of safety I have with them and builds our relationship: "I can trust you to assume the best of me or to at least ask me about it."

So what does option six and seven look like in real life? Here's part two of the story from the last lesson. About a month after the Christmas party situation, while driving to church with the family and a friend, my five year old shared one of her favorite jokes, which involves a banana asking, "How are you peeling?" She thinks she's hilarious. I recently heard a terrible/amusing joke, so I added, "Here's a joke you can tell your teacher: If you're cold, why should you stand in the corner? Because it's 90 degrees." My wife's response was: (with light attitude) "Why would you tell her that joke? She's not going to understand it. It doesn't make any sense why you'd say that." Not only was this response Cold and Condescending (aka rude), it was not the nicest for our daughter since my wife basically just called her dumb. Sure, our daughter won't get the joke, but sometimes jokes are a great way to learn something, which is part of the idea behind late night talk shows, learning the news in a funny way. I had a very manly response (aka I had a little pity party

for one), which I should've kept to myself: (sulky) "I'm just going to shut up then," (very manly). Ignoring me, my wife added a joke she's said before: "What does toast wear to bed? Jammies." I might be biased, but my stolen joke was better. What I should point out is when I shared my joke, it was partly to amuse our friend in the car and maybe even give my wife a chuckle. I had even added the line, "Here's a joke you can tell your teacher," because my daughter might not get the joke, but her teacher would. Since my daughter loves to make people laugh, I was helping her (or so I thought). According to my wife, I was being dumb (aka I didn't achieve woman standards).

What was my wife's mistake (besides being a little rude)? She should've just groaned at the joke. Our kids like hearing that reaction. Plus, from there she could've told our daughter why it got that reaction. That would've been ideal. The second best option would've been to ask me why I thought she would like it: "Was that joke for our daughter to laugh at now or more about sharing with her teacher?" or "Was that joke really for our daughter or were you going for something else?" Instead, my wife shut me down and left me feeling too unsafe to talk anymore. And in my hurt, I was a whiney pants – oops.

Later that night we were driving to my mom's for our weekly family dinner. Something came up about someone being rude and the mood felt right (timing is important), so I went with option seven and tried double checking her intention: "This morning on our way to church when I said my joke (reminding her of the moment), were you trying to playfully tease me or was that more of a putdown for doing something dumb in your eyes (two options for her to consider as her intention)?" Another option would've been "...were you reacting out of confusion or just being very direct with me?" ***The main goal is to have one option be what it felt like with another being more positive.***

When I first asked my question, my wife was confused why I would even ask, which I share because it can be helpful to see that even someone who uses this all the time like me can hit a roadblock. I pointed out I wanted to understand her intention, but she was still stuck on why I'd ask her that question. Now I was confused – it's a simple question. Unfortunately, I was caught in the moment and didn't realize her response meant she knew she had been rude, but didn't want to admit it (again, even I can make a mistake doing this). I was also likely stuck on this idea that I wanted her to admit she was rude to feel validated (arguably a little childish). Instead, of letting it be, I brought up the situation with her mom: "So when we were at the Christmas party with your mom and I made my comment

about the hot chocolate only to have you accuse me of being rude...” (wife) “Yeah, you were really rude.” (me) “I appeared rude, but I was going for lighthearted teasing. Was that what you were going for with me today or were you trying to shut me down?” This question seemed like a good idea (it wasn’t). I should’ve stopped pushing the issue (I didn’t). It only opened the door to my wife repeating how rude I had been (her response was dumb even for guy standards). Instead of leaving it alone, I repeated my question (now I was dumb for a guy’s standard: (normal guy) “Dude, shut uuuuup.”) I think I mentioned timing is important – oops). This time she spun it to be: “Why do you always think the worst of me?” What’s great about this line is she stole it from me since I’ve used it countless times when I lost my cool and unable to use my two option questions (yes, I can screw up). She then threw in, “I know you’re just going to make me look like the bad guy.” These two lines felt like passive aggressive “whoa-is-me, I’m the victim” type lines, but they could’ve simply been expressions of frustration. When people are emotional, we say things we don’t mean. It’s just the first thing to come to our heads. Fortunately, I realized it was now time for option five: “Take it,” (took me long enough). My wife clearly wasn’t in the right headspace because her defensiveness had been triggered pretty hard. I should’ve recognized the futility of the conversation a few sentences sooner, but even I can get caught up in the moment.

So how do I find resolution when we’re not talking? ***The truth we often miss the fact that resolution doesn’t have to include the other person admitting or even recognizing anything.*** Resolution is up to us and I needed to summarize the experience for me in one sentence: My wife had been rude to me and I was hurt, especially since she didn’t see it. That’s it. My wife wouldn’t have agreed with this and would’ve had a different sentence for her own resolution, but that’s normal. ***It’s about the person finding a one sentence conclusion that gives them a sense of resolution.*** I know my wife is a good person and has a very good heart, but sometimes things like tiredness and being uncomfortable can affect her (like it does everyone). In this situation, she was pregnant and from what I hear, it’s not as easy for the woman as it is for the guy, but who am I to judge? (Sarcasm is fun.) I also know I chose to marry someone who can be more direct with me, so I can’t hold that against her now just like she can’t hold the fact I don’t live up to woman standards. If women rarely achieve woman standards, what chance do I have? I’m only half female.

This week may you feel validated knowing that even I can screw up.

Lesson 13

What is Your Social Stamina?

When it comes to communication, sometimes we miss the message. When I was 23, I went on the Sponge Bob Square Pants 4-D ride at Canada's Wonderland – it was a big moment. How does this 40 something year old know the exact year he rode it? I went opening year. To know the opening year, am I that big a Sponge Bob fan? Nope. Did I love the ride that much? Not even close. Wikipedia is full of useless information – score. Before this ride I'd never watched Sponge Bob because I was too old for cartoons... or because it wasn't Disney (one of those is true). That ride was my introduction to the pineapple under the sea and it turned out I was allergic. Being a 4-D ride the chairs moved, and after riding roller coasters all morning and being fine, I was now suddenly very sick. I figured it was because I was dehydrated, but no. I later realized, I can't handle shaky seats. My body was trying to tell me something and I didn't get the message: "If you shake me, I'm going to throw up." That's a pretty clear message, and I missed it. In my brain, I was thinking, "If I can handle roller coasters, I can handle a kids' ride." Nope. I was very wrong. Even now, my body loves a good drop like on a big roller coaster, but shaking or any spinning makes me dangerous for anyone in the potential "splash" zone. Sadly, it took a number of very sick experiences for me to figure this out. Sometimes, messages don't get through no matter how clear they are. (Is this what God is thinking about us not realizing how badly we're destroying the planet with garbage? Did WALL-E teach us nothing? Yes, I watched that cartoon because it's Disney and it doesn't melt your brain like Bob the Sponge.)

In our world of over communication, it's amazing how many messages get missed – even important ones. Unfortunately, sometimes our brain can't grasp anymore information because that part of it is exhausted. Like any muscle, our ability to listen is limited (some more than others). I'm sure the ladies can think of someone with limited listening abilities. When it comes to communication, I find guys to be like sprinters. We go hard for a short burst. Women, however, tend to be more like marathon runners; they can just go and go and when guys are toast, their wives are just finishing their warm up and getting ready for the main event: (disappointed wife) "Are you done already?" Yes, I'm talking about communication and not...you know... but God is consistent with how He's made us. Women often think guys are terrible listeners, but we're actually better than them... for short

bursts like a sprinter. That being said, if we've listened a lot at work that short burst becomes even shorter at home. Ask my wife. A guy's brain is designed to focus on one thing and then move to another whereas a woman's brain is designed to handle multiple things going on at once, which makes them naturally better at communicating longer and watching a brood of children. As a guy, I'll make sure one child is safe... maybe. I might get distracted or the game I choose isn't the safest: "But the kids love it when I do this with them." At the same time, which gender do you think will naturally be quicker to get stressed out or overwhelmed doing too much? Women. Men tend to be better in emergency situations because we can focus for a burst and not think about less important things unlike women who have a harder time prioritizing what to focus on because they have so many things going on in their heads: (wife) "The house is on fire! Oh no... shoot, I also need to remember the kids have hockey later, I need to call the doctor, and pick up a baby gift for..." Our differences can balance us or drive us crazy.

Regardless of whether you're more a listening sprinter or marathoner, we all have a certain social stamina. This means we can only handle so much social interaction before we're done with people. Just like running, the more we practice, the longer we can go... to a point. Everyone will have a maximum for how much socializing they can handle and different situations will be more wearing than others. For instance, when I first started as a youth pastor, running a Friday night event would exhaust me, and Saturday would be a recovery day. After a couple months, however, I was barely fazed by a Friday night. The next challenge was running weekend retreats. The first couple I ran exhausted me for days after until a couple years in and once again, I was barely fazed. I also found that when I'm in leadership, I have higher social stamina than if I'm at an event and supposed to just mingle – that kills me. That's, of course, why I bring games with me places... or I did before I had kids and became busy keeping them from destroying the place – not my favorite game. I prefer Blokus.

I first got a glimpse of social stamina when I was in my early twenties. When my older sister was in her early twenties, she moved to Toronto for school and then stayed for work. After two years of teaching there, she landed a position in Hamilton, which meant she moved back home to temporarily live with the family – like a winner (writes the guy who didn't leave until he was 36). Before she left for Toronto, she was always out socializing and running events like an extreme socialite would, but now she was coming home from her day at school and hiding in her room. It was a complete flip and I didn't understand the change. Did something happen to her in Toronto? Yes, she got a job that was socially

exhausting. She was no longer the student with lots of social energy left after school. She was a teacher who was burnt out after a day of talking (and entertaining) students and coworkers. To add to this exhaustion, she got used to living by herself. Now she had family around who'd asked her questions about her day when she wanted to be left alone. As time passed, her stamina improved, and she started having more of a life again.

Most people are big on the whole introvert versus extrovert idea, but I'm more about social stamina. Even the biggest introvert needs to be interacting with people. We're created to need human interaction. We need each other. No one person can do everything. Even if they had the ability to do everything, they wouldn't have the time. We need people and by interacting with others we can increase our ability to put up with them. (Was that too negative a way of saying that?) We can be worn out in different ways like by our role (e.g. leader, worker, mingler, etc), the number of people around (e.g. I prefer groups of three), the kinds of people (e.g. family versus strangers), how stimulating the environment is (e.g. music, noise, and screens can cause sensory overload), the activity associated to the event (e.g. dinner, playing games, just mingling, etc), how good the people are (good people are easier to handle), or how tired we already are mentally and physically. Being tired can give us the idea that we're too worn out to socialize, but that's not necessarily the case. Being tired in one of the ways (i.e. socially, mentally, and physically) might make us feel too tired to do the other two, but that's not true. For instance, when my brother first started as an accountant, he was too mentally tired to want to work out, but as he pushed himself (and had me nagging him), he learned his body was grateful to be used psychically after a long mentally challenging day. I ran into the same problem when I started as a therapist. It was hard to get out for a jog because my head was tired, but when I started making it part of my routine, my body was grateful to be used and my brain found it healing. ***Sometimes the best thing for us is the hardest to do.*** This same thing can happen to people who work physical jobs: (worker) "I'm too tired to think or socialize now." (me) "Nope, that's your brain lying to you." ***By pushing yourself to use your brain in a different way, it'll thank you.***

This idea of social stamina connects to how people can be a Hider. ***They can lie to themselves and say they're shy or too tired to interact with people, but that's often an excuse not to push themselves to do something uncomfortable.*** If someone's social stamina is so low they claim they can never talk to others, it's all the more important they start talking in order to grow their weaker social stamina.

If you consider social stamina on a scale of 0 to 10 with 0 being no social stamina and 10 being the most you can personally have, we have the power to grow it. Sure, my brother's 10 is about my 7 because I've always been more drawn to people, and my 10 is like a 2 compared to some women (I don't get how social some people can be), but we all should be growing and/or maintaining a healthy level of social stamina. Why? Because it's healthy.

And how do you grow your social stamina? By interacting with people. Just like growing a muscle, you have to do more than what's easy. ***We also need to be careful not to waste our socializing time on social media because that's second-rate socializing.*** We need direct interaction with people.

This week may you consider what healthy social stamina looks like for you.

Lesson 14

Know Your Goal

This past holiday weekend I had the privilege of being at my wife's family cottage to join the shenanigans going on in South Hampton. (The downside of being self employed is you don't get set holidays, so you sneak in short getaways whenever you can.) On the Saturday night I was jogging along the beach path at my usual 11pm time after everything in the cottage had settled. Early in my jog, a guy similar in age was walking toward me with a dog and before I could say anything, he said hi (like a decent person), and I responded: "Wow, that's one of the first times someone has beat me to saying hi. Well done." That's strange, isn't it? Why was that my first thought? "You're saying hi without being prompted? Weird. People normally suck." About an hour later on my return home (I stopped to enjoy the stars at a rest spot; I'm not that dedicated to jogging), I was approaching the point on the beach path where it's very dark and there's a bend (a less than ideal spot for a bend). Five young guys in their twenties chatting with each other were coming the other direction. The one guy said to his friends, "Watch out guys; someone is coming," and then they all moved over for me. In as cheerful a voice I could muster despite jogging I said, "Thank you," and carried on. What was weird was my body felt shock at their actions: "Did you young guys just show me politeness? Wow, I can't believe it." This is not the response I should have to basic human decency. This time last year that wouldn't have been my response, but the last couple months I've been hit by a barrage of disappointing human behavior, and I've lost trust in humanity. The best example was the night before. I got to the cottage in the late evening and surprised my daughters, which was a great moment. There were big hugs and then the kids were wired and couldn't sleep... so not the best response in my wife's eyes. The kids eventually crashed asleep, so it was fine. At almost 1am in this typically very quiet area, music was thumping from a nearby cottage. Even with the windows closed, the cottage was vibrating like a car was driving by with a loud stereo booming. Even though I was showered and in pajamas, I put a pause on getting into bed. Instead, I got dressed and went to the party house to ask them to turn down the music. My wife asked if I'd rather her call bylaw, but besides not knowing how long that would take, the first step should be to talk to people directly. People are decent and they'd understand... wouldn't they? The cottage making the noise was on the other side of another cottage and several clumps of trees, so the sound was even louder when I got closer. What was strange was this noisy group was surrounded by a bunch of

cozy cottages. I don't know how I could have been the first person to address this, but... maybe they knew something about these people I didn't. I once had bylaw called on me by a neighbor when I cut my grass in the spring at 9:30pm when it just started getting dark with an electric mower. It was so quiet I was cutting beside my newborn baby's bedroom window, but I was still called out, so in my head this party was insane. Approaching the group I was expecting to see some teenagers being loud because anyone else would know how rude it was to be loud at 1am in a family cottage area... wouldn't they? Nope, it looked like a family party of 15 grownups between the ages of mid 30s to mid 60s. The group was on a property just off the road, which was lit up with a large bonfire. When I walked up close enough to be seen, I did the normal, "Excuse me," and when I had their attention I continued, "Would you please turn down your music? My family's trying to sleep." The first response was from a woman who said, "I'm sorry; I can't hear you. The music is too loud." That was funny, but then the rest of the responses were not so joking and definitely not expected. One guy asked, "What's your problem?" That was a stupid question because I already clearly stated the problem – turn down the music. One woman told me to close my windows, to which I replied, "I have." Then I heard this collection of brilliance: (the first guy) "Maybe you shouldn't rent a cottage on a holiday weekend." Was that supposed to be an insult, calling me a renter? What kind of a jerk says that? I'm not a renter (not that there's anything wrong with that), I'm a moocher who's mooching off his in-laws (take that). The same guy added, "Maybe you shouldn't let your dog bark so much." Most of the comments being thrown at me didn't get responses because I was too confused, but for this one I replied, "I don't have a dog." The same guy then added, "I work hard in the day; I can do what I want at night." I didn't respond to this because it was too stupid: "I work hard in the day; I can be an inconsiderate jerk at night!" No, that's not how it works: (guy) "Yes, officer I shot that man, but I worked hard this morning, so it's okay."

After being totally confused by what was going on when all I wanted was for music to be turned down – a basic decent person thing to do when asked – the guy who works hard all day started shouting, "Get off my property!" I was a couple feet from the ditch, so I was possibly still on city land. Either way, was he screaming at me to get off his property because I asked him politely to turn down his music at 1am? Who responds like that? I then heard a woman say, "Let the guy speak," which was nice of her, but still strange because I was done speaking. I would've actually left already, but because people were speaking to me, my natural response wasn't to walk away – that's rude. The guy then retorted, "He can keep speaking when he's off my property!" What? Was that supposed to be his gesture of

kindness? (guy) “You can do whatever you want, but do it four feet away.” When I realized the music was off I turned to leave and I continued walking away despite having some more things shouted at me that included a lot of f words. My guess is this “I work hard” guy must have embarrassed a few people there because the music was never turned back on. Normally, jerks turn it down just to crank it louder after, but that didn’t happen.

While walking away I started to realize what had just happened – the strangest response ever by grownups to “Can you please turn down your music?” Their response should’ve been: “Oh sorry. I didn’t realize how loud we were,” or “I didn’t realize it was that late.” As the shock settled, my anger started to rise, which was a very healthy response because I should’ve been angry. I then had a very unusual reaction – I prayed: “God do something terrible to those people, so they realize how mean they are. Please, please, please punish them for being so awful.” I’ve never had that kind of reaction before, but I’ll admit, it really helped me calm down. I needed to do something to feel empowered after being attacked and just taking it. This prayer was essentially a way to make me feel stronger and a great way to get out my emotion. Since I wanted bad things to happen to them and God knows my thoughts, why not be honest and say it out loud? ***Prayers don’t have to be nice; they’re meant to clear our hearts and help us connect to God.***

What crossed my mind after all the meanness was over was if we hadn’t all been white people raised in Canada in a similar socio-economic position, it would’ve been easy to assume it was some type of prejudice (e.g. racism, ageism, classism, etc). At least that would’ve made more sense. I wonder how often people assume it’s prejudice when it’s the person acting like garbage because they’re garbage. Either way, it’s important to note that you shouldn’t continue to engage with garbage people. It would’ve been very foolish for me to continue talking to this group – ***garbage people produce garbage conversations. Don’t expect good to come out of dealing with them.***

I should also note that to prevent conflict from growing, I typically teach people to ask a question with two options like “Are you talking to me like this because you’re drunk or because you’re upset you don’t get to do what you want (like a child)?” Of course, the question I wanted to ask was, “Are you compensating for having a small brain or small manhood?” Answer is both: “I work hard in the day...” The main problem with that approach in this situation, however, would be timing. ***You***

don't ask a question to someone who is too tired, angry, or drunk (or too garbage) to answer properly.

Here's the most important communication lesson to take from this story: **Know your goal and stick to it.** After realizing I was being attacked, I wanted to retaliate, but I had achieved my goal – the music was turned off. Saying anything back to them would've been foolish because it could spark the music being turned back on. Sure, it didn't "feel" right to leave it alone, but it *was* the right thing to do. **Feelings can blind us from truth.** Sure it wasn't "fair" for me to be treated that way, but I got what I wanted. Who knows, maybe that guy was spoken to after by his family – most wives would severely scold their husbands for being that rude. Either way, by not retaliating I proved to be the better person in that situation, so screw him (written with irony).

If people in that group had any brains, they should've recognized how lucky they were that I wasn't a nut job or vengeful (aka passive aggressive). Let's consider the facts. I knew where they were staying and they didn't know where my cottage was – advantage me. Even if I wanted to avoid doing a light felony like teepeeing their cottage (if you act like a child, I can treat you like a child in return... although that may not be what the Golden Rule means), I could've been at their place the next morning at 7am with my two kids serenading them with screaming. My kids would've loved doing that, and I'm pretty sure there isn't a law against it: "We worked hard for the week; we can do what we want on the weekend." If I didn't want to wait until the next morning, I could've stayed on the road and sang "I know a song that gets on everybody's nerves"; it's a wonderfully terrible song. Even simpler, I could've stood on the road and stared at the guy all night. How uncomfortable would that be for him? "Stop staring at me (I keep staring saying nothing). No seriously, stop staring (I keep staring saying nothing). There's definitely no law about me standing on public property staring at someone. Sure, he likely would've punched me in the face eventually, but then he'd be screwed because I could charge him with assault and what's his defence going to be: "Officer, he was looking at me for a very long time." Sure, I wouldn't actually do any of these things, but they are fun to think about and sometimes that's all we need to do to feel better: (to friend) "Can you imagine if I had of..."

This week may you consider how the goal in conversation is more important than "feeling" like we were treated fairly.

We Don't Always Hear What's Actually Said (with bonus tips)

Communication is difficult because it can be hard to line up what you're saying with what people are hearing. Sometimes we say "Circle," and people hear "Square," or "Circle, you idiot"; it all depends on how our brain is feeling in the moment. It's amazing how often words are misinterpreted or misspoken, which is why I encourage people to see words as fairly meaningless. It's more important to consider what the heart is behind the words: (teenage girl with disdain) "I like your shoes." The words say compliment, but the intention is insult versus: (child with awe) "Wow, you have a big head." The words say insult, but it's actually a compliment. Unfortunately, words (or the lack thereof) cause a lot of unnecessary problems. I was recently at a seminar run by a therapist I have liked as a person for a long time. He was teaching a therapy style called Imago (it's as pretentious as the name suggests). To be fair, it was said you need to be trained in this style for two years before you're considered qualified to officially use it, so my hour seminar may not have done it justice (or it's as lame as I thought it was). I assume my friend was trying to share what he had been learning as a way to inspire the rest of us, but it *felt* like it was being presented as "If you're not doing this like I am, you're not a good therapist." This, of course, could have been a "Circle, you idiot," moment for me since I find listening to people at my work meetings I regularly hear a lot of blame, criticism, and you need to be better. During this talk, the speaker claimed he didn't used to believe in using grounding exercises to start sessions, but now he wouldn't dare do a session without using them. Guess what I don't do... ever... even for myself because I don't like them. Here's the thing about therapy: The therapist needs to follow their own style just like a good stand-up comedian or musician. This style can change over time and be influenced by others, but ***trying to be someone else makes you seem phony, amateurish, or in the very least, awkward.*** The speaker shared how his newer style has had couples ball at the end of the session, which is great... for some people. To me, that's gross. That being said, we need different styles because the world is full of different people. This style is obviously helping some people, but I've had many first time clients terrified that therapy is supposed to be super emotional and then they feel better when I reassure them that's not what's going to happen with me.

My goal: To learn practical tools to be emotionally healthier and communicate better like what's shared in this book. In my style, ***I follow the idea that you don't need pain to feel better just like a good chiropractor doesn't have to hurt you to help you physically get better.*** There can be pain/emotion depending on the situation and person, but in my therapy style the experience is more of what you want it to be. This is just like church where some people are super emotional and expressive while some people are like me – dull. Unfortunately, this idea of different styles for different people isn't what the speaker appeared to be promoting. He was more: This is the way.... and yes, that's a *Mandalorian* reference to sound cool.

The one thing I appreciated is there was a list of points given out to help summarize Imago on our table, which helped give me something to better understand the actual idea behind it (and confirm how dumb it sounded) and not just interpret it off the speaker. Here is a selection from the ten points in the definition of Imago:

- 1) Partners choose each other to get from each other what they did not get from their parents.
- 2) When each partner stretches beyond current defensive character adaptations to give the other what they need, the giving partner begins to grow back into their wholeness and the receiving partner begins to heal from childhood pain of not having the need met.
- 3) When there is conflict, each partner is trying to get the other to grow back into their full potential so that they get their needs met
- 4) The unconscious agenda of both partners is to help them move to the next level by pairing them with someone with whom they will be confronted with their most challenging growth stretch

Summary: Our primary goal becomes to restore our original state of relaxed joyfulness which is where we feel connected.

If you're like the speaker, you're thinking, "This is exactly what is happening" whereas if you're like me, you're thinking, "What is this crap? Why are you trying so hard to sound smart? Life is not that complicated." Again, different people want different approaches, so I need to be open to the idea that this "complex" idea is meeting the needs of some people... but no thanks. What do people want? To feel affirmed and cared about – simple. Why did I choose my wife? She was hot and she was willing to date me – simple. Why'd she date me? Because I am an

amazing kisser... or maybe that was just the cherry on top of this once delicious sundae... that other girls had no interest in.

When I'm hired to perform a wedding ceremony, I always ask the couple: "What are three reasons why your partner was first attracted to you?" If I were to answer this, I'd point out my wife and I met when I became the youth pastor at her church, so she was clearly attracted to my money and prestige (I'm hilarious). I believe she was attracted to my strength and confidence that comes out when I'm in leadership roles (when I'm not in leadership, I can be a Hider). I was also someone who looked like I knew how to have fun and laugh (and not someone who spent hours writing blogs and books on his computer). Probably the most important reason she was attracted to me was one of our first times hanging out we were leaving a wedding reception and after her female cousin of similar age complained about her feet being sore, I threw her over my shoulder and carried her to the car while ignoring my future wife. She was essentially attracted to me because I flirted with her cousin and made her jealous. How do you get the hot girl who always has guys hitting on her to notice you? Hit on someone else – thank you *Ghosts of Girlfriends* past for that lesson. I Matthew McConaughey'd her. This is the way... to get the hot girl. And what drew me to my wife? She was hot. Part of the hotness included her being incredibly friendly at church, and she knew how to laugh – it's that simple. Fun fact, the most common answers I've heard from couples I've asked are smile, eyes, and butt. Yes, the most common answers are physical with funny/laughs, and caring being next in line – simple.

My other question to couples is "Why will you make a good spouse?" Since I'm married, let's change this to "Why did my wife marry me?" She's said she wanted a guy who had the qualities to be a good dad – check. She's said she wanted a guy who could have their own opinion and not be super whipped like some of her past boyfriends – check (although she will still find it really annoying when I don't agree with her). She's said she wanted a good mother-in-law (a brilliant goal) – check times a thousand. She's also said she wanted someone who could help her grow closer to God because of his own relationship – check. (And yes, I know that was four, but I'm showing off that I actually listened and remembered what she's said... which is a pretty rare combo for me.) Why did I marry her? She has a good heart, she tries to be good with money, and she was willing to grow as a person. It helped she also doesn't like tattoos and we have a similar taste in movies, music, plays, and church. Notice how none of those options are about filling some need from my childhood? It's simple. The most common answers I've been given from

couples for this question are, “I cook,” (women or men), “I’m organized,” (women) “I’ll support her in the things she wants to do,” (men... obviously).

Bonus: I recommend you answer these two questions: “What are three reasons why your partner was first attracted to you?” “Why will you make a good spouse?” (or why did your spouse marry you?) It’s a great exercise for growing self worth when you can validate yourself.

To add to Imago’s confusion is some people are drawn to what they know while others want the opposite. For instance, some young people with terrible families feel uncomfortable dating someone who treats them with respect and/or comes from a great family while others from terrible families want the opposite: “My family is nuts. I need some kindness.” It can go either way. Even further, I find our personality can adapt depending on who we’re around. For instance, I get calmer with an emotional person and I get more emotional with a calm person (so yes, my wife is great at helping me be calmer). I can also be louder with a quiet person and quiet with a louder person... or I can be burnt out socially from work and it doesn’t matter who I’m with because then I’m boring. Maybe I’m just a chameleon, but from my experience this is pretty normal – we adapt. How are we marrying someone who fills some void our parents left?

The biggest problem I see in marriages is women tend to feel overwhelmed trying to do too much whether by choice or because they feel stuck with it. This causes them to be less than their normal kinder selves, and as they get snippier from feeling alone and overburdened, the guy starts to distance himself, which adds to her snappiness. This cycle eventually grows resentment making things worse unless addressed. At the same time, I find guys grow in anger if they’re trying hard to be a good partner, but nothing they do feels like it’s enough or will ever be enough. If almost every client I’ve shared this with agrees it sounds like their dynamic in some way, people aren’t trying to fill some childhood need; **they want to feel understood, affirmed, and loved. They want to feel safe with their partner and if there isn’t a sense of safety, defensiveness grows.** It’s not rocket science. How do I know this? I can’t do rocket science, but I can help people have better marriages by helping them process their emotions (what did they feel), make sure they had the right emotion (e.g. did they feel anger when they should feel anger?), and then help them know (if any) the request they need for change – it’s simple.

But again, it comes down to different people finding different things helpful. Whether I was “Circle, you’re an idiot,” or hearing the speaker the way he intended to be heard doesn’t matter as long as I can make my own conclusion: I’m fine as I am, and he’s welcome to enjoy Imago. I haven’t been doing anything wrong by being different. The world needs both of us.

Bonus 2: I’ve been doing therapy work for about 18 years and studying it for longer. I’m generally very confident with my style, but listening to the speaker I still had a moment of second guessing myself, which can be helpful for people who also struggle with second guessing to hear – you’re not alone. The plus side is second guessing ourselves once in a while can be healthy if we use it to check: Is there something I need to change? No. Great, I’m fine to continue as is or it’s yes, great, then adjust as needed. It doesn’t have to be insulting. It’s just an opportunity to affirm yourself and/or adjust to be even better.

This week may you consider if you’re hearing people with “Circle,” “Square,” or “Circle, you idiot.”

How Does Your Brain Lie to You? (Inferior vs. Superior Thinking Pt 1)

In the last lesson I mentioned the idea that we can say things that aren't heard correctly using the idea that one person says, "Circle," and the other person hears, "Square," or "Circle, you idiot." I've recently learned a new option: "Circle, I'm special." My brain (and my whole family's) has always leaned to "Circle, you idiot." I'm quick to blame myself (it's as fun as it sounds), which means I have to fight feelings of inferiority because my brain is mean to me (it's like super fun). It turns out, there are others who don't think like me – what? In many ways, my wife and I are very different. I was a country boy (by location and not the music – gross) while she was a city girl. I grew up with one ply toilet paper because we had a septic and she had fancy pants, three-ply toilet paper (yeah, very fancy pants). When I first used her bathroom I was like "What is this magical product I'm rubbing on my butt?" She was also different because after puberty she had a ton of guys wanting her while after puberty, I only had one guy wanting me (I wasn't as attractive to the boys... obviously). Besides having similar taste in movies, music, and church (very helpful similarities) and both of us being technologically daft (not so helpful), we are quite opposite, which has been wonderful as we balance each other out (or it's driven us crazy). This also means she has been incredible at teaching me different ways of thinking, which she has recently done again with "Circle, I'm special"; a concept I'm still struggling to grasp: "You don't just beat yourself up? You are missing out; it's fantastic... if you don't want self esteem."

Two years ago I posted a lesson called "12 Lies the Devil Uses to Mess Us Up." This included things like I'm fat, I'm ugly, and no one likes me. You know, the classics. I told my one friend I used to struggle with feeling stupid, but had switched to the category of discouragement (the devil has been excellent at using this against me this past year). When I asked my friend what lie he needed to be weary of, he replied, "Being superior." That was shocking... but made sense. My friend is very confident (way more than me) and he has a ton of friends (again, way more than me). His sense of superiority means he doesn't need to prove himself or show off, and his communication skills are one of the reasons I look forward to our weekly jogs together.

What was strange was my wife and I couldn't peg what lie the devil uses to mess with her... until now, a year later. I'm not necessarily the smartiest. We never pegged her because we never considered her to be like my friend – superior. Unlike my friend, she still has the natural female people pleasing mentality, but her people pleasing has a different feel than mine. Where I used to try to earn love (a common motivator for performers) and be good enough, she's more of an "I'm special and should help others." This might be the result of being a beautiful young woman who had a lot of special treatment or it could be the result of having a dad who had a very rare disease from the time she was in grade four to college when he passed away and left her feeling like life owed her something. It might be something completely different or a culmination of life moments in general – the joys of dealing with our thinking patterns; it's all a guessing game. Regardless, it was a really interesting moment for me when her sense of superiority was discovered because I've been with her for 17 years – how'd I not see that before? What's crazy is this realization came out of a pretty simple situation. We needed to special order a couple cabinets for our new bathroom. My wife had already gone and made a preliminary order and this was supposed to be just a paying for it situation. I had, however, found the receipt for the vanity we had already purchased for that bathroom and I sent it with her to show the salesperson to make sure it all matched – it did not. When I heard about this, I was very relieved the mistake was found whereas my wife was angry. Was she embarrassed? Nope. Was she like me who would've felt dumb for making such a big mistake? Nope. Was she like me and have a fear of wasting time? Nope. She was essentially upset because she "deserved" to have it go right. When she said this idea out loud, it clicked for me – you see yourself as superior. Suddenly, so many moments she's had that seemed superficial and not like her all started to make sense. On one hand, she's the kind of woman who volunteered in a youth group for nine years (she started before I took over the group), she currently helps in Sunday School, she used to be part of a group who drove around helping the women of the night, and she's very quick to buy gifts or make meals for others as encouragement. At the same time, she has some bizarrely superficial desires like having a big house in a superior area whereas I'm thrilled to live where we do and in the house we have (and not just because our taxes are lower in a city that's going tax insane). A few years ago, our pastor asked: Would you rather make \$50k in an area where most people make \$30k or \$100k in an area where most people make \$200k? Because of my competitive nature and not wanting to be at the bottom (a natural result of wanting to feel good enough), I easily chose the \$50k option while my wife, without hesitation, wanted the \$100k. She's also said she'd rather have the worst

house on the street of a great area than the best house on a street in a decent area because she's more about being part of higher society. I'm guessing the fact she has almost zero sense of competition is part of this because being the worst would kill me: "I'm the biggest loser! How will anyone like me?"

So how does this connect to communication? Since one person can say, "Circle," and our brains can hear something else, it becomes very important to consider how we're likely going to interpret it (aka what lie is going to influence the interpretation?) These lies can fall into one of two categories: I'm Inferior or Superior. Inferior is based on weakness, which includes mentally weak (e.g. stupid), emotionally weak (e.g. sensitive), appearance weak (e.g. ugly or fat), physically weak (e.g. vulnerable), financially weak (e.g. poor), spiritually weak (e.g. guilt ridden sinner) or socially weak (e.g. an outcast, weird, or too brash). People in this category tend to be really good at spinning things to be their fault and we need to help others to distract us from our own problems or feel like we have value. We typically need to fight feelings of guilt, shame, regret, and dread while over thinking seems second nature. Because of this, we are susceptible to shutting down and burnout. Meanwhile, people in the Superior category need to be careful not to be passive aggressive and condescending. These people can still feel guilt, but it's not the same. My wife definitely feels guilt (women tend to be great at finding ways to feel guilt), but it's more "I should help them because I'm special." In a way, it's healthier than my approach, which is more fear based and wanting approval. My wife still has fear like for our children's safety (women tend to be great at finding ways to be scared for their kids), but she's not fear based in her general thinking like I am (she's missing out). My fear makes me want to hide from uncomfortable situations and conflict or walk on eggshells worrying about upsetting people. Meanwhile, if my wife doesn't do something, it's more likely her dismissing it as uncomfortable and not worth the bother. My way hurts way more (again, she's really missing out).

Even with this realization about my wife, I don't see her as less than me (obviously; that's not how my inferior bent brain works). I also don't see her as superior... sometimes. Sometimes I can't fight my natural instinct when it's combined with her sense of superiority. In healthy moments, however, I realize I need her different way of thinking to balance my natural inferior driven brain. We help each other be better.

This week may you consider if your brain is more likely to lie to you about you being inferior or superior.

Continuing Inferior and Superior Thinking

(Inferior vs. Superior Thinking Pt 2)

In the last lesson we considered the idea that I come from a mindset that is inferior based while my wife and friend come from one that is superior – they are so weird (written with love). To take this further, let's consider this on a scale:

Inferior (-10)-----We're All Equal (0)-----Superior (+10)

I'm not exactly sure where I'd put my friend and my wife, but I'm thinking they're both a five or less because they're very generous and can be quite kind while not being arrogant or blatantly talking down to people (for the most part). That being written, since my wife didn't recognize her position on the scale until recently, either my friend's higher up on the scale or more self aware. There is also a chance my wife flips between both sides, but considering guilt and people pleasing can be on either side of the scale as discussed last time, I see her as being more consistently on the superior side.

Like most scales I use, the ideal spot is the center. The most important thing for moving toward the center (besides knowing there's a scale), is recognizing facts and not letting lies and fears see us as better or worse than we are. ***Facts are facts. They're neither insulting nor offensive; they are what they are.*** If we're offended by facts, that's our brain twisting something that is simply truth – but why be offended by truth? For instance, I'm 20-30 pounds overweight. If someone says this to me, they have poor social skills, but I shouldn't be hurt. I either need to accept that this is my weight and/or do something about it. Being hurt has no value (unless it motivates change). If, however, the person talking to me is speaking out of disgust, they are being condescending, or trying to hurt me, it's best to recognize they're being Cold and Condescending and then brush it off because mean people suck (a fact). If anything, we should try not to be hurt by these people because we shouldn't give them what they want – power over us. That being said, being hurt by someone who wants to hurt us isn't necessarily a sign of weakness. If someone stabs you, you bleed. That's not weakness. That's reality. If someone stabs you with their words, being hurt means you are

interpreting the situation correctly (good job... I guess). It's okay to be hurt (you're human), but we should work at dismissing it and not letting it fester in our brain. What's interesting is even though being hurt would normally appear like an inferior thing to experience, it can also be on the superior side: "Why aren't you giving me special treatment?" Regardless of the side we land on, we need to be careful not to give bad people the power to hurt us because ***we should ultimately care more about what good people say.*** After all, jerks will be jerks (another simple truth).

