

The Two Essential Developmental Skills Required for Long-term Intimate Relationships

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Among the many elements that contribute to satisfying long term relationships are two premiere sets of skills: (1) both partners must **feel that they are respected and "special,"** and (2) **both must participate in cooperative conflict resolution** → **deciding a solution** to any problem that is mutually, emotionally satisfying.

1. **EMPATHY SKILL** -- AFFIRMATION or ACCEPTANCE OF EACH PARTNER'S FEELINGS (95%)

A. In most intimate relationships, the most important **unspoken goal** is to be emotionally valued and emotionally accepted, without conditions ("unconditional positive regard"). No matter what, each person is acceptable to the other. **Affirmation or empathy is an EMOTIONAL SKILL.**

B. To empathize with another is to understand his/her feelings (and accompanying thoughts, intentions, perceptions, and behaviors) through skills such as:

PARAPHRASING SKILL.

C. **NOTE:** This does not necessarily mean "agreement" or "condoning" of any thoughts or behaviors that may accompany the feelings.

D. The relationship skill of affirming each other's feelings must occur before attempts to resolve disagreements or conflicts (see #2 below).

2. **COOPERATION SKILL** -- RESOLUTION OF CONFLICTS in MUTUALLY SATISFYING WAYS (5%)

A. **NOTE:** Most relationship disagreements or "fights" are actually disguised or angry hurt about the couple's failure to achieve emotional empathy (skill # 1 above) well. That is, when both partners feel that their feelings are not affirmed or accepted in empathic ways, conflicts can flare. Each partner may feel rejected or "fixed." Therefore, the "golden rule" of good relationships is to "*Feel* first, and attempt to *Fix* last."

B. **Conflict Resolution work is an INTELLECTUAL or COGNITIVE SKILL.**

C. The crucial skill for conflict resolution is achieving a mutual decision for action or behavior, that is emotionally satisfying to **each** partner, through skills such as:

COOPERATIVE CONFLICT RESOLUTION SKILLS.

D. Most (if not all) **mutual agreements are "mosaic" solutions** -- that is, they are made up of several specific behaviors which each partner contributes to the resolution and prevention of future conflicts.

E. Good solutions always feel good for both partners. When there is a "winner" and "loser", both will ultimately lose. Intimacy requires mutual "winning" emotionally. When emotional satisfaction is made the priority in relationships, intimacy matures.

THE SKILL OF "PARAPHRASING" COMMUNICATION

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Partner 1

Step 1

"I" - MESSAGE

Partner 1 reveals him/her self, briefly expresses one's own thoughts and feelings, trying to be clear, direct, open, and revealing of the personal message being offered. The focus is on partner 1 alone --> "I think... feel..." This is an assertive revelation or sharing, an opening of one's heart.

Step 3

APPRAISAL

Partner 1 makes an "appraisal" of their effort for empathetic understanding: "Am I feeling completely understood?" If he/she feels a full empathetic understanding, then the appraisal is "YES". If not, "NO."

YES = continue by moving to the next step.

NO = return to step 1, the original "I" message, and try again.

Partner 2

Step 2

PARAPHRASE

Partner 2 listens undividedly, then summarizes the personal sharing he/she understands Partner 1 to be expressing. "**What I think I hear you saying is...**" The focus is solely upon Partner 1. This is empathetic listening -- offering one's own words of one's understanding of Partner 1's thoughts and feelings.

Two kinds of "Paraphrasing":

1. TWO-WAY " or "leap-frog" paraphrasing -- switch partner on "yes" appraisals.
2. ONE-WAY or single-focus paraphrasing -- even with a "yes" appraisal, the same partner continues (doesn't switch). This use provides the partner with the "floor" to continue on the same focus until satisfaction. It is especially useful when the feelings are very important.

Couples Problem Solving Format

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1. TOGETHER DEVELOP YOUR COMMON STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Develop together a statement of the relationship problem based upon your understanding and mutual empathy from “paraphrasing” regarding the conflict. This is a description of the challenge you face and what you want to achieve or bring about emotionally together.

Goal Statement: “How do we...(resolve this conflict)...in such a way that we feel...”

2. BRAINSTORM 100 SOLUTION IDEAS

Develop ideas for solving the common problem. “Brainstorm” as many specific ideas (silly or wild ones, too) which could in any way possibly contribute to the solution package. In important conflicts, as many as 100 ideas may be needed as background for developing a mosaic solution later.

RULE: This is the creativity phases; Do not evaluate these ideas at this stage.

3. DISCUSS THE IDEAS TOGETHER

Discuss together and prioritize the ideas with an eye toward those specific ideas that you think could contribute something meaningful to a “mosaic” solution -- that is, contribute to the collection of ideas that could make up a composite resolution.

4. DEVELOP SEPARATE PROPOSALS

Based on the discussion of ideas (step 3) and your own desires, put together your individual proposal(s) for a mutual resolution that includes both what you think you would like and well as anticipating what your partner may want in exchange. Do this privately, sharing the proposals together later, when both ready.

5. MERGE THE PROPOSALS INTO A TENTATIVE COMPOSITE AGREEMENT

Together, blend your individual proposals into ONE proposal for a mutual resolution.

6. EVALUATE YOUR TENTATIVE AGREEMENT

After several days (i.e., “sleep on it”), individually consider the plan, asking yourself the critical question: “Does this plan FEEL good to ME? Will it satisfy ME?” If you feel a confident “YES”, confirm the tentative plan with your partner. If you feel a lack of confidence, a “Maybe” or “No,...” return to making new suggestions for a mutual resolution (Step 5).

7. MAKE YOUR AGREEMENT AND THEN FINALIZE IT

Make the decision specific and formal. Then set a date and time to initiate the plan. Also, set the time to evaluate your agreement once it is enacted and has had time to be tested. Remember that the criterion for a successful agreement is that it FEEL GOOD for BOTH partners.

8. PUT YOUR AGREEMENT INTO ACTION

9. EVALUATE THE AGREEMENT AS SCHEDULED, AND REVISE AS NEEDED
