

INSIGHTS THAT MY CLIENTS HAVE TAUGHT ME

KEYS TO A SUCCESSFUL RELATIONSHIP 40 YEARS AND COUNTING

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What is the secret of building a strong relationship that lasts? Bob and Roberta have been married for 65 years and this is one question that every reporter asks the couple. The answers that older couples give to this question are often silly or frivolous but it deserves a good answer. To start with, there is no single key to making a marriage work but there are at least four main elements that can keep your relationship together.

Your expectations can be one of the biggest hindrances to a successful relationship and peaceful co-existence. Each of you came together with numerous ideas/expectations of what a relationship should look like. For young people, many of their expectations of what a marriage should look like are based on what they experienced in their own family or have seen at the movies.

There are two ways you develop expectations for relationships. First, modeling after your parents is where you learn what a man is and does and what a woman is and does. As a result, you assume this is how you should act in your marriage.

As it turns out, this is not always a positive thing to do, especially if one or both parents have destructive behavioral patterns. Such as:

- Where one or both parents are alcoholics,
- Where one or both have been abusers, or
- Where one has played the victim while the other person has shut down emotionally, or
- Where the parents have been over protective or
- Where there was little or no emotional or physical protection, etc.

Some people learn to do what their parents did, while fewer people learn by making a commitment to NEVER do what their parents did! In either case, the vast majority of couples are not aware of where their expectations came from, much less how those expectations affect their relationships as adults.

Most fights are the result of expectations not being met. Whether it is about sex, time together, going to church or cleaning the house, it is all about expectations that you have for each other. When no problem solving is happening and/or expectations are not changed, then couples tend to act out their anger by various forms of fighting such as: not giving the other person what they want, having an affair, getting even (passive-aggressive behaviors), going on strike, etc. They do all of this instead of looking at their expectations and questioning, "Who says he/she should live up to my expectations?"

Here is an alternative, “I know it has got to be upsetting when I don’t live up to your expectations. Maybe, we need to talk about the expectations that we have for each other.” This is a first step that can lead to problem solving.

Commitment to staying together is the glue essential to staying together. Many people think that they have it made when they made their vows to each other but if you look at their behaviors afterwards, it is easy to see that they have missed the point. When expectations are not met, what is often heard is, “If we can’t get along any better than this, maybe we had just better get a **divorce**.” Where is the commitment in that?

The “D” word is intended as a threat to manipulate the other person into living up to “your expectations.” Threats of divorce, leaving, going home to mother is often just that, for after a few days or months, you will find them back together. It does not take long before the person threatening is no longer credible and the response is, “So, go!” This is not the worst part of using threats, both of you will become less open, less trusting, less vulnerable and loving to each other. Who wants to have the risk of the other person leaving always hanging over your head?

Never threaten a divorce or leaving unless you have the papers in your hand and are willing to move on with your life. Threats only get threats back.

Act out of love. Let me suggest a definition of love to help with this third key to a successful relationship. *Love is when someone else’s happiness is important to my happiness.* This definition starts with the premise that you are already happy and are NOT looking for someone to make you happy.

*Love is when someone else’s happiness
is important to my happiness.*

In this type of love relationship, you both are doing things because you wish the other person to be happy. You cannot make them happy (nor can that person make you happy) but you will feel sad for them if what they are doing is not getting them what they want. The only person you can make happy is yourself. If someone is hell bent on being unhappy, there is nothing you can do to change that. The only power you have is to change yourself. Once you have done that, then you can invite that other person into your happiness.

If the other person does not wish to change, then you will want to be supportive of the other person. You are not being supportive when you give answers or quick fixes. Here is what you might try, “Wow, that doesn’t sound like it came out very well. That has got to be upsetting. You need a hug? . . . I wonder how you could do it different next time.”

Many couples do not act out of love, but out of their fears, fears of abandonment, fear of being controlled, etc. You are making decisions about how you want to live your life every day.

Love orientated living makes the commitment that I will love you no matter what happens in our lives. When you change, I will embrace you as a dynamic growing human. You do not have to live up to my expectations, instead I will rejoice in your changes. I will love you whether you love me or choose to not love me.

So, I say to you
that there are two types of living.
One: fear-oriented;
one: love-oriented.

Fear-oriented living
can never lead you into deep relationship.
You remain afraid, and the other cannot be allowed—
cannot be allowed to penetrate you to your very core.
Up to an extent you allow the other,
and then the wall comes and everything stops.
--Rajmeesh 1931 -- 1990

Common values, beliefs and goals are part of what makes up expectations. When values, beliefs and goals are not similar, it becomes harder to accept the other person. What should the world look like? How should people treat each other in this world? What do you believe about God? How important is He to your life? How important should He be in your mate's life?

In terms of money, home, children and work, where do you think the two should be in five years? In ten years? In twenty years? How will you handle it if these goals are not met? Is your partner's picture of the future similar to yours?