Sometimes facts can seem hurtful when it's personal, but they're still just facts. For instance, when my oldest was around the year mark, my wife and I did swimming lessons with her. I know all parents think their kids are cute, but I would say she was the second cutest in the class. (Can a parent say that?) If my love was based on looks, this would be a problem, but since it's not, it's just a fact – she was second place. If I was the director of a commercial, she would've been runner up. My daughter had big greenish eyes, but they looked small compared to this boy's ridiculously giant blue eyes. The simple fact is big eyes make things look cuter... at least for awhile. I saw him more recently and he peaked as a baby. (Can I say that?) Meanwhile, my daughter is still holding strong on the cuteness factor and will likely be a knock-out like her mom was in her teens and twenties. Even if she's not, that doesn't make me love her more or less – it's just a fact. As you can likely imagine, my wife was not a fan when I pointed out that boy was cuter. She also disagreed: (wife) "No, ours is the cutest." (me) "Is that more fact or your very biased opinion?" If anything, doesn't it make my love more real if I can acknowledge my daughter isn't the best at everything and I still love her the same? Good parents look for ways to be proud of their kids because they are *their* kids. At the same time, kids should be doing things to help their parents have reasons to be proud of them. After all, it's hard to be proud of a mass murderer... or it should be: (proud mom) "My son made it to the number three most wanted in Canada. He's so talented." To take this further, kids should be doing things to be proud of themselves – it's easier to be proud of yourself when you don't suck. What's interesting is this can be a problem for people on both sides of the scale. Sometimes people feel inferior because they don't do anything with their life and sometimes people think they're superior because, by not doing anything, they can hold onto that illusion since there's no proof against it. It's interesting how perspective can put the same issue on either side.

One of my proudest accomplishments was writing the script and music for a musical I directed with a grade 12 drama class in my first couple years as a youth pastor. When I was in my undergrad, I wrote a screenplay, and somehow years

later while volunteering in a drama class, the teacher suggested I put it on stage as one of his grade twelve class's major projects. It was amazing how it worked out because the class had the right students for the different roles, and no one was more perfect than the leading lady – she was spectacular. The truth is, however, she wasn't the best singer or the best actor, but she was magnetic on and off the stage. It's like the biggest Hollywood actresses are not the most drop-dead gorgeous or even talented – they're alluring and you want to be their friend. There was even a new girl who joined the class right after we started rehearsals who had more stage experience and was a naturally better singer, but she would've been garbage compared to my leading lady. My leading lady ended up with lots of well deserved praise from the audience (and jealousy from other girls). One of the reasons I picked her was she radiated an inner beauty. I've only met a handful of people who would fit this description, but it's incredible. Where they go, the world feels better because they bring joy. As a naturally negative brained person (it combines well with my inferior brain), I find people like this particularly refreshing. I also wasn't the only one who noticed. I remember an older teacher I was close with saying to me she was proof that high school boys are idiots because she was single and didn't seem to have any pursuers. He added if he was a student she'd be the one who would've stolen his heart because she was such a high quality person. Here's a fun fact: a teacher saying this to another trusted teacher as a way to describe a student is fine (or it used to be), but saying this to the student is disgusting. I remember the 40 something year old, overweight, married youth pastor I volunteered with saying to my single sister in her late 20s, "If I was your age, I'd be asking you out." I'm guessing the youth pastor was trying to be encouraging and maybe if he looked like Ryan Reynolds it would've been a compliment, but this guy? Gross, no. He might have been sharing a fact, but some facts are better left not said to the person – that's called social skills. Who would've guessed someone working with teens for low pay in their 40s didn't have the best social skills.

What was interesting about my leading lady is despite having this incredible presence, she saw herself as inferior. As an outsider looking at her, it would've been easy to see her as someone who should be on the superior side because she was a light. Getting to know her, however, I was able to see she had the same sense of rejection I felt at her age: "I'm single, so there must be something wrong with me." This, however, was a lie. The truth is sometimes people like her are single because they're a higher calibre and it takes a special person to be the quality she deserved. It's amazing how lies can appear like facts and knock down good people. As an outsider, we can wonder how someone like her can't see how

wonderful they are, but isn't that the plight of all inferior minded people? It really can be surprising who sees themselves as less because others see them as so great – the struggle of many parents: “Why don't you see yourself the way we see you?” Meanwhile, superior people believe lies in a different way: “What I did is amazing... even though others don't see it,” or “If I tried, I'd be the best.” Sometimes superior brained people have bad grades because by not doing their work they can tell themselves things like “If I studied I would've aced it.” It's like they're afraid to try because if they weren't the best then they'd have to reconsider if they're really superior. This way, they have an out.

As an inferior brained person I need to realize that not everyone is like me and that's a good thing. ***Sometimes inferior based people do incredible things because they're fueled with a desire to stand out while superior based people can do incredible things because they don't see why they shouldn't be able to do something.*** “Why wouldn't I win the lottery?” In fact, my superior brained friend actually won a 50-50 draw at a Blue Jays game and took home a car. I wouldn't have bothered buying a ticket because why would I win? Both sides have their benefits and dangers, but the healthiest position is in the center, which starts by recognizing facts and not twisting our thoughts to see ourselves as less than or better than others.

This week may you consider how you can be in the center.

Lesson 18

Defining Inferior and Superior Thinking (Inferior vs. Superior Thinking Pt 3)

The last couple of lessons have been based on the following scale:

Inferior (-10)-----We're All Equal (0)-----Superior (+10)

The ultimate truth is that in our humanity we're all equal, but our brains can tell us otherwise. Regardless of whether we might think we're better or worse than someone (aka being judgemental), we all generally lean to one side or the other of this scale. For instance, I lean to the Inferior side, but that doesn't mean I never have moments of thinking I'm better than someone. It's rare, but it can happen.

Even though I've already looked at this concept in the last two lessons, I haven't really defined anything (because I'm brilliant). I would argue the main difference between the inferior and superior side is "I'm trying to *earn* something like respect, love, and admiration," versus "I *deserve* something like respect, love, and admiration." Beyond this definition, it can be hard to determine where someone is because most things can happen on both sides; they are just inspired by different motivations and beliefs. Let's consider the following:

1. ***Not being able to say no:*** Inferior minded people don't want to disappoint others while superior minded people can feel compelled to do everything because they'll do it better.
2. ***Dreaming of a great triumph:*** Inferior minded people can want to prove they are worth something (the inspiration for many movies) while superior minded people can want to prove they are in fact superior.
3. ***Trouble asking for help:*** Inferior minded people can be afraid of being a burden while superior minded people can wonder how someone else could figure out something they couldn't.
4. ***Trouble accepting compliments:*** Inferior minded people can brush off compliments because they don't think they deserve the attention or they'll find fault in what they did while superior minded people can brush off compliments because what they did isn't a big deal – it's what superior people do.

5. ***Perfection driven:*** Inferior minded people can be drawn to perfection in their attempt to feel acceptable while superior minded people want things done to their standards and they can get very angry at others who don't strive for the same impossible standards, which emphasizes the idea that others are less than them.
6. ***Too quick to forgive:*** Inferior minded people can forgive too quickly because they just take it and bury the hurt even though this can later lead to them having a meltdown whether exploding or shutting down. They can also carry growing resentment because it's not really forgiven; it's buried. Meanwhile superior minded people can brush things off as "Of course you screwed you up; you're lower than me."
7. ***Potentially great employees:*** Inferior minded people can be great if they're the people pleasing kind who wants to do a good job to earn something while superior minded people can be great because they have confidence and believe in themselves.
8. ***Potentially terrible employees:*** Inferior minded people can be terrible if they give up too quickly and/or call in sick all the time because they feel too low while superior minded people can be entitled jerks who won't do work and expect more money for their little effort.
9. ***Potentially mean people:*** Inferior minded people can be mean as they want to drag others down with them while superior minded people can lack compassion and/or care: "Know your place."
10. ***Potentially angry people:*** Inferior minded people can be angry because they're constantly on the defence feeling less than others (i.e. anger is a defence mechanism) while superior minded people can be angry when they're not being treated as they feel they deserve.
11. ***Potentially anxious and depressed people:*** Inferior minded people can lose hope because they don't see the good in themselves while superior minded people can lose hope because if everyone is less than them and they don't have it perfect, what hope is left for the world?
12. ***Potentially very nice people:*** Inferior minded people can be very nice and often end up pushovers for fear of conflict or getting in trouble. This can include walking on eggshells or hiding. Meanwhile, superior minded people can be nice because they care about the "little" people and feel it's their position to help those below them.

Another way to consider these two sides is to reduce them into basic mindsets:

Inferior Brained People

1. I'm inferior, so I live with fear and guilt, which means I'm a huge people pleaser to limit the conflict and/or judgement I might face (i.e. passive).
2. I'm inferior, but want special treatment like I'm superior (i.e. passive aggressive).
3. I'm inferior, so I spend lots of money, have a mean streak, and/or try to look really tough to compensate (i.e. aggressive).
4. I'm inferior, so I serve with quiet resentment.
5. I'm inferior, and want special attention as such (i.e. they find power in sympathy).
6. I'm inferior, and dream of being seen as superior even for a moment, so I work really hard and sacrifice a lot to achieve my dream (i.e. a popular movie theme).
7. I'm inferior, and dream of being seen as superior, but I don't do anything about it (i.e. lazy).
8. I'm inferior, so I've given up.

Superior Brained People

1. I'm superior and I don't do anything with my life, so I can imagine I can do anything I want since there's no evidence that I can't
2. I'm superior and expect special treatment for it.
3. I'm superior and achieve great things because of my confidence and believing in myself
4. I'm superior and want to help others to look superior and/or avoid guilt.
5. I'm superior and feel obligated to help others, but have some resentment growing toward them.
6. I'm superior and feel disgusted by others who are below me
7. I'm superior and dismiss those below me because their problems aren't as important as mine.

This week may you better understand what inferior and superior brained people look like because it has huge implications for how people act and communicate.

What is Success? (Inferior vs. Superior Thinking Pt 4)

Over the last few lessons I've been looking at the idea that some people see life from an "I'm inferior" or "I'm superior" mindset. I also pointed out that in our humanity, we're all equal because... well, we are. As a Christian, I believe that we are not only God's creation, we are His children – that's pretty personal. He created us and we're His children? I guess that means our flaws are originally from Him. So did God screw up or are our flaws actually a blessing? That's a fun thought to mess with your head.

Even as a believer I'm not superior as it is written: "Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it." (Eph 2:9). No matter how we look at it, in our humanity, we are *all* equal. That being said, ***there is definitely a better way to live our lives because it can be successful or a failure.*** Normally when I discuss success I simply point to one of my favorite exercises for being emotionally healthy: What are the five things you want said about you at your funeral? Ultimately, if you know what you want said as your description, you know how you should live your life: (person) "I want to be known as Santa... I should grow a beard and practice eating cookies." As this points out, ***success is a personal definition.*** For instance, I believe it's better to be a good person than to put on a good show to look better than I am (no offence to many people online). I also believe it's better to be a good worker than to have it easy (I'm that weird). My definition of success is clearly different than many others would choose today. This leads to the idea that what we consider successful may be a personal choice, but it can still be very misguided. For example, most people put fame and fortune into the category of success, but considering how many celebrities end up going to AA and/or rehab (or needing to go) that's clearly misguided.

To better define success, let's consider a scale for success:

Inferior -----A Successful -----Superior/Selfish
Lifestyle (-10) Lifestyle (0) Lifestyle (10)

The Superior/Selfish Lifestyle on this scale has a similar definition as the original Inferior and Superior scale from previous lessons since it continues the plus side using the “I deserve” mindset. Thus, this category includes people who think they’re better than others because of their money, status, or title. It also includes anyone who is very self indulgent and condescending. Celebrities often land in this category because it’s easy for them to lose their grasp on reality because of the special treatment they’re regularly given. Seeing yourself as special is a natural result of people seeing you as something special. This category also includes the kid who “works” at Walmart playing on their phone while complaining minimum wage doesn’t pay enough – they “deserve” more.

The Inferior Lifestyle is a little murkier to define. Sure, it includes people who try to “earn” love from others. Earning love is most commonly seen in people being overly serving and giving until it hurts. Jesus taught that we should serve one another, but not to be a slave to others who don’t do anything in return. ***We are supposed to serve one another, which means we need to serve and let others serve us in return – it’s a healthy equality.*** I discussed the Benjamin Franklin Effect in the *52 Lessons to be a Better Person: The perfect gift for someone else*, and it’s a good thing to consider here. This concept teaches we make more friends *asking* for favors rather than *doing* favors. This is the opposite of what we typically think: “I help you, so you’ll like me more.” ***The feeling of reciprocity has a shelf life, which is determined by what was done and the person who received your help.*** On the other hand, when we simply ask for a favor and the person does it, they end up attaching themselves to us. That means ***when we serve, we attach ourselves.*** This ultimately means people being overly serving are not only setting themselves up to be taken for granted, but they are attaching themselves too heavily to those who won’t feel the same in return. When I started as a youth pastor I wondered why I liked people more than they liked me and then I learned this idea. As I started asking for help, my relationships started to get more balanced, which also meant I was moving toward the middle of this scale, A Successful Lifestyle. Of course, I still struggle to ask for help, so I’m still on the road to being more in the center, but at least it’s a start.

Being overly serving connects to being overly helpful. By overly helping others we live an Inferior Lifestyle while limiting how healthy others can be. We are meant to help others, but at a certain point our help becomes enabling. Enabling means people can continue making bad choices and be further away from the Successful Lifestyle. ***If people make bad choices, they need to face the repercussions.*** If I cheat on my wife, God doesn’t intervene: (God) “Don’t be upset with my

precious baby. He made a small boo-boo. Don't be mean to him." No, God lets us face what we deserve (at least in this life), so we can learn from our mistakes. ***Facing repercussions means there's a better chance we'll move towards a more successful life.***

An inferior lifestyle is also simply that: An inferior lifestyle. What's inferior? I would argue that ***an inferior lifestyle is filled with any of the Seven Deadly Sins: pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, and sloth.*** I may not be Catholic, but it's a solid list. If we allow these seven things into our lives, it's going to bring us down. "Sin" isn't just what upsets God; it's what hurts us and those around us. ***Why do you think God hates sin so much? He doesn't want us to be hurt or hurt others.*** He's not "offended." He wants better for us. He wants us to have a successful life.

I would go so far as to say that anyone who uses a substance every day like booze or pot is living an Inferior Lifestyle because I'm yet to meet anyone who uses these things every day who isn't hiding from something. Substances are very appealing because they can help distract and/or keep something buried that we don't want to face. Unfortunately, burying hurt keeps it there haunting us. ***The best life is one that has come to acceptance of all the pains and hurts we have experienced and uses them to be stronger and wiser in the future.***

This leads to an important question: Is there anything that better defines A Successful Lifestyle? ***I would argue a more universal definition of A Successful Lifestyle includes finding the healthy balance of tending to the four parts of the person: the body, mind, heart, and soul.*** This means each area is challenged enough while also being given enough rest. Just like our muscles need to be strained once in awhile to be healthy, so does our brain, heart, and soul. For instance, we are meant to learn new things and face new challenges, meet new people, and connect to the bigger picture through nature and worship. Ultimately, this helps us grow in our ability to love, which means being stronger at being patient, kind, and self controlled. (This topic is further discussed in my book, *52 Lessons to be a Better Person: The perfect gift for someone else.*)

Another way to define success is by considering what God considers successful. The one parable that has always stuck with me is in both Matthew and Luke with Luke's version being pretty harsh (I'll explain that shortly). In this parable, three servants are put in charge of a leader's money while he's away. Each servant is given a different amount of money and when the leader returns, he "called them to

give an account of how they had used the money.” (Mat 25:19b) The two given the most money to be responsible for doubled what they were given, and the master was full of praise: “Well done, my good and faithful servant. You have been faithful in handling this small amount, so now I will give you many more responsibilities. Let’s celebrate together.” (A duplicate verse in Mat 25: 21 & Mat 25:23). The leader, who represents God, rewards his two servants with more responsibilities. Talk about a workaholic’s dream: “I get more work? Sweet?” Our culture, on the other hand, seems to worship relaxing and comfort – oops. After these two happy moments, the third servant confesses to hiding the money in order to keep it safe because he was too afraid of losing it and upsetting the harsh master. The master/God’s response is far from gentle: “You wicked and lazy servant...” (See? Not gentle.) “Why didn’t you deposit it in the bank? At least I would’ve gotten some interest on it.” (Mat 25:26b-27) He then gives the money from that servant to the first saying, “To those who use well what they are given, even more will be given, and they will have an abundance. But from those who do nothing even what little they have will be taken away.” (Mat 25:29) The next line gets rough: “Now throw this useless servant into outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (Mat 25:30) If you didn’t know, a place with “weeping and gnashing of teeth” is a reference to hell. That’s seriously intense... but Luke’s version is even more intense. The main character in that version is a nobleman who goes off to become king and then returns to a similar sequence. His final words, however, are “And as far as these enemies of mine who didn’t want me to be their king – bring them in and execute them in front of me.” (Luke 19:27) So much for Jesus being a softy.

As you can probably see from this parable, ***a successful life means investing our abilities into doing good. If we hide our talents and gifts under a bushel, God gets angry.*** Hiding is selfish – it’s easy, but it’s wrong. I can be drawn to it because it feels safe, but that’s a lie. God wants us to use our blessings to bless others with the ultimate goal of our love demonstrating our love of God. Thus, we need to recognize our little lights and let them shine. It might feel safe under the bushel, but we need to let our lives shine.

Thought: Success means confidence; confidence means better communication.

Being a good communicator is more than just the words we say and hear. It’s reflects the whole person.

This week may you consider what your talents are and how you can use them in order to have a success life.

How I Handle Having a Negative Brain

I have a negative brain. I'm not a big fan... obviously. It can be hard to like things when you have a negative brain, especially something bad like a negative brain – I'm negative about being negative. That being said, ***having a negative brain has its benefits***. For instance, having a negative brain has helped warn me about potential dangers, which has prevented unnecessary bad situations (yea, for being lame). It has also been an excellent motivator to make me a good worker and strive for better things.

Having a negative brain has left me very attracted to positive things like Christmas and Disney (yea, for being a geek). This also includes needing to watch movies with a happy ending because it gives my brain relief while a sad ending leaves my brain stuck in the pit of despair (yes, that's a *Princess Bride* reference, which has a great ending for my brain). Being attracted to positive things also includes my being drawn to positive people like my mom. Growing up, every morning she would mop the floors whistling a happy tune, and she was always ready to give a cheerful good morning. My sister hated my mom's morning cheerfulness, but it made waking up easier for me. I was reminded of this last spring when my family slept over at my mom's house the night before our family trip and even with the 4am wakeup time, she was just as chipper as if she woke up at a normal time. I don't know how she does it. It doesn't matter when I wake up, the first words out of my mouth aren't "Yea, it's morning!" It's more a lack of words, "Uhhhhgggg."

I'm guessing it's strange I'm starting my lesson about having a negative brain by offering positive thoughts about it, but I've been working on being more positive for the last twenty years because ***the wisest choice a negative brained person can make is to actively try to find the positive. Just because I'm naturally negative, doesn't mean I have a right to sulk or feel sorry for myself.*** My starting point for the day might be uhhhhggggg, but I don't need to stay there. After all, there is always positive to be found if we look for it. One of the more helpful exercises I've done has been doing a nightly thankful journal where I list 10 things I'm thankful happened that day (it helps keep my brain trained to look for

positive things), give myself a compliment (that can be hard), and offer a blessing for someone else (it's not all about me), and I ask God for three things. I need to do things like this because trying to see the positive is important in my pursuit for being more emotionally healthy and to be a better communicator – whiners are wieners.

Please know by sharing the positives of a negative brain I'm not saying, "I wish everyone could be negative brained because of the benefits." Everything has a good and bad side. And what's the drawback of seeing the negative side of life? It's seeing the negative side of life – it's uhhgggg-tastic. ***With a negative brain, it's amazing how easy it is to fall into a slump when everything seems to be going wrong or if I get lazy with actively working at seeing the positive.*** It's like having a slow metabolism. You might be eating the same as the skinny-Minnie beside you, but you're getting fat while they're fine. I once worked with a guy at Dofasco who looked very fit for someone in his forties and what was his secret? He would eat six donuts a sitting. Not exactly a meal of champions. Of course, he might look fit on the outside, but his innards were probably a mess. And there's the negative part of my brain coming out... in a positive way. ***My negative brain can protect me by finding the negative of his potentially jealous causing attribute*** – yea, in a strange way. In my grade six class, I was the heaviest kid, but that led me to starting to exercise, which has developed a routine and appreciation for it that has been a huge benefit as an adult. Meanwhile, people like my wife who were naturally skinny in their teens typically struggle to get into working out when their metabolism slows down – yea, for being the husky kid.

What's interesting is my negative brain protects me from certain vices. For instance, some people struggle with shopping and overspending, but that's never been a problem for me as a grownup because my monthly MasterCard bill helps scare me into good behavior – yea, for being cheap. My negative brain also keeps me from overeating because I hate the feeling of being too full – yea, for less calories in my body that seems to want to be fat.

At the same time, my negative brain can cause other vices to be incredibly tempting because my brain naturally seeks ways to cope with the swirling brain crap. Ideally we learn to flush the crap away (too bad there isn't a toilet you can insert into your brain), but it's so much easier just to numb it with drinking, pot, and modern video games. Their popularity makes sense. Fortunately, I've been too scared to try them – yea, for being a wuss. Even knowing how to flush the crap away and never having tried drinking, my brain will occasionally think, "I

wish I drank because it'd be so much easier than being healthy right now.” I can only imagine how hard it would be for other negative brained people who do those things not to overindulge.

As a negative brained person I'm more at risk of depression and anxiety issues, but that's not an excuse for me to have depression and anxiety issues. ***I might be running the race of life with a starting point behind others, but I don't have to stay at the back.*** It just means I need to work a little harder to get up and stay with the front of the pack.

I should point out that my experience helps me understand why people can have depression and anxiety issues, but I don't always have the most compassion for it. My first reaction now when I hear someone has depression is to wonder ***are you going to wallow in it or do something about it?*** It's a good thing I have a social filter (sometimes) and keep things like that to myself (usually). It's also good I don't drink because I can't afford to limit my already weak social filter: (drunk me) “Here's all the stuff my wife told me never to say...”

One of the patterns I've found with my negative brain is if I'm not careful it's easy for me to dread life. This is what happens when I overwork as a therapist because it wears down my brain and I start to dread getting up in the morning. Fortunately, it can be worse (***recognizing what could be worse is another helpful tool to fight the natural negative brain***). My first summer as a post secondary student I was working a landscape construction job (55 to 60 hours a week) on top of working a part time job, playing two nights of Ultimate Frisbee, and doing a project with my comedy team. It was all self imposed (although I didn't see it at the time), but I started to dread going to bed at night because going to sleep meant I'd have to face another very long day. This naturally caused me to stay up later than I should, which made me more tired in the morning further adding to my dread for the day. ***When you start to dread life, that's an obvious sign something needs to change.***

Besides looking for the positive, the other most important thing we can do with a negative brain is focus on the facts and not let our brains catastrophize situations. Facts are facts. They're not insulting or meant to hurt. They are what they are. If you don't like the facts, work at changing them or if you can't, accept them for what they are. For instance, I'm middle aged and every day getting closer to being dead – what can you do?

Focusing on facts adds to another important tool: brush things off. Last year I joined the board for my denomination after giving a lesson at the annual retreat to all of the members on what it means to be nice in a healthy way and not a pushover. At the first virtual board meeting, one of the elders was late joining and didn't realize I was now on the board. When he was asked about the weekend, the first thing he said was the weekend was great, but then added, "Chad was terrible." That was a real "welcome to the team" moment. It turned out he was upset my lesson for emotional health didn't use more scripture references. Because his reason was so lame, it made brushing his opinion off really easy. It also helped I could see the good in it (e.g. it was nice to have someone else put their foot in their mouth instead of me for a change). If that happened five years ago I wouldn't have handled it as well, which is a great sign of growth. Fortunately, he later apologized and admitted he regularly has to pull his foot out of his mouth (I can imagine). Things are fine between us now, and it helps knowing he's a very blunt person with very different opinions than most people. He wasn't being personal; he was sharing his belief that any talk should be filled with scripture references, which is not what I think makes for a good talk. People are allowed to have different opinions. Weird makes the world more interesting (if we don't take it personally).

This week may you consider how you can better handle having a negative brain and/or dealing with others who have them.

*Kind words are like honey—
sweet to the soul and healthy for the body.*

Pro 16:24

*A truly wise person uses few words;
a person with understanding is even-tempered.
Even fools are thought wise when they keep silent;
with their mouths shut, they seem intelligent.*

Pro 17:27-28

*Only simpletons believe everything they're told!
The prudent carefully consider their steps.*

Pro 14:15



The Struggle for Positive Minded People (& Dreamers)

In the last lesson we looked at how I have a negative brain, what that means, and how best to handle it. It could've been better... I mean it had some good moments (good save, me). There's nothing quite like real life experience to teach you helpful lessons. Personally, I'd rather real life experience teach me what it's like to win the lottery. In this lesson we're going to look at the opposite – yea. Positive minded people are amazing... if they're not annoying about it. Ever meet someone who was overly positive when you felt like garbage? Yea, you want to garbage them up. This isn't a necessarily mean response (unless you *act* mean to them). It's most likely wanting them to better understand how you feel. We just need to find a nice way to convey that rather than something like “I need to hurt you, so you'll better understand me! Where's a frying pan?” If someone is too positive with a negative person, they're not reading their audience. ***You might be positive, but you still need to have social skills.*** It's like a negative person feeling negative walking in a store with a greeter and growling at them. ***No matter how we feel, sometimes we need to muzzle our mood for the other person's sake and fake pleasantries.*** That being said, sometimes it's funny seeing an overly positive person with a grouch. Years ago when my very non-cheerful, non-morning person sister was at home, my cheerful, morning person mom greeting her was comedy gold (at least to me). The clash was their thing and it had an underlying enjoyment to it, which was something everyone else enjoyed seeing as well.

When it comes to positivity, I just have to look to my mother-in-law. She is off the charts positive... yeah, I don't get it. Early in my dating days with my wife, I was in a van with my wife's family including the grandparents. My mother-in-law was driving – why? I have no idea. Her husband was in the seat behind her yelling at her for something and her dad was in the passenger seat beside her yelling at her for something else. While they yelled at her, my mother-in-law was smiling and said, “Look at those trees. Aren't they beautiful? And that sky? Wow, it is looking so good today. This is going to be a great day.” It was like she didn't hear them. That moment stuck with me because I would've crumbled if I was the one being yelled at, but she was unfazed. Years later, I asked her about it and she said that was just how they talked – that's a very positive spin. To me, if you act like a jerk,

there's a good chance you're a jerk and need to make some changes. I'm still not sure which perspective is better, accept who the person is versus pushing for improvements, but there are benefits to both.

My mother-in-law's (very confusing) positive spirit can be very helpful. When my oldest was three, my mother-in-law entertained her with a bowl of water, a spoon, and 3 rocks for twenty-five minutes until dinner was ready. When she brought her ensemble of "goodies" out my negative brain was like "This is stupid," and then I was proven very wrong. My daughter was enthralled with this super lame, "Look at the rock change colour when I add water" game. My mother-in-law's positivity helped my daughter be glued to every word. In general, my mother-in-law is incredible with toddlers, old people, and people with mental disabilities. She is the queen of small talk. She'll talk for hours about nothing with such positivity people love it. Of course, my negative brain can flip this gift to the negative: ***Being good at small talk means avoiding serious conversations, which is what I'm drawn to.*** My brain is good at being a downer, but it's not necessarily wrong.

There are two very strong dangers for positive people. First, they can be taken advantaged of and even be scammed because there's a gullibility that naturally comes out of being positive: "I'm sure I can trust them?" Nope. "I'm sure it'll work out." Nope, again. This leads to the second danger: positive people can crash hard into a negative stupor because they were too positive to consider the risks. I once read that being overly positive was almost as dangerous as being overly negative. In fact, what can be surprising is I've found overly positive people are more likely to need depression or anxiety medication than partially negative people. The crash effect and being taken advantage of can be that painful. Thus, ***where I need to be continually asking myself, "Okay, I know the negative, but what's good about this?" positive people need to protect themselves by asking, "Okay, I know this will be great, but what are some risks?"***

What's interesting is I might be a negative brained person, but I can crash like a positive person – I get both worlds. Am I a positive person? Nope. You can trust me on that (and hopefully everything else I've written). ***What changes things for me are two very strong influences: I'm a dreamer (I come up with some crazy ideas) and I'm an inferior brained person*** (as discussed in previous lessons). So what is a dreamer? Over a span of five years, I spent many hours looking up calling agents of celebrities with different angles – I go big. I asked agents of top celebrities like Dwayne Johnson about doing a biography. They weren't interested. Fun fact, several years later, he came out with one. I tried

asking agents of medium level celebrities like Matthew Perry about doing a biography. They weren't interested. Fun fact, several years later, he came out with one. I went to New York and met with Zachary Levi to ask about doing a book on love and kindness, which I'll discuss more in another lesson. Several years later, he came out with a book on kindness. I even tried asking about using a celebrity's dog for the cover of one of my books. They weren't interested... and this time none of them came out with a book (at least not yet). Realistically, anyone having said yes to my requests would've been the same odds as winning the lottery, but being a dreamer, I had to convince myself it was worth asking. Knowing that meant calling was really hard because ***it felt better having the hope of them saying yes then to face the reality of them saying no.*** I knew the odds were stacked against me, but it was still disappointing to have the dream shot down. That being said, the worst thing for a dreamer is not having a dream. That's brutal. When there's nothing new to replace your broken dreams, it's like the crash of a positive person.

Being an inferior brained person (i.e. I need to earn it) makes me kind of like a positive person: "I can't do this, but I'm sure everyone else can." Nope. I give way too much credit to others. With construction stuff I regularly think, "I can't do this, but the worker can." Nope. Most times I don't think it's possible because it's not, but my inferior brain wants to assume it's just me. This dynamic naturally sets me up like a positive person: "I can trust you." Nope, and now I've crashed.

My wife, on the other hand, is more of a superior brained person (i.e. I deserve it), but throw in some negative brain thinking and she isn't nearly as blindly trusting of others as I am. On our honeymoon we got lost in a Mexico airport. Not the best airport to get lost. I asked for directions from several people (I assumed they were smarter than me). Nope. The one person tried taking us off the property to talk to some locals and I was like "I'm sure it's safe," but my wife was like "No thanks." She made the better choice. We were actually five feet away from the person who was supposed to shuttle us to the hotel. At the same time, my wife's negative brain (it's not as bad as mine) can make her very hard on herself and second guess everything she says and does. My guess is my wife's negative thinking is influenced by years of seeing her mom's blind optimism: "This will be great!... or I thought it would be." Fortunately, her experience helps me be safer... at least in a Mexico airport when we're lost.

This week may you consider how your communication is affected by being a positive person versus a dreamer and/or inferior brained person.

15 Options to Start Improving Communication (Improving Communication Pt 1)

I was recently talking with a friend who was struggling with communication in his relationship – a therapist who had a discussion about communication; how rare is that? What was unique about this situation was it was the guy complaining about it (yeah, it happens). My friend is an amazing person who doesn't know how amazing he is (a typical problem for amazing people). His wife is a lot of fun in public, but from what I can guess she is ultimately a Hider who buries her head in the sand to avoid dealing with things and justifies it by passing the blame to others. Meanwhile, my friend is a Hider who takes the blame, which leads to him punishing himself in some way rather than pushing an issue. The reality is if he was with a stereotypical woman who wants to communicate (women typically aren't Hiders with their spouse), he could easily have a relationship with solid communication because he wants to share more. Unfortunately, that's not the situation. Thus, he has three options:

1. Do nothing and suffer. This will likely lead to someone cheating or having really strong resentment grow, which leads to its own issues.
2. Do nothing and hope it magically heals (not a wise move).
3. Try something different.

When I presented these three options, my friend naturally wanted to do the third one (not a tough choice), but he didn't know where to start. Here's a list of options I shared:

1. ***Schedule double date nights:*** Meeting up with another couple adds new conversation options and gives opportunities for partners to reminisce together.
2. ***Join an activity together:*** This can be volunteering somewhere, doing dance lessons, going to church, etc.
3. ***Join a team:*** Being on the same team for a sport or board game night helps couples feel like they're partners. This is the same advice I

recommend for parents wanting their kids to get along – put them on the same team.

4. ***Do a project:*** Finding a project to do together like something around the house or at a parent's can get the couple working together and having something to talk about.
5. ***Daily Talks:*** It's very beneficial to schedule a time to talk every day about frivolous things like during dinner or on a walk.
6. ***Weekly or monthly "business meeting":*** Having a 5-15 minute business style meeting where all serious matters can be discussed can prevent constantly rehashing the same fights and being afraid of criticisms throughout the week or month.
7. ***Nightly thankful time:*** Sharing something you're thankful happened that day can be uplifting as it's a very positive way to end the day and build connection.
8. ***Appreciating the other:*** Whether by note, text, or in person, it's helpful to share one thing you're thankful the person did that benefited you that day. This forces you to see what each other are doing and give validation to the effort.
9. ***Something Learned:*** Share something you learned like a new song you heard, an interesting fact, something in the news, or a lesson you figured out from an experience you had.
10. ***Read together:*** Reading a newspaper, magazine, or Bible together and pointing out interesting things can be helpful for starting conversations. This is the whole premise for these 52 Lessons books I write.
11. ***Premade Questions:*** Look up conversation starter or "Would you rather...?" type questions. (Lesson 52 in *52 Lessons for a Better Relationship* gives a list of conversation starter questions.) These are particularly great if you can go on a road trip or if you're sitting around a campfire where the environment is very conducive for sharing.
12. ***Hate:*** Find something you can both hate together. God gave us the devil to hate, so that's one option. You can even find a book (hopefully not mine) or a news show you can get angry at together.
13. ***Extra help:*** See a therapist or find an older couple you admire to give you guidance on what they do in order to have better communication.
14. ***Survey:*** Do a survey together where you ask as many people as you can the one rule they'd recommend for communication.

Tip: A lot of people say, “Don’t go to bed angry,” but that’s terrible advice because most times when we’re fighting, the best thing we can do is get some sleep and start fresh the next day.

15. **Limit texting:** Text messages should only be quick notes like “Good morning,” “I’m going to be late,” and “Don’t forget your head at work like last night.” (Maybe not that last one.) Full conversations should be with voices in person or on a phone.

Side Note: Texting and social media addictions are killing couples. A common problem is couples will be in the same room with one watching a show and the other on their phone and the person watching the show will feel rejected. When someone is on their phone, it feels like they’re tuning us out and that we don’t matter, which leads to fights. Couples need to have set hours where there is no phone.

This week may you consider how you can grow in communication.

Helping Someone Want to Improve Communication

(Improving Communication, Pt 2)

In the last lesson I gave 15 different options for improving communication. I came up with that list after a friend told me he realized he needed to work on his communication with his wife. After thinking I had just come up with the answer to my friend's problem he threw this curveball at me: "Yea, she's not going to want to do any of that." What? She's going to dismiss my brilliance? (Written with fake cockiness). That's the problem with offering ideas; sometimes what we think is great won't help. My friend said my list was good, but the bigger problem was convincing his wife to actually try something to help their situation. After all, as I noted last time, she's a Hider. Hiders can be particularly difficult to work with because they don't want to actually face things like challenges and conflict. Hiders are at a high risk of stonewalling, which is shutting others out emotionally, which can be very hurtful to others. People can stonewall out of fear or punishment. If it's out of punishment, they're more Cold & Condescending whereas Hiders are more fear based. When a typical wife complains about her husband's communication, she's most likely dealing with a fear stonewalling: (guy) "We're fine. I'm not happy, but I can put up with this, so let's leave it alone. Talking about it will only lead to you criticizing me and making me feel like I'm not good enough. The odds are I'll be forced to apologize to make you feel like I get it, but I'll be silently angry since *you* won't apologize for *my* hurt leaving me feeling like a pushover." My guess is my friend's situation is different. I don't know the whole story, but I'm guessing she wants to feel sorry for herself, which means not wanting to change. Why do the work of figuring out what you can change of yourself and then do the work to be different in the future when it's easier to blame the other person for everything. This isn't far from the typical pattern I see as a therapist where a lot of women burning themselves out doing so much end up passing the blame to their husbands for the relationship not being better. Because they're already over working to keep the household to their standards, how could it be their fault? Being overwhelmed, they're hoping for their partner to change and make their life better/easier. Unfortunately, unless she married a loser (it can happen), the partner is burning out along with her already and/or he's getting frustrated that she does too much and expects too much of herself and the family.

So how do you address a situation like this where the partner doesn't likely want to address the communication issues? This is the route I recommend:

Partner A: Can I ask you a question? (Asking permission helps the other person feel like they have a say on this conversation)

Partner B: I guess so. (If the response is "No," then you simply say, "Okay; I'll try again later.")

Partner A: Would you say that our communication has room to grow or is it the best it can be?

