

Lessons Learned: How spouses can better communicate in remarriages

By Rachel Diamond, PhD
Postdoctoral Clinical Fellow

Remarriage is quickly becoming a normative event within our society. Because estimates suggest that more than two thirds of women and three quarters of men remarry after divorce (Sweeney, 2010), eventually more people may be a part of a remarriage than a first marriage (Dupuis, 2007). Unfortunately, however, research also suggests that remarriages tend to end more quickly and more often than first marriages. Compared to first marriages, second marriages are about 10% more likely to end in divorce, while the risk of divorce in third marriages is 20% higher (Sweeney, 2010).

Two major factors affecting divorce potential are a couple's ability to communicate and the manner in which they resolve conflicts (Gottman, 2011). The quality of couples' communication is strongly associated with both marital satisfaction and stability. Moreover, the manner in which spouses resolve disagreements is not only important for the health of the marriage, but is also predictive of divorce (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998; Gottman, Carrere, Swanson, & Coan 2000).

Although significant advances have been made in understanding communication patterns and spousal interactions in first marriages, relatively less attention has been paid to specific communication processes within remarriages. However, communication patterns

likely change from a first marriage to a second marriage, due in part to the experiences spouses bring with them from their first marriages. Therefore, it is important to understand the ways in which remarried couples communicate, as well as any unique challenges they may face when entering a new relationship.

Communication Differences between First Marriages and Remarriages

Communication for remarried couples is likely influenced by the unique challenges inherent to this type of relationship. For example, many remarried couples enter into their marriage with children. Indeed, the majority (approximately 65%) of adults who divorce and remarry bring children from the prior marriage into the new relationship (Dupuis, 2007). While disagreements related to stepchildren and childrearing are the most common topics of arguments among remarried couples, this is not true for spouses in first marriages (Pasley, Koch, & Ihinger-Tallman, 1993; Stanely, Markmean, & Whitton, 2002).

Compared to their first-married counterparts who enter marriage as newlyweds without children, remarried couples with children are not afforded a "honeymoon" phase without childrearing responsibilities. Instead, they must immediately start communicating about a myriad of parenting-related issues. Furthermore, partners may find themselves entering into a system of already established rules, roles, and relationships that

may clash with the expectations they had for the family they hoped to create. Remarried partners will likely find that the need for parental agreement in establishing shared values will be greatest early in the marriage, when a high priority is to ease the transition for children by spending time as a family. Unfortunately, this also limits opportunities for the couple to spend time alone together during this critical transition time.

Finances tend to be another key area which differentiates first marriages from remarriages. Because remarried individuals are typically older, with more life experience, they tend to bring more complex financial assets to the marriage. However, financial obligations to one's children or spouse from a former marriage can create tension in the current marriage. While couples in first marriages regularly merge assets, there are typically more constraints in remarriages that make combining finances difficult. Additionally, if spouses do not agree with each other about their financial arrangements (e.g., separate vs. combined assets; individual vs. joint decision-making about money; amount of financial support for children or ex-spouse), arguments can quickly arise.

Communication Patterns in Remarriages

Individuals entering a remarriage often place a high priority on establishing good communication patterns in their new marriage as they remember the destructive communication patterns that existed with their former spouse. Compared to partners in first marriages, however, remarried couples tend to show both less positive and less negative communication (Halford, Nicholson, & Sanders, 2007), and are more likely to mutually withdraw and withhold communication (Halford et al., 2007; Mirecki, Brimhall, & Bramesfeld, 2013).

These findings suggest that individuals in remarriages

might be hesitant to engage in disagreements, in an attempt to prevent conflicts similar to what they experienced with their former spouse (Brimhall, Wampler, & Kimball, 2008; Ganong & Coleman, 2004). In other words, low rates of both positive and negative communication, along with high rates of mutual withdrawal, imply that remarried couples might be avoiding what they perceived to be the problems of the first marriage. If remarried spouses believe that their first marriage's divorce was caused by the airing of relationship issues, they also likely developed the idea that it is better to withhold negative emotions from their spouse and avoid difficult topics of conversation. However, such beliefs can cause remarriages to fall into harmful cycles of relationship avoidance that, if continued, can lead to decreased levels of affection and emotional responsiveness (Huston, Caughlin, Houts, Smith, & George, 2001).

