

The Value of Intimate Relationships and the Challenge of Conflict

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The value and importance of human intimacy is examined as a complex combination of passion, commitment, friendship, and love. Models of healthy and unhealthy conflict in relationships are offered as well as suggestions for moving from unhealthy expressions of conflict to healthy ones.

Human intimacy is a complex combination of passion, commitment, friendship, and love in which two individuals experience a compelling desire for ongoing close interaction with each other. Such interactions typically span the full range of human activity. Intimate relationships are social, physical, intellectual, and spiritual. They support work, leisure, and learning. Unfortunately, popular media (television, movies, books, magazines) often offer a modern view of the risks of intimacy, which seems to imply that attempting to find a life-partner is fraught with such peril and low probability of success that one might better spend the time learning how to be comfortably alone. There is a great sadness to such a widespread perception. We are in fact social creatures. At the very center of our social system is, or should be, deeply caring relationships. Intimate relationships provide mutual support, mutual fulfillment, and promote positive growth and development. These relationships are the bedrock of the fundamental social system: the family. It is important then to affirm the value of intimacy and to identify ways to maintain a healthy intimate relationship. As a beginning, let's examine some of the benefits of such relationships.

Mutual Support

Individuals involved in significant intimate relationships provide to each other a sense of concern and compassion in times of stress and difficulty. This readiness to be supportive gives evidence to an emotional bond that leads each to care about the other's concerns and values. If an issue is significant to one, it is by definition significant to the other. This is not to imply husbands and wives or other intimates necessarily share all interests. In fact this is usually not the case. Differing interests appropriately foster and validate the individual's uniqueness within the relationship. What it does mean is that when one partner is distressed the other feels discomfort as well, and when one partner is happy or excited the other shares in that joy.

Individuals involved in significant intimate relationships provide each other a sounding board for thoughts & feelings. There is not only an empathetic, shared, emotional experience but a willingness and interest in helping each other explore areas of concern and develop useful ideas, perceptions, and plans of action. Individuals involved in caring relationships not only care; they act with each other to negotiate life's challenges as successfully as possible.

Individuals involved in significant intimate relationships provide protection from the physical, social, and emotional pains that afflict us from time to time. In word and in action there is evidenced a genuine desire to protect each other from harm whenever possible. An Irish proverb asserts, "It is in the shelter of each other that the people live." Daily acts of protectiveness (reminders of outside obligations, carrying heavy items, picking up some cold medicine at the market) are regularly evidenced in caring relationships.

Mutual Fulfillment

Individuals involved in significant intimate relationships provide a sense of completion or wholeness to each other. We are social creatures with strong emotional and physical drives toward intimate bonding. Meaningful companionship contributes significantly to one's sense of well being. The mutual awareness that two people hold each other in high regard and will actively work for their mutual benefit provides each with a sense of security. This security brings confidence in their ability to successfully meet needs and discover life's joys.

Individuals involved in significant intimate relationships provide each other the opportunity to construct a new social system. Family is the most significant social system to which we belong. As individuals grow and develop, their roles within the family change. Through adolescence and early adulthood, individuals appropriately transition out of the tight social network of their family of origin. Formation of an intimate adult relationship provides the opportunity to continue the experience of new and fulfilling family relationships throughout the life span.

Individuals involved in significant intimate relationships augment each other's sense of value or self worth. The support and concern inherent in such relationships increase and bolster one's sense of self worth but does not create it. A healthy relationship is composed of two individuals who begin with a positive sense of self, as opposed to two individuals whose self-doubts or insecurities are allayed by their developing partnership. All significant relationships experience times of uncertainty, especially in the formative stages. Uncertainty about the value or stability of the relationship should not translate into uncertainty about the value or stability of oneself.

Promoting Positive Growth and Development

Individuals involved in significant intimate relationships encourage continued mutual development of skills and knowledge. Through their ongoing interactions each seeks and facilitates opportunities for improvement, gain, and growth for themselves and for the other. Through encouragement and genuine interest the individuals support each other's efforts to acquire new skills and life competencies. By believing in each other they give permission to try when success is not assured and provide comfort and reassurance when setbacks occur.

Individuals involved in significant intimate relationships also encourage the discovery of new or untapped aspects of self. As a subset of the above consideration, each encourages the other to expand possibilities, interests, and capabilities, which lead to a strengthened sense of self worth, a better functioning individual, and a better functioning relationship. Areas of dissimilar interest can intrigue and entice partners to explore new possibilities, new forms of expression, and new areas of growth that might not have been considered without exposure to a valued model such as a loved one.

