

UNSPOKEN CONTRACTS

By Ginger E. Blume, Ph.D.

It's Monday morning. You're running late for your dental appointment. You're furious with your spouse for refusing to take the kids to school this morning, even though he doesn't have to be at work at a particular time. You were certain he'd be in the mood to help you out this morning, since you watched a movie with him last night that you really didn't care to watch. You're equally certain he's being unfair. Or is he?

Granted, he may not be acting in a helpful or considerate manner this morning. But, is he being unfair? Actually, when you rerun the tape inside your head, you'll realize you thought you had an agreement with him from the night before. You had made a mental contract with your spouse---yet, never voiced it aloud to him (i.e. I watch your movie tonight, and you take the kids to school tomorrow.). Couples oftentimes rely on such silent agreements on a daily basis and later wonder why their partner is constantly disappointing them. Silent agreements are often the fuel for couple's arguments.

Why does this happen so frequently for some couples? While the answers may be complex, depending on the particular couple, I'd like to provide some insight into this tangled web. Anytime communication is short-circuited, havoc is bound to occur. Unspoken agreements are merely one form of poor communication. Lets consider why this occurs.

- 1) When there is a power imbalance in a couple's relationship, the low person on the totem pole may engage in these silent negotiations out of fear. They are usually so frightened, they don't recognize that their negotiation is one sided! Plus, the thought of directly voicing their needs and possibly being rejected or causing an argument is frightening. Such fears are oftentimes based in childhood experiences.
- 2) Sometimes, a partner believes that the world operates in a fair and balanced manner. Hence, they trust that if they do something unwanted, their partner will do the same. This is an immature view of how the world operates and some people cling to this belief because they want it to be true. For staunch believers in fairness, reality doesn't seem to erode their ill-founded beliefs. Unless they face reality, they will continue to repeat this nonproductive behavior, rather than directly voice needs, wishes, etc.
- 3) Some individuals believe that true love means their partner will just "know" what is expected/wanted by the other. They believe they shouldn't have to announce their needs. If their partner truly loves them, they'll know what their partner's needs are.

- 4) If one of the partners is uncomfortable with appearing needy or dependent, they'll avoid openly stating what they want. They may feel ashamed about their needs and/or assume that their partner will similarly, put them down. Many such individuals have grown up in a shame oriented, dysfunctional household.

In all of these situations, realistic, direct communication of one's needs/wishes/desires is not taking place. The simple solution, "to give voice to what you want," requires several things to be present in your relationship. First, a willingness to acknowledge to yourself and then, to another person, what you want and expect. Second, a relationship that is safe, both emotionally and physically (i.e. no emotional or physical abuse is occurring). Third, a keen awareness of yourself and a desire to express yourself to others. Fourth, the verbal skills to express yourself in a direct manner.

In our culture, many young girls are raised to be subtle and coy, whereas little boys are given permission to be direct and ask for what they want. Not surprising, as adults, men are often confused by their female partner's insistence that he read her mind to prove he loves her. Women, who grew up in such households, may need to supplement their verbal skills by taking adult education courses or workshops to improve their communication. Courses on assertiveness can be very empowering for both men and women.

Psychoanalyst, Freud, pointed out that a healthy life is filled with a productive work life and a loving relationship. Today, these two arenas are still keys to happiness. Both areas depend on communicating well with others. I encourage you to begin paying attention to your unspoken contracts with others and to practice developing a more direct communication style.

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