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communication and healing

Invalidation: painful put-downs

Invalidation is a pattern in which one partner subtly or directly puts down the thoughts, feelings or character of the other. People tend to stop sharing their innermost feelings when they think they will be “put down.”

- Janet: (angrily) You are late again tonight. I had dinner ready and now it's overcooked.
Mike: (defensively) It looks fine. I don't know why you get so fussy about things that don't matter.
Janet: I put a lot of effort into it and even though I tried to slow it down, things are dried out.
Mike: It doesn't matter. It tastes fine to me.
Janet: That's because you wouldn't be able to tell the difference. I could serve you shoe leather!

Mike doesn't want Janet to feel bad about the meal being ruined (nor be angry at him for being late). He tries to re-assure her, however, he is minimizing Janet's feelings. This invalidation just makes her feel worse. She goes on to disparage him!

We also experience invalidation when we are expecting praise for something we have done that ends up being ignored by our partner, while some minor problem is highlighted. If we have worked hard all day on a project and our partner comes home and only notices that we never got out to mail the letters we said we would mail, we are likely to feel hurt and angry.

A wedge is created between partners who invalidate each other. It feels risky to share experiences when people expect to be put down. Invalidation hurts. It is one of the best predictors of future problems and divorce.

Preventing invalidation is important. We do not have to agree with how our partner feels. We do need to acknowledge and demonstrate respect for the other's point of view. Let's look at how the above conversation could have gone:

- Janet: I feel hurt when I go to a lot of effort to prepare a nice meal and you come home late.
Mike: That really upset you didn't it?
Janet: Yes. I understand that you will be late sometimes. I would just like to think I am important to you and you would let me know.
Mike: I understand what you are saying. It's hard to feel important when I am late and don't even call.

In this scenario, we can see how Janet raised the issue in a softer way: she started by talking about how she was feeling. Mike was able to tune in to Janet's feelings. She felt respected and heard. By connecting with her feelings, he was able to reach out and bridge the gap between them. Validation is a powerful way to build intimacy and reduce anger and resentment!

(These concepts are developed in: *Fighting for Your Marriage* by H. Markman, S. Stanley and S. Bloomberg)

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