

My Husband Doesn't Seem to Care About Our Marriage

by Philip Mulford

This is the first of a series of articles about relationship communication – how it works, why it doesn't, and how to make it work in your relationships. I welcome your emails about the communication issues you face in your relationships and will be happy to address them in future articles.

Dear Philip:

I'm a stay-at-home mom, with 3 kids, ages 7, 12 & 14. My husband and I have been married for 16 years. It seems like the last couple of years my husband always has something more important to do than be involved in our marriage. Most nights he comes home from work and checks out on the couch with the paper. Weekends are no better; he always has something on his calendar. I work hard making sure everyone is taken care of - meals, laundry, errands, the demands of the kids' busy schedules - you name it, it all falls on my plate. It's like we're living separate lives. When I try to talk to him about it, he accuses me of nagging and we end up in a fight. I'm fed up and hurt.

— Peggy C.

Dear Peggy,

Thank you for writing. What you describe is probably the most common issue I see in my mediation practice. Don't get me wrong, everyone's story is different and unique, as is each individual and couple, but the underlying issue is the same - two good people, trying their best, taking on the "role" each assumes is important to the other and to the marriage. Your role of "making sure everyone is taken care of" and his role of "providing financially for the family" are not uncommon, however, problems often arise when one spouse's behavior

doesn't fit the other's picture of what it should be - and both spouses end up angry, unappreciated, misunderstood, and hurt.

So let's take a step back. Remember when you were dating? My guess is you each made the other your primary focus - checking in with each other often, perhaps even several times a day just to hear the other's voice - to feel connected; giving deference to the other's preferences without evaluating or judging the other; willingly adjusting your schedule to fit the other's. Remember those days? You probably also noticed and enjoyed your

differences and much as your similarities. So what happened?

Simply put, the mission changed. Prior to your marriage, your mission was him - and his was you. When you married, each of you took on new roles and responsibilities that didn't necessarily best serve your pre-marital mission. Your new roles as spouse, and eventually as parent, were each demanding. The specifics of your new roles were probably not mutually defined by you as a couple, but by each of you independently. You trusted the other to know what to do. You probably didn't

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talk a whole lot about how you saw your new role with your spouse, or he with you. Neither of you were trying to make the other secondary; you probably assumed the other would simply understand that whatever changes were occurring had to occur for you to accomplish your new role.

Is it possible that for you to feel successful in your new role as wife/mother you “knew” and assumed your husband also “knew” that you needed to be a stay-at-home mom which meant being the housekeeper, meal preparer, laundry cleaner, kids’ chauffeur, on call, all the time, 24/7 - meaning less time for him? Is it possible that for your

husband to feel successful in his role as husband/father he “knew” and assumed you also “knew” that he needed to be the financial provider which meant long hours at work, maybe a long commute, dealing with pressures from his boss, co-workers, and clients, perhaps traveling away from home at unexpected times, and basically doing whatever it took to keep his job and get the next promotion so he could make ends meet as your family grew from two to five - meaning less time for you?

I’d guess neither of you had much, if any, input in what the other’s role would be and how it would play out in your lives together. I’m betting you don’t have much

say in your husband’s daily job decisions. I’m betting he doesn’t have much input on how you run the house or parent your children. In fact, if you ever suggested he approach his job differently, he’d likely resent your suggestion and feel you were involving yourself in “his business,” just as you might be taken aback if he ever told you how to run the household.

It’s easy to take your spouse’s efforts for granted while feeling your spouse is taking you for granted, especially when you’re giving your heart and soul to accomplish all that you do for your spouse and your family. The feeling of being taken for granted can easily become the feeling that you’re not important to the most important person in your world. That’s an awful feeling.

So what can you do?

First, know he’s doing the best he can to perform his role as he sees it; as I’m sure you’re doing the best you can to perform your role as you see it. Next, reevaluate your own role: assess your individual, parental, and marital priorities. It’s so easy to get caught up in the demands of our busy lives and lose sight of our priorities. If you were to decide that your spouse and your relationship were going to again be your priority, then career, parenting, and household decisions could be made in the context of what’s best for your relationship. It’s been my experience that when you put the relationship first, everything else is well-served. If, instead, you make parenting your mission priority, you may be a great parent, but it would be at the expense of your relationship with your husband. If you refocus on him and adjust your role to serve your mission, you can make parenting decisions that will meet the needs of your relationship and serve your children well.

