

## It's Not Really about the Dishes (Part I): Secondary Communications

With an unpleasant face your partner says, "You didn't do the dishes last night."

This is a common enough phrase, right? It's not really about the dishes! This is the *primary communication*, or what is said aloud. There's more meaning to this statement than just what was said. When this meaning is openly discussed, your partner's upset and concern can be fully addressed, allowing you both to move forward instead of repeating nasty patterns.

*Secondary communication* is the implied meaning behind primary communication. This is unspoken message that also needs to be verbalized. This is the real reason that your partner is upset.

Sometimes, this underlying message is conveyed more through the *tone* than *what's actually said*. Although often we don't name the secondary communication because we are unwilling to voice our needs, hurt, or disappointment. Or we're unable to see that there's a secondary meaning at all, we actually think we're pissed about the dishes.

Some examples of primary and secondary communications (each primary could have one or more secondary):

Primary communication	Secondary communications
"You didn't do the dishes last night."	<p>...When I cook dinner for you and you don't clean up, I feel taken for granted and unappreciated.</p> <p>...You said you'd clean up and you didn't, I need to be able to count on you when you say you'll do something.</p> <p>...I end up taking more responsibility around the house because I like it cleaner. I feel disrespected and unimportant when you aren't more proactive about cleaning.</p> <p>...I'm worried that we are too different to live together, and that ultimately means we may not be good fit long-term.</p> <p>...You're such a pig. Who taught you how to keep a house?</p>
"You're late again."	<p>...When you are late and you don't call, I feel neglected. I want to feel like a priority.</p> <p>...Can't you just be punctual for once? This is the simplest thing. Be an adult.</p>
"I'm concerned about your spending."	<p>...When you aren't conscientious about money, I want to be more lax myself. It's lonely being the only one that budgets so that we can take fun trips together.</p> <p>...Why are you so irresponsible? You haven't learned how to manage money yet?</p>

You can see that three of the secondary communications exhibit more projection and attacking (they are about “you” not “I”). But others are more wholesome, where our frustration might be cutting us off from the vulnerable hurt part ([see my article on primary vs. secondary emotions](#)). For example, “it makes me feel unappreciated” or, “I want to feel like a priority”.

The vulnerable or hurt part is really saying, “You really matter to me” or, “I care about your opinion of me” or, “I’m afraid that your actions really mean that we are different or you might not love me like I love you.”

This is the most important part to share. It’s an opportunity for courage, opening up, and intimacy. It’s an opportunity for *getting to the root of the issue*. We need to be able to say what the dishes are really about!

The good news is, if you have a partner that also wants to learn about themselves, you can work on this together.

[See part II of this article](#)