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The 4 Habits of *Joy-Filled* Marriages

How 15 Minutes a Day Will Help You Stay in Love

• *Brain Science Hacks that Boost Your* •

Emotional, Spiritual, and Physical Connection

CHAPTER 5

Habit #2: Listen for Emotion

I HAVE LED DOZENS of marriage retreats and always ask the couples, “What are the top three problems in marriage?” The number one answer at almost every retreat is “communication.” Most of us had it drilled into our thinking that communication is the key to a good marriage, and there is a lot of truth to this. We are going to address the issue of communication in this chapter. However, we are going to start with why communication isn’t always the first step in dealing with our problems.

**PRINCIPLE 1: COMMUNICATION IS USELESS
(AND SOMETIMES DANGEROUS) IF YOUR
RELATIONAL CIRCUITS AREN’T ON.**

Marriage specialist Gary Smalley developed one of the most watched self-help videos in history called *Keys to*

Loving Relationships.¹ In one of his sessions, he describes what it is like to try to communicate with someone who is shut down or, using the brain science imagery from chapter 2, someone whose switch is off. He uses a fist to illustrate the problem. Imagine your partner's shut-down relational circuits as a fist. Because your partner's switch is off, he or she has gone into full self-protection mode and has stopped talking. Now imagine your other hand flapping like it is talking to your fist. (Go ahead, try it.) Trying to talk to someone whose switch is off is like trying to talk to a fist. The words just bounce off. There is not really any communication taking place.

The idea of your open hand trying to talk to your fist is a good picture of one person trying to talk to another person who is emotionally shut down. That person isn't really listening, because their switch is off. When this happens, your words just bounce off the hardened emotional shell created by their shut-down relational circuits.

One of the reasons people shut down and quit talking is to protect others from what they feel like saying. If you poke at them until they talk, you may not like what comes out. Another reason people shut down is to protect themselves. They are afraid that anything they say "can and will be used against them." Shutting down always happens because the switch in our brain has flipped off.

Brenda and I know all too well what this is like. Early in our marriage, I noticed that when I got triggered, the

relational circuitry in my brain shut down. I didn't yell at Brenda. I just stopped talking altogether. She didn't know what to do with me when that happened. At that point, the only tool in her marriage kit was communication. So she would do her best to get me to talk. The problem was when I was triggered and my relational brain shut down, talking was not a very good idea.

Years later—it felt like a lifetime—we started learning some of the brain science behind good communication. Brenda tried something different one day. We had been arguing, and I had shut down. I simply wasn't talking at all. Brenda was sitting on the bed and I was sitting on a couch. Normally, she would have tried to get me to talk, but this time she looked at me and realized that my brain's relational circuits were totally shut down and that talking wouldn't do any good if they didn't come back on.

Instead of pushing the conversation, she said, "Do you mind if I come sit next to you?" That caught me totally off guard. My defenses were up and ready to repel a barrage of words. I had no defense in place for someone who wanted to be with me when I wasn't at my best. Once she sat next to me, she asked, "Is it okay if I hold your hand?" I looked at her like she was from another planet. "You aren't very good at this fighting thing, are you?" I asked. But I let her hold my hand, and I could feel something change inside. It was like a lock sprang open and my relational circuits came back online. Suddenly, being in relationship with

Brenda felt more important than winning the argument.

Brenda was modeling for me what it looked like to keep the relationship bigger than the problem. Since then, we have tried to make that our “go-to phrase” when we get upset. It is not uncommon for one of us to say, “Let’s keep the relationship bigger than the problem.” This is the clue that we need to get our relational circuits on before we continue our conversation.

Sometimes we fail to communicate because we are trying to communicate with someone who is totally shut down.

Brenda jumpstarted my relational engine before trying to communicate. This is exactly what Gary Smalley had recommended in his talk. He had said that before you try to talk to someone who is shut down, you need to help them open up. The fist needs to relax so the hand can open and receive what is being said. To illustrate

this point, he took the hand that was doing the talking and had it begin to stroke the fist in a comforting way that allowed it to relax. Once that happened, communication came easily.

Sometimes we don’t fail to communicate because we aren’t trying. It is because we are trying to communicate with someone who is totally shut down.

**PRINCIPLE #2: LISTEN FOR EMOTIONS
BEFORE TRYING TO SOLVE PROBLEMS**

Your brain processes data from right to left. This means the relational right side of your brain gets data before it goes to the problem-solving left side of your brain. In the same way, communication needs to start on the right side of your brain by listening for emotions *before* sending the information to the left side and trying to solve the problems you hear. This process is called validation. It is the most important tool I know for keeping relationships bigger than problems. You validate someone's emotions by accurately identifying what they are feeling and offer some explanation that shows you understand why the person is feeling that way.

