

Episode 43

Communication Breakdowns After Baby: Why Couples Stop Talking & How to Fix It | Ep. 43

Do you feel like the person that you used to talk to about everything has suddenly become a person that you barely talk to at all?

After a baby, it is so easy for conversations to switch to survival mode. Did you grab the diapers? What time is the pediatrician's appointment? Instead of moments of connection. And when this happens, it's not just the silence that grows louder, but it's also the distance that keeps on growing between the two of you. If you found yourself wondering, when did we stop talking or maybe even worrying, is this how it's going to be from now on then let me tell you that this is something that a lot of couples go through.

Parenthood changes everything. It changes our priorities, our routines and yes, our relationship to ourselves, to our partners and to everyone around us, really. But the good news is that if this change has brought on distress, it doesn't have to stay that way.

Markella: Hi there! If this is your first time here, welcome to The Parenthood and Relationship Podcast.

I'm your host, Markella Kaplani, a Psychologist, a Parenthood and Relationship Coach, and a parent myself.

Together we explore the transformative journey of Parenthood and its profound impact on our relationship with ourselves, our partners, and our children, so that we can be present and show up as we envision without having to do more.

Let's get into today's episode!

In today's episode, we're going to unpack why communication breaks down after a baby. We'll talk about the most common signs that something deeper may be going on because that is something that a lot of couples worry about.

What I hear a lot is:

"What if we never loved each other in the first place?"

"What if I married him or I married her because I was insecure and I didn't think that I could make it with anybody else? That this was the best shot I had."

"Were we maybe not compatible and I just realized it now?"

So we're going to look into the root causes of this distance growing, because it's rarely just because of the sleepless nights. And most importantly, I'll share tested and transformative ways to rebuild that connection.

The way we communicate as a couple sets the tone for the entire family system. And so it becomes crucial to make sure that we look into ways to spark that love again.

And before we dive in, just a small reminder for you to sign up to my newsletter.

It is packed with tips and tools, and it's there to compliment the episodes that we have here on the podcast, giving you some exclusive strategies that you could use in order to implement what it is that we talk about here.

The link is in the show notes, so don't miss out.

Let's get into it.

Reasons for Communication Breakdown

Let's start with the foundation. Why do communication breakdowns happen after a baby arrives? Why is it that so many couples, even after the babies have grown into toddlers, still find themselves not being able to connect the way that they used to?

The short answer is parenthood changes everything, and with that, our relationship to our partners too.

But The long answer is a mix of subtle shifts - -some you notice, some you don't- that slowly create more distance than you might realize.

Before having kids, your relationship mainly revolved around each other.

You had time to share your thoughts, laugh at inside jokes, and connect without interruptions.

There was space for curiosity about how the other person is feeling or what they're going through.

When a baby comes along, when children come along, the focus almost entirely shifts to them. And understandably so, especially in the newborn phases.

Conversations become less about each other and our feelings and our thoughts and more about what needs to get done. This is all very necessary. But, at the same time, it starts to feel like your relationship is running on autopilot rather than with intention. And of course, while it's not the main reason, sleep deprivation is no joke. It's like living in a fog. And so even the tiniest of conversations, after a long day of doing all the things, can feel like an effort.

And so it might be that one of you does try to have a deeper conversation, one of you does try to reconnect the way that you used to, but the other one is too exhausted to engage.

It's not about not caring, it's about sheer survival mode. However, it's very easy for the partner that did try to engage to feel like they are no longer as loved, as cared for, and to then retract and not attempt again.

Here's the thing, communication struggles after children are entirely common. But they're not inevitable.

So while there is that one reality where all the couples around us seem to be doing just fine and we don't know what's behind closed doors, but seeing them this way, we assume that we might be the only ones experiencing this problem, there's the other camp where we start to see couples having issues. We have friends who have shared with us the struggles that they're going through. We find commonalities. We feel validated in what it is we're going through and then it's almost as if we start to feel like, okay, this happens to everyone and it's just how it's going to be.

So I want to make sure that we find the middle ground. Yes, it's very common that we will have some issues in our communication after having children. However, that doesn't mean that just because it's common, it is something that we cannot avoid or we cannot salvage if we've gotten there ourselves.

