



Speak Up! Change Begins with You

This month I've been blogging about the essential ingredients in healthy relationships. Some of you have recognized that your relationships are not so healthy and want to know what steps you can take to turn things around.

First it's important to recognize that change always begins with you.

Anna thought she had a good friendship with a woman at church but over time Anna began feeling smothered and irritated with her friend. Anna asked, "How do I keep her as a friend and still have my own life? She calls me all the time and gets offended if I don't return her call or I'm too busy or have other plans."

In order for Anna to change things in this relationship, Anna must speak up. If she doesn't, eventually her feelings will reach a boiling point where she will blow up at her friend vomiting out her angry emotions and/or distance herself from her friend entirely.

Therefore, when you want to change relationship patterns that have already been established in an unhealthy way, I recommend several steps to make this difficult conversation more likely to result in a positive outcome. And, that's the goal, isn't it? This is not the time to dump your negative feelings on your friend (or spouse) but rather, to invite him or her to hear what you have to say so that the relationship can change and become healthier.

Here are five (5) steps you should take before having this important conversation.

1. **Pray:** Ask God for a humble heart and a gentle spirit. Ask him for the right words to share what's been upsetting you without blaming or judging the other person.
2. **Prepare:** Difficult conversations require time to think about what you want to say and how to say it wisely. Hard words need not be harsh words. Write it out. Wait 24 hours then reread it. Is it what you want to communicate?

Begin your conversation with the positives about the person and why you value this relationship. Confess your own unhealthiness before you ask for a change. For example, Anna could say to her friend,

"I love being with you. You're funny and creative and I have never laughed harder with a friend in my life. But I need to share something with you. I haven't been totally honest

about something and I need to do so now. I'm starting to feel anxious whenever you call because I know you're going to feel disappointed or offended if I don't have the time to talk right then. It's not that I don't care about you or our friendship, but I need more space without you feeling like I don't care about you. I have other things I have to do or other people I enjoy hanging out with too. That doesn't mean I think less of you, but there is only one of me."

3. **Practice:** Rehearse what you've written at least 20 times. This is an awkward conversation and you want to make sure you say what you want to say without forgetting something. You only get one shot at this kind of conversation, do everything you can do to say it well (Psalm 141:5).
4. **Plan the time and place:** You want to have this conversation at a time and place that you are most likely to be heard. Don't wait until late at night or try saying this when someone is preoccupied or rushed. When Queen Esther needed to talk with the king about Haman, she realized the first dinner wasn't the right time so she invited him to come a different night (Esther 5 and 7).
5. **Place the outcome in God's hands:** You can't control another person's feelings or reaction, but you can control your words and your voice tone to make a positive outcome more likely. However, the scriptures remind us, "As much as it is up to you, be at peace with everyone" (Romans 12:18). There are times we do all of the steps and yet our friend is unable or unwilling to hear what we have to say. This is not the time to return to your own unhealthy ways just to keep the peace or preserve the relationship. You must persevere in your own growth yet show patience with your friend, asking God to help them see.

Understand this. Whenever we try to change the status quo of a relationship—better known as rocking the boat—we will face resistance (a little or a lot). It's important to press through this awkward and uncomfortable stage until a new pattern is established that you both can live with.

Sometimes that never happens. However, the longer we tolerate what is intolerable, the more difficult it will be to alter the relationship.