Validating doesn't mean agreeing with what someone is feeling. You don't have to agree that they should be feeling a certain way. You simply need to acknowledge that they are, in fact, feeling that way. For example, if my son comes into the room afraid of a storm, I don't have to say, "You are right to be afraid of the storm," in order to validate his emotion. I can say, "The loud thunder and strong wind can be kind of scary, can't they?" My goal is to get my son to nod his head in agreement. Once I get agreement that I have understood his emotion, I can move to problem-solving by asking, "Would you like to stay in here with mom and dad?"

The brain science behind validation is pretty straight-

forward. The problem-solving part of your brain tends to listen for problems. The relational part of your brain listens for emotions. If your relational circuits are off, you will find it almost impossible to listen for emotions. All you will want to do is listen for problems that you can fix.

I had a couple come to see me for premarital counseling, and I tried an exercise to help them understand the importance of listening for emotions. First, I asked them if there was a problem in their life they had trouble agreeing on how to fix. They looked at each other immediately, as if to say, “We know what that is.” The man was convinced it was better to build a house before getting married. His fiancée wasn’t quite so sure. I said, “Why don’t you guys discuss this problem while you have a third party present, and it will give me a chance to see how you go about problem-solving.” Well, it wasn’t pretty. Before this conversation, they looked like the typical young couple in love, excited about the upcoming wedding. Within a few minutes, they had pulled away from each other and the conversation was becoming rather tense. I decided I had had enough fun at their expense and it was time to intervene.

“Let’s try this again,” I suggested. “Only this time, I don’t want you to listen for the problem. I only want you to listen for the *emotion* the other person is expressing. Name that emotion accurately and give a sense of how big it is for them.” I then had the young man listen as his fiancée shared why she didn’t think it was a good idea

to build the house before the wedding. Anyone watching this conversation would have easily caught that the emotion she was feeling was anxiety. She was afraid that the house would become his focus and that the wedding would be an afterthought. Confident that this was a fairly straightforward answer, I asked the young man, “What emotion did you hear?” He said, “Anger.” That caught me off guard. “Really?” I asked, then said, “You are either very intuitive or a really bad listener.” He said, “I think I am really intuitive.” “Okay,” I responded, “tell me where you heard anger.” Without hesitating, he said, “She’s angry because she knows she is losing this argument.”

I suggested we try the exercise again, and this time, rather than being intuitive, he try to repeat back to her the emotion *she* thought she was feeling. This time, he hit a home run. He said, “She’s afraid that if we build the house before the wedding that I will get so caught up in the details of the project, I won’t be emotionally available to her on one of the biggest days of her life.” She started to cry. He got it. She felt understood, and feeling understood made her feel safe. She suddenly blurted out, “Go ahead and build the house!” That caught me off guard, too. It also showed me that she trusted him. However, I made them slow down and said it was her turn to practice listening for emotions. I wanted him to share with her why it was so important to him that the house get built first. His initial response was that there was nothing emotional about the

decision, it was just logical. I nodded. “We’ll see.”

The young lady had to ask a few probing questions, but eventually he realized how much he wanted his dad to be proud of him. “If I had a house built for my family before I got married, my dad would be so proud of me.” Saying this out loud touched something deep inside and soon both of them were in tears. The simple exercise of listening for emotions rather than problems had brought them back together at a deeper level than before and helped them resolve their problem without sacrificing the relationship.

Counterfeit Validation

There is a counterfeit form of validation that doesn’t work at all. Instead of validating the other person’s emotions accurately, we simply say, “I understand.” This is counterfeit validation. When you say, “I understand,” instead of taking the time to actually name your partner’s emotion correctly, what the other person hears is, “Shut up! I’m tired of listening.” Adding the words “Sweetie” or “Honey” or “Dear” doesn’t help. It just makes the statement feel even more condescending. However, you can say, “I understand this is making you feel scared or angry” because you are naming the emotion accurately. But left to themselves, the words “I understand” tend to shut down conversation rather than validate emotion.

SAD-SAD: Six Core Negative Emotions

To help you listen for emotion, we want to introduce you to six core negative emotions. These six are often combined to form other negative emotions (such as dread, which is most commonly a combination of fear and despair), but if you understand these six and learn to listen for them, your ability to validate emotions accurately should skyrocket.

