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Lending An Ear to Love

By Mark Wolf, Rocky Mountain News
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Are you listening?

Or are you receiving your partner's sonic input while your brain is engaged about what you're going to say next?

Nina Atwood says you should be "listening empty."

"Listening empty requires a conscious decision to set aside my point of view in order to understand yours," said Atwood, a therapist and author who lives in Dallas. "It's listening without the usual internal building up of my own thoughts. It's a fairly new skill that couples are having to bring to bear on their relationships. Without it, what you get is the usual scenario of two people talking at the same time or in rapid succession; then it becomes an argument or a conflict."

Listening empty is one of the communication skills Atwood details in her new book **Soul Talk: Powerful, Positive Communication for a Loving Partnership** (Sourcebooks, \$14.95).

"My observation through years of working with both couples and singles is that the primary issue they don't work out is due to issues with communication," said Atwood.

Love is active, not passive, Atwood writes.

"It's not just a feeling, although it begins with a feeling," Atwood said. "In order to last it takes action: real sustainable behavior on a day-to-day basis. It's the behavior of love that keeps us connected and also keeps our feelings of love alive and well. Those two go together."

If couples can learn and practice solid communications skills they can manage their relationship, Atwood said.

"The way of managing relationships is to recognize that we can't afford to take it for granted, that it does require an investment on our part. If it's money, should we just spend everything in the account and not worry about putting anything back in? We'd say that was crazy," she said. "We tend to approach relationships in that way, spending everything in our emotional bank account minus the consistent investment strategy."

"We're constantly getting into relationships with the idea of 'What's in it for me?' and don't make the investment in heart and soul communication, meeting each other's

needs, then we're surprised when the account runs dry and we look up and realize we've lost our connection."

Couples need to learn to speak to empower, Atwood said.

"You have to consciously and deliberately think about the impact of your words on your mate. Words have a great deal of emotional power for the people around us and a love relationship magnifies it times 10," she said.

"In order to avoid contaminating relationships with toxicity, you must stop and think about how you can say what's truthful, honest, and open, yet spoken in a way that takes into account the other person's feelings and the impact what we say can have on them. It's doing it with compassion and care."

One of the worst habits couples get into, she said, is getting into an altercation wherein emotions are going up.

"Anger is going up, feelings are hurt, and you're seeing it happening but doing nothing to stop it. It escalates until both people end up deeply wounded," she said. "The correction to that is very simple: You have to make a decision to stop inputting. As soon as you feel negative emotions flooding in, then you have to have a safeguard - an agreement that you're both going to interrupt the process, stop talking, stop interacting.

"Then, do whatever it takes to bring your emotions back down: walk around the block, make some tea, whatever you have to do. Later, go back and resume the conversation. These steps will save you a lot of damage in the relationship. Whenever human beings become flooded with intense emotions, our brain doesn't allow us to process whatever is going on and make wise choices."

Couples need to craft a "No Exit" agreement, Atwood believes.

"The 'no exit' agreement says you agree with one another that you give up the right to make an abrupt exit without telling the other, except in case of abuse," she said. "As soon as you begin to have thoughts of discontent, you begin with 'You're my partner and my mate and I'm committed to discussing this with you.'

"You do everything in your power to diligently search for resolution to the problems you're having with your mate and you do that with your mate, not with your friends, hairdresser or bartender.

"If you can't work it out, it's because you both can't work it out; the decision to separate or divorce should be mutual. What that does is set it up so that you earn your way out of the marriage, not just bailing out because you've stored up enough negative evidence against your mate."

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