

It's Not Really about the Dishes (Part II): Getting To the Root of an Issue with Your Partner

When your partner/spouse is frustrated that you didn't do the dishes, it's likely more meaningful than annoyance over a household chore.

Dirty dishes is a simple metaphor for day-to-day, mundane interactions within a couple that can be ripe for projections—making up a personal story and meaning for someone's behavior.

A sink full of dirty dishes is trivial. It's about what your *not doing the dishes* signifies for your partner.

There are ways of communicating with your partner that can get to the bottom of issues faster and yield more selfunderstanding for both of you:

Apologize and Ask About What Was *Actually* Upsetting

"When I didn't follow through, did you feel forgotten and unimportant? I'm sorry that I messed up last night, let me make it up to you tonight by cooking for you."

"You seem angry and that's justified. I apologize. I'm wondering if you might have felt disrespected when I didn't do what I said I would do. What do you think, love? You're important to me and I want my actions to communicate respect."

"I'm really sorry. I might be angry too if you disregarded my opinion. It seems like this might be about more than my impulsive purchase, but I'm not sure. What's happening for you darling?"

Apologize and Address the Deeper Meaning Directly

"Schweetie, I'm sorry I didn't do the dishes. I got involved in some writing and totally forgot about the kitchen. I said I would clean up. When I say I'm going to do something, you need to be able to count on me. The kitchen will be sparkling clean tonight."

"I can see that you are angry and that's understandable. I made a mistake and I'm sorry. Please don't insult me, it makes it more difficult for us to repair this. I can feel your anger, but are you also hurting? I bet I hurt your feelings when I arrived late. Maybe you feel like you aren't a priority. *You are* and my actions didn't represent that."

These have 3 important parts:

- 1)** an apology and/or acknowledging and owning the part you played in upsetting your partner
- 2)** validation of your partner's feelings
- 3)** addressing the secondary communication or the meaning underlying your partner's conspicuous emotion.

If my partner is disappointed or angry, I want to know *why* what I did was disappointing. I'm not rushing her through her anger or upsetness. I'm validating her feelings then asking her if she could pay attention to how this was particularly meaningful.

With an attitude of curiosity, openness, and warmth, I address her interpretation. Through this, she knows her experience is important to me.

Or, did I mean to communicate something by not doing the dishes, something I was acting out instead of verbally expressing?

This may seem hard to initiate and tiresome. But, I promise you a habit of clear communication will save you time and energy in the long run.

Both of you will be more understanding and feel more understood. You will recognize how and why you are triggered by mundane situations, like dirty dishes. And that's what matters because the dirty dishes don't.

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