

Adult and Relationship Newsletter, Spring 2005

Emotional Intelligence in Marriage

Brent Atkinson Ph.D. has coupled the findings of John Gottman and brain research to develop a treatment approach based on the cognitive and behavioral habits that contribute to successful marriage.

The habits cited by Atkinson are not new to most couple therapists. Nonetheless, they bear repeating and require attention for everyone in a relationship and the marital therapist who guides couples out of distress.

1. Assume there is a legitimate reason for your partner's words or actions when you find yourself offended by their behavior. When you experience your partner in a negative manner you are likely to suggest to yourself that your partner is at fault in some way. Perhaps you said to yourself, "my partner must be illogical, poorly motivated, insensitive or wants to hurt me." Or maybe "my partner has a faulty personality (lazy, controlling, etc.). Ultimately you wind up believing that you must be upset because your partner did something wrong. Not so. Actually there are many ways to go through life. Believing that there is a correct way will only lead to marital strife and unhappiness. It is better to manage your intense negative reactions to your partner by assuming that there is a good reason for their actions and seek to find out the personal priorities behind his/her behavior.

2. Give your dreams, priorities, values and viewpoints equal consideration in the relationship by standing up for yourself. Just because you give up the notion that your partner is wrong does not mean that your concerns should not be given consideration. Partners in successful relationships respectfully consider the feelings and desires of one another.

Turn that impulse to criticize your partner into an understanding of their motives and a clear statement about what you want. In essence, according to Atkinson, you're asking your partner to "move over and make room for me."

3. If something your partner is doing is upsetting to you, manage your emotions and then find the understandable part to their behavior. Learning how to calm yourself is important to keep your thinking process from getting short circuited by your emotions. Remember, your thinking is constrained when you are angry or upset. The same negative thoughts just reverberate in your head. When calm consider for yourself the possible reasons for your partner's behavior. Consider your partner's values, priorities and what contributes to their emotional stability. Approach your partner with some possibilities for discussion. Learn to get out of yourself and be an "everyday psychologist."

4. Try to identify and communicate the larger needs, worries and fears behind your distress once you have calmed yourself after a distressing experience with your partner. Consider what feeling experience might be fueling your angry/critical reaction to your partner. Successful couples are

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able to reflect on their own internal states to determine what is getting touched off. A spendthrift husband might engender criticism from a wife who has fears about having enough money.

5. Calm yourself in the face of your partner's defensiveness and assume your partner feels attacked in some way. This requires that you challenge any negative thinking about your partner or labels like, "he's a jerk," or "she's a martyr." Don't make a big deal and say things like, "Why are you treating me this way when I was just trying to tell you how I feel?" Better to offer assurance with statements like, "I don't mean to be critical or attacking. I think your feelings are important too. I want to understand them."

Atkinson lists an additional five habits to this list. The next newsletter will explore the other five. Certainly, developing the skill of emotional intelligence in marriage requires a considerable amount of restructuring of thinking. The brain gets hardwired over the years of negative interaction in marriage. Consequently, sustained effort with repetition becomes required to establish the habits of thinking and behavior for successful marriage.

Your comments to this newsletter are welcome. Please feel free to pass this newsletter to someone you know. For additional copies, telephone me at (248) 540-8243.

Resources for this newsletter come from the handout to Brent Atkinson's workshop on April 1, 2005, in Lansing, Michigan for the Michigan Association for Marriage and Family Therapy.