



# How to Avoid Hurtful Speech



## THE CHALLENGE

Each time a conflict arises, you and your spouse unleash a torrent of criticism at each other. Hurtful speech has become so common in your marriage that it is now your “normal” style of communication.

If this is happening in your marriage, you *can* stop the pattern. First, though, you need to consider the causes and why it is in your best interests to make changes.



## WHY IT HAPPENS

**Family background.** Many husbands and wives were raised in homes where hurtful speech was common. One or both spouses may be repeating the type of language they heard from their parents.

**Influence of entertainment.** Film and television comedies turn rude speech into a laughing matter, leaving the viewer with the impression that it is harmless—or even funny.

**Culture.** Some societies teach that “real men” are domineering or that women need to be fiercely aggressive so as not to appear weak. During a conflict, spouses with such attitudes may view each other as adversaries rather than allies and use words that hurt rather than heal.

Regardless of the cause, hurtful speech can be a predictor of divorce as well as a number of health problems. Some even say that words can hit harder than fists. For example, one wife who was both verbally and physically battered by her husband says: “I found the insults harder to bear than the violence. I would have preferred that he hit me rather than say such hurtful things.”

What can you do if you and your spouse have let hurtful speech erode your relationship?



## WHAT YOU CAN DO

**Show empathy.** Put yourself in your spouse's position, and try to understand how your words make him or her feel. If possible, think of a specific circumstance in which your mate felt that your speech was hurtful. Do not be sidetracked by what you really said; the issue is how your spouse *feels* about what you said. Can you think of ways that the hurtful speech could have been replaced with kind expressions? The Bible says: "An answer, when mild, turns away rage, but a word causing pain makes anger to come up."—Proverbs 15:1.

**Observe respectful couples.** If negative role models have influenced your manner of communicating, look for good examples. Listen to married couples whose pattern of speech is worthy of imitation.—*Bible principle: Philip-  
pians 3:17.*

## Hurtful speech is more often a problem of the heart than of the mouth

**Revive the feelings you once shared.** Hurtful speech is more often a problem of the heart than of the mouth. So strive to nurture positive thoughts and feelings about your spouse. Reminisce about activities you once enjoyed together. Look at old photographs. What made you laugh? What qualities drew you to each other?—*Bible principle: Luke 6:45.*

**Use "I" statements.** Rather than verbally attack your spouse, express your concerns from the standpoint of *how you are affected*. For example, "I feel slighted when you make plans without consulting me first" is much more likely to elicit a positive response than "That is just like you—always making plans without consulting me!" —*Bible principle: Colossians 4:6.*

**Know when to stop.** If tempers are beginning to flare and speech is getting out of hand, it might be best to postpone the discussion. Usually, there is nothing wrong with walking away from a heated argument until the discussion can be handled more calmly.—*Bible principle: Proverbs 17:14.* ■

## KEY SCRIPTURES

"Husbands ought to be loving their wives as their own bodies."  
—Ephesians 5:28.

"The wife should have deep respect for her husband."  
—Ephesians 5:33.

"Let all . . . screaming and abusive speech be taken away from you."—Ephesians 4:31.

## WHAT IS "ABUSIVE SPEECH"?

The Bible says: "Let all . . . screaming and abusive speech be taken away from you." (Ephesians 4:31) Why did Paul distinguish "screaming" from "abusive speech"? The original-language word translated "screaming" (Greek, *krau-ge'*) refers to raising the voice. In contrast, "abusive speech" (Greek, *bla-sphe-mi'a*) describes the content of the message. What does this mean? That abusive speech may not always involve shouting. Really, any speech that is malicious, demeaning, or insulting is abusive—even if it is delivered in a low voice.