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Four Elements of a Successful Relationship

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Joe and Susan were concerned because their relationship was falling apart. Either they got into very loud verbal fights, or they went for long periods without saying anything to each other. Their children were starting to act out in school by fighting and receiving low grades. Joe and Susan came to therapy to learn to communicate more effectively. They both thought that there was still love in their relationship and they cared for each other, BUT... They were not so sure, however, that they could continue to live together under the present circumstances. Each felt resentful and angry toward the other and complained of experiencing depression and lack of energy.

Maintaining Feelings of Love

Most couples start out feeling love for each other, but how to maintain feelings of love in an intimate relationship is a major problem in today's society. We tend to look at love as something that happens to us rather than as something we do. We talk about love as an accident: "I fell in love" (like slipping on a banana peel). Because we tend to see love as an accident, the problem is that if I can "fall" in love, then I can just as easily "fall" out of love. As a result, we experience a tremendous sense of powerlessness and insecurity in our love relationships.

Many couples handle their sense of powerlessness and insecurity through anger, controlling, manipulation, smothering and/or jealousy. We often blame the other person for the break-up of our relationships: "Men are ..." "Women are ..." "You are ..." Or, we conclude that, "I cannot stand to be hurt this way again." For whatever reason we choose, we will put up barriers, feel powerless and isolated.

The result of all this powerlessness is that in many areas of the country, divorces outnumber marriages. Today, more than ever before, men and women are refusing to stay in "loveless" relationships. So the question becomes: How can you create successful loving relationships?

Four Requirements for a Successful Relationship

Relationships that are successful require four things. The first is willingness on the part of both people to share and accept each other's feelings. The ability to share feelings is essential to creating intimacy and openness in a relationship. Both "negative" and "positive" feelings need to be shared. It is important for us to learn acceptable ways of sharing and expressing these feelings so that we do not put people down or create hostility and anger in our loved ones. Acceptance means I acknowledge that what you feel is real for you and important. It does not mean that I like or approve of what you feel. Acceptance is the recognition that humans are not born with emotional on-off switches or that some feelings are good while others are bad. It is important to listen without becoming defensive. To do this, remember that to

listen does not mean I agree; to accept doesn't mean I approve. After someone has shared and we have listened, feel free to come back at a later time and say, "I really appreciated what you said, but I see it a little differently. If you are interested, I would be glad to share it with you some time."

The second requirement for a good relationship is that both people use a problem-solving method where neither one loses. Most families have learned to solve problems with right-wrong, win-lose methods. "You'll do it because I said so." "I may not be right, but I'm never wrong." The writer, Ernest Hemingway said, "Winner takes nothing." Win-lose problem-solving methods invariably create scorekeepers. Some people have called it "brown-stamping" or "gunny-sacking." This is when I let my resentments build and build until I have reached the last straw. Then, I can say, "See? He/she's done it to me again!" Now I can turn in my book of "brown stamps" for a divorce, affair, alcoholic binge, or the like. I justify my behavior by blaming the other person. "He/she drove me to it."

No-lose problem-solving looks at what things mean to me and how I feel about them. Then, I express these meanings and feelings to others, rather than judge or try to prove who is "right" or "wrong." Here are some examples of statements that are not allowed: "You always leave your clothes around." "You never listen to me." "You're under-sexed." "You don't love me." "You're irresponsible." "You're selfish." These types of judgments make the other person feel attacked and create defensiveness: "I did not!" "You did too!"

Remember, judgments are debatable, feelings are not. Judgments deal with facts and create win-lose situations where we end up fighting about who is right and who is wrong.

However, if you share your feelings about an event and what that event means to you, there is no way to lose a fight. The worst someone could say is, "That's a dumb way to feel. You shouldn't feel that way." Then, all I have to do is agree in part, "You're right, it may be a dumb way to feel, but I still feel that way. I wish I had a switch so I didn't have to feel this way."

The third thing a couple needs to make their relationship successful is values that are somewhat similar. Your values don't have to be exactly the same, but they should be close enough to be open to negotiation. Values include such things as religious beliefs and morals, child-raising techniques, and role expectations (i.e., couples should be sexually faithful, children should/shouldn't be spanked, a wife stays home with the children, the man handles the money, vacation plans, recreational activities, etc.).

Values are your beliefs regarding how the world ought to be, how families ought to be, and how your mate should be. Problems most often occur when you and your mate have not examined and discussed your values and expectations. Problems begin when you discover your values and goals are very different. Because values are your "truths," couples are not usually willing to compromise or change them to any great extent. What usually results is a contest of wills where you try to get the other person to change. Since "truth" is on your side, you will probably use any method to get change in the other person--including manipulation and/or outright threats. The resulting power struggle inevitably ends in feelings of non-acceptance and resentment for both parties.

The fourth element is the very cornerstone of a good relationship. Without it the other three cannot stand. This element is a willingness to work at the relationship. Sharing and accepting takes work. Problem-solving without losers is hard. Figuring out shared values can be a chore. The biggest lie we were told as we grew up was ... "and they got married and lived happily ever after." We were told that this was the end of the story. The truth is that it was, and is, just the beginning. Both of you need to commit to working on the relationship when the going gets rough during the inevitable "bumpy times." It is easier to stay committed when both of you agree that a great relationship is not just an accident and that it will take work.

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