

IMPROVING RELATIONSHIPS

by [Claudette Coombs](#)

This is the introduction to a series on improving relationships. This year expect to see a series of articles with topics on: Past Influences; Future Expectations; Communication; Listening; Making Time; Understanding Anger; Fighting Fairly; Crisis Management; Surviving Betrayal; and Enhancing the Positives. The intent is to offer insight into the difficulties experienced in relationships and provide practical suggestions which can alleviate problems and strengthen constructive interactions.

This month's article will address the expectations we have when we enter a relationship and how they set the tone for further development or difficulties. For ease of communication, the article references a couple's relationship. However, many issues are similar in relationships with family members, colleagues and friends.

Understanding Human Nature

Before we can understand a partner, and even before we can really understand ourselves, it helps if we know about human behaviour in general. We are each born with unique traits, talents and predispositions and then the environment takes over. This "nature vs. nurture" philosophy has been used to explain, excuse and describe all sorts of good and evil. If we can accept that we are all born with a specific genetically pre-determined potential, then we can begin to understand our level of control in influencing the direction of that potential. Although our physical appearance, intellectual capacity and personality styles have already been programmed by the time we are born, what happens afterwards actually determines our development. Our experiences, both joys and disappointments, and our lessons learned and reinforced throughout childhood and adolescence lead us into a distinct and unique adulthood.

By the time we reach adulthood we have adopted fairly fixed behaviours and patterns of interactions. Some of these have been beneficial during certain phases of our lives but may now be obstacles to establishing mutually satisfying relationships. For example, during our single university years we may have settled into a rigid cycle of study and time off which was repeated on a weekly and semester basis. If we are stuck in that cycle, it doesn't work well for the required flexibility and demands of family life. We have also explored and refined our interests and personal abilities. We may excel in some areas but may have very little insight into, or awareness of, the skills and talents in other areas. This is obvious when we research theories on knowledge development, multiple intelligences and personality styles. It also becomes very real when we try to understand others from our vantage point. We experience conflict and frustration if we fail to see the innate and learned differences among ourselves. Understanding our commonalities and divergence does not guarantee that we get along perfectly with others but it does give us the tools to live in harmony with others and support their differences without challenging our own credibility and value.

Understanding the Players

Self: Our comfort level with ourselves plays a significant role in the success of any relationship in which we engage. When we understand our needs and how they differ from the needs of others we are in a better position to have our needs met in a relationship. What do we enjoy or detest? What do we find comforting, stimulating, relaxing or exciting? What things are important? What things give us a sense of achievement or success? What criteria have we used in making significant life decisions in selecting career, friends, home and hobbies? How do our interests and choices compare to those of our friends?

By clearly defining what we expect from ourselves and from others we can understand why some things give us pleasure and some things cause us pain! Self awareness is a prerequisite to being content with ourselves and creating fulfilling relationships with others. It gives us the necessary ammunition to identify

personal gaps, then to fill them. For example, we may not realize that we are poor listeners but performing a self assessment of our communication skills will reveal the weakness and enhancing our listening skills will open a whole new avenue for personal growth.

The Partner: We enter a relationship with ideas about the new partner. Some are realistic, others not. As time progresses we become more familiar with our partner's thoughts, values and behaviours and we develop a more comprehensive picture of our partner. While the excitement of a new relationship may allow us to overlook things, later revelations will likely cause us to revise our understanding. The more we know and the more willing we are to openly accept the realities in our partner's life, the better equipped we are to make the relationship work. We don't use this idea to excuse flaws which are unhelpful and can be changed. Instead, we use this information to identify areas where improvements are possible. It is important to know that we do not begin with a premise that we must change our partner! We have enough of a job trying to make changes within ourselves, we don't need the added stress of trying to change other people.

Understanding the Relationship

Inviting someone else into our personal space is done for only one reason we see a personal advantage in doing so! This is true even in helping out a complete stranger. We "feel good" because we have been able to provide assistance to another. And of course, we all want to "feel good" and therefore we engage in behaviours that cause us to feel that way. Sometimes the feeling is short lived, such as eating a calorie-rich dessert to make up for a disappointment; sometimes it is the anticipation of feeling good that inspires behaviour, such as saving for the downpayment on a new house; and sometimes we incorporate behaviours and changes into our lives that provide an ongoing and long-term good feeling. This is experienced when we feel that we are doing the "right thing" for ourselves. Selecting a partner should bring this kind of feeling. NO this does not mean that there will never be questions, frustrations, anger, hurt, or a sense of loss! It does mean that we establish a baseline and even with the natural lows in a relationship, we feel good about ourselves and the relationship. If that feeling has somehow gone into hibernation, it is time to re-examine our goals and behaviours.

The perceived advantages to uniting with a partner vary greatly and depend on the needs, personalities and expectations of the two involved. For example, I may enjoy socializing and being around people and activity. When I realize that and clearly explore the consequent implications on an intimate relationship, I can look for ways to satisfy my social needs without overwhelming a partner. By understanding where my partner's comfort level fits in the spectrum of social contact, I am also able to work with him to accommodate our discomforts and heighten our pleasures. If instead I expect my partner to feel the same as I do and want things exactly as I do, then I am headed for certain conflict.

As educators we constantly seek improvements. Too often that search focuses on our professional rather than personal capacity; however, improving relationships can have a tremendous impact on the quality of our lives in any capacity. To create change we must first be aware of the need for, and benefit of, making that change. The next step is collecting the information and support to make the changes and finally, we must practice the new patterns until they become automatic. The upcoming articles will provide the opportunity for self assessment and the instruction for change. It is up to you to analyze the status of your relationships and incorporate the actions that can bring about improvements.

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