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Defrain, John, "NF01-485 Creating a Strong Family: Listening and Speaking from the Heart" (2001). *Historical Materials from University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension.* Paper 336.
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NF01-485

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Published by Cooperative Extension, Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources,
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Creating a Strong Family
Listening and Speaking from the Heart

By John DeFrain, Extension Specialist, Family and Community Development

"Allen's been retired six months, and he's miserable. He was used to managing several hundred people in his business, and now he sits at home and frets and grumbles all day. He says he doesn't have any purpose in life. He drinks too much. I worry he might harm himself."

For 45 minutes the woman discussed her husband's distress and her own feelings of inadequacy as she struggled in vain to find ways to help him. I listened closely and suggested she contact a good counselor in her hometown - one familiar with alcohol use - to work with both of them. The conversation wouldn't have been particularly remarkable, except that she and I had just met for the first time on a brief airplane flight. I sat down next to her, said "How's life?" and she told me. In great detail.

Despite being total strangers, she probably confided in me because she was in a most difficult time in life and she found comfort confiding in another human being who expressed interest. Also, it was clear throughout the conversation that she hadn't talked with anyone else about her husband's situation. She carried the burden alone.

Good listeners often find themselves in conversations like this. "Bus stop intimacy," I call it - the desperate human need to connect with others, but done with strangers who will soon be gone. Why? For a number of reasons.

Self-disclosure is a fragile art and needs constant nurture to survive. As young children we learn quickly in the rough-and-tumble world that revealing one's genuine feelings about life can be dangerous. There are those who are quite willing to attack you, mistaking the human need for self-expression and connection as weakness. So, we learn to hide our feelings. We become chameleons, projecting a blank and conventional image of ourselves to the world. But the loneliness and feelings of disconnection drag on us.

In a marriage we often get so caught up in survival issues - jobs, children, in-laws, broken-down cars and so forth - that time to sustain our relationship is put on the back burner. We simply don't invest enough time in intimate communication with each other.

Also, power comes into play in many marriages. The woman I was talking with on the plane seemed to approach life with her husband like an employee rather than a spouse. He was used to being the boss at work, and he brought this attitude home to his family. Rather than enjoying his time with loved ones, he simply "managed" them. She had to walk softly and waste a huge amount of emotional energy puzzling over how to approach him on countless delicate issues. She often was caught between the adult children and her husband as the children struggled to control their own lives and the husband tried to assert his authority over them.

The problem with applying a business management model in families is that few employees love their boss, and few bosses love their employees. As employees, we may respect our boss (which often simply translates to fear of the boss), but we aren't likely to genuinely love or even like the boss. Love and friendship occur between equals. Love and friendship occur among family members when they invest time talking with each other and when they make each other feel safe and valued as they express feelings.

If I were asked to state the two most important principles for nurturing positive communication in a family, I would say:

"Listen with your heart and speak from the heart."

Positive communication in families is open, honest, straightforward. And kind. Family members listen respectfully to each other. The goal as a listener is not to gather information on others so that one can pounce upon them and win an argument and assert control. The goal is to better understand how the speaker sees the world and find ways to help the individual live a more fulfilling life. All this builds a warm, emotional bond between people.

File NF485 under: Family Life
F-35, Relationships
Issued June 2001

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Elbert C. Dickey, Interim Dean and Director of Cooperative Extension, University of Nebraska, Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources.

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