What is the purpose of a woman? The purpose of a man? What is the role of a woman? The role of a man? What should happen if your mate does not fulfill their role or do what they said they would do?

Each of these areas is a source of possible missed expectations and conflict that can ruin your relationship. Often, young people have not lived long enough, or had enough experiences to even know what their view of the world is or to be able to make good judgments about their goals and beliefs. Good judgment comes from experience and experience, well that comes from making bad judgments.

Research suggests that the optimal time to get married is from the ages of 25 to 30 years of age. It is not a guarantee that your relationship will be successful but it does give you time to have some experiences, good and bad, to begin to clarify your goals and beliefs.

Problem solving methods where there are no losers is an essential element to making all of the above elements work. Expectations, values and goals are seldom set in stone and can be modified or changed. Life experiences are one of the major change elements that shape your expectations, values and goals. As new life experiences, such as the birth of a baby, divorce, or the death of a loved one comes into your life, your beliefs, values and expectations start changing. Remember the pregnant woman

who tells you, in no uncertain terms, how she is going to raise her child, and then when the baby is born, how that all seems to change?

Starting as a very young child, your expectations are set by watching mom and dad. "Mom and Dad will always be there for me and take care of me forever." Then suddenly one of them leaves. They are not there for you and your view of the world starts to change and become very unsafe. "If Mom could leave Dad, then maybe she will leave me." Now, as an adult, what are your expectations? Will the ones that say they love you abandon you again? Once you decide how the world is, how men are, how women are, you start looking for evidence to "prove" that your reality, your values, and expectations are correct and everything else is incorrect.

Problem solving without losers starts with the belief that reality is what you get used to and that values, beliefs and expectations are all learned AND what is learned can be unlearned. What should a man be doing in a marriage? Should he be doing what your father did? What should a woman be doing in a marriage?

Problem solving requires being clear about your own values, beliefs and goals at this point in your life (with the understanding that at some point, they may change).

Now, the next question is, "How much are you willing to risk to get what you say you want?" Not all of your values, beliefs and goals are worth dissolving the relationship over. Are you willing to risk the loss of the relationship? Without being willing to risk a divorce, you will probably not get what you want! I am not recommending divorce as a starting place (you do not play your highest card first). Divorce is a way of looking at what is really important. Asking yourself, "Is this value/belief worth a divorce," will help you set a hierarchy of what you are willing to fight for. The goal is to choose your battles carefully. Only the narcissistic person believes that they will or should get everything that they want in a relationship. Problem solving is the art of compromise.

The pessimistic person defines compromise as, you not getting what you wanted and I'm not getting what I wanted, so we end up with something that neither of us wants! It does not have to be that way.

Start with sharing your feelings, one at a time. Make sure that you do not confuse feelings with judgments. Feelings are internal reports and, as such, are not debatable because no one knows what you feel except you. If someone tells you "that is not what you are feeling," all you have to do is say, "Never-the-less, that is what I feel."

There are four rules that separate judgments from feelings.

1. Judgments are debatable, Feelings are not. **If you find yourself in a debate, what you shared was NOT a feeling.**
2. If your "feeling" statement says, "I feel that . . .", it is not a feeling, it is a judgment.
3. "I feel like. . ." is also not going to be a feeling statement.
4. If you can substitute "I think," for "I feel," it is a judgment.

When you confuse judgments with feelings, it can be like putting out a fire with gasoline. However, if you share what you feel, you will not lose. If you share "I don't feel loved," which is a feeling and the person says, "You're right I don't love you; I've just been using you." That is something you probably did not want to hear, but isn't it better to

hear it now than to hear it ten years from now? The chances are that is not what the person will say to you. What you are more likely to hear is “That is stupid; you know I love you. You shouldn’t feel that way.” That is when most people feel discounted and putdown. Then they shut down and stuff their feelings. BUT, wait a minute, do you have a button you can push and not feel what you are feeling? I don’t. So, all you have to do is use one of the two magic words, regardless or never-the-less. “Regardless, that is what I feel, it may be the stupidest thing I’ve ever felt. I don’t like feeling this way, never-the-less, it is what I feel. Now do you want to keep telling me I shouldn’t feel this way, or do we want to talk about what would help change these feelings?”

Now is the time to start problem solving. “It is not right or wrong what you are doing, when you do _____ it just doesn’t make me feel loved. Would you like me to feel loved?”

This is a good time to start taking turns of making requests of each other. This would sound something like, “Would you be willing to. . .?” The other person can only answer with one of three answers: “Yes, I will or No, I will not or Yes, I will under these conditions. . .”

Successful, fulfilled, long term relationships do not just happen by accident. They are the product of two people agreeing on their expectations, commitment to each other, having common values and goals and being able to do problem solving without either person losing. Now, someday when a reporter asks you what is your secret to your long relationship, you will be able to tell them.

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