It's like I said before, if you guys have stopped talking, if you feel that there's a distance between the two of you, don't go back over-analyzing whether you made the wrong choice in the first place, whether you no longer love him or you never loved her in the first place. These are things that are going to make things worse.

Our brain does this thing where it is trying to understand what's happening. And so it goes into this mode where it attributes meaning to the things that we feel. And so now I may feel very uncomfortable in our relationship the way that it is. I may feel distance from you.

But then my brain starts to think, where did this form? Is it just the kids? I don't want to blame the kids. And so what it does is it goes back and it starts to overanalyze. Did I not see the signs before? Were the signs there? Did I not care? Why did I not care? Maybe I was too insecure to look elsewhere or maybe we never really connected in the first place and we just had some nice past time together that we can't have now that we have the kids and so we connect on no level. And do I want these values to be passed down to my children now that I'm figuring out how different we are? And it just starts to spiral. And it begins to feel like there is nothing that you can do other than separate.

But I'm here to tell you that there were things that connected you to one another that are valid and are true, even if your worst case scenario is also true. Both can coexist.

And it's also very important to note this, that communication struggles often look very different to one partner versus the other. A lot of times I get couples coming in where usually the wife is going to feel like, "My God, we can't communicate at all. And we seem to be so different." And where the husband -usually, not always,- but the husband will say, "I thought we were fine. I think we're okay. I think this is something we can get past."

And so you might have this one person that completely shuts down and avoids conversation because they don't feel like they've got anything good to say. And because in a way they are preserving the relationship or so they think, right? They are thinking that if we don't have conversations where I hear something that will disappoint me, then we can, at the very least, put a pause on these problems that we're facing so that when we have a little bit more time for one another, we can maybe pick it up from a different place, from a different state of mind.

The other person, on the other hand, may be going the completely opposite route. They may be pushing for conversations, for discussion, for forms of connection that don't necessarily feel natural but feel needed. But this too can cause a boomerang effect because usually you've got these two people that are paired together.

And so the one person that is trying to subconsciously preserve their relationship by avoiding the conversation in the first place, and avoiding their own disappointment with their partner piling up, you've got that other partner that feels like, "My God, how are we ever going to resolve this if we don't actually start talking?" And they push for discussions that none of them are ready to have that are not happening at the right time or the right place or with the right tone, - because yes, there is a right and a wrong way to say things and there is a right and a wrong time to say things- and so this escalates the problem.

These patterns feed into each other, creating a cycle where both partners feel unheard or misunderstood. And then it begins to feel like you're speaking different languages. One partner is saying, "I just need space," and the other one is saying, "Why won't you let me

in?" that is where a lot of couples get stuck. Trying to meet each other from completely different places.

Think of your relationship like a radio station. Before kids, you were tuned at the same frequency. Clear, strong, and in sync. but after the baby, all the static- you know what I mean, the crying, the to do lists, the sheer exhaustion- makes it so much harder for you to hear each other. It's not that the station is not there anymore. It's just harder to tune back in. The good news is that you still have the capacity to change the dial. It's not broken. The static is eventually going to clear out by making a few shifts. But as you can understand by what I just said, this needs intentional effort to cut through the noise and to reconnect.

And so, just a quick reality check here. I know that some of you may be thinking, "Isn't this just how it's supposed to be?" What I was saying. "I've heard this before. A lot of couples go through this. Isn't it just normal that communication will take a hit?" yes, it is normal. But you don't have to settle for silence and for distance. The changes you're experiencing are opportunities for you to grow and develop together, not something that you have to endure.

Signs of Communication Breakdown

So now let's move into looking at what exactly does communication breakdown look like? Sometimes it's not as obvious as silence or very big arguments; it's the little things that point to something bigger. In fact, more often than not, there are subtle patterns that build up over time, chipping away at the connection that we once used to have.

The first sign is where we have functional conversations only; the logistics. We discuss who's picking up what for the baby, who's doing dinner, when the bills are due, but there's no room for emotional connection and for curiosity for one another. It becomes more like running a business together instead of building a life together. Necessary, yes, but fulfilling, not so much.

