

Sam's Corner

“Setting the Tone”

I have been doing counseling for over twenty years, and I hear couples argue the issue of what a **“tone”** means at least ten times a week. That adds up to over ten thousand times I have heard couples discuss the confusion and disagreement about whether a tone exists and what it means.

It all begins very early as we hear our parent say, “Don’t use that tone with me young man (or young lady)!” Our look of confusion pleads our innocence but we are not believed. We may even go through our lives protesting the messages our tones send, but being very sensitive to the tones we hear from others. The truth is that there is a message conveyed by intonation with every verbal communication we deliver, and the message of our tone can be very different from the content of the verbal message thus creating a **double message**. Innumerable times I have heard, “Why are you so angry? I said I would do it.” Or I have heard, “I was just telling you the facts. Why are you so defensive?”

So how does one correct the problem of **setting a tone** that delivers a double message? One thing I have discovered is that we will **never** stop doing it, so that is not an option. However, I have also discovered an approach to deal with this problem that is generally more successful than the terrible arguments we all experience.

I have observed and learned that if a double message is received, it most likely has been delivered. Therefore, we can adopt the assumption that if we are told we are giving a double message through our tone, **it is true**. It may not be the message we want to give, and it may be mixed up with some other feelings of anger and frustration that have nothing to do with the situation. Whatever the reason, simply acknowledging that this has happened can calm the moment and open the door for us to talk about what we are feeling. This may not be very comfortable, but it is far more productive than the argument about whether it has happened or not. It also never hurts to apologize when we realize that we have really **set a tone** we didn’t intend or one that created confusion and pain. This responsibility is not easy to assume, but it works.

Sam Sligar, Th.M. is a Pastoral Counselor and licensed Marriage and Family Therapist. Sam is the Director of the *Crossings Counseling Center, Inc.* located at Christ the King Lutheran Church in Peachtree Corners. Your questions and comments are welcome. Sam’s email address is ssligar@ctklutheran.org and his phone number is 770-314-8247.