

# Fighting for Your Marriage

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## Chapter 4: When What You Heard Isn't What I Said - Understanding Filters in Communication

What we hear can be very different from what the other person is saying. A simple question can stimulate issues.

**Role Play:** Mary and Bob can relate to this common problem. Their jobs leave them exhausted each day. One Thursday night, Bob was home first and reading the paper while waiting for Mary. He was thinking, "I sure am wiped. I bet she is, too. I'd really like to go out to eat and just relax with her tonight." Good idea, right? Here is what happened (their thinking or hearing is in parentheses):

**Bob:** (thinking he'd like to go out to dinner with Mary, as she comes in the door) What should we do for dinner tonight?

**Mary:** (hears "When will dinner be ready?") Why is it always my job to make dinner? I work as hard as you do.

**Bob:** (hears her response as an attack and thinks, "Why is she always so negative?") It is not always your job to make dinner. I made dinner once last week!

**Mary:** (The negative cycle continues, because Mary tends to feel she does everything around the house.) Bringing home hamburgers and fries is not making dinner, Bob.

**Bob:** (With frustration mounting, he gives up.) Just forget it. I didn't want to go out with you anyway.

**Mary:** (Confused, as she can't remember him saying anything about going out.) You never said anything about wanting to go out.

**Bob:** (feeling really angry) Yes I did! I asked you where you wanted to go out to dinner, and you got really nasty.

**Mary:** I got nasty? You never said anything about going out.

**Bob:** Did too!

**Mary:** You're never wrong, are you?

1. Bob had a great idea, a positive idea, yet conflict blew out the evening.
2. Bob was not as clear as he could have been in telling Mary what he was thinking. Thus, many interpretations.
3. She assumed that he was asking - no, telling her to get dinner on the table as she walked in the door.
4. Miscommunication is all too common and frequent. The biggest arguments start with a misunderstanding what the other meant, with the misunderstanding itself being what then drives the angry words. This is called meta-communication.
5. What is it that gets in the way of clear communication? Answer: Filters that change what goes through them.
6. Examples: A furnace filter takes dust and dirt out of the air. A filter on a camera lens alters the properties of the light passing through it. A coffee filter lets the flavor through and leaves the gunk behind. A filter on your e-mail system gets rid of spam before it reaches you (or your kids).
7. As with any other filter, what goes through our "communication filters" is different than what comes out.
8. When what you say (or what you intended to say) is not the same as what your partner heard, there is a filter.
9. Our main point here is a simple one: filters are the leading cause of miscommunication in relationships.
10. By understanding your filters - and counteracting them - you can immediately improve your communication. You will see how filters are also the main source of negative interpretations.

### I. FIVE KEY FILTERS

We all have many kinds of filters packed into our head which affect what we hear and say and our interpretations. They are based on how we are feeling; what we think; what we have experienced in our life, family, and cultural background; etc. Here are five types of filters that can affect our struggles for clear communication:

1. Distractions
2. Emotional states
3. Beliefs and expectations
4. Differences in style
5. Self-protection

## 1. Distractions

1. Attention - a very basic kind of filter. When you say something to your partner, do you have his or her attention?
2. Both external and internal factors in your environment can affect your ability to pay attention. Explain both.
3. People seem to be busier and busier, working more hours and having less, or taking less, time for leisure.
4. There is the stress of striving to have more nice things, entertainment, etc., or in just trying to get by.
5. The stress of underemployment or unemployment affects many couples very deeply.
6. Stress and busyness wear down the part of the brain most involved in focusing.
7. Distraction is a bigger problem than ever before because of the electronic revolution (E-mail, the Internet, texting, cell phones, iPhones, iPods, and video games).
8. Attention Deficit Disorder is a real, neurological problem for many children and adults.
9. When it comes to communicating clearly, the key is to make sure that you have your partner's attention and that you give your attention when it really counts most.
10. Try not to assume that your partner is ready to listen right now just because you are ready to talk about something important. Ask: "Is this a good time to talk?"

## Sidebar - Paying Attention

1. There are a number of brain functions that are all governed by the same part of the brain.
2. Psychologists call these executive functions - your ability to control your focus, behavior, and follow - through.
3. They include such things as focusing, resisting temptation, delaying gratification, and making decisions.
4. A number of researchers have shown that these executive functions are a limited resource.
5. With a hard day with lots of decisions and stress, the part of your brain that governs these tasks will be pooped out.
6. That means it will be extra hard that evening to pay good attention to your partner — or anyone else, for that matter.
7. Does that mean that you should go sit in a cave and ask your partner to wait until your executive functions are refreshed?
8. Probably not the best idea. You cannot always lower the stress of a day, and you often can't shirk your responsibilities.
9. Let your partner know when it's been a tough day. You can also work on being more aware of when you are depleted.
10. Try extra hard at those times to give your partner some focused attention before you crash!

