



The Conversation: How Black Men and Women Can Build Loving, Trusting Relationships

By Hill Harper

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In his first book for adults, New York Times bestselling author Hill Harper invites you to join the Conversation: an honest dialogue about the breakdown of African—American relationships. For generations African Americans have turned to their families in times of need—but now, this proud and strong legacy is in peril. Black men and women have stopped communicating effectively and it threatens the very relationships and marriages necessary to sustain the Black family. Today, less than a third of Black children are being raised in two—parent households, a sharp decline from past generations. So, why is it so difficult for Black men and women to build long—term, loving and mutually beneficial relationships? What is happening in the community that makes it so hard for women and men to find their way to each other? And why are there so few people who manage to hold a marriage together, even after finding a person to love?

In his moving yet practical book, Hill Harper undertakes a journey both universal and deeply personal in search of answers to these questions. He has conversations with friends and strangers—married, single and divorced—and learns about their private struggles, emotional vulnerabilities, and real concerns, and begins to see common themes emerge. As his journey picks up momentum, Hill begins to recognize his own struggles in other people's stories, and is encouraged to more deeply examine his own relationship issues.

Why does so much misinformation and mistrust exist between the sexes? Hill addresses the stereotypes that have developed in the Black community, in the hope that by addressing the challenges, Black men and women can find their way to common ground. *The Conversation* aims to open up the lines of communication, and offers inspiration to those who want to take control of this crisis and start building successful, sustainable relationships.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Hill Harper trades solving crimes on-screen for a new mission: fixing relationship drama."

-*Essence*

"Hill's work presents a light, insightful, and accessible user's manual for African American men and women to better understand that which keeps us apart (and hopefully what can bring us closer together)."

-Wearerespectablenegroes.blogspot.com

About the Author

Currently starring in *CSI: NY*, Hill Harper has appeared in numerous prime-time television shows and feature films, including *Beloved* and *He Got Game*. He graduated magna cum laude from Brown University with a B.A. and cum laude from Harvard Law School. He also holds a master's degree in public administration from the Kennedy School of Government. He was recently named one of *People* magazine's Sexiest Men Alive.

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7.

The Language of Men

I'm glad I understand that while language is a gift, listening is a responsibility.

Nikki Giovanni,

world-renowned poet, writer, commentator, activist, and educator, and a mother since 1969

A lot of the women I've talked to ask me what's the best way to effectively communicate with a man. How can a woman know what a man is really thinking if she can't get him to talk?

It's almost a cliché to say that men and women communicate differently, but it does seem to be true. We're simply different. "It's like my boyfriend speaks a completely different language than I do," my friend Gail once said.

"That's because he's talking in the language of men," my other friend, Mary, replied. The three of us were having lunch. "If you didn't grow up with it," Mary continued, "it may as well be gibberish." She explained that she hadn't grown up with any men in her house, and so she'd never really learned to understand the language of men—the sports talk, the sparse replies, the sudden and deep silences. She acknowledged that she had, on many occasions, interpreted her ex-boyfriend's silences as emotional cruelty. "I honestly thought he was just being mean, giving me the silent treatment. I'd ask him how he felt and he'd just give me a blank stare and shrug. It drove me crazy."

Both women then turned and stared at me as if I could magically reveal the tools to properly decode this language that men speak—if and when they speak at all. Unfortunately, all I could share were my observations.

Linguistics scholar Deborah Tannen considers male-female conversation a form of cross-cultural communication. The innate differences in how men and women think, act, listen, and therefore communicate are so profound that it is as if we are products of completely different cultures. These communication differences have been seen as early as the age of three.

I started this book by explaining how I believe that Black men and Black women don't really even talk to each other anymore. I grew up watching my grandparents sit and talk. They talked about everything—from the weather, to the news, to the neighbors, to the grandchildren, to their plans, and then back to the weather again. Watching those older couples at the Blakes' home reminded me of the flow and ease of my grandparents' conversations. I loved how the men joked with one another and with the women. I loved how the women were an integral part of the exchange, either adding something affirmative to their husbands' statements or putting forth an alternative view, not just talking among themselves.

