



Affective Center for Therapy

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LOVE AND ACCEPTANCE

Love without acceptance is corrosive and manipulative and does not feel loving!

Over the years, I have noticed a number of things that can destroy a couple's relationship, but there is one negative fighting style that stands out. That is when one person is a yeller and screamer while the other person shuts down and becomes resentful, bitter and/or becomes passive aggressive. This combination is not healthy or conducive to marital harmony and happiness. And yet, couples continue this style of combat year after year. If it is not helpful, then what is the purpose of yelling and screaming? What is the purpose of shutting down? What are you trying to accomplish?

For over 80 years, scholars have discussed the "fight or flight syndrome" as it applies to human behavior. In the animal world, this behavior is exhibited between different species but is not common within the same specie! Seldom do animals of the same specie fight to the death, unless they are trained and forced to do, such as in dog fights.

To apply the fight or flight model to human interactions gives a misleading picture of interpersonal relationships. In the animal world, within the same species, there is what is called the "pecking order." One dog asserts dominance while the other rolls over and exposes its soft underbelly or backs off without the fight to the death.

This type of behavior is also true of elk, lions, elephants, chickens, seals, etc, etc. and humans in relationships. The yeller/screamer/thrower tries to assert control to get the other person to do "what they are supposed to do." If you are the yeller/screamer, what you are saying is, "I want you to live up to my expectations. You should meet my needs." In these types of cases, there are two major types of expectations that are often not being met:

1) "I want some kind of emotional response from you." Some children and some wives have found, for them, it is better to be "beaten" either physically or emotionally than to be ignored. "Being ignored is like being dead; you don't exist."

2) "I feel powerless over your behavior (drinking, staying out, not helping around the house, etc)." As a result of feeling powerless, the person resorts to verbal and/or physical violence to "make" the other person meet their expectations. The ultimate tragic end could be in the death of one of the partners. This type of final solution was portrayed in the movie, THE WAR OF THE ROSES. Fortunately, this is the exception. Usually, there may be some yelling back, but even in these situations, sooner or later one person will leave the relationship or just give up, roll over and play dead. To be able to do this, the person has to talk themselves into staying by coming up with some rationalization:

a) "This is as good as it gets. If I left, I would find someone just as bad or worse. --- I don't deserve anything better."

- b) "I need to stay for the children," (so they can see what a real bad relationship is like).
- c) "If I end up fighting with you, I could hurt you because I get so angry I could lose control." Or,
- d) "It just isn't worth the fight."

Couples, who fight, want to fight!

Fighting always takes two people. If one person refuses to fight and the other person continues, then it is not a fight. It is just one person pummeling another.

In most cases where one person gives up and "accepts" the relationship, you can expect to see passive-aggressive behaviors start to appear in the less aggressive person. There used to be a sign the read, "I don't get angry, I get even." This is the definition of passive-aggressive. This can happen even in the animal world. I have a friend who moved her boyfriend in. Her dog did not take this kindly, so when it became evident that the boyfriend was not leaving, the dog would jump up and pee where the boyfriend was now sleeping! Now, that is what I call passive-aggressive behavior.

May I suggest that instead of just the two responses, fight or flight, there is another alternative? Submission can be with or without resentment. Fight, flight or submit are all legitimate options.

Submitting Without Resentment

Submitting without resentment requires that you pick your fights carefully. Resisting just to "prove" that you have control and that no one controls you is a trap that many couples fall into. If you have to "prove" that no one controls you, then you must have some doubt or you would not have to prove it!

Submitting because, "I recognize this is important to you, and I love you enough that I want to do this for you," is very different than submitting because "I don't want to fight."

The person holding the expectation can make it easier and more likely for the other person to respond by giving up the expectation (should) and making it into a request. Instead of saying, "You never help and you should. I feel like a maid always cleaning up after you (You're such a slob)."

Next time, as a request, say something like, "Sometime, when you want me to feel loved, you could do the white clothes on Tuesday." (Note that the request is specific in regard to behavior and time, not "help around the house.") Then, when it happens, be sure to reward appropriate behavior! Do not respond with, "Well, it is about time you did something around the house."

The reason many people will not ask in this way is that they are afraid that if the person does not do what is requested, that means they don't love you. NOT true. There are a lot of times that you may choose not to do something for another, and it does not mean that you do not love them.

