

5 Keys to a Safe Relationship

For a couple to have a healthy and thriving marriage, there must be *safety*. Obviously, there must be *physical* safety. That goes without saying. But, what we have come to notice, there must equally be *emotional* and *relational* safety between spouses.

How would we define *safety*? *Safety* is the ability to openly and freely express one's opinions, feelings, and needs without fear of rejection, rebuttal, or retribution.

As we've worked with couples over the past three decades, we've observed there are at least 5 key components that contribute to relational safety between a husband and wife.

Here's the **5 Keys to a Safe Relationship**:

In safe relationships, spouses are:

1. Approachable

Would your spouse say that you are *approachable*? Do you feel your spouse is *approachable*? To be *approachable* means that you and your spouse...

➤ *Communicate openness with your body language*

You do this by keeping your head up and making eye contact with one another. This communicates to your partner that what they have to say is important to you.

Also, make sure your arms are not crossed. Though often not intended, crossed arms can inadvertently communicate that you are closed off to what you are hearing. Your spouse may feel as though they are on trial and/or have to prove themselves to you. You don't want them to feel as though they are on the defense.

➤ *Lower your defenses*

Are you open to hearing what your partner thinks and feels, even if you may not agree with them? Are you willing to be challenged on your own ideas, opinions and suppositions?

Defensiveness is often rooted in a spirit of offense. We get offended that our partner disagrees with us. It can offend us that they don't see it our way. If you think about it, defensiveness is rooted in pride. Pride says, "*I know better. My way is right and your way is wrong.*" More often than not, pride is rooted in sin and a general distrust of God. We may not trust that God is Who He says He is and that He can do what He says He can do. Thus, we take matters into our own hands and then feel we must defend ourselves. (See how defensiveness entered the world through Adam and Eve in **Genesis 3:1-13**).

When it comes to love and marriage, we must all remember that God is our ultimate defender. We don't have to defend ourselves. He alone knows what's best for us and can provide what's best for us. We simply have to trust Him to do so. That's easier said than done, we know.

Remember the words of Moses to the Hebrews as they stood paralyzed in fear, uncertainty, and distrust on the banks of the Red Sea - "*The Lord will fight for you while you keep silent (Exodus 14:14, NASB).*" As we trust the Lord to help guide our communication with our spouse, we can lower our defenses and entrust the outcome to Him. See **Proverbs 3:5,6**.

➤ *Don't make assumptions*

We all know what happens when we assume! And that's not a good thing for you or for me. If assumptions are going to be made, it's best if at all possible to assume the *best* about your partner and not the *worst*.

Solomon states in **Proverbs 11:27, NIV**, "*He who seeks good finds goodwill, but evil comes to him who searches for it.*"

When it comes to love and marriage, you will always find what you are looking for. If you're assuming the best about your partner, you will more than likely find goodwill and even good intentions coming from them. On the other hand, if you're looking for selfish ambition or evil intent in your partner, you'll most likely be able to find that as well.

Remember, you're going to find what you're looking for. Why not look for the best? Why not assume the best? Doing so tends to lead to *safe* conversations between spouses.

➤ *Listen to understand*

If you really want your partner to believe you're *approachable*, listen to them.

James 1:19 NIV, says that, "*Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry...*"

Notice James didn't say to be "*quick to speak, slow to listen and quick to become angry.*" That's rather easy for many of us to do. After all, for the vast majority of us, it comes rather naturally. It's part of our sinful nature. Yet, if we want to be *approachable*, we need to be quick to listen to understand. And that can only happen consistently with the empowering of the Holy Spirit through the fruit of self-control (**Galatians 5:22-23**).

The Apostle Peter encourages husbands to "*live with your wives in an understanding way...*" (**1 Peter 3:7**). Biblically speaking, knowledge leads to understanding and understanding leads to wisdom. You can't get understanding without knowledge. And you can't get wisdom without understanding. A wise man will spend intentional time getting to know his wife. The better he knows her, the more he will understand how best to interact with her. A key component to wisely interacting with your wife, men, is listening to understand them.

2. Attentive

Scripture teaches that we are to, “*Know well the condition of (our) flocks, and pay attention to (our) herds* (**Proverbs 27:23, NASB**).” In the context of marriage, we are to be *attentive* to one another.

We all are *attentive* to someone or something, be it our *kids*, our *cash*, our *careers* or our *calendars*. Those are all well and good and obviously need our attentiveness. But, even more so there’s a need to be *attentive* to our spouse.

How do we do that?

➤ *Remove distractions*

What distracts you from being *attentive* to your spouse? Your phone? The tv? Your kids? Your to-do list?

When your spouse needs your undivided attention, do whatever it takes to remove the thing(s) that distract you. Silence your phone or turn it face down. Press pause on the tv remote. Ask your kids to give you and your spouse a moment alone (if possible). Prayerfully ask God to settle and still your mind from all that’s on your agenda so you can focus on your mate.

Taking these necessary steps says to your spouse, “*You matter to me. Giving you my undivided attention is as important to me as it is to you.*” By doing this, you’re well on your way to creating a *safe relationship*.

3. Affirming

We all need affirmation. Scripture is replete with the admonition to *build one another up* and to *encourage one another* (**Romans 14:19, 1 Thessalonians 5:11, Hebrews 3:13, and Hebrew 10:24,25**).

