

# Tough Talk

Sex, payrises, sharing housework - all of us have subjects we find uncomfortable or difficult to talk about. Alexandra Campbell asked Harvard experts what works when we discuss what matters most.

Sarah's husband Derek, a sales manager, has been made redundant. She works part-time, mainly from home, as a bookkeeper. Now he's at home all day, she feel 'supervised'. While she's on the phone he signals, 'Will you be long?' or jokes about the time she spends gossiping rather than working. She feels he's invading 'her' house (she's used to being alone during the day) when he should be trying to find a job.

Everytime she tries to talk to him about it, they argue and Sarah's ready to explode. 'I know he's worried about getting a job, but how can I help him to find one and stop getting at me?'

**Think about your opening approach** — is it clear you want to talk about a shared problem? According to Doug Stone, co-author of *Different Conversations - How To Discuss What Really Matters Most whether you're* dealing with emotions, trying to sort out an argument or handling a dispute at work, don't just launch in with your point of view. 'I'm really fed up with you listening to my phone conversations' or 'I'm being treated unfairly' only trigger defensiveness and counterattacks. That's why Sarah's pleas turned into arguments.

## **Outline the problem as neutrally as possible**

If your trying to sort out a dispute over who inherits your mother's beautiful desk, don't start with, 'Mum told me it would be mine!'. Try, 'There's a dispute over Mum's desk, and she may have told each of us something different. Can we discuss it so that we can be fair to everyone?'

In Sarah's case, Doug suggests she tries saying, 'I know you get upset when I talk about this and I get upset too, so let's see if we can come up with a solution.' Of course, Derek's response maybe, 'You're right, I get upset, so let's not talk about it.' Or, 'The solution is easy - stop hoping the phone.'

## **Stick to your guns by asking questions**

Along with two co-authors at Harvard University, Bruce Patton and Sheila Heen, Doug spent 15 years interviewing thousands of people before writing the book. He says that asking questions is the best way to stand your ground. 'Can you tell me why this conversation upsets you?' or 'I understand you need to use the phone, but I have to talk to clients and arrange school runs, so let's sort out something to suit us both.'

## **Avoid turning feelings into accusations**

The statement 'This wouldn't happen if you got another job!' accuses Derek of being lazy. And, 'Your phone calls are too gossipy,' accuses Sarah of being unprofessional.

Derek once said, 'Now I've see how you work, you could certainly sharpen up your act!' Sarah's defensive response was, 'Well, you're the one who lost his job!' This is just mudslinging. The kind of phrases that help are 'That comment is very hurtful' or 'I'm sure I could improve, but can we deal with the use of the telephone first?'

Always think about what you want to achieve and avoid getting waylaid by insults. Sarah could raise the issue of Derek's job by asking, 'You must be worried about the job situation - is there anything I can do to help? This softly-softly approach is not an invitation to turn yourself into a doormat.'

## **People never change unless they feel understood first**

'If you start out determined to have your own way - to make the other person apologise, to make you boss admit he's wrong, or to force your husband to do his share of housework - you almost certainly won't get it,' says Doug. 'If you introduce it as a joint problem, listen to the other's point of view, ask question and admit your own part, you're much more likely to find a solution that works.'

Most people think that if they admit they're to blame in anyway, they put themselves in a weak position. The researchers believe the opposite is true.

## **Avoid the Blame Frame**

Most people make a big effort to do the right thing - but from their own perspective. Take David, a doctor. His neighbors, Sheila and Jack, parked across his drive and David politely asked them to move the car, explaining he was often on call.

They were apologetic and asked him in for a drink. A good friendship developed, but one day, trying to juggle children, work and a crippled mother, she parked across the drive temporarily. The doorbell rang frantically. 'For God's sake,' roared David. 'Your bloody car is blocking mine again. Move it right now!' Shaking with indignation Sheila moved the car.

