

The North Fulton Marriage Newsletter

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Responding to Feeling and Meaning

In last month's newsletter we learned that responding to the content of what someone says is crucial to effective listening. We also learned that within the context of the marriage relationship, our spouse will be more likely to feel that they are being heard if we effectively listen and respond to the content of what they are saying. Responding to content is crucial to effective listening, but responding to feeling is equally important. What is the difference between responding to content and responding to feeling? If your spouse tells you, "I had a long day at work," and you respond, "You had a long day at work," you would be responding to the content. But if your spouse tells you, "I had a long day at work," and you respond, "You are worn out," you would be responding to the feeling. Responding to feeling only is much trickier than responding to content, and it takes a lot more practice because it involves reading and understanding both verbal and non-verbal behavior. During our premarital workshop we have couples practice responding to feeling only. Couples practice listening for the content of their spouses' statements and at the same time try to infer and decipher the feeling behind their statements. Sometimes this is pretty easy; for example, if your spouse says, "I am feeling overwhelmed," then, there you go, the feeling behind the statement is overwhelmed. I often encourage couples to expand their feeling word vocabulary and have specific feeling words at their disposal when listening and responding to their spouse. The more specific the word, the better. For example, the word "frustrated" is a popular feeling word, but it is really not that specific or in some cases intense enough. For example, if your spouse says, "Between work, the children and dealing with finances, I really don't know what I am going to do," and you respond, "You are frustrated," that might not specifically describe their feeling or its intensity. But if you responded, "You feel very overwhelmed right now," they may respond, "Yes, I do!" Your spouse will appreciate you specifically responding to their feeling.

The next step in the process is to respond to the meaning of what someone says. The meaning is simply the content of a statement plus the implied feeling. Using the example above, if you responded, "You feel very overwhelmed right now because of work, the children and our financial situation," you would be responding to the meaning: the content of the statement plus the feeling. If you can respond to the meaning of what your spouse says, you might help them further explore how they are really feeling. Responding to the content, feeling and meaning of your spouse's statements should improve your ability to communicate. Below are a few tips on responding to the feeling and meaning of your spouse's statements:

- Look for verbal and non-verbal cues when trying to decipher the feeling behind a statement.
- Try to be specific with your feeling responses, i.e., overwhelmed instead of frustrated.
- Respond to both the content and feeling of your spouse's statement.

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References

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HRD Press, Inc. Copyright 2000.

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