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Abstract

Respect is one of the cornerstones of healthy relationships. The article features the Couple's Respect Questionnaire as a tool for couples to explore specific examples and qualities of respect in their relationship. The four Rs are presented as core components of respect. They consist of Respect for differences, Responsibility (ability to respond respectfully), Review (a willingness to review), and Release (a willingness to release). Following a profile of the assessed behaviors, a stepwise procedure is outlined to increase a couple's respect and understanding of behavioral and personality differences.

Keywords

respect, couples, couples counseling, personality differences, review, release, responsibility, couples problem solving, questionnaire for couples, forgiveness

For the past 20 years, the column focusing on couples in *The Family Journal* has been organized around Haley's (1973, 1980) four ways of assessing couples. The four ways include understanding and respecting personality differences, role perceptions, communication, and problem-solving skills.

The purpose of the present respect-focused article is for you, as a couple, to explore your own understanding of respecting personality differences. More than 30 years ago, the seeds of the present article were planted when coauthor Daniel Eckstein was counseling a couple. As they bickered back and forth, he had an epiphany: Basic respect for one another was what was lacking in their relationship. With that came the understanding that, without the foundation of respect, there was no basis for the couple to have a meaningful relationship. Indeed, the couple eventually ended their marriage.

This respect-focused article is organized as follows: Following a brief overview of respect, you will be invited to consider differences in your behaviors, thoughts, and feelings of respect compared to those of your partner. Coauthors Donna and Sarah Eckstein have created the Couple's Respect Questionnaire (CRQ), identifying several core components of respect that contribute to a healthy partnership (see Appendix A).

Answer the questionnaire based on your rating of yourself and/or your partner. The theory behind the questionnaire comes after it. If interested, each of you individually may choose to predict your scores based on the authors' model. The next step in the CRQ is to score, profile, reflect on, and discuss your respective scores. Implications and "next steps" application will conclude the article.

If you are the only one completing the questionnaire, you can limit your reflection and assessment of respectful behavior

to yourself, or you may choose to complete the form from the perspective of your partner.

If you are not currently in a committed relationship, you can complete the activity alone from the perspective of past or even possible future significant relationships. While the article is written for you as a couple, you may find it useful to discuss your own responses, based on your assessment of yourself and your partner, with someone you trust. This may include a friend, family member, counselor, psychologist, social worker, or spiritual advisor.

This review of the literature provides supportive research about four factors, "the four Rs," contributing to a healthy, respectful relationship. Additional activities from previous couples' articles, focusing on understanding and respecting personality and behavioral differences, will conclude the article.

From an Adlerian perspective, some form of inferiority and/or superiority is at the heart of disrespectful couples' relationships. Dreikurs (1999) contrasted the vertical versus the

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horizontal plane as a concrete way of perceiving yourself in relationship to others. The vertical plane is defined by a “better than/worse than” pecking order, a “top down” approach. Conversely, the horizontal plane stresses “different from” as in “an apple is different from an orange” rather than being somehow “better than” or “worse than” an apple.

The four basic ego states proposed by Harris (1969) in his classic book, *I'm OK-You're OK*, described a basic superiority position of “I'm OK-You're Not OK” compared to the inferiority belief of “I'm Not OK-You're OK.” The most discouraged position is “I'm Not OK-You're Not OK,” while the ideal interpersonal orientation is described in the book title. In the present article, the authors encourage partners to attempt to adopt the lens of “I'm OK-You're OK” as much as possible. Methods of abstaining from negative judgment are outlined using the four Rs.

Literature Review

Given that a healthy partnership is a broad concept, there is an equally broad approach to achieving this desired state. Respecting differences, responsibility, a willingness to review, a willingness to release, and many other relationship factors are significant in contributing to a healthy partnership (Bertoni & Bodenmann, 2010; Carlson, 1997; Gottman, Gottman, & DeClaire, 2006; Worthington, Lerner, & Sharp, 2005). Here is some basic information on how to strengthen a healthy partnership.

Respect (Respect for Differences)

One aspect of respect is the way in which a person handles differences between people. Even though numerous findings have revealed that people are romantically more attracted to people who are highly similar to them (Böhm, Schütz, Rentzsch, Körner, & Funke, 2010; O'Rourke, Claxton, Chou, Smith, & Hadjistavropoulos, 2011), further literature demonstrated that there are many ways to strengthen a healthy partnership despite the partner's impactful differences. Differences can include differences such as personality, behavior, lifestyle, gender, age, culture, and unique preferences.