The second sign is when one of you starts to avoid certain topics altogether or avoid each other. So avoidance might look like withdrawing from certain conversations or topics that

feel difficult, or brushing off opportunities to communicate and connect because it just feels easier and maybe even safer to stay in our own bubble.

The next sign is passive aggression or resentment. So while one of the signs is silence and withdrawal and disconnect, communication issues don't always show up like that. They also can show up as tension. Maybe it's in the form of sarcastic comments or snapping at each other over small things. Resentment builds quietly, but it often leaks in these ways if it's not addressed.

And while there are many other signs, I'm sticking to the common ones, so let me give you just one final sign: feeling unheard and misunderstood. You might feel like every time you're trying to communicate, it is either misinterpreted, or misunderstood, or even dismissed. Maybe you're opening up by saying how tired you are, and then your partner responds, "Well, I'm tired too," instead of validating what you're saying and being curious to learn more; not necessarily support you, not necessarily offer a helping hand, maybe they are drowning just as much. But at the very least, what we're looking for when we try to make these little pockets of connection is to feel heard and to feel like our feelings are being taken into account. That's all.

I'm thinking of this couple that I worked with. Let's call them David and Lisa. After their baby was born, Lisa felt like she was carrying all the mental load of parenting herself.

Every time she brought it up to David, he felt like he was being blamed, from his point of view and so he would answer, "I am doing my best."

Meanwhile, David felt like Lisa's comments were an attack on his effort and his willingness to support her and their baby. So he started avoiding conversations altogether. He knew that if he allowed for the conversation to happen, he would begin to feel resentment because he would feel like his contributions are not being seen.

Do you see how it's a protective mechanism in a way, at least?

It wasn't that they didn't care about each other. It was just that their communication styles had completely diverged and the way that they were expressing their needs was starting to feel like an attack on one another.

Lisa was looking to be acknowledged and to feel like she's in a partnership where she can release; not necessarily have David hold more, but at the very least release. For David, what he wanted was to not feel like he's failing all the time.

Once they recognize these patterns and how they triggered one another, they began addressing what was really going on under the surface, what their real needs were, and then they were able to communicate them in a way that didn't trigger or hurt the other person. And you can see that then, of course, this creates a much bigger willingness for the partner to listen to what it is that I want to share.

Communication breakdowns don't happen overnight. It's not like one day you suddenly stop talking. It's not like one day you wake up and you start to feel like there are narcs all over the place that you cannot step on and so you decide to stay put and not speak.

The missed opportunities to check in. The assumptions that go unspoken. The small irritations that snowball over time. That is what leads to communication breakdown.

So I invite you to look at this without blame for yourself or for your partner and to start to recognize, is anything like this going on for us too?

If we catch the leaky faucet early enough, we can prevent the house from flooding. Sure, it's inconvenient that I have to deal with it now. Sure, it's not such a big problem in the now, as it leaks just a little bit. It hardly even shows up on the bill. But eventually, the pipe could erupt.

And so eventually I might have a much bigger problem in my hands. So, it's better to look at it now, with bravery and courage. Because when I look at it at the time that it's escalated, it feels like there's no going back. It feels like it's too much to handle.

And this is why we have that grave statistic where it has been reported that couples go to couples therapy 6 to 7 years late. And that's because we allow the leaky faucet to keep on dripping. And only after the pipe has erupted do we think, "Hey, I can't fix this on my own. I need to call in a professional."

But the professional, despite their experience, is going to need time to clear this out. And we don't know by the time that all the water has cleared out, what other damage it has caused in its path; what other things will now have to be fixed. You get the idea.

Causes of Communication Breakdowns

Markella: Okay, so now let's briefly talk about the causes of communication breakdown. Because it's rarely just about the sleepless nights or the endless diaper changes. It's about what's beneath the surface.

The main cause and the one that we recognize the least because we don't talk about it and the one that I like to talk about in this channel is the emotional shifts, matrescence and patrescence. It's the identity change. The transition that we experience into motherhood and fatherhood does not speak about just physical experiences. We experience deeply emotional, mental, and psychological changes as well.

We might feel like we've lost our identity, feeling like we have to be everything for everyone, being sucked into what society expects of mothers and women, but also of fathers and men and how they're supposed to show up in the family, and so you guys may also feel just as burdened.

