

### 3 Ways to Really Listen to Your Spouse

Roberta, a good friend of ours, offered to help Kari babysit our son on a day our daughter, Hannah was not feeling well.

“Would you mind taking Michael to get his haircut?” Kari asked and then explained exactly how she wanted our little toddler’s hair to be cut. “A little off the sides and top, but save the curls,” smiled Kari, ruffling Michael’s golden locks.

With Shirley Temple curls and pudgy cheeks, Michael at three years old, already had a real knack for charming the opposite sex – mostly those over 65. No grandma could resist patting his head and asking, “Where did you get those beautiful curls?”

Since Roberta was one of Michael’s favorite sitters, this outing was a special treat for him.

Once they arrived at the barber shop, Roberta repeated the instructions on cutting Michael’s hair just as Kari had explained to her. “A little off the sides and top – and please save the curls.” Roberta said confidently.

Michael being a “big boy” now, sat in his chair very quietly as the older man went to work. Roberta, feeling satisfied with her instructions, walked over to the waiting area. After several minutes Michael came running up to Roberta with a big sucker in his mouth.

“I’m all done!” he grinned with a big smile.

Roberta looked up from the magazine she was reading and gasped in horror. What she saw sent shivers up her spine. Michael had been scalped – as if he had just stepped out of a military barber shop.

She stood frozen until the barber tapped her on the shoulder. “I saved the curls for his mommy,” he beamed proudly, handing her a plastic bag full of Michael’s beautiful curls. Instantly, Roberta tried to think of several ways to hide the damage but knew sooner or later Kari would discover the curls were gone.

“How could this have happened? I told the barber exactly what to do” she wondered.

When they arrived home, Michael burst through the door. As he rounded the corner from the entry way, Roberta heard a shrill scream. Kari was standing in the middle of the kitchen in shock. Looking at her son she moaned, “How did this happen?”

Tearfully, Roberta explained the terrible tragedy. Even though Kari was surprised, she told Roberta it was not a big deal. It was just hair ... right?

When I arrived home for lunch several minutes later, I noticed Roberta leaving the house. All she said was, "I'm so sorry." Dashing into the house, I saw my son sitting on Kari's lap. My first thought was, *What's wrong?*

I instantly saw the problem. Our son had been scalped!

In marriage, this kind of scalping happens more often than we would like to admit. We think we have fully communicated what we want to say, believing our spouse understands everything we have just shared. Time after time, however, we are left standing in shock that it did not happen the way we planned.

Howard Markman, Scott Stanley, and Susan Blumberg in their book, *Fighting For Your Marriage*, states that couples who have a constructive method to resolving their conflicts will almost be guaranteed to have a happy, fulfilling marriage. Unfortunately, the majority of couples don't have a communication strategy. Even in the best of marriages conflict can accelerate quickly, but the difference between a good and bad marriage is how they choose to resolve the issues.

Over the next few months in a series of articles, I'm going to share an effective communication strategy called, L.U.V.E. talk. This simple communication method was developed by my father in law, Gary Smalley. I've not only seen this strategy work over many years in my own marriage and family, but also in countless other marriages and families all over the world.

The "L" is for LISTEN. Effective listening is really one of the greatest gifts we can give to someone. Nothing is more irritating when you can tell the person who you are speaking to is not really hearing you. They are looking past you or disengaged in what you are saying even though they are right in front of you. It really makes you feel unimportant. But, when they are looking at you in the eyes and nodding their head with you in your conversation. It makes you feel loved and very valuable to them. James 1:19 encourages us to focus on listening, "Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger."

**True listening requires you to be:**

1. Wholly present
2. Engaged
3. Focused on your spouse

When listening to your spouse with your eyes, heart, and body it communicates that they are extremely important and that you care. To experience the deepest levels of intimacy in your relationship it begins by listening with your entire being.

Here are some simple ways to show your spouse that you are listening (from Dr. Gary Smalley):

- Turn towards him or her and give eye contact

- Offer your undivided attention, putting what you have been doing out of sight and out of mind
- Turn off all distractions or any other activity that might take you out of the moment (cell phone or TV)
- Concentrate on what he or she is saying, paying extra attention to his or her heart – feeling and emotions
- Watch non verbal clues and body language
- Use encouraging and reassuring gestures and body language
- Resist thinking about your reply or rebuttal
- Don't get sidetracked by whether you agree with what he or she is saying
- Let him or her finish talking before you respond

While listening, the natural tendency in a conflict is to respond with a correction or solution. (Trust me, I understand that one.) However, the purpose of listening is being disciplined to truly hear not just their words, but the emotions and feelings that are behind those words. The listener's objective is not to be the judge of right, wrong, or who's fault it is. It's to create a safe place for him or her to share their opinions, thoughts, or feelings without being shamed, criticized, or belittled. If you're able to do that well, your marriage will grow stronger and be healthier just by doing the first step.

After listening, we move to the "U" in L.U.V.E. talk. To move deeper into a more loving relationship we want to seek to UNDERSTAND. Next month's article will focus on how we can seek to understand, so we can move closer to resolving the conflict.