Carlson (1997) advised people to seek to understand, over and above seeking to be understood. A need to be right can often compromise your ability to really listen and understand your partner's feelings. Seeing the gray areas where neither partner is perfectly “right” nor “wrong,” but just different, can be a very challenging but helpful habit to develop when communicating. Pausing for a moment to understand your and your partner's separate realities is highly recommended. Compromises are often one of the best tools couples can employ to work respectfully together (Bertoni & Bodenmann, 2010).

Demonstrate Respect

Vassar (2012) identified a dozen behaviors, to actually demonstrate respect, not just to talk about it. You can commit to the ability to “show respect” (even when you are not thinking it or feeling it) to both your partner and, indeed, to all others.

- Face the person with whom you are speaking;
- Make and keep eye contact, unless this is considered disrespectful, as in some cultures or situations;
- Use friendly facial expressions and subtly mirror the other person's postures;
- Display open body language and use accepting behaviors: smiling, nodding, and so on;
- Stand and or sit with your spine erect;
- Give time to the other person to express his or her thoughts, feelings, needs, values, concerns, beliefs, or perspectives;
- Use “I” messages instead of “You” messages for sharing your opinion;
- When disagreeing with your partner, state it as a personal opinion rather than as a fact;
- Agree to disagree;
- Speak firmly, slowly, and clearly and commit to a calm voice whenever possible;
- Avoid interrupting your partner;
- Practice basic manners by being polite, thankful, appreciative, and sensitive to your partner's opinions and needs (Retrieved March 15, 2013, from <http://lakesideconnect.com/anger-and-violence/respect-one-antidote-for-shame/?gclid=CMzj94Ckn7ECFQW0nQod2ll1Wg>).

Responsibility

Responsibility (or response ability) has two facets: the ability to respond respectfully to your partner and the ability to accept personal responsibility for your behavior (accountable, trustworthy, and reliable). The ability to respond respectfully during a conflict of differences is an important factor in a healthy partnership (Worthington et al., 2005). There is, however, an array of approaches to respectful partner interactions: direct and detailed verbal communication, more passive suggestions of feelings and needs, passionate eruptions of material from both parties at once, and so on (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Johnson and Lebow (2000) highlighted this by stating that in the past decade, there had been “a greater recognition that different cultures hold differing expectations for relationships and that one-size-fits-all interventions have intrinsic limits” (p. 32). Identifying yourself and your partner's unique methods of effective communication is vitally important because all couples communicate with each other differently. There is no “cookie cutter” to show all couples exactly how they should communicate in order to achieve the healthiest relationship possible (Gottman & Silver, 1999).

Demonstrate Responsibility

So what can a couple do to demonstrate their responsibility (and “response ability”) when a conflict arises? Many authors advise you to tell your partner how you truly feel and what you need, even though this may cause tension temporarily (Gottman et al., 2006). Bring up the problem with as little criticism and shaming as possible (Garcia, 2012), accept personal

responsibility for your portion of the problem immediately (Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2005), and refrain from interrupting your partner or interpreting the messages before he or she has finished speaking (Gottman et al., 2006). Due to the rich variety of methods by which couples can demonstrate responsibility (response ability), there is a list of relevant articles, books, and other resources at the end of this article for additional information on this fundamental topic.

Review

A willingness to review includes the desire to reflect and communicate with awareness and understanding (reconsider, examine, change, and improve).

Research supports communicating your feelings and/or needs to your partner frequently, even though it may stir up resentment or anger (Gottman & Silver, 1999). This includes your willingness, and ability, to choose your battles wisely. Be sensitive to raising a conflict; is this the appropriate time and place, and is the argument a necessity (Carlson, 1997; Gottman & Silver, 1999). Carlson (1997) instructed couples to examine a list of the most frequent arguments they have and ask themselves if they were willing to permanently let go of reengaging any of cyclical conflicts. To facilitate increased prioritizing and perspective, he invented the "time warp game," in which an individual reviews or considers an issue and asks himself or herself whether this issue is important enough to matter in a year. If it is, it is likely worthy of a serious conversation with your partner. If not, it may be time to let that issue go.

