

Praise for *It's Not About Communication!*

Dr. Bruce Chalmer's book *It's Not About Communication!* takes the reader "behind the curtain" of the whole couples therapy process. He demystifies the often mysterious and unknown experience of therapy so that couples know what to expect as soon as they walk through the door. Compassionate and informative, along with using a bit of humor, Dr. Chalmer shares his wealth of knowledge that comes from years of treating couples. **I recommend this book to both therapists and couples alike** who are looking for a roadmap of the couples therapy process. —**Dr. Alyson Nerenberg**, author of *No Perfect Love: Shattering the Illusion of Flawless Relationships*

It seems to most men that their female partner can talk circles around them... which holds them back from seeking couple's therapy. Seeing a therapist feels like a losing proposition to the average guy. However, Dr. Bruce Chalmer explains that it's not how you're communicating but what you're communicating that is the solution you seek to achieving deep intimacy, respect and comfort with each other. **If you're stuck in your relationship this book may be the catalyst you need to have the relationship you want.** —**Susan Bratton**, "Intimacy Expert to Millions"

Unlike so much of the help on offer these days, Dr. Chalmer offers an engagingly and endearingly clear path to this way to feel at home in the universe. **A breakthrough book for couples ready at long last to brave reality in all of its paradoxical splendor.** —**Jeremy Sherman**, author of *What's Up With A**holes? A Beginner's Guide to Advanced Psychoproctology*

Written in an accessible, conversational style, this book provides the unexpected solution to relationship problems in couples. Based on three key ideas and illustrated with case examples from clinical practice, Dr. Chalmer highlights the steps to lasting change. **A worthy resource for both couples and therapists who want to be effective.** —**Dr. Paul Foxman**, author of *Dancing With Fear*

D R . B R U C E C H A L M E R

It's Not About Communication!

Why Everything You Know About
Couples Therapy is Wrong

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
You're Already Communicating Effectively.....	7
Why Do You Want to Communicate, Anyway?.....	21
Ideas and Ideologies, Wonky Version	33
Ideas and Ideologies, Non-Wonky Version	55
It's About Faith	67
Busting Myths About Couples Therapy.....	91
Couples Therapy Under the Hood	115
Finding Couples Therapy That Helps.....	139
Acknowledgements.....	147
About the Author	149
References	151

INTRODUCTION

It's About Communication, Right?

“Great to meet you. So here’s my favorite opening question: How will you know if this is helping?”

“We need some tools to help us communicate better. Every time we try to talk about [insert pretty much anything here], we end up in a [screaming fight] [two-week silence] [screaming fight and then a two-week silence]. Can you give us some rules to follow so we can communicate better with each other?”

I’d say about two-thirds of the couples I meet start off with some variation on that theme. Those couples who don’t lead with communications issues are probably dealing with a crisis such as infidelity, and even they are often looking for ways to communicate better about it.

My wife Judy Alexander and I host a podcast, *Couples Therapy in Seven Words*, and by far the most popular episode to date has been “It’s Not About Communication.” (You can find our podcast at <https://ctin7.com>.) Another episode, “Maybe It Is About Communication After All!” was also one of our most downloaded episodes. As I see in the office when I meet couples for the first time, people looking for relationship advice are convinced that improving communication is the key to improving their relationships.

The basic idea of this book is that the problems you are having are (almost always) not about communication. And if you think couples therapy should give you tools to communicate better, you're probably wrong. And if you're a couples therapist who teaches those tools, you're probably not helping much.

As we'll see, the relationship problems you're having aren't because you need better communication skills. The problem isn't *how* you're communicating. The problem is *what* you're communicating. Indeed, in almost all cases (we'll note some interesting but relatively rare exceptions), you're already very skilled at communicating what you're feeling and thinking. You may be misinterpreting what your partner is communicating, and vice versa, but it's not because you lack skill. And rules won't help.

So, as the (admittedly overblown) subtitle of this book indicates, if you think as most people seem to, that couples therapy should be about helping you communicate better, you're wrong.