These shifts that we experience on a personal level make it so much harder for us to communicate as a couple because of the internal upheaval that we're experiencing and because as I change and as you change, our dynamic is also shifting, it needs rearranging. And we don't take the time, we don't have the time to upkeep and to review. We can make the time, but we don't.

Because this isn't at the top of the priority list, but before we even get there, we don't recognize it as a problem. In fact, we think that if our relationship is strong enough, if we

were ever truly deeply in love, if we really still care about each other, if the love is there, then that should be enough. And honestly, does this work in any other relationship? Do we think this way about our friendships? Even with your closest friend, that one friend that you may have lost touch for a year, but then you sit down for a coffee and it feels like you guys connected again as though it was yesterday that you had just talked. But still, you know that if you don't want to lose this friend, you have to do some kind of work. You have to do some kind of effort. And it's normal there. It's even normal when we think about it with our own parents. You move out of the house, you have your own family, but you still think, well, every once in a while, we should be having Sunday lunch or dinner together. I should be calling, checking in. I need to respond. I need to have those touches of communication.

And so I wonder a lot of times why we don't think about it that way with our partners. There's a lot of ego and a lot of pride that comes into this. With our partners, we are reenacting a lot of our own traumas. So the expectation of unconditional love, no matter what, that trauma that we may have experienced if we didn't feel like we got unconditional love from our parents, we reenact it with our relationship. And we expect that the partner that we chose is supposed to act in the ways that we have wanted all our lives for our parents to have acted. We don't expect love to be unconditional with our parents or with our friends or with our colleagues or with our bosses, but we do expect that it should be unconditional with our partner.

And what we confuse is unconditional love with lack of intention. I can love you unconditionally, but I will still need you to intentionally want to connect with me. I can love you and have good intentions for you but at some point, if we lack in communication and in connection, I may no longer find any interest in being around you. That doesn't take away the love. I can still love you. And that is why sometimes I may come off as a cynic to some people but I say, love is not enough. Love is not enough. Our generation has been fed this lie that love is enough. Love is enough to be a good parent.

If you absolutely adore your children and you love them unconditionally, love is enough, and that this will be your guide in raising them and in helping them navigate life and build their moral compass and learn social cues. Love isn't enough. If we don't set some boundaries in place so that they can feel safe, love is not enough. Love becomes

permissive parenting. In that same way, love is not enough with our partner. Love is not going to carry all the weight of everything that happens if we don't make sure that we keep on strengthening that hammock that is holding our love.

So to wrap up this first cause after my little rant, basically what I'm trying to say is that as you are changing and your partner is changing, you need to make sure that you are tending to the relationship as well, acknowledging that it is changing as well and remaining curious about one another and your changes. Because if we don't recognize the change in ourselves and we don't recognize that our partner is changing, we expect them to be a particular way. That adds pressure to our partner and it adds pressure to us to "get back to normal" quote unquote. So all of this creates a strain on the relationship and what you need to do instead is to acknowledge this change, to acknowledge that it's not a bad change.

To know that going back to normal isn't a thing. You are going to be renewed through this. This is an opportunity to grow even more and to avoid reverting to, "I'm fine," just because you are still processing. Yes, you are processing and it's valid that you don't exactly know how to answer certain questions, but if not with your partner, then with who are you going to experience this profound change. To whom are you going to express all of what it is that is happening within.

And so if you're listening to the solo, I highly recommend that you share this with your partner as well. So that it becomes a thing where you guys know that it's okay, that you're changing, that you don't have to hide it from one another so that that obstacle gets out of the way, I don't have to explain that I'm changing and justify why this is okay and how this is normal and explain matrescence , or patrescence to you, you know, now that this is something that happens.

We take the mystery out of it. We take the potential shame out of it. And now we are just able to sit down together and have it as a given that I know you must have changed somehow, and I've changed. So let's talk about it. How are you now? Who are you now?

Cause number two, and I've alluded to that a little bit, are inner wounds that haven't been dealt with.

Parenthood has a way of bringing up old wounds, wounds that you may have even been to therapy to resolve and you may really feel like you got past, but are triggered in very different ways now that you're a parent.