Did you notice how the question has two options? I'm all about questions with two options because it encourages the person to pick one. Open ended questions have their place, but I rarely use them because there's no control for where the conversation goes. Open ended questions can also be overwhelming and cause a panic response. Two option questions, however, keep the conversation flowing and gives the asker a little more control. For instance, in this situation the two options question will lead to five options:

- 1) If they choose "There's room to grow," respond: Me too. I'm glad we're on the same page. I have three ideas to make it better; which one did you want to try first? There's (give options from last lesson's list).
- 2) If they choose "It is the best it can be," respond: Really? I was thinking we have room to grow. If we're the best we can be; I guess you won't mind trying this idea I had to prove me wrong.
- 3) If the answer is "Both," respond: "That makes sense. I have three ideas to make it better; which one did you want to try first? There's (give options from last lesson's list).
- 4) If the response is like a politician and doesn't answer the question: "I see what you're saying. Now back to my question; do you think there's room to grow or is it the best it can be?"
- 5) If the person starts attacking you, it's likely a sign they're feeling overwhelmed or angry that you're calling them out on something. Asking a two option question can get you yelled at because the person is subconsciously trying to scare you off. If this is the case, get away; don't let them attack you. Later, when things are calmer ask something like "Earlier when I asked you a question you got upset; was that because you were having a bad moment or were you afraid of saying your real answer?" Ultimately, if the person doesn't answer by the second or third time, make a guess, "I'm guessing you're not answering because the

answer is (negative option).” People will be quick to correct you if you’re wrong or do something defensive if you’re right.

My friend told me that his wife had already agreed that they had bad communication, but told him they would deal with it later. Great, I can work with that. Here are a couple two-option question options to use. (Yes, I’m going right back to the two option question):

- 1) “When you say you’ll be willing to do something in the future, do you want to aim for next week or next month?” By giving times, it pushes the person to choose.
- 2) “When you say we can deal with it later, do you want to wait to start because you’re going through something really difficult right now or are you procrastinating?” This calls the person out on the fact they’re likely procrastinating.
- 3) “Are you asking to address this later because you’re hiding *something* from me or are *you* hiding from me?” This one is risky because it’s so direct, but it’s pushing the person to confront any guilt or fear that might be there holding them back. The guilt could be from something like an addiction, hidden debt, or an affair while the fear could be a sign we’re scarier than we realize or the person is just scared of conflict in general. But either way, they need to get over it because that’s what you do in relationships. You can’t love someone properly if you’re hiding from them.

Bonus: If your partner has already mentioned your communication is weak, you can go with a question like “When you said our communication is weak, was that your way of initiating us doing something about it or was it simply an observation?” And then you can offer the list from the last lesson.

My friend liked what I was saying, but replied his wife would simply shut him out and not answer. That means he has to go back to my previous suggestion: Ask the question again and if she still won’t answer make a guess: “I’m guessing you’re not answering my question because you don’t want to admit that...” If he’s wrong, she’ll correct him, but in this case, I’m guessing she’ll go Desperate Attacker to scare him off. If this happens, he now has several more options:

- 1) Say something like “I’m guessing you need a chance to process this. I’ll ask you about how you want to address our communication tomorrow.” Continue this every day until the person cracks: “Fine! Let’s try something.”

- 2) Offer a reward: “I’ll make you a deal. If you’ll have a conversation about what we can do about our communication, I will let you give me back rub (or a better reward for the other person).”
- 3) Ask something like “Are you not interested in working on things right now because on some level you enjoy suffering or do you just not care about me and my needs?”
- 4) Go heavy (best left as a last resort), “Here’s something for you to consider. I love you and want us to be together, but I can’t keep doing this the way we are. Either you don’t get how angry I am about this or you don’t care. Either way I need to help you see why you should want to make this work. So if you’re not willing to work on our communication by next month, I will (repercussion).” A repercussion isn’t punishment; it’s motivation.

Sometimes a helpful repercussion is a trial separation, which is having one person live in the house for a few days to a week while the other stays somewhere else and then the two switch. It’s to help give people a better idea of how terrible life is without each other while giving space to heal. Breaking up is brutal on the family, and this can be a way to show that. Unfortunately, sometimes you need to go heavy to make the other person wake up and/or stop hiding. A common problem is for the wife to say she wants change only to have the guy brush it off until a year later when she says she’s leaving him and then he’s begging her to stay and do therapy together. This could’ve been prevented if this approach was used to prove how serious she was. Trial separations are meant to save relationships and prevent resentment from continuing to grow.

This week may you consider how you can use these two option questions.

Men & Women are Different

(Improving Communication, Pt 3)

One of the biggest problems we have with communication in marriage is not accepting the fact that men and women are different – and boy, are we different. I know some people like to claim that we're all the same, but that's impossible when you consider one has XX chromosomes and the other XY, which explains why women often ask, "Y are you so dumb? Oh, right. You're missing an X." As a therapist, one of the most common differences I've noticed between men and women (in Canada) is that one gender tends to be mean and the other is oblivious. Occasionally the roles can be reversed, but it's pretty steady. Any guesses how this is distributed, mean versus oblivious? Here's a scenario my wife still reminds me of that happened 15 years ago – women tend to have better long term memories (at least for mistakes the guy makes). We were at a wedding and the bridesmaids were walking down the aisle trying not to look awkward despite all the strangers looking at them. While the one was attempting to strut despite her lack of experience in heels, I leaned over to my wife (my girlfriend at the time) and snickered, "That one really let herself go," and then waited for her to laugh at my uncouth observation. If you're a guy, you'll probably understand this kind of joke. It's up there with "Smell this... it's disgusting." It's funny because it's wrong. If you're a woman, you're probably thinking, "Chad's a jerk," and you'd have the same response as my wife. After I shared my comment, I watched for my wife's face to have that "I can't believe you just said that; you're so naughty" laugh moment, but it never came. Instead, my wife looked at me like "Are you serious?" She then whispered, "She's pregnant." Now, that moment would be extra funny if I was like "Yeah, that's the joke," but here's the thing – I had no idea. I just saw this woman with a dress that must have been crammed on after covering her in butter like getting a ring on or off that's too small. The back zipper was screaming, "How long do we have to hold this thing together? We need reinforcements!" In my defense, I wasn't judging this young woman. I just wanted to make my wife laugh... and failed miserably. My wife was appalled (and not just because the people around us could hear me – oops). She couldn't understand how I could be so oblivious.

Now let's consider a different situation. It was the third year of dating my wife, which was back when she lived at home with her mom and sister – that was a lot of estrogen and way too many XXs. If you didn't know, girls typically don't share

home space well. This is partly because women are nesters and, therefore, want to be able to make their home the way they want it. Sisters become competition and it gets even worse if there's any clothing being borrowed – that's when the real nasty sides come out. If you met either sister in public then or now you would think they are the friendliest and happiest people, but at home... whoa. At home it was a very different situation. I should point out that as soon as my wife's sister moved out of the house, their dynamic improved and now they're very close. It's funny how distance and being able to have their own nest can make it easier for girls to be close.

I should also point out that I came from a home that if someone yelled once a year, it was shocking. At my wife's house, if someone yelled only once a day, it was shocking: "Are you feeling okay?" When we first started dating, we were both thrown off. My wife didn't think my family loved each other (yelling was something you did with people you loved) while I thought they were nuts (written with love). One of us was right. But who's more nuts, the person who's nuts or the other person who willingly dates, marries, and has kids with someone he knows is nuts? I think I win; yea?

In this situation between my wife and her sister, my wife locked herself in her bedroom while her sister screamed through the closed door at her. I don't remember what exactly was said, but I think it was something like: (sister) "I love you so much!" (wife) "Well, I love you more!" (sister) "No, I love you more because you're so amazing. The proof is how amazing your boyfriend is!" (wife) "You're right. I must be super amazing to have a guy like him!" While this vocal workout was going on, the sister's boyfriend and I ended up sitting in the living room waiting for things to calm down. We were smart enough to know not to get between two sisters expressing their love for each other. If you could see the two very opposite scenes, it was pretty funny, but the topper was the actual conversation us two guys had: (me) "So how was your week? (Girls screaming in the background.)" (boyfriend) "It was pretty good. (More screaming.)" (me) "Uh, Mike? I can see your testicle." (boyfriend looking down) "Huhn, you're right." That was a very strange moment for us. The boyfriend was wearing shorts with a giant hole in them (he was cheaper than I've ever been) and that hole had made arrangements to be in line with the opening of his boxers allowing the testicle to be let out for air – delightful. While our girlfriends were going nuts, I got to see some nuts.

When it comes to hurting your partner, I find there are five main reasons for women doing it.

- 1) It was role modelled.
- 2) Women tend to be really mean to themselves and this can spill over to the person who is their extension – it's very romantic.
- 3) Some women want payback and/or to punish: "You hurt me, so I'm going to hurt you back."
- 4) Some women hurt their partner because they want you to know your place. They're number one.
- 5) Some women hurt other because they want to feel understood: "I'm hurt and if you don't show me you care, you must not understand how hurt I am. This means I need to hurt you to make you be on the same level as I am because then you'll properly understand."

I should also point out that certain women like my mom would never hurt anyone (except to protect her kids). The only person these people will hurt is themselves as they take the blame for everything while giving others a free pass. The majority of men I know and meet, however, didn't marry women like my mom – those women are pretty rare. Women tend to be very good at using their brains to get what they want while guys are more brawn.

From my experience, many teenage boys have a tendency to be like girls when it comes to meanness as they try to knock down other guys who are the competition. Married men, however, tend to be different. We're not in competition anymore. Now we're in survival mode. Thus, we tend to go another way: "Can we just have fun and relax?" Common husband phrases: "That upset you? Why? I was joking," or "Why are you so angry? You asked my opinion, and I gave an honest answer." ***One of the reasons we're oblivious is because we're not the one making the social rules – women do.*** If I happen to follow social rules it's likely because I was originally trained by my mom and sister who then passed the baton to my wife to continue training me. I just want people around me to be happy, so I'll follow some rules if that helps, but sometimes the rules don't make any sense or I'm too lazy to care. I'm not trying to be mean – why would I? What's the logical reason to be mean? Meanness is more of an emotional response (like if you want to attack me for this paragraph).

In marriage, I find guys less wanting to hurt their partner and more "I'm hurt, so I'm going to stuff it down and/or hide from you." I know when my wife has a

bad moment, I immediately shutdown and it'll last until I feel safe enough to be normal. It's this mix of "I'm scared you'll hurt me more" and "I don't want you to criticize me for how I feel." For instance, the other day I had a spare moment, so I moved a plant in the back garden. My wife is a little more casual about our gardens, but I was really happy with how it made the garden look from the kitchen window, especially when it was her favorite plant. When I showed it to her, her response was "I don't really care right now." Her "right now" comment is a good reminder that **timing is huge in communication**, but I would argue my timing was fine; her response just sucked. She should've simply replied, "That looks great." It's less words. Plus, it's nicer. That's how my mom would've responded. (Can I say that? I don't know; I'm oblivious.) It often seems women burn themselves out trying to make everyone happy (my wife does this), which means there isn't a lot left at home for the husband. The husband, on the other hand, is expected to accept what is given him because after all, "Happy wife, happy life," and "Happy husband... who cares? Is the woman happy?"

Can you imagine if I had responded to my wife the way she did to me and then she told her friends I said, "I don't care"? I'd sound like the biggest jerk in the world. There's a double standard in communication, however, that says husbands need to suck it up. If you're a woman and it feels like it's the reverse, you got screwed. Women are supposed to rule the roost; they nest and get the husband to help. If the husband doesn't help make the nest better, again, she got screwed. This idea also connects to why women often get stuck thanking and praising their husband's more than the husbands do in return. A lot of women get upset because they do more around the house, yet when their husband does something good, he wants to be praised. Why is this? Because the husband only did it for her. He wouldn't have bothered if it was up to him.

One of the struggles for women is they want to make things better and it can feel like they're alone in their emotion as guys tend to be more easygoing or lazy. It's hard for them not to get fed up and use digs and complaints. I get it; guys are annoying. There's a reason I didn't marry one.

The main reason recognizing this specific difference that one gender tends to be mean and the other is oblivious is it should reduce the hurt. Women need to remember that the guy is oblivious and not trying to be mean. Sure, the guy can try to be more sensitive, but if his goal isn't to be hurtful, why do you need to feel so much hurt? It was an accident. It's like the difference between someone purposely plowing into your car versus someone who made a mistake. The

intention should matter in how it's interpreted. You can still be upset, but it shouldn't be nearly as bad. At the same time, if someone is trying to be mean, we shouldn't take it personally. If they're mean, it's not us; it's them. It's like a cat slinking away when you try to pet them. It's not you; it's them. Sometimes a mean person is hurt, so we should have compassion and other times the message is simply, "I suck; just a reminder." (other person) "Oh, right. I won't take this personally."

This week may you see how mean and oblivious are very different.

When We Screw Up (Improving Communication, Pt 4)

In the last lesson I wrote that men can be oblivious, and I proved that really well with the previous two lessons where I wrote about a friend's situation. It was originally one lesson, but I divided it into two lessons for this book and expanded them in order to be more helpful. From a therapist perspective, they were two very practical lessons. From a personal level... they sucked. I was feeling good about the lessons until the friend I wrote about messaged me to say, "She read your lesson and isn't happy." Oh, crap cakes (the worst kind of cake). When I wrote that lesson I never took into consideration that she would read it – can you say oblivious? I also thought I was vague enough that it couldn't be connected to them. After all, I could've been writing about a client and just said "friend" or I could've been lying and said "friend" to hide the fact that I don't have any. Based on the dumb things I say and do that wouldn't be farfetched. A wise person once wrote, "But a tiny spark can set a great forest on fire. And among all the parts of the body, the tongue is a flame of fire... It can set your whole life on fire... People can tame all kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, and fish, but no one can tame the tongue." (Jam 3:5b-8a) If the tongue is so dangerous, how can we not expect it to get us into trouble once in awhile, especially when what we say/write is then up to the receiver for interpretation? How many husbands have gotten in trouble for saying what they thought was a joke, but it was interpreted as a jab? How many people have made situations worse by texting even if what they wrote seemed helpful? Fortunately, social media never leads to misinterpretations. (That might have been sarcasm.) Since the tongue is so dangerous, we need to be ready to know what to do when we screw up.

In my original lesson that got me in trouble I mentioned how awesome my friend is and this situation proved it. He was incredibly gracious, especially since I got him in trouble with his wife. I screwed up hard. He could've easily attacked me or been an extreme Hider never talking to me again, but he's too good a person to do that. I'm a lucky friend.

As we discussed in the first lesson of this book, when we screw up we have a handful of choices:

1. **Desperate Attack:** It can sound strange, but it’s amazing how often this is the go-to especially for married people as we attack to scare the person off: “I could apologize or yell at you... yeah, the second sounds better. I’ve had a bad day.”
2. **Desperate Defend:** Go over the top kind and apologize to the point of annoying.
3. **Hide:** This can include physically hiding or lying.
4. **Cold & Condescending:** Some people defend themselves by passing the blame or talking down to others: “Yeah, you deserved that. I think you owe me the apology for making me hurt you.”
5. **Simply apologize:** There’s a novel idea.

Bonus: “A gentle answer turns away wrath/ but a harsh word stirs up anger.” (Pro 15:1, NIV)

You’d think being a therapist the fifth would be a no brainer for me – nope. I desperately wanted to lie and say it wasn’t about them. I even wrote a beautifully crafted lie before deleting it. I knew my friend deserved better (more crap cakes). Honesty’s hard, but I needed to own what I did. ***In this situation my friend proved by being someone of integrity he made it easier for me to follow his lead.*** I didn’t need to bite my tongue or be the “better” person. I simply needed to mirror his integrity, which is one of the reasons the Golden Rule is so valuable. We’re more likely to do back what the person does to us. People are often mirrors. ***By being a good person, we’re more likely to have people be good back.*** If we’re rotten, guess what the return is likely going to be.

Now the question becomes how do I properly apologize? ***An apology is always a great way to show we care about someone and sometimes it’s a way to admit fault.*** In this case, I needed to do both. I cared and I was at fault. I know a lot of people don’t like apologizing because they don’t think they did anything wrong, but an apology isn’t always about admitting fault. It’s like being at a funeral: (visitor) “I’m sorry for your loss.” (family member of the person who died) “I knew you did it!” It’s also important to remember that an apology is not a sneaky way to give an excuse for what we did and it should never include a “but” because a “but” erases the apology.

When someone cares and is at fault like I was, ***I needed to give a proper apology, which includes defining in one sentence what I did wrong and how I can prevent it from happening again.*** In this instance, my original apology to

him sucked because of my fear. What I wrote should've been simpler and to the point more like the following:

"I am very, very sorry. My goal of giving you a compliment and saying how much I think of you while teaching a valuable lesson backfired hard. Instead, what I did became a betrayal of your trust because it got you in trouble with your wife. I should've been smarter by asking permission to use the conversation we had as a basis for my lesson or simply not mentioned you. Thank you for being so gracious. I hope I can be given the opportunity to restore what I've damaged."

This is a good apology. The one I actually sent was rambly and didn't include thanking my friend like it should. Panic makes even the most experienced person dumb. Ultimately, I should've apologized to admit fault and to humble myself before him, and then I should've offered appreciation to raise him up because he was incredibly kind when most would've lost their mind on me. And for the record, I asked permission to write this lesson.

Now, having apologized, I will now have to let time pass while trying to demonstrate I can be trusted (***Trust = Time + Good Boundaries + Good Behavior***). That is the repercussion for my poor choice. Where I get stumped is how would I apologize to his wife (if I was ever given the chance)? To be honest, I'm not sure how to define what I did wrong to her. Ideally, I would be able to ask a couple two option questions like I taught in the lesson that got me in trouble to better understand what made her so upset. For instance, "Are you upset at me because I betrayed your husband's trust and you're mad on his behalf or are you angry because you think I did something personally against you?" If it was the first, that makes sense. If it was the second, that's really unfortunate because that definitely wasn't my goal.

The more direct question for me to ask is "Are you angry that your husband told me something you think should be kept private or that I made him sound better than you?" If it's the former then this becomes another question: "Should we be allowed to talk about our marital frustrations with a close friend or are we supposed to keep it buried?" From an emotional health standpoint, the answer is we need to be sharing. It's healthy for us and helps develop friendships when we share our hearts because when venting is done right it leads to better connection. If the answer is she felt like I made him sound better than her, I would want to follow it up with an apology and a question: "I'm sorry for the hurt I caused. I would never intentionally want to upset you, and I can see how I was too cavalier

in my lesson since I never thought you'd recognize it was about you let alone you even reading it. If I can ask a question: Do you think my goal was to compliment my friend or to put you down?" Notice I'm not saying "but" in my apology, but (now I'm using a "but") by recognizing that I made a mistake (aka I was oblivious) and wasn't purposely trying to put her down (aka be mean), it should reduce the hurt (or logically it should). Ultimately, what I think about her when we haven't seen each other in years is really a matter of who cares? To her, I should be a nobody (or someone she can use for free help because I'm friends with her husband).

The question I'd love to ask but will never get the chance is "Are you hurt because I mislabelled you as a hider who passes the blame or because I spoke truth and you didn't like the way it sounded?"

Bonus: Here's a great line: "So don't bother correcting mockers;/ they will only hate you./ But correct the wise,/ and they will love you." (Pro 9:8)

What's unfortunate is I believe in being factual in order to develop better self understanding and confidence. This, in turn, helps me better accept others for their ways. For instance, I am a guy who struggles with wanting to hide from conflict and bounces between blaming myself too much and passing the blame. This is who I am and this is what I need to work on improving. When I labeled my friend's wife as a Hider who passes the blame, was I judging her or simply observing her behavior in order to better address the situation? I'd argue the latter because it was factual observing, which is necessary for proper social skills and growth. After all, who am I to judge? I don't know the whole situation and I'm a nobody to her.

What's been interesting/challenging for me is while I'm a Hider or Desperate Defender, my wife bounces between all the categories. With most people, she is quick to hide from conflict and blame herself, but with me she's more Desperate Attacker and Cold & Condescending. You could argue this can be seen as a compliment because it's a sign of her trust with me. Either way, that's who she is – it's fact. She can work on being healthier, but those tendencies will always be there. Considering I married her, I can't be angry for her being who she is. I can only help encourage healthier behavior by demonstrating what's healthy. ***I ultimately need to be like my friend who showed great integrity when I screwed up making it easier for me to show integrity in return.***

The great thing about my wife's modes versus my own is we can balance each other out. By being different, we can make each other better... or drive each other nuts. It's always a little of both.

In regards to my friend, there are two main possible results:

1. His wife will prove I was right (i.e. she's a Hider who passes the blame by not dealing with this situation while hating me.)
2. She'll prove I'm wrong. This could be proving she's not a Hider or she'll simply be motivated to push past her natural instincts and work with my friend to have better communication, and a year from now she'll be thanking me for my bluntness/ obliviousness.

Side Note: It's been well over a year since this happened and nothing has changed, so I guess I was proven right.

This week may you consider how and when to apologize.

Do You Want Fairness or to be the Better Person?

People suck... I'm including myself on that list, so it's okay. Sometimes it's hard not to say or do something I shouldn't, but what can you expect when I'm a person? I find the hardest time not to say something I shouldn't is when I want a situation to feel fair. ***The problem is I can either seek fairness or I can be the better person; you can't have both.*** Fairness means if the other person appears to be rude, I'm rude back; if the other person appears loud, I'm loud back; if the other person appears mean, I'm mean back. See how that works? It's very tit for tat. You give yin; I give yang... or however that works. But here's the problem. Whenever I ask someone who started the fight, it's always the other person. Whenever I ask who was mean first, it's always the other person. When I ask who yelled first, it's always the other person. Who started it is perspective, and we tend to see the other person as the bad one. In this, grownups are just like kids: "They started it!" We can always justify our actions: "I had to yell at them because they yelled at me." That's so-called fairness. This is why people in divorce can get so nasty: "But I deserve (blank) because they did (blank)." People can always justify their behavior because they were seeking fairness. But again, if you seek fairness, you sacrifice being the better person. Why shouldn't I yell at someone who first yelled at me? Because if I want to be the better person, I need to bite my tongue. If I yell back, I'm doing the same thing that they did; I'm equally bad. If you yell and I don't, I'm the better person. If you swear, use insults, or have a condescending tone while I bite my tongue, I'm the better person. What's unfortunate is in the moment our brain craves fairness and biting our tongue feels wrong – it wants justice. In the long run, however, what our brain really wants is to feel proud: "I bit my tongue. Screw them; I was the better person." That might sound less than nice, but it's the reality. If I bite my tongue – something that is very hard to do – then I need to give myself a mental reward later. Saying, "Screw you," is a totally fair thing to do if the other person doesn't hear us. It's a form of venting and letting out our frustrations. The better person might scream and swear and say the meanest things possible, but it's all done in a journal or privately in the car where no one else will hear it. ***The better person bites their tongue in the moment and releases their anger alone later.*** A foolish person bites their

tongue and never releases it – that’s called bottling up and that leads to an explosion later.

Here’s a quick example where I was good. I recently had someone contact me about being their therapist. In their message they said they wanted someone who does in-person sessions and has an office with easy access parking. They also asked for my bio, which was weird because they found my contact on a website that has it already listed. Regardless, they knew what they wanted – good for them. My written response was “Thanks for reaching out. Unfortunately, I currently only work virtually. I’m guessing that means you won’t want to work with me, but in case you’re still interested, my website is www.chaddavid.ca.” I could’ve had a better message, but this was more of a quick note acknowledging I received their message with little expectation they’d want to use me. I’ve been turned down by a number of people who want in-person because for some reason they really want to spend the time and money to drive to an office and share germs with the risk of cancelling from weather or sickness. (Fun fact, virtual therapy has had better results than in-person largely because it’s so convenient people can do more sessions and there’s never a disruption from snow or sickness). Their response? A little shocking: “Considering how negative you are, I wouldn’t want to work with you. Best of luck.” What? Did you just insult me and then add a dig at the end: “Best of luck”? What is that? This message really threw me off because... what? Why did you bother responding if you were just going to be mean? My brain wanted to send an equally jabby response because my brain wanted fairness: “Hey genius, I don’t meet your requirements. Maybe you don’t need therapy. You need an IQ upgrade.” Instead, I needed to be the better person – it’s part of my job. I sent an apology with a quick explanation that I meant I didn’t meet their criteria, so I figured they’d want to find someone else. This time they ghosted me... something they should’ve done the first time. At least I can be proud of myself for biting my tongue... although it still feels a little unsettling. Why? Because they suck.

I recently had a moment where I didn’t bite my tongue, and guess who that was with? As many married people would guess, my wife. As much as I try, like a normal person, my desire for fairness sometimes wins... and I pay the price later. When we’re at home, having self control is harder because our home social filter tends to be more relaxed than our in-public filter. It’s like how our fashion is more relaxed as home. For instance, at home I wear old jogging pants while in public I wear my good ones... like a winner. At home, a spouse often has a way of getting under our skin unlike anyone else. My wife is a champion at this while she’d say

that I'm the gold medal winner... although I win without even trying because I'm oblivious to what I'm saying being dumb or I accidentally left a mess because I got distracted. So here's the situation: I had opened the fridge to get something to eat and as I went to close the door, my two year old snuck in the way – never a good thing. She found her uncovered cup of apple cider on the top shelf of the fridge, and she clumsily went to grab it... you know, like a two year old. Before I could stop her, she was saying, “Saw Daddy” – my two year old is the champion of messes, but at least she can be nice about it... sometimes. As the cider dripped from the top shelf of the fridge like a dirty waterfall, my response was below angry but slightly above calm, “Why was there an uncovered glass of cider in the fridge?” That is what I call a rhetorical question – not my wife. Personally, I still think I had a natural response that was fair to say out loud because I wasn't yelling or directing a comment at anyone specifically. I was also happy I didn't get harsh with my daughter because she already knew she made a mistake and apologized. Discipline is meant to correct a behavior and since she already knew to be apologetic, anything I could say to her was unnecessary. Meanwhile, my wife didn't agree with my expression. She felt I had attacked her (even though it had nothing to do with her... yet). She came in the kitchen snapping, “You filled the glass too full and she barely drank it. What was I supposed to do, dump it in the sink?” In her mind, she was seeking fairness. Considering I wasn't talking to her and I didn't even know she could hear me from the other room, I now felt attacked – this wasn't fairness in my eyes. So what's my go-to? I, in turn, went for what I thought was fair. In my defense (aka my excuse), I had just finished work and I was trying to get something for dinner, so not only did I have my weaker home social filter, I had tiredness and hunger adding to my lack of self control. Sure, my wife was tired from watching the girls all day, but this is about me, so I'll ignore that fact (you know, like a selfish person). She said, “What am I supposed to do, dump it in the sink?” and in high pitched from fear/shock voice I replied, “Yes, pour it down the sink. Why set me up to clean a mess?” Like my earlier question, in her eyes her question was rhetorical – not to me. She wasn't looking for an answer. My response was completely unnecessary. We are now equal – although not in her mind because I now just one upped her. Fights are fun, aren't they?

Because my wife and I are both “get the job done” people, we both started trying to clean up the spill – guess how that went. Two agitated, tired people working in close proximity – that's not ending well. One of us complained “You're in the way!” I won't say who said that, but while my wife loves physical touch, she hates people being too close to her when she's working. As she was sopping up the

cider with a cloth, I pointed out that we should take the shelf out to clean it properly. Guess how that went. Even the friendliest suggestion when someone is upset feels like criticism. Can you say, “Bad choice”? I don’t know what she said next, but my response was definitely far from making me the better person: “Is there anything else you want to criticize me for?” There’s the comment I really should’ve kept to myself. Was that how I felt? Absolutely. Was that a fair thing for me to say, especially when I often feel criticized, which is a very normal husband complaint? Absolutely. I was seeking fairness and I got it... at the expense of being the better person. It also meant my wife left leaving me to clean up the spill on my own – bugger.

Another less-than-great moment was when I was helping my two year old and something small spilled. My wife said to me, “You’d better clean that,” and my go-to response was a sarcastic, “Oh really? I never would’ve guessed that.” Yup, this therapist can be a jerk. That’s what happens when our brain seeks fairness. Unfortunately, “fairness” often looks like being a jerk. I guess I still have some things to learn, but we’ll keep that between us.

I should note that if we do something out of kindness or simply bite our tongue when someone is angry at us and the other person gets angrier: “You think you’re better than me for not saying anything?” That’s fine. Let them be angry. Let them think you’re a bad person... because that’s what they are being. ***People accuse others of what they do.*** If they’re being bad, don’t seek fairness because that only makes you bad as well. Bite your tongue and release your anger later – be the better person (unlike me).

Tip: It can be very helpful to tell yourself you’re the better person as a reward because otherwise it can feel like you’re bottling up and being weak.

This week may you strive to be the better person

Stop Giving Men So Much Credit

Me: Why were you so upset when I said (blank)?

Wife: Because you were referring to (a different blank).

Me: No, I wasn't. I said (blank) because I meant (blank). There's no "read between the lines" with me.

Wife: Well, take it as a compliment that I thought you were smart enough to.

Me: For the record, I'm way too lazy to be manipulative – you're welcome.

Side Note: If you're wondering, my use of "(blank)" isn't because I'm hiding something from you – I try to be honest in my lessons. I used "blank" because I actually don't remember what was said... you know, like a guy. I don't really remember fights (unless I write them down right away to use as an example). My wife? She can remember fights... you know, like a wife. How accurately she remembers them... that's up for debate: (wife) "But that's how it felt." (me) "But do you remember how it actually was?"

As a marriage therapist, the above conversation is a common problem I find with couples: Guys get accused of being these grand manipulators (this includes gas lighting, guilt trips, and underhanded comments) when the truth is... nope. We are normally grand relaxers and women haaaaate that to the point they often don't believe it: (wife) "You can't be that relaxed. You must be hiding something and manipulating me." (husb) "Sorry, were you talking? I was relaxed and not paying attention." For instance, when a guy is driving on a clear highway and his wife asks, "What are you thinking about?" There's a good chance the guy is going to answer, "Nothing." This, of course, doesn't make any sense to the wife who is thinking about ten things at once and is likely wanting the husband to say something like "I was thinking about what chores I can do for you when we get home to reduce your workload." That's a gold star moment. A rookie move would be to say, "I was thinking about how lucky I am to have you in my life," because there's a good chance she'll think he's being sarcastic or overcompensating to hide something: (wife) "Who's the other woman!" (husb) "I said I was thinking of you!" (wife) "That doesn't make any sense. What's really going on?" Or maybe this last one is just me because sarcasm is my first language: (me) "I love you." (wife) "You sound like Tim Curry in Home Alone 2. You really need to learn how not to sound sarcastic." (me) "That's a greeaaaaat idea."

When a guy says he's thinking about nothing it drives most wives nuts: (wife) "How can you not be thinking of something to feel guilty about or something nice you can do for a friend? Don't you care about our home? Don't you care about me?" What's crazy is there's a 99% chance the guy was just driving and in a happy place of nothing. It's a beautiful place; I highly recommend it. But now, because of this one question, the guy is brought back to reality and getting attacked – that's not nearly as nice a place. What sucks is he's getting in trouble when all he did was shut off his brain and drive on an open road, which is something guys love to do. If there was traffic and you asked, "What are you thinking about?" he'll say something like "Traffic sucks!" because that's what he's thinking about; commuting in traffic is terrible because we can't think about nothing. We have to pay attention – boo. Women typically have to work to achieve thinking about nothing through things like yoga and meditation. Not a guy. When we can put our brain on autopilot like when we drive, jog, or cut the grass, we can tune out the world and it's a glorious spot – sorry ladies. Because women's brains tend to think of ten things at once, it's harder for them to relax, and if they can't do it, it doesn't make sense the guy can unless he somehow doesn't care when, in fact, it's because our brains are wired differently (and we're less thoughtful, so that helps)

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I love the analogy that women have spaghetti brains (everything is all mashed together) while men have waffle brains (things are compartmentalized into boxes like the work box and the nothing box). This means that even if a guy is a cunning planner at work, that ends when he gets home – he's in a different box. He can shut that part of his brain down. As a therapist, I'm thinking all day, so after work the last thing I want to do is think. When a guy works a more physical job, after work when he's done exerting energy the last thing he wants to do is think. Thinking is not our thing unless it has to be. After work, guys want to relax and be happy. We want to be track-pants comfortable physically and emotionally. Meanwhile, **women are drawn to being thoughtful and perfectionist**. This naturally means women have way more emotional energy than guys (or they push themselves harder), which means after work on some level they actually like to think – weird (says the guy).

Not wanting to have to think is one of the reasons guys can be so straightforward when we speak – having a filter is too much work. When we're at home, guys like to keep things simple. We like low conflict, and low drama. We want to have as little to worry about as possible: (wife) "What do you

want for dinner?” (husband) “Whoa, answering that would require thinking. I think I’ll pass on that one.” Or maybe you’ve encountered a situation like this:

Wife: Why don’t you ever plan a date night for us?

Husb: How about dinner?

Wife: Where?

Husb: Where do you want?

Wife: I want you to plan it.

Husb: But if I choose, I’ll be told it’s the wrong place.

Wife: But I want you to plan it.

Husb: Okay, when do we have time to go?

Wife: You’re supposed to choose!

Husb: But you’re the one in charge of the schedule.

Or maybe this is more accurate:

Wife: Why don’t you ever plan a date night for us?

Husb: I’m content doing absolutely nothing unless you plan it or there’s a sport I play that I didn’t have to organize and then I’m there.

Wife: Don’t you love me?”

Husb: Of course. That’s why we’re married.

Wife: Then why don’t you plan a date night?

Husb: I put a ring on it, so I could stop putting energy into the relationship. I love you, and you love me – we’re good. Why do you think when most men get into a relationship they put on a few pounds? They’re settling in and ready to enjoy the lazy time of the relationship. The beginning part where we openly share and go out of our way to win you over, that’s exhausting. I’m in hibernation mode.

Okay, so that conversation may be a little exaggerated, but there’s truth in it. A guy who is single has a very different drive and energy level than a guy in a long term relationship, but even a single guy who has more energy isn’t using that for manipulation purposes (unless he’s a turd). He uses it to win the woman over.

In order to manipulate, you need the guy to do things he typically doesn’t want to do:

1. Manipulating takes energy – no thank you. Energy is one of the reasons guys struggle to be romantic – that would also mean thinking, ugh.

2. To manipulate you have to listen and remember things – no thanks.
3. To manipulate, you need to be okay with drama – can I nap instead?
4. To manipulate, you need to think you're better than the other person (who has higher social standards, cleaning standards, and perfection driven? Not guys). Control sounds like work and responsibility, so no thank you.
5. To manipulate, you need to want power: I don't want to pick dinner, so why would I want the power?

So why do women (or people in general) assume men manipulate at home?

1. We accuse others of doing what we do ourselves.
2. We accuse others of doing what we're used to others doing (e.g. mean girls).
3. We want to feel sorry for ourselves.
4. It can be hard to accept that men can think differently than women.
5. Women will often twist things to be mean to themselves through self blame, guilt, and self punishment – a lot of good women have perfected being mean to themselves.

All this being written, if someone feels like their partner is the exception and they are a manipulator (there are always anomalies and some cultures outside of Canada and the United States are more prone for men being manipulators), we should ask something like “To double check, do you have a hidden agenda or am I misreading this?” “Just so I know, am I supposed to read between the lines or are you being straightforward?” or “Out of curiosity, is there a hidden message here or am I looking too deep into this?” The challenge of course is we have to believe what the other person says, which can be hard, but at least when we ask this question we are planting a seed for them to consider if they are actually manipulative without realizing it in the future. If we don't believe the other person we also will have to reach a certain point where we need to ask ourselves, “Is this the truth or is it me not wanting to believe it?”

This week may you consider when it actually is manipulation.

The Conflict Zones: Getting Started (Attack Zone vs. Hide & Suck Up Zone, Pt 1)

In the first lesson of this book we looked at the 5 conflict styles. We can actually put them on a scale where Desperate Attacker and Cold & Condescending are on the Attack Zone side and Desperate Defender and Hider are on the Hide & Suck Up Zone side:

Attack Zone (-10)-----Self Controlled (0)-----Hide & Suck Up Zone (+10)

Each of these three positions has two types. For instance, in the Attacker category there are Direct Attackers and Indirect Attackers. Direct Attackers are like a dog trying to protect an injured paw. They might not want to admit it, but their actions are fueled by fear and self protection, and all they want is for you to back off. The good news is recognizing this can make accepting their attacks easier. Attackers become like a toddler having a temper tantrum rather than a potential bully. This is why I laugh when young guys try to look tough. You're only trying to look tough because you're scared of people seeing the truth – you feel weak and/or vulnerable. If you weren't scared, you wouldn't have to look tough. You could lighten up and have fun. Instead, you go with the "back off" vibe because you're trying to hide your wussiness.