We call these negative emotions the “SAD-SAD” emotions because SAD-SAD helps you remember what they are. Since the brain runs best on joy, these emotions all represent some way in which joy is stopped, stalled, or robbed. Each of these emotions also affects your body in some specific ways, which is helpful when you are trying to recognize your own emotions or those of someone else.

SADNESS. “I have lost something that brought me joy.” Sadness is a low-energy emotion. It feels like someone stepped on the brakes, and your body has lost some of its drive. Sadness can show itself as a pouty lip, tears in the eyes, or sagging posture. Whenever there are changes in relationships and routines, a sense of loss can create sadness. Perhaps your spouse is unavailable when you want to connect, or you schedule a date night and have to cancel it. Noticing the physical cues can help you recognize that your partner is sad. Validating the emotions can help your spouse feel like you are sharing the burden rather than leaving him/her alone in disappointment and loss.

ANXIETY. “I fear not being able to find joy as I look

at the future.” Whereas sadness is a low-energy emotion, anxiety is high energy. It triggers our fight, flight, or freeze response, which shoots adrenaline all through our body.

Fear and anxiety go hand in hand. Fear is the emotional response to what threatens me while anxiety is rooted in imagination. We can all imagine scenarios we know would be overwhelming to us; therefore, everyone feels anxiety at times. Staying connected with people and knowing that I am not alone helps disarm anxiety. Validating your partner’s anxious emotions can help them feel connected and secure.

DESPAIR. “I feel like joy is impossible.” Despair is another low-energy emotion. It can suck the life out of your body so that you have no energy and don’t feel like doing anything. It can make your arms and hands hang limp. When you look at the future and see no hope of joy, you will feel despair. Despair means you do not have the time or the resources to fix a problem that is stealing your joy. Despair is hopelessness and is found at the root of most depression. It is the feeling that there is no solution for your problems. Despair can be hard to validate for some people because they want to give the other person some hope and help fix things rather than simply being present and happy to be with them even in their despair. We need to validate first and make sure the other person knows we see what they are going through before we jump to comforting them.

SHAME. “I feel like hiding because I can tell I don’t bring you joy.” Shame is also a low-energy emotion. You feel like hanging your head because you don’t expect someone to be happy to see you. You want to justify yourself so you don’t feel like it is your fault that another person doesn’t want to be with you. Healthy shame is recognizing changes that need to be made to your attitudes and behaviors. However, toxic shame is believing that you are simply a bad person and that your very presence is a cause for shame. Validating the emotion of shame in others can help people understand that you are happy to be with them even when they don’t expect it.

ANGER. “I want something to stop right now because it is robbing me of joy and causing me pain.” Anger is a high-energy emotion. It also triggers adrenaline as your body gears itself up for a fight or to make a situation stop. Anger tends to be motivated by the desire to stop pain or establish justice. When you want to cause someone else pain, it is often because you feel wronged and want them to feel the pain you feel. It can be hard to validate anger when it is directed at you, but it can also help to defuse situations that have escalated to say something like, “You are angry at me because you feel betrayed, like I am putting my own needs ahead of yours.” Validating anger may lead you to own the truth of what is going on, but, at the very least, it will show that you understand their feelings.

DISGUST. “I feel like recoiling from a person or situation.” Disgust is a low-energy emotion often connected with the desire to vomit. It relates to your body’s protective instinct to get rid of poison you may eat accidentally. Disgust makes you want to get as far away from something (or someone) as you can. One of the experiences that helped me understand disgust was learning to change diapers. It takes a certain amount of maturity to be able to feel disgust at the odor and texture of what you are dealing with and still be happy to be with your baby and do the needed task. Validating disgust is important because it lets people know that someone is willing to share their displeasure and stay relationally connected.

Your Brain and Listening for Emotions

Becoming an expert at listening for emotions is the first step toward becoming an expert at keeping relationships bigger than problems. When you listen for emotions, you force your relational right brain to stay engaged. This keeps your relational circuits on. When you don’t listen for emotions, but focus on problems instead, it tends to shut down your relational right brain and keep you stuck in your problem-solving left brain.

I can tell when I shift into the problem-solving part of my brain because I either interrupt or I stop listening once I hear the problem. If I don’t catch myself, I will respond condescendingly to my wife’s problem, only to find out that I stopped listening too soon and addressed

the wrong problem. If I don't apologize for my lack of relational connection and start listening for her emotions, the situation tends to escalate. This is because I am fully in nonrelational, problem-solving mode where winning is more important than relating.