I wondered why it seemed so special to see men *and* women gathered together and talking. Then I remembered a panel that I'd been a speaker on the previous year. It was an all-male relationship panel at the Essence Music Festival in New Orleans. I was intrigued (and, to be honest, scared) to be a part of it because I wasn't sure what was going to happen. I mean, traditionally, men are not considered big talkers—especially not when it comes to relationships.

The thesis of the panel seemed to be that through a combination of biology, brain chemistry, and socialization, men are “doers,” while women are “feelers.” When women talk, they feel comfortable expressing their emotions. From the outside, it seems to be a required part of their discussions. When men talk, however, it's usually about something specific—sports, business, home repairs, movies, television shows, or making money. We concern ourselves with the mechanics, not the emotions or the minutiae of these things. We focus mainly on the nuts and bolts.

That, obviously, is a generalization. The truth is that if you spend enough time in a barber shop, at the pool hall, on the basketball court, on the golf course, or at any bachelor party, sooner or later, golden nuggets of men's true thoughts, questions, and concerns about women and relationships will eventually come to the surface.

Even then, the revelation is seldom direct. It is often shrouded in humor or made to sound like a passing comment, not something to ponder, dissect, and comment on. If the other men do comment, those comments will invariably also be shrouded in humor or peppered with playful insults and invectives—kind of like what happened when Don told us that he was going to propose to Robin. When it comes to effectively communicating with men, how a woman says something is nearly as important as what she says. Delivery is everything. Here are three particular things I know men universally dislike:

NAGGING

Men definitely want a woman by their side who has their best interests at heart. However, there is a fine line between having someone's best interests at heart and aggressively forcing an agenda on someone. If a man has made it abundantly clear, in his actions if not with his words, that the topic you've decided is crucial enough to revisit countless times means nothing to him, give up. He is not ready to deal with it. He might not

say that in so many words, but key in to his nonverbal clues. If he seems to shut down completely when you bring up a subject, then maybe you should back away a bit.

If it's something that you can't put off, try a different tactic. Draw him out by beginning the conversation with a question. For example, "How are you feeling about the recession? Is it having any effect on you? I'd love to hear how you're dealing with it." Nobody likes to feel as though they are being spoken at, rather than being spoken to, and a question makes it clear that you really want to hear his thoughts. Even if you respond with your own thoughts and you end up with a difference of opinion, at least you've both heard and listened to each other. Some women I've known deal with the fact that the men in their lives don't talk much by taking over the conversation. The only room the men are given to speak is at the end of the litany, and that doesn't seem at all like a space reserved for thoughtful opinion or an alternative view.

Scenario A

Woman: Babe, how do I look in this? Does it make me look like I've gained twenty pounds?

Man (hesitantly): No, hon. You look fine. You're as beautiful as you were the day I met you.

Woman: Is that supposed to be some sort of joke? I was thirty-five pounds heavier when I met you. I've been going to the gym every day, working my ass off to look good for you, and you don't even notice.

(Man drops his head and shakes it, suddenly losing all desire to go out to the dinner they'd been getting dressed to attend.)

Scenario B

Woman: Babe, how do I look in this? Does it make me look like I've gained twenty pounds?

Man (hesitantly): Don't get mad at me. You asked for the truth, so I'll tell you. It's not the most flattering dress you own. Why don't you wear the red dress you wore last—

Woman (upset): I remember a time when you always used to tell me that I was beautiful, when you really appreciated me.

(Man drops his head and shakes it, suddenly losing all desire to go out to the dinner they'd been getting dressed to attend.)

No one wins in this situation. The woman wanted to hear that she is still the object of her man's affections. He thought she just wanted an answer to her question, and when he realizes that she didn't, the man feels like he was trapped. The more this sort of thing happens, the more frightened the man becomes about remarking on his woman's appearance at all, which means that the woman starts to feel the only way she can get a compliment is to fish for one, and the whole cycle just feeds on itself.

The solution to this problem is to be more direct about your feelings. If you're not feeling especially attractive or sexy, then express that to your partner. He might know just the right—and sincere—words to offer to make you know that you are loved. Also, when he does volunteer a compliment you appreciate, go ahead and tell him so, and let him know he's welcome to say things like that anytime he likes. With a little encouragement, most guys will figure out that if something works they should keep at it. We are, after all, very trainable, when we're given positive reinforcements and rewards. Just like a puppy.