Indirect Attackers are people who hide their attacks (aka passive aggressive). These are the Cold & Condescending Attackers. This can be eye rolls and sighs meant to point out how dumb you are. They can be jab comments or guilt trips. They can be underhanded comments and subtle insults like: (with attitude) "You're not going to wear that are you?" or "That's an interesting choice." These are the kinds of attacks where the person can be smiling at you, but they leave you wondering, "Was that a putdown?" as you eventually feel emotionally beaten down. One of the reason indirect attacks are harder to handle is you can't complain about them the same as direct attacks: (victim of direct attack) "They yelled at me." (listener) "That's terrible." (victim of indirect attack) "My partner looked at my vacuuming job and sighed while rolling their eyes." (listener) "So what's the problem?" (victim of indirect attack) "It was a really mean sigh." On top of not getting sympathy from others, the other problem with Indirect Attackers is they can make you feel crazy and second guess yourself. In some

cases it can even feel like they're eroding your soul. It's so subtle you might not even notice your soul has been eroded until you're left weeping alone in your car not sure what's happened to you. If you do notice your soul being eroded and you question the Indirect Attacker, their response is: (with disgust) "I didn't do anything wrong," or "You deserved that," "You're being passive aggressive." The one sign you're most likely dealing with a passive aggressive person is they'll accuse *you* of being passive aggressive. I know direct attacks hurt and can be scary, but indirect attacks are the worst. ***Bruises heal, but your soul might not ever fully recover if it's damaged long enough by indirect attacks.***

Sometimes it can be hard to distinguish between Direct and Indirect Attackers. The other month I asked my wife, "Earlier when you said (thing) was that out of fear or were you talking down to me?" She said it was fear, which is a Direct Attack move, but it really felt like it was an Indirect move, an "I'm superior" thing. That being said, there are times when she does speak to me as superior like when it comes to cleaning, which makes sense since she's super uptight about cleanliness... I mean she's more particular than I am (good save, me).

On the other side of the scale, there are the Hide & Suck Up Zone people, which can be either good or sucky people. Some of the nicest people you'll meet are in this category... or the most frustrating. They typically do good things and don't want to be a bother. My mom could be dying, but she wouldn't tell anyone. Instead, she'd be making a meal for someone else in need. These types of Hide & Suck Up Zone people can burn themselves out because they're too kind whether they're walking on eggshells and/or wearing out trying to make everyone happy. These people struggle with guilt and over thinking, which can lead to avoidance behavior. The other type of Hide & Suck Up Zone people, the sucky ones, are selfish. These are the people who avoid doing responsibilities and claim anxiety without guilt and/or they say things like "I'm having me-time," and "I do what I want to do – I do I" (or whatever the opposite of "You do you" is). These people suck because they leave you feeling like you don't matter, and can be arguably classified as Cold & Condescending people.

What surprised me is when writing about this, I realized there are two types of Self Control, and only one of them is good. ***The good type of Self Control involves caring about ourselves and others in a healthy balance.*** We recognize that neither side is more important; we're equal. The bad type of Self Control is not caring about others enough, which looks like brushing them off when we should offer a hand. It's not an attack or hiding; it's also not when someone keeps their

nose out of someone else's business because they recognize boundaries (that's good Self Control). This is simply not caring about someone we should be caring about. You could argue this is an Indirect Attack, but there is a point where it's not an attack; it's cold hearted dismissal.

Sometimes Hide & Suck Up Zone people can become this second type of Self Control because they've become resentful. We might be hurt, but we need to get over it. We're ultimately meant to be in community and our ability to be in community improves when we actually push ourselves to be in them. This is important because we're created to have to rely on others for certain things.

We're created to help and be helped. To not do one of these things is very foolish. Acting "self sufficient" doesn't make you better; it means you're limited with how much you can do. Every Grammy and Oscar winner has a list of people to thank because it's never just them. We need people to help us do what we want to do.

As a therapist I'll hear a married person say, "I could do this on my own," and 95% of the time that's a lie they tell themselves in order to let their resentment fester. When I was at Disney this past spring, it became very clear to me how easy it is to only see what I am doing and ignore what my wife is up to. If I was feeling tired and/or overwhelmed, it was easy to blame her for not doing more. Thankfully my mom was there regularly pointing out how much we were both doing with compliments, which helped open my eyes: "Wait, I'm not the only one doing something?" This was a good reminder why it's helpful for a couple to spend a few minutes every day saying thank you for one thing the other person did that day. If you can't think of anything, maybe you didn't see what they were doing... or maybe they're a slug. Either way, this exercise can help open eyes.

Finding the balance between the two sides can be very challenging. Even though I teach about emotional health and how to be self controlled, I can still screw up. This spring my 80 something year old Italian neighbor who loves his polka music and growing tomatoes in giant cages he made to keep the squirrels away (he's very Italian) made a poor choice. During a very busy time for me, I came home to find my wife very upset because he had been on the attacking side to her. His shed is on our shared property line and we had a vine I kept trimmed growing up the back of it to hide its ugliness on our side. When I got home my wife ended up attacking me out of her guilt (it was great) and when I went outside to cool off I went to the backyard to look at the vine... but there was no vine. He had hacked it down. My three year old vine was now a tiny, leafless stem sticking out of the ground. I was

furious: “You came onto my property, ripped down a plant I bought and loved without any warning, and then got my wife angry at me? You suck!” I was so angry I wanted to breed squirrels to eat his tomatoes. Fortunately, I know ***the three times we most want to talk to someone is when we’re drunk, tired, or already angry, and the three worst times to talk to someone is when we’re drunk, tired, and already angry.*** For the next four days I continued to let myself be angry for a moment and then distract myself – our emotions need breaks like a good worker. Four days later, after walking my daughter to school, I walked past his house and thought, maybe I should just let it go... and that’s when I knew it was time to say something because I was no longer motivated by anger.

I decided to leave a note in his mailbox because on the one hand, this would give him a chance to process what I was saying privately before we talked while on the other, it allowed me to hide – like a wuss. Unfortunately, I fell into the trap of saying too much – the typical note problem. Overall, my letter was quite good. I admitted that I should have talked to him the year before when he took down a different vine, which gave him the wrong message – you can rip out my plants. My main problem in the letter, however, was I should’ve left it as “Please don’t touch my plants.” Unfortunately, I went one step further and added, “If you continue to do this, I will put up a gate.” I told myself this was giving a boundary, but it really upset him because it felt threatening. Sometimes it’s good to be clear: “If you (blank) then I will (blank),” but this wasn’t one of those times. I had become an Attack Zone person. After reading the letter, he immediately found me and apologized in an aggressive way – it was very confusing. It also reminded me why talking to him directly was a bad idea because you can’t get a word in – it’s the Attack Zone nature. His vine cutting could’ve been seen as sneaky, but knowing him and his background, he was being direct; he wasn’t hiding anything, especially if he scolded my wife. He might have even thought my wife gave him permission to cut the vine in their conversation – who knows?

In my letter I should’ve kept it simpler, especially since I should’ve considered how it’d be interpreted, but on the plus side this a good example that even people who teach self control can screw up sometimes. Fortunately, knowing this scale can help me try to stay more in the center next time.

This week may you consider what it means to be Self Controlled in a healthy way and not an Attack Zone or Hide & Suck Up Zone person

Lesson 29

Continuing the Conflict Zones (Attack Zone vs. Hide & Suck Up Zone, Pt 2)

This lesson will take the scale we looked at last time a little further:

Attack Zone (-10)-----Self Controlled (0)-----Hide & Suck Up Zone (+10)

Self Controlled (the healthy middle) means standing up for yourself in a loving way. This includes considering how the other person will interpret your actions. For instance, I might think I'm being self controlled, but if I'm not seen as such by others am I really being self controlled? Either I don't understand what self control looks like or the other person's misreading the situation. That's the problem with anything to do with emotional health; there's always an element of it being a guessing game based on perspectives. I know I've thought I was being self controlled while my wife saw me as being harsh. Was I blind to how harsh I was being or was that my wife's interpretation? It's hard to say... but I know my opinion.

Earlier in the book I mentioned that I'm drawn toward Desperate Defender and Hider while my wife is more of a Desperate Attacker and Cold & Condescending (at least with me). By using this scale you can see why I don't consider these terms insulting. They are simply two options. Everyone leans more heavily to one side or the other depending on the person and situation, acknowledging this is just an observation. If I look down on someone for where they land then judgment has set in, but otherwise it's simply about categorizing behavior, which makes a big difference in understanding social situations. For instance, if someone's not talking to you or apologizing when they've hurt you that might not be a sign they don't care about you; it could be a sign they're a Hider. When someone doesn't contact you or book appointments like you've asked, it might not be that they're incompetent or they don't care about what you've asked them to do; it could again be a result of them being a Hider. Ideally, the person should be working toward being more self controlled, but a Hider's going to want to hide and a suck up is going to want to suck up. ***The benefit of recognizing where someone is on this scale is it can hurt less when they do the behavior their drawn toward:*** "You're hiding from me? Right, it's not me; it's you and something you need to work on improving." I should point out that if someone purposely avoids you or

does any action as payback or punishment, that's an attack. It's a passive aggressive, indirect attack, but it's still an attack. This is where it's good to ask a question with two options: "Are you not talking to me as punishment or for another reason?" We never want to assume... unless you want to be a terrible communicator.

Being in the Hide & Suck Up Zone is fun... if you enjoy emotional torture. It's easy to over think, which makes things worse as you're drawn to beating yourself up. What's interesting is the more you're in the Hide & Suck Up Zone, the more likely you are to be drawn to being further in the Hide & Suck Up Zone. This is why I cringe when people say they're an introvert: "Are you really an introvert or is that a nice way of covering up that you're a Hider hiding?" Meanwhile, the more you push yourself to be around people, the more comfortable you'll become around others... until there's conflict. Whether it's a fear of being attacked or simply a fear of having people upset with you, Hiders hate conflict, which makes hiding a serious addiction risk. Sometimes you need addictions like drinking to help you hide, but ***hiding itself can be an addiction.***

When anyone gets out of doing something they should do because they claim anxiety I feel my blood boil. ***Anxiety is not an excuse to get out of doing something we're meant to do.*** That actually encourages more anxiety. ***We become stronger and reduce anxiety when we prove to ourselves how capable we are through accomplishments.*** If someone is too scared to do something, have them do something easier. Help them build up some confidence doing easier things and build up to the thing they need to do. Letting someone get out of a responsibility because of anxiety is enabling, which is a nice word for emotionally handicapping someone. ***Love doesn't let Hiders hide. As it's taught in Al-Anon: Don't do for others what they can do for themselves.***

One of the most dangerous things for those in the Hide & Suck Up Zone is when things bother us we'll hide or suck up... hide or suck up... hide or suck up... explode! When the dust settles this person will feel terrible for exploding and the embarrassment and/or guilt we feel can further encourage future Hide & Suck Up Zone behavior. This explosion can be at others or ourselves, but the result is the same – guilt and shame. If the person explodes and then says, "See what you made me do," they're not a Hide & Suck Up Zone person. This is the explosion of an Attack Zone person because it's the move of a Cold & Condescending person. It's about superiority and can be soul crushingly hurtful. At least when a Hide & Suck Up Zone person explodes there's remorse; whether they apologize or

not depends on how much of a Hider they are because sometimes they're so upset with themselves they disappear instead of apologizing like they know they should.

The best way to avoid exploding is to learn how to get your buried emotions out in a safe way through processing (e.g. talking to a trusted connection or journaling) and/or physically getting things out. There's a reason violent sports can be so appealing to young people – it clears out their emotional baggage. This will be discussed further in the lesson, *The Importance of Venting*.

The risk for Hiders is they can develop strong social anxiety because being around others puts them at high risk of feeling terrible. This can be the risk of conflict or being used. Hiders tend to be helpful people and can be quick to volunteer, especially if it helps them avoid something. Unfortunately, even if Hiders offer to help, there is a risk of them becoming too afraid to be around people for fear of feeling obligated to help. The best way to prevent this is for the Hider to learn the power of saying, "Sorry, I can't this time," or "I think (person) would be a great option to help," or "No." ***Saying no has the power to protect friendships whereas never saying no eventually breaks them apart.*** Unfortunately, many Hiders end up saying no at the wrong times like for social events and end up feeling alone; if you always say no to invitations, eventually the invitations will stop coming.

Attackers on the other hand, have their own issues. Sometimes Attackers only have a select few they attack, which can be very confusing for those on the receiving end: "Why are you so nice to everyone else?" Unfortunately, for these targets they are likely being attacked because they are seen as extensions of the attacker and/or it can be a sign of trust: (spouse 1) "I trust you enough to attack you." (spouse 2) "That's so sweet... but could you start not trusting me so much?"

Probably the hardest thing for me being married to an Attacker Zone person is my wife's likely to attack when she should be apologizing. I should point out, she's learned to apologize to me (being married to a therapist you tend to pick up tools), but she tends to be sorry for things I don't care about. The moments I'd like to hear the "I'm sorry," she's more likely to attack out of fear, which is the norm for a reactive personality (again, just a fact). It can sound bizarre, but I get it; guilt can make you lash out. One night early in our relationship, my wife, then girlfriend, was trying not to attack me and instead of getting loud, her emotion came out in tears. We'd been dating for several years by that point and being a Hide & Suck Up Zone person I generally just took it (I was scared of the potential retaliation

attack). Seeing her tears, however, I felt this wave of guilt and I have never wanted to scream at her more. It was a bizarre moment: “Stop crying and making me feel bad!” It can sound strange unless you’ve been there. This, of course, is a good reminder that even though we tend to lean toward one side, we’re all capable of doing a different approach depending on the situation. For me to want to go Attacker Zone because of guilt teaches that ***sometimes apologizing and humbling ourselves can be a challenge – anger is easier than feeling bad.***

The important thing for Attack Zone people is to learn to do for themselves what parents are supposed to do to angry kids: “Go to your room!” We’re supposed to get angry at injustice and things that aren’t fair or right, but we’re not meant to hurt people in our anger and thereby create a dominoes reaction of hurt that gets passed on. Hurting people in our anger is also bad because the person we hurt will likely hurt us back whether then or in the future – very counterproductive for someone trying to protect themselves. ***Since attackers are prone to hurting others, they need to separate themselves and get their emotions out privately in order to address the situation with a calm brain.*** These are the same things that Hiders & Suck Up Zone people need to do. The difference is Hiders need to get their buried emotion out and not let it be bottled up (i.e. processing and/or physically getting out the emotion hitting something like a bed, screaming alone in the car, or smashing things that need to be smashed with a sledgehammer).

The great thing about being a Hide & Suck Up Zone person is you can help reduce conflict. Hiders are often people who are good at processing through problems and finding better solutions in the future. The great thing about Attack Zone people is they can help issues be addressed. They also tend to recover really fast. My wife will get angry and then be fine a few minutes later. As someone who suppresses feeling, I can take hours to recover. (If someone takes a week to recover that’s a sign resentment has set in and needs to be dressed.) This is one of the reasons I hate conflict – I subconsciously know it’s a lot of energy and time to recover. I also have a strong fear of repercussions because I’ve met some really mean people in my lifetime. ***Both sides have their benefits and drawbacks, but ultimately we want to grow self control because self control is a sign of love and the hallmark of being a good person.***

This week may you consider how you can be more self controlled.

A Key to Improve Communication (Attack Zone vs. Hide & Suck Up Zone, Pt 3)

One of the most important things to consider when it comes to communication is a four letter f word; any guesses? I'll give a hint. It ends in an "r." I bet that confused you. When I talk about the primary emotions, I'll help people guess the first three, mad, sad, and glad, and then I'll give them a tip for the fourth before telling them the fifth, disgust: "The fourth is a four letter f word." People's faces at this tip are hilarious: "It can't be that word... is it? Can I say that word to a therapist?" And the four letter word I'm looking for is... fear. We as a society hate the word fear while anxiety has become like a rock star. Pharmaceutical companies have made anxiety, depression, and mental health, in general, four of our society's favorite words. It was a brilliant way for them to make billions of dollars. (They made ADD our favorite acronym.) If anxiety was the problem they've made it seem, the main thing we should be shipping to a country at war like the Ukraine right now isn't weapons or medical supplies, it should be anxiety and depression meds. If anyone should have those, it's the person at risk of being shot or their home blown up, but that's not the target for the pharmaceutical companies. They want people in more comfortable lifestyles – ***comfort breeds anxiety***: "I don't want to lose this feeling of comfort I have." Please know I'm not saying anxiety and depression problems aren't real, but they've been impressively exaggerated. Selfishness breeds self-focused problems. ***By creating a me-focused world void of God and the Golden Rule (treat others the way we want to be treated), our "You do you" society (aka the mantra of selfish people) has naturally created a lot of unnecessary anxiety problems.*** What's really impressive is the pharmaceutical companies have convinced people that when their body's isn't happy – our body's way of warning us that we need to fix something – instead of addressing the source, we mask it with drugs. If you have a bad back, you don't just take pain meds; you try to deal with the source. The same should work for our emotions. Anxiety and depression are a sign we need to change what we're doing, and not just shut our body up with drugs... but enough of that rant.

When I was a kid, fear was still a word that was popular in churches, which made sense because the Bible claims: "Fear of the LORD is the foundation of wisdom," (Pro 9:10a) and when people in the Bible want to give a great compliment, they describe someone as a God-fearing person (we've definitely lost that). If you want

to go intense, there's also the verse that says, "Don't be afraid of those who want to kill your body; they cannot touch your soul. Fear only God, who can destroy both soul and body in hell." (Mat 10:28) You want the cure for social anxiety? There's a good start. Besides the odd crazy person who screams on inner city street corners, however, fear is becoming forgotten in church as we try to sell Buddy Jesus: (Christian) "He can be your friend" (random person) "No thanks. I don't need any more. He can follow me on social media, but I'll block him if he tries anything weird." Even in church, we've lost the power of healthy fear while "anxiety" reigns.

I have a friend who prefers to use "respect" instead of "fear" because it feels normal to say. For instance, claiming "Respect your parents," sounds proper while "Fear your parents," is uncomfortable. But is that right or have we just been trained not to like the word fear? Shouldn't we have healthy fear of disappointing our parents? I've heard parents say, "My kids could never disappoint me." If you believe that, you're either a dreamer or an idiot (written with love). Kids need the fear of disappointing their parents; it's a wonderful motivator. Kids should want to make their parents proud. Some parents throw the "I'm proud of you" statement around like grass seed on a weed-choked lawn. It ends up meaning nothing to kids who have developed a false sense of security. ***A parent's number one job is to raise a good person.*** Good people are not made with overindulging in praise and comfort. ***Strength grows in struggle. Motivation and drive are the product of fear. Fear is a gift.*** I've recently had a string of young people admit really screwing up and there was a total void of remorse. When I asked them about it, the basic response was "Why would I have fear?" They seemed surprised I even asked about it: "They're my (fill in role of person). They'll always love me." Why should you have fear? Because you did something wrong! There are repercussions for doing something wrong... or have you never had to face that before because you were so coddled?

Healthy fear of our parents is the beginning of respect. It doesn't even have to be a "good" fear. When I was a teenager one of my fears toward my dad was proving him right. Proving him wrong was an excellent motivator and gave me an incredible drive. The year I went to comedy school in my early 20s, my dad said nothing and I crumbled. My mom later told me he thought it was a big mistake, but he never told me that. If he had, I would've done so much better. For people like me, there is power in trying to prove others wrong (I'm nicer than that makes me sound... maybe). What I needed was for him to say this was a waste of money and time. I needed the drive to prove him wrong in order to push me past my

other fears like the fear of sucking on stage. Instead, I let my Hider side kick in and I avoided being on the stage as much as I should have, which naturally made my year conclude with limited results.

Let's consider fear on a scale:

No Fear (-10)-----Healthy Fear (0) -----Too Much Fear (+10)

Healthy Fear motivates us to do things to protect ourselves and others. No Fear makes us stupid and Too Much Fear holds us back. This scale connects really well to the one we've looked at the past few weeks:

Attack Zone (-10)-----Self Controlled (0)-----Hide & Suck Up Zone (+10)

Self Control, the healthy spot on this scale, includes Healthy Fear. We need Healthy Fear for proper communication. It helps us avoid saying things we shouldn't. ***Healthy Fear helps us care about the needs of others (a skill often forgotten).***

What makes this really interesting (at least to me) is Self Control not only needs a healthy amount of fear, it needs the *right* fear. Attackers attack because of fear; Hiders hide because of fear. They're both reacting to their fear differently (aka fight, flight, or freeze response), but the problem is they both have the wrong fear. Their fear is all about them. It goes back to why we have so much anxiety problems in our culture: ***We are too worried about ourselves.*** For instance, Attackers would stop attacking if they focused on having a healthy fear of hurting the other person. Hiders would stop hiding if they focused on having a healthy fear of hurting others through neglect and emotionally shutting off. They could both stop doing what they're doing wrong if they had a healthy fear of not doing what's right. ***When we attack and when we hide we're being selfish, and we need to push through that in order to have the right fear: the fear of not treating others the way we should.*** Love is patient, kind, and self controlled. It's not attacking or hiding.

This week may you consider how your communication can be improved if you have the right fear.

*A truly wise person uses few words;
a person with understanding is even-tempered.
Even fools are thought wise when they keep silent;
with their mouths shut, they seem intelligent.*

Pro 17:27-28

*Only simpletons believe everything they're told!
The prudent carefully consider their steps.*

Pro 14:15

Anyone who rebukes a mocker will get an insult in return.

Anyone who corrects the wicked will get hurt.

*So don't bother correcting mockers;
they will only hate you.*

*But correct the wise,
and they will love you.*

Pro 9:7-8



Lesson 31

Talking to God is Similar to Talking to our Partner (This was written in July 2023)

The last two weeks have been absolutely dreadful. They started with so much promise, but no. The second phase of framing for my addition was supposed to start, which was originally supposed to be done last fall, so there was definitely some excitement for this to finally be happening. This part of the framing included ripping off the back part of my house's roof. Guess where this is going – no roof? That sounds risky.



(This recent picture can hopefully help you see how the back of the house was replaced with a flat roof section. That was the exposed area)

I had spent the previous two weekends ripping out the trim and drywall preparing for the framers. Preparing also included moving beds to various parts of the house

– exciting yet awful. With the beds and dressers moved into the main living areas we have an extra “snuggly” house, which is a nice way to say we’re living like hoarders – how do they do it? All this rearranging is what dreams are made of... by really weird people. I prefer order over chaos. On the plus side, last fall I was told the wood to frame everything would be just under \$30k and then in March when the framers did the first part of the addition, the cost had dropped \$9k since COVID prices had come to an end. That was a huge blessing. Based on what was left on the list for the second phase given to me by Rona, I only needed \$6000 in materials. I was feeling pretty good about this... and then the framer came to my house and asked, “Where’s the rest of the wood?” It turned out there was a special side order called an engineering floor plan that was a whole other list of wood. I didn’t know what that was, but back in March I put in the request for it like the framer told me to do – I do as I’m told. When I sent in the blueprints, the guy at Rona emailed back, “This will work.” In May I emailed to ask about it and he didn’t respond, but I assumed it was fine, especially since I figured if it was that important the framer would be pushing for it. And what happens when we assume? Great things... when “great” is used like in calling it the “Great” War. My result was less death (fortunately), but it led to a week of havoc since the guy from Rona was wrong – the drawings I sent didn’t work and nothing had been done. He even conveniently deleted the emails I had sent him. Fortunately, I was able to forward them to him and the manager to prove I wasn’t another liar.

Some of the wood we needed arrived the following Monday, which meant the framers were set back a week. Since I had already paid my \$20k in wood, I assumed there was only a little left – nope. I was then given a \$16k bill – what! Finding out I owed that much money, especially when I’m cheap was kind of like the start of the flu when you want to throw up but can’t – you just stay nauseous. The next day my wife got a notice from the CRA saying she owed \$2500 because her one boss made a tax mistake. That week I also had to pay a speeding ticket I received by photo radar. I was caught doing 13km over the speed limit – who cares about 13km over? That experience taught me that getting a ticket in the mail leaves you feeling violated. Photo radar has nothing to do with safety, which should be the purpose of speed limits.

Add to the unexpected \$20k week, I also learned credit cards can take 2-5 business days to receive money transferred online. I had transferred money on the Friday before Canada Day and the person at MasterCard said it could be until the following Monday before I was able to use my card because apparently computer

systems take off weekends and holidays. Nothing made any sense and I was feeling pretty helpless, which is a great way to stir up emotions.

After the first terrible week, I told myself on the Monday, “It’s a new week,” but it turned out a new week meant new problems including severe issues with the drawings I had originally paid professionals to do. Fun fact, I recently learned from several different sources who regularly deal with architects is the majority of them have little practical experience (or social skills), so things “work” on paper, but they aren’t the best way to do them and almost always cost more than if the specialists like the framer chose how to do the work themselves – I’m glad the government forces us to use this set up. My favorite moment was the framer calling the engineer the architect hired to help with the drawing: “The roof consists of two eyebeam joists beside each other repeated across the roof; how do I insulate between them?” And the engineer’s response, a man with years of schooling and experience was “I don’t know. Talk to the architect.” When the framer asked the architect, his response was “That’s a good question. I don’t know.” How do you design something that you don’t know how to make work? Here’s a better question: how did the city approve plans that included a missing support wall? Walls don’t float, but this one was supposed to – brilliant. The original drawings had to be redone 3 times because the architect had so many mistakes, yet the city missed that? Does anyone at a desk know what they’re doing? Anyone involved in design and building approvals should be required to have some actual construction work experience, so they can learn how things actually work.

To add to the joy, there was an issue getting some of the joists because they were an unusual size (another thank you to the architect and engineer). The joists eventually arrived on the second Fri, a week after the other wood was delivered and two weeks after they should have originally been sent if Rona had done the engineered floor plan as requested. Delays in construction are expected, but my framers had a two week window to do my week and a half job before they went on holidays for a week. Guess what that meant? That’s right. I now had all the material at my house, but I had a tarp on half my roof for this past week while the framers are on vacation. And when I write “roof?” I don’t mean a roof with plywood. No, that would make sense. My roof is the eyebeams that the architect didn’t know how to insulate with a tarp on them, and when I say tarp I mean it was an old tarp with holes in it, so it was more like a sift. And guess what happened Saturday night – rain. Lots of rain. The tarp/sift was not happy about the rain and “cried” into the house. My wife and I frantically grabbed anything we could find to help prevent flooding into the house like buckets, plastic table cloths,

blankets and towels to catch the tears and fortunately only ended up with a little water damage in the kitchen. Then it was Sunday night – a lot more tears. The weather was calling for clouds, but it turned out those clouds brought rain, very angry rain. The tarps and buckets that worked the night before were a fraction of what we needed – more panic. While working upstairs doing whatever I could to stop the water coming in, my wife went to the kitchen and found a giant pool of water on the floor because there was a serious leak happening that had nothing to do with the tarp area. Fortunately I was able to rearrange the plywood upstairs to essentially create a roof inside the house to shoot the incoming water to an opening to the outside and I was able to make something to protect the kitchen from further damage.



I wish that was the end... no. The next night we didn't have rain – yea! We had wind – crap! I couldn't sleep as the tarp flapped in the wind like a flag and the weather was calling for worse winds to come. Fortunately, the next day at work I had a cancellation and I was able to screw boards on the roof to prevent the extreme flapping. It still flapped, but not like a hyper person flapping a rug to shake off crumbs.

If you had asked me, “What is the worst case scenario for your framing?” this was way beyond what I could've predicted. Our entire addition, which was supposed to have been completed last fall has been consistently worse than the worst case scenarios. Fortunately, the disasters we had last fall in the long run worked out for our benefit with the wood cost drop, but this time the disasters seem to have upgraded and I'm not seeing the future silver lining.

Even though I have the level of grounded faith you'd expect an ordained pastor to have, over the last few weeks I was left asking, “Why did God allow this?” “Why didn't God direct me to a better architect or lead me to working with someone at Rona who wasn't useless?” (Workers at another Rona were told our situation and they guessed who I had been talking to because he has a reputation). I have been praying for guidance and wisdom for almost two years for this addition, but I consistently seem to make the wrong choices. That being said, the manager at Rona was incredible. He was very apologetic and handled the situation perfectly. At this point I'd highly recommend them to anyone else... just not the worker I originally worked with who set this all in motion.

On Saturday night I started asking myself was the the devil messing with me or did God not want me to do this project in the first place because in many ways this project seemed cursed (and still does). This questioning was amplified Sunday night when my wife was weeping and I stared at the damage in the kitchen wondering how we were going to get through the week the framers were away when it was calling for more rain.

Here's the interesting thing about prayer – sometimes you get answers. At the original church I was a youth pastor at, I signed up to have an older gentleman include me on his weekday Bible verse emails. For some reason last week I discovered a lot of his emails were being sent to my spam, but I fixed that and on the Monday after the tarp cried, the daily email said, “Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.” (1 Pet 5:8) That was interesting because I had asked that very question:

Is it the devil? Maybe that was a coincidence, but then I noticed I had another Bible verse email: “Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?” (Job 2:10) Okay, that’s also pretty on the nose. Then I noticed there was a third email: “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Mat 28:20) Call this coincidence, but it was pretty incredible how all three verses were completely in line with my prayers the night before. Then, out of the blue, my sister sent me a text after hearing about the Sunday night and wrote: “Honestly, your strength is super human. What has been thrown at you this last year alone has been insane. Your family is so lucky to have you.” That was another message I really needed to hear because I couldn’t help, but feel like a huge failure with this addition – how could I make so many bad decisions? The Sunday night trying to stop the incoming rain I had the lyrics to a song going through my head: “It falls apart/ From the very start/ It falls apart/ Seems like everything I touch/ Falls apart.” I couldn’t remember who sang it, but for this post I looked up the lyrics. It’s by Thousand Foot Krutch, a Christian rock band, and the lyrics continue: “Everything around me/ Falls apart/ When I walk away from you.” That’s another message I needed, which means I ended up with five incredibly timed messages. God’s either showing off or the coincidence level is off the charts.

Does God talk to people? I find He speaks differently to us depending on our relationship and personality. For instance, I don’t have the gift of prophecy, but I find He will give me these “taps” that tell me to do something kind for someone I wouldn’t typically think to do myself – I’m not that thoughtful on my own. On very rare occasions (very, very rare occasions), I get messages like this that are encouraging. Are they coincidence? ***We believe what we want to believe*** and I’m clearly biased, but to me, they’re God’s way of reaching out to me.

Bonus: I rarely talk to my mom about my posts, but I mentioned this one to her and after I finished sharing about the verses, text, and song, my mom smiled and said, “Sunday night I prayed God would give you a verse.” How do you not feel comforted in times like these? There definitely is a practical benefit to following Jesus.

So how do we hear from God? ***The only way to hear from God is to listen.*** This means we need to have things in place to allow Him to speak like daily reading the Bible and/or doing devotions, listening to Christian music, having daily verses emailed to you, regularly being in church, spending time in nature, having times of silence like in the car, and having Christian friends and influences since God can speak through people. ***Like any conversation, we also need to be***

asking questions: (God) “Yes, this is the devil messing with you, but I’m here; trust me. Good will come out of this. It worked out last fall. It will work out again. I have more power than he does.”

What’s interesting is the way we hear from God involves the same things we need to hear from our partners: Be available for talking, give space for the other person to share, ask questions, and have set times for connecting like at dinner or walks after dinner.

Bonus: It’s good to practice thankfulness, especially when talking to others to help us not sound super negative. To follow my own advice, let me conclude by saying I’m very grateful we had the smaller rain Saturday, so my upstairs was in better shape for the torrential rain Sunday night. I’m also very grateful I was at home and available. I’m grateful the damage in the kitchen was drywall and not the cupboards. I’m grateful God has given me some construction experience and the creative mind to come up with the solutions I put in place to reduce the water damage. I’m grateful my wife was there to help, so I wasn’t alone Saturday night and then Sunday night my mom happened to be there and was a big help. I was also grateful to see my five year old understand what was happening and while my wife and I were putting out buckets, she brought a couple of her toy buckets upstairs to help.

This week may you consider how you can be available and make room to talk to God and your partner.

Side Note: Reading this lesson almost 10 months later and the addition is still far from being finished and feeling cursed, it’s encouraging to read how God was there. This is a good reminder it can be helpful to have reminders, especially when someone sends you an encouraging note like my sister did.

The Challenges of Communication

The basic conclusion I have with communication is we need to be careful not to take it so seriously. That means not getting into the trap of saying things like “When you were angry you said (blank)? Yeah, I’ll never let that go,” or “You know how you said (blank) five years ago, I’m still hurt by that.” We need to be quicker to double check what was intended and/or simply let it go because people say things they don’t mean all the time, especially when they’re hungry, tired, over stimulated, or in pain. Because of this *I try to follow my own advice: half listen.* This means not taking everything to heart as Gospel truth while trying to understand what the person is actually trying to say based on their body language and emotion: “So what you’re really saying is...”

Another reason communication is limited is sometimes stories grow or change. In the last lesson I shared how I had a tarp covering the back half of my house’s roof during the construction of my addition and I was at a standstill for a week because the framers were on their scheduled holiday. Reading that lesson it probably sounded like it all worked out – Nope. Not even close. I posted it on Friday, but I originally wrote it on Tuesday. Wednesday night the story continued on the original terrible path – yea? After the rains on the weekend I had what I thought was a pretty solid system in place to prevent problems, and felt better. And it would’ve been solid in normal rains, but Wednesday was not normal. Overall, that was the wettest week we had all year and that Wednesday was the hardest rain I’ve seen in years. Glad I had a tarp with holes in it protecting my house.

Wednesday I woke up around 3:30am because my cat was meowing excessively. She’ll sometimes do that when she really wants outside, but with our upstairs open, she can get in and out on her own – the benefit of the tarp and missing windows (although I’m still not sure how she got down to the ground from the roof). Because the cat could come and go as she pleased (as could any animal and yes, we had issues with raccoons trying to move in with us), the meowing was unusual. Groggy, I went to the kitchen to let the cat out and almost fell because I slipped in a giant puddle of water – that’s not good. I didn’t realize how hard it had been raining and the water was coming in the kitchen somehow. I quickly put towels over the floor to soak up the water, cut out holes in the ceiling to let water flow out in a more controlled way, and then went upstairs to the tarped off area to see

what was going on. My guess was there was so much rain some water was getting down the walls, so I created more barriers to prevent that from happening anymore. The benefit of getting upstairs is I found there was a small section that had started leaking that hadn't before. I put some large blue bins on top of tarps to help with that, and with things in better order I went back to bed with adrenaline pumping making sleep impossible. About 15 minutes later, thunder! But this wasn't distant thunder. This was thunder that felt right outside our basement window. I shot out of bed and ran upstairs because something told me it was about to get crazy... and it did. As I got upstairs to the tarped roof area, lightning. But this wasn't a little flash. It was the brightest, blinding flash of lightning I've ever seen as a forty something year old. Despite there being a blue tarp, the light was so bright I had to close my eyes and turn away. As I opened my eyes it was like there was a pool in the sky above us that was ripped apart as this crash of water came down... and it kept coming down. All the work I had done to prevent the other rains from damaging the house was made almost useless as the rain pounded the house. It was an incredible reminder of how little power we have to nature and it was terrifying. During the three other rainfalls I stayed level headed, but this time I was waiting for the whole tarp to be ripped in half – it was pounding so hard. During the previous rainstorms I had made a makeshift roof inside the upstairs with plywood for the half that didn't have the roof above it. Unfortunately, the water was coming in so hard, it was exploding off the inside roof and going into the section of the upstairs still under the original roof. Since I had already put out all of my buckets and containers I had, I kept rearranging everything and throwing towels and blankets to help soak up water coming in. I felt helpless as I screamed for God to stop the rain... but it just kept coming. Apparently I'm not like Jesus who calmed the storm... although He probably didn't include profanity in His prayers like I did.

My wife somehow slept through most of this, but near the end of the downpour she called up, "Do you need help?" and I screamed "Yes!" loud enough for her to hear, but not in a way that would wake up the girls who were also somehow sleeping despite the raging storm. What was strange was Saturday and Sunday night, my wife had been in tears and this time she was the opposite. She slowly sauntered upstairs and while I was panicking, she couldn't have been more casual about the whole thing. She didn't seem numb. She actually didn't seem fazed in any way. The next day I asked her about it and she responded, "What? We were screwed. What did it matter? Everything just sucks." She was broken. Her fear and sadness had turned to resentment toward the workers for being on holiday and leaving us in this position. Fortunately, being someone who is working on her self

control, she agreed it would be best she stay away from the house when the workers were there to prevent her from losing it on them. ***Self control isn't about having good feelings; it's knowing how to avoid sharing angry feelings in a hurtful way.***

At 5:30am, the storm had passed and there was nothing left for my wife and I to do, I messaged the framer half begging half telling him to come do something before the rain being called for on the weekend because we couldn't handle anymore of this. What was interesting is when my phone turned on it happened to be on the weather APP with the map of where the storm had been and it was just a small section where we lived that was hit. Most of the city didn't get anything – awesome. It definitely felt like it was the devil messing with us again. This time, however, I realized that the third verse was in play: “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Mat 28:20). Out of the four storms, God protected us by letting the rain start with the lightest ones and build up. If this last storm was first, the house would've been destroyed.

What's crazy is if it wasn't for the cat meowing, there would've been a lot more damage. I don't know if the cat was meowing because she didn't like that there was water in the house or if this was her way of warning us. Whatever the reason, her meowing got me out of bed and helped me clean up a mess that was about to get worse. It also had me reinforce a weak spot upstairs and put out some blue storage bins that ended up with an inch of water in them from the thunderstorm. She was our protector. Whether God specifically used her to communicate to us or not is up to the hearer of the story, but to me it was a miracle in a traumatic experience.

Fun Fact: Months later I was in a roofing store near my house and noticed their ceiling had water damage. Not a great selling feature for them: “Use our products... we should've.” When I asked about it, the worker said there was a storm in the summer that was too much for the building to handle; I knew exactly what storm he meant. Somehow we survived better than they did with an actual roof. We were definitely lucky to have survived it as well as we did.