Involvement in significant intimate relationships promotes interdependence. The nature of such relationships promotes a mutual reliance on each other as a source of strength, support, and fulfillment but does not demand or expect that either or both become dependent on the other for positive feelings or experiences. The life of each is greatly enhanced through the relationship. Each is a competent, capable individual whose possibilities and opportunities are expanded through the cooperation, support, and encouragement available within the relationship.

With these benefits attached to intimate relationships, there is a great deal of individual investment in maintaining this rich source of personal satisfaction. What then are some of the reasons why

relationships lose their vitality or in some cases actually become destructive to the individuals involved?

Sources of Conflict

Failure to Clearly Communicate Expectations or Needs

Conflict often occurs in a relationship when one or both individuals are unable to successfully articulate what it is they want from the other. As noted above intimate relations are a rich source of support. When partners do not effectively communicate what kinds of support are needed it lessens the chance that such support will occur.

Failure to Legitimize Another's Expectations or Needs

When a relationship becomes unbalanced it may no longer be viewed as a mutually supportive experience. Individuals may cease to perceive the relationship as a combination of mutual expectations but rather attempt to define the relationship based solely on one's own expectations.

Failure to Meet Another's Expectations or Needs

When, due to a lack of understanding, a lack of interest, or a lack of skill, one or both are unable or unwilling to meet significant expectations of the other, serious conflict is likely to result. Significant expectations are those that an individual views as essential to maintaining the supportive character of the relationship. Such expectations can differ quite markedly from relationship to relationship and from one individual to another within a relationship.

The occurrence of conflict within a relationship is not unusual, nor is it necessarily threatening to the stability of the relationship. The manner in which conflict is identified and addressed is in fact a significant measure of the health of the relationship.

Healthy Conflict

Healthy relationships demonstrate persistent attempts to resolve conflict rather than maintain or ignore it. Both parties seek to resolve problems with confidence in their ability to do so and respect for each other's point of view. The fact that conflict occurs is not an overwhelming or paralyzing experience. There is evidence of trust in self, trust in the other, and trust in the relationship. Blaming is of much less interest than mutual acceptance of the problem and mutual discovery of solutions.

Healthy relationships contain persistent attempts to clearly communicate one's perceptions about the conflict. Communication about one's concerns is relatively direct, clear, and specific. Successful problem solving is seen as dependent on successful communication of one's perceptions. Reliance on hints, guesses, or behavioral acting out is avoided or at least minimized. There is an understanding that to be understood one must be open, honest, and direct.

Healthy relationships make persistent attempts to seek perceptions of the other about the conflict. A genuine attempt is made to seek and understand the other's point of view. Successful problem solving is further seen as dependent on successfully listening to and understanding of another's perceptions and point of view. There is a reluctance to accept uncertainty and active attempts are made to seek clarification.

Healthy relationships show persistent attempts to seek resolutions that respect the rights of each partner and recognize the responsibilities of each. Individuals in healthy relationships see workable solutions that share responsibility and mutually meet needs as far as possible. Fairness and respect are important concerns for both.

Healthy relationships display persistent attempts to seek, acknowledge, and tolerate the possibility of differing expectations within the relationship. Each realizes that the other may have some conflicting needs, interests, and expectations, which will require tolerance and understanding. All desirable change, from one perspective, may not be possible or even desirable from another. As long as these differences are not too great and are not considered central to the relationship, the relationship may still flourish.

Healthy relationships acknowledge that the relationships may dissolve if differences are too great. There exists an awareness that in any developing relationship essential differences may interfere with the ability of each to mutually support the other. There is also an understanding that if this is so, the relationship may need to be dissolved. Individuals typically will work earnestly to prevent this. However, when necessary, such dissolution will occur without excessive blame or self-recrimination. It likely will be viewed as a sad but appropriate change in the lives of both. In contrast, unhealthy relationships commonly evidence distinctly different manifestations of conflict.

Unhealthy Conflict

Manifestations of unhealthy conflict often focus mainly on the needs or expectations of one party. Either through mutual agreement or through coercion, one party becomes the central focus of the relationship. Meeting that singular set of needs and expectations builds a glaring deficit in the notion of mutual fulfillment and creates an emotional storage bin for resentment and discontent.

Unhealthy conflict is also found where there is disregard for the rights of the other party. Because of the distorted unilateral focus, one party inappropriately loses rights and assumes responsibilities of the other. The misperception that one individual's needs are more important than the other's leads to the mistaken conclusion that this favored individual's rights proportionately outweigh the other's.

Unhealthy conflict often assaults the dignity and self worth of one or both partners in a relationship. As a means of maintaining this imbalance partners attack the dignity and the human value of the other in order to justify the relationship's concentration on only one set of needs and expectations. The devaluing of one is an attempt to justify the emphasis placed on the other.

