

Relationship Help: Think Like a Shrink and Build a Stronger Relationship

By Richard Nicastro, Ph.D.

Many of us have experienced first-hand the power and benefits of counseling. And many relationships have been made stronger by marriage counseling. But what exactly is so helpful about the process?

You might be surprised to find that the most powerful predictor of whether counseling will be successful has to do with the emotional bond formed between the therapist and client. When you feel connected to your counselor, you are more likely to overcome what is troubling you. It appears that an emotional connection to another (emotional intimacy) has healing qualities.

You can improve your marriage or relationship by doing what therapists do. Let's look at how therapists build a strong connection and how you can do this in your intimate relationship.

Therapists create a powerful connection by:

~ Showing *acceptance* of another person.

~ Communicating an *understanding* of a client's deepest struggles.

When acceptance and understanding are a part of counseling, the relationship becomes therapeutic and healing can take place. Why is this so important?

The need for acceptance and understanding is universal—a need shared by all people. When these vital ingredients are missing from our lives, we cannot reach our full potential. Painful isolation and depression may result when these conditions are absent.

1. Send the message of acceptance to your partner

Important parallels exist between your relationship with your partner and the kind of relationship formed in therapy. Unconditional acceptance creates an atmosphere of *safety* (an essential ingredient in your relationship); it allows you to let down your guard and truly be yourself, trusting in the security that you will not be judged or criticized--this condition is paramount for emotional intimacy and a healthy relationship.

Once your guard is down and you feel secure, you're able to become fully authentic and vulnerable with your partner. It is vital that you and your partner create conditions that allow mutual vulnerabilities to surface. It's the communication of these shared vulnerabilities and the experience of *mutual understanding* that allows a meaningful and deep connection to form.

You create an atmosphere of unconditional acceptance when you suspend *judgment* of your partner (something that's not always easy to do); you open yourself up to his/her uniqueness, quirks and the differences that exist between you. While you may not agree with everything your partner does, the message should be that you accept her/his *essence*, despite the differences and disagreements that arise in all marriages and relationships.

2. Show your partner that you understand him/her

Nurture intimacy by communicating an understanding of your partner's core vulnerabilities.

We all bring emotional vulnerabilities into our relationships, areas of our psyche where we feel totally raw and unprotected. These core vulnerabilities usually house our deepest hopes and

fears, aspirations and longings. Just a hint of criticism is enough for you to quickly cover up and guard these parts of yourself.

Our deepest pain occurs in these areas, as well as our most rewarding connections with others.

You and your partner's *core* vulnerabilities stem from the emotional injuries of childhood. The hurt and pain we inevitably suffer on the road to adulthood leave emotional scars that we all bring to our adult relationships. While everyone's emotional scars are unique, the need to protect these vulnerabilities is shared by all.

When you learn about your partner's life (including the triumphs and failures), listen closely to where s/he felt most alone and pained—this clues you into those unique vulnerabilities. Communicate an understanding by validating how difficult it must have been. And don't stop there.

Continue to validate each other's current struggles. When you see the world through your partner's eyes (even when your perspective is different), your partner will feel understood by you and will feel closer to you. This is where intimacy begins.

There's no denying that your marriage or relationship has the power to lift you to heights you never dreamed of. It also has the power to drop you to lows that you haven't imagined. When you make acceptance and mutual understanding a regular part of your relationship, you sow the seeds of intimacy and your marriage enjoys a deep, fulfilling attachment.

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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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