Fortunately, the framer came the next day and fixed the main part of the roof by spreading the plywood across the roof (what he should've originally done). Things should be fine now, right? Nope. The next night it rained and very little water came in... under the plywood spot. The kitchen now had a waterfall coming out of

the holes I made Wednesday night. It came in faster than the night of the pounding rain – what was going on? While the rain poured, I was on the roof (not when you want to be a roof). I found a 10 inch square at the top of the roof that had been exposed when they redid the tarp and now the water was being caught like a funnel to come into the house. This spot was likely the leak we had before, but the tarp had been protecting it better before it was moved, and while there was some protection before now there was nothing. Fortunately, my brother-in-law was there to hold a ladder while I put a tarp over that hole, which soon stopped the indoor waterfall feature my wife and I didn't want.

Looking at these five crazy rain experiences in a week (during July, a month traditionally known for being dry), we were protected. If the first four storms hadn't gotten progressively worse we wouldn't have survived the last couple. If I hadn't been home and awake to deal with this, we would've had much more damage. If I hadn't cut holes in the ceiling Wed night, the rain water coming in Saturday night would've shot all through the ceiling looking for ways out and would've destroyed a lot more than a small section of the kitchen ceiling. And again, if it wasn't for the cat meowing, we would have had lost a lot more in the storm. Sometimes divine protection doesn't stop all the bad things from happening, but it can help prevent things from being much worse. Of course, *like in all communication, there is room for interpretation.*

Side Note: I posted this after having faced a sixth storm and another two-three hours panicking to save the house. This time, my protector was my mom who suggested she come to my house instead of me going to hers for our normal Thursday night where she babysits while I work. I had no idea there was a storm even coming. *It's amazing how much we need help from others. It's another reason we want to be kind and have connections.* This time the framer had finished, but the roofer was delayed two days and left us vulnerable – I was less than thrilled. Fortunately I quickly created a new set up with something I had thought of during the previous storms. It's amazing how other people's choices can end up hurting us through collateral damage. It's also amazing how things can stick with us. 14 months later, I still have panic responses when I hear rain.

This week may you consider how communication can get us in trouble or save us from it.

The Importance of Talking

From my experience, women tend to be external processors (aka they're talkers – surprise, surprise) while guys tend to be internal processors (aka we stay in our head – more surprise, surprise). That's a fun difference: (woman) “Why don't you talk more?” (guy) “There's nothing to talk about.” (woman) “I want you to tell me about your feelings.” (guy) “Okay... uh, I'm fine... wow, that felt good to share.” (woman) “Can't you at least ask me about my feelings?” (guy) “Your answer won't be 'fine' so it kind of scares me.” Most women are used to sharing their thoughts and feelings with someone as a way to figure things out. That's why they typically get angry at their husbands and/or parents who throw solutions at them when they try sharing: (woman) “I can figure this out on my own. I just need to hear myself talk it out. If I want your help, I'll ask for it.” (confused guy) “If you don't want an answer, why do I need to listen to you talking? Besides, I'm giving you the answer, so you'll think I'm your hero... and it'll help you shut up, so I can watch the game – win-win.” The added benefit of ***external processing is women get things off their chest and create a sense of connection with the person with whom they're sharing.*** It's a very healthy way to deal with emotions... but it's not the “right” way. Since men are more internal processors (aka they keep things to themselves), they naturally reduce the risk of gossip and unnecessary drama. Both ways have their benefits and their drawbacks. And of course, I'm not saying all women are talkers and all men keep it to themselves. That's just the main pattern I've seen as a therapist. That being said, I've met talkative men, but I'm yet to find a woman who wasn't able to talk a lot if she feels safe. A woman not sharing is a giant warning sign. If a wife isn't talkative over a period of time, there's a good chance she doesn't feel safe, and if she doesn't feel safe enough to talk, there's a good chance she's building resentment and/or talking to another guy.

Unfortunately, when men don't share very much with their partner (aka being normal guys), women often take that as rejection. Thus, a husband who's not bonding with his wife through sharing will likely end up getting sharp and/or cold behavior in return and wonder why: (guy) “I didn't say anything dumb, so why are you angry at me?” (woman) “It's not what you said; it's what you're *not* saying.” (guy) “Would it help if I said I was fine again?” What's interesting is this rejection women feel is like payback for the years of rejection a guy felt from girls in high school... or maybe that was just me. As much as women want men to share, many

men struggle with sharing because when they've tried to open up in the past, it led to a fight or what's shared has been used against them in the future. The problem is a woman will say she wants the guy to share his feelings, but when he does, it's taken personally like it's a criticism even if it seems innocent to the guy. Of course, taking someone's sharing personally isn't exclusively a woman thing. A lot of times when a woman tries to share her heart, the guy takes it as criticism... mostly because the words are likely criticisms (or maybe that's me again). Overall, I find women are more likely to criticize their husbands because it follows the idea that they feel like the only parent and the husband is like one of the children. From my experience, a lot of female "criticism" can be translated to "I want to feel like you care about me," and connected to, "I feel overwhelmed and I want you reduce my stress in some way." If this is the case, what she's looking for isn't to be told what to do (strange, I know) or to be asked "What can I do to help?" This will likely push her over the edge: (woman) "Don't ask me what to do. Think for yourself!" ***What she needs is for the guy to give a couple specific options for what he can do to help because it shows he's put thought into it:*** "Do you want me to do that job you've been nagging at me to do for the last five years or take the kids to their thing tonight?"

What a husband or wife have in common is if they feel criticized they'll likely either shut down or defend themselves through attacking or giving proof why the criticism was wrong (aka bad choices). Trying to prove criticism wrong only leads to the criticizer defending their original point (often with a louder voice) and not saying "Oh, good point. Thank you for proving I'm an idiot. I love being proven wrong when what I want is to feel loved." Defending yourself is never a good option in situations like this. "Yes, and" is a much better choice.

The other reason why men don't like telling women things is they listen and remember. Even if guys listen we don't remember. When a guy gets angry we resort to "Screw you," or as I recently heard an angry dude yelling at another dude, "What's up, bro?" intermixed with "What's your F'ing problem?" and "That was my girl!" He sounded very intelligent... yes. Meanwhile, women remember what we say and can use it against us as they analyze us through angry eyes: (wife) "The way you treat me is why your mom calls me instead of you now." (guy) "What? Well... uh... uh... screw you!" Ultimately, we should never reach a point of anger when we want to yell, "Screw you," because that's a sign a time out should've been called much earlier. I should note that we're more than welcome to analyze someone when we're angry, but we should never share it – that's mean. ***If you wouldn't say something when you're calm, you shouldn't be saying it when***

you're angry even if you "feel" like it, especially since when we share we want to make sure the listener is in the right spot to hear us. If we're angry, there's a good chance they're also upset, and, therefore, not in a listening state.

In conflict, our focus should be on the goal for our conversation and pursuing it. To be clear, hurting someone should never be our goal. I know women can be drawn to this when they're hurt: "I'm hurt, so I'll make sure you hurt, too," whereas a guy is more likely to be "I'm hurt, so I'll try to scare you to back off," or "I'm going to hide for awhile." *Ultimately, our primary goal should be trying to help the person sharing feel loved and then get out any hurt feelings privately. Defending ourselves is a bad goal... unless someone tries to punch you; that's different – block it.*

Differences aside, we all need to learn how to share. (I can imagine wives cheering at this point.) I've had many clients share something and then add, "When I say that out loud, it sounds pretty crazy." (me) "Yup." *In our heads we can be drawn to untruths and create other negative ideas that can escalate the situation as we spiral.* Being in our heads can also leave us feeling bottled up and push us to wanting to shut our brain off by drinking or other unhealthy choices.

As important as talking is we need to make sure we're not talking too much or to the wrong person. (I can imagine the wives are now confused – too much? The wrong person?) Here's the number one rule people should follow for sharing: *Never talk to the person you're angry at unless you can summarize your point in one sentence, and for the record, "Screw you!" isn't a good one sentence.* This rule definitely doesn't make women happy – one sentence? Yup. If you can't share your point in one sentence, you're not ready to address the problem with the person. There's too much emotion at play, so you need to share it with someone else who won't take it personally. *Generally speaking, if you want to talk about a problem you have with someone there's a good chance that's the anger wanting to come out, which means you're not ready to talk.*

My second rule is: *We should never start a conversation by saying "We need to talk."* And many wives are now just plain angry at me: (woman) "But that's what I do! Are you criticizing me?" (me) "No." (woman) "Then what do I do when he won't talk?" (me) "Stop trying to have a conversation with him when you're too emotional to listen without taking it personally." Men typically hide from women when women want to talk after a fight because we can't keep up with

them. They're normally better with words and say a lot of them, so we get confused. They throw examples at us and we can't follow the logic or we don't agree with the details and start nitpicking at them. Talking when both people are emotional will only restart the fight and the guy is left thinking, "This is why I avoid talking to you!" Instead of starting with "We need to talk," we should start with "Can I ask a question?" "Can I make a request?" or "I'm guessing you felt hurt when (fill in the blank). I'm sorry for that." We shouldn't have a "conversation." ***Any serious talks should be less than five minutes for a check-in that ideally helps both people feel like they matter.*** Talking is great, but we should be bonding with our partners over issues other people cause and not trying to bond through the issues we cause each other.

Now that I've upset the women, it's time I upset the guys with my third rule (I like to upset everyone equally, so it's fair): ***Even if we want to process things in our head, we need to push ourselves to talk and/or write some things down.*** We can do some processing in our heads. I do this when I'm jogging as I find the silence allows my subconscious to bring things up I need to address. At the same time, I still need to talk with trusted people who help me process and keep me accountable. Most guys are drawn to talking to girls because guys are less likely to offer sympathy, and it feels safer being vulnerable with girls. It might also connect to how guys grew up talking more with their mom than their dad. My wife is an excellent person to talk to... when it's not about her (like a normal person). Fortunately, I also have my mom, sister, and a jogging buddy who are good listeners. These connections are vital in preventing me from seeking conversations with other women who can put me on a path to an emotional affair – a path I've seen happen many times with other men. ***Going to a person of the opposite gender to share your heart is a very dangerous move... unless you're gay; then it's encouraged.*** Ideally, talking or journaling will help us figure out how to summarize our problem in one sentence in order to help find the best question, request, or apology to use (more on this to come).

If you want to improve your marriage, learn how to share properly – not too much and not too little.

This week may you consider how proper processing can help you be a better communicator.

The Importance of Journaling (Healthy Habits, Pt 1)

6yr old: (Being tucked in bed) Are you going to write in your diarrhea now?

Me: That's a no... and always will be if my brain is working right.

6 yr old: I thought you write in your diarrhea every night.

Me: I write in a diary, but that's very different.

(6 year old laughing as she realizes her mistake)

Talking is very important, but there's something that is sometimes even more important (I think I heard women gasping). Sometimes the best thing for us is to journal. When I suggest this to most guys their response is "Ew." I get it, but when I say journal, I'm not saying we should be like an adolescent girl: "Dear Diary..." I make my journals a prayer and start with "Dear LORD," but you don't need a greeting. You can just go straight to writing: "Today sucked!" "Why is she so crazy?" or "Why is he so stupid?" Dumping information on a page allows our brain to let it go and relax. This is the same reason why writing to-do lists before bed can be helpful for better sleep – when it's written down our brains don't have to remember anything anymore.

The first rule I should note is ***journaling doesn't have to be long***. We write what we need to dump on the page. I usually recommend guys aiming for three to five sentences. That's it. On average, that's how long I write. My journaling usually follows this basic set up: What do I feel? Why do I feel this? Anything I can do better next time?

The second rule of journaling is ***it doesn't have to be every day, but it's good to do before bed to clear your head, especially after a tough day***. When I was a teenager, I journalled pretty much every day, but back then life was dramatic and my brain was in high development mode (now it's more on the decline – yea, aging). Presently, I typically journal a couple times a month because life is pretty basic. If I start journaling more regularly, this is a warning that things are off and I need to address it. For instance, last November and December I was journaling almost every day because I was going through a rough spell. Unfortunately, there wasn't anything specific I could do about it. I just needed to ride out that terrible

time, and journaling helped me keep some sanity. Even better, I got to complain without sounding like a whiner to anyone.

The third rule of journaling is *it doesn't have to be nice*. In my seventeen years with my wife I've never yelled at her or been insulting... to her face. That being said, I have many journal entries that start: "Why is she so crazy?" and I'm guessing hers would mostly start: "Why is he such a jerk?" I've written some pretty nasty things, but who cares? No one's reading it – not even me. This is just an emotional dump. I never reread my journals unless I wrote something particularly insightful and I put a big star beside it to remember to use for a blog. These moments, however, are super rare. Normally it's just an emotional dump that I leave on the page. Maybe one day when I'm old and want to reflect on my life I'll read them, but overall, all that my journals are good for is burning, which I've made my wife promise to do after I die.

I know a lot of women would rather their husbands share more with them directly, but I find a journal is safer. I can put anything I want down on the page and not worry about it being taken the wrong way or being used against me later. It's also great because if I ever want to return to what my brain has needed to process, it's available. Writing out the most private thoughts without fear of judgement is very beneficial because *if we can't get something out, it'll grow in power over us*. Even better (what women will like to hear), *by writing it on paper, it can help us be more comfortable sharing it in person*.

Journaling can also be great for helping women reduce how much they share (I think I hear husbands cheering) since it helps them to consolidate some of their thoughts. This is helpful because guys have limited attention spans. It's not that we don't care; our brains are different, and we need it more to the point.

Journaling is great for everyone when we need to process something, especially if it's late at night when other people are too tired to listen. Other times, I find journaling helpful because I don't have to worry about including another person like in a proper conversation or be distracted by their comments. Sometimes that kind of conversation is helpful and other times we need to just focus on ourselves.

The other week I could feel my head being weighted down and needing to write in my journal. I had talked to my wife about it, but it was still swirling in my head. That night my journal was longer than usual, but it led to a very interesting revelation. I'll give you the basics of it as an example of why I journal. First, here's the back story. I first met Zachary Levi (Chuck, Flynn Ryder, Shazam) in

2012 when I was in New York City for a book seminar. He was doing a play and he signed autographs for fans after the show. I ended up giving him my book, *Emotional Sex: Making Good Relationships Great*, and he quoted it on social media, which was pretty amazing. After that, I contacted his agent and asked about helping him write a biography that he could give to fans as a free download in order to promote himself. I was told thank you, and never heard back from the agent – shocker. Several years later Zac did a second play, and I came up with a proposal to ask if I could help him write a book on kindness – something he claimed to be very into. I arranged two separate trips with friends and family to see him three times each trip after his shows when he did signings from giving him the proposal, getting a group photo with friends, (I wanted to make sure he knew I had friends, so I looked less crazy) and giving him different gifts like gift cards to pass out to homeless people. On the second trip, at the sixth meeting, for whatever reason, I asked if he'd meet my wife and I for coffee and for some reason he agreed – what? He met us the next day at Starbucks before the show and I could barely speak. I might as well have handed him my tongue because I forgot how to use it. He was very kind and left saying, “I’ll pray about the idea.” This is arguably the smartest rejection ever because now it was God’s fault if it didn’t work out and not his. Overall, the experience was mind blowing, but I never heard back from him – who’d have guessed? In 2019, three years later, Zac was in Toronto for autographs at Fan Expo... and I obviously went to see him. When I went up to him for a photograph, he remembered me – that was pretty cool. He also remembered me with a smile and not “Oh, the crazy person” – that was a bonus. I once again offered to help him write a book and this time... was like the others. Several years later he came out with a book on kindness. I like to think I put the idea in his head, but I’m pretty sure that’s not how he would see it. Now fast forward to Christmas 2022. I’m doing my devotions and this idea crosses my mind: “You need to go to Fan Expo and encourage Zachary Levi.” I remember thinking, “That’s weird,” especially when nothing had been announced about Fan Expo and celebrities almost never go more than once. I told my wife that I thought God gave me a job to do, and she was like “That’s weird, and he’s going to think you’re weird,” and I responded, “Yup, but who cares because the odds are he’s not going to be there, so it’s fine.” Two months later it was announced he was going to be there, so I was like “I guess I’m going to look weird.” I then spent the next however many months trying to think about what I should say and how to say it without sounding like a weirdo. I also pushed hard to publish my new book, *52 Lessons to be a Better Person: The perfect gift for someone else* to give him a copy since he’s a Christian who is a big advocate for emotional health. A number of things

came together that helped me be able to go, and I kept telling myself, “If this is from God, it’ll work out.” Arriving at Fan Expo, my hatred of crowds was triggered hard. If you’ve never been to Fan Expo, picture a New York City subway at rush hour on Halloween with vendors adding to the claustrophobia and BO being a steady scent in the air. Unlike previous visits with Zac where I was trying to sell the idea of having me help him write a book, my goal was to encourage him and offer help with his charity work that addresses mental illness – I’m a therapist, so it’d make sense for him to want to use me.

What’s interesting is every time I’ve met Zac it came at a really difficult time in my life. It was like God was giving me something positive to look forward to... or seeing Zac is bad luck – it could go either way. Because of my last experience seeing him, I had a better idea of what to expect, so I was more confident. As I waited in line to see him I knew the message I thought God wanted me to share was too long to say, so I wrote part of it down on a piece of paper I put in the book I was giving him. This time I was able to avoid the trap of being too nervous to talk. I also didn’t beat myself up after like every previous visit, but I still had some things to unpack, which I did in my journal that night (and several times since). That night I wrote about how it was neat the way things came together for me to be there and ready to see him, which led to asking God: “Why have I had these opportunities to connect with Zac? Is it just coincidence or something more?” The heavier question was: “Why have you helped me be in this position where You’ve taught me so much wisdom and helped me write books I’m proud of but don’t have any real way to get people to care about them?” I also concluded that I want to help the world, not for pride or to like myself (not like years ago). I want to help the world because it’s so mean. How can anyone really feel safe? All of these ideas were discovered through journaling.

What was hard for me this time was it felt different going in, but it ended up the same. What was interesting was my final point in my journal: “Maybe today was all about me. Maybe God wanted me to ‘encourage’ Zac because He wanted *me* to be encouraged.” He knew I needed a break and a chance to spend time with my brother, which never happens anymore because of our kids. He knew I needed a chance to sit in silence, which is what happened for 45 minutes waiting to watch an interview with Jamie Lee – that was heaven... not Jamie Lee; his interview was dull. The silence before his interview, however, was amazing. When you’re used to watching kids, what I used to think was boring is now the greatest gift – peace. God also knew I needed to laugh and Zachary Levi’s panel was stand-up comic level hilarious since he’s a mild version of Jim Carrey. It was incredible watching

him work the crowd. Even the message I thought God wanted me to share, a three sentence encouragement, I suddenly felt like God was saying, “This is also for you. Whether he reads the message you wrote for him doesn’t matter. You need to hear this.” Maybe that conclusion was my brain being wishful, but it was nice to consider. In other journal entries I wasn’t as positive about the experience and that’s okay because all of our emotions are a gift from God and need to be experienced.

Bonus: If you’re curious, the basic message I felt I was supposed to give Zac that I later felt was also for me was based on Mat 25:21. He’s a Christian, so it would hopefully make sense to him: “I believe God wanted me to share this with you: As discouraged and attacked as you might feel at times, I want you to know, ‘You’re doing well, my good and faithful servant.’” I’ll never know if Zac read it, but this meant a lot to me as I fully hope when I die God will be able to say to me, “Well done, my good and faithful servant.”

This week may you consider how talking and journaling can help you flush out your thoughts better.

Here’s my brother and I with Zac the year I could actually talk.



The Importance of Venting (Healthy Habits, Pt 2)

In the last two lessons, we looked at the importance of talking and journaling. Both of these activities fall in the category of venting. ***Learning to vent in a healthy way is one of the most important things we can learn to do in order to be a good communicator*** (and to be emotionally healthy), especially when our world has become so tap driven (e.g. texting and scrolling). In the old days we chopped fire wood, scrubbed clothes on a scrub board, planted gardens we tilled by hand, and we even killed our own food – people were physical (and way tougher than me). In the not-so-distant past, we used to slam a phone down after a bad phone call and use something to scribble on a page that we'd crinkle up and throw in the recycling bin. We were physical, so emotion had natural ways of getting out. Based on how our world has changed, we need to purposely find ways to vent and get out our emotions because there's a lot of bottling up going on, which puts a lot of people on the brink of exploding, shutting down, or panic attacks.

As far as venting goes, there are two basic kinds – there's processing (i.e. talking and journaling) and physical release (i.e. using hands and/or feet). Both are important, especially since processing is best done after we've had the physical release. When people are verbally fighting, they are essentially venting at each other with a mix of processing and physical release (e.g. raised voice), which is why they say things that are exaggerated by emotion (i.e. social filters have gone on lunch break). Ideally we'll brush off what's said about us in venting, but unfortunately these fights are worse than useless because they create a deficit in the relationship since what's said in those moments tend to be remembered and trump anything nice we say or do later in our right mind. Even worse, the dumb things we say when we're fighting are used to justify bad behaviors in the future: "If they think (blank), screw them; I'm going to do (blank)." This brings us back to the point in the earlier lessons: ***We should only talk to someone we're angry at after we can summarize our point in one sentence, which is best found by talking to a safe outside person or journaling.*** Talking to the person you're angry at is setting yourself up for failure because you're not saying anything smart and the other person's not in the right mindset to listen.

The great thing about the one sentence is you can turn it into a question as a better way to create a constructive dialogue with the other person even if the question is as simple as: “When you said (thing) was that a true statement (what it felt like) or just anger coming out (what I hoped was the case)?” or “When we were talking, did you get louder because you weren’t feeling understood or was it more to get me to back off?” The one sentence also helps us feel more in control. For instance, building my addition has been a disaster. Last week four different construction teams were supposed to show up to do some work on Thursday and zero showed up or called to tell me they couldn’t make it. Since I had already summarized the main reason why this addition has been bothering me so much – it has shattered my trust in people – the disappointment was easier to swallow because it just continued what I already knew – people suck.

Sometimes to be in a position to process our situation down to one sentence we need to first do some physical venting (aka we need to get some anger out to think better before we can process by talking and journaling). Other times we need to vent because things have been bottling up without us realizing it. When life keeps throwing crap at us, just like a toilet, we need to flush it away or we’re going to have a bigger mess. Fun story (that transition must be intriguing: “Speaking of needing to flush...”), my family went to Clovermead near London in the summer, which is like a bee farm meets small amusement park. From their engagement, I’d say my three and five year old had more fun there than at Disney World because it’s so hands-on there. Being in the middle of nowhere, however, Clovermead’s bathrooms are septic based and not sewer, so they have to be a little creative. At the front of the park they have normal toilets in bathrooms that have glass walls with a beehive on the other side – they were very cool. In the actual park, however, they have these special toilets you have to hold a lever for five seconds for water to come in and then the hole at the bottom of the toilet opens up. They were essentially fancy outhouse toilets. In my five year old’s rush, she ran into the one stall bathroom and jumped on the toilet seat before my wife could put toilet paper over the seat – gross – and then when my wife caught up, my five year old confidently said, “Don’t worry, Mommy, I only got a little wet.” Was that a wet toilet seat moment? Maybe. The bigger issue was the last few people didn’t hold the lever down long enough, so instead of the water and fun stuff being sucked down the hole, the toilet was full of the world’s nastiest stew and my daughter was sitting in it – super gross. To add to the fun, the toilet was already full, so when my daughter went potty it just flowed out the sides. Not the best “water” feature. This is just like our emotions. If you don’t flush out the emotions once in awhile, you end up with a bigger mess or as my daughter said, you get “a little wet.”

I know a lot of “good” people don’t like the idea of physically getting out their emotion because it sounds primal, but primal is “primal.” Eating and drinking are primal. If we don’t eat and drink, bad things happen. If we don’t get our emotions out, bad things happen. A lot of young people have sports that naturally help them get out their emotions, which is good because teenagers are extra emotional as their brains are developing and the hormones mess with them. As we get older, however, we typically don’t have time to play or we get injured. We’re busy working and/or taking our kids to play. Sometimes working out can help, but even then unless we’re trying to get angry or think about the things that have hurt us, we’re just moving our muscles. We need to think about the crap we’ve been collecting when we’re being physical to help flush it away.

So how do we actually vent? Well, what does your body want to do when it’s angry? Yell, hit, stomp/kick, throw, and smash. You know the things we’re taught not to do as kids? Yup, that’s what we need to start doing. We need to retrain our bodies to get out the emotion in the way it was designed to get it out. Of course, we were taught not to do these things because we can look crazy doing them, which is why we want to learn to do them in private. Yelling on the bus full of people? You’re a nut job. Yelling alone or singing loudly in the car? Healthy. Hitting people or walls? A criminal offence. Punching your bed or punching bag? Healthy and very releasing. Smashing your spouse’s favorite vase? You’re a jerk. Smashing a bunch of junk you’re throwing out anyway? Amazing. Years ago when I worked at the Disney Store (I miss that store), I was given a bin of damaged snow globes and mugs and I was told to smash them in the garbage bin. At first I gently threw each item in, but after a few throws, I got really into it. It was the best five minutes of work I’ve ever had (no offence to my clients, but smashing stuff was way better than any conversation I’ve had). This can be replicated with junk bought at a garage sale or “dollar” store and finding a garbage bin to reduce risk of injury and need for cleanup.

This idea of physically getting out our emotion is why some people love to burn things and blow stuff up. Other forms of venting include playing the drums, throwing stuffed animals or pillows, shooting a gun, throwing paint or slapping a paint brush on a canvass, baseball hitting, vigorous cleaning, and two handed medicine ball throws on the ground. We can even vent vicariously through people like listening to angry music or an angry comedian like Bill Burr or Christopher Titus. Even a cardio activity like riding a bike can be really good. While you’re doing the activity, you want to think about something that causes emotion and start pedaling extra hard for a couple minutes. I once had a pastor tell me that he

got in the habit of breaking sticks because using his hands to break something helped him feel stronger and more in control. Be creative. One of the best forms of venting is mime screaming in a mirror. It sounds silly, but it's oddly therapeutic even though no noise is made. There's something about seeing yourself angry in a mirror that makes you feel validated: "Yeah, you should be angry!" Physically venting is ultimately an explosion of energy that leaves you feeling lighter after.

Bonus: If anyone suffers from panic attacks, one of the best things you can do when you feel your anxiety rise is physically vent. Your body is going into fight, flight, or freeze mode, so do something to get that energy out and feel like you're in control. For instance, jumping Jacks as fast as you can for one minute or push ups are particularly great for this because after you'll end up deep breathing naturally. People who just try to breathe aren't listening to their body.

This week may you consider how you can physically vent to help flush out the crap building up in the toilet of your life (being poetic has never been my strength), which will also help you become a better communicator.

The Importance of Coping (Healthy Habits, Pt 3)

Physically venting is one of the healthiest things we can do in our technologically focused world because we're all so bottled up and on the brink of exploding or shutting down. Venting is actually part of a bigger category – coping. While venting is specifically geared to getting out emotion, coping is the broader umbrella of getting through difficult times or experiences. Even if we didn't live in an incredibly unhealthy world, we would need to find ways to cope with the struggles of life from physical to emotional pain. As spoiled as we are (and partly because we are so spoiled and not as tough as previous generations) the need for finding healthy coping skills is all the more important. Unfortunately we tend to rely on terrible coping tools like drinking and smoking pot instead of looking for healthier options as people are drawn to saying: "I'm fine if I can't feel – drug me."

So why is our culture so unhealthy? Besides reducing activities that cause natural physical exertion (one of the reasons we need to physically vent as discussed in the last lesson), we've also devalued the importance of community and family while promoting independence. Not only does independence promote a culture of divorce and doing whatever's best for me, kids need to be encouraged to have community. Kids need to be taught to be kind and how to get along with others because these are lifelong skills. By ourselves, we're only so smart and strong. With the right people, we are so much more. Kids need to be taught how to live in community because it's only through community that we find true self acceptance. I've met people who would say they had "self acceptance" but they were selfish jerks. ***We're meant to have a balance of what I think and what others think.*** If I focus on me – narcissist. If I focus on others – overly people pleasing. I need a balance. ***People thrive when they want to benefit the community and not just satisfy their own self desires.***

We're so foolish as a culture we've made it acceptable for people to give up and look to others to carry their weight. We let people make excuses not to work and/or be contributing members of society when that actually increases how emotionally broken they feel. If we aren't contributing to our community, how can we feel value? We're just a user, and our brains aren't happy in that position. ***We need to feel value and that only happens when we do something of***

value. I've heard people say they struggle to feel like they have value, so I'll ask, "Should you feel value or is that a sign you need to step up?" The truth is you're either lying to yourself and you do have value; you're just not appreciating all you do. The other option is you're feeling exactly what you should feel – no value. Being human doesn't inherently mean you should feel value. You only have value if you're doing something of value. I once met a severely handicapped child who couldn't speak more than sounds and he needed straps to hold him up in a chair, but he had the most incredible smile and he made everyone around him feel good because he was so joyful. In turn, his own joy was fueled by seeing others be happy around him. ***Despite his extreme limitations, he had incredible value because he was a gift to those around him.*** Sometimes all you need in order to feel value is for someone to give you a friendly smile, which, in turn, gives the person smiling value.

We're so foolish as a culture we're replacing nature with asphalt. Who needs trees and stars when you can see pictures of them, right? Not only are we removing nature from our lives, we're cramming people in together. Who gets stuck in traffic or hits stop light after stop light and feels better about life? Who doesn't like being herded like cattle through busy walk ways? Maybe it's because I grew up in a smaller country town, but I struggle not to feel claustrophobic when I'm crammed in with people. It's like quality of life doesn't matter anymore because more people means more tax dollars (or maybe I'm cynical). Either way, we're left needing to find ways to cope.

What shocks me is we've created a culture full of basic things guaranteed to cause struggle and then we're surprised when addiction and suicide are growing problems. It doesn't make sense unless unhealthy is the goal. Instead of promoting proper coping tools, movies and TV promote drinking like it's the answer to feeling down (even though it's proven generation and generation to make things worse) and then our culture itself promotes other terrible coping tools like smoking pot, shopping, scrolling, binging Netflix, gambling, hooking up, over working, and overeating. It's no wonder we're such an unhealthy world – ***we have lots of reasons to be stressed and the most common tools for dealing with it make it worse.***

When it comes to coping mechanisms, there are three basic categories:

1. ***Bad Coping Mechanisms:*** These are things that cause us to bury feelings and not address what needs addressing. Examples include yelling

at others, punching a wall, biting nails, self harm in any form, eating disorders, drinking, smoking, spending money, over indulging, gossip, drama, slander, sex outside of a proper relationship, and being married yet sharing your heart with someone else that we find attractive.

2. ***Good But Can Become Bad Mechanisms:*** These are things that can be healthy coping tools, but can become dangerous since they can lead to addiction. Examples include listening to angry or sad music, video games, self pleasure, sleeping, eating a treat, exercise, and watching TV.
3. ***Good Coping Mechanisms:*** These are things that help us deal with our mental messes. This includes playing sports, crafting, listening to uplifting music, playing music, learning something new, finishing a project, achieving a new accomplishment, connecting with friends, making new friends, volunteering, helping someone like an elderly person with something they can't do themselves, getting out for a change of scenery, creating something to look forward to (e.g. look at where you can travel, booking a time to see friends, buying a ticket to see a play or concert), going to an uplifting church, watching comedy, hugs and physical touch in general, sex with our partner, having a security blanket, be in nature, and anything that helps you feel stronger and/or safer.

Please Note: Good coping mechanisms (aka things that give us value) are best done in conjunction with healthy venting.

The benefit of seeing these lists is they can help guide us to choosing the right things to be on our coping list. We have power to choose what we do to cope... sometimes. One of the problems with coping tools is once we get an idea in our head for coping, it's pretty much forever going to be in there somewhere. When bad things happen, what essentially happens is our brain goes to our coping options A, B, C, or D, and these can be good or bad. For instance, when I was 18 my grandpa died, and I went into a spiral of asking, "What's the point of life?" I never had a plan for killing myself, but I was in the "I wish I could die" mindset. Because I've had that once, I now have killing myself on my coping list and there's no erasing it. For me, when bad things happen, my simplified coping list is options A, B, C, and D is kill myself. Because I've never had alcohol or pot, neither of those is on my list – thankfully. Video games also aren't on my list because when I was younger I played a few games like Aladdin, Earthworm Jim, and ESPN Hockey, but they were never a coping option; they were just something fun I did for 10 to thirty minutes (the max people should play a game). Instead, on my list I have "Die!" and no matter what I do, this will be on my list the rest of my

life. It doesn't mean I'm suicidal, at risk of being suicidal, or even a bad person. It just means when bad things happen I can expect that option to cross my mind. The problem is if "Die!" moves up from option D to option B. ***As a grownup, we all have bad coping options on our list, but it's up to us to try to make sure we have healthier ones higher up in order to prevent the bad ones from being chosen.*** For instance, anyone who has drinking as option A needs to work at pushing that down the list by replacing it with healthier choices. Bad options tend to feel easier to think of, but we can train ourselves to do healthier ones with some work. ***The problem is the easier something is to do in the moment, the less benefit it'll have later while the harder thing to do in the moment will have much better results in the future.***

Bonus: Coping is always easier when we're not alone, which is one of the benefits of community.

This week may you consider what you want on your coping list because being better at coping will help us have a healthier life.

The Importance of Decompression Time

(Healthy Habits, Pt 1)

I've been promoting the importance of venting for many years with clients, but the one thing I've often neglected to encourage is decompression time.

Decompression time is when we unwind from the day. It's like relaxing, but deeper. When COVID first kicked in and I started working from home, I noticed a hit to my brain because the only separation between work and home was a door – that was not enough. My brain really missed the 15ish minutes drive home from work to unwind. When I was in the office, I left work around 9pm, which meant my drive home was low traffic – awesome – and on a highway – awesomer. I barely had to hit my brakes – the dream. Driving in traffic means being on high alert, which is exhausting in its own way. I feel sorry for commuters. It's crazy how relaxing a peaceful drive without stops can be while being in traffic makes you want to scream. It's no wonder years ago people took Sunday drives. There's a peace to it and a time to reconnect as family. Now driving is always busy and there are so many stoplights, stop signs, and speed bumps everywhere. Any purposeful way of slowing traffic makes me angry. Considering brake dust is cancer causing and hitting the gas to get the car moving faster uses more fuel and expels more exhaust, all of these slow down techniques scream: "We're killing the environment," with a side of "We're wasting your time and money, Sucka!" Yes, my brain is mean, but it's not wrong. Flowing traffic is better for the environment and our brains.

After I started working from home, I discovered I needed to jog late at night a couple times in the work week in order to clear my head, which I continue to do. Considering I used to hate cardio (like a normal person), it's quite the change that I now look forward to my late night jogs. Because I was so easily able to compensate for the lack of driving unwinding time, I didn't give decompression time much thought until this past summer during construction on my house when a lot of my other decompression tools were slammed. For instance, my wife and I have been sleeping in the basement for the last four months on our daughters' twin mattresses while they share ours in the living room on the main floor. Not only does this mean we're not in our normal beds in their normal spots, our floor space in our house is largely erased by beds. Add in scattered clothes due to a lack of dresser/closet space and we've created a natural claustrophobic/hoarder feel in

the house, which causes my brain to be on edge in the place where I'm supposed to be able to find peace. On top of this, my wife and I sleep in the room where the TV is, which means on the three nights she goes to bed earlier than me, I don't get to watch a 20 minute show at the end of the day, which really helps my brain calm down. I've also missed out on enjoying my gardens and visiting fancy garden centers like I love to do every spring and summer because I have more pressing matters to focus on.

For Context: If you're wondering what kind of joy living through renovations can look like, here's our main floor living room where our girls slept with a small section for play on the other side:



And here's the basement main area. To the right of this mountain of stuff is where I have my desk for work and spend most of my day. On the other side is a couch and the two beds my wife and I slept on for seven months. In the middle of the pile is an old furnace I used as my dresser... I wouldn't recommend it. There's a reason people use actual dressers.



On top of all of this chaos, possibly the biggest kicker started in July and has nothing to do with the addition; it was just bad timing. For some reason our shower suddenly stopped having cold water. That meant showers involved getting in the cold water as soon it was turned on (that was unpleasant) because I needed the cold to help me handle being roasted by the hot water (also unpleasant). Showering in two minutes can be done. Not having a good eight minute shower (I enjoy showers, but I'm cheap) at the end of the day let me without a good chance to decompress. After a month of dealing with back and forth with the manufacturer, we found out the shower couldn't be fixed and the only way to fix it was to rip up a wall in a room that couldn't be touched – good times. That meant we had to accept this set up until the new shower could be finished, which should

have been in September, but it wasn't done until February. Renovations are the best... at pushing your patience and sense of perseverance.

Fortunately, on top of jogging for decompressing, I still had my writing, which naturally increased that summer. I know I'm in a rough spot when I write in my journal more than a couple times a month, so when I was writing almost every day that was definitely a red flag. What surprised me was realizing my job can be good decompression if I've spent too much time with my kids. Similarly, being with my kids can be good decompression time if I've been working too much. Too much of anything has its struggles, and my kids can be hilarious. For instance, the other day my three year old went to my wife with cupped hands in front of her and said, "Here, Mommy," and then opened them, which allowed throw up to fall all over my wife's pants – hilarious (not to my wife). Not even an hour later, the same daughter left the bathroom, went up to my wife with both hands up in front of her face and announced, "I went this many poops." Her innocence is hilarious... most times. The other day we were at the park and she pointed at someone and said, "What's wrong with that person's eyes? It's creepy." (me in shock) "Um, that's a sign she can't see, and she has super human hearing... which is particularly unfortunate in this moment."