Submitting With Resentment

Resentment comes from the repression of feelings, not the expression of feelings. The passive-aggressive behaviors only work for so long before they start to fail. This is because the submitting/resenting person tends to keep silent "score."

When the score gets high enough, then there is “justification” to strike back by having an affair, getting a divorce, or physical violence. Remember the movie, THE BURNING BED?

The question is how to change this deadly cycle of yelling and shutting down? This could be stopped during the first stage, where both are yelling. One of the combatants could stop yelling and screaming, while the other person could stop responding in kind. Both could start expressing their resentments in calm terms. This can best be accomplished by using an object such as a pen, small ball, or Kleenex as the talker’s tool. Whoever holds the tool is the talker. The other person has to listen until the tool is passed to them and then the talker becomes the listener. In this way, only one person talks at a time. If you want to be listened to, then you must be willing to listen!

For such an earth shaking thing to happen, both persons need to give up their old expectation that their mate has to live up to their expectations and agree on some new expectations about listening and making requests of each other. This is the part that is very hard to do. After all, what did you get married for, if it was not for your mate to take care of you and make you happy? In the **fairy tales**, didn’t they get married and live happily ever after? No one had to work at listening; the relationship just happened!

Herein lies the problem. You can NEVER make another person happy! The only person you can make happy is yourself. If someone is hell bent on being miserable, there is NOTHING that you can do to make them happy. For instance, someone who feels guilty may believe that they do not have a right to be happy and may unconsciously choose to feel depressed. Or, negative thinkers choose to see the world in negative ways as a way of protection from disappointment. Unhappiness sometimes results from the belief that people should do what I think they should do, not what they do. In any case, you cannot make someone happy unless they allow you to.

The definition I have chosen for love is, “Love is when someone else’s happiness is important to my happiness.” This definition starts with the assumption that you are already happy. If the other person chooses to be unhappy, you can feel sad for them, but it does not change your happiness!

So, one of the expectations you might consider giving up is that **it is your job** to make your mate, or even your children happy. A better expectation than it is your job to make someone happy, is inviting them into your happiness. If they come and join you in being happy, that is beautiful. If they choose to remain unhappy, that is sad. That is their choice.

How do you go about giving up that expectation? Start with the fact that you were born without any expectations. Every expectation that you now have is something that you have learned or accepted as the way things/people “should” be. Expectations are yours to keep or reject. Fritz Perls M.D. expressed this giving up of expectations and acceptance of each other for who they are in the Gestalt prayer:

I do my thing, and you do your thing.
I am not in this world to live up to your expectations
And you are not in this world to live up to mine.
You are you and I am I,
And if by chance we find each other, it’s beautiful.

If not, it can't be helped. (Frederic Perls 1893 – 1970)

The only part I disagree with is the last line.

Fritz, what do you mean, "It can't be helped?" Of course, it can be helped! The only problem is that most people are not willing to give up their expectations of the other person and accept them for who they are. Acceptance is always a choice.

Acceptance does not mean approval or that you have to live with that other person. Acceptance means that I accept you for where you are and do not judge you. I can feel sad for you when I believe that what you are doing is self-destructive and/or non-productive, but I will not lay a guilt trip on you. I can see that you have beliefs that I find are 180 degrees different from mine and I can accept that is where you are.

However, I might **suggest** that it seems to me that what you are doing does not look like it will get you what you want in the long run. I can accept that you may not see that or change. I can accept that where you are is where you are choosing to be until you choose to be somewhere different. As an adult, I accept your decision that you have a right to do and/or believe whatever you wish. However, if I believe that what you are doing is destructive, dangerous and/or illegal; I may choose not to have us live under the same roof.

Love without acceptance is corrosive and manipulative and does not feel loving! The key to acceptance is taking your judgments off of yourself first and replacing them with "Isn't it interesting. Isn't it interesting that I really screwed that up. I wonder how long I want to keep doing that?" Once you can accept (love) yourself, then you can start looking at accepting other people by, again, taking off the judgments and replacing them with "Isn't it interesting." I not saying this is easy, but it essential if you want to feel loved and you want your partner to feel loved. The problem is not finding the right person to love; it is loving (accepting) the person you have found.

- ✓ What are your expectations for your mate?
- ✓ What behaviors in your mate do you find hardest to accept?
- ✓ What is it in your background that has shaped your expectations?
- ✓ How could you express you expectations without the "always" and "never," or without demanding, controlling or using sarcasm?

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