

The North Fulton Marriage Newsletter

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Responding to Content

Have you ever been talking to someone and they seem to completely miss what you just said? For example, you say to them, “My son is starting college next year and we are really excited!” and they respond with, “When is your son starting college?” Or you say, “I missed two days of work this week because I had the flu and I am now really behind at work” and they respond, “Oh really, why are you so behind at work?” Or you say, “My cell phone died this week” and they say, “Who died this week!?” Very often, people are not truly listening to the words that come out of our mouths. They pick up bits, pieces and fragments of what we say, but it is often just enough to make them look ridiculous when they respond. They may be distracted, thinking about themselves, thinking about what they are going to say next, or they may just not have a good reason to listen. It reminds me of a famous line from the movie *Rush Hour* (1998), when Chris Tucker’s character does not think that Jackie Chan’s character understands English, so he screams “DO-YOU-UNDERSTAND-THE-WORDS-THAT-ARE-COMING-OUT-OF-MY-MOUTH?”

Understanding the content of what someone says is crucial to effective listening. When I was in graduate school at Georgia State University my interpersonal skills professor, Dr. Steve Sampson, would make us practice listening and responding to content ONLY, over and over again. It was a great exercise: listening for the content of what someone says. This is one of the building blocks of effective listening. This past month I led our premarital workshop, which is held four times per year. One of the exercises we have couples do is practice listening and responding to content only. Couples are instructed to not think about how they want to respond and to not think about how they feel about what their spouse is saying. Couples are instructed to concentrate and listen for the content and details of what their spouse is saying and then repeat it back to them. For example, one spouse says, “I am really looking forward to eating pizza tonight” and their spouse responds “What I hear you saying is you are looking forward to eating pizza tonight.” It may seem remedial, but the workshop participants really do find this to be useful as it forces them to suspend judgment and listen. Within the context of the marriage relationship this is doubly important because the more effective we are at listening to our spouse, the more likely they are to feel that they are being heard when we respond. This is a big deal. Listening and responding to the content of what your spouse says can prevent misunderstandings, misinterpretations and ultimately prevent both of you from becoming defensive during your conversations. A really superb way to practice this is to set aside ten minutes, two or three times per week, in which you can concentrate on listening to your spouse. For the first 5 minutes you talk to your spouse and they cannot respond at all, even when you finish. Then switch roles and listen to your spouse for 5 minutes without responding. This will give you and your spouse an opportunity to be heard, and you might find that it is actually kind of refreshing. In summation, listen and respond to the content of what your spouse says, they will appreciate it!

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References

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