God has actually created us with natural decompression times. There's having to slow down to eat (unless you have toddlers like I do), there's going to the bathroom (unless you have toddlers who interrupt you and/or make you rush), and there's napping (again, if you don't have toddlers). It's no wonder parents with small kids are so on edge – we lose out on natural decompression times. It's also no wonder renovations cause couples so many problems – we lose some of our decompression options while ramping up the stress with constant decisions that need to be made, money concerns, setbacks, not having home as a safe foundation, and conflicts with contractors who don't show or do as they promise.

So what else would be considered decompression time? Good question, me. As someone new to paying attention to this, decompression time is whatever activity helps you breathe a sigh of relief: "Ahhhh, that's good." Maybe it's a hot tub or a cup of hot chocolate. Maybe it's eating a piece of cake or the smell of cinnamon buns. Maybe it's sitting at a bonfire or looking at the stars (if you're somewhere you can see stars). It can be watching something light and fluffy that doesn't involve a lot of thinking or anything stressful. It can potentially be connecting with someone in a deeper way (unless you're not social) or carefree playing an instrument. It can be doing a monotonous job without a timeline like cleaning

dishes, vacuuming, cutting grass, or mopping a floor like in the movie *Bruce Almighty* (one of my favorite movies). It can even be sitting on a couch exchanging foot rubs with someone... unless you're smart and realize that's gross.

The big thing I should point out is decompression time isn't scrolling on your phone because that's a dopamine hit seeker. ***Decompression time is not a "high." It's not a rush; it's a release.*** It also isn't finishing a task – that's more of a coping tool. It's more about putting your feet up after the task is done. Some people will have a hard time decompressing because they don't actually work hard enough to need the break. Meanwhile, workaholics can have a hard time with decompressing because we're too on the go. This is one of the challenges I have when I travel – I just keep going and doing more stuff; I feel bad stopping because travelling is a special event and I don't want to miss anything.

When I was growing up and we ate around the table as a family every night, there was a decompression feel to it as each person was able to share about their day. My wife and I do this now after the kids go to bed (or try to). We take 10 to 30 minutes every day to chat about the day and random things that cross our minds. The conversation isn't very deep, but it's calming. This is also why walks and hikes can be particularly helpful for people. There can be talking or silence as we let thoughts pass through our brains and we reflect and let things go. If anything big does come to mind, sometimes it's wise to write it down and deal with it later in order to enjoy the unwinding time.

Not only can venting, coping, and decompressing lead to meaningful conversations, they can also help us know when not to have certain conversations like if either party isn't calmer.

This week may you consider what decompression time means for you.

What Does Resolution Look Like?

One of the great things about marriage and living with someone who is closely tied to you is it can lead to new opportunities to learn and practice tools for communication. Is that a nice way of saying you'll have crappy days? Crappy days are never what we wake up in the morning hoping will happen: "Good morning life. Give me something terrible to face today!" Maybe it's a me thing, but I've also never woken up in the morning and thought, "I can't wait to treat someone like garbage, so I can feel better," but some days that's how some people (not saying my wife) seem to wake up (also not saying it's *not* my wife). In all fairness to her, she's going through some pretty rough physical issues (aka pregnant) while being pretty amazing at handling the chaotic house renovation situation. Fun fact, when I asked her how she's been so good at dealing with the renovation chaos, she responded: "My house growing up was always in some type of disaster. I'm used to it." Huhn, I guess there really is good in all things including having a chaotic house growing up. My mom used to wake up at 5:30am before everyone else in order to get ready and sweep the floors. I was raised with pristine, so this mess is driving me nuts while my wife is already nuts... I mean used to the house being nuts. I guess you could say she's used to the house being a mess and her man being perfect... she wouldn't say that, but you could if you want. I don't mind.

On this one particular Saturday, I had to get some things done for the dry waller who was supposed to come the next day. My working on the house means my wife is alone with the kids, which means I need to appreciate that her role allows me the chance to avoid my kids... I mean work on some things on my own. (Parents never need a break from their toddlers... never.) I quickly felt stressed and frustrated trying to figure out challenge after challenge – construction is definitely not my strength. Meanwhile, some neighbor friends randomly stopped by and played out front with my girls while my wife chatted with their aunt who was watching them. The night before I asked my wife about going to a garden center to buy a nice fall plant – something that I really love doing (I'm that manly) – and I sacrificed doing something else with a friend I wanted to do in the morning in order to have an hour to do this with my family in the afternoon. These visitors were putting a crunch on our time and I twice reminded my wife the girls needed to eat lunch because it was nearing 2pm. (As bad as I am at construction, she's worse at reading a clock.) After the neighbors left, I helped get the kids eating, so

we would be ready to leave quicker. While the kids had been playing, however, my youngest somehow found the hidden Play Doe and had everyone playing with it on our nice stone porch. I happened to pass by seeing that and thought, “That’s not a good idea.” Later, while the girls ate, my wife was on her knees scrubbing the Play Doe smears off the porch. (I was right; it was a bad idea.) I ended up having to pass her to take some garbage out and on the way back in I very casually said, “So I guess we won’t be letting the kids play with Play Doe on the porch again.” You might be thinking that’s a pretty simple observation (like me) or you might be thinking “What an insensitive jerk,” (like my wife). To her credit, she didn’t explode and I had no idea until later she was angry at it. And in my defence, I thought I was making a basic observation – no we shouldn’t let them play with Play Doe on the front step. In general, I hate Play Doe. It’s always a mess. If you hate someone, give their little kids Play Doe and laugh maniacally as you think about all the messes they’ll be cleaning up later. I should point out, ***sometimes people don’t explode from anger, but they can slow release with some pretty strong jab comments.*** This is often the choice for people good with words. My wife is excellent with words...

While the kids ate, I gave my wife timelines in the helpful way I always do because of her clock reading “ability”: We need to leave in half an hour. We need to leave in 15 minutes. We need to leave in 5 minutes. We need to leave in two minutes... and that’s when my wife decided to start doing laundry. While I was brushing my teeth, I ran downstairs to grab something from our makeshift bedroom (I have a pile of clothes on our old furnace – jealous?), which is when I saw her in the laundry room. I reminded her that we had to go and zing. Confused, I made a benign comment about the store closing soon and zing zang (or whatever is stronger than a zing). A few minutes later we were upstairs and I was given a zing zang zong and my soul snapped. I didn’t yell or say anything; I just broke. The crazy thing is I didn’t look at my wife, but I felt her smirking like “I win.” It was a very strange moment.

At one point my wife told me to go to the store on my own, so instead of getting to enjoy something I had been looking forward to do with my family I was now feeling rejected and sniped. After I broke, I vented (I followed my own advice – physically get out the emotion safely is very important) and my wife was very good to give me the privacy I needed. If you saw this situation unfolding; I’m sure you wouldn’t be thinking: “This couple must really love the LORD,” or “This guy must be a therapist.” Here’s the problem: The closer someone is, the greater the hurt we can cause and when things are not in a good place, little things can be a lot

more hurtful than they would be when times are better. That means as an outsider it could look like we both should've brushed off each other's comments, but they hit hard because we were personally involved. That being said, if you've learned anything about healthy communication, my wife and I actually did pretty well. We never yelled at each other despite our hurt, we gave each other space when needed, and I was smart enough to vent out my emotion privately, so good things were happening even though I would've looked like a maniac when I was venting – the reason you do it privately.

After venting hard for a couple minutes, I went back to work upstairs – at least I could be alone. Being able to read a clock (it's a great skill to have) I noticed if I left in that moment I had maybe ten minutes to be in the garden center before they closed... so I went. It might have been a bad day, but I could at least get a plant to make me smile for the next few weeks. When I got to the nursery, I discovered a vacant lot. It had been shut down for a month or so and was being prepped to be replaced by condos. Losing one of my favorite places definitely didn't help my day. Fortunately, I was on the phone with my sister (I was doing some processing) and she pointed out there was a smaller garden center not far away that was open an hour later. They had a couple smaller plants that worked really well, so I treated myself to some plants on sale – blooming plants have power to bring healing to the soul and a sale is just awesome.

When I got home, I went back to work upstairs and continued working through dinner. I only stopped to help get the kids ready for bed. After prayers and saying good night, I went back to work. At one point in the evening I asked myself: ***By not talking to my wife, am I giving her the silent treatment (i.e. I'm not talking to you as punishment) or was it something healthier?*** The line between these two very different intentions can be a little tricky. Part of my brain was like "Screw her!" but the main part of my brain was healthy: "I have no idea what to say and as Thumper taught: 'If you can't say something nice, don't say nothing at all.'" Finally, about nine hours after I snapped, I knew what to say and was ready. Leaving the upstairs, I found my wife steaming the kitchen floors with her headphones in, which is her sign she was "steaming" with me. This was very strange because I thought I was the one who was angry. It turned out she was also angry at me – what? After asking, "Are you angry at me or something else?" she told me how angry she was about my Play Doe "criticism" and when she replayed the moment she used this teenage girl attitude with head swivel motion. That was interesting because I'm neither a teenage girl nor a head swiveller. As I wrote in previous lessons, what I said didn't match what she heard. I said "Circle," and she

heard, “Circle, you idiot.” I tried pointing out that what I said was very benign and more of a new boundary – no Play Doe on the stairs – but unfortunately, I forgot my own rule: **Statements lead to bigger fights**. She heard my comment as further criticism and even my saying “I wasn’t being a teenage girl,” was translated in her head to: “You’re so dumb; you don’t even know how to do something simple like listen.” Fortunately, we both regrouped. My wife went with “We shouldn’t talk right now because we’re both tired and nothing good will come out of this.” That was a very wise point. As discussed in previous lessons, however, “talking,” no matter when you do it, almost always leads to a bigger fight. Another option is one person will admit defeat and stuff their feelings down in order to appease the other scarier person, but that’s damaging in its own way. Not wanting to take any more time – it had been nine hours – I pointed out, “I don’t want to talk; I just want to ask a couple questions.” This is what I should’ve done in the first place, but even I can make mistakes (shocking I know). With permission and her warning about not wanting to “talk,” I asked, “When you make comments like you did this afternoon, do you see them as innocent or were you trying to hurt me?” Her response (gruff): “I don’t know.” Translation: “It was obviously to hurt you, but I’m not going to admit that right now.” I could, however, be wrong (not likely). As a compliment to my wife, most people when called out on their bad behavior, start to yell as a way to get the other to back off, but she didn’t. She just repeated, “We shouldn’t talk because we’re both tired.” I, however, continued, “I just have one more question,” and with permission, I asked: “Let’s flip the same question to me. When I say things, do you think I see them as innocent or am I trying to hurt you?” Again, she said, “I don’t know,” but this time it was softer. Translation: I know you don’t try to hurt me. When it comes down to it, my wife knows I’m not a jerk/teenage girl with attitude; I’m socially dumb. (I think that’s better?) A consistent theme in our 17 year relationship is when my wife is in a bad spot, she wants to see the things I say as being mean and trying to hurt her when I consistently try to remind her that hurting her is never my goal – hurting her makes my life worse. I’m not saying I’m noble; it’s more logical.

After I asked my questions, the conversation was done, so it was less than five minutes – perfect. **Post fight conversations should never be more than a couple minutes**. With this new information, we went back to our corners to try to nurse our wounds. To my wife’s credit, she never tried to externally process her feelings with me and the next day she was completely back to her kind self. Considering how much physical pain she was in that was very impressive. And to my credit, I journalled my thoughts and found my one sentence conclusion: My wife confused her physical pain with anger at me because anger feels better.

And that was it. That's resolution. There was nothing left to discuss. ***Resolution doesn't mean we're ready to hug. Sometimes, it's just coming to our own acceptable conclusion in one sentence and having a good night's sleep.*** In this situation, my wife and I were under a lot of stress with the house and to top it off she was pregnant – she definitely wasn't herself.

As far as my wife transferring her anger, that's easy to understand because I did that the week before. I had been working on the side of the house all weekend and at 9pm Sunday I was like "This is taking so long... Why isn't my wife helping me? How can she leave me to do this on my own?... Oh, right. She's been watching the kids all weekend, so I could work on this. I'm not angry at her. I'm angry I'm still working on this stupid project the impossible inspector is forcing me to do." It's amazing how easy it is to confuse our emotions. If I can do it, I should be patient when my wife has a turn.

I should note that when a conflict like this happens, ***it's good to consider was this moment so big that it caused the conflict or was it more the accumulation of different things including the past?*** For us, it was an accumulation. My wife was in a lot of physical pain while I was on the emotional edge. Overall, I'd say my wife and I handled ourselves really well considering how out of sorts we were. This situation ultimately proves how far we've grown because we kept it smaller than it could've been and shorter than it could've become. ***It takes two people to have a conflict and two to limit how far it gets*** – yea, us.

This week may you consider what resolution looks like.

When God Isn't There (It can Help to Bite Your Tongue, Pt 1)

Please Note: The main reason this lesson was included for communication will be very apparent in the next lesson.

This year has been the gold medal winner of awful for me (not to brag). If someone told me I had been cursed I would be like “That makes sense.” The best way to summarize in one sentence what I’ve been experiencing (a healthy practice) is it feels like I’m a cat toy being batted around; sometimes the hits come fast and other times there is a lull that leaves me wondering, “Is the terribleness over?” and then whack. (Sounds fun, doesn’t it?) For instance, last week I had an excellent Thursday with workers showing up as promised (a surprisingly rare occurrence) and I was feeling optimistic. The next day a \$4000 window was dropped that I am responsible for paying replace (awesome). That was a hefty cost for trusting the wrong person.

I recently saw an older gentleman I really admired from my old Salvation Army church who lost his wife last year. He asked how I was and I replied, “Things are hard, but how can I complain in light of what you’re going through?” He then surprised me by saying, **“Sometimes it’s the little things that add up to cause the most pain.”** Those were very wise words. I’ve been blessed this past year not to have faced the death of a loved one, but dealing with something that’s clearly terrible at least gives you a solid reason for feeling like garbage. This year has been a steady emotional beat down without any one thing really giving a clear message to others what I’m going through. It’s just one thing here and one thing there. Even if someone tries to convey they understand, it’s easy for my brain to lie to me and dismiss their caring because *I* don’t understand how *they* can understand (is that easy to understand?) This allows my brain to further mess with me by second guessing if I should feel as beaten down as I do: “Maybe I’m making it worse than it is? It’s just little stuff.” ***I know feelings can be liars, but sometimes the lies are hard to distinguish from the truth, especially when you’re feeling low.*** This is the one benefit of my \$4000 window situation – it’s a clear example of why it’s been so hard. It’s also easier for others to understand how much you’re struggling.

Please know I'm not sharing this as a pity party or even a vent (I have a journal for that). It's the lead into a specific lesson I recently learned while also sharing that even though I'm supposed to be a professional at knowing how to help people handle life (that's a laughable way of describing my profession), ***sometimes life just sucks and that's it. There's nothing you can do, but continue trying to make the best choices you can and riding the wave.*** As Dori said in *Finding Nemo*: "Just keep swimming. Just keep swimming."

The crazy thing is my terrible year started the end of October last year, so I'm now into overtime. It actually started the week after I posted my lesson on the "12 Ways the Devil Messes with Us." This list has the typical lies like I'm ugly, I'm an outcast, and I'm a failure. In this lesson I noted that after working through my lifelong fear of being stupid, the devil switched his method to mess with me through discouragement. It's really great how the devil role models perseverance: (devil) "That's not messing you up as much anymore? Okay, new tactic. I never give up!" (Sorry, I'm not sure if that's sarcasm or not,) After acknowledging I struggle with discouragement, I then had the most intensely discouraging year I've ever had. That's one crazy coincidence or the devil was like "You think you know my attack so you can be better prepared to combat it? Challenge accepted." It's like I'm a batter being told what's coming: "This is going to be a fastball... how'd you miss it? Now I'm going to do a curveball... how'd you miss that one, too? You suck! You can't get a hit even when you know what's coming at you."

When I was younger, there were times I would say that God abandoned me or to put it in a softer way, He gave me "space to grow" while He watched from a distance. When I went through those times, there was emptiness with underlying hope that He'd reveal Himself again. This year has been very different. It's nothing like I've ever experienced. ***God doesn't feel absent. It feels like He doesn't care.*** Yes, I believe He loves us and He has saved us through His grace, and believers will be welcomed into Heaven because of Jesus' death and resurrection. Beyond that, however, I'm not sure how much God actually cares on a personal level. I know this idea will get a lot of Christians riled up: "How dare you question Him! There is a reason for everything!" First off, there isn't a reason for everything. ***We can bring good out of all situations, but there isn't a "reason" for everything beyond sometimes bad things happen because people make stupid choices.*** Second, if you use platitudes like "God doesn't give you more than you can handle," you deserve a solid slap in the face by a gust of wind, so not to cause anyone to be charged with assault. When you're low, that's one of the worst things to be told.

I actually had one Christian friend say to me, “Look at the good things God has done for you over your life like how you have a house and a good job and close family. What more does He owe you? There are kids starving in the world.” That’s a very misguided way of thinking. How is my situation connected to starving kids in another country? Unfortunately, even with this logic I wasn’t able to brush off this comment because it was hard not to feel like a whiney, spoiled brat. Nothing like having guilt to work through on top of my hurt.

What’s interesting is I’ve been part of a church for over four years now and I thought I was friends with the pastor since we’ve been connected for over 20 years. In the summer he was away for a month, and when he got back we were chatting and I flippantly mentioned it had been the worst summer of my life and then shortly after I apologized for my bluntness. He said he appreciated my honesty and we carried on like usual. I’ve missed almost every Sunday since because of working on the house and the couple times I was able to go he walked past me in a rush for something. He has also never reached out to ask how I’m doing or ask my wife who’s been taking the kids every week. I get that pastors are busy, but it’s hard not to feel slighted, especially when he says that his gift is encouragement – doubtful. On the plus side, this is how it feels with God. He’s there; He just doesn’t care enough to connect with me.

What I should point out is through this year I haven’t stopped doing my thankful prayers, reading scripture, asking God for help, and listening to worship music. In October I hit a spot where I couldn’t handle listening to certain songs praising God because it was like salt in a wound, but fortunately, I’ve jumped headfirst into Christmas music – it’s safer. This week I was listening to Tommee Profitt’s version of *O Come All Ye Faithful* (his Christmas album is brilliant) and it felt like God was saying “Jesus is the King. No matter what you’re going through; when all else is gone, you need to remember that Jesus is the King; He is Emmanuel, God with us.” I’m not sure what that ultimately means, but it was a good reminder that no matter how bad life feels, whether God specifically cares about my life or not, Jesus is the King.

Key Note: Like all relationships, I hit a spot where I was very hurt by God.

Because of the hurt, I had to limit certain things I would normally have been able to do, but as I continued doing a few fundamental connecting and communication points, I was able to get to a better spot. Six months after writing this post, I’m in a much better spot. I still find myself struggling to sing certain songs or I get extra emotional during others, but I’m healing.

This is what happens for couples and close friends who go through difficult times. When we learn how to be healthy and implement the tools, especially for healthy communication, things get better.

Fun Fact: After my four thousand dollar window smashed, the window company took almost three months to make the replacement and then they screwed up the window three times with added delays in-between. In the end, it took almost four months for them to get the right window and have it installed, which ended up being an exact year after the other windows had been installed, April 5, 2023 and April 5, 2024. That was a push on patience.

This week may you consider what it means for Jesus to be King, God with us.

Bonus: In case you wondered what a broken \$4000 window looks like.



How to Reduce Hurt (It can Help to Bite Your Tongue, Pt 2)

In the last lesson I shared how I've had times where God felt absent, but I've been recently going through a season where I've been left questioning if God really cares about us on a personal level – Jesus died for us, but is His love shown beyond that? Because it's been such a difficult year of many smaller things wearing me down instead of a major grief experience that would give me a target for my pain, it can be hard to even explain to others how hard it's been. This can also lead to me second guessing my feelings: It's all small; am I that weak that I can't handle it or is it legitimate to feel this way? Another way of looking at it is a Tyrannosaurus Rex would be scary, but a smattering of little dinosaurs can still kill and eat you, which is a very strange comparison considering I've never encountered either. I've been surrounded by small children and that gives me the same feeling as being surrounded by tiny, hungry dinosaurs, but they don't see me as dinner as much as a trampoline/play-set to climb (and kick). In that lesson I wrote the following paragraph:

What's interesting is I've been part of a church for over four years now and I thought I was friends with the pastor since we've been connected for over 20 years. In the summer he was away for a month, and when he got back we were chatting and I flippantly mentioned it had been the worst summer of my life and then shortly after I apologized for my bluntness. He said he appreciated my honesty and we carried on like usual. I've missed almost every Sunday since because of working on the house and the couple times I went he walked past me in a rush for something. He has also never reached out to ask how I'm doing or ask my wife who's been taking the kids every week. I get that pastors are busy, but it's hard not to feel slighted, especially when he says that his gift in encouragement – doubtful. On the plus side, this is how it feels with God. He's there; He just doesn't care enough to connect with me.

I shared this because I liked how it explained the way I felt about God, but what's interesting is it led to me having another idea grow (communication can open our eyes): Do I need to reach out to the pastor to see why he hasn't connected or do I wait? ***When we feel forgotten or hurt, it's very tempting to want to keep waiting for the other person to make a move. At a certain point, however, not reaching out really just becomes a way for resentment to grow and darken our heart.*** We might feel hurt, but we make it worse if we don't address

it. That's how a lot of marriages and friendships die: "If they really liked me, that'd know I was hurt and they would (blank)."

After another Sunday when I wasn't able to go to church and nothing was said to my wife, I mentioned to her: "Do I need to reach out to [the pastor] to ask why he hasn't checked in?" Her response surprised me: "Don't be mad." (That's a terrible way to hear an answer start.) "About a month ago I asked him to contact you." (I'm still not sure why she thought I'd be angry at her.) "I assumed he hasn't reached out because you haven't said anything. The other day I asked [her friend] what I should do. She told me to reach out again and ask, but I've been too scared. Can you help me write a message?" I always promote very simple and to the point messages and that's what we did. I'm not sure what the final draft looked like, but the first real draft started with the question: "A month ago I asked you to reach out to Chad because he's going through a rough time. Did you not do it because it was too low a priority (e.g. you forgot) or is it something else?" To be honest, being hurt that wasn't my first suggestion. My first few ideas were pretty jabby, but that's the beauty of writing a quick message: ***You can edit yourself.*** Unfortunately, most people don't take advantage of this ability and end up sending pages of rambling emotions. ***"Letters" to people need to be simple, non accusatory, and no more than three sentences.*** More than that increases the risk of misinterpretation and missing the point.

The next day the pastor sent a message to me: "How can I pray for you?" On one hand, it was nice he messaged me, but on the other, I hadn't talked to him for three months and there wasn't even a simple pleasantry. My first response started with "So nice to hear from you..." but it made me want to vomit. The second one was more honest, "We haven't talked in three months and this is the message I receive. Are you asking me this because you feel obligated or do you actually care?" I also erased that one because it was rude... but it felt good to write. ***Generally speaking, if your response "feels" good, don't use it; it's likely a jab.*** I ended up going with my third option, which was more polite and fair (and didn't feel as good):

Hi [pastor]. Thanks for reaching out. The last time we talked at the end of the summer I apologized after saying it had been the worst summer I've ever had. I've since had the worst fall I've ever had. This addition we're doing has been... an experience. Prayer wise it'd be great if something amazing came out of this struggle (make it worth it) and for this season of terribleness to end. Is there anything I can pray for you about? (Not that my prayers seem to be doing much lately)

This message didn't make me "feel" satisfied, but it was a proper response... and then I felt great about it later. Shortly after I replied, my wife received an apology from him where he mentioned he's going through something really difficult and his mind isn't working the way it should. When she told me that I gave him a call to check in on him and after leaving a message, he got back to me. We talked for a half hour with fifteen minutes each explaining some of what we've been through. He couldn't share too much about his situation, but it has something to do with being bit by a spider and staying up all night fighting crime... I could be wrong. My brain isn't working right either.

What is important to note is our conversation had nothing to do with him not reaching out to me. Talking about the hurt like that would've made things awkward between us. Instead, sharing a little and hearing his little bit of sharing helped us connect like friends and it was like a weight was taken off my shoulders. What's crazy is right after our conversation things got better with my situation... well, not really, but I was emotionally stronger for better handling it. ***By removing the emotional burden, I felt more confident and stronger for handling the garbage that was being dumped on me.***

It's also important to note that this was all made possible by two things. ***First, I bit my tongue and didn't write a message that "felt" good at the time (those usually lead to guilt and regret), but instead went with a message that was proper.*** It didn't feel good at the time to send, but it felt great later. Because I never jabbed at the pastor in my hurt, I increased the level of safety and trust he had for me and prevented me from any awkward feelings later. Meanwhile, jabbing him would've made me less of a friend and more of a typical congregant who's nice only when it's convenient. Instead, he can better see that I want to assume the best in him. The other very important factor was my wife was careful not to meddle, but she became an excellent conduit for me to reconnect to a friend. That's a tricky position to find, but she achieved it, which is largely because she kept her original request simple and details few. ***She didn't try to "fix" the problem, but rather try to arrange us to fix it ourselves.*** People can often fix their own problems, but sometimes they can use a conduit... but this is incredibly risky because you can suddenly be hated by both sides.

After the reconnection, my wife had an interesting thought. She pointed out that my life got increasingly busy to the point I couldn't go to church for a number of months the exact time the pastor needed a friend. Maybe it was more about me not being there for him rather than him not being there for me. This would make

sense since he's in such a valuable and public position, but I lean toward the devil trying to mess with both of us and it just worked out that by keeping us apart we both ended up more hurt than if we had each other to lean on. ***The devil wants us to feel alone; there's more hurt to be had and more potential resentment to grow for future damage.*** Love and feeling cared about is what helps make life better, so it's a natural point for us to have attacked.

Whatever the truth is, I now feel less rejection from God and ultimately less alone because of handling this situation the way I did. ***It's a good reminder that biting our tongues and being kind leads to better results than sharing what we feel and how we feel like sharing it.*** It also proves that by sharing things like I did in my lesson (it can also be in a journal or conversation), our brains can point out a new idea.

I'm still in a position where I'm hoping God will bring something great out of all of this because right now the pain has been stronger than anything good we've experienced in this year and four months, but ***quite often the good isn't truly visible until much later.*** For instance, most people wouldn't remove things from their past if given the choice because it helped make them who they are now. It was terrible in the moment, but in retrospect, it has value. Hopefully that's what I'll eventually feel as well.

This week may you consider how you can address unresolved situations with kindness in order to find more healing.

*Some people make cutting remarks,
but the words of the wise bring healing.*

Pro 12:18

Slandering others makes you a fool.

Pro 10:18b

Wrongdoers eagerly listen to gossip...

Pro 17:4a



Beware of the “Screw you!”

I grew up in a house where my parents never got mad at each other. Some parents save their fights for after the kids go to bed, but my parents never actually fought – never. It helped that my dad was a Hider and my mom was more Desperate Defend. These are both from the passive category, which means they are in the anger category where you avoid conflict at all costs no matter how much it hurts you. Sometimes this can lead passive people to inadvertently grow resentment and/or distant, but my parents never did that either. What prevented that was they had an abundance of respect and understanding of each other’s differences – yes, they were very weird. They both assumed the other was doing their best to be their best as they were both striving to please God with how they lived (being Christian has its advantages if you’re doing it right). On rare occasions, my parents would give each other suggestions, so they weren’t dangerously passive, and there was enough trust between them to help keep each other accountable. For instance, when my parents had my older sister, my dad taught my mom to use the rule of three: three strikes and you get punished (a parenting technique I highly recommend). My dad was passive, but he was a firm disciplinarian (sometimes a little too firm), which helped my parents not be weak with us. My mom would discipline us, but like most moms, she struggled with it because typically ***a mom’s natural instinct is to want to make the child happy whereas a dad’s primary goal is to make his wife happy, which makes disciplining easier for him.*** In my house growing up, we knew our parents were in charge, which reduced our anxiety since we knew we could rely on them to protect us if we needed – weak parenting amps up the overall anxiety. My parents were to be respected and not seen as our friends or servants like a lot of today’s weaker parents. If my dad was alive today, now that I’m a grownup, I’m sure we’d be friends, and we’d make fun of all of the stupid things we see around us like normal guys do. Growing up, however, ***we each had our role, and my parents’ role was to raise good people and not make a friend – they already had those.*** For my parents and for most parents from their day, the goal was to be a good provider whereas today’s parents focus on making their kids happy, which is a very dangerous goal.

My parents were a team, and they were great at it. They definitely weren’t perfect; there’s a reason I struggle with workaholicism and my sister with perfectionism.

When my dad passed away in their 37th year of marriage, my mom said the biggest thing she would miss was their prayer time together. I never knew they did that, but she said it was the most intimate thing a couple can do, which I can see – sex is easy; praying together is hard. I'll be honest, my wife and I pray as a family with our kids, but I find my personal prayers too vulnerable to do with anyone else. Hopefully one day I'll reach that level of trust and security my parents had with each other, especially since I was told couples who pray together only have a 1% chance of divorce. Until then, however, I have something to work towards... among many others.

Growing up in a passive household, we had an uncomfortably large conflict maybe once or twice a year, which was pretty crazy when there were five of us. I don't know who was in more shock since my wife was from a house that yelled at each other at least five times a day. That means all four in their house individually yelled more in one day than my entire family had major conflicts in a year – there's a reason I now study fighting. On the flip side, when my family did have a conflict, it would last a few days until it would be resolved or buried while my wife's family would recover within minutes every time they yelled. Even now with my daughters you can see this. One minute my wife will yell at them for something, and then the next, she's hugging them and telling them how wonderful they are while I'm slower to yell, but if I do, give me space because I need a chance to calm down. (For the record, it's good for kids to occasionally get yelled at because it'll help them know how to better handle it later in life.) Together my wife and I are a wonderful balance... now... and for the most part; we still have moments. Before we were married, our differences led us to almost breaking up many times, and even today it can lead to being frustrated with each other. Add in the fact that if you have one person who is more passionate with their anger and the other limited, you can guess which one of us is more passionate about affection. Yelling and being affectionate often go hand in hand like in Spanish soap operas. Similarly, slow to anger and slow to offer affection also go together. One offers more excitement and the other boredom. I know what I give, sweet boredom.

In my teens, my dad and I had a few big conflict moments, and I remember one time being alone in the car (emphasis on alone) screaming, "Screw you!" and trying to figure out how I could afford to move out. I didn't know back then that ***screaming alone in the car is incredibly healthy because it gets the bottled up emotion out without hurting anyone or adding to the conflict.*** If I had yelled "Screw you!" to my dad, I wouldn't be wondering how I could afford to

move out, I would be figuring it out since I'd be out of the house. ***My parents were incredibly generous and loving to their kids, but there was no tolerance for disrespect.*** Maybe it was because it's in the 10 Commandments or they tried so hard and sacrificed so much for their kids that respect was demanded, but either way, ***they taught us how to bite our tongue and not spout stupid stuff off at each other even in our anger.*** My wife...

In this mixed up world where many parents have forgotten their role as guides, teachers, and disciplinarians instead of slaves of so-called happiness for their kids, it's no wonder so many young people spout their mouths off in a fight with anyone who upsets them. My parents taught me to shut up when I'm angry or I was going to, as Russell Peter jokes, "Get hurt real bad." ***Learning to shut our mouths when we're angry is one of the most important communication rules we can learn. The second, realizing what someone says in anger is just an emotional outburst expressing their anger and not true words, so we shouldn't hold onto them because they're demonstrating unhealthy venting.*** What they say should be said in private. If they don't, however, when the person is calmer later, it would be wise to ask, "Earlier when you said (things) were those true words or was that just emotion coming out?" If they're true words, you'll want to address them, but if that was an emotional outburst, you'll want to request they get their anger out privately and talk to you when they're calmer.

I'm proud to say that in over 18 years together, I've never yelled at my wife, which has saved a lot of unnecessary hurt and backlash. I'm also proud to say I've never said, "Screw you!" to her (largely thanks to my parents who taught me to shut up when I'm angry), but I've yelled that alone in the car and written it countless times in my journal. ***There's a reason you never read someone's journal: it's an emotional dumping ground of exaggerated and untrue statements.*** That being said, several times I've had to catch myself because I was very close to saying, "Screw you!" to my wife. Between tiredness, emotional exhaustion, and my wife being really good at finding my anger buttons that she likes to tap like a hungry woodpecker once in awhile, and suddenly not yelling can be very difficult.

Couples will regularly ask me how they can stop fighting so much. One of the most important rules is to have a safe word that signals a time out with a time. As we get angry, we get dumber. As I noted earlier, my wife is quick to get angry and then to quick calm down while I'm slow to anger, but then I explode and take a long time to recover. ***Between us, my role is to call the time out and my***

wife's role is to help us get back to normal. We both have our roles based on how we handle anger. I can't resent my wife for making me be the one calling the time outs and she can't resent me for being slow to recover because that's part of who we are and both attributes help us be better as a couple. Some things can't be changed, and only accepted and handled properly.

The most important part of the time out being called is having a time for when you return. You can have a pre-set time, so you give the safe word and you just know or you can make the safe word a time like "Five!" People have asked, "What if the other person doesn't stop even when I say a time?" The answer is simple: Run! If a person is so caught up in the moment that after you call a time out, they don't stop, you have to run away (without getting in the last word first). Staying there will only lead to hurt. If your partner will walk up to you, drop a bombshell, and before you can respond, they call a time out, you have to give them that time out. They're being a jerk, but you need to follow it. When you return after the time out, however, you can ask, "Did you purposely call a time out after you said your piece so I wouldn't get to respond or did I misread that situation?" Notice the two options in the question? The two options are very important, and so is the best non accusatory tone you can muster. ***You don't want to assume your partner is a jerk just like you don't want to become a jerk.***

As far as the calm down period, my rule is five to fifteen minutes for smaller issues. That's all you should need for screaming in a pillow, punching the bed, doing push ups, doing jumping jacks, or some type of explosive action to burn off your anger energy enough to return to talking. If it's close to bedtime or one of you is really tired, you'll want to wait until the next day when you're rested because there's no point talking to someone when they're hungry, tired, or in too much pain to think properly. Beyond calming down enough to talk, some people will take a few days to a week to recover from the situation, but that's way too much time lost to emotion. Going to bed should be like unplugging the modem for 12 seconds – you should be reset for the next day. If you're just as angry the next day, you likely didn't vent enough, you built the situation bigger than you should, or you have past hurt you need to work on letting go (or you just suck at love because love is patient, kind, and self controlled).

Ideally, when you come together after a time out, you want to be able to summarize two things in one sentence each: What made you angry (to help prevent in the future) and what is the goal for this conversation (to stay on target). This

can be tricky without some guidance and/or practice, but it is what we should be aiming toward to prevent the time out being just a pause in the fight. Ultimately, we should be trying to figure out what is triggering us to want to say, “Screw you!” After all, it’s always 50% your fault if you yell or receive yelling. As Brittany Spears taught, “You’re not that innocent.”

This week may you consider how you can reduce the temptation to say or receive a “Screw you!” in your relationship.

Self-discipline and Discipline (& How to Discipline a Difficult Teen)

Discipline your children while there is hope./ Otherwise you will ruin their lives. (Pro 19:18)

Self-discipline is the ability to make ourselves do the right thing even when we don't necessarily want to do it. Having self-discipline is supposed to start with being disciplined as a child. When you're a child, it's your parents' responsibility to force you to do things you don't want to do. For instance, it's your parent's responsibility to make you eat healthy enough, to go to bed at a good time, to go to school, to practice whatever interest you have in order to get better, to have manners, to be nice to wait staff and customer service workers, and to help you accept responsibility for your mistakes. Then, as an adult, it's your own responsibility. At that point, ***whether our parents did a good job or not, it doesn't matter; discipline is now our own responsibility. We go from being disciplined to being self-disciplined (hopefully).*** Self-discipline is simply taking over from our parents telling us what to do and doing it ourselves... and sometimes that sucks. It can feel better being angry at our parents telling us to get up or to go to bed than to push ourselves to do it because we only have ourselves to be angry at. In many ways it's easier being disciplined, but it's pathetic if you need your parents to parent you when you're old enough to be a parent yourself.

Claiming that disciplining your child is the first step toward them having self-discipline makes sense, doesn't it? ***Discipline fuels discipline.*** Disciplining your child leads to them being able to self regulate their own behaviors one day; it's to help them become a good person and have integrity. As a parent you essentially want to get your voice stuck in their head: "Don't do it!" "Say please and thank you!" "Avoid wizards and anyone who can cast spells." What's great about this is ***by getting your voice of discipline into your kids' brains, you essentially live on because your voice continues. Of course, this same voice also should remind them that they are loved because we need the balance.***

Looking around, it's hard not to think our culture struggles with having enough self-discipline. That suggests a lack of discipline to our children – not a shocking concept. Then there are those who struggle with having too much self-discipline. Arguably a much better problem, but it can lead to burnout and anxiety problems

as you put too much pressure on yourself. Oddly enough, too much self-discipline can also be the result of no discipline as the person overcompensates for what they lacked. Either way, too much self discipline is better because it's easier to ease up on self pressure than to push for more – a lazy person wants to be lazy.