Who Should Read This Book?

This book is for people who want to improve their couple relationships, and for people who help others improve their relationships—in other words, it's for couples and couples therapists. If you're considering couples therapy, this book will help you know what to look for in a therapist. If you're already in couples therapy—or if you practice couples therapy—this book will help you avoid useless exercises and focus on what can actually help.

I am presuming some things about you, the reader, as I do about the people who come to my office for help. I realize that these presumptions aren't always accurate, but until I get clear evidence otherwise, I assume that (1) you're not crazy, and (2) you're not evil.

In presuming you're not crazy, I don't mean to be flippant about mental illness. By "crazy," I mean things like paranoid schizophrenia or other forms

of psychosis, where someone may be experiencing delusions that make it very difficult to perceive or accept goodwill from a partner. If you or your partner are dealing with that sort of mental illness, you will indeed have problems communicating. But even then, the solution isn't to teach communication skills; instead, you need to treat the illness.

I also don't want to be flippant in presuming you're not evil. We can all be jerks sometimes—it's part of our survival mechanism to be capable of acting in ways that can be hurtful to others. But I'm assuming that you're capable of caring about how you affect others. In thirty years of working with couples, I'd guess I've encountered three or four people who could be considered psychopaths or sociopaths,¹ in that they seem to have no concern for how their actions affect others, or, worse, that they seem to enjoy causing others to suffer. People in relationships hurt each other, but almost always as a result of either cluelessness or panic. If you really were a psychopath or sociopath, it's unlikely you'd have picked up this book in the first place, so I think my presumption is solid.

Of course, I hope you already know you're not crazy or evil. So why do I bother pointing out the obvious? Because a lot of the assumptions that people bring to couples therapy actually imply that they think their partners, or sometimes they themselves, *are* crazy or evil. As we'll see, when you can change those assumptions, healing becomes possible.

The Three Big Ideas

This book is organized around three big ideas:

1. **It's not about communication:** You don't need to work on communicating better. The problem isn't *how* you're communicating; it's *what* you're communicating. *How* follows from *what*.

¹ Google the difference, if you're interested in learning more.

2. **Ideas open possibilities; ideologies close possibilities:** If couples therapy is about rules for how to communicate, it'll be mostly useless. More generally, when you harden otherwise good ideas about how to relate into ideological rules, and focus on following the ideologies, you get caricatures of the original ideas, sometimes with horrendous results.
3. **Faith is what heals people:** The main thing you can get from couples therapy is faith—not necessarily religious faith—which is how you can face the scary task of recovering intimacy.

Once we've developed the three big ideas, we'll bust some myths about couples therapy—the myths that gave rise to my rather grandiose subtitle. Replacing those myths with a more realistic picture will give you a much better shot at finding or providing effective couples therapy.

Next, we'll take a look under the hood, so to speak. I'll give you a detailed view of how I like to structure a first session with a couple: what I say, what I ask about, and why. You'll get a sense of how the ideas we've developed in this book actually play out in practice.

About the Example Couples

The example couples are all realistic in the sense that I've encountered situations like theirs in my practice. But names and details have been thoroughly disguised. If you happen to be a former client of mine with the same name as one of my examples, it's entirely coincidental.

About the Reflections

At the end of each chapter is a Reflections section. These offer some questions for you to consider. In addition to helping you apply the ideas in the chapter to your own life, many of the questions in the Reflections also serve to introduce the ideas you'll be encountering in the following chapter. So I

highly recommend taking some time on the Reflections for each chapter before you proceed to the next.

Of course, many of the Reflections ask you about yourself in the context of a couple relationship. If you're not currently in a couple, feel free to think about a time when you were, or imagine a couple relationship you could be in.

As you do the Reflections, don't worry about getting it right or about avoiding inconsistencies. One of the subtexts of this book is that we all have mixed feelings. Let the different voices in you speak, even if they don't always agree with each other. They all have something important to say.

About the References

When I refer to an author's work, you can find the complete citation in the References at the end of the book.