

CAN THIS BE LOVE?

COUPLE'S GUIDE TO HEARING EACH OTHER

What to do when what he says is mostly "Huh?"

If you suspect that you and your partner haven't really heard each other since before the introduction of Reaganomics, it doesn't mean you both can't relearn the art of listening—in the same way amnesiacs can relearn the art of knowing their own names. Both of you should consider the following hints as an adult-education course for the selectively deaf.

1. First of all, have your hearing checked by a specialist. You owe it to yourself to explore the possibility that there is an organic

reason for your failure to hear your partner's views on just about any topic under the sun. (Of course, if you can be awakened in the middle of the night by the sound of a feather falling from your pillow onto the carpet, don't hold out too much hope that your inability to hear your partner's suggestions when you're driving is caused by a physical problem.)

2. Check your ears for wax or other foreign matter. Even if you are not among the organically hearing-impaired, you can't ignore the possibility that failing to hear your partner's directions (about how to get to what promises to be the most boring office party of the decade) is caused by a block in your ears—as opposed to a block in your mind.

3. Don't assume that *everything* your partner says will be either boring or irrelevant, just because this is usually the case. Keep an open mind and be fair: Ask yourself if your mate is really more bland, dull and uninteresting than, say, Bryant Gumbel, to whom you willingly listen every morning.

4. Try pretending that listening to your partner is like knocking on wood, and that not listening will bring you bad luck (which you can bet it will).

5. Observe the good listeners you know and ask them how they manage to attend to their mates for more than six seconds at a clip. Perhaps they can apprise you of useful strategies. One woman who can repeat her husband's long-winded speeches verbatim told me she has acquired her skill by imagining he knows a valuable secret that he might one day inadvertently impart to her in the midst of mouthing his usual trivialities.

6. Make sure that when one of you speaks, the other's body is at least partially upright, with eyes at least partially open. Who knows, maybe neither of you has been catching any more than half of what the other says because you've been asleep during the other half.

7. Make sure you pick the right moments to speak seriously to each other. For instance, don't try to inform your partner of your upcoming tonsillectomy while he or she is talking to several other people at a party or at the critical point in making a hollandaise. Such attempts will only ensure that you wake up in the recovery room alone, without your partner or your tonsils.

8. Try speaking less to each other than you do now. In fact, if you hardly speak to each other at all, you are likely to be much more attentive when one of you finally *does* open your mouth.

9. Be sure to enunciate your words. It's possible that your third-grade teacher was right when she called you "a mumbler." Of course, if nobody except your mate has any trouble understanding you, try another tack: Learn to lip-read, on the off chance that it is your *partner* who's the mumbler.

10. Try using simpler language when talking to each other. Maybe the trouble is not that you don't hear each other, but that you don't *understand* each other. For instance, instead of saying, "I caught a brief glimpse of the Smiths today," you could try: "I saw Dick and Jane."

11. Take a public-speaking course, on the assumption that making your partner listen to a rundown of your day at work requires the same skill as making a hundred strangers listen to you try to sell them unbuilt condominiums on a Florida landfill.

12. Learn shorthand, and whip out your notebook whenever your partner speaks. Even if you don't really register what is said, you'll have notes to refer to in a pinch. Then, when your partner says in a warning voice, "Darling, I'd like to introduce you to Joe Shmoe, whom I've told you so much about," you won't be tempted to escape by jumping out the nearest window.

Try all of the above remedies and you may be surprised to find that you and your partner are no longer hearing each other less often than you hear voices from outer space.

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by Bette-Jane Raphael