

BUILDING AND MAINTAINING A STRONG RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR SIGNIFICANT OTHER

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Alfred Adler, the founder of Individual Psychology, helped us understand that “all the main problems of life are problems of human cooperation.” He emphasized the importance of finding our place among fellow human beings as “an equal among equals.” Adler helped us to understand how our inclination to avoid being in a position of social inferiority is so strong that no one will tolerate being in such a situation. (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956) When you see a relationship in which one partner seems to be agreeing to settle for a position of inferiority, look again, look more closely, because somehow, somehow, the person who senses himself to be in a position of inferiority is likely to overtly or covertly deny his cooperation to the person who is treating him disrespectfully.

The keystone of every cooperative relationship is respect for one’s self and one’s partner. We must sensitize ourselves to behavior that is disrespectful of ourselves and others. We must identify it in ourselves and reduce its presence.

Respectful behavior does not include attempting to control our partner or the relationship. It does not include making disparaging comments about our partner, or citing imperfections of our partner to our partner or to others. It does not mean winning an argument or insisting upon being right. It does not include blaming our partner even if the placement of such blame is accurate. It does not mean using humor as a thinly veiled attempt to belittle our partner. It does not include punishing our partner openly or covertly by means of anger or tears.

It does not mean using our superior financial status to demean or control, nor does it include using our greater command of logic or facility at debate to belittle our partner or attempt to make her powerless. It does not mean using alcohol to make life appealing as a substitute for the natural high which is a corollary of a respectful effort to face life’s daily problems. It does not mean using overt or subtle means of punishing a partner for our perception of his failure to meet our needs or wishes. It does not mean feeling mistreated or unappreciated when we conform to our partner’s wishes and leave our own thoughts and wishes unvoiced, and it surely does not mean using a coddling relationship with a child to gain a position of superiority in the marital relationship.

A means to help us get a clearer view of the private logic we use that gets us into difficulty in intimate relationships is to take a bit of time to focus upon the models for relationships provided by our parents. If you experienced your parents’ relationship as one in which both parties demonstrated their respect for themselves and their spouses, you are indeed fortunate and probably are amongst a relatively small number of people. If even one of your parents modeled these positive characteristics you are quite fortunate. However, having such models does not compel us to act in the same manner as our parents in relationships, but at least we have the opportunity to observe respectful approaches to a relationship

in action, and we have the opportunity to make such behaviors part of our approach to life as we move through the process of creating the belief system that becomes part of our style of life. (Ansbacher, Ansbacher, 1978) More frequently, we experience modeling of behavior between our parents that falls short of the ideal. Such modeling may include the following behavior:

- A parent who dominated a spouse.
- A parent whose primary goal was to please a spouse.
- A parent who expected to receive special service.
- A parent who used anger and/or tears in an effort to have his way or punish his spouse.
- A parent who took little part in family life and essentially abdicated family responsibilities and neglected loved ones.
- A parent who abused alcohol and helped to create an unsafe and frightening atmosphere.
- A workaholic parent who valued achievement to the detriment of the relationship with a spouse.
- A parent who was a martyr, whose effort to gain a high state of moral superiority involved laying down her life for the family in order to be above reproach.
- Parents who frequently were involved in conflict and disharmony.
- A parent who felt sorry for himself or herself and who adopted the style of the victim.
- A parent whose primary goal was to be right.

The list of possible mistaken approaches to life that may manifest themselves in our parents' relationship is probably unlimited, but the above list provides some idea of the information available to us as we are creating our own approach to the challenge of forming a respectful and cooperative relationship. The conclusions we draw from our observations become part of our belief system and are manifested in the style we will use in our relationships. We may copy our parents' style, we may attempt to improve upon our parents' style, but frequently we reject and even guard against a style that we judge as mistaken.

We can analyze our own feelings and thoughts about mistakes we believe our parents made, and we can analyze our feelings and thoughts about aspects of our parents' style of interaction which we value. This self analysis can help us understand what may constitute a position of inferiority for us. ("I would not be a worthwhile person if I made the mistake my parent made," or, "I would not be a worthwhile person unless I can emulate the good characteristics my parents brought to their relationships.") Understanding aspects of the private logic we bring to our intimate relationship can place us in a position to be more aware of our choices. It can put us in a position to be much more aware of what we would judge to be an imperfection in ourselves. Such insight can help us to be aware of our inclination to guard against falling to a position of assumed inferiority in the relationship by use of any of the great variety of tactics we human beings may use in an attempt to prove our superiority.

When we wish to focus upon developing a more respectful approach to our intimate relationship we must adopt an approach to our relationship that is not complex, but on the other hand, is not always easy to implement. This approach begins with self acceptance. Self acceptance requires us to acknowledge our imperfections while simultaneously regarding ourselves as an "equal among equals."