DROPPING HINTS

Compliments aren't the only things women ask for indirectly. Unfortunately, men aren't always that good at picking up on those hints. If you want a guy to do something, be direct. Don't be coy about it. Just say what you want him to do. Obviously it shouldn't be delivered like an order or command in a game of Simon says, but I'm not the only man I know who responds well to the word *help*, as in, "Can you help me out next Monday? I've gotta put my car in the shop and I need someone to give me a ride to take care of a few things."

Everybody likes to hear *please* and *thank you*; nobody likes to feel taken for granted. Even if the two of you are married or engaged or have been dating for years and years, you can still ask directly and ask nicely—and show your gratitude when it's been done. (Guys, that goes for us, too.)

I think sometimes women make too much of this so-called language of men. I believe that a man who wants to be an active partner in communication will be. If talking to your man feels like pulling teeth, maybe you should give your relationship a second look. See whether you've really developed a friendship. I know that men and women communicate in different ways, but we all share an understanding of what it means to be considerate of our partners.

Talking to someone you care about shouldn't seem like hard work. If it does, then maybe he is trying, through his silence, to tell you something. Yeah, I'll admit it; men can fall back on being passive-aggressive sometimes, too.

Withdrawal can occur when a man is overwhelmed by money, work, stress, or other things that he is trying to work out before communicating with you. So, it's not always a sign that a man is unhappy in the relationship when he turns inward. When something is bothering a woman, she usually doesn't hesitate to call a girlfriend to discuss her insecurities, issues, or problems.

But that's not how the male brain works. Some guys just need to process on their own first. It's got to be an extremely serious problem for me to call one of my boys and say, "Man, I need your help. . . . I need to talk about something."

Denise, a married friend, doesn't agree, because her husband is a great communicator. He will pull her aside and inform her that he is distracted or feeling distant, explaining that it has nothing to do with her but with other things in his life that he is trying to process. She usually gives him a few days, but if he's still emotionally absent she'll jokingly attempt to pull him out of this "funk." Because he understands his wife and himself, he lets her know as soon as he recognizes this shift. Occasionally she'll be the first to confront him on his pulling away. The point is, they are able to have mature conversations about what's going on. She believes this is one of the key reasons she is still in love with her husband after all these years.

Of course, withdrawal *can* also signal that a man wants out of the relationship. As far as the woman knows,

she and her man are still in a relationship, but in actuality he is long gone. The man resorts to silence, hoping that the woman will get fed up and make the decision to move on. That way he won't be blamed or held responsible for disappointing her, for shattering her hopes and dreams. It's difficult for a man to tell a woman he cares about that he doesn't love her anymore or that he does love her but not enough to remain in a relationship. At times, cowardly men just remain silent, and as I said before, I was one of those men.

Unfortunately, people respond to uncomfortable situations in a way of their choosing, not ours. Just as we intuitively know when someone is into us, we also intuitively know when someone is not into us. If you're willing to discuss the situation in order to stay together, but your partner is not interested in even talking about it, that alone should tell you where he (or she) stands. No amount of rationalization or excuse making is going to change what you already know deep down is true.

I'm not trying to place the burden of truth on the women's shoulders. This book is about relationships, starting the conversation that all men and women need to have and maintain in order to survive the odds and overcome the obstacles. If you're with someone who refuses to talk, the conversation is over. Period. It's as simple as that.

The distance that was present when I finally reached out to Nichole was created because I hadn't honored our initial connection. During that first call, it was obvious that she was guarded, not as open and forthcoming as she'd been the evening we'd met. And that's understandable. It was awkward, our conversation full of odd pauses and nervous chuckles. I ended the conversation by telling her, "I'll call you tomorrow."

It took a whole lot of strength, though, for me to call her a second time. I wanted the connection to come easily again, as it had when we met. But I knew that I'd have to work for it. I'd have to earn her trust, let her know that I was serious about getting to know her. I'd so admired the vulnerability Nichole displayed when she'd asked, "Will you call?"

I realized I had to allow myself to be vulnerable, too. Nichole had to be able to detect in me the same sincere vulnerability that I'd detected in her. Had I not been ready to grow, I would have resorted to rationalizations. I would have convinced myself that I'd done nothing wrong—*After all*, I would have told myself, *I'd promised her that I'd call, and I did call; I never said when.*

In fact, I almost started down that road. But when I did, I'd catch myself and ask out loud, as I had that night, "Who do you think you're fooling?" So I called Nichole that second time and I started the conversation by doing something I should have done during the first phone call; I apologized for letting so much time pass between the night we met and my call.

