

## **Marriage help: Change your feelings, change your marriage**

**By Richard Nicastro, Ph.D.**

"He gets under my skin so quickly and before I know it, I'm yelling and screaming and it takes me forever to calm down...We need relationship help!"

~Terry, describing a recent argument with Steve, her partner of seven years

### **Feelings are contagious**

If you had the choice, would you rather watch a movie by yourself or with other people?

If you prefer to watch a movie with others, you're probably aware that having people around impacts your movie-going experience: Funny scenes seem funnier when others laugh along with you, hearing the screams of a friend make that scary scene all the more frightening, while crying along with your partner validates the sadness that a movie invokes in you. This is why people will always flock to a movie theater to catch a long-anticipated film—the feelings that others around you have deepen and heighten your own emotional experience.

This is a powerful form of emotional contagion.

But you don't need to be surrounded by a large group of people to experience this type of emotional sharing—emotional contagion frequently occurs in your marriage/relationship. Let's look at how you can use this information to create a more harmonious connection with your spouse/partner.

### **Marital Conflict: Emotional contagion and the cycle of negativity**

In the opening quote, Terry is describing feeling emotionally triggered by her partner Steve. When she doesn't feel supported by Steve, Terry quickly feels agitated and frustrated. Flooded by the intensity of her negative experience, these emotions quickly spill over to Steve in both dramatic ways (she yells and accuses him of not caring for her) and subtle ways (she withdraws, and her responses are curt whenever Steve tries to talk to her). Emotional intimacy is the first causality to these kinds of interactions.

Before you know it, Steve's feelings are paralleling Terry's (though he may handle these feelings differently)—now both Terry and Steve are on emotional and physical overload, fueling each other's intensity like an emotional ping-pong game gone awry.

*Whenever couples enter into a dance of mutual dysregulation, defensiveness and emotional escalation, the emotional connection that grounds the relationship is lost.*

Does this pattern sound familiar to you?

### **Regulate yourself, regulate your relationship**

Have you ever observed a parent calmly talk to an upset child?

The distressed child is physiologically overwhelmed and it is the calm, soothing presence of the parent that helps to bring the child's overwhelmed physical and emotional experience back online (back to homeostasis).

But in order to accomplish this, the parent needs to remain calm and emotionally centered while entering into the child's overwhelmed emotional orbit. Without this emotional footing, the parent is likely to become distressed and besieged by the child's experience and this would only exacerbate the child's agitated state.

Couples need to approach their marriage or relationship in a similar manner. This was evident in the following interaction I recently witnessed:

Ben was becoming increasingly upset with a decision his adult son made regarding a career choice. As he repeatedly imagined his son's financial demise, Ben's level of agitation soared—he quickly became a runaway train of emotional distress.

At the peak of his emotional intensity, his wife Carla broke her silence. She turned to her husband, placed her hand over his heart and calmly repeated:

"Ben, I see you're upset and you care very much for our son. But it's his life. You did a terrific job raising him and now you have to let go...Look at me." (Ben made eye contact with Carla and she took several deep breaths to help her remain calm.) "It's OK. It's his life. Now it's time to focus on us. Ben, it's OK..."

This interaction had a dramatic impact on Ben—it's as if his emotional dimmer switch was slowly turned down as he opened himself to his wife's calming presence.

### **Why was that interaction so effective?**

Ben couldn't ignore his wife's gentle touch and serene energy—her calm presence permeated Ben's experience and helped him become emotionally centered. This transformative interaction could only occur because Carla met Ben's agitated energy with an opposite energy—a *powerful* calmness.

Carla also made the point of validating Ben's experience ("Ben, I see you're upset...") before trying to comfort him—this is an important step that shouldn't be overlooked. *Acknowledging* your partner's experience (whatever that experience is) is vital to creating an empathic connection with your spouse/partner—this connection is the foundation of emotional intimacy. And it is this empathic connection that will allow your partner to be receptive to your calming presence.

A communication truism: If your partner doesn't feel validated by you, his/her emotional door is likely to remain closed off to your attempts to help him/her.

### **Relationship help: self-reflection questions:**

The goal is to practice *self-regulation* in order to avoid interactions where you and your spouse/partner are both emotionally overwhelmed.

1. What can you deliberately think (repeating self-statements, creating comforting images) that can help you hold onto your emotional center in an effort to avoid becoming flooded by what your partner is feeling?
2. What can you do with your body (e.g. monitor your breathing, go for a quick walk, tense and relax your muscles) to prevent becoming physically overwhelmed (which often accompanies becoming emotionally overwhelmed)?

3. How can you and your partner validate each other's distress before offering each other soothing, comforting words and/or touch?

As you answer these questions, don't forget that it will take time and practice to effectively incorporate your responses into the fabric of your marriage/relationship.

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### **Author Bio**

Over the past fifteen years Richard Nicastro, Ph.D. has helped couples build stronger, more fulfilling marriages and relationships. Dr. Nicastro has lectured at several universities and now conducts workshops for couples on a wide range of issues. His relationship advice has appeared on television, radio and in national magazines. A member of the International Coach Federation, Dr. Nicastro is passionate about coaching and believes that healthy relationships can add meaning and fulfillment to our lives. His goal is to guide individuals and couples as they implement the skills that will allow their relationships to flourish.

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