



Wendy Trainor
communication and healing

Qualities of a good relationship

There are many qualities that make up a good relationship. Unfortunately, growing up in a patriarchal society, we are not well versed in the skills required to maintain a positive relationship. Young girls are taught to silence themselves and please others, a sure way to end up feeling angry and resentful. Young boys are taught to disconnect from their feelings, a sure way to feel isolated and disillusioned in a relationship. We are all taught the romantic notion that there is one “right” person for us out there and when we find that person and hook up with them we will live “happily ever after.” We don’t learn that there is a natural cycle of harmony and disillusionment within relationships and that we will have to work hard to keep our relationship in good repair. This is a natural ongoing process when two flawed human beings get together.

In order to have a successful relationship we need to develop new ways of being in the world that stand up against the rules of patriarchy. There is no ideal way for a relationship to be. We need to value our relationship for what it is. It is easy to glance at someone’s relationship at a party and find our relationship defective by comparison. Deep love comes from accepting our own and our partner’s imperfections. Real intimacy evolves as partners struggle with their own flaws and those of their partner.

We need to learn what we can and cannot change. We cannot change our partners, only ourselves. Yet, paradoxically, as we change, we leave room for our partners to be different too. We need to understand that all of our needs will not be met in our relationship. At some point we will need to make a conscious choice to say: “Enough of my needs are getting met in this relationship that I am willing to deal with the loss of those that aren’t getting met.” We need to recognize that we will need to grieve the loss of those things that we do not get and that this grieving process will be ongoing throughout our relationship.

The ability to be vulnerable with our partner is evident when we are in a good relationship. We feel safe enough to express the truth of what we are experiencing in our lives – whether that is about problems with a colleague at work or issues that are affecting our sexual relationship with our partner. The focus of a couple’s dialogue needs to be on our feelings, our experience of what is happening in the relationship. We naturally turn to our partner for emotional reassurance when we feel vulnerable. If our partner is able to respond to our needs, the relationship remains in good repair. It is like putting money in the emotional bank account. If our partner does not respond, we need to be able to dialogue about that. When people give up on ever getting their needs met and move away from their partners they feel resentful and become distant. The energy and passion is sucked from the relationship. Problems end up affecting the sexual relationship.

It is easy to see how the ability to listen effectively is another important attribute of individuals in a good relationship. This requires us to have a good sense of ourselves: we need to be able to hear what our partner is saying without being reactive or defensive. We need to realize that when our partner is upset it is important to respond to their needs. If it is about something we have done, our rationalizations of our behaviour are not important

to our partner at that time. We need to apologize for our transgressions and make an attempt to repair the damage. The message has to be: "You are important to me. I will take the time to listen to you and notice when you are feeling hurt. I will do what I can to make amends and to be more sensitive to your needs in the future."

While our boundaries need to be permeable enough to allow our partners to influence us, they also need to be strong enough for us to step outside of battles with our partner. If we get hooked into battles with our partner, arguments escalate and nothing gets resolved. For example, if your partner criticizes you for not getting the kids to bed on time, it is important to acknowledge any truth in the statement and any agreement you may have broken with him by not doing this rather than launching a counterattack about how he forgets the garbage and doesn't help enough around the house.

Successful couples learn how to negotiate. Women often have to move from complaining about the past to making requests about what they want in the present. Men often have to learn sit down and negotiate with their wives and not agree to something they have no intention of doing.

We all have issues we bring to our relationships from our family of origin. They are like invisible threads tugging at us and having us react in certain ways to our partners. We need to be aware of these issues and be willing to do the work to break old patterns. We all have blind spots to our own issues. This work often has to be done in therapy. When we have a good sense of who we are, it is easier to keep our own issues separate from those of our partner.

In this fast-paced world with dual-income relationships, couples often do not spend enough time together to nurture their relationships. Just like plants, relationships will wither and die if they are not tended to. We need to cherish our relationships and give them the attention they deserve and approach our partners with the tenderness we long for.

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