

A Marriage Killer: Talking to Others About Your Spouse

by Norman and Ann Bales, All About Families Newsletter, Jan.29, 2009

What do you tell others about your spouse when your partner isn't present? There are four possible answers to that question.

1. "I don't ever mention my spouse when I'm with others."
2. "I usually discuss my spouse's positive traits."
3. "I usually complain about my spouse."
4. "I try to balance the conversation between discussing my partner's faults and merits."

Unfortunately, too many of us choose option 3, and we don't seem to understand that a constant barrage of that kind of talk has the potential to kill our marriages. If a wife keeps finding ways to tell her friends what a rotten husband she's married to, it's not likely that her marriage will get better. If a husband makes crude jokes about his wife's lack of attractiveness when he's out with the boys, he's setting himself up for serious marital difficulties.

It seems to start so innocently. Perhaps a wife decided to tell her beautician that her husband refuses to help with the housework. Then it's quite possible the beautician may say, "You know, my husband's the same way, and besides that he won't pick up his clothes off the floor." They begin mutually reinforcing each other. The rehearsals of their husbands' faults escalate and soon they engage in labeling. They may describe their husbands as "pigs," "buffoons," "lazy scoundrels," "fools," "jerks," and other uncomplimentary names. The phrasing of the put down statements almost seems creative. Many times other women in the salon will get drawn into conversation and the negative talk escalates even more.

Switch the scene to the barbershop. The conversation goes like this. "My wife does a poor job of housekeeping." "My wife is overweight." "My wife complains all the time." If the conversation takes place between the barber, his customer, and a few good old boys waiting to get in the chair, they're soon on a roll, and the language becomes less complimentary. "My wife is a slut." "All she does is nag." She's never satisfied with anything I do." "All she can think about is herself." The statements are frequently followed with remarks like, "You shouldn't have to put up with that."

That kind of negative talk – some call it trash talk – has a way of getting out of hand. We say things we don't really mean. We portray our spouses in the worst possible light. To make matters worse, when others respond in kind, we react to the reinforcement, and tell things we never intended to say in public. Do we really think our conversations will never get back to our spouses? Don't we realize that those words spoken in the beauty shop or the barbershop will not stay there? Soon they will be much more widely known, and it may well produce chaos in the marriage relationship. Why do we act in such a negative way? Is it possible that we are too emotionally involved with our own ego and self-image?

Stop and think about it. Would you say the same things if your spouse were present? How would your partner feel about being the topic of a negative discussion when the boys get together, or when the girls are sharing their thoughts? Such negative talk can communicate this

message to a spouse. "If my partner doesn't appreciate me, I'll find someone who does." One thing is for sure. Prolonged trash talking will kill intimacy, and it may well kill a marriage.

We have been unpacking boxes of books. Ann found a book by Jayne Bremyer titled "Dear God, Am I Important." Though the book was printed in 1974 what she says is still applicable today. In one of her "talks with God" she writes about her negative feelings toward her family. She says you can cope with others actions through God's love. The way to do that is to come-on-soft because that makes other people turn softer, too. God has told us to deal with others the way we want to be treated. That means we must mentally step into our spouses' shoes, think how they feel "in their secret places" and then ask how you would feel if you were the one being trash-talked about by your spouse. It was interesting to note that she only talked about her negative feelings to God and no one else. That is something to think about.

The Bible has a great deal to say about the way we talk. We want to mention some passages that are relevant to trash talking,

James 4: 11 "Don't bad-mouth each other, friends. It's God's Word, his Message, his Royal Rule that takes a beating in that kind of talk. You're supposed to be honoring the Message, not writing graffiti all over it" (The Message).

Ephesians 4:29 "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen."

Matthew 15:11 "What goes into a man's mouth does not make him 'unclean,' but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him 'unclean.' "

Matthew 15:18-20a "But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man 'unclean.' For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man 'unclean'; but eating with unwashed hands does not make him 'unclean.' "

These verses are not directly aimed at marriage communication; they're about the way we talk in all human relationships. But they certainly apply. When we are bashing our spouses in public or even just to one other person, we should stop and remember that all of these statements "come from the heart." We're not so naïve as to think that there are no legitimate issues that arise between husbands and wives. Disagreements are inevitable, but our issues with each other need to be counterbalanced by building each other up. All the words that come from our mouths when we are having a disagreement should "come from the heart" and they don't need to be addressed in a public forum. As a friend of ours would say, "Don't put your business on the street."

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