

Building Healthy Relationships

Student Counseling

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Healthy relationships allow for individuality, bring out the best in both people, and invite personal growth through negotiation, compromise and validation of the other person's feelings and rights. We do NOT have the right to make another person feel threatened, scared or controlled by fearful behaviors or language.

Getting Close: Developing meaningful relationships is a concern for all of us. Getting close to others, sharing our joys, sorrows, needs, wants, affections, and excitements is risky business. What is it that interferes with us getting close to each other? Often it is one or more of these common fears:

- **Fear of becoming known as we really are.** Opening ourselves and being vulnerable to others and their reactions is not only difficult for us, but it puts a demand on others to be likewise.
- **Fear of pain and disappointment.** Mass media and advertisers have tried to convince us that we should be 100% happy 24 hours a day. Hurt, pain, disappointment, and loneliness are not comfortable feelings, but they are human. Without the risk of experiencing them, one can never experience loving and being loved.
- **Fear of losing our freedom.** Can I risk giving up some of my freedoms to care about you without you wanting to take it all away? Can I be close in a relationship and still be separate from you, keeping my own identity?
- **Fear of being a taker as well as a giver.** It is difficult for most of us to receive, yet if we don't, no one can experience the joy of giving to us.
- **Fear of judgment.** People are reluctant to disclose themselves because they dread the moral judgment of their friends, family, minister, and the law.
- **Fear that showing love and affection is not proper or weak.** This is especially true for men, but NOT restricted to them. Somehow we have been convinced that this is a sign of weakness rather than a sign of courage and strength. We each show affection in different ways. It is important to learn what you need to feel loved and communicate that to others.
 - **REWARDS for Conquering Our Fears of Getting Close:** If we learn to communicate effectively with others and are willing to risk sharing our own feelings and respect the feelings of others, many rewards will await us.

Obviously, a very special relationship evolves. Getting close means you can need someone else and they need you. These needs may be emotional needs as well as tangible ones. It means when you feel discouraged or upset, someone is there to comfort and care about you, and you can do likewise.

You acquire faith in yourself, faith in others, and an ability to be faithful

to others. It enables you to live fully in the present and to have meaning and purpose for your own existence. It allows you to let go of the past and have hope.

You become more sensitive to yourself, with choices about how, when, and where you wish to share your feelings. You KNOW when you are experiencing love, joy, anger, and other emotions and feel safe in expressing them to others.

- **The Art of Communication:** When people are asked what the most important ingredients in a relationship are, communication is almost always on the top of the criteria list. Trust is also a key factor in building healthy relationships, but it is often the outcome of effective communication. Yet we rarely are taught HOW to communicate so we can feel understood properly. Communication with others boils down to either expressing ourselves or responding to someone else. Yet the methods for doing each are quite different.

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Expressing Ourselves: When you are stating an opinion, making an observation, or expressing a feeling, the most appropriate format to use is called an “I-statement.” You may even be using them already.

I-statements allow us to state things in positive terms, to express ourselves directly and honestly, and to take responsibility for what we think, feel and need while avoiding blaming or accusing others. In contrast, “You-statements” blame the other person, put them on the defensive, and often cause communication to be blocked. To simplify things, we can use a kind of “formula” for I-statements:

1. “I feel/think/want (express the feeling/thought/desire) . . . when (state the behavior causing it) . . .”
2. Because (identify the reason) . . .”
3. “I would like (prefer) to have you . . . (state what you want to be done instead of what you don’t want to happen

The nice thing about this formula is that we can decide how much of it we want to use. It can be just the first one, or the first two lines, or all three.

Responding to Others: When other people are expressing themselves, it is not appropriate to use I-statements when responding. A more effective technique is called “Reflection.”

Reflection is saying back, in your own words, the content and/or feeling of what the other person just said. Reflection does not question, challenge, argue, approve, or disapprove. We can use an even simpler formula for Reflection:

1. “Sounds like you’re feeling/thinking/wanting (express the emotion, thought, desire you hear) . . .”
2. Because (state the reason you heard for it) . . .”

Reflection requires us to listen very carefully to what the other person is actually saying. Yet we also do NOT have to be right in identifying the emotion or reason we hear because the speaker will automatically clarify it for us (and sometimes for themselves in the process). What we need to remember is that when we use Reflection, the other person is going to continue talking about what they are experiencing, so we need to make sure that we have time to listen.

When we first begin using I-statements and Reflection, it can feel artificial. It doesn’t take long for them to become automatic. Experiment with them, and you may find that your discussions with other people become much more productive and satisfying.

Often, professional counseling is helpful in relationship building. We can help!