If you grew up, for example, in a household where emotions weren't validated, you might find it very hard to express your needs or listen to your partner's needs, openly, now as you navigate this new era of your life.

Similarly, if you had a parent who was very distant and who wasn't very emotionally involved with you, when your partner retracts as they are processing, you may interpret their retraction as a disconnection from you and then you may be responding from that place; from a place of being hurt, of taking it personally. And so the way that you're going to express the need to reconnect is going to be much more clumsy, potentially leading to more distance, leading to more miscommunication, misinterpretation, that then goes back and confirms your hypothesis that your partner is going distant because they have a problem with you.

So this is basically where the mother wound or the father wound or both come into play.

So, when my partner, for example, may be too tired to connect, I may start to feel rejected. But even though on the surface it feels like, this is the reason why I feel rejected, most probably my fear of abandonment or rejection is being triggered. And so instead of calmly addressing this need that I have to connect with you and being able to accept that, yes, I want to connect with you too, but this is not the time. And then me being able to call me, say, "okay, let's make the time. How can I support you so that you are a little less tired because I also need this," I may just come out and attack you and say, "You no longer show interest in connecting with me. You no longer care about me. You're all about work, or you're all about the kids, or you're all about the logistics, and you don't make time for me. And when I come out and say it this way, well, my partner is obviously going to become defensive.

A lot of times the comeback will be something along the lines of, "Well, hey, I mean, obviously I am doing all these things because you're sitting here asking for connection, but

who will handle all this mental load? Who will handle all the workload? Who is supposed to care about these things while you are asking to be

treated like a baby yourself? Are you jealous of the kids?" It becomes a whole big thing and I wanted to play out these two scenarios so that you can see that coming from a place of my own internal wound is going to then trigger my partner and is not going to lead to the intended result. Not only am I not going to get more time, not only am I not going to get connection, now there's even more distance between us because we both feel hurt by one another. Whereas in the example where I don't have an active wound affecting, influencing the way that I think about your actions, not triggering something that makes me then take your actions personally, I can just come out and very calmly express my need.

And say, "I want to make more time for us, and I really need this. How can we make it work?" That's it.

And this is why a lot of couples experience this paradox. They seem to be having very small disagreements about things that don't really seem like they should be causing such big issues. But these small disagreements spiral into big arguments that leave them feeling as though they're with the wrong person altogether.

So, if this is happening for you guys then this is a sign that most probably one of you or both of you have some unresolved inner wounds that need to be addressed.

A third cause are the silent assumptions, yet another thing that I see very, very often in the couples that I work with. There's unspoken expectations, and we've talked a lot about that, but I also want to go into something that I don't think I have mentioned before, which is that a lot of times we think we understand something and we make an interpretation in our head and even though we aren't sure if that is really the case, we avoid asking, just directly asking our partner if this is what was wrong.

So as an example, I'm actually thinking of a couple that I saw last week. They were having that session where I see them separately. And if you don't know, I have the signature program, The Couples Intensive, where I have couples see me together the one week in a

double session, so that we have enough time to address issues, but then I also have them see me separately the week after.

And then that keeps on going on in this zigzag motion of together and separately, together and separately. And the reason that I do this is because when I get to see them separately, we uncover those inner wounds that are personal to them from their own generational trauma or their childhood trauma or just not even trauma, even experiences.

So I was seeing them separately and they both brought forward the same issue. They were both very hurt and upset about an issue that had happened in the days prior.

And what I got to see and what I got to tell both of them was, you expressed this to your partner in the way that you're telling this to me now? Because what happens a lot of times is we go to our friends or to our parents, our siblings, whoever, our therapist, and we talk about what happened and we can say it from a place of security. But when we go to our partner, we are either aggressive or passive aggressive, or we filter out what we say, or we decide not to say anything whatsoever.

So in this particular case, there was an interpretation made, "Oh, I was yelled at by my partner for doing X. And I think that it was crazy that. They yelled at me because I don't think X is wrong. Is it, Markella?" And so I always make sure to tell everyone that I'm not a judge, and I'm not gonna sit there and defend something.

