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**SOME RELATIONSHIP SURVIVAL SKILLS**

Being in an adult love relationship can be a difficult task for many people. Even when we function very well in work or in friendships we can find ourselves experiencing emotional extremes in a love relationship that simply   
do not exist in these other areas. These extremes include intense love and connection, as well as intense rage, suspiciousness, disappointment, fear of abandonment, neediness, and entitlement. Most experts agree that this is related to our re-creation of the early symbiotic bonds we experienced in our families. Our deeply engrained emotional "memories" emerge when we least expect them and we can respond to a nuance or a tone in our partner's voice with an intensity that more realistically belongs to these past relationships. The art of being in an adult love relationship involves learning how to recognize our own emotional "triggers" and then making a commitment to managing these triggers in a more reasoned and effective way. In my work with couples, I've developed these strategies for this ongoing work of being in-relationship.

**Stop, Identify Your Feelings, and Check Them Out:**

Just because you feel something (attacked, threatened, blamed, hurt, rejected), this does not necessarily reflect   
your partner's intention. In fact, in the case of intense and repetitively occurring feelings, this is probably not the case. As stated, these intense and repetitive feelings are usually deeply ingrained emotional body memories and sensate responses related to childhood trauma. Check out the reality of these feelings with your partner. *Ask.*

**For example:** "I'm feeling criticized. Can you tell me what you need instead?

**Instead of:** "How dare *you* talk to *me* like that?"

**Listen to What Your Partner Has to Say:**

Breathe, stay open, and reach for empathy. Stop explaining or defending, and really listen to the content of what your partner is saying, even try to repeat it back (active listening). It is unproductive to counterattack, counter-threaten, counter-blame, or counter-reject in an attempt to manage your emotions. As an adult you *can* survive being blamed, rejected, threatened, or attacked, even if it is actually happening. You do not have to fight as if your survival depends on it, and you do not have to be vindicated in the moment. The need to "win" or be "right" also cuts off the opportunity to have a dialogue about what may be our partner's legitimate need or disappointment.

**For example:** "You're saying that you're upset that I didn't think about making dinner. I see that this was very important to you. You would have liked me to think of you."

**Instead of:** "How can *you* talk to *me* about making dinner? When was the last time *you* did anything for me?"

**Contain Your Feelings, Don't Act Out:**

Stop, breathe, and attempt to make contact with and support the frightened, hurt, or angry child within. This is

your job, not your partner's. Your sense of well-being cannot be dependent on your partner's behavior or validation. This is how you felt as a child, when your survival did depend on the good will and validation of an often irrational or non-respectful adult. Remember that your partner is probably imperfect, rather than of truly bad intention. Remember that two people of good will can have different perceptions of the same situation, each rooted in his/her own experience. Support yourself, so you can be open to your partner's experience.

**For example:** Say to yourself: "These are my familiar childhood feelings. I don't have to defend myself.

I can breathe through these feelings. I can wait to react. I can be open to what my partner is saying."

**Instead of:** *"Unless* you admit what you're doing, this relationship is over. I can't be with someone I don't trust."

**Ask for What You Need:**

Just because your partner has not intuited your need, does not mean he/she has actively rejected you. Your partner may be anxious, depressed, threatened, unaware, or even self-involved. Hopefully, he/she is educable and of good will, and hopefully you are working on building a relationship together. Hopefully, your partner will learn to be more aware and responsive *over time.* Ask for what you need, rather than making a statement about what you're *not* getting. This creates a shift toward hopefulness and openness, and away from blame and self- fulfilling negative prophecy.

**For example:** "You know how easily I feel criticized. Could you try to say the same thing without any blame attached? Could you try and just tell me about your own need or reaction."

**Instead of:** "You are just a mean person. You'll *never learn* how to talk to another human being."

**Accept Frustration or Disappointment:**

Your partner cannot always give you what you need, even when you do ask directly, usually because of his/her own emotional trauma and imperfections, or even because of realistic time restrictions or other obligations. In a good relationship, we get some of what we need most of the time. In a great relationship, we get most of what we need most of the time. Over time, you can assess whether you have a "good enough" partner and a "good enough" relationship, and you can make decisions about the relationship based on your assessment. This assessment cannot usually be made in the heat of the moment, however, during one fight or because of one disagreement. As adults, we *can* survive not having our needs met, even needs that are deeply felt. This is part of accepting our partner as an imperfect, separate human being. Again, our survival does not depend on a specific emotional need being met immediately, and we can only assess the value of the relationship and the full measure of our partner over time.