This concept of reestablishing mission priority applies not only to the big decisions in life, but also to the seemingly insignificant ones.

For example, recently my wife yelled out for me while I was behind the house

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trying to fix our riding lawn mower. By the time she was close enough for me to hear her, her tone and volume sounded urgent. When I heard her, I quickly crawled out from underneath the tractor wondering what was wrong. When I discovered she was yelling for me just to let me know she was leaving to run some errands, I got angry – she'd interrupted my "tractor fixing role" for "no good reason." Little did she realize that I was doing something "very important" – that fixing things is one of the critical components of my "husband/father" role. Without even thinking, I instantly evaluated her need for me and judged it unnecessary. I judged the process she used to find me as uncalled for. In my mind, she had acted thoughtlessly. Maybe it was my frustration with the tractor, maybe it was simply another opportunity for me to impress her with how important my role was, but I got angry with her for interrupting me. Sounds like I overreacted a bit, doesn't it? But it seemed she deserved my anger at the time and I felt entitled to give it to her. Of course, she had no idea why I was so angry. She just felt mistreated.

Why had I behaved that way? Because

I'd made fixing the tractor my priority. I'd made my role as "tractor fixer" more important than my mission. That allowed me to judge my wife's needs and feel entitled to be angry with her for "unnecessarily" interrupting me. In the process I hurt her and did damage to our relationship. That wasn't my goal, it wasn't my intention, but that's what I accomplished.

Even though I want to give priority to my wife and my marriage at all times, it's hard. Work, parenting, and life in general demand so much of us. But if performing my role as husband/father means getting angry with my wife when she interrupts my efforts at fixing the tractor, then my mission, my relationship with my wife, will be compromised. If I want to make my relationship with my wife my #1 priority at all times, then to accomplish that goal, I have to stay on mission. Whenever I put something else first, I will always be putting my wife second and fail in accomplishing my mission.

This doesn't mean I don't fix the tractor. It does mean that when my wife calls, I'll respond with tender words and a gentle tone consistent with my love, honor, and respect for her – even when her tone is unnecessarily urgent. The tractor can wait. It'll still get fixed,

but maybe with an unplanned break to simply say, "Love you. See you later."

By the way, this doesn't stop me from letting my wife know that she worried me when she called me the way she did. It also doesn't stop me from sharing with her where I'll be when I go out to fix the tractor so she won't need to search for me.

So, be willing to tell your husband that you want to make him your #1 mission again, that you've lost sight of him in your efforts to parent and run the household, and that you want to make some changes in your life. Share your perspective with him about your role - not about his - and about the impact performing your role is having on you. Believe it or not, you are both most likely motivated, in all that you do, by your love for each other. And remember, there's nothing wrong with anything you're doing, but it's just not serving your relationship the way your relationship needs serving. Express your appreciation for all that your husband does. Refocus on your pre-marital mission – him.

Of course, everything I'm suggesting goes for him, too. If you're not happy in your relationship, then no matter how successful his career, no matter how hard he's working, he's not accomplishing his most important mission - you. Just don't tell each other what to do. Share your respective thoughts and feelings, but let each decide what to do to complete the mission. And then appreciate the other's efforts with the peace of knowing that you each are doing the best you can.



Once a practicing attorney, Philip founded **Mulford Mediation** in 1990 and has mediated professionally for over 20 years. With offices in Fairfax and Warrenton, VA, Philip specializes in marriage, divorce, and family business mediation and communication. Philip may be reached at pmulford@mulfordmediation.com or at 540-341-4615. In addition, Philip and his wife, Lisa, are the creators and co-hosts of a weekly radio talk show called **Communication360** where the topic is relationship communication. The show, with over 170,000 listeners per month, is available on the air at WWPR 1490 AM in Sarasota-Bradenton-Tampa and on the internet at www.webtalkradio.net. All shows are archived and can be listened to on demand or downloaded. For more information about **Communication360**, please visit www.C360today.com.