*Winning
rarely strengthens
the relationship.*

Of course, the problem with winning these conversations is that winning rarely strengthens the relationship. The more often you find a way to win even when you are wrong, the more twisted your character becomes. To put this in perspective, in extreme cases we call people who have lost their conscience and only care about winning sociopaths. They don't care who they hurt as long as they win. I trust most of us aren't sociopaths, but that doesn't mean that we can't—from time to time—adopt sociopathic behavior that stops caring about how the relationship is affected and just wants to be right.

SHRINKING THE GAP

As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, brain science teaches us that right brain activity needs to come before left-brain activity. This means that validation (a right-brain activity) must come before comforting (the left-brain action of making a problem smaller and thus more manageable). The order is crucial. Right-brain activity has to precede left-brain activity or the whole

process will create even more problems. In our book *Rare Leadership*, Jim Wilder and I present a simple acronym for remembering the order this process needs to take: VCR. Validate, Comfort, Repattern.

VALIDATION. The right brain *validates* by accurately naming the emotion the other person is feeling and accurately identifying how big it is for them. In order to do this, we need to become skilled at listening for emotions, which is what this chapter is all about.

COMFORT. After your right brain validates, your left brain *comforts* by problem-solving with the person. The goal is to offer strategies and perspectives that make the person's problems smaller and thus more manageable. Comfort includes finding something to appreciate and feel thankful for—even in the midst of the emotion.

REPATTERNING. As we experience the process of validating and comforting again and again, our brain learns to make that pattern its new normal. The VCR pattern becomes our natural habit for responding to our own emotions as well as to those of others around us. In time, you stop being afraid of those emotions, because your brain learns that it can recover from them.

Until your brain learns this new pattern, it will tend to avoid people and situations that generate feelings it doesn't know how to handle. If you can't recover from anger, you will avoid people and situations that trigger anger. If you can't return to joy from fear, you will avoid

people and situations that trigger fear. However, as your brain learns how it can return to joy through validation and comfort, those emotions become less overwhelming and you are able to stay relational and engaged in situations that used to trigger you.

People who skip validation and go straight to left-brain comforting generally make the situation worse. We call these people “fixers.” They are more interested in fixing you than listening to your emotions. The point here is that both validation and comfort are important, but the order is even more important. It is great to help people make their problems smaller and more manageable, but we *first* have to listen for and validate their emotions. If you get the order wrong, the person will feel like you don’t care.

In this week’s exercises, Chris will give you a variety of scenarios to help you turn on your relational circuits and practice listening for and accurately naming emotions. We want to focus on mild emotions first. Just like any other skill, you need to practice on a “beginner level” before advancing.



**EXERCISES FOR HABIT #2:
LISTEN FOR EMOTION**

Welcome to the second round of exercises. In this section, you and your spouse train your brain’s ability to perceive,

read, and listen for emotions. With practice, you can learn to activate your relational circuits so you keep relationships bigger than emotions, pain, and problems. A big part of training the relational brain to listen for emotions involves a skill known as **mindsight**, which you can think of as your relationship reader. You use mindsight to “read” and interpret the other person’s body language, voice tone, and facial expressions. When mindsight is accurate, you see and understand the mind and heart of your partner. For example, when you say, “You look tired. Do you need to rest?” your spouse feels seen and understood. This skill creates intimacy, connection, and much-needed resilience to help process negative emotions.


When mindsight is faulty or “leaky,” then unprocessed pain from our past leaks into the present, which disrupts our ability to see, hear, and understand our partner.² One spouse may overreact from a word, voice tone, or behavior that reminds him/her of something painful from the past. At this point, we no longer clearly gauge what is happening inside our partner’s mind, so we misread what is said and misunderstand our partner. This broken “relationship reader” creates pain and leads to conflict and miscommunication.

This heartache is avoidable! One way we can correct this unhelpful pattern is to share nonverbal stories where we must rely on our emotional brain to “read” our partner and then predict how he or she will respond to better help


our partner understand what we are trying to convey.

The following exercises aim to enhance our brain's relationship reader. Our body is the canvas for our emotional brain. Like a work of art, our body tells a story about our emotional well-being. Paying attention to our muscle tension and breathing can tell us if big emotions are present or even sneaking up on us. We will practice the one-two punch of validation and comfort to re-pattern our brain to better read emotions.

Happy and Sad 15 MIN

1. While holding hands, share three things from your day that made you happy, then highlight one thing that made you sad. Include how your body felt in the happy and the sad.  3 MIN

For example, I was glad when my coworker helped me on a project and this felt refreshing and "lighter" in my body.