## 2. Emotional States

1. Moods greatly affect communication. We give people more benefit of the doubt when we're in a good mood, vice versa. 2. If you are in a bad mood, you are more likely to perceive what your partner says or does more negatively.
3. Moods are powerful filters.
4. The best defense against allowing these kinds of filters to damage your relationship is to acknowledge the filter exists.

Here is an example. Marta had a stressful day at work. She just got home. It's dinnertime and she's in the kitchen cooking macaroni. Tom just got home, too. He's sitting in his favorite easy chair reading the mail.

*Tom: This bill for the phone company got missed again. We better get this paid.*

*Marta: (snapping with anger) I'm not the one who forgot it. Can't you see I have my hands full? Do something helpful.*

*Tom: I'm sorry. I should have seen you were busy. Rough day?*

*Marta: Yes. I had a very frustrating day. I don't mean to snap at you. I've had it up to here. If I'm touchy, it's not anything you've done.*

*Tom: Maybe we can talk about it some after dinner.*

*Marta: Thanks.*

Without using the word "filter," Tom and Marta acknowledged one was there. Marta had a bad day and was on edge. They could have let this conversation escalate into an argument, but Tom had the good sense to see that he had raised an issue at the wrong time. He decided not to get defensive and chose to become gentle with Marta in her frustration. Marta responded by telling Tom, in essence, that she had a filter going — her bad mood. Knowing this helped him be less defensive in reaction to her mood. Don't use a

filter as a reason to treat your partner badly. The best defense against allowing filters to damage your relationship is to acknowledge the filter when you are aware that it's there. Many kinds of emotional filters can exist in any one person. If you are angry, worried, sad, or upset about anything, it can color your interpretation of what your partner says and your response. Tom's response was helpful because it opened the door for Marta to clarify her emotional filter and allowed them to de-escalate and be clear with one another.

### 3. Beliefs and Expectations

1. Many very important filters arise from how you think and what you expect in your relationship.
2. Many studies in the fields of psychology, medicine, & law demonstrate that people tend to see what they expect to see.
3. You are not immune to the tendency to look for or hear in others what you are expecting.
4. Don't delude yourself: if you think you are immune, you're just holding a false belief looking only at supporting evidence.
5. It takes some humility to accept that you don't always get it right in how you size up others or their motivations.
6. Studies show that expectations not only affect what we perceive but can influence the actual behavior of others.
7. Example - so many old habits and patterns of communication come back with full force during the holidays with family.
8. Everyone's got their expectation filters working, and everyone is reacting to the mix.

This next example shows how difficult it can be to get around filters involving beliefs and expectations (Alex and Helen, a couple who came to one of our couples retreats.) They were having problems deciding what to do for fun when they had free time. But they rarely got their act together to get out and do something, so both were feeling emotionally disconnected and frustrated. This conversation was typical for them. Note how each acted as if they could read the mind of the other:

*Alex: (really wanting to go bowling, but thinking that Helen was not interested in going out and doing anything fun together) We have some free time tonight. I wonder if we should try to do something.*

*Helen: (thinking that she would like to get out but hearing the tentativeness in his voice and thinking he really doesn't want to go out) Oh, I don't know. What do you think?*

*Alex: Well, we could go bowling, but it could be league night, and we might not get in anyway. Maybe we should just stay in and watch TV.*

*Helen: (thinking, "Aha, that's what he really wants to do.") That sounds good to me. Why don't we see what's on cable tonight? Maybe there will be something good.*

*Alex: (He's disappointed, thinking, "I knew it. She really doesn't want to make the effort to get out and do something fun.") Yeah, OK.*

In this conversation, there was no escalation, invalidation, or withdrawal. Nevertheless, the couple did not communicate well due to the filters involved. Alex's belief that Helen doesn't like to go out colored the entire conversation so much that the way he asked her to go out led her to think that he wanted to stay in. He "assumed" that she really didn't want to go. That's called mind reading. As we discussed in Chapter Two, the kind of mind reading that damages marriages most is the kind that includes a negative assumption about what the other is thinking or feeling. In other words, you think you know why your partner said or did something, and you judge him or her based on your guess. Of course, we are all sometimes right when we mind-read like this. But we are very often wrong. This is a specific form of negative interpretation that can be especially difficult to stop unless you try hard to do so. This is a good time to review our recommendations in Chapter Two to counteract filters. Remember to do your part to "check out" your assumptions about your partner. So what happened? Both Alex and Helen wanted to go out. Both assumed the other didn't. They didn't speak clearly about what they wanted, and their filters caused the conversation to unfold in a way that left them both feeling unsatisfied and unhappy. If they had asked each other clearly about what was really going on, and had clearly stated their own desires, they probably would have gone out on a bowling date that night.

