

5 STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE YOUR RELATIONSHIP NOW!

I hear the following from many of my couples:

"We are having communication breakdowns that continue to get worse– we don't give each other the benefit of the doubt during arguments and neither of us feel heard. We also have underlying issues that keep popping up over and over again... we need help breaking our negative cycles and getting our relationship back to a healthy place."

In my nearly 15 years of work with couples, I notice where many of the blind spots occur. The good news is that earnestly applying these changes has the power to transform your relationship.



- 1) **Hold 2 Realities.** *"The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function."*

- F. Scott Fitzgerald

Here is how this quote applies to your relationship: What happens when your partner accuses you of something you did, that you don't agree with? What about when your partner says you are yelling, but you disagree. Who is right? When your partner tells you that you are being defensive, offensive, hurtful, insensitive, etc, but you disagree... who is right? The answer is... you are BOTH right. Your partner is right, in that they are experiencing and perceiving and feeling whatever they are describing. And, you are right, in that you didn't intend to come from that place or create those feelings in your partner.

The clincher: Can you be CURIOUS about what your partner is describing? Can you ask your partner questions in order to understand them better, even when you don't agree and without defending? You can do this without giving up your perspective or without agreeing with what you hear. You can hold both realities. This strategy is a major component of a healthy and thriving relationship.

- 2) **Look at Your Contribution:** It takes 2 people to create a negative pattern, and it takes both people to change it into something better. No one is exempt! Can you take an honest look at what your contribution might be? It's not easy to do that, yet it's another major component of effective marriages. Maybe you quickly get defensive instead of curious when your partner begins to describe their distresses to you. Or maybe you withdraw and get quiet instead of sharing what you are thinking or feeling with your partner. If you know what it is that you do, it is tremendously helpful because it gives you leverage into making positive changes in your relationship without putting all of the expectations on your partner.

If you are not sure what your contribution is, you could ask your partner: What are the top 3 things I do, that cause you the most distress? Then, be prepared to hear the answers without defending. This is your partner's truth, and treat their responses like gold nuggets: More often than not, if you were to make adjustments in these areas, not only would your partner and your relationship benefit, but consider whether you could personally benefit from changing in this way as well.

- 3) Apologize.** Since your experience is different than your partner's (thankfully – your relationship would be REALLY boring if you always thought the same about everything!), it makes sense to apologize for your part in any blunders. What if you disagree with your partner's feelings or experience? Well, that's irrelevant in this case. You have your perception/experience, and your partner has theirs. Apologizing is about acknowledging pain that has been inflicted upon your partner, whether you agree with it or not. When "I'm sorry" isn't enough, here are some additional steps to take for an effective apology:
- a. Acknowledge what happened in your partner's words
 - b. Let them know that it isn't your intention to cause them to feel hurt, afraid, like they can't depend on you, disappointed, etc.
 - c. Explain how it makes sense to you that they might feel that way given what happened
 - d. When the time is right and they feel ready, let them know that you would like to explain your thought process that led to whatever happened... without justifying or condoning or defending the situation.
 - e. Discuss a plan to prevent the blunder from happening again.

Successful relationships have times of disconnect – and reconnect. The above steps are an effective way to reconnect, and prevent resentments and issues from piling up between you.

- 4) Nurture, Not Fix.** You are a good person, and therefore you want to help your partner to feel better. That's great! However, pay close attention as to whether you are offering solutions to your partner when they really just want you to listen and offer empathy, because that can sever moments of connection. "Just listening doesn't seem very productive," you might say. But in fact, when your partner is feeling upset about something, responding with things like, "that sounds hard," "do you need a hug?," "oh, I can understand how that is upsetting" can go a loooooong way. You might try asking your partner, "what is it that you want from me right now? Would you like some ideas to help you feel better or would you rather I just listen?"

If you are on the receiving end of "fix-it" offerings, you could gently and kindly say to your partner, "honey, thank you for offering to help, but right now can you just listen?" This type of open communication can save you a lot of misunderstandings and missed moments of connection!

- 5) **Love Language.** What can/do you do to make your partner feel most loved, valued or appreciated? How confident are you that you truly know the answer to that question? Sometimes couples feel underappreciated because they begin to take each other for granted. Or sometimes they do give to each other, but miss the mark in terms of what is meaningful to their partner. For example, I know a couple where one partner says “I appreciate that my partner cooks dinner for me every night – it’s really nice – but it doesn’t make me feel loved or valued. What makes me feel loved is when my partner tells me what qualities in me that they love, or when they buy me gifts.” This scenario is very, very common, so consider asking your partner this question. Furthermore, we tend to give what we want to get! But what you are giving may be nice, but missing the mark. Here is a great website to learn more about this topic: 5lovelanguages.com

Making these changes can go a long way in improving your relationship.

If you would like some help applying these tools and SO many more in your relationship, here are 2 options:

- 1) **Couples Communication Workshop** – while it’s a group setting, it’s totally private in that you will not be sharing anything with the group or with other couples. Click here for more information and to see upcoming dates: <https://michellejoymft.com/couples-counseling/communication-workshop/>
- 2) **Couples Transformational Program** – Want a unique approach to couples therapy? A way to get you back on track more quickly than weekly, conventional therapy? I’ve developed a program that I customize to work with you and your partner, one on one in private, to get you right-side up faster. Here is more information: <https://michellejoymft.com/couples-therapy-intensives/>

Wishing you the very best in all your relationships,

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