

Healing and Strengthening Significant Relationships

An ecological framework for couples therapy.

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Posted on PSYCHOLOGY TODAY on Aug 16, 2020

"Every evolutionary step is an addition of information to an already existing system. Because this is so, the combinations, harmonies, and discords between successive pieces and layers of information will present many problems of survival and determine many directions of change."

—Gregory Bateson

Significant relationships are a process, a union that comes to fruition through mutual learning. It is a systemic journey where each moment is simultaneously part of wider instances. The essential caveat regarding this sacred union is understanding how each context is unique and defies labels. There are no one-fits-all strategies.



"Alchemy" Source: (c) Natasha Rabin

Context is what influences us in a multitude of ways. It is where we evolve and supersedes dependency on content. Significant relationships are an agreement when seen holistically, they may not be permanent, but regardless allow us to rise above narrow cause-and-effect thinking to resolve discord. With this understanding, there is little room for fragmentation and blame since there are infinite possibilities to explore and celebrate.

This framework, which I have used successfully for the past thirty-five years in my Couples Therapy practice is based on recognizing that we are interdependent. "It takes two to know one." Learning about ourselves through dialogue with another, informs us about the many attributes and resources that we possess. It creates "liminal" opportunity that anthropologists describe as the exploration of new terrain through reciprocity and improvisation.

The quest to understand ourselves through the gift of relationships emanates from the legacy of how we have managed conflict in our lives. **Conflict can produce creativity and is a segue to aesthetic rewards.** Ask any artist about what motivates their work.

To enhance our relationships, it helps to know the workings of our Nervous System, which has two main parts and is defined as being Autonomic, (meaning that it is vastly automatic). There is a Sympathetic state, commonly called the fight-or-flight part, and there's the Parasympathetic part, which is the calm state. The largest component of this amazing system is our Vagus Nerve named for its Greek meaning of "wandering." This incredible nerve is true to its name, traveling throughout our body, from brain to gut, regulating our metabolism, heart rate and most importantly our emotional well-being. It is the nerve that glows with compassion, and unfortunately when compromised as a result of unresolved conflict, creates fear and insecurity.

When our HPA Axis goes into action, (the Hypothalamus Pituitary and Adrenal Glands, which are our central stress response system) the Hypothalamus releases corticotrophin, which binds with the Pituitary Gland and releases the Adrenocorticotrophic hormone to stimulate the Adrenal release of Cortisol (ironically the Pituitary Gland can also release Oxytocin, the "cuddle hormone" when people bond). All this activates our fight-or-flight defense response that threatens our Vagus Nerve. This makes us dumber since blood rushes to our appendages to get us to safety, not a good time to work on our relationships.

If we see our relationships as threatening or adversarial, we are sabotaging them. The Autonomic Nervous System does not differentiate between the loss of a loved one or not getting a parking space. Given the state of our society and world, it may not be healthy to be saving our life 24 hours a day and in an autonomic manner rather than creating an atmosphere that makes use of our potential to "cuddle."

Managing our Nervous System when experiencing conflict is obviously a high priority to help navigate relationships. **The ability to recognize what sensations are occurring supports mutual learning which is essential in a healthy relationship.** This awareness helps us to better recognize our strengths and resources to adjust, choose, and create from the many options that await us. I use various healing modalities in my practice that soothe the Nervous System, such as meditation, visualizations, Homeopathy, Qigong, Tai Chi, Aikido, Coherent Breathing to mention a few, all of which help produce an environment in which to find solutions that encourage healthy communication. This in itself, is a work of art.

We all have our core concerns and simultaneous desires to make a difference in our lives. The initial foundation for sustaining good relationships is being committed and not ambivalent to learning from each other. This is the only way to strive for producing contexts that will be equitable. Understanding our interdependency depends on collaboration that accepts individual legacies, diversity, lifestyle and views of the world.

When commitment and equity are established and beneficially maintained, our nervous system works properly and enhances our immune system, making it easier to have harmony in our everyday interactions and communication. **We can form a synchrony when we are truly mutually connecting,** which manifests in good vibrations that our species possesses and has access to if we so desire. This includes, especially for significant relationships, the hundreds of ways to get it on. From best friend to a shoulder to cry on, to sharing a walk in the park, to the nonverbal connections we long for, all of which bring closeness and forms a 24-hour type of foreplay leading to improved intimacy.

Here are some steps to an ecological approach to mutual relationships that I have learned and used over the years in Couples Therapy that can enhance your significant relationships.:

- 1) Accept that all relationships, especially significant ones, are a holistic process that depends on a non-ambivalent commitment to mutually learn from each other.
- 2) Establish and maintain equitable power and roles with regard to respecting each other.

- 3) Agree to communicate in a non-violent manner based on win-win communication that will create a biological connection, while pursuing the infinite ways to be respectful and intimate.
- 4) Celebrate the many possibilities that mutual learning has to offer. Utilize improvisation, appropriate healing modalities and exploration to be aesthetically creative.
- 5) Accept that we are all fallible, make adjustments by learning from our mistakes, and most of all be safe and well!