Demonstrate Review

When reviewing arguments or conversations with your partner or just within your own mind, Garcia (2012) encouraged individuals to set their intention on learning from the past. Examine unexplored angles. Identify changes you would make if you could go back and redo that interaction. Then make a personal commitment to try to make those changes, if possible, in the future to the best of your ability. As you go through this sometimes-humbling process of reviewing, try to be patient with yourself and your partner; this is designed to be a learning experience that highlights both your strengths and your areas needing improvement (Carlson, 1997).

Release

Release is the willingness to let go of negative emotions, conflicts, arguments, and/or abuse; to forgive; to work toward a relationship based on creating respect for differences between you and your partner; the willingness to relinquish or extinguish an unhealthy relationship when appropriate. If a couple is ready to let go of a conflict, how do they do this? Forgiveness is a primary factor in this answer as can be seen in the renowned author Brown's (n.d.) famous witty quote: "One of the keys to happiness is a bad memory."

Worthington, Lerner, and Sharp (2005) noted that couples who can interrupt the cycle of criticism and conflict quickly are significantly happier than those who allow a conflict to be painfully repeated many times. Increased forgiveness is so important, in fact, that it has been shown to significantly reduce a stress hormone, cortisol, in the brain (Kiecolt-Glaser, Bane, Glaser, & Malarkey, 2003). A second benefit of increased forgiveness is it seems to predict a reduced frequency of divorce; a couple is at least 50% less likely to divorce if they can forgive each other (Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 2003). Forgiveness and releasing emotions, however, can be extremely challenging. Couples are encouraged to practice respectful communications by reviewing past arguments, taking responsibility for their behavior, releasing emotions surrounding the conflict, and communicating their forgiveness to each other (Worthington et al., 2005). Practice forgiving your partner for smaller issues first, and focus on expressing empathy and support for your partner (Worthington et al., 2005). Expressing empathy while forgiving your partner can be done by verbally reflecting, repeating back to your partner what you heard, in a thoughtful manner that says you understood what was said about feelings, meanings, and needs (Elliott, Bohart, Watson, & Greenberg, 2011).

Demonstrate Release

The willingness to release emotions and let go of conflicts within yourself as well as with your partner is considered crucial by many professionals in the field of psychology (Fennell, 1993; Fincham et al., 2005; Garcia, 2012). An unwillingness or inability to release emotions and let go of conflicts may lead to the need to end the relationship. In the case of a breakup, Garcia (2012) advised individuals to "identify and accept that which cannot be changed and to let go, grieve, and grow from the experience." Letting go of partners can be extremely challenging; however, literature reveals that this process can facilitate a healthy forward movement toward a more centered you and better future relationships.

Conclusion

Because each individual is so different, disappointments and disagreements are inevitable in a committed relationship. Finding ways to respectfully communicate negative feelings, to ask for your expectations to be met, review past behaviors, and release resentments that do not serve you are incredibly helpful skills that take time and perseverance to achieve (Fincham et al., 2005). These tactics, however, have been documented as viable means by which healthy, respectful, long-lasting, and mutually enriching romantic relationships can be established and maintained for many years.

Summary

The purpose of the present article has been to focus on the critical role of creating respect in couples using a model that one of the authors, Donna Eckstein, calls "The four Rs." A review of

the literature on the qualities of healthy relationships has shown that factors involved in creating respect in couples include the abilities to show respect for differences, to accept personal responsibility (response-ability), a willingness to review (strengths and conflicts), and a willingness to release (negative emotions, conflicts, arguments, and/or abuse, as well as to forgive yourself and your partner). It is the belief of these authors that creating respect in couples is a daily commitment to use “the four Rs” to work toward a healthy and loving relationship.

The CRQ was created by family members, Donna and Sarah Eckstein, as an introspective and interactive exercise for individuals and couples. The information derived from the CRQ is best supported by an ongoing commitment to working toward a healthy relationship based on creating and improving respect for differences within oneself and one’s partner. This may also include the willingness to relinquish or extinguish an unhealthy relationship, when appropriate.

Appendix B has additional *Family Journal* columns for couples, addressing relationship personality differences. All 20 years of Haley’s four ways of accessing couples can be found in Eckstein (2012).