**For example:** "I'm disappointed that you keep criticizing me and I feel upset by it. I hope we can work out a better way to talk about your frustration (hurt, disappointment...) in the future."

**Instead of:** "This relationship is hopeless. I'll *never get* what I need from you. I’m leaving."

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**Attempt to Work Out Feelings in, Not Outside of, the Relationship:**

This is especially important when you find yourself confirming familiar negative thoughts or feelings (triangulating) with a friend or even with a therapist, or when you find yourself withdrawing into a private self-congratulating mental dialogue. If you confirm your negative world-view, you will feel morally superior and you may even feel safe, but you will not develop a partnership. This is the opposite of being in a relationship. It is like being alone—either with yourself, or with someone who is offering you a mirror image of yourself--and it only serves to confirm your childhood emotional world-view and set of expectations. As Harville Hendricks once asked, "Would you rather be right or be in a relationship?"

**For example (to a friend):** "I know you're trying to support me, but I should really bring these feelings back to my relationship and see if I can work them out there. It's too easy to confirm all my negative feelings."

**Instead of:** "Don't you agree that *I'm right?* Can you believe how badly he/she acted? Isn't he/she unbelievable?"

**Focus on the Positive:**

Many years ago, I learned an important lesson from an article about animal trainers. They only reward the small steps that lead to a new and desired behavior, something they call “approximations.” For instance, if a sea lion is being trained to wave its fin, and doesn’t engage, the trainer does not respond, but rather stands still, is careful to look away, and gives no emotional engagement or reward, something called Least Reinforcing Behavior (LRS). Conversely, when the sea lion moves its flipper up and down, even only an inch, the trainer responds excitedly and immediately gives the sea lion another fish. We have all seen how many fish it takes to get the sea lion to wave, but in the end, it does just that. In the article, the author describes how she used this concept with her husband: rather than nag & criticize about clothes that are left on the floor, she would thank him whenever he threw a shirt in the hamper. Rather than complain that he never suggests anything fun to do, she responds excitedly when he asks if she would like to take a walk. Focusing on the positive creates a cycle that reinforces desired behavior; focusing on the negative re-enacts a cycle of disappointment and mutual criticism and blame.

**For Example:** Thank you so much for cleaning up your dishes. I love it when the sink is clean, and it also reminds me to clean up my dishes, which I really appreciate.

**Instead of:** You always leave dirty dishes in the sink. You never clean up after yourself. I can’t believe I’m married to such a slob.

**Apologize When You Hurt Your Partner:**

An apology is a powerful tool that can mediate a difficult relational moment and put it to rest, but it is also something one partner may have great difficulty offering to the other. This is because—depending upon your point of view—it is important for one partner to appreciate and recognize that they have done something that has hurt the other partner, possibly unintentionally or reactively, or it is essential for that partner to defend themselves at any cost against an unfair allegation, completely unreasonable and undeserved. This moment is a perfect storm, because what is often triggered is a childhood feeling of being ignored and invalidated or, conversely, of being unfairly criticized. But the work of being in a relationship is to see the others’ point of view, even if it doesn’t make sense to us, and to validate the other’s perception, even if it doesn’t feel justified. It is their perception after all, and to be curious about it opens a bridge toward a healing connection. In crossing this bridge, we enter into what Martin Buber calls the I/thou or the “between,” the sacred space that is created by two individuals as they attempt to look at or experience the world through the others’ eyes. This goes both ways, but the pathway to healing starts with an apology.

**For Example:** I’m so sorry I hurt your feelings. I got caught up in work, and forgot that I promised to call you this afternoon. I’ll try to remember next time.

**Instead of:** All you do is think about yourself. You know how hard I work and how much stress I’m under. Instead of blaming me, why don’t you deal with the part of yourself that is always feeling so abandoned.