Implications for Remarried Couples

Remarried individuals often choose a new spouse they perceive to be the opposite of the former spouse; they also tend to believe they have learned lessons from their former marriage which will contribute to improved communication this time around (Mirecki et al., 2013). Therefore, it can be especially alarming for remarried spouses when inevitable conflict surfaces due to the array of unique vulnerabilities inherent to the complex structure of the remarriage (Mirecki, Chou, Elliott, & Schneider, 2013). Each conflictual experience can signal fear that the remarriage may follow the same failed path as the former marriage, thus increasing the pressure remarried spouses may place on themselves to be a more effective communicator this time around.

It is important for remarried spouses to be aware of their tendency to choose avoidance and withholding as their preferred communication style to prevent potential conflict. Although remarried couples may prefer to

avoid sensitive topics and attribute this avoidance to their uncertainty about the status and future of the relationship (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003), mutual withholding and avoidance can be a harmful communication pattern because it creates psychological distance between spouses. Communication avoidance prevents the airing of thoughts and feelings surrounding relationship problems and, as a result, impedes movement toward conflict resolution (Gill, Christensen, & Fincham, 1999). Instead of taking an avoidant or withholding stance, spouses should try to express their fears, especially those anxieties which are based on past relationship experiences.

An additional difficulty may also arise when a current spouse's words or way of interacting triggers a remarried individual to have a strong reaction because it reminds him or her of a previous relational experience. In these situations, he or she should try to communicate to the new spouse that part of this reaction stemmed from a past relational experience.

Over time, it is hoped that remarried couples will feel safe enough to reduce the psychological distance created by mutual avoidance and withholding. Through this process, couples can develop what is known as “relational efficacy,” in which they increase confidence in their ability as a couple to withstand conflict together (Gill et al., 1999). Couple therapy can be an especially helpful and appropriate context for remarried couples to work on increasing security and improving communication within the remarriage.

Special Considerations for Remarried Individuals

- Be aware that remarriages have their own strengths, as well as their own vulnerabilities. Because of this, counseling — individual, couple, and/or family — can be beneficial at any point of relationship development.

- Understand that relationship roles, particularly those in stepfamilies, form slowly, especially if your remarriage involves the incorporation of children from your former marriage, your spouse's former marriage, or both. Be sure to allow for flexibility in developing expectations and roles. Research suggests that it can take an average of 5–7 years for stepfamilies to function comfortably in their interactions (Dupuis, 2007).
- Identify negative triggers from your previous marriage and discuss how these triggers may arise in your current marriage. For example, a word or way in which your spouse communicates with you might cause you to have a strong reaction. While it may seem easier and safer to avoid discussions and withhold emotions during these situations, it might be helpful to communicate with your spouse that part of your reaction stemmed from patterns you experienced in your past relationship. These types of disclosures can be hard work for both you and your partner, but a skilled therapist can help guide you through this process.

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Author Biography

Rachel Diamond, PhD, is a Postdoctoral Fellow at The Family Institute at Northwestern University receiving advanced clinical training in couple and family therapy. Dr. Diamond offers therapeutic services to individuals, couples, and families. In her clinical practice,

she focuses on developing effective attachment-based clinical interventions to work with couples and families dealing with a variety of relationship transitions, losses, and difficulties. Dr. Diamond also specializes in working with couples and families that have experienced perinatal loss and/or infertility.

The Family Institute at Northwestern University is committed to strengthening and healing families from all walks of life through clinical service, education and research. The Family Institute is a center for direct care, academic learning and new discovery. For more information on The Family Institute, visit www.family-institute.org or call 847-733-4300.