David's wife urged him to apologise. 'Sheila's wrong' said David. 'I've often popped over if their children are ill and this is all I ask in return! They don't care about my pressure.' Meanwhile, Sheila told everyone, 'I only parked there for a few minutes when I had to and I was around to move it when he needed. It delayed him by less than 30 seconds.'

## **Admit your contribution**

If Sheila had said, 'I'm sorry I parked across the drive - I hoped it wouldn't inconvenience you,' or David had said, 'I'm sorry I shouted, I'm under great pressure,' they would have broken the ice. Eventually David apologised but Sheila failed to acknowledge her contribution, find out why he'd snapped (a call to a child with suspected meningitis) or apologise. The once friendly relationship deteriorated into polite nods.

## **Stop a conversation from getting stuck on one point**

Take Jenny, who pulled out of a family party at the last minute because her husband's back made traveling difficult. Her brother Simon was surprised because Paul's chronically bad back hadn't deteriorated since she accepted the invitation. 'You don't understand,' she kept saying, 'how bad Paul's back is.'

Eventually she exploded. 'He's in terrible pain and your bullying me into coming to a trivial party. And I've had a sleepless night worrying about letting you down!'

Simon, of course, felt accused of being a monster just because he'd suggested Jenny should take a train. He had merely suggested alternatives to be helpful and Jenny's reference to a sleepless night, which she made no emphasis her concern, sounded like an accusation: 'You're so unreasonable that I lost sleep over this,' she seemed to imply.

'When people keep saying the same thing. It's a sign that they don't feel heard,' explains Doug. If this happens you'll prolong the row by saying to convey your own point of view.

## **Spend five minutes listening to the other person's problem**

Ask questions of listen, even repeating their points back to them in your own words. 'It's not easy, and it does take practice,' acknowledged Doug. The other person, who has literally been shouting inside, will usually calm down enough to listen to you.

Both Jenny and Simon felt that the other had disregarded their feelings. Jenny was angry that Simon didn't understand about Paul's back, and Simon was upset that Jenny so abruptly pulled out of a party he'd hoped she'd enjoy, making it plain she considered the invitation an imposition.

## **Understand that some situations are painful and accept there will be fallout**

It's a great mistake to think you can take away pain. For example, parents often think that they should be as reassuring as possible when telling their children that they're getting divorced - saying that Mummy and Daddy are still great friends and that everything will be all right. In fact, that makes it worse because the children will be hurt and frightened, and they're being told that they're wrong to feel that way.

A better approach would be, 'We're getting divorced, but we both love you very much and we'll help you as much as we can.' Similarly, if you have been unfaithful to your partner don't try to play it down. 'It was nothing,' denies them their right to hurt feelings.

But what if your partner has been unfaithful to you? How do you talk about it without falling into the Blame Frame? How can you see it from his or her perspective when you're hurting so much? 'This can't be sorted out quickly,' says Doug. 'It may be a two-year-long conversation, but the same principles apply. If, eventually, you can talk about what you have both contributed to the situation and what you can both do to prevent it happening again,

you're much more likely to move forward.

All marriage guidance counsellors and agony agree that no marriage can flourish in an atmosphere of blame which implies 'You're the problem, you were unfaithful - you sort it out.'

**Learn that success in dealing with any difficult conversation means the relationship can go forward**

In the long term, victory can only be achieved by one side if there's complete climbdown by the other. And that's often not the outcome you really want. If you want to stay married, don't be satisfied by a short term victory: an admission of guilt and a groveling apology.

Acknowledging your contribution to the problem, how ever minor, justifiable or unavoidable (too busy, too tired or too occupied with the children to pay the relationship attention), could improve your life as well as the marriage. 'These skills can really help,' says Doug, 'but they can't wipe away problems. In my own life, I've become better at talking, but it's a long process and there's no finishing line.'

**Practice these skills on relatively trivial issues and it will be easier to cope when there's a real crisis**

As Jenny sighed to Simon before they finally slammed the phone down on each other, 'If we have a row like this over a party, it doesn't say much for the chances of World Peace.'