Appendix A

Couple’s Respect Questionnaire (CRQ)

The CRQ is designed to assist with your awareness, measurement, and reflection of your perceptions of respect as an individual. It can be used as a self-assessment of your behavior and/or the behavior of a partner. “Couple” and “partner” are used to describe two people in a relationship. This can include any significant person in your life that you would like to review.

Instructions. To the left of each question, rate your self-assessment for each behavior. If you choose to review and assess your partner (or another significant relationship in your life), you will need two copies of the questionnaire. On the second copy of the CRQ, repeat this process by rating your experience of your partner’s behavior. At the end of each section, total and average the scores.

Measure your responses on a scale from 1 to 5 to reflect the degree that you *agree* or *disagree* with each statement.

Strongly disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither	Slightly agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

The behaviors are organized and assessed based on the “four Rs” of respect in couples. These behaviors, listed below, support and build on respect in couples.

Respect
Responsibility
Review
Release

Section A: The CRQ

Respect—Showing respect for differences. (Key words: consideration, acknowledgment, value, courtesy, and love vs. thoughtlessness, disregard, devalue, rudeness, and hate)

- 1 I do not communicate in a condescending manner
- 2 I am able to assert my needs versus being nonassertive to avoid upsetting my partner
- 3 I do not take it personally when my partner has a different opinion
- 4 I show love for my partner by avoiding criticism and other negative personal interactions
- 5 I can be aware of my partner’s, and my own moods, and wait until we are both calm to convey a serious message
- 6 I can be different, and allow my partner to be different, instead of needing to decide who is “right” or “wrong”
- 7 I consider my partner’s needs and the ways my partner likes to receive messages
- 8 I build and maintain self-respect by developing my own interests, goals, and strengths
- 9 I resist the urge to overly blame and judge by turning my criticism into a respect for differences
- 10 It is important to me that my partner cares about my feelings and shows sensitivity for my feelings

Total: _____ (divide by 10 to get) Average: _____

Responsibility—“Response-ability”. The “ability to respond” to your partner respectfully and to accept personal responsibility for your behavior. (Key words: accountable, trustworthy, reliable, answerable, and responsible vs. unaccountable, untrustworthy, unreliable, unresponsive, and irresponsible)

- 1 I uphold commitments that I make to my partner instead of making excuses
- 2 I refrain from interrupting my partner’s messages before my partner has finished speaking
- 3 I respond respectfully during a disagreement or argument with my partner
- 4 I make it known that I need to talk when I need to communicate something serious to my partner
- 5 I respectfully respond to my and my partner’s different style of communication
- 6 I am not aggressive or abusive physically, verbally, or emotionally
- 7 I compliment my partner when he or she does something well
- 8 I respond respectfully when there are cultural and/or sexual differences and expectations about my partner
- 9 I accept responsibility for my own behaviors that create a problem with my partner
- 10 I consider the time and place, as well as my and my partner’s behaviors when bringing up a problem (i.e., not as my partner is walking out the door or just waking up)

Total: _____ Average: _____

Review—(Willingness to review). The ability to reflect and communicate with awareness, understanding, and respect. (Key words: reflect, reconsider, examine, change, and improve vs. deflect, inconsideration, overlook, permanent, and worsen)

(continued)

Appendix A. (continued)

-
- 1 I believe that relationships are designed to be a learning experience that highlights both strengths and challenges
 - 2 I am committed to self-improvement and to relationship improvement
 - 3 I am aware of the hot topics in our relationship that often trigger arguments
 - 4 I listen so I can understand what is being said as I interact with my partner
 - 5 I am able to assert my needs when appropriate instead of making the needs of my partner more important
 - 6 I refrain from jumping to conclusions about my partner's intentions
 - 7 I am able to apologize when I think I am wrong
 - 8 I review a conversation with my partner to gain further insight, not just to reiterate the points
 - 9 I am able to reflect on my needs and effectively communicate them to my partner
 - 10 I am willing to work on being patient with myself and with my partner as I go through the process of reflection and review
-

Total: _____ Average: _____

Release—Willingness to release. (Key words: forgive, let go, encourage, relief, relinquish, and self-respect vs. blame, restraint, discourage, burden/oppress, extinguish, and self-abandonment)