2. Next, your partner will express the emotional content from what you said, including his/her observations. (You can take one item at a time if this works better.)  3 MIN

HAPPY EXAMPLE: When you were glad your coworker helped you today, this felt refreshing and you felt lighter. I even noticed a smile appear on your face while you were sharing.

SAD EXAMPLE: *When you observed the person yelling at her young daughter in the grocery store today, you felt very unhappy and your body felt heavy. I noticed your energy level dropped and your tone of voice sounded sad while you were telling me this story.*

3. Switch roles. 🕒 6 MIN
4. Discuss how you feel after practicing this exercise, then close with quiet cuddling and resting together. 🕒 3 MIN

Joy Reminiscing 🕒 15 MIN

1. Think of a joyful memory with your spouse from the previous year. 🕒 2 MIN
2. Before telling your story, write a few notes on the following details: 🕒 1 MIN
 My body: *What was I feeling in my body?*
 My emotions: *What emotions were present?*
3. While holding hands and gazing into each other's eyes, briefly tell your stories and include the above details. 🕒 6 MIN
4. When finished, take turns highlighting and validating the emotional content from the story your partner shared. 🕒 3 MIN

EXAMPLE: *Our weekend getaway to the beach was a special time for you as you were feeling encouraged. Our time together helped you rest*

and relax so your body felt peaceful and your shoulders were no longer tense.

5. Discuss what you noticed from this exercise, then close with quiet cuddling and resting together. 🕒 3 MIN

Mirroring My Mate 🕒 15 MIN

1. Think about a moment from your day when you felt peaceful, then think of another moment when peace was absent. These examples should be short and simple. 🕒 2 MIN

2. Once you have two examples in mind, briefly review:

My body: *What was my body feeling?*

My emotions: *What emotions were present?*

🕒 2 MIN

Here are two examples:

Peace: *While enjoying my cup of coffee this morning, I felt joyful, calm, and peaceful.*

No Peace: *Driving to work, I was stuck in traffic. At that point I felt anxious and restless; my stomach twisted into tight knots.*

3. Now, take turns telling your stories including body sensations and emotions. Listener, once your spouse finishes telling one story, tell the story back to him or her nonverbally (using your body gestures, facial expressions and

acting-out movements) based on what you observed and heard. Do this for both stories. (This step improves mindsight.) 🕒 8 MIN

REMINDER: *The elements of a nonverbal story include eye contact, facial expressions, vocal expressions, posture, gestures, timing, and intensity.*

4. When you both finish your stories, discuss what you noticed from this exercise, then close with some quiet cuddling and resting together.

🕒 3 MIN

A Few of My Favorite Things 🕒 15 MIN

1. Take turns sharing a *favorite activity* you enjoyed growing up. Include reasons why this activity was so meaningful for you and a special memory associated with this activity. 🕒 3 MIN

EXAMPLE: *I used to ride my bicycle all around my neighborhood and this was special for me because I would enjoy the wind on my face. I remember having my paper route and how fun it was to deliver newspapers . . .*

2. After each person shares his or her *favorite activity*, take turns validating each other and highlight how important this was to him or her.

🕒 2 MIN

EXAMPLE: *I can tell you really enjoyed riding your bike when you were younger and delivering*


newspapers. Feeling the wind on your face was very freeing for you . . .

3. Now take turns sharing your *favorite food* along with reasons why this food is a favorite. Include a special memory associated with this food.



 3 MIN

4. After each person shares his or her favorite food, take turns validating each other and highlight how important this food is to him or her.

 2 MIN

5. Next, take turns sharing one of your favorite songs. Include why this song is important to you and any special memories associated with this song.  3 MIN

NOTE: *You can insert a favorite movie, book, or Scripture verse here instead of a song if you like.*

6. After each person shares his or her favorite song, validate emotions and highlight how important this song is for him or her.  1 MIN
7. Close with a moment of quiet cuddling and resting together.  1 MIN

You will find no shortage of opportunities to listen for emotions in your interactions with the one you love. God created us with emotions because, simply, we are made in God's image, and God has emotions! Emotions are not bad; they are signals alerting us that something needs

to be addressed. Marcus and I want to encourage you to continue the validation and comfort with your spouse as opportunities arise. Practice happy and sad on a daily basis, and watch what happens with your joy levels! The dinner hour tends to be an ideal window to practice this exercise, as you can review your day and connect with your loved ones. Sharpen your brain's ability to notice and listen for emotions by expressing what was satisfying from your day as well as noticing and expressing what was not satisfying. Your brain and your marriage bond will thank you!

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