### 4. Differences in Style

1. Everyone has a different style of communicating, and different styles can lead to filtering.
2. Perhaps one of you is much more expressive & one of you more reserved. Maybe one talks fast, the other more slowly.
3. You may have some trouble understanding each other because you use such different styles.
4. Styles are determined by many influences, including culture, gender, and upbringing.
5. Sometimes, style differences rooted in family backgrounds can cause great misunderstandings and filters that distort.

Sue and Tod came from very different families. His family has always been very expressive of all manner of emotion. They tend to show great intensity when emotional. It's just their way. Sue's family has always been more reserved. As a result, a slight raising of the voice could mean great anger in her family, whereas it would hardly be noticed in Tod's. In many conversations, therefore, Sue would overestimate the intensity of Tod's feelings, and Tod would underestimate Sue's feelings. For example:

*Tod: What did it cost to get the muffler fixed?*

*Sue: Four hundred and twenty-eight bucks.*

*Tod: (intense, getting red quickly) What? How could they possibly charge that much! That's outrageous.*

*Sue: (lashing out) I wish you could stop yelling at me! I've told you over and over that I cannot listen to you when you are yelling!*

*Tod: I am not yelling at you. I just can't believe it could cost that much.*

*Sue: Why can't we have a quiet conversation like other people? My sister and brother-in-law never yell at each other.*

*Tod: They don't talk about anything, either. Look, four hundred and twenty-eight dollars is too much to pay, that's all I'm reacting to.*

*Sue: Why don't you take the car in next time? I'm tired of being yelled at for things like this.*

*Tod: Honey, look. I'm not upset at you. I'm upset at them. And you know I can get pretty hot, but I'm not trying to say you did anything wrong.*

*Sue: (calming down) Well, it seems that way sometimes.*

*Tod: Well, I'm not upset at you. Let me give that place a call. Where's the number?*

Sue and Tod are caught up in a misunderstanding based on differences in style. You'd think that after so many years of marriage they'd understand each other a little better, but even so, they did a great job of not allowing things to escalate. As in preceding examples in which the conversation got back on track, one partner figured out that there was a filter distorting the intended message and took corrective action. Here, Tod forcefully clarifies that he is not mad at Sue. Our research suggests that differences in styles do not matter as much as how the two of you handle the differences that you have. Being more aware of how your differing styles affect your communication can go a long way toward preventing misunderstandings. Also, work on appreciating and accepting your partner's style of relating. We recommend that you give some thought to these differences between the two of you and talk about their effect on your communication.

## **5. Self – Protection**

1. This last kind of filter comes from the fear of rejection – we all struggle with this in intimate relationships.
2. Fear is the big enemy of secure & warm attachment. Our fear of rejection stops us from saying what we truly want/feel.
3. Even a question as simple as “Wouldn't you like to go see that new movie with me?” can reflect a fear of rejection.
4. Instead of expressing our desire directly (“I'd like to see that new movie; want to go?”), we hide / increases the risk.
5. This may not matter a lot when it comes to movies; matters more when it comes to feelings, desires, and expectations.
6. Think of this filter as causing you not to know each other as well as you otherwise might.
7. With this filter, you may not say what you really feel or need in your relationship, for fear of a negative reaction & hurt.
8. The more self-confidence and self-esteem you develop, the more you limit the negative effects of your own self-protection filter.
9. Also, the more secure each of you feels in your marriage, the safer you will feel.
10. It's all made much easier if each partner fundamentally digs the other — in the jazz, bebop sense. And that means digging the whole person — moods, reactions, and all. We're simply less reactive and frightened by our partner's moods when we see all of these as part of what gives us a kick. Talk clearly and respectfully about what you want and need in your relationship and why this is important to you, thus increasing the potential for enhanced intimacy.

## **II. MEMORY MATCHING**

1. Some of the biggest arguments couples have are about what was actually said in the past.
2. How often have you wished that you had a tape recording of a previous conversation? This happens to all of us.
3. These differences in memory occur in great measure because of the variety of filters that operate in us all.
4. Any of the filters we've discussed can lead to differences & arguments about what was actually said or done.
5. Tell story of what happened in major league baseball - A New York Mets player (tape recording didn't convey true meaning).