"I enjoy talking to you," I said, "and I look forward to getting to know you better." It wasn't a line; it was the truth—and that's what made it so difficult to say. I felt exposed. I ended each of those first few conversations by telling her when I'd call her again. And each time, I kept my word—because if people don't respect your time, it's an indication that they don't respect you. I wanted to lay a solid foundation for a possible relationship with Nichole. Eventually that easy, natural connection Nichole and I had returned, and our phone calls fell into their own natural rhythm.

While we're on the topic of communication, I want to bring up technology. In this new, cool world of high-tech, low-touch communication, we have the ability to send messages to anyone, at any hour, using any one of a variety of media. Whether it's Twitter or Facebook or e-mail or voice mail, we have no shortage of ways to talk. But are all these new advancements helping or hurting our communication?

There was a time when the only way to interact with the object of your affection was by being in the same

room with him or her. When lovers were out of visiting range, they had to write letters. Now technology has changed the game completely. When I have to quickly let a friend know that I am running late, I wonder how we ever got along before cell phones. Even if I know the person I'm trying to reach can't answer his or her phone, I can send a text.

The same technology that helps us to communicate can also hurt the quality of that communication, especially in romantic relationships. Many men don't like to have confrontations with the women they're dating. Is it any wonder, then, that so many of my female friends tell me that it is becoming more and more common for men to use text messaging to back out of a date with them, or even to break up with them? With text messages you can get your point across without any lengthy or uncomfortable explanations. It's also easier to manipulate the truth. Many of my male friends write things in text messages that they would never have the courage to say if they were looking the woman in the eye. And what's worse, many of my female friends allow men to get away with this type of "conversation."

We can also use the technology as a diversion. For instance, I am not proud to admit that I have sent the text "What are you up to?" to someone I was dating when I knew I didn't want to talk to her for the rest of the day but I wanted her to think I was checking on her. Not good.

Even if couples use technology to manage time and find ways to be more effective and efficient, it is still important to be aware of the ways in which we communicate with each other. Unless we're careful, relationships have the tendency to resemble business negotiations: We're dealing with our individual schedules, our kids' schedules, family dramas, financial decisions, social obligations, work and/or school commitments, professional deadlines. Those details can be all-consuming, and before we know it, all that other stuff has taken over the relationship.

Modern technology can expedite working out all of those details, but it can also make us feel as though we've had our fill of communicating with our significant other. By the time you two are actually face-to-face, in the same space, you're all talked out, even though you haven't really said anything. Before you know it, a relationship can be absent of any true and consistent personal connection.

You might think that sounds extreme, but it's very possible. I'd even say it's common. These high-tech methods of communication can sometimes cause a lot of confusion in relationships. There is no eye contact; there is no body language; there are no facial expressions. The nuances that come from tone and voice, and the visual cues we use to understand the significance of whatever is being said in person, are completely lost.

If you're face-to-face when a misunderstanding begins, you have the ability to say "Stop! That's not what I meant," and to correct whatever has been misunderstood. In person, we have a real-time awareness of when things are going right and when things are going wrong. The problem with "flat" mediums like texting, e-mailing, and instant messaging is that sarcasm sounds mean and jokes may sound dismissive when you don't have the intonation that makes them make sense. Statements meant as hints can sound like nagging or have no force at all. There are just too many ways for it to all go very, very wrong, very, very quickly.

I'm not saying that if a person e-mails or texts *I love you* to his or her partner, the person doesn't mean it. Plenty of couples find inventive and positive ways to use technology to enhance their personal communication and, thus, their relationship. But relationships are made in person. Communication is strengthened by looking into a partner's eyes, by holding hands while conversing, and by having the courage to say what's going on in our hearts, minds, and souls.

Just as we need to step up with our actions, we need to speak up with our emotions. We can't hide behind the ease of technology, the excuse of gender tendencies, or the history of our own bad habits. If we want to be with someone, we need to learn how to communicate—how to have our say, how to let someone else have

his or her say, and, most important, how to find common ground.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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