While we may indulge in a lifelong effort to reduce our imperfections, a great deal of the strength we bring to our relationship with our partner (and elsewhere) is derived from our understanding that such imperfections do not require us to perceive ourselves as less than others. We do not need to perceive ourselves as less than others when our imperfections are revealed to us by virtue of our own insight, or when highlighted by others including our partners, or simply by the challenges of daily living.

Probably the most beautiful quality we human beings possess is that we absolutely choose our attitude towards every situation we encounter. When we picture ourselves as being relegated to a position of social inferiority by virtue of our partner's behavior it greatly increases the likelihood that we will attempt to compensate for that perceived position of inferiority by belittling our partner or in other ways attempting to place ourselves in a position of superiority through some uncourageous and selfish means.

Kurt Adler, son of Alfred Adler and a highly successful psychiatrist and teacher in Manhattan for many years, wrote that the most powerful thing that therapists have to offer their clients is to help them understand themselves more clearly – to understand what they are up to, what they are trying to accomplish with their behavior. I believe this is also the most powerful thing we have to offer ourselves.

Increased understanding of our objectives includes learning to use our emotions as clues and signals that can alert us to the private logic we are using and the objectives we are seeking.

When we wish to strengthen and maintain our relationship with a loved one we are being so courageous and caring when we recognize that we are calling upon the emotion of anger to help us defeat or punish our "loved one." We need to train ourselves to understand that when we call upon resentment, anger, and rage we are preparing ourselves to fight or punish our partner. No one "makes" us angry. In fact, it is impossible for your partner to "make" you angry. How fortunate for mankind that regardless of the treatment we receive from our partner, we are not forced to become angry and vindictive, but instead can seize the moment to remind ourselves: "I am beginning to get angry, and obviously the purpose of doing so is to help me defeat or punish my partner. I am not certain what I will do, but I am certain what I will not do. I will not attempt to overwhelm or punish my partner." Such action may involve "quitting when we are behind," or letting our partner have the "last word."

In such situations strength comes from focusing upon those matters we control, side stepping the inclination to feel put down, and capturing in our mind the loving, courageous, generous thought, "my effort is going to be to help, not to win or punish."

Sometimes, it is helpful to invite our partner to focus on our mistakes: "I realize I am getting myself angry and I'm not much help to us when I do that. Let me take a little break and come back to this when my effort is to help instead of fight."

By means of such an action we are passing up the opportunity to make ourselves superior by putting our partner down. This is a courageous and respectful act. So often we find that when we treat others with respect, it is difficult for others to treat us disrespectfully. It is not impossible, of course, but it becomes

more difficult. Such courageous decisions on our part often stimulate our partners to feel caring towards us and to lose the will to treat us badly.

Couples will benefit enormously from understanding that the issue in a fight is almost never what it seems to be. We may believe that the fight is about some disagreement as to how we should discipline our child, or which parents we should visit during Christmas holidays, but if we are in a fight, the real issue is “who will win and who will lose,” “who will control my life,” or in other words, “who is up and who is down.”

In a fight each person knows exactly what the other person should do, which is the most useless information he can have, because the other person is not going to agree. It is actually comical to picture one partner saying the in midst of a fight, “You know, that’s a good point, honey. I never thought about it that way.” So our point is, teach yourself to recognize when you are getting ready to fight. Recognize the courage and love of self and others you are manifesting at that moment. It is so valuable to learn to encourage yourself. If others are a source of encouragement to us, it is very nice, but that decision is out of our hands. If you learn to encourage yourself, you possess an endless supply of encouragement.

One might ask why am I not focusing more upon methods to bring about cooperation, the collaboration that we hear is so important in a relationship? What about compromise? What about sex?

Well friends, this is the way it works. Once you are able to accept yourself and your partner with your imperfections; once you are able to side step the inclination to feel put down and put your partner down; once you have reduced the use of the disjunctive emotions that turn you against your partner; a byproduct of such behavior is that many obstacles to communication, to cooperation, and to genuine displays of affection have been removed. You see, we simply cannot move in two directions at once. If I am against you, I am not for you. When the greatest impediments have been removed, the rest of the job is easy by comparison. Perhaps the most common detriment to a loving, cooperative, affectionate, productive relationship is not the overt displays of power that we see in some households, but rather the very subtle, covert and passive use of power that is present when we are not openly fighting but are commonly against one another, resisting, jostling and often hiding our real intentions that are tied so tightly to our determination to avoid some position of assumed inferiority.

No structured approach to cooperation will have any lasting effect until we truly view our self as “an equal among equals.” Our mentor Alfred Adler said it this way: “Comrades must be equal, and when people are equal, they will always find a way to settle their difficulties.” (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1978)

Of course, our willingness to relate to ourselves and our partner in such a manner does vary, but once you and your partner have experienced the reality of the relationship of which I speak, you possess the recipe. You have the road map. You can find your way back to the path where you move forward hand in hand, addressing the problems that life brings your way.

References

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