

# Marriage Partnership

Quarterly Series

ARTICLE

## Talking to Yourself

*It's not a sign you're losing your mind, but a means to a better marriage.*

By Les and Leslie Parrott, for the study, "Hurtful Words Start Inside"

One of the world's longest marriages was celebrated recently. Lee Hoon-yo and Kim Bong-geum from South Korea celebrated their 82nd wedding anniversary. On their anniversary, the couple was given special gifts, including 182 roses ... and hearing aids.



After more than eight decades of marriage they were getting hearing aids! Guess they still wanted to be sure they wouldn't miss a word. Can you imagine the number of conversations this couple has had? In all that time, they must have touched on every conceivable topic a husband and wife could discuss.

But this amazing marriage got us thinking. Were Lee and Kim aware of the private dialogue they engaged in daily? Few couples are. Yet it's the most important discussion you ever have. Its words linger longer, are felt more deeply, and determine the closeness or distance you feel.

We're talking about the conversation you have with yourself—your relational self-talk.

### The surprising things you say to yourself

Each of us holds an unending internal dialogue, which colors every experience in marriage. Self-talk occurs without prior reflection or reasoning. Our brain instantly sees it as plausible and valid, even when it's not. While these thoughts are rarely noticed, they continually shape our attitudes, actions, and outlook.

Imagine you slip a microchip into a computer and it tabulates everything you've thought about your spouse and your marriage.

Now imagine you and your partner sitting down to study it. What would you find?

First, you'd almost certainly be surprised by what you heard. You might find, for example, that you're giving your partner internal compliments he or she never hears. *I love it when she wears that dress. He's brilliant with the kids.* But you may also be



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shocked by how much negative commentary you quietly grumble. *He cares more about his car than me. She's so careless with our money.* This kind of self-talk sets up impossible standards and then tears down your spouse for not meeting them. In fact, according to some experts, as much as 77 percent of the average person's self-talk is negative. One negative thought can kill dozens of positive ones if it's expressed at the wrong moment. Imagine the impact this has on a marriage—how it ultimately hinders your connection with each other. That's why it's particularly valuable to monitor your inner voice in situations that elicit a negative tone.

Our friend Donna confessed this story to us. It was Friday night and Donna wanted her husband, Tim, to suggest a fun restaurant for dinner. *After all, she thought, we've both had a tough week at work. He'll realize I shouldn't make dinner tonight. We can take it easy and relax together.* "But I didn't say anything to him," Donna admitted, "because I thought, *He should initiate it. He should know.*" Tim obviously didn't know because he didn't suggest going out to eat. So Donna angrily heated some leftovers, while she thought, *He only thinks about himself. He doesn't care about me.*

During the meal Donna sulked, and it only got worse when Tim didn't ask about her day. She said to herself, *If he really loved me, he'd want to find out how I'm doing.* She threw a pity party, and he didn't even notice. "I sat there feeling rejected and depressed. And I thought, *He's so selfish.*" The rest of the evening Donna avoided Tim. Why? Because "a woman shouldn't have to ask her man to talk to her."

## Improving your inner voice

If Donna had monitored her self-talk, she would have realized she was being her marriage's own worst enemy. While her goal was to connect with her mate, instead she punished him for not meeting her unspoken expectations. Think how her mood—and the evening—would have changed if she'd countered her negative self-talk with positive, rational thoughts: *I can't expect him to read my mind—he doesn't know I'd like to eat out. Or, Just because he doesn't initiate a conversation doesn't mean he's not interested in me.* Sure, it may take some mental muscle to conjure these thoughts, but aren't they more accurate?

Here are eight ways to improve your inner voice.

1. **Pray.** Negative relational self-talk steals our joy and destroys our relationships. We try to start every morning by praying the Bible back to God, using this simple prayer from 2 Corinthians 10:5: "Lord, help me take captive my every thought to make it obedient to Christ and pleasing to you." It's amazing how God answers that prayer by filling our minds with positive thoughts about each other.
2. **Take note of your self-talk.** Recognizing a problem is the first step toward solving it. So start listening to your thoughts. If you were to sum up all your



self-talk statements, putting the negative ones on one side of the scale and the positive ones on the other, which would win out?