Review the conversation between Bob and Mary. Notice that they ended up arguing about what was actually said at the start of the conversation. He truly thinks he asked her out to dinner, but what he said was vague. She truly thinks he told her to get dinner on the table, which also is not what he said. Think for a moment. Unless you just met last week, you probably can think of some whopper arguments that the two of you have had over memory disputes. We do not know any couples who are able to argue about whose memory is more defective and then end up sharing moments of romantic bliss. This train does not go to that station. But there is a nice sheer cliff that it runs along; you can get a great view just before you tumble over the side and crash down the mountain.

**We recommend two things that can save your relationship from such fruitless arguments about the past:**

1. First, don't assume your memory is perfect. Have the humility to accept that it isn't. (There's that H word again.) There are countless studies in the field of psychology that show how fragile human memory is, how susceptible it is to distortion by motivation and beliefs. Yours is not as good as you tend to think it is. Accept that both of you have filters and that there is plenty of room for you to say or hear things differently than what was intended.

2. Second, when you disagree, don't persist in arguments about what was actually said in the past. You will get nowhere. Don't get stuck in the past, even if it was five minutes ago. Shift the topic to what you each think and feel in the present. A lot of times, doing this also takes humility, because the fastest path out of arguments about memory is to say something like this: "I'm not sure what I said exactly, but I want to tell you what I meant to say, OK?" Listen carefully and non-defensively when your partner clarifies something in this way. Something very artful is happening, and you don't want to miss it. Slow down here a bit and think about this. Maybe even meditate on it.

In the argument between Bob and Mary, note how a response of humility on the part of Bob would have defused the entire argument. That would require moving to a gentler stance and putting away any need to win the argument about what words were just said. What if Bob were to say this: "You know, I'm not sure what I said when you came in the door. Maybe I wasn't clear. What I meant to say is that I wanted to take you out to dinner and just relax. I know you've had a hard week, and I have, too. I'm sorry if I was not clear enough." What is behind our great need to defend our memories? Instead of clarifying what we wanted to convey, with humility, most of us are prone to risking days of peace and harmony in our marriages to win this point about mental superiority. Is this a kind of insecurity? Is it because we feel invalidated by what our partner assumed? Life is way too short (and so is your memory) to waste this time and squander close connection in this way.

We now come to one of the points in this book where we'll say something of such profound importance that if you both really get it, and act on it, you can dramatically increase the quality of your relationship: **gentleness and humility are two of the most powerful forces that you have for staying close and keeping love alive.**

**III. LOOK FOR FILTERS AND USE THIS CONCEPT**

We hope you understand how important it is to be aware of filters in your communication with one another. We all have filters. Either we react to them with little awareness, which can cause damage to the relationship, or we learn to look for them when conversations go awry. Get in the habit of "announcing your filter" when you are aware that you have one. For example, suppose you've had a bad day and are mad at your boss. When you come home, share what happened with your partner and then say, "So if I seem short or distant, it's not you, it's because of what happened at work." Or suppose you've had a recent argument with your spouse about an issue, such as sex, and you are having another meeting to talk about it. You might say, "I know I'm sensitive about sex, so I may not be real clear in what I'm trying to tell you right now, but I'm very clear that I want us to understand each other better here." The two most important things about filters are that everyone has them, and they are not intrinsically good or bad. What counts is whether or not you let them distort your communication. We all have differing moods and levels of attention, and differences in beliefs, experiences, and upbringing. These can all result in filters that block clear communication. The goal is to recognize filters before they can do any damage. When you acknowledge and deal with your filters, you can see each other in a clearer light and open up pathways to intimacy - enhancing communication.

## In summary - Talking Points

1. We all have filters, and they are constantly affecting what we say and hear.
2. Humility is the little-used greatest power for good in your relationship.
3. Recognizing and acknowledging your filters will go a long way toward improving your communication and your relationship.

### IV. **EXERCISE:** Thinking About Your Filters - Considering the five types of filters:

1. Distractions; 2. Emotional States; 3. Beliefs and Expectations; 4. Differences in Style and 5. Self-protection

Answer the following questions about each type of filter:

1. Does this filter often keep you from hearing your partner's point of view? How?
2. Think of three things you can do before having a conversation with your spouse to make it more likely that this filter will not be triggered. This might include some relaxation (taking a walk or a bath), some reorganizing of the situation (turning on the answering machine), or some planning (should you talk before or after dinner?; his favorite show is on TV tonight - maybe you should talk tomorrow; and so on).
3. Does it seem to you that both you and your partner may have this filter? How does that make a conversation more difficult?
4. Remember some techniques you've used to keep your conversations pleasant, productive, and respectful. Do any of those techniques apply to this filter? How can you use such techniques to handle this filter? Although we are dealing here with intimate relationships, you could profitably do this exercise in relation to your communication with anyone important in your life — family, colleagues, supervisors.

### V. **CONCLUSION** (recap the highlights of this chapter)