-
- 1 I have the skills to forgive myself
 - 2 I have the skills to forgive my partner and to say that I have forgiven my partner when appropriate
 - 3 I am able to walk away from arguments that I think are not important in the long run
 - 4 I would rather be connected, respectful, and happy with my partner than fight
 - 5 I am learning to interrupt the cycle of criticism and conflict faster instead of allowing a conflict to be repeated several times
 - 6 I am able to compromise when differences cause conflict
 - 7 I am able to learn from past arguments and/or conflicts (i.e., sex, money, chores, past relationships, etc.)
 - 8 I am willing to end a relationship that no longer meets or respects my needs
 - 9 I refrain from bringing up irrelevant mistakes or poor choices that my partner has made in the past
 - 10 I can put myself in my partner's shoes to understand his or her perspective or reasoning in order to let go and be more willing to change my mind and behaviors when appropriate
-

Total: _____ Average: _____

Section B: Profile

Plot the average of the totals for each section on the graph provided below. You may want to compare the scores from your perception of yourself to the scores of your perception of your partner. For example, mark your score using an "X" or a colored pen to identify your self-rating average score for each section. Connect the marks to form a graph. Use an O or a different color pen to mark your rating of your partner.

Respect

1 2 3 4 5

Responsibility

1 2 3 4 5

Review

1 2 3 4 5

Release

1 2 3 4 5

Section C: Reflection**Exploring the Four Rs—Respect, Responsibility, Review, and Release**

Summary of question content. The questions you just answered were organized by four topics: respecting differences, response ability, review, and release.

- **Respect for differences:** An awareness of your and your partner's individual patterns of behaviors and lifestyles and your ability to work collaboratively.
- **Responsibility (response ability):** An ability to respond to your partner respectfully and a willingness to accept responsibility for your own actions.
- **Willingness to Review:** An openness to effectively reflect, understand, and communicate about your and your partner's behaviors and the patterns that emerge.
- **Willingness to Release:** The willingness to release negative emotions, conflicts, arguments, and/or abuse. It is the ability to forgive yourself and your partner. It is a daily commitment to work toward a relationship based on creating respect for differences between you and your partner. This may include the willingness to relinquish or extinguish an unhealthy relationship when appropriate.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with this profile?
 Were any parts of your results surprising to you?
 After reviewing your profile, what do you consider your areas of strengths?
 What do you consider your challenges, conflicts, and/or areas in need of improvement?
 If you assessed your partner, what do you consider your partner's areas of strengths?
 Based on your findings, what do you consider your partner's challenges, conflicts, and/or areas in need of improvement?
 What would you like to do to create more awareness of and respect for your partner?
 What would you like your partner to do to create more awareness of and respect for you?

Section D: Discuss Self-Assessment

Write and/or share the results of this questionnaire with someone you trust (friend, family member, therapist, etc.) about what you have done with this questionnaire.

Section E: Discussion With Your Partner

Share your experience of the above information with your partner. After sharing your experience with your partner, can you and your partner identify any other steps you would like to take to improve the level of respect for differences that currently exist in your relationship? If so, take this time to design an action plan together that will lead to an increased level of respect for each other's differences in the future.

What is the first step you and your partner would like to take for creating more respect for differences? Is that something that you and your partner are willing to do individually and together?

Congratulations on completing this questionnaire and review. We wish you much success with your commitment to create more respect for differences between yourself and your partner. After completing this, you may be ready for an additional "R."

Section F: The Fifth R

Relax—The Willingness to Relax! Humor can be very healthy and healing. After completing the CRQ, one couple, who has been married for 44 years, added some music and humor by singing some songs about the four Rs. One of the songs that they sang was "Respect" by Aretha Franklin. Are there any songs that come to mind for you . . . and your partner?!

Appendix B

Articles Addressing Relationship Personality Differences

- Duffey, T., Somody, C., & Eckstein, D. (2009). Musical relationship metaphors: Using a musical chronology and the emerging life song with couples. *The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families*, 17, 151–155.
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Authors' Note

Sadly, Daniel Eckstein passed away before he was able to see this article published. He lived the themes that were central to his writing: Encouragement, Empathic Connections (the Couples' Column), and Enjoying life. We are grateful for the many scholarly and emotional contributions he made by encouraging others get more involved in the joy of learning, creating, writing, presenting, publishing and contributing to our field.

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