Unhealthy conflict often fails to acknowledge personal responsibility for one's actions. One or both parties fail to accept ownership of problem behavior such as assaultive or degrading attacks. The perception of one person being responsible for the feelings or behaviors of the other becomes mistakenly legitimized. Messages are given and accepted that feelings and behavioral choices of one partner are "caused" by the other.

Unhealthy conflict often focuses on altering partner's perceptions rather than discovering and understanding them. Within this distortion of balance and abandonment of mutual respect, concerted attempts are regularly made to shape another's perceptions to fit one's own, without discovering the nature of the other's perceptions or considering the possible validity of these differing perceptions. Altering feelings and perceptions takes precedence over discovering, validating, and respecting feelings and perceptions.

Relationships that contain unhealthy conflict often seek to control partners and not to negotiate for solutions. Ongoing efforts are made that attempt to require compliance to one's expectations as opposed to gaining agreement to mutual expectations. Various forms of coercion or seduction are viewed as legitimate tools to manipulate another's behavior.

Manifestations of unhealthy conflict often oppose the right to differ. One or both parties see differing perceptions or opinions as an inherent threat to the continuance of the relationship. A strong perception persists that disagreement within a relationship is by

definition commensurate with the disintegration of the relationship.

Couples experiencing unhealthy conflict often reject the possibility that the relationship can change or dissolve. As a corollary to the previous erroneous assumption, one or both parties see the termination of the relationship as an intolerable threat to one's sense of self worth and well being. A strong perception persists that disintegration of the relationship is by definition commensurate with the disintegration of the self.

Finally it is important to acknowledge the resiliency and dynamic quality of human relationships. Even if a relationship has many qualities of unhealthy conflict it does not automatically mean doom for the relationship itself, or the individuals in it. Inviting behavior provides some fundamental ideas on rebuilding a troubled relationship.

Re-establishing Equilibrium

Self Assessment

Initially each individual needs to ask a set of questions aimed at identifying how one contributes to the current difficulties. Such questions include, "How do I contribute to unhealthy conflict? Do I inflict pain or attempt to control? Do I invite or allow this behavior?" The goal is for each party to acknowledge how and when their personal behavior is problematic.

Partner Assessment

Secondly, an honest assessment of how each partner perceives the other is likewise important. How does each contribute to unhealthy conflict? Does one attempt to inflict pain or control? Does one solicit or allow this behavior? The goal is to acknowledge and find ways to honestly share mutual perceptions of the other.

Affirm and Maintain Mutual Respect

Each party must propose and practice respect for self and others while overtly verbalizing the worth of each person in the relationship. Each must make conscious attempts to act on the belief that each person is of equal value. Unhealthy relationships often operate on unstated "rules of engagement" which directly violate the expectation of mutual respect. Overtly stating the importance of mutual respect makes it difficult to covertly violate this principle.

Affirm and Maintain a Commitment to Change

Partnerships can be salvaged best if the couple caringly and assertively invites each other, with the possibility of a healthy relation by using conflict resolution. At the same time, each should withdraw from the prospect of continually maintaining the current unhealthy relationship. An unhealthy relationship need not end if it can be healed. Partners need to assure each other of their honest commitment to establishing a supportive, caring relationship.

Withdraw from Control & Abuse

An equally important message a partner must sometimes deliver is the refusal to remain in harm's way. Various forms of abuse or control may be evident in unhealthy relationships such as:

Social Control: Including attempts to control whom one sees, where one goes, or attempts to limit or control the nature of contact with others.

Emotional Control or Abuse: Withholding positive affect or inflicting emotional pain as a means of controlling behavior within the relationship.

Physical/Sexual Abuse: Violence, degradation, forced acts, forms of imprisonment or other such attempts to use pain (physical or emotional) as a means of control.

When a relationship becomes highly controlling or seriously abusive, it becomes dangerous for both. The abusive partner is also in danger from increasing isolation, sense of guilt, and fear of loss of intimacy. Even relationships such as these with seriously troublesome problems are not beyond repair. However it is usually necessary to seek safety and healing within the context of a professionally based support system.

Summary

Conflict in intimate relationships is expected, perhaps unavoidable. From time to time, as two individuals attempt to negotiate the challenges and concerns life presents them, they naturally develop differing perceptions and differing notions of how best to meet their mutual needs. What is certainly avoidable is the expression of conflicting views and needs in a manner that is harmful to either party, and destructive to the relationship. Individuals who truly care about each other, who hold each other's best interest at heart, and who value the support and fulfillment of a significant intimate relationship, approach conflict as a problem to be solved, not a threat to be ignored or overcome. They find ways to resolve differences while respecting each other and trusting in the power of the relationship as a support through difficult times. Conflict for such individuals often becomes a growth point that serves to strengthen the relationship and ready it for future challenges.

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