

Skills for love match are acquired

By Mark Wolf, Rocky Mountain News
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Flicking a backhand shot in tennis, catching a football, dealing with conflict with your spouse; you can plunge into each of those situations blindly, but learning precise skills will give you a better chance at a successful outcome.

That's the baseline wisdom Denver clinical psychologist Susan Heitler seeks to impart in *The Power of Two Workbook: Communication Skills for a Strong and Loving Marriage (Harbinger, \$19.99)*, co-authored with her daughter, Abigail Hirsch.

"It's the same feelings newcomers to a sport often feel," Heitler said. "When I'm hitting a tennis ball, why do I have to end my stroke with my racquet so high? I'd rather just whack at the ball.

"A successful marriage begins with a well-matched couple. It is facilitated by commitment to the marriage and to each other, but it flowers when the couple has the skills," Heitler said.

The workbook, based on Heitler's 1997 book *The Power of Two*, includes written exercises on a variety of communications skills including "straightforward talking."

"That's the foundation problem for 90 percent of the couples I see. What happens is that life inevitably presents challenges, difficult decisions for couples, upsets that are hard to digest. Couples who have the skills have these same moments as couples in distress. The difference is that with skills, these moments lead to mutual understanding and mutual agreeable plans of actions. Couples without the skills deal with the problems and end up feeling resentful or hurt," she said.

Couples need to be able to get from hoping and hinting to speaking directly, she said.

"Over the years I've come to see that more marriages are destroyed by no one speaking up for what their concerns are rather than being destroyed by fighting," she said. "Fighting is more visible but the silent withdrawals and resentments can be profoundly corrosive. Many times when couples end up fighting it's after a long period of time of not speaking up for what their concerns are."

Knowing how to express concern is just as important as being able to speak up, Heitler said.

"When people try to speak up they tend to put their concern in the negative ('I don't want to have the same three meals over and over.'). If you put it in the positive, you have a greater chance at success ('I'd like to talk to you about how we can extend the variety of the menus we've fallen into').

"A sentence saying what you don't like is like giving someone the negative to a picture. Even if they want to be responsive it's hard for someone to know what to do."

By contrast, she said, phrases such as "would like" open up possibilities and suggest directions that could solve problems.

Couples need to learn to talk safely to each other, she said.

"People contaminate their relationship in two ways: one is by telling each other what to do. No one wants to be controlled. When you tell me do this or that I feel like you're encroaching onto my space and my immediate reaction will be to repulse you. If you say, 'You're angry at me,' that's telling me what I feel. I may be angry or irritated or just preoccupied with something else, but each of us deserves the right of being asked what we feel instead of being told," she said.

"The second way is by saying negative comments about each other. If I tell you you're lazy because you never get out of your armchair at night, I'm contaminating your view of yourself. You need to feel good about yourself. Just as we need to keep our body physically healthy, we need to keep our psychological space healthy by keeping out negative self-images."

Successful couples learn to "braid" their dialogue, she said.

"It means one spouse says their viewpoint, then the spouse responds in a way that shows they heard what's said and they're taking it seriously and then add their own perspective," she said. "It's more than just taking turns. That creates a dialogue that's something like pingpong. Braided dialogue not only takes turns but it contributes toward creating a shared view of the problem."

Some communication traps to avoid, the workbook points out, include becoming attached to one solution to a problem, criticizing your spouse's concerns and premature closure.

Susan Heitler's Web site is www.therapyhelp.com

How much do looks matter?

- On the NBC reality show *Average Joe*, a group of guys not likely to turn up in fashion layouts is competing for the affection of a beautiful woman.
- How much should a man's physical appearance matter to a woman? Have you ever broken off with a good guy because of his physical appearance? E-mail your thoughts to Spotlight@RockyMountainNews.com.

wolfm@RockyMountainNews.com or 303-892-5226