**Love is Never Quarantined: 12 Steps for Developing Loving Relationships**



COVID-19 has impacted and rearranged all of our lives. Out of necessity, we spend more time together, often living in close quarters. How we relate to each other, how we give and receive love, and the quality of that love, is particularly important for our health and well-being. If you are interested in living a conscious, loving relationship, the steps that follow are for you.

Recently I was at the eye doctor when a staff member discovered I was a marriage and family therapist. This piqued her interest, and she promptly inquired “What is the secret of a good relationship? Do you have any tips?” After 30 years in the business of helping couples heal and grow in their relationships, I responded, “Yes, I do.”

As I started to enumerate some of what I had learned personally and professionally over the years, the staff member said, “Wait, wait. I want to write all this down.” As she was carefully recording my comments, the wonderful doctor in charge glanced in through the door in search of his valuable employee. The staff member met the doctor’s gaze and realized that she was lingering a little too long. Given how busy the office was, our conversation had to remain unfinished.

The outcome of this unfinished conversation was the inspiration for this article. So, you could say, that both the staff member and the doctor are the reason this piece of writing exists. While there are numerous thoughts on the subject of relationship, I doubt that many of them were inspired by a trip to the eye doctor during a global pandemic. Based on years of professional and personal experience, here are 12 steps to use as guides. If two people are open to grow and willing to plant their feet and do their work, these steps will enable them to create the relationship of their dreams.

**1) EMOTIONAL SAFETY**

First and foremost, diligently focus on creating an emotionally safe environment for the relationship to grow. Emotional safety enables you to truly be yourself and to show up in a relationship. Otherwise you live, for the most part, in a survival mode, never free to be yourself. What I have observed is that when a partner feels emotionally safe, the best version of that person shows up. When the safety isn’t there, this caring loving person can quickly turn into the “wicked witch of the west” or an “angry ogre.” Emotional safety impacts the behavior of both women and men, and the tips that follow all contribute to increasing emotional safety in a relationship.

**2)** SELF**- LOVE** Developing a healthy self-love is critical for two reasons. First, it is well-known that our capacity to love others and for others to love us, is directly related to our capacity to love ourselves. Secondly, when we are filled with self-loathing, shame, feelings of anger, self-rejection, toxic self-criticism, feeling not good enough, these negative feelings get projected onto others, and then we blame others and make them responsible for the way we feel. When we blame others for the way we feel, we often criticize and attack others until we unconsciously get them to respond to us the way we are feeling about ourselves. “Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself you have built up against it.” - Rumi

**3) DELETE NEGATIVITY**

Notice how quickly transformation takes place when you adopt the message of Jon Kabat-Zen, “Write yourself a restraining order against self-criticism and criticism of others.” When you ask something of someone, make sure there is no negativity or implication of ‘wrongness’ in the request. For example, ‘wrongness’ is implied when you say, “You never think to take the garbage out.” Such a message communicates how wrong and deficient the person is. Positive words that would maintain the loving connection while getting the message across could look like this, “Something I really appreciate, is when you remember to take the garbage out. It makes my day!”

**4) GRATITUDE/APPRECIATION**

Research shows that gratitude is one of the fastest ways to transform a relationship and bring it to a new level. Express appreciation and gratitude every day to your loved ones and those who are significant in your life. Not only does it stimulate positive chemicals in the brain of the receiver but also in the brain of the giver. Gratitude, according Brother David Steindl-Rast, “…can change the world immensely. If you are grateful, you are not fearful, if you are not fearful, you are not violent, and you act out of a sense of enough…and are willing to share.”

**5) CHOOSE YOUR WORDS AND TONE OF VOICE**

The words you use and the tone of your voice are some of the most powerful connectors on the planet but they’re also powerful disconnectors. Your words, as well as your tone of voice, have the power to foster connection, inspire, encourage, uplift and validate. They can also extinguish a mountain of joy, destroy through toxic criticism, diminish hope, and leave others feeling shamed, blamed, and not good enough. Your words have the power to breathe life into someone or take someone’s light away.

**6) COMMUNICATION SKILLS**

Three simple skills that foster connection within a relationship are mirroring, validation and empathy. These skills make an enormous difference. As Paul Tillich tells us the first duty of love is to listen. For example: your partner says, “As soon as it is safe to travel, I want to take off for a long vacation.” Imagine if the response to your partner sounded like this, “Just forget it. We don’t have that kind of money.” This dampens the partner’s desires and they feel unheard and devalued. A better way to respond is with mirroring, validation and empathy. To MIRROR (reflecting back): you’d say, “So when we get beyond Covid-19, you would love to travel and take a long vacation.” To VALIDATE: (Validation doesn’t mean you agree, but that you understand why the person thinks that given their circumstance.), you’d say, “That makes sense, after being cooped up for so long.” To EMPATHIZE (acknowledging the feelings): You’d say “I imagine with a vacation like that you might feel really excited, very free and happy. Did I get that right?”.” For further information on communication skills, see: *SafeConversations.com.*

**7) BOUNDARIES**

Good boundaries are important for any relationship. Imagine two people standing in hula hoops where each one is an authority in their own space. Problems occur when someone acts like they have authority over someone else’s space. When intruding, people often use “You statements” like, “You always feel…,” “You think…;” “You never …” These are almost always boundary violations, so instead, try using “I” statements to express your concerns. In contrast to “You statements,” “I statements” keep you safely in your own space. “I felt disappointed when…”

**8) OWNERSHIP OF FEELINGS**

When two people are having problems communicating with each other, you will inevitably see what is known in our profession as the “Projection/Personalizing Dance.” In this dance, neither person is taking ownership for their feelings. If not transcended, it is a frequent destroyer of a potentially good relationship. The Projector often resorts to anger. When this happens, the feelings that come up in the projector’s “well” are not owned, rather they are “missiled” over to someone else. Projected remarks sound like, “You made me feel unimportant.” “You made me feel embarrassed.” In reality, all the partner can ever do is trigger, or bring up, the feelings already in the person’s “well.” The partner does not cause them. The feelings of unimportance, shame, guilt, inferiority, rejection, have to already be present in the Projector’s “well” otherwise these feelings would not come up, regardless of what the partner says. Think of a bullet without powder in it. No matter how often you pull the trigger, the bullet will not fire. Eleanor Roosevelt said it best, “No one can make you feel inferior, unless you consent to it.”

