



"STRENGTHENING YOUR (BASICALLY) GOOD RELATIONSHIP... (...While It's Still Basically Good!)"

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Our relationship with a loving partner, a 'significant other' by marriage or other commitment, is among the most important of all connections we experience in our lives. Many committed relationships succeed and thrive, while many others falter and fail. Many more (and some would say most) relationships, sadly enough, simply survive, limping along, or otherwise 'merely existing', sometimes for years. And yet, they survive! Finally, we know that nearly all relationships (including even the best ones) at some time, endure difficult, trying and often very painful periods.

In this E-Tips I will offer a step-by-step process specifically addressing those relationships that are basically good, and could be wonderful - with a little work. Each week we will focus on one simple, yet profound and challenging question that committed couples can ask, and explore, individually and together. The self discovery and learning to be found in fully addressing these critical issues may help put commitment, trust and intimacy back into the love that you know is still very much there.

Question Number One:

"What's the 'glue' that created your loving bond in the first place, that holds it together now, and that makes working on it worthwhile?"

Before beginning any work identifying and fixing 'problem' areas in a relationship, a productive FIRST STEP is to consider the foundation on which your love rests. By reminding yourselves and one another of the good things that brought you together, and keep your love going, you set a positive tone for the difficult discussions to follow. At the same time, you build up a reserve of good feelings about one another, and the relationship, on which you can fall back, if/when you begin to hear the little voice asking why you're putting yourself through all this now.

When problems develop in a significant relationship, we are naturally drawn to focusing on what's wrong, because the issues often fly in our faces at almost every turn. (If we think about it, couples seldom sit down to talk about their relationship, or seek help, when things are going well!)

However, whenever we focus on problems we also tend to feel the effects of those problems, which usually have something to do with hurt feelings, broken trust, anger and frustration. It takes a lot of emotional energy to cope with these negative feelings, and not have them dampen your communication, or feelings for one another. In addition, it's not difficult to imagine that the atmosphere around such discussions is hardly a supportive one for generating creative ideas or motivation to resolve the issues at hand.

Remembering the good qualities you love, respect and admire about one another taps into your relationship's wellspring of positive energy and emotions. Spend some time individually reflecting and writing notes to generate thoughts you may then come together and share during a quiet walk, or sitting in the comfort of your home. Once established, these positive, loving truths can form the basis and motivation for productive, honest sharing about mutual concerns and needs.

Question Number Two:

"What would I be willing to change, or do differently, in order to make this relationship better?"

Whenever two people disagree, there is a tendency to get caught in a cycle of blaming one another for words spoken or unspoken, past or present mistakes, errors, mis-communications and other problems related to interpersonal relations. When that happens, a number of unfortunate - and preventable - events occur:

- Effective Listening erodes (or washes away entirely!)
- Finger-pointing flourishes!
- Self-Defense (protectiveness) becomes the 'sole dynamic'
- Mutual Trust is minimized
- Feelings go foul

This frustrating, sometimes painful, cycle has been labeled the "Blame Frame", as it definitely feels like you and the other party are trapped in a square box, often with no visible way out, short of 'caving in' and admitting you're wrong.

(Admitting you are wrong, by the way, is actually a VERY EFFECTIVE TACTIC if, in fact, YOU ARE WRONG! Accepting responsibility for your words, actions and behaviors is a highly honorable asset that gains far more than it loses, by way of commanding respect - and infuriates those who can't or won't rise to your level!)

Stopping the 'Blame Frame' is a very simple matter, **if** you will simply **give up focusing on your partner's mistakes and faults**, and look instead at your own issues. By considering what YOU might be willing to do differently to help improve your relationship, you accomplish three essential tasks in effective communication:

- Accept responsibility for your own thoughts, feelings, words and actions (I cannot blame you for "making me feel..." anything. My reactions are mine, alone.)
- Demonstrate openness and willingness to make things better
- Hold your loving partner responsible for his/her 'stuff', as well, trusting that s/he will meet your open, honest efforts equally.

Question Number Three:

"Am I willing and ready to do the work that will help to make this relationship better?"

Regardless of the nature or depth of its strengths or difficulties, almost no loving relationship is entirely beyond the need for, or hope of, improvement. Individuals committed to being together (and being happy) can almost always find growing edges in their love that can reclaim, or further develop, the magic that brought them together in the first place. The question to ask is not, "**Can this relationship be helped (or be saved)?**" The answer to that is, Yes, of course, if you both want that. And, if you are willing to put in the effort and work that may be required to open up, take risks, listen (really listen), and honestly share your thoughts, feelings and needs. A more productive question, perhaps, asks each party to consider and decide wholeheartedly, "**Am I willing and ready to do whatever it will take to make it better?**"

Strengthening a (basically) good relationship is challenging, in and of itself. It doesn't take many years of loving and/or living together to establish solid, yet unwritten, roles and expectations of one another, as well as patterns of communicating, listening, reacting and relating to one another. For example, many relationships, healthy or struggling, may include varying degrees of any of these basic role dynamics:

- O Spender / Saver (Does one partner 'give' the other partner 'allowance'?)
- O Cautious Planner / Spontaneous Spirit (When/How and by Whom do weekend social plans get made?)
- O Runner / Chaser (How many rooms in your home are visited, and how many tries does it take, before a serious issue can be resolved?)

We tend to be creatures of habit or, at least, familiarity. If/when our familiar patterns become dysfunctional, we very often don't even recognize it, or we may feel generally frustrated, but don't know what's wrong, or how to address it. Then, when the erring pattern ('rut'?) is brought into the light, there are the old monsters of human pride and defensiveness that crop up and, sometimes, reek havoc on your efforts.

Asking yourself if you have what it will take to improve your relationship is like taking an energy inventory, checking your supply of motivation, coping mechanisms, conflict resolution skills, support systems, and the like. This exercise helps in three ways, for you first consider what supplies you will need, then take stock of those resources, and finally begin the opening up process. If you decide that you have what you believe you need, you become ready to commit your whole self to the effort, and you have actually already begun the searching and exploring process. Hopefully, your partner has reached the same conclusion, and you can both begin to really talk and listen, neither blaming, nor demanding from one another. Rather, you will have set the stage for open sharing, which leads to deeper understanding and intimacy for your mutual effort.

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