It’s been said that “*Affirmation is the lubricant of relationships, it reduces friction and increases wear.*” As we affirm one another in our conversations, the possibility of tension and friction greatly decreases.

Here’s some simple steps you can take to better *affirm* your spouse:

➤ *Use appropriate body language again*

We can say so much with our bodies without saying a word. A simple nod of the head or pleasant facial expressions say, “*I hear you, I’m listening to you.*” When we do this our spouse is *affirmed* in their value and worth. They sense they are important to us. A spouse that feels valued and of worth to their partner is highly likely to feel *safe* as well.

➤ *Give feedback to what you've heard*

Paraphrase what you've heard your partner say. Don't merely parrot back what they said, rephrase it as you heard it. Doing this says to your partner, "*I was listening to understand you. I was not thinking about what I was going to say back.*"

We find many couples break down at this point. It's rather common that a spouse is more concerned about being understood by their partner than they are understanding their partner. If this is the case, it's likely one or both partners will feel unheard and as a result will then feel devalued, disrespected, unloved and uncared for. That's a recipe for an *unsafe relationship*.

Rather than putting so much emphasis on being understood by your spouse, why not put more emphasis on seeking to understand them? Simply ask your partner, "*Help me understand why you see it that way?*" As they give you their response, give them feedback from what you've heard.

➤ *Give clarifying statements to the listening spouse*

As you and your partner practice listening to understand one another, you'll now be in a position to receive feedback from each other. As your spouse gives you feedback from what they've heard you say, listen to their feedback. Then, if necessary, clarify for them anything that was misunderstood or misinterpreted.

As they give you feedback, be cautious of getting defensive if what they heard was not what you said or meant for them to hear. Listen patiently to their feedback and then lovingly clarify anything that may have been misconstrued. Remember, "*A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger* (**Proverbs 15:1, NASB**).

4. Accepting

Can we tell you something you may or may not have realized by now?

You and your spouse are different!

You may be saying to yourself right now, "*No duh, Sherlock!*" But, you'd be surprised to find out just how many couples seem to be shocked by this reality. Afterall, in the courtship phase of the relationship, they seemed "*so alike!*"

Marriage tends to reveal what courtship tends to conceal. It's been said, "*Love is blind, but marriage is an eye opener!*" And you know what? We believe that's by design. If you and I knew *then* what we know *now* about our spouse and marriage, most all of us would have run for the hills.

Scripture teaches that we are to, "*Accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God* (**Romans 15:7, NASB**).

You do realize how you were accepted by Christ, right? Paul states, “*in that **while we were yet sinners**, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8)*”. How does this translate into marriage? We’re to extend the same acceptance to our spouse that Christ extended to us.

At this point, many often confuse *acceptance* with *approval*. The two are not the same. Rick Warren states it well, “*You can accept people without approving of everything they do. There is a big difference! We are to accept everybody; we are not to approve of everything everybody does. Love is not saying ‘I approve of everything you do.’ Love is saying, ‘I accept you in spite of what you do.’*”

With that understanding then, we accept one another’s differences. You and your spouse are different for a variety of reasons. The obvious is that one of you is male, the other is female. But beyond that, our personalities are different, our **Love Languages** are often different, our families of origin are different, we often come from different socio-economic backgrounds, you may have different ethnic or cultural backgrounds, the list could go on. Let’s just leave it at this fact: *You and your spouse are different!*

So, what do we do with this fact? We *accept* it. The worst thing you can do is *reject* the fact that you and your spouse are different and try to make your partner into a mini version of you. Ruth Graham famously said, “*‘If two people agree on everything, one of them is unnecessary.’ The sooner we accept that as a fact of life, the better we will be able to adjust to each other and enjoy togetherness.*”

Accept the fact that you and your spouse are different. Allow God to use that reality to form you both more into the image of Christ through patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control. All of which are fruit of the Spirit that are made manifest by abiding in Christ.

Spend some time with your spouse acknowledging and discussing your differences. If those differences are not due to something being illegal, immoral, unethical, unbiblical or a violation of your conscience, then can you not in Christ *accept* them? Why not embrace you and your spouse’s differences as *beneficial* for your relationship and not a *barrier* to your relationship? The sooner you do, the more *safe* your relationship will become.

5. Actionable

The most frustrated spouses we tend to deal with are those who’s spouse knows what their partner wants and needs but either from apathy, laziness, or busyness have yet to do anything about it.

James (the half brother of Jesus) puts it this way, “*Therefore, to the one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin (James 4:17, NASB)*”. We can sugar coat it all we want, but if we know what our spouse wants and needs from us, and if those desires are legitimate, but for one reason or another, we have yet to attempt to meet those needs, it is sinful of us. There’s really no other way to slice it.

Safe relationships are actionable relationships. They communicate openly with one another. They listen to understand each other. They discuss and accept one another's differences. They then form a plan to act on what they've heard from each other. This plan can be *measured*, it's *realistic*, and it's *specific*.

Safe relationships are not *perfect*. They gauge health, well-being, relational and spiritual maturity through the lens of *progress* and not *perfection*. They give grace to one another and even themselves.

Do you want a *safe relationship*? If so, we encourage you, in Christ, to become more *approachable*, *attentive*, *affirming*, *accepting*, and *actionable*. If these 5 key components are in place and are growing and developing, you and your spouse will be well on your way to *safety*.