And even if I did, that would be my own personal opinion about something and, hey, this may be something that happened in my household, and I may be completely biased. You don't want my opinion necessarily. But in that specific scenario, I was able to objectively say, if I take a step back as a third person, the way that you are describing the situation, I can tell you that no, there was nothing wrong about X, but I'm willing to bet that your partner didn't yell because of X specifically; not about the content. What they got aggravated about was potentially the tone, or the way that it was said, or the timing, or the setting, or... so many other things that come into play, that because I've seen you guys enough, I can read between the lines, and I can make a small prediction that there was something else there.

And so what I invited this particular client to do in that moment is to consider, did I ask my partner what it was that bothered them? Since I am so confused, did I make sure to then at a later time when we're both calmer, to revisit the issue? And ask, "Hey, you know what, I am not sure why this argument happened and I'm not sure what I did wrong. And you know, I want to ensure that I don't create any other such argument, at least on my end. So I want to understand where I was wrong and I apologize, but I don't know what it was. Break it down for me, please."

But it may have been convenient to think of the partner as crazy. It may have been very convenient to focus on what most people would objectively say was okay. There was no reason to be agitated. It wasn't the content of what this person said that was the issue. And they knew it very well. And so presented from that viewpoint and leaving out certain details, they can maintain their sense of, "I am being wronged when my partner decides to be aggressive with me about things that most people would say, I'm in the right."

And so what I had the particular person do was go to their partner and ask, simply ask, "What was it about what I said that was wrong? And of course, they got the answer that I was expecting, which was that there was a tone that was demeaning about what was said. It wasn't what was said, what was said was actually correct. Their partner confirmed that they were right in what they were saying, but the delivery was off. The delivery was passive aggressive. The delivery was carrying, in the partner's opinion, wounds that were being passed on.

And so it's really, really important that we don't let things be assumptions and that we question why am I willing to talk about this to my therapist, to my friend, to whoever, but I haven't actually sat down with my partner and revisited the issue to ask what, went on there.

And so this does take a little bit of work of taking responsibility for our own part and of cutting down a little bit of our pride and of our ego.

And this is why the couples intensive really works. And it goes faster than other formats that I practice. Because we get to take what it is that's causing the agitation in the couple and break it down with each person showing them their own responsibility and allowing

them to be vulnerable alone. Because a lot of times, you know, you get into couples therapy and you want to resolve certain things, but then it takes time before I feel vulnerable enough to be able to open up my own things from my own past and deal with them in front of you. We don't necessarily want our partner to witness our wound as it's being opened. Sometimes, we need to open it, process it, and then relay it to our partner. Not hide it, not resolve it and pretend it was never there. The point is to be able to do our own work and get to a point of comfort where I can be vulnerable with you. But I don't necessarily want you to see the open wound and to see me break down in that moment.

And so if we put the external stressors of deprivation of sleep and all the running around and the exhaustion and the mental load aside, which definitely do add into the communication struggles those are the three main causes for communication breakdown.

Solutions: How to Start Talking Again

Markella: And let's get to the solution. How do we start talking again? Well, you don't need to overhaul your entire relationship overnight. That's for sure. Rebuilding connection starts with small steps, intentional steps that create room for understanding, empathy and reconnection.

Here is how to begin.

Number one, and I think you know what I'm going to say here, is inner work first. One of the most important places to start as you try to rebuild connection in your relationship is yourself.

When communication feels strained, it's easy to focus on what your partner isn't doing, but true connection begins with self awareness.

Start by identifying which parts of you show up during conflict. For example, if you're feeling very defensive during conflict, it may be that a protector part is stepping in, in order to ensure that you're not going to get hurt again.

This protector part will put a shield on, and that may make you look very defensive. It may make you look very cold and cynical, which then may be affecting, obviously, the way that you will resolve or not resolve the issue at hand. It will also affect how your partner thinks that you feel about them, which then of course will make you feel twice as hurt because you'll feel misunderstood. You aren't distant or cold or cynical, but that protector part that came forward made it look like you are. And so as long as you're unaware of this process, as long as parts of you feel like they have to step in because otherwise, you don't have a handle on the situation and you're going to be hurt and mistreated then you're going to keep on going through the same patterns again and again.