The biggest problem with discipline and self-discipline is knowing where the healthy middle is between too little and too much. ***Generally speaking, healthy discipline leads to healthy self-discipline.*** Unfortunately, disciplining a child becomes even more confusing as every child responds differently to what's used and there isn't a one size fits all for disciplining. For instance, I was often spanked while my brother was never even yelled at (it's weird that the better child was spanked... yes, the better child). My brother essentially learned from me getting in trouble. He owes me.

The one thing that parents should recognize is that disciplining your children shouldn't feel good. You shouldn't be punishing your children in your anger because anger makes us dumb. This is especially true if we're taking our anger from other things like work and using our kids as our emotional punching bag. There are times we need to yell at our kids, but it needs to be yelling for their best interest and not because we're venting our emotions at them. ***Disciplining your child should hurt you in some way as the parent, but you need to do it because you love your child more than your own comfort.*** After all, what you do to your child will be a lot nicer and wrapped with more love than what the world will do to them if you don't teach them the lessons first.

The one thing that bothers me is parents need to be careful not to assume their child is innocent. If other people tell your child to behave, you should thank them and feel sad that you weren't the one to correct your own child first. Most parents today are quicker to defend their child instead of recognizing that their child is causing others issues. There's a time to defend and a time to discipline. ***When your kid is frustrating others that's not a time to defend because you're teaching them it's okay to be a jerk.***

In the wisdom book of the Bible, it says, "Those who love their children care enough to discipline them." (Pro 13:24b) Discipline is a form of love – wow. In a culture that seems to see discipline as an archaic concept, this verse means those who discourage disciplining children aren't enlightened like they want to think; they're idiots. (Is that too harsh?) I've heard so-called experts claim that it's better for kids to "self discover" and not have the parents put their biases or restrictions

on them because it hurts creativity. Um, if you start a job, do you want to be shown how things work or be left to self discover? “You know all the knowledge we’ve developed that we can teach you in order to help you be better prepared in an efficient way? Forget about it. We don’t want to hurt your self esteem or make you feel controlled.” It’s such a dumb thing to me. ***Discipline is a gift, especially when it’s from a good person.*** It teaches us what’s expected and gives us direction and motivation. It makes things more efficient and effective. As it’s been said, “Why reinvent the wheel?”

Another verse in the wisdom book states, “A wise child accepts a parent’s discipline; a mocker refuses to listen to correction.” (Pro 13:1) ***A wise person actually wants discipline.*** They want to know how to grow and be better. Discipline shouldn’t be seen as offensive, but a way to grow. Another verse claims: “Don’t fail to discipline your children. The rod of punishment won’t kill them. Physical discipline may well save them from death.” (Pro 23:13-14) I’ll leave that one alone, but it is fun to share at parties if you want to see certain moms’ heads explode.

So why would Proverbs, this so-called wisdom book, be so big on discipline? Let’s consider some reasons:

1. Discipline teaches there are repercussions for our decisions.
2. Discipline helps children know their parents are in charge, which helps reduce their own anxiety as they know their parents are in control and will protect them.
3. It can toughen the child emotionally. For instance, having seen a parent’s anger, other people having it won’t be as scary, but accepted as a repercussion of bad choices and/or the person lacking self control.
4. Discipline teaches children socially acceptable behavior and helps them be less annoying to others, which can help them have more friends and do better at work.
5. Discipline teaches children to respect their parents, and respecting parents helps children respect other authority figures, which helps society function in a healthier way.
6. Discipline reminds parents that they need to be in control and not let their kids rule the house.
7. The more you invest, the more attachment grows, which means the more you discipline your child, the more attached you can become and the prouder you can be of their accomplishments because you were involved.

Side Note: Self discipline is important to communication because it pushes us to do the right thing even if we don't "feel" like it. This includes saying thank you and I'm sorry, trying to connect to friends, saying hi to strangers, and biting our tongues when we want to yell at someone.

Bonus: How Do You Discipline a Difficult Teen?

What do you do when your child doesn't see you as an authority figure? Here's my rule: ***You're either part of the family or a renter.*** I'm a firm believer that if you live under your parents' roof, you live under their rules. If you hate the rules, you have motivation to work hard and leave. If you can't afford to leave, be grateful you have a place to live and work with what you're given. Are you thinking I'm old school? You got it. Old school helped raise me and my friends, and we are all functional adults contributing to society, so it did its job. There might be a few bruises along the way, but that's life: Learn and be better to avoid the bruise causer next time.

Based on my belief that you're either part of the family or a renter, I have come up with the ultimate tool for dealing with difficult young people: ***You can follow the rules and do chores or you can start paying rent and be treated as a renter.*** Of course, even as a renter there are still rules to follow; there are just a few less. At the same time, you also have fewer benefits, so when the family goes out for ice cream, a renter doesn't get to go and/or they have to pay their own way.

So how does this work? You provide two clear options to the child. Here is what it means to be part of the family with clear benefits and rules and here is what being a renter looks like with the clear benefits and rules (and drawbacks). You then have the child pick. This means they need a clear understanding that if they choose to be part of the family, they need to follow the rules or they will be forced to be a renter. If they choose to be a renter, they need to know that means they can be kicked out if they don't follow the rules – that's how renting works. Of course, being a renter means they'll need a job to pay their rent. Now, let's say the child chooses to be a family member, but they refuse to do as their told or don't bother doing their chores. Great; they get a fine like in real life. If they don't have a job, take the fee out of their family experiences. They don't participate in a family event? They lose out on pizza the next family pizza night. They don't do their weekly chores? Take \$5 off their birthday gift. You can make a deal where they do a chore or something to make up for their error, but there needs to be a serious repercussion. The bottom line is ***you have to be ready to out stubborn***

the child. That's the key to a good parent: You have to know when to outstubborn your child and when to adjust and show grace.

Or here's your other option:



This week may you consider what proper discipline and self-discipline look like.

The Lost Art of Gentleness

Last week when I was at Marineland with my family for the fifth time this year (my two daughters are obsessed with the dolphins, belugas, and penguins), I was pushing my two year old in a plastic car and accidentally bumped into the person's heels in front of me. My knee-jerk reaction was to apologize while bracing to get yelled at for being careless. But... I was never yelled at. There wasn't even any anger; there was grace. It was weird... in a good way. Now, I should point out that I have a wife who is very reactive and sensitive to pain (my theory is not playing sports growing up didn't allow her the opportunity to physically develop a thicker skin). Combine those two facts and her knee-jerk reaction when something like a plastic car hits her heels and her response will be very emotion filled (i.e. Desperate Attack). I've learned to better accept her very passionate reactions (and I'm still learning) because being very in the moment is a symptom of ADD. I sometimes have to remind myself this is who she is and not take it personally while also recognizing these are the same features that help her be amazing at showing love to people and being fantastic at opening gifts while my lack of emotion is terrible for that (I can't emphasize how terrible it is). We balance each other. This kind of rationalizing took years for me to develop as I used to take her reactions very personally and it caused a lot of hurt – hurt she didn't mean to cause. The best part of this is it's taught me to be more understanding of different people's reactions, which helps me be a better person (and therapist). The downside is I'm now trained to expect to be yelled at when I do something wrong.

Overall, I'm lucky because my wife's reactions typically aren't personal. Other people aren't so lucky. It's less passion and more explosive resentment. I've worked with a lot of couples where the response from one or both people was venomous. There was no sense of love. There was no kindness as there was intent to hurt like they were trying to even the playing field. It's like they had forgotten the importance of gentleness.

So what was this person's reaction? As I was apologizing to them, they were apologizing to me for being too slow and being in my way. Do you know how refreshing that was? It was amazing. ***To apologize at the same time as someone else is the ideal situation because you're both taking responsibility for what happened. It feels equal. It feels safe.*** If only one person apologizes,

it feels like “That’s right; you should apologize. You owe me because I’m a better person.” But this person was a perfect role model of gentleness. And who was that person? My mom. Yes, there’s a reason I’m a mama’s boy. She’s a very kind and gentle person, and the world would be a much better place if we could all learn to be gentle like her. Especially post-COVID where stores have signs stating, “Abusive behavior won’t be tolerated,” and radio programs like Funny 820 have started using a disclaimer that humor is subjective. People have become increasingly intolerant and mean. Everyone I’ve talked to in customer service has agreed there’s been an increasing number of demanding and condescending customers/clients. People used to reserve that kind of negative behavior for their families while putting on a good front in public, but that’s changed. I would also argue there’s an increasing number of people with social anxiety and those who are shutting down and/or finding ways to hide, which would make sense when there’s an increasing number of meanness happening. Oddly enough, some of the people claiming social anxiety are also the meanest people: “I’m scared people will be as mean as me.” This is a good reminder that it pays to be nice since you’re more likely to assume others will be nice to you.

I will acknowledge that wanting to yell or be mean to someone who is yelling or mean to us makes complete sense. For one, *people tend to be mirrors*. If I’m rude to you, you’ll likely be rude back. If I’m nice to you, you’re more likely to be nice back. If I’m nice (or tell myself I am) and the other person is rude, that feels wrong. It feels unfair, and our brains are drawn to fairness. This is where the problem begins: ***If someone is mean to us, they might be interpreting our behavior as mean to them, which is why they’re being mean; if we become mean (or meaner), they’re going to amp up they’re meanness in return because in their head, we started it while in our head, they did.*** It then becomes an Israel and Palestine situation: “They started it!” What happens on big scales like this is what happens on the small scales like in our own personal lives. The main difference is it’s harder for countries to end a conflict because how do you stop fighting? When can either side be appeased when they’ve suffered so much more from the fighting? It’s not like you can send the two countries to a therapist... although that’d be funny.

Sometimes people are mean to us because they interpret us as mean, but sometimes they’re mean because they’re having a really bad moment and they need someone to be gracious. For instance, when people are hungry, tired, or anxious, they do stupid things. In scuba diving lessons they teach you should only try to help someone struggling to swim from behind because if you’re in front, in their

panic, they might hurt or drown you – not good. ***Like anger, fear makes us stupid and we do things we'd normally never do.*** This idea connects to a lesson I like where I teach people to treat others like a baby: When a baby cries we shouldn't take it personally. We should ask: "Are they hungry, tired, uncomfortable, need a distraction, or need a hug?" Grownups are the same: "You're upset. "Are they hungry, tired, uncomfortable, need a distraction, or need a hug?" Ultimately, what we need to remember is ***we are all capable of being terrible people when we're not at our best, which means we need to be patient with others when they're not at their best.*** For the most part, when people act out, they need to feel safe and loved in order to settle, which definitely doesn't happen if we get mean.

Other times people are mean because they're simply bad people. If that's the case, don't take their behavior personally – they're bad. And even if they need help, if they don't want it, let them suffer. ***You can only help people who are willing to accept it, so focus on those who appreciate it.*** As a therapist, it'd be crazy for me to spend all my time begging people who don't want therapy to talk to me while I ignored those actually wanting to see me. ***Sometimes the most loving thing is to let someone fall on their face, so they'll learn to appreciate when people are willing to help.*** Either way, I've learned it's important to focus on helping good people instead of burning myself out trying to help everyone.

So what do we do if we want to be a good person? I've recently had this proverb stuck in my head: "A gentle answer deflects anger,/ but harsh words make tempers flare." (Pro 15:1, NLT). The next verse is interesting: "The tongue of the wise makes knowledge appealing,/ but the mouth of a fool belches out foolishness." (Pro 15:2) I don't know why Fox news comes to mind when I read that last part.

This verse is from a book written between the tenth and sixth century BCE, yet here we are thousands of years later still struggling with this basic concept. ***We might have smart phones, but we still live as dumb people.***

So what does it mean to have a gentle word?

1. Sometimes a simple, "I'm sorry," is all that's needed. Even if you don't want to say it, it's better to say "I'm sorry" and wait until later to address the problem because the other person is not in the right frame of mind to listen. Of course, saying sorry needs to be said with gentleness to it and not with attitude because "I'm sorry," can sound like "Screw you."

2. Sometimes we need to “Yes and” in order to affirm the person, “Yes, that sounds like a really difficult situation,” and “I agree with you; this is very unfair for you.” If you want the person to care about what you say, make them feel heard before making your own point. ***You have to listen to others if you want others to listen to you.***
3. Sometimes silence is the best response, especially because sometimes it gives the person space to keep talking without feeling interrupted. Of course, if this is your choice, make sure you’re nodding to show you’re listening otherwise you can look rude or uncaring.
4. ***The best thing we can learn is how to ask nice questions because a statement, even in the nicest tone, feels condescending to the receiver.*** If you can’t come up with a good question, at least throw in a “Have you thought about...” in front of your statement to lower the condescending feel. ***We need to give people “food for thought” and not shove our opinions down their throat.***

This week may you consider what it means to offer a gentle word in order to reduce conflict.

The Lost Art of Saying “Thank You”

When I was a kid, I loved the movie *Ernest Saves Christmas* (it’s crazy what we think is cool as kids). The one thing that stuck with me is the one character had a kids’ TV show with the catchphrase, “They never get old. They always stay new. Those three little words ‘Please’ and ‘Thank you.’” Maybe it’s my age, but it seems like those three little words have vanished from a lot of people’s vocabularies, especially post pandemic. Even a little wave when you do something nice while driving seems to be reduced. It’s so simple – lift up your hand... with all your fingers (the number of fingers makes a big difference). When I was a child, my parents drilled manners into my head. All the kids I played with growing up, their parents drilled manners into their heads. We were all polite, and it felt pretty natural. Now? I’m not so sure. Maybe it’s a grownup thing. Maybe people think becoming an adult means they don’t have to be polite anymore since they no longer have a parent there to correct them. Maybe it’s a sign people are so busy and stuck in their heads they don’t think to be polite. Saying “thank you” and showing appreciation, however, are incredibly important for being a good person, and it’s so simple... or maybe that’s the problem; we like answers that are more complicated.

Here’s a question: What’s more important, people thinking you look beautiful/rich or that you’re friendly? Based on the money our culture spends on appearances and how manners are disappearing, our priorities seem pretty clear. And then we wonder why we have so many issues of depression, divorce, and workaholism – we have wrong priorities.

The biggest instance of not being appreciated for me is connected to one of my coolest God experiences (as strange as that may sound). In the fall of 2019, when life was still normal, my 2009 Honda Civic reached 200k on the odometer, the AC was going to be \$3000 to fix, and the paint on the roof was receding like a bald man (for some reason 2009 and 2010 Hondas were terrible for that). On top of this, my wife was expecting our second daughter and a Civic isn’t the best family car for two little kids, especially without AC on hot days. I was very torn on what I should do: Do I suck it up and drive it until it dies or do I get something bigger? I hate buying and selling vehicles. Actually, I hate buying. I had never tried selling because being a people pleaser and someone who hates conflict, I’m a terrible

salesman... for my side; buyers love me: “So I’ll pay you to take this? That seems fair.” Out of curiosity, I looked up options and I found a 2012 Ford Fusion with low kilometers for an amazing price. It was a private sale and it was being sold because the owner needed a car with a backup camera. The interior was pristine, but there was some minor damage to the front and rear bumper he was up front about, but likely why the car wasn’t selling. I really liked the car, but I changed my mind on buying it four times in a couple days because of my fear of selling my own car. Instead, I did the “healthy” thing of burying my head and hoped it’d fix itself. Ignoring the problem was going very well until... the following Sunday at church. I had been steadily going to this church for about four months, and had visited off and on for twenty years because life hadn’t allowed a commitment until then. The youth pastor at the time was the pastor’s daughter, which means I’ve known her just as long, but we were never close. Despite this fact, I hadn’t talked to her since joining the church because she was maybe in the service once in those four months.

While sitting in church that one Sunday, I had the “tap.” The tap is this feeling that you need to do something. It’s like a gut instinct but stronger and often more defined. The tap told me to talk to the youth pastor, which was strange because she was never there... but then I saw her. After the service, like a “good” Christian, I avoided being anywhere near her (I’m not very obedient) until my wife was ready to leave and then I felt this pressure I couldn’t fight anymore. I told myself I would just say hi because it’d been years and it’d be the polite thing to do. When I asked how she was doing, she said how desperate she was to get a new car because hers was so rusted it was dangerous to be driving, especially with youth kids. Later, when I told my wife that I owed an amount in tithes similar to the value of the car she agreed that we should donate it to the youth pastor and buy the Fusion. It was a win-win-win-win-win since the youth pastor was going to have a safe and reliable car (that’s kind of important), it would be my tithe (I was going to be giving something anyway), I bought the Fusion with the most beautiful interior at an amazing price (it was very fancy), we all got an incredible story (it’s pretty cool to think God would answer two prayers like this), and most importantly, I didn’t have to go through the hassle of selling my car (thank goodness).

The next day I contacted the church, and they had the youth pastor call me (people rarely respond to me, so that was a miracle in itself). I told her I had a car I didn’t need. She asked what kind and I told her it was a Civic. She said that was exactly the kind of car she wanted (that was pretty cool). She asked how much I was

selling it for. I paused (I'm a drama queen) and then said it was free. There was silence on the other end for a few seconds (that was a cool moment). She double checked she heard that right and I told her it was hers because God told me to do it as my title, so it was God's gift to her. She seemed pretty astounded – as she should have been. Of course, the government doesn't believe in generosity, so she ended up having to pay \$1200 in tax for it, but that's a sign of how valuable the car was.

That following Sunday, the pastor/her dad ran up to me and gave me the biggest hug and said thank you in a very genuine way. The youth pastor... wasn't to be seen. That was fine. I ended up emailing her later that day to say I forgot I had winter tires on rims she could have – another huge savings for her. She didn't seem that impressed. That was fine; it was email, and email's often not the best for conveying feelings. What was strange was when I dropped off the tires at her house (I had to drop them off because, as I mentioned, I'm a terrible salesman), she told me to put them at the side of the house and that was about the extent of our conversation before she closed the door. I was giving her tires and dropping them off, and she acted like she was doing me the favor. That was... not fine. It was very strange. What's even stranger is I was so proud to be able to do this for her I thanked God a bunch of times to be part of something so amazing. I seemed more appreciative than her, and my main thing was not having to go through the pain of selling my car – she got the much better deal in this exchange.

If you're wondering, besides the initial phone call, she never said thank you. She never gave me a card or a note that said thank you. Her fiancé, who was a youth pastor at a different church, picked up the car for her and he never said thank you. Over the next few months before the pandemic, I saw her a handful of times and she only said hi once to me and that was after I said hi first. Now here's the thing: ***I don't need a thank you to feel good, but I do need a thank you if you want me to do anything for you again.*** Thoughtfulness and actions need to go together for thoughtfulness to have any value. Maybe she intended to say thank you or send a note. Maybe she was embarrassed and afraid to even say hi to me, but ***fear is not an excuse for avoiding doing something we should do.*** Meanwhile, I'd be willing to help her dad/the pastor. I like to help people, but I'm going to spend what I have helping people who value it. ***A generous spirit needs to be met with a grateful heart or there's going to be problems in the future. We need this boundary because unappreciative people drain the pool of kindness.***

What's extra cool about this experience for me is when I was a teenager I was visiting a church in Chicago that had about 20k members (it was a big church), and it was mentioned that people in the church had given cars to those in need. I thought that was the greatest thing in the world, so to be able to have done that myself is an incredible gift from God. Sure, it was my tithe, there was a benefit to me, and it was a ten year old car, but it's still pretty remarkable to have this experience.

Now, I know there are some people who will read this and question, "Was it really God? How can you be sure?" I have my reasons, but they won't be good enough to satisfy anyone else. What I will say (like to the five couples this year who are so against God they didn't hire me to be their wedding officiant because I told them I do a prayer in the ceremony – something I've never had happen until this year) ***my discouragement with humanity means I need to believe in God or I would just give up.*** I need a greater purpose, and I don't see this without God... or maybe I'm just a grumpy pants who's missing something.

This week may you consider the importance of saying thank you and how it can make the world a better place.

Why Guys Don't Listen to Their Wives

As a therapist, I regularly hear women complain that their husbands don't listen to them. Does my wife complain about this? Possibly... I don't know. What's funny is a lot of women think I'm a great listener and will even say how lucky my wife is, but then I point out if I have listening geared conversations for nine hours in a day, what do you think I want to do after work? Yeah, that's why you never marry a marriage therapist... or a porn star (the latter is not about listening). You don't marry someone who does something all day for work you want them to do at home. There's a reason my wife bought me a plaque that says, "Husbands never tell your secrets... because they likely didn't hear you say them in the first place." To be honest, I've gotten a lot better at being able to have the mental energy to listen to my wife after work, but I'm still a guy, so sometimes... I just don't listen. Why? Let's look at that.

First, I should point out that ***there is a difference between listening and obeying.*** There are many times women complain their husband doesn't listen when what they mean is their husband doesn't obey them. The husband heard what was asked, but they don't want to do as they were told... you know like a grownup. It makes me laugh to myself when I ask: "When a boy hears his parents boss him around and give him rules he doesn't like, do you think he dreams of one day finding someone to marry who will continue to boss him around and give him rules he doesn't like while also taking money he earns to do what she wants or do you think he wants to have a say in his life?" Usually when I ask this the wife looks at me confused because they had never thought of that before. ***Marriage isn't slavery (hopefully); it's supposed to be a partnership, a union of equality. As a grownup, we can make requests and share desires that will help us feel cared about, but the other person isn't obligated to do everything on the list; sometimes it's not even possible because the list is too great or the only way the partner can do it is to sacrifice something they really want to do. Marriage isn't about giving our partner everything they want. It's about finding a healthy balance where both of our needs and wants can be met enough in a fair way, which means both people should feel equally valued.***

Another reason why men are accused of not listening is because they don't give the reaction the woman expects: (wife) "And then Becky said (thing)." (guy staring

blankly) “Okay.” (wife) “You must not have heard me because that is the juiciest news I’ve heard in a long time!” Men and women are different, which means sometimes we care about different things.

Reasons a Guy Doesn’t Listen

1. ***He’s Rude:*** Sometimes a guy is just a rude dude. It happens. Everyone can be rude from time to time even women. Of course, if they’re always rude that might be a sign you picked the wrong guy or he’s really struggling with something. Sometimes a person might appear rude, but that’s not what they’re going for, which is why it’s good to double check: “Are you trying to be rude or am I misreading this?” The other option is for the partner to make a request for how they would prefer the person to respond.
2. ***The Bridgerton Effect:*** One night while I was working on a project, my wife was watching the show *Bridgerton*. It was like *Paw Patrol* for women. Kids love *Paw Patrol*, but as an adult, it’s painful. My wife loves *Bridgerton*, but as a man, it’s painful. Sometimes guys don’t listen to women because we really can’t stand what they’re talking about, and that’s okay. Men and women need friends of the same gender because we get each other differently than our spouse can. We shouldn’t be angry at our partner for not liking all the same things or expect them to talk in the same way. Instead, this should be motivation to have friends.
3. ***She’s Boring:*** As strange as it might sound to some women, there’s a chance a guy thinks you’re boring (there’s a chance other women think you’re boring, too). This is especially a problem for people who can’t get to the point.
4. ***He’s Easily Distracted:*** Guys are very much like dogs... squirrel! Our brains are more apt to being distracted than most women. I write “most” because my wife has ADD and gets more distracted than the average guy because that’s one of the symptoms.
5. ***Bad Timing:*** I learned very quickly that if I was to survive being with a wife with ADD I needed to learn the importance of timing for trying to have conversations. If she isn’t in the right headspace, it doesn’t matter how entertaining I am, her head will be somewhere else. It’s like a guy trying to talk to a woman who is focused on the kids – she’s not going to be paying attention to him.
6. ***Different Agenda:*** In every couple I find there’s a “fix-it-now” and a “fix-it-later” person, which creates its own fight situation: (fix-it-later person) “I need a chance to process this and/or I hate conflict, so I’m running away in

hopes it'll magically disappear.” (fix-it-now person) “Where are you going? Don't abandon me! If you loved me, you'd want to fix this now, especially since you'll try to sweep it under the rug later.” In situations like these, whether the woman is the fix-it-now or the fix-it-later person, the guy is not going to simply follow what she wants. He has his own goal. It's like when someone says “F off,” and the other person doesn't leave. Clearly the swearing person wants to be left alone, but if the other isn't done talking about it, they're going to want to try to keep the conversation going... which will lead to being told to F off again and again until they leave.

7. ***He Doesn't Want to Get Angry:*** Women typically tell stories based on how they felt while guys are more fact based, which is one of the reasons a guy's version is likely shorter – there are only so many facts. This difference can cause some serious conflict. For instance, I've learned that when my wife is telling a story that involves me, I'll hear her share how it felt (aka get the facts wrong) and I'll want to correct her, but if I do, I look rude. The answer? Don't listen so closely to avoid the temptation of correcting her.
8. ***She's Confusing:*** One day my wife complained I worked too much since I had been killing myself from overworking between work and getting stuff done around the house, but then she was disappointed I didn't do a job she wanted done. It was confusing: “How can you be upset I work too much and then be upset I didn't do the thing you wanted?”
9. ***He Assumes it's More Panicking:*** My wife has these jumpy, panicking mom moments that spark my own panic brain. I've had to work at not reacting to her panic because it happens so often with our two toddlers. Usually the best way to prevent my brain from having a panic moment is to tune her out, which is helpful since 99% of her panic is unwarranted and everything is fine.
10. ***He's Hiding:*** Whether it's fear of criticism or conflict, sometimes guys get really good at hiding. Last summer at the family cottage, my wife was screaming because my daughter who was just over one was drinking from a teacup out of the toilet... that wasn't flushed. It was a “Let it mellow” moment. When my wife was screaming who didn't flush the toilet, I hid in the other room and pretended that I didn't hear her. I clearly did (the street likely did), but I was busy praying not to be seen because I was hiding from being reprimanded like a child. I might have been the “let it mellow” bandit.
11. ***He's Given Up:*** I've met guys who don't try to listen anymore because they feel so defeated. It's like when they try to do something nice, they get shot

down. If they try to be helpful, they get criticized. If they offer silence, they get in trouble for not offering suggestions. ***Whatever they do, they get in trouble for not doing something else.*** This kind of situation is likely the result of the woman wanting to be angry and her husband is the easy target: (wife) “Does this make me look fat? If you say no, I’ll attack you for lying. If you avoid answering or stay silent, I’ll attack you for being a wimp. If you say yes... I’ll be planning your funeral.” (husband) “What if I say, ‘Uhhhhhhhh,’ for an hour?”

12. ***Men are Sprinters (as discussed earlier):*** When it comes to conversation, ***men are sprinters and women are marathon runners.*** One isn’t better than the other; we’re just different. Guys have shorter attention spans, which makes sense when our stories tend to be shorter. We’re very much, “What’s the point?” whereas women are more about the journey and bonding. What helps women listen for long periods of time is they can think of 10 things at once, so when the story is slow she’s listening while also organizing thoughts in her head: (woman) “After this I need to pick up...” As a guy, we can only focus on one thing at a time, so when someone is talking that’s all we can focus on, which means it’ll be short lived. We have limited listening stamina. As a therapist, I’ve grown mine to a pretty good level, but now I struggle to listen to one person for more than an hour including friends: (my brain even talking to friends) “Okay, it’s been an hour, time for me to go to the bathroom and hear someone else talk.” As a guy, we can train to be more of a 400m racer instead of a 100m dash, but it’s still a sprint.

This week may you consider if this list explains why the man in your life doesn’t listen.

Avoiding Those Petty Fights

Marriages are rarely broken by a major issue. In fact, more people recover from affairs and hidden debt scandals than you'd expect (there are also more hidden debt scandals than you'd expect where one person builds thousands of dollars of debt behind their partner's back). Instead, what kills most relationships is the petty little fights. If you asked what ended things and the divorcee was honest, they'd say, "We had fights, lots of fights... over nothing!" Petty little moments fester, multiply, and grow into giant explosive fights and/or days without talking. The biggest fights start with a spark and suddenly tangents and rants fire up with random details that seem important in the moment (when they're not) that are dug up and thrown back and forth. Sparks can be as insignificant as "You left stubble in the sink!" "Why do you chew so loudly?" "Why does your face keep doing that thing?" "Why do you insist on popping my back pimples?" or "You're complaining about that same person/thing again? Do something about it or get over it!" "Why do you make everything so dramatic?" These are all complaints I've heard from frustrated people. My wife and I have our own hot button issue we have to be careful about. For instance, I apparently have a gift for being in her way, especially in the kitchen – she hates that. Even worse, after my wife and I got married, I either started mumbling or she went semi-deaf because she constantly has no idea what I'm saying and I have to repeat myself, which annoys the heck out of her. You can probably guess I'm not thrilled with this either, but my response isn't to complain; it's more of a twitch.

Young and in love people don't get this: "Why would you fight over something so small? You should just kiss and make up." Ah, the early days of a relationship when you're at your best and too horny to be petty. [When I wrote this] I've been with my wife fourteen years (far from the honeymoon days) and have two daughters who help kill the horniness almost as much as my oldness (growing up is so much fun). I used to wonder why there's the term "grumpy old men," and now I get it. That's not an insult. It's a rite of passage, and I'm on my way (written half jokingly).

Here's a good example of a petty fight situation:

At the beginning of the COVID isolation time, my wife pointed out there was a puddle in the basement. Considering we had three floods in the basement last

summer, this wasn't a happy moment. Fortunately it was just a puddle and that puddle wasn't urine... this time. My daughter was starting her potty training and often showed us that she preferred to use the floor than the potty, but she wasn't in the basement, so it wasn't her. It also wasn't my wife (I had to check). It turned out water was dripping from the one pot light, an object not known for being a tap. Water dripping from your ceiling is never a good thing, but from the little I know, electricity and water get along like a bucket of cheese and someone who's lactose intolerant. I ended up cutting a good sized hole in the ceiling to follow the leak, and I found the source... a week later; I'm a little slow and the leak was a strange one. Unfortunately, while cutting the ceiling drywall, I clipped a wire. With isolating ourselves like good citizens because of the virus, it was months before we were finally comfortable to have an electrician come to the house, and as soon it was fixed, I was patching the hole. I was in a rush, not just because I'm uptight (I can admit it), but because the hole was visible during my video calls, so for the four months we'd been in isolation, I'd been apologizing to my clients for the hole in the ceiling. The one morning I was anxious to work on the spot, but my wife had other plans. I was swamped with clients all week, so I had limited availability to work on the patch, and the morning I was ready to work on it, my wife was busy – she also knew she had limited time because of my work schedule. Before I realized it, I was watching our baby and two year old while she vacuumed and did laundry (for the record, I normally do the vacuuming; I'm a modern man... although I don't do laundry; I'm not that modern a man). To me, both those jobs were unnecessary at that time (because they were). The priority should've been fixing the hole (at least to me). After she vacuumed the main floor and upstairs, she left to do more laundry stuff, so I quickly emptied and cleaned up the vacuum in order to get to my job as soon as she got upstairs and could watch the girls. When she was done the laundry, she was very annoyed that the vacuum was put away because she had it in her mind she had to do the basement where I work, but I said, "It's fine because I'm about to make a mess." My wife was still annoyed I interrupted her plans while I was annoyed with her for making me wait for her to do what she wanted. While sanding the ceiling, I found myself getting angrier as the voice in my head was muttering "She doesn't understand you. She only cares about herself. She doesn't care about the ceiling getting fixed and for me to look professional. I have virtually no time this week and when I do have a moment, she makes me wait for her. It's always about her!" My mind was going full tilt. I then had the thought, "My priority doesn't matter to her because she has her own priorities..." and that's when it hit me: ***why are my priorities any more important than hers? I'm being petty.*** I was essentially angry at my wife for

having a different priority than I did. It's not like she was watching TV or playing video games. Her priority was to do household work. Granted, vacuuming day wasn't necessary for another couple days according to my calendar (I said I was uptight), but to her it was important. Not only is my wife allowed a different priority, I never communicated what I wanted to do that morning, so I had no right being upset. I just assumed I could do what I wanted even though my wife was spending long hours with our daughters while I worked. At the same time, she was just as guilty because she didn't communicate her plans either; she was just quicker to get started on her priority. Fortunately, I never said anything to her and I was able to process it on my own (the one thing I did right) and my wife didn't say anything either, but that moment could've easily been a blow up. We were both a bit tired and irritable to begin with, so the ingredients were there to have a massive fight over pretty much nothing.

In this situation, both of us were like little kids – I want it my way and I want it now! Fortunately, by biting our tongues and not sparking the fire, we were able to move past that moment and get to better spots individually and as a couple. Hopefully next time I'll be quicker to communicate to prevent a problem or catch myself for being petty sooner, but if not, as long as we both bite our tongues and take a moment to process things, we'll still avoid an unnecessary petty fight.

Bonus: Some people might accuse my wife and I of sweeping the problem under the carpet because we didn't talk about it after. We could've potentially given one sentence to summarize our feelings, but in this case, we were both really just being petty. What's left to discuss? (me) "I was petty." (wife) "Yup." (me) "And you were petty." (wife) "Yup." (me) "Great. Conversation done. Let's go do something that's actually fun now." Sometimes it's best not to talk about it with the person who's upset us. (We should write a lesson about it and put it in a book).

This week may you prevent unnecessary fights.

Choices, Interpretations, & How to Respond

Our choices have consequences, which means we should live so our future selves will thank us. I was reminded of that lesson in January when I had to see the doctor. That's a good start to a story: "A doctor? Someone was hurt... that's awesome." Although that might just be my guy brain. It was one of those moments where I didn't need my wife nagging me to go because it was that uncomfortable (I'm a big boy now). I even called and booked the appointment myself (I'm that much of a big boy). I'll avoid the details of my symptoms, but I'm sure you'll be able to figure them out in a moment. When I was telling my doctor what I was experiencing, I mentioned my chiropractor thought my recent intense back pain might be the sign of something else like a kidney stone and my body was trying to get my attention. My doctor smiled at this idea... not in the comforting way, but more in the "It's cute they thought that" kind of way. He said the symptoms were not kidney stone related. They were likely the sign of a STI. (Yeah, I think that made the story a bit more interesting... or gross). He said that it sounded like Chlamydia or gonorrhea, but there was a one percent chance it wasn't. Those are two words that sound very pleasant as words, Chlamydia and gonorrhea, if you don't know what they are. And now you can probably guess the symptoms I had – you're welcome. This was our following conversation:

Doctor: Have you recently... um?

Me: Cheated? No.

Doctor: Would your wife... um?

Me: Cheat? No, we have a two and four year old. Her idea of pleasure is napping.

Doctor: What about in your past? Sometimes you can have a STI in your system for years before it shows itself.

Me: Seriously, it can be there for years? That's crazy... but again, no. We both waited until marriage to have sex... (jokingly) at least that's what my wife told me.

Doctor: (Looking relieved) Thank you. That's so refreshing. I keep hearing stories of young people who think 10 partners isn't a lot and that sleeping around is fine, but there are many consequences to doing that. And as you now know, they can show up years later.

Side Note: I love my doctor. We have a connection that lets him be honest with me, which I really appreciate. I also like that he's bit of a germaphobe. It makes me laugh because he works with germs all day. Good thing he's not a jerk-aphobe or he wouldn't see me as a patient.

What's crazy is no one I've asked knew that STIs can be in your system for years before they show themselves. Talk about a risk to your future self... and your future partners. You could both think you're clean when you're actually both a Petri dish ready to spread.

In case you were wondering, my symptoms looked like Chlamydia or gonorrhea, but the test results proved I was the one percent. I have to say, it's nice being in the one percent, but can you imagine if I had cheated on my wife or had partners in my past? It took several days for the test results to come in, so I would've been losing my mind assuming the worst (and coming up with a believable lie to tell my wife). Can you imagine if I didn't trust my wife not to cheat or that she had multiple partners before me? I would've been losing my mind assuming she was the reason I had my issues. Can you imagine the potential fights? My anger would've been volcanic because of how betrayed I would've felt. Thankfully I'm one of the few people who walked away not worried about something my wife or I did because our past selves made some great choices – yea, us. This was a great reminder that living for the moment is dangerous because our present choices are very important for our future benefit.

One of the most important choices we can make is how we interpret things because a lot of our emotional hurt comes from our perception. A few weeks ago my wife had made a meal to take to some friends who had a baby. Unfortunately, after we got our girls to bed, which is when we normally spend time together, she told me she was tired from making the meal and needed to get ready for bed. I told her that it was disappointing that her doing something nice for someone else meant I had to miss out. She left the room without saying anything. I assumed the issue was done, but a few minutes later she came back and told me in one sentence that it hurt her that I would tarnish her good deed. To her credit she took a time out to figure out what to say. My response was to apologize and then I followed it with a question. I tried to avoid the trap of “I’m sorry, but...” Instead, I went with “Do you think I was trying to tarnish your good deed or was I stating a fact?” She then replied, “But it feels like you were trying to tarnish my good deed.” Holding strong, I countered, “I’m sure it does, but is that a true feeling or is your brain lying to you?” Don’t you wish you could be married to a

therapist? Fortunately, my wife just looked at me for a second... and then walked away. My wife later shared that she doesn't like knowing I was disappointed. She's a very thoughtful person, but there are consequences to being thoughtful – it costs money, time, and energy. I'm *not* a very thoughtful person and there are consequences – I save money, time, and energy... and people like my wife more.

