

Speaking Your Partner's Language of Love

In 2005, counselor Gary Chapman published a terrific book called *The Five Love Languages: The Secret to Love That Lasts*. It describes a particularly common problem in communication in couples and I have found it useful in my treatment of couples. I want to spend some time illustrating this dynamic by presenting my work with a couple, who I'll call Denise and Fred.

Denise and Fred sought therapy because of troubles in their marriage. Each felt that the other was unappreciative and rejecting. Denise and Fred described how they took care of the other but felt an absence of reciprocity. Both felt that they were giving more than they were getting. This bred anger and feelings of loneliness in each person.

Now, this is a common problem in couples and stems from a painful but important misunderstanding about love – namely, that we love others in the way that we want to be loved, rather than in the way that our partners may most need or value.

So, for example, Denise was someone who responded especially strongly to verbal expressions of affection from Fred. She had grown up in a family in which words were used to injure, not comfort. When Fred *told* her how wonderful she was and the various ways he appreciated and loved her, Denise felt his love intensely. Her most treasured gifts were love poems that Fred had written for her. This form or channel of love got through to her in an especially powerful way.

But because verbal expressions of affection were so important to *her*, she frequently *told* Fred about how wonderful he was and how much he meant to her. Fred saw this and believed in its sincerity. And yet, Fred continued to complain that he felt unappreciated and neglected. How could this be, Denise would ask? Was Fred just a bottomless pit? Was he determined to be a victim?

The answer was No. Fred intellectually knew that Denise love him. But for Fred, words didn't have much meaning or impact. What emerged was that Fred was the type of person

who was especially moved by those moments when Denise *did* things to help and comfort him. Actions meant the world to Fred, not words. When Denise went out of her way to make day-to-day life easier for Fred practically, he felt understood, supported, and loved.

It turned out that Fred's childhood was quite different than Denise's. When Fred was growing up, his parents were often absent. They communicated the sense that they were so burdened or overwhelmed by life that taking care of their kids seemed like a burden and so Fred grew up worried about burdening his friends and partners.

But when Denise made him meals, managed household finances, and/or planned vacations, Fred's fears about being a burden were alleviated and he felt cared for. He felt loved. Denise's willingness and ability to help Fred in practical ways, to ease his everyday burdens, got through to him on a special channel and touched him deeply.

But here was the rub: As a result of Fred's special upbringing, fears, and his sensitivity to being helped by his partner, he proceeded to express his love for Denise by going out of his way to *do* things for her, helping Denise

practically in multiple ways that made her life easier, for example, by doing household chores, managing their money, food shopping, and hiring and supervising people who helped them out around their home, like mechanics and handymen. Denise acknowledged that Fred did all these things and intellectually understood that these things reflected Fred's love.

Still, she felt deprived and somehow cheated, frequently feeling distressed by feelings of disappointment in her marriage.

So, the problem was clear: *Each partner expressed love in the way that he or she preferred to receive it, not in the way that the other person preferred to receive it.* Fred and Denise each privileged very particular – but different--forms of love and caretaking as meaningful and mistakenly assumed that the other person felt the exact same way. It's easy to see how, given this situation, feelings of neglect and rejection began to surface. Fred and Denise gave what each wanted to get and yet missed the mark, despite their good and loving intentions. As a result, both knew that they were loved, but didn't feel it.

Too often we assume that other people are like us. This is perhaps a universal bias in human beings. But in couples, the problem arises when we give what we want to get and don't pay attention to the very unique and idiosyncratic ways that other people preferentially feel loved. It's as if everyone has their own special channel and if they're loved on that channel, they can really take it in. If it's offered on another channel, the incoming love can be seen but perhaps not really believed.

As Chapman describes it in his book, the two "languages of love" that I saw in Fred and Denise are not the only languages. Some people feel especially loved when a partner is physically affectionate. Others are especially responsive to gifts. And still others seem to need displays of admiration. Each person has a channel in which love is experienced in a particularly meaningful way.

The lesson to be learned from this very common marital pattern is that people need to learn how each other preferentially likes to be loved and try to love them on that level and using *that* channel. I have found that when asked, most people can articulate their preferred language. But this

means being open to the possibility, not the probability that the other person especially values something that may not seem important to you. And to then be willing to give that to a partner on that partner's terms. An elderly psychoanalyst who had treated couples for over 50 years once told me that, in his experience, the key to a healthy relationship was when each person loved what was unique and different about the other person, not what was similar.

Contrary to the popular wisdom about what constitutes compatibility, love is about the recognition and appreciation of difference, not similarity. In the last analysis, it doesn't matter much whether you think you're the most loving person in the world if you aren't speaking your partner's language.