

Love that Lasts – Basic Communication Techniques

At the core of our humanity, it seems we all want to love and be loved by someone special. Even if we find this someone special, it's amazing the number of things we do to muck it up, stir the pot, and put to the test how much we love or can be loved. It's what we now call normal.

Let's start with...The beginning....

When you and your partner first got together, you probably had some conscious and unconscious dreams about the kind of relationship you would create together. Grand and glorious hopes they were. However, after about a year or two, normal stress and predictable disillusionments arose. Perhaps some event brought on disillusionment that hit you like a ton of wet sand.

That doesn't necessarily mean anything is wrong. It just means you have left that temporary state of "love psychosis" and now are beginning to see a much bigger picture of your partner and yourself. So how can you think creatively about your situation?

A couple bonding together is a lot like two people beginning a successful start up company. In a start up company, the two people are excited about what they are going to build and the rewards to be harvested. They're aware of the synergy of talents, values and desires. Plans are made and each person is responsible for follow through. Both people know there will be unpredictable and inevitable obstacles. Adjustments, big and small, will be required.

The key point is that partners in a successful start up know there will be problems no matter how good the initial plan and product is. Success requires one adjustment after another. And it requires ongoing communication about being on track and tackling problems as they occur. Lots of communication.

Of course there are limits to this parallel. The entrepreneurs expect problems. Most start up relationships don't. So the attitude is very different when the ugly problems show up. The kinds of problems are also different. But one key parallel for successful relationships is the attitude "Of course there will be struggles, so let's deal with them--together." Ironically, relationships get a little easier when it's accepted that there will be problems -- no matter who you are with.

Think about the bliss, energy and hopes you had in the first stage of your relationship. These were major driving forces behind the decision to say "I do." What were your dreams? What kind of future did you wish to create? What kind of partner did you think you would be? What values did you keep and strengthen? What values have been challenged and stretched? What interests have you let go that are still important? What interests and goals have emerged that are surprising to you? What has changed that you appreciate and don't appreciate? What areas need new actions and new ways of thinking?

Sometimes the thought of having these discussions with a partner brings on anxiety. Maybe the discussions will cause more distress than inspiration. In some couples, the discussions are avoided and partners languish in silence. Or maybe the discussions are avoided because of the time and energy of daily life demands.

However, when successful start up businesses hit the wall, they will make time to rethink the challenges they face.

Tips on How to Communicate

Here are a couple of guidelines: Take turns talking. One person has the floor for a while. You can discuss the questions above and add more of your own. Your partner recaps what they are hearing. They also ask questions for clarification or to get examples. The listening partner does not defend himself or justify previous actions. The role is to understand, and understanding does not mean agreement. This is to ensure understanding and make it emotionally safe for the speaking partner to express items of importance.

Then change roles. The listener becomes the expressing person and talks about items of importance to them. A key factor in this dialogue is not to try to solve problems. The biggest obstacle for success in this kind of dialogue is premature problem solving as in, "Well, what should we do about it?" Those questions will engage a different part of your brain and you simply will not be able to get full expression of important information. The problem solving needs to be delayed for another meeting.

Getting things out is a very important stage of problem solving. Tolerate the tension that goes with describing your vision in stages. Patience is a valuable virtue in this situation. It builds a more collaborative foundation to deal with problems later.

So go out for a quiet dinner. Relax. This is a discussion about hopes and dreams. You've had it before with your partner. You can have it again. And remember to give each other lots of appreciation for engaging or reengaging in these discussions. Be compassionate, courageous, caring, and open and you will have a rewarding evening that's the beginning of important new growth for you together.

*Adapted from the Couples Institute, Ellyn Bader, Ph.D. and Peter Pearson, Ph.D.
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