This situation leads to two important points. ***First, being nice to one person means someone else might be upset.*** For instance, in traffic, if we let someone in we might make the person behind us angry or I'll hug one daughter and the other might get jealous until I hug them. That doesn't mean we shouldn't ever be nice, but we should be careful when we do it. My wife wasn't kind to these people to spite me. She had a pure heart doing what she did, but I'm allowed to feel second place because I lost out. In my eyes, there were better days for her to do her kind act, but she chose that day, which means she needed to accept disappointing me. ***This leads to the second point: We need to let people be disappointed with us and simply apologize.*** The worst part about this situation is I felt disappointed and by stating that I got in trouble – that sucks. Women often complain their man doesn't communicate, but that's a major reason why. If a guy shares something negative, his wife often gets angry at him. My wife followed that pattern as she interpreted my comment as hurtful, but I was being honest. I didn't want her to feel bad. I just wanted to know she cared about how I felt, and the best way to do that was to simply say, "I'm sorry you feel disappointed. I can see why. I'm glad you want to spend time with me. How about tomorrow I'll make sure to have time for you?" This way she could feel good about her act of kindness on top of showing she cared about me with a rain check. There doesn't have to be any guilt or damage of good feelings. ***Make the person disappointed feel cared about and move on.*** Unfortunately, many married people will defend themselves rather than simply apologizing and offering a solution.

One of the worst interpretations is when stressed people only see their own stress. Because of how they feel, they assume it must be the result of their partner not pulling their weight. If one person is stressed, however, there are three basic options:

- 1) The other person isn't pulling their weight.
- 2) The other person is pulling their weight, but the partner doesn't see it (maybe the person isn't stressed or the stress isn't obvious), so it feels like they're not.

- 3) The other person is pulling their own weight for what should be expected, but their partner has crazy high standards, which causes them to look like they're not doing enough.

I know for me, it's easy to feel stressed in the moment and want to blame my wife for not helping more. Meanwhile, she's just as stressed as I am, but she's doing something else to be helpful. ***We really need to be careful how we interpret things because good people end up divorced because of bad interpretations and the ensuing resentment.***

This week may you consider how you can be kind to your future self.

A Simple Communication Tool

The other day I made a new communication tool! Yes, I'm way more excited than a normal person should be, but being a therapist as long as I have, it's rare to come up with anything new; it was quite refreshing. This new tool isn't going to revolutionize anything, but it made the couple I was working with happy, so it has merit. One of the tools I regularly teach is to summarize your point in one sentence like the thesis of an essay. This can be hard to do, but it's well worth it for limiting rabbit trail fights. Rabbit trail fights are the fight topics that pop up and distract the couple from the original issue, so lots of things get stirred up with nothing getting resolved. The one person in this couple always had a hard time defining their issue in one sentence and would instead just start talking (aka ramble). Not knowing what the real issue was yet, this person would be talking and not making a lot of sense as they tried to flush out the problem, which in turn made the listening partner frustrated – a pretty common scenario. Add in the fact that one gender is known for not really listening and you have a great recipe for a big fight over someone being hurt. One of my triggers is feeling like I'm wasting time, so if I was married to this just-start-talking person, I'd have a very hard time being patient as they filter through what it is they're actually trying to say – get to the point! Of course as a therapist, the person I'm working with can take as long as they want because they get an hour of my time. You could repeat the same thing over and over for the full hour and I'd be fine with it: (repeating client) “Bird... bird is the word.” (me) “What's the word?” (repeating client) “Bird... bird is the word.” (me) “Fascinating.” If you're paying me, you can pretty much say whatever you want. My wife? Nope. And yes, I'm aware that sounds terrible, but I have things to do and chores to get done... and yes, I'm aware that makes me sound like a woman and I'm okay with that... and yes, I'm aware that I'm rambling right now and if I was the reader, I'd be getting annoyed with me.

Normally, I would suggest the rambling person needs to learn to talk to a friend or journal to flush out their thoughts until they can simplify what they want to say in one sentence to their partner. The problem was, however, this rambling person is a Hider, and like most Hiders, they only get the drive to say something when they're upset, so if they don't address their emotion in that moment, they're not going to say anything, which will add to bottling up and either a bigger fight later or quiet resentment.

So here's what we came up with: Have a list of the top 10 likely causes for you to be angry. Like a combo menu at a fast food restaurant – That's the one! This cuts out a lot of the thinking and helps the person skip to what it is that's actually bugging them, so the couple can now address the actual problem and not fight about the person being upset, not knowing why, and rambling about it.

The fun thing is everyone will have a different list of triggers. For instance, my wife would have a very different list than I would: (her list) He's too perfect, he's too amazing, he's too awesome, etc.

Example 1: Top 10 List of Triggers for a Typical Married Guy

1. I feel criticized and/or talked down to like a child.
2. I feel like I'm not good enough or doing enough.
3. I feel like nothing makes my partner happy and/or they just needs a target for their anger.
4. My partner assumes the worst of me and makes me sound like a villain in their stories.
5. My partner catastrophizes everything making it worse than it is.
6. I'm not allowed to process anything because it looks like I'm sulking.
7. I'm not allowed to have any emotion that isn't positive.
8. I can't rely on my partner to follow through with what I ask.
9. I feel blamed for everything while they're always the innocent victim who never apologizes.
10. They get away with doing things I'd be crucified for doing by them and their friends.

Looking at this list of typical complaints I hear from guys, there's a theme of failure and hopelessness. After a fight, it can be helpful to consider which one to two lines are most likely at play in this situation. Maybe he'll discover more, but this is a good place to start. I don't need to include a woman's list because they're better at figuring things out, but a few examples include: I don't feel cared about, I don't feel heard, I don't feel like a priority, I get stuck running the house, I get stuck being the secretary of the house, and I'm tired of having to nag people to do simple things to make the house run smoother.

To take this a step further, it can be helpful to know our underlying fear – the thing that will get us angry every time. I have two main triggers: fear of wasting time and fear of repercussions (which can connect to wasting time). Knowing my triggers can help me limit their power over me, especially since it lets me prepare

for potential time wasting moments. For instance, I bring writing notes with me wherever I go and have audio books in the car. By knowing my underlying fears I can also help my partner know what to be careful of triggering. The bonus is if you have anxiety issues these one or two triggers are likely a major source of the overall anxiety problems you feel and knowing can help reduce them.

Options for a general trigger include:

1. Feeling forgotten or ignored.
2. Feeling second place to kids, job, and/or everyone in general.
3. Feeling controlled.
4. Feeling overly responsible for everything.
5. Feeling like I'm carrying all the financial.
6. Feeling like I'm carrying the household weight.
7. Feeling scared of the partner's anger.
8. Feeling judged (partner has a tone or look).
9. Fear of feeling stupid
10. Fear of being vulnerable
11. Fear of being manipulated or tricked.
12. Fear of rejection (so I reject first).
13. Fear of physical pain.
14. Fear of the past.
15. Fear of the future.
16. Fear of being powerless or helpless.
17. Fear of being attacked.
18. Fear of death.
19. Fear of feeling like I can't say or do anything right.
20. Fear of feeling like I'm darned if I do and darned if I don't (e.g. if I don't share my feelings I get in trouble, but if I share my hurt or frustration, I get in trouble for not being happy.)

Bonus: When people are angry, it's also good to remember that a person's actions are affected by HHAALLT: hungry, horny, angry, anxious, lonely, lost, and tired.

This week may you consider what regularly triggers you in order to help prevent it and help your partner know how to better communicate with you and vice versa.

Do I Need an Apology?

The other day I oiled the baby stroller's wheels to stop the squeaking. It felt very manly – I'm using oil – so manly. We normally keep the stroller in the car, but because it was dripping oil, I left it at the side of the house. I may have gone overboard with the oil – so manly. A few hours later, I was in the middle of something and I remembered the stroller was outside, so I said to my wife I should go put the stroller away. She told me not to worry about it. She even said if it didn't get put away that night she didn't mind. Since I was in the middle of something, I told her I'd do it later... but when has anyone ever remembered to do a job later? Not this guy. I was in bed with only two hours left before I was supposed to wake up when my wife woke me to ask if I put the buggy away (the thing she told me not to worry about). She asked because it was pouring rain – oops. She knew I didn't put it away, so this was her way of saying, "Put it away." As soon as she mentioned the stroller, my brain's response was to jump up, put on shoes, and go outside in my pajamas to bring in the buggy (I was essentially dressed to go to Walmart). Jacket? Why? I'm a man... I used oil, remember? When I was back in the house, I was soaked. I went to the bedroom, changed out of my wet pajamas, and put something dry on as I slipped back into bed not nearly as friendly as I left. While I closed my eyes, my wife made a jab comment. I was too tired to remember the exact words, but I do know they weren't words of encouragement. I mumbled, "I should've brought it in earlier," and tried to sleep while I realized I should've dried my hair because now my pillow was wet and uncomfortable.

The truth was I should've brought the stroller in when I thought about it earlier in the day, or knowing my memory sucks, I could've written a note to remind myself later. I'm aware of what I should've done differently and now I had to deal with the fact I was wet and uncomfortable. At the same time this happened partly because my wife had dissuaded me from doing it the moment I remembered. When I had gotten back in the room dripping wet all I wanted was to be told, "Thank you for going outside," or "I'm sorry you had to go outside," or "I'm sorry I told you not to worry about bringing in the buggy earlier." I just wanted something to feel like she cared. Instead, I received a very unwelcoming response when I came back in the room.

I should point out my wife remembered the stroller because she was up feeding our baby and was tired. Add in the fact that my wife comes from an aggressive background where she was taught and role modelled to not show sadness/sympathy for family. Instead, you get angry and/or lash out (it's as fun as it sounds), so her response wasn't surprising. I'm well aware of this, but I'm used to a mom who is very sympathy and encouraging oriented, so in my mind that's the proper response – because it is. If someone is uncomfortable, you should offer either a “Thank you,” or “I'm sorry.” In that moment when I was wet, that was what I wanted. I wanted to be validated that it sucked I had to go out in the rain, especially when minutes before I had been comfortable in bed. I wanted to know she cared, but instead I got her family response and that made me upset. Fortunately, I bit my tongue and worked through it as I fell asleep – potential fight avoided.

When you marry someone, you can't expect them to change – there's hope, but you can't expect it. For instance, the day before, after my wife didn't get a joke I made, I said to my friend who was there, “We've been together 14 years and she still doesn't understand sarcasm,” to which she replied, “We've been together 14 years and you still don't understand that I don't get sarcasm.” It was a brilliant comeback. Similarly, in bed our conversation could've been “We've been together 14 years and you still don't understand how to show sympathy or encouragement to me,” to which she could've replied, “We've been together 14 years and you still don't understand that I don't show sympathy and encouragement to you.” She also could've said, “You're 40 years old and you still don't think to write yourself a note or to just do the job when you think of it?” These are all true and logical statements. They're not very warm or gentle responses, but they're true. Using them makes you a bit of a jerk, but they're valid. In the moment I was in bed with my wet hair and pillow, my wife was tired from being up with the baby, and how often do I thank her for getting up with the baby? Not too often (aka zero times). I need to be better at thanking her for things if I want her to be doing that for me.

In this situation I had several paths to choose from:

1. I could scream at her and create a huge fight where I look like a jerk (tempting).
2. I could bottle up my feelings and build resentment (it sounds as good as it feels).
3. I could bottle up my feelings and feel weak and pathetic after.
4. I could share with her in one sentence that I felt uncared about when I came in wet from the rain without a “Thank you.”

5. I could ask a question like “Out of curiosity, when I came in from the rain did you not say, “Thank you,” or “I’m sorry,” because you didn’t think it was warranted or were you annoyed you’d have to deal with a wet buggy in the morning?”
6. I could vent my feelings alone and just chalk it up as another incidence where my wife was tired.
7. I could request that my wife and I work at being better at saying thank you and I’m sorry, but in our case, we’re generally both pretty good and this was more of an unusual situation.

As a natural Hider, guess where I went. Like most husbands, sharing my feelings often just leads to a fight: (wife) “You’re criticizing me after all that I do for you?” It can also open a floodgate where I get told about all the times I’ve left my wife feeling uncared for, so I also get to feel worse than if I said nothing. It’s no surprise avoiding a conversation becomes the preferred option. Ultimately, in marriage we really need to pick our battles because some things need to be addressed in order to prevent being bottled up or building resentment. We might want to avoid a potential fight, but sometimes we need to face the risk to have a healthier relationship. What should be remembered, however, is timing is important. I’d be foolish to talk to my wife when I was wet and tired, especially because she was also tired.

For this situation, do I need an apology? No, I’ll survive without one. I also know she was tired, so she wasn’t at her best... or maybe I’m just being a wuss.

The Best Option: The best way to bring about effective change is through requests. Requests are solution based and avoid the temptation of criticizing the other person. Classic therapy teaches people to say, “I feel (emotion) because (thing that person did). Any idea why this is stupid? You might be saying “I feel,” but it still feels like criticism, and any hint of criticism will receive a Desperate Attack or Desperate Defend response. The best option is to start: “Can I make a request?” and if the person says yes then you give your one sentence request. If they ask for an explanation you can share why, but otherwise after your one sentence your part of the conversation is done.

This week may you consider whether you need a thank you or apology or if you can let things go and if you need to work on saying thank you or giving an apology to your partner.

Are You a Mary Poppins or Bert?

When I was a kid, on special occasions we rented VHS videos. How old does that make me sound? My family was lucky because in the mid 80s (now I sound old), when having a VCR meant you were rich, my dad was able to borrow one of the school's Betamax players during the summer. We couldn't afford one to own until later, so this was a real highlight – highlights are things that today's generation misses out on because everyone seems to get what they want when they want. When we picked a movie out at the store (another old fashioned, but awesome thing), it was very exciting. Just being in the rental store was an experience, especially if you went to Jumbo video where they gave out free popcorn. For us, the movie we chose had to be from the "Family" section because we weren't allowed movies with swearing. We were allowed to watch some "racier" movies, but only if they were on TV because they were dubbed versions like for *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*: Even when I was an early teenager we only saw *Die Hard 2* on the TV: "Yippee Ki-Yay, Mr. Falcon." Talk about different times than now. The 80s were a time you could watch the *Song of the South*, but couldn't say Jesus' name in vain or call someone a female dog. Before the Simpsons, you never even heard "H" "e" double hockey sticks on TV. Now *Song of the South* is banned and you can pretty much say or do anything on TV depending on the station. That blows my "Mr. Falcon" mind.

Back in the 80s, it was even unusual to find many of the Disney cartoons to rent because they weren't released yet to video. Disney made it special for each movie being brought "out of the vault" whereas now we just take them for granted on Disney+. In the 80s, this meant most squeaky clean movie options consisted of live-action Disney movies from the 50s and 60s like the original *Parent Trap*, *That Darn Cat*, and the *Apple Dumpling Gang* – how do you become really cool? Watch out of date movies that no one else your age watches and wonder why they don't get your references.

One movie my family regularly watched was the classic, *Mary Poppins*. (Yes, that was a long journey to get to this point, but it was fun reminiscing about the 80s). About fifteen years ago I ended up being able to see the Broadway play based on the movie, and that started my obsession with theatre. It was soooo good. Unlike the *Lion King*, a very disappointing play beyond the costumes because it's just the

movie with strange voices, *Mary Poppins* was similar enough to connect you to the movie while different enough to keep it fresh (being cool was clearly never my goal). When I was at the theatre to watch it, they were selling t-shirts that said the classic line, “Practically perfect in every way,” and seeing that, it suddenly hit me. When I was a kid, I was trying to be “practically perfect” like Mary Poppins. She had somehow become my subconscious role model. ***I didn’t even really like her as a person, yet I was trying to be her.*** Part of what bothered me was she seemed more worried about being proper than loving. Plus, at the end, I thought it was a pretty jerk move the way she left without saying good-bye – that’s not nice. Maybe that’s why she wasn’t “perfect” only “practically” – she ghosted people. That being said, Julie Andrews had a charm about her that was very drawing (Emily Blunt missed that in *Mary Poppins Returns*). As a kid, Mary Poppins was more of an authority figure, so it didn’t really bother me that she was essentially a prude, especially because she got the job done. Realistically, parents can take a lot from her lead – more strict and less wuss.

Despite the movie being called Mary Poppins and mostly focusing on her, I now see the real hero of the movie was Dick Van Dyke’s character, Bert. Bert was amazing! He was funny, loving, and made life look like fun – what I assumed Dick Van Dyke was like in real life. On one hand, he was everything I wanted to be as a kid – full of life. This was the side of me that was drawn to comedy. At the same time, I was torn because I wanted to be “practically perfect in every way.” What was I to do? Be fun or be perfect? I thought those two things were separate and couldn’t be mixed. Now that I have better understanding, I can see that ***being mature is knowing when to be more one way or the other.*** We don’t just want to be one distinct side. We need times of being serious and fun and how “serious” we get depends on the person. After all, ***we want to be a little bit Mary and a little bit Bert,*** and if we lean toward one side, we do well with someone who leans a bit the other way to help balance us out.

Looking back at my childhood, I’d say between the battle of fun and practically perfect, the latter won because I had a very strong judgemental side that seemed more prevalent at church... you know, where I should be the least judgmental – oops. It didn’t help that I was also very competitive: “I need to be more practically perfect than everyone else!” Of course, I wasn’t a complete jerk (most of the time, anyway), but this was the voice that could pop into my head, which was the twin of “They’re more practically perfect than you because you suck!” Our heads can be fun, can’t they?

Now that I'm older, I have a whole new respect for both of these characters, Mary Poppins and Bert. They are both wonderful personalities, and the world needs both of them to stay balanced. We need the Mary Poppins keeping things in order and moving smoothly and we also need the Berts who help life be more enjoyable.

To take this a step further, they both essentially represent their genders really well (not that I think all women are prudes... well, I can wonder sometimes... oops, there's that judgemental side again). Mary Poppins who is all about structure and being proper while occasionally allowing for some frivolity and playfulness represents how a lot of moms think. Women are drawn to perfection. They want to be practically perfect. Married men? Not even close. Practically perfect sounds terrible. That sounds like a lot of work without any great reward: (snobby guy) "I'm practically perfect." (other guy) "Sorry to hear that. Want to go do something stupid or just watch sports and relax?" A guy can want to "perfect" his craft, but that's different than being a perfectionist. ***Being perfect at something is different than being a perfectionist because the latter needs perfection in every aspect of life.*** Meanwhile, the former is striving to produce something as good as possible – it's trying to be the best. This can be a competitive thing, a way to impress, or simply for the satisfaction of accomplishment, but it's different than demanding perfection in everything that's done.

From my experience, guys have an inner child who should regularly want to be allowed out to have fun or something's off. We should want to be playful once in awhile and not take things too seriously. ***Guys typically joke to heal and bond while women typically share feelings to heal and bond that might include laughter or tears. Neither one is better than the other – just different.*** This difference means we need to be careful how we interact with each other. We need to read our audience and be a little less or more jokey depending on the person to whom we're talking. Communication is made easier when we try to understand our differences. Guys typically prefer to keep the mood light and the emotions kept low. More than anything, we don't want to feel like we're being criticized or under constant watch (we can be very sensitive to this depending on our past). We want to be allowed to be a grownup, a grownup as we define it, and not likely the way our wives do as many women complain that their husband is more like a child. Meanwhile, that's what a guy thinks is a grownup – someone who does his basic responsibilities, but still makes time to have fun because life shouldn't be taken that seriously and drama isn't worth the energy.

In my practically perfect days, I was like a typical wife. I even used to complain my girlfriend at the time made me more like a parent than a partner. It's no wonder she left me for a woman; it was an easy transition: (my ex to the new female partner) "You're just like my ex... minus a few physical things I really hated." Fortunately, age and life have helped me allow my inner child out more as I let the standard of being practically perfect lighten up. As I've come to learn, love doesn't require a pickle up our butts (metaphorically); it's patient, kind, etc. An emotionally healthy person is responsible enough and does their job well while also being able to laugh and enjoy life. And the best person knows how to break out into random song and dance and magically makes everyone around them look choreographed.

This week may we be a little Mary and a little Bert (and randomly break out into song).

*Sensible people control their temper;
they earn respect by overlooking wrongs.*

Pro 19:11

*Spouting off before listening to the facts
is both shameful and foolish.*

Pro 18:13

*Those who control their tongue will have a long life;
opening your mouth can ruin everything.*

Pro 13:3



The Basic Steps for Handling Conflict with Proper Communication

The other day I was talking to a friend outside of my house (yes, I have friends). My family had just returned from the park, so we were all still outside. My wife had the baby and was putting the stroller in the house, my middle child was climbing a tree (I think she was trying to make a couple more bruises to add to her collection), and my six year old was making happy noises and dancing in front of one of my gardens... which was strange. She was waving around what looked like tiny green leaves on a stem. As my brain was very confused by this, she bent over and quickly bounced back up with more tiny green leaves on a stem in her hands. This time she raised leaves high in the air dancing like she had just defeated her lifelong enemy. I suddenly realized she was ripping apart one of my plants. In shock, I interrupted my friend's story to scold, "Gracie! What are you doing?" My daughter immediately stopped, turned around to look at me, and then ran away. Not knowing what to do, I apologized to my friend and let him finish his story. It wasn't long after this that my friend left and I found my daughter. She's grown up going to garden centers and has had nice gardens at the house her entire life. She's even helped me plant and water some of the flowers we have. It's not like she's an alien that's just arrived on our planet and learning what these things are: "These green things are so fun to wave like flags after I free them from their brown prison!" Not knowing how to begin and unable to come up with a question with two options, I simply asked in a very confused voice: "Why were you ripping at my plant?" With as much remorse as a child can have, my daughter replied, "I thought they were weeds."

I should point out that my oldest is generally a very good girl. When she's tired she can be a bit rude like a normal person. Her main issue is actually something she's very proud of – she's a hoarder. She's going to be on TV one day... and not in a good way. Overall, she gets it when she's done something wrong and is very good to be remorseful. When she was two, she accidentally ripped my Bible and even at that young age she was incredibly apologetic and the care she showed was impressive. My middle child, the one covered in bruises, is not the same. She's four, and if she knows she did something wrong, she'll likely go full on mean girl teenager style and throw sass on your anger: "I don't care." That's fun. Hopefully

we'll be able to break that habit soon. On the plus side, where my oldest had a month of feeling bullied at school (although I'm not really sure if she was), when my middle daughter starts school next year, she won't get bullied... she's more likely to be the bully who will make the teacher cry. ***I point this out because it's important to know your audience.*** When my oldest told me she thought it was weeds, even if she was lying, she felt terrible for upsetting me. I didn't have to go hard on her. My middle? She would've likely ripped a bigger plant out to spite me for being upset. It really is fun. I would need a different approach with her.

After my oldest gave her reason, my shock grew even bigger. All I could think was: "Why would you think it was a weed?" Instead, what came out of my mouth was "New rule: You can't touch any of the plants unless you first check with me." She quickly agreed and then there was silence as I stared at her still in disbelief of what she did.

So my daughter was upset for doing something wrong, she agreed to the new rule, which meant the goals of helping her be a better person in the future and keeping the contents of the house safe had been achieved. With this in place, do you think I felt better? Did I feel satisfied? Were my emotions absolved? Not a chance. I felt like screaming at her. I felt like repeating my new rule over and over. I felt like giving analogies and expressing why her doing that was unbelievably dumb... but would that help her in any way? No. It'd likely make it worse. My daughter would likely develop an unhealthy fear or resentment toward me, which would make things worse for me in the future. By knowing when to stop and actually stopping my discipline, I was putting myself in a better position to be respected as I was acting respectable. What's strange is if this was my middle child, she would've given me a fight, but on some level it would've felt better for me because I would've naturally gotten out more of my emotion by being more threatening and using lectures to put her in her place. It's a strange reality.

At this point, I was done disciplining my daughter, but I was still rattled. So what did I need to do? As I regularly teach, I needed to vent privately. I needed to find a space for myself to do something to safely get out my emotion, so I didn't bottle anything up. In this situation, I did a few fist clenches and grunts, nothing too intense, but that's all I needed as I moved onto doing something to distract myself.

Part of the problem with conflict is we don't feel good after, but our brain wants to feel peace. That's why a lot of people end up talking too much and pushing issues because they're trying to "feel" good, but resolution doesn't feel

good. It's like telling a kid to apologize to their sibling. Sure, they might say their sorry, but they're not happy about it. Adults are no different. We're not suddenly fine. Some people recover quicker because they're easily distracted, but most people need a cool down period after a conflict or a very big environment change. My daughter knew she screwed up and was remorseful, but that didn't help me feel better. My job was done, but the emotion was still there because the plant was severely damaged and will likely die.

So how do we deal with conflict? The basic steps are pretty simple in concept, but they're hard to execute:

- 1) Define the problem in one sentence.
- 2) If step one can't be achieved while with the person, call a Time Out with a Time. It's like in a boxing match. Ring the bell to show the round is done, so both parties can go to their corners to regroup and find one sentence to summarize their point.
- 3) To help figure out the problem, sometimes we need to physically vent to calm our emotions before processing the situation by journaling or talking to a trusted outside person to find our one sentence.
- 4) After finding the one sentence summary of why we're upset, there are three main options:
 - a) Using the one sentence, turn it into a request for how you'd prefer the other person to behave next time. Complaining feels like criticism, but making a request for different behavior next time is solution focused and easier to accept, which is what I did by making a new rule for my daughter.
 - b) Each person in the conflict in one sentence shares the hurt they felt and then apologizes to the other party for the hurt they felt whether it seems justifiable or not. Both sides need to apologize because conflict means two people were hurt. After both parties have apologized, you can then ask if you can explain what you were actually trying to do if their was a misinterpretation.
 - c) Ask a two option question to double check what the person was doing. For example, "When you (thing they said or did) were you trying to hurt me or did I misread it?" or "When you said (blank), were you trying to be helpful or were you talking down to me?" If the person was being

bad, get away because they were being bad. If you misinterpreted, great. Move forward knowing the other person wasn't trying to hurt you.

Tip: Whatever choice you go with, conversations should be less than five minutes because the longer the conversation, the greater the risk of blowing up into another fight.

- 5) Vent privately (if needed).
- 6) Find resolution with one sentence to summarize what happened and/or define what we can do differently next time. For example:
 - a) We had a fight because we were both tired, which means we shouldn't talk about anything serious right before bed.
 - b) When it feels like she's criticizing me, I get too defensive, which makes it worse. Instead of giving explanations for what I was doing, I need to help her feel cared about by (thing).
 - c) When he doesn't do what I ask, it feels like he doesn't care about me, but I should remember it might be a sign he has a different perspective and ask a two option question about it before getting angry.
- 7) Distraction is a necessary last step in order to prevent over thinking.

In my situation with my daughter, if I couldn't come up with my one sentence, I would've sent her to her room with a time. This would give me a chance to calm down and process the situation better. Instead, I was able to go straight to:

- 1) Problem: She ripped out my plants.
- 2) Request: Don't touch the plants unless you check with me first.
- 3) Vent out the emotion to calm down.
- 4) Distract myself in order to let my brain relax.

In this story, my daughter gave a great example of showing how it's helpful to be remorseful when we've upset someone because you can really reduce the potential conflict when you don't defend yourself and simply show you care.

This week may you consider how you can reduce conflict.

Practicing Two-Option Questions

My first book, *Emotional Sex: Making good relationships great*, was a collection of the best lessons I had learned from books combined with my limited life experience, which makes it a solid book in its own right. Now my 52 Lessons series comes from a collection of the best things I've learned from life experience with limited book influence. They are the result of over twelve years of writing and figuring things out since my *Emotional Sex* came out in 2012. One of the books I originally learned from was *Dealing with People You Can't Stand*. I liked their list of 10 personalities they addressed since they were helpful for warning me what not to be. For the final lesson, I thought I'd share that list again and use them to go over examples of the two option questions that I've encouraged to use throughout this book because if you take anything from my teachings, learning to use two option questions is the best tool I can offer besides "Yes and," and using Requests. As a bonus, I've also noted the five types of communicators they can be connected to, which brings us full circle back to the first lesson. Eye bee like ah tottal geniuous:

1. **The Tank/Bulldozer (Desperate Attacker):** The tank is confrontational, in your face, and often angry. They are the ultimate in pushy and aggressive behavior. Domineering, loud, and forceful, the Tank is all about getting the job done even if it leads to some hurt feelings.

Question for Suspected Tank/Bulldozers: Are you acting out of fear or are you more passionate about this?

2. **The Sniper (Cold & Condescending):** Whether it's jabs, attitude, or a roll of the eyes, the sniper knows how to make you feel dumb. This covert operator will remember personal things you share, identify your weaknesses, and recognize how to use guilt against you because they are all great tools for getting you to submit to them.

Questions for Suspected Sniper: Was that meant to be a jab comment or am I misreading it? Are you talking down to me or is this a self protective thing?

3. **The Grenade (Hider or Desperate Defend with a slim chance of Cold & Condescending):** After a brief period of calm, the Grenade explodes. When they blow, they're unable to stop, and shrapnel hits everyone in range. If they feel bad for the hurt they cause they're more the Hider and Desperate

Defender, but if they justify the explosion, they're more in the Cold & Condescending category.

Question for Suspected Grenade: (Later when things have calmed down) Have you been bottling up your emotion and then just popped or is that normal anger in your eyes?

Follow up if bottling up: Are you going to do something different in hopes of preventing bottling up and exploding again or should I prepare myself for another blow up later?

If normal: If I said your anger was scary would you try changing for me or would you suggest I get stronger because it's just me?

- 4. The Know-It-All (Cold & Condescending or Desperate Attacker with a slim chance of Desperate Defender):** Know-It-Alls aren't big on listening... unless it's to their own voice. They don't listen to others because what's the point? They know more than you. Even if it's something you're very experienced in, Know-It-Alls will teach you about it (at least that's what they think). Sometimes Know-It-Alls really are brilliant, but they have a way of leaving everyone around them feeling inferior. Other times they're not brilliant, but they want you to think they are.

Question for Suspected Know-It-All: Are you telling me this because you like to share what you've learned or are you trying to prove yourself to me in some way?

- 5. The Think-They-Know-It-All (Cold & Condescending, Desperate Attack, or Desperate Defend):** The Think-They-Know-It-All can fool some people into thinking they know what they're talking about, but there are enough flaws in their sharing they soon get dismissed as being a blowhard. Unfortunately, as much as they want to believe they know everything, they typically know very little.

Question for Suspected Think-They-Know-It-All: Do you like to share these things because it's your way to try connecting with me or is this to prove yourself in some way?

- 6. The Yes Person (Desperate Defend or Hider):** The Yes Person tends to have good intentions and might even really want to do what's been asked, but there is only so much time in the day. These people typically over-commit in an attempt to seem likeable and/or avoid confrontation, but they often let people down or they end up burning themselves out, which can lead to resentment.

Question for Suspected Yes Person: Do you think you have to say yes all the time or are you just a very ambitious person who takes on a ridiculous amount?

7. **The Maybe Person (Desperate Defend or Hider):** The Maybe Person is excellent at procrastinating making a decision in the hopes that a better choice will present itself or that the decision will be made for them. These people can be very frustrating because they won't give a solid answer when asked for an opinion.

Question for Suspected the Maybe Person: When you say you'll let me know if you can make it, is that your way of saying no without saying no or are you actually thinking of coming? Do you avoid making decisions because it's easier to see what happens or are you afraid of making the wrong choice?

8. **The No Person (Desperate Attack, Desperate Defend, Hider, or Cold & Condescending):** Should I describe the No Person? No? Got it.

Question for Suspected No Person: Is saying no an automatic response or are you really quick at thinking things through? Do you always say no to things or am I misreading it?

9. **The Nothing Person (Hider):** The Nothing Person is great at being the life of the party... that's dead. These people can be confusing because you have no idea what they're thinking because they won't tell you or give you any non verbal feedback. This can be a sign the person has Asperger' Syndrome (a term I use because people with it have told me they prefer it) or the person has shut off their emotions for protection.

Question for Suspected Nothing Person: Do you try to keep people at a distance because you're scared or is it something else? Do you think you give good responses or do you see yourself as having limited expression?

10. **The Whiner: (Desperate Defend, Hider, or Cold & Condescending)** Whiners are wieners because nothing is good enough. There's always something to feel sorry for themselves for or to complain about. Offering solutions only makes it worse because wallowing is their goal whether in an attempt to bond with those around them or to gain sympathy power.

Question for Suspected the Whiner: When you share these things are you trying to bond with me through venting or do you see yourself as helpless? When you share these things, does it feel good to complain or is it a sign you feel helpless?

Bonus Lesson

(Ending on a fun note to encourage healthy communicating)

Fun Questions You can Ask Your Friends

When I was a youth pastor I discovered the power of random questions to help build relationships. On camping trips where there'd be a three to five hour drive, I'd purposely put kids who didn't know each other in a car together and after doing questions like the following, by the end of the trip, they'd be friends. This same idea is great for building relationships, in general, because the question stimulates memories and ideas you wouldn't otherwise think about. Hopefully you can use these questions to build stronger connections.

1. What is the most exciting place you've been to? The most peaceful?
2. If you won a free trip anywhere you wanted, where would you go?
3. If you won \$1000 what would you do? 100,000? 1,000,000? 1,000,000,000?
4. Who are the most beautiful man and woman you've met? Seen on a screen?
5. In a perfect world, what would your commute look like? (e.g. length, scenery, mode of transportation)
6. What is the best mode of transportation you've ever tried? What do you imagine is or would be the best form?
7. If you could magically become whatever you wanted (e.g. like in the Matrix where a computer chip is put in your brain and/or you can change parts of your body like a Mr. Potato head), what career choice would you choose and what would you look like?
8. Who is the smartest person you've ever met? The wisest? The funniest?
9. What is the one thing you wish you could ask when you meet someone, but know you shouldn't?
10. What is your worst fashion moment?
11. What is the best restaurant you've been to? The worst restaurant?
12. What is the best meal/food you've ever had? The worst meal/food?
13. What is the weirdest food you've tried? Heard or seen someone else try?
14. What is something you've purchase and after wondered what you were thinking?

15. What is one talent you wish you had developed and could enjoy now (e.g. juggling, yodeling, etc.)?
16. If you had more time, what is an activity you would do on a regular basis?
17. What is the one thing you've done you'd recommend everyone else do? What would you recommend people *not* do?
18. Who is the one person you'd like to meet who is still alive? Not alive?
19. Which TV or movie character do you think best defines what a man should be? What a woman should be?
20. Which TV or movie character do you think best defines what a man shouldn't be? What a woman shouldn't be?
21. What is your weirdest or worst dating experience?
22. Who is the best person you've met? The worst? The weirdest?
23. What is one thing you wouldn't change about your childhood? What's the one thing you would?
24. What is the best compliment someone can give you and who would be the best person to give it?
25. Why is this the greatest book you've ever read? (Is that a fair question?)

Some Personal Questions

1. Why did you pick your job? Was there another one you had hoped to be doing?
2. What does fun look like to you?
3. What things do you like to do on your own? With friends? With your partner?
4. What habits do you have that others find annoying?
5. Would you rather brag about spending money or saving it?
6. What does budgeting look like to you?
7. How do you want to be similar to your mom? Different than her?
8. How do you want to be similar to your dad? Different than him?
9. How do you want your kids to be similar to you? Different than you?
10. What three words would your friends use to describe you? Your family? Those who don't like you? What three words would you give yourself?

Blessing

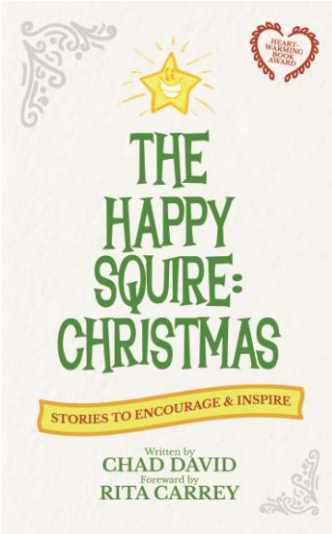
May this book bring you as much joy and hope as a
seven foot chicken to my daughter:



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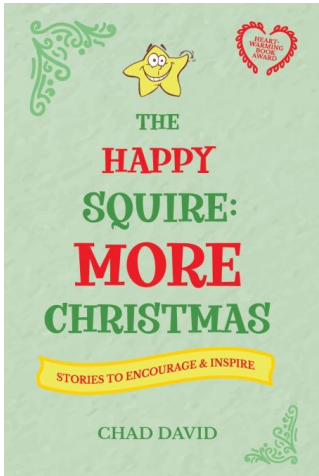
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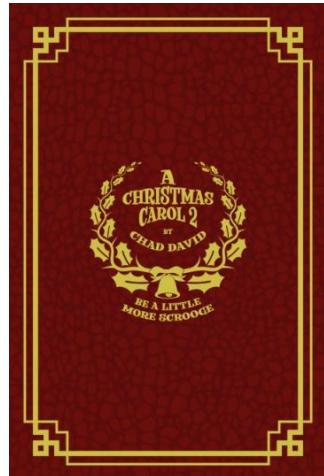
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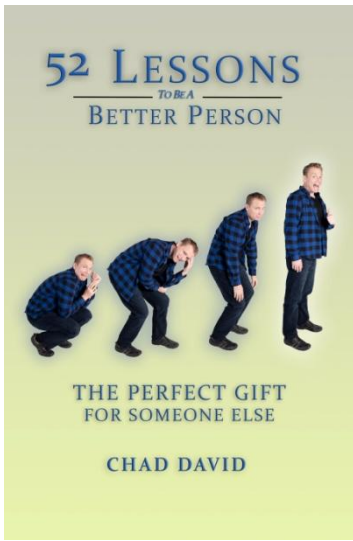
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