For five days, early in our marriage, I (Les) literally kept track of my internal dialogue. I carried a pad and pen to jot down what I was saying to myself. I was astounded by how negative my self-talk could be—how often I had critical thoughts about Leslie, myself, and our relationship.

3. **Identify the situation.** Cindy grew up watching her father always open doors for her mother. In fact, her mom would stay in the car until her dad opened the door for her. *That's how a man shows his wife he loves her*, Cindy thought. But when Cindy got married, her husband never considered such an "old fashioned notion." "That's why we have power locks," he'd joke. But a quiet voice inside Cindy's head would say, *If he really cherished me, he'd open my car door*. Small thoughts—that began to eat large holes in her actions toward him. Once she identified situations most likely to provoke an irrational internal conversation, she could proactively work on changing her attitude.
4. **Ask yourself some questions.** As you become more aware of what you're saying and when you're saying it, ask yourself: *Is this a rational thought? Is what I'm thinking really accurate? Is it negative? Is it spouse-condemning?* Once Cindy recognized the negativity in her self-talk each time her husband didn't open her car door, she realized it was contaminating their relationship. She could then say, *He didn't grow up in a home like mine, and it's unfair, even silly, for me to read motives into whether or not he opens my car door*.
5. **Counter your thoughts.** Say aloud: *My thoughts determine my feelings*. Once you own the fact that it's not what happens to you, but how you talk to yourself about what happens to you, then you set your mind on a positive track. You begin to live out what the apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians (4:8-9): "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things ... and the God of peace will be with you." Countering your thoughts may take some time, so don't beat yourself up when you fail. Just stick with it.
6. **Speak the positive.** The best part of understanding your self-talk is realizing you control it. So make it positive. The best way to do this is to select an aspect of your partner's character you admire. For example, Les is one of the most organized people I (Leslie) know. Sometimes his desire to have everything in its place can get under my skin. Ever felt that way? The very thing I appreciate about him can become the thing that bugs me. But I can train my brain to say, "While this may irritate me right now, his self-discipline is something I value deeply." This kind of positive self-talk changes my



perspective and makes life easier. By the way, I've found this is much easier to do when I'm not tired or hungry. So train your brain on a full stomach!

- 7. Verbalize your thoughts.** If your self-talk is an irrational guessing game or a litmus test to determine if your spouse really loves you, give it up. There are no merit badges for mind reading, so you can't expect your spouse to do this. In Donna's case, when she worried Tim didn't care about her because he didn't suggest eating out, she could have verbalized her thoughts: "Tim, I've had a tough week. How about we go out to eat tonight and relax together?" That straightforward question could have changed their entire evening.

If your relational self-talk is positive, all the more reason to tell your spouse. If you're thinking, *She looks great in that dress* or *I like the way he laughs at my jokes*—say it! You can never give too many compliments.

- 8. Take action.** Want to really make a positive change in this area? On paper identify the most common self-statements you use throughout the day. Next, write an alternative to each, countering it by turning the negative into a positive. For example, counter, *She's always nagging me about my clothes on the floor*, with *She cares about making our home pleasant for us*. This simple exercise can trigger a positive response the next time it's needed.

By the way, if you have a negative self-statement (*my spouse is a slob*) that's difficult to counter, it may be because it's true (your spouse really is sloppy). That's when it's time to turn your self-talk into couple's talk and actually discuss the issue.

With a more reasonable internal dialogue, you won't hold your spouse to unvoiced expectations. You'll feel a new sense of empowerment in your marriage, almost immediately.

—Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott, mp regular contributors and authors of [Love Talk](#) (Zondervan), are cofounders of the Center for Relationship Development at Seattle Pacific University. Visit Les and Leslie at [www.RealRelationships.com](http://www.RealRelationships.com).

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