

Stop Killing Yourself with Silence

by Peter A. & Susan R. Glaser, Ph.D.

Confronting delicate issues is never an easy matter in the workplace or at home, but avoidance can be hazardous to your health. A stunning array of studies has revealed that the ways men and women resolve conflict are linked to both physical and psychological health including depression, eating disorders and heart disease - the number 1 killer in the US.

In a recent 10-year follow-up to ongoing research, women who "held their tongues" when disagreeing with their husbands were four times more likely to die during the course of the study. The research seems to say we're risking an early death because we're afraid of suffering the discomfort of interpersonal conflict. Does it make sense to pay such a high price to keep an unhealthy peace in our personal and professional lives?

The first step may be the hardest: overcoming our fear and discomfort in raising delicate issues. Just as we may be uncomfortable when we first begin to exercise, we may also feel awkward exercising a new style of communicating - but with practice, initiating courageous conversations will come to feel natural and, more importantly, could save our lives.

How we communicate through moments of confrontation defines our influence, our impact, and our legacy. Yet most people navigate through these moments on automatic pilot, reacting from emotion rather than intention. We can transform our influence, our relationships, and our health by getting off auto-pilot and being pro-active in the face of conflict.

As communication researchers and partners in work and marriage for 37 years, we have experienced both the joy and agony of personal and business communication and have found some simple steps to resolve conflict and build trust in relationships. We've found that these steps can take the sting out of difficult conversations and create trust from conflict.

Listen when your impulse is to argue. Listening, a rare and pure gift from the heart, requires that we are quiet long enough to ponder another's message. Instead of defending, explaining, disputing and discounting their concerns, consider asking yourself: What does this person wish I would understand? What are they trying desperately to get through to me? Ask them questions to more completely understand, and then communicate what you are hearing. Before arguing your side, be certain that you absolutely grasp theirs.

Edit accusations that might make the other person feel put down, and instead describe your feelings. "I feel lonely" has a different ring than "you're selfish and unresponsive." By becoming accountable for our own emotions, our communication is less threatening to other people.

Pinpoint details. Even if a problem occurs repeatedly, describe a specific example, without your evaluation or interpretation. Most of us are willing to concede that on one occasion we made a mistake, but few want to accept the "fact" that we regularly screw things up.

Acknowledge your role in the problem. Remember: every issue really does have another side. When we describe how we contributed, even unintentionally, to a problem, this encourages the other person to hear us out. And as we prove we can see the world from their point of view, hostility begins to dissolve.

Agree on a solution. Every solution requires input from both people involved. It's important to reach an explicit, collaborative agreement about what each person will do differently in the future to correct the situation.

Follow up on that agreement. Arrange a time to get back to one another and be sure to follow through. Since many attempts at resolving conflict end in failure and fighting, this evaluation appointment is important. It proves your commitment to view conflict resolution as a process rather than a one-shot trial.

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Carefully orchestrated directness produces creative solutions, increases closeness, and leads to more trusting business and family relationships. You may not feel comfortable the first time you try it, but the more you practice healthy confrontation, the better results you'll get for your family, your business, your relationships and your health.

Drs. Peter and Susan Glaser are communication and conflict resolution experts and co-authors of the recently released and internationally acclaimed book, *Be Quiet, Be Heard: the Paradox of Persuasion*. Their firm, Glaser & Associates, Inc., is based in Eugene, Oregon and can be reached online through their Web site, www.theglasers.com.