To break the habit of projection in relationship, it is very helpful to start conversations with, “I know these feelings are more about me than you, but it would really help me if I could process them with you.” Notice the different response you get from your partner when you take ownership for your feelings. The person you are conversing with will relax and listen because they know you are not going to dump what is not theirs onto them.

The Personalizers, on the other hand, often feels pain, hurt or rejection, frequently of their own making. This happens because Personalizers takes what the Projector says, or how they behave, and makes it say something about them. Because the personalizers lacks good boundaries, pain, hurt and rejection are frequent companions. In good relationships, it is understood that feelings always say more about the person feeling them. Personalizers are like a sponge, taking in everybody else’s feelings and behaviors, making these feelings and behaviors say something about them. They take in what is not theirs to own.

Personalizing is often present when a partner says. “If my spouse loved me, they wouldn’t say that.” or “If my spouse loved me, they wouldn’t do that.” But frequently, this is not the case. The unacceptable words or behaviors are more often due to conditioned patterns of communicating, lack of self- love or unconscious behavior. These patterns don’t necessarily connote a lack of love for the partner.

Remember, you do not need a perfect partner, only a partner open to growth. The task of a conscious relationship is to assist each other to grow beyond the unfinish business we each bring into the relationship. We do this by listening with compassion and by engaging in loving respectful feedback when requesting what we need. The exchange goes much better when we begin the dialogue with the sentence referenced above, “I know these feeling are more about me than you…” Then, let your partner know what words or behavior you would appreciate that would help you feel more emotionally safe.

Some years ago, I encountered a young teacher who was feeling hurt and in deep pain because she discovered that her husband, who owned his own business, had been acting out his sexual addiction for years. Subsequently, she spent a few weeks at a well-known treatment center to help her cope. When I met her again, some months later, she looked very different, happy and feeling good about herself. When I inquired about the transformation, her response was that she had developed a new awareness, namely, that his behaviors were not about her, and they did not reflect who she was as a person. Once she stopped personalizing his “stuff,” she became her beautiful self once again.

**9) LAUGHTER**

Good relationships are joyous and fun-filled and lightened by laughter. Laughter relaxes your whole body, boosts your immune system, triggers the release of endorphins, protects your heart, diffuses conflict and attracts others to you and much more. In your relationship, try to consciously engage in behaviors that increase humor and laughter. Play a game of Scattergories, share some jokes from online, tap into a laughing yoga class, watch a funny movie, or just stand and face each other and have a good belly laugh. This will ensure some lightness in the relationship.

**10) BE INTENTIONAL**

The brilliant cell biologist, Dr. Bruce Lipton, teaches us how powerful thoughts are either for improving the immune system or diminishing it. This renowned researcher encourages us to be much more conscious of what we put into our bodies and the impact this has on our health and relationships. When you worry, you are energizing what you don’t want in your life, calling it towards you. Consciously energizing and being intentional about what you do want in your life and in your relationship make a profound difference in the outcome. For a deeper understanding of the power of intentions, thoughts, and beliefs listen to his life-changing talk on YouTube, “What You Think You Become.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GiBDm7Za-> Create your own story. Choose love over fear.

**11) FORGIVENESS**: Forgiveness is never about condoning the words, actions or behaviors of the oppressor, abuser or offender. Forgiveness is about activating your internal power. It is about taking back the power another has tried to take from you and nurturing a healthy self-love. Love is your essence. If you awaken this aspect of yourself, no one can take it from you. Forgiveness is about making a firm determination not to carry the “stuff” of the oppressor, abuser or offender in your body. You rid your cells of any shame, guilt, self-rejection or displaced anger that may have been projected onto you. It doesn’t belong to you. Your desire is to be your authentic self, releasing from your body all negative debris that could damage your health. When Nelson Mandela was asked if he hated those who made him a prisoner for 26 of the best years of his life, his response was, “…if you hate them…you will still be their prisoner. I wanted to be free, so I let go.” Forgiveness sets me free.

**12) MEDITATION**

One of the best ways to create more peace, joy and serenity in a relationship is to engage in the practice of meditation. Meditation puts the body in a state of deep relaxation where the nervous system becomes calm, releasing damaging stress. Meditation takes a couple’s relationship to a more conscious level where harmony, emotional balance, and a deepening of the relationship occur. To help those in a significant relationship achieve this, my husband, Dr. David McKeon and I, have produced a set of meditations. These meditations may be downloaded for free from any of the music outlets like Spotify, Pandora, Apple music. To access these meditations type in ***Thriving in Relationship: 21-Day Meditations for Couples.***

In closing, a good relationship will certainly sprout, grow and flourish if we choose to communicate with kindness, take responsibility for our emotions, and live out the powerful words of the beloved Congressman John R. Lewis , “… walk with the wind … and let the spirit of peace and the power of everlasting love be your guide.”

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