

marriage sos

"He only hears wh

Kathleen Emrick, 51, Sunrise, FL

"He never listens to my side of the story"

"My husband is always telling me how to feel," says Kathleen Emrick, who's been married to George for 15 years.

"There used to be balance, patience and listening in our relationship, but that fell to the wayside with the stress of working, paying the mortgage and having two kids in our late 30s. Now it drives me crazy how George never listens to me—he rushes ahead and tries to 'fix' everything.

"When I came home the other day distraught over a work issue, George shrugged me off by saying, 'You don't need to feel upset over this. Just go in, do your job and come home.' He never listened to why I was upset, which was all I wanted from him in the first place.

"George also shuts me down whenever I try to offer my opinion on a decision in our marriage. He says my views aren't right and acts as though both sides of the conversation have taken place in his head.

"We recently needed to replace a wall in our house. I told George I wanted the job done fast and right by a professional. Instead, George wasted time watching YouTube videos to learn how to do it himself. I was frustrated and told him, 'Great, a job that could've been done in 3 days is taking 10 weeks!'

"More and more lately, I feel devalued, which leads to blowups where George stomps off, sometimes for a few days. We had so much in common, but now it feels like the love isn't there anymore."

The key to achieving

"Feeling devalued is a common and corruptive force in relationships. It can lead partners to feel misunderstood and eventually build walls of bitterness. And in many cases, the invalidation is unintended and unrecognized by the perpetrator," says certified marriage counselor and family strengthening expert Jacqueline Del Rosario, Ph.D. "To strengthen this relationship, I taught the Emricks simple ways to really listen and support each other.

"First, I encouraged Kathleen to tell George exactly what she needed from him, like 'I just need you to listen while I vent about my day.' With clear direction, George would know how to respond so he could feel helpful.

"Since men generally have difficulty listening for long periods of time, I also counseled Kathleen to give George the CliffsNotes version of her problems, not the expanded version. This ensured she got her message across before her husband naturally tuned out or grew defensive and shut down. As a result, Kathleen felt heard.

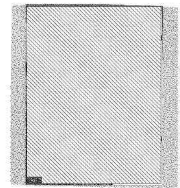
"To help George become more empathetic, I taught him this rule: Validation is about *feelings*, not facts. The goal is to tune into his wife's emotions more than her specific words.

"We didn't know it could

"Now I know I can't fix everything. It's been one of the hardest things I've ever learned—just listening and supporting. But it's been a godsend," says George, one year later. "Sometimes I just hold her and let her cry on my shoulder."

Kathleen adds, "We're forever changed. We both listen more. I don't nag or shut down. And we're more attuned to what each other wants. It definitely saved our marriage!"

PHOTO: VANESSA ROGERS, H & M; ALLI TOLLE; TEXT: LISA MAXBAUER



at he wants to"

true understanding

"For George, that meant practicing real communication with Kathleen— not just passing in the hallway and nodding, but sitting with his wife, making eye contact, placing a hand on her back and letting her vent without interruption. The gift of time and the power of touch can go a long way toward proving he *hears* her and rebuilding their trust.



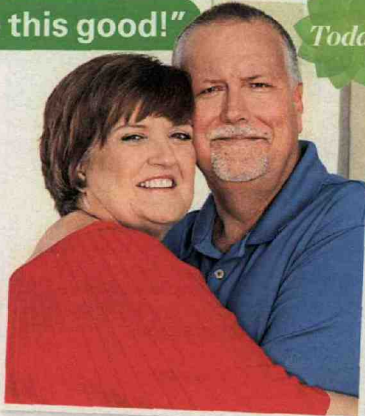
Jacqueline Del Rosario

"Because this didn't come naturally, George practiced the habit of listening. He learned to respond with a soft voice, using reassuring phrases such as, 'I hear you saying you feel like [blank] and I can understand.' He also made a special effort to avoid offering fix-it suggestions or brush-off language such as, 'That's not right; I don't agree; you shouldn't feel that way.'

"In the end, validation works when both spouses get what they need. Kathleen was given time, support and security. And by being a good listener, George fulfilled his need to help. Plus, when he helped his wife feel understood, she was better able to process life's challenges."

be this good!"

Today



"She takes things the wrong way"

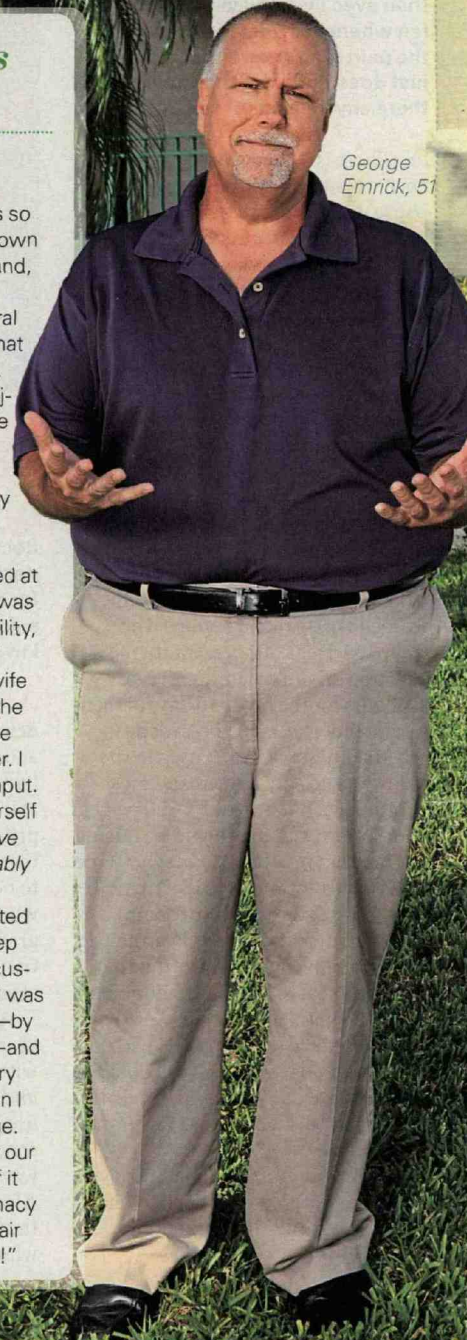
"My wife's way of thinking is totally different from mine," explains George. "Kathleen is so sensitive. She gets bogged down with details. I, on the other hand, like to solve problems. That's what I do in my job as a general manager. So it's only natural that I do the same in my marriage.

"Take that home repair project: The professional estimate was close to \$2,000 and I did it for less than \$200, despite hitting some setbacks. But my wife was critical of me every step of the way. No wonder I became resentful and snapped at her. It's like she'd forgotten I was taking on this huge responsibility, busy working full-time, for *us!*

"I've also tried to help my wife with her work problems over the years. I've always told her to be a duck and let things roll off her. I thought she appreciated my input. If she grew quiet or kept to herself afterward, I figured, *I must have fixed the problem. She's probably tired from being upset earlier.*

"Over time, however, I started noticing fights following my pep talks. I finally replayed our discussions in my head and realized I was always responding the same—by telling Kathleen to get over it—and getting the same unsatisfactory outcome in return. That's when I knew something had to change.

"I love my wife, but I know our marriage would have ended if it weren't for the kids. Our intimacy has crumbled. This is one repair job I can't afford to get wrong!"



George Emrick, 51