You're going to want to show up differently next time, but it will be very hard to override that protector part that needs to come forward. That has been conditioned to come forward. And that is why we need our own personal inner work first.

And so a practical way of thinking about this as I try to do my inner work is if I find myself saying, why don't you listen to me very often, instead I can turn this around and ask myself, what part of me feels unheard when this happens? What part of me felt unheard in that conversation, in that fight that we had two nights ago? This shift can change the tone of the entire conversation next time around.

Another thing that you can do is to revisit your inner child. Parenthood has a way of just shining a spotlight on our own childhood experiences.

Take time to reflect on how your own upbringing has affected the way that you communicate in the now. Did you learn to suppress your emotions in order to keep the peace?

As a rule of thumb, when you notice a strong emotional reaction in a conversation or argument that you're having with your partner, it's good to ask, "What is the deeper issue here? What am I taking personally? What is my own thing that is being triggered right now?"

For example, if there are certain things that don't bother you too much, but then you find yourself getting extremely explosive when your partner doesn't respond to you right away. This might be tied to a childhood experience where you felt dismissed.

A third option would be doing some shadow work. And so this ties in very well to what I was just saying about those parts of us that are being triggered and what they might mean about our own past. Shadow work is about exploring those parts of us that we may not want to admit exist, like resentment or fear of vulnerability.

The same applies to your relationship. Creating a space where we can name these shadows can bring them into the light, where then they lose their power over us.

You can try having a conversation with your partner, where both of you sit down and discuss what it is that you're struggling the most with right now in your relationship. But, we want to do this from a place of understanding, that's the intention, not blame.

So for example, when it's my turn to speak, I could start by saying, I've noticed I've been feeling quite distant from you lately. And I think it's because I fear that I'm going to be rejected if I open up. Can we talk about that?"

An obvious thing that you can do moving forward is to create intentional time for connection. It doesn't help to be talking about communication struggles and disconnect and then saying, "Oops, but we have no time" or, "It's not in my priorities" or even worse, "I don't see the point. Judging from where we are right now, I am not willing to make the time."

Here's the thing, it doesn't have to be elaborate. Even a 10 minute weekly, not even daily, just weekly check in can make all the difference when there was zero time. But an actual intentional 10 minute check in, not talking about the kids, not talking about the house, not talking about the business. 10 minutes of checking in with one another. This is a check in where we talk about our feelings and our emotions. I would even go so far as avoid discussing needs in this check in because then, again, it can very easily spiral into talking about logistics or blaming our partner for the fact that this need hasn't been met yet. And, "Oh my god, it's so obvious. If you really cared enough, you would have done it." We don't

want to step into that territory. Because that will reinforce the message that every time that we try to connect here, this is what happens. We argue. So we're doomed. We don't want any of that. You guys are not doomed.

Instead, let me introduce you to just a couple of prompts that you can find in the transcript. I always have the full transcript linked in my show notes description, in my YouTube description, wherever it is that you listen to this or watch this, so make sure that you go in and you find whatever it is that you need.

So the prompts are,

1. What's been on your mind lately that I might not be aware of?

Or you could ask,

2. What is one way that I can support you this week?

Now, I know that this goes into talking about needs, but it's different if I ask, and if I extend my hand, and you don't have to come to me to talk to me about your needs and what has been unmet, automatically it dials down the defensiveness because I asked you, so I showed you I care. And a lot of times when we are describing what it is that we need, the reason why it comes off as so aggressive or defensive is because we feel that the other person hasn't cared enough so far, and we are afraid that yet again I'm going to have to express this need, be vulnerable, potentially feel weak if that's the way that I have been raised, and then I don't know that you're going to necessarily meet it.

So, I come with attitude which stems from my fear and my disappointment from previous times. When you will ask me, "Markella, what is it that I can do to support you this week?" then a lot of that is taken away. I don't feel so defensive because you are intentionally asking me and I have at the very least bigger hopes that you are going to go through with it because you weren't forced to listen to my needs. You yourself showed the intention to take care of me.

If you can, and if you feel comfortable during this conversation, it would be a good idea to use non verbal connection as well to enhance the conversation. So that is like holding hands during the conversation to promote the sense of connection.

As you do start to have these deeper conversations with intention, make sure that you speak to be understood.

So far, I have not come across one couple where at least one partner does not express feeling unheard. But a lot of times, the reason why we feel unheard also has to do with the way that we approach the conversation, the way that we speak our minds. Preconceived notions and fears and our own other deeper wounds may be affecting the way that we express something and therefore affect the way that it is received by the listener, our partner in this case.

The number one thing you want to do in this case is to avoid blaming statements. So I can complain all day long that my partner doesn't listen to me and doesn't take what I say into account. But if I start the conversation with, "You don't help with the baby," I am already putting him in defense mode. He is going to feel blamed. He's going to feel hurt. He is going to feel unacknowledged for what it is that he believes he's been doing versus what I believe he hasn't been doing. And so now he has shut down. And I blame him for not listening and I blame him for not taking what I said seriously or into account so that he can change. But I have also contributed to the fact that this conversation went south, to the fact that I wasn't heard.

Now is this an excuse for a partner who doesn't help with the children? No.

But again. I can't control my partner, I can control me. And if I, as the variable in this equation, am also creating more confusion or more obstacles and barriers to the communication, then that is a part that I can fix and then I can see, "Yes, I'm with the wrong partner because I, have taken care of my own wounds, because I can approach this conversation very calmly and without blame and without feeling attacked myself and I'm still not getting what I need. We're still getting nowhere." Then, yes, let's discuss the fact that you guys may be incompatible. Let's open up a conversation about the fact that your

partner may truly not be as supportive as you need them to be, and where do we go from there?

But, in my experience, there are a lot of steps before we get there. We get to this objective truth where I have resolved all of my issues and I know for a fact that I'm coming into the conversation blank slate, which doesn't exist, but a healthier, more functional slate. And then I can objectively complain that even so, my partner still is not able to meet my needs. In most cases, I haven't done enough inner work in order to be able to say that. I'm going to go as far as to say in all cases.

And the second way that I can make sure to foster a conversation where my partner is going to hear me out is to encourage reflective listening.

So you can encourage your partner to reflect back what it is that they hear from you. This resolves the assumption problem that we were talking about before.

So if you say, "I feel like we're not connecting lately," your partner may respond by saying, it sounds like you're feeling quite distant. Is that right? And then both of you can feel heard and understood. In the example that I was saying before with that couple, where the one partner felt that they were right and so why did the other person blow up and explode? Well, if there was reflective listening happening, then partner A could have said, "I understand that you don't necessarily like what it is that I said.

And the person who got aggravated could then pick up that fact and say, "No, what you said is right. I just don't appreciate the tone," for instance, and it could have been resolved right there on the spot because then they went on days, where partner A had a lot of assumptions leading for them to think that their partner is crazy.

As Brene Brown says, "Connection is why we're here. It's what gives purpose and meaning to our lives."

Rebuilding communication is about creating space to remember why you guys connected in the first place.

As we wrap up, if one of you or both of you feel called to take that next step, sign up to my newsletter and learn more about my reconnect with your partner challenge. It may just be what you guys need.

As a journaling exercise, because I always leave you with something so that you can take that first step, I invite you to set aside 10 minutes this week to reflect on these prompts.

Number one.

What's one thing I miss about the way we used to communicate?

Number two.

What's one way I can show up differently in conversations with my partner?

And number three.

What's one thing I wish my partner knew about how I've been feeling?

Make sure that you don't go into blame mode. The intention of this exercise is to put down in writing what it is that you feel and to clarify what may have been lost in translation, what may have been lost in assumption and misinterpretation and fear of how our partner will react and so we don't talk about it.

Thank you for spending time with me on the Parenthood and Relationship Podcast. Share this episode on your social media or with your friends. You don't know who may benefit from listening to this, who may feel validated and who may need to try to understand the root causes and the signs and the solutions so that they can strengthen their marriage, their relationship and create a stronger family dynamic in the process.

Every small step that we take in order to connect or reconnect is not just for us or just for our partner, but for the family that we've built together. Take care of yourself, take care of each other, and I will see you next Sunday. Bye-bye.

