

Does Familiarity Breed Contempt?

The expression, familiarity breeds contempt, is all too familiar. Yet, as the case with many common sayings, we might benefit from taking a look at whether it truly makes sense. When we don't examine these beliefs they tend to become self-fulfilling prophecies. Ordinarily, the expression "familiarity breeds contempt" refers to what often happens in long-standing relationships and marriages. Regrettably, over time too many relationships begin to see their happiness retreat. Yet, the question remains, is it actually familiarity that causes this disappointment?

We might consider whether it's familiarity that's the culprit or whether something else is provoking the contempt. At times, familiarity may in fact pave the way for greater intimacy and love. After all, when the relationship begins and we open to emotional intimacy, we set the stage for falling in love. If a soft kiss, an understanding hug or the simple feeling of being cared for becomes familiar, then familiarity in fact evokes and sustains love. In loving relationships that embrace emotional support and respect, familiarity produces a wonderful life.

What we become accustomed to should become the focus of our attention. In relationships, the problem is not with familiarity, but more about that which we're acclimating to. For example, disrespectful, dishonoring, and negative energy all too often become familiar territory in relationships. These are the elements that cause contempt.

At the onset of romantic relationships we seek to become familiar with one another. After all, that's the only way that we can truly know of each other. If love and intimacy are the goals they can only be achieved through a more intimate knowing of one another. The difficulties that marriages endure are not derived from this intimacy, but are caused by a turning away from each other. When we do so, we begin to take each other for granted. This typically happens after we've become comfortable enough and the conquest of love has been achieved. This may signal the beginning of that negative familiarity.

When we honor one another we're not likely to experience contempt. The disdain comes from not getting our needs met. It originates from a turning away from your partner and a relationship philosophy that more likely resembles a "me first" attitude. Contempt is the emotional reaction to not feeling cared for and perhaps feeling devalued. When we feel valued by our partners, our relationships are inclined to thrive. At the least, this feeling of being valued tends to limit hostility and scorn. When we dishonor our partners, contempt becomes very prevalent.

We must pay close attention to the slide into the devaluing of one another. This pattern becomes cyclical, for as soon as one feels disrespected, it's likely that they will react negatively and impart the same negativity upon their partner. One solution rests in learning to authentically communicate your feelings rather than acting them out. Tell your partner how you feel, rather than behaving contentiously. Communicating that you're angry is very different from acting angrily. Not doing so will assure that the pattern of contempt will begin.

The Roles That We Play

The various roles that we play often incline us to take our partners for granted. We become so identified with being parents, providers, homemakers and the other numerous functions that we must perform, that it becomes very easy to dishonor the loving energy that brought us together in the first place. When we get so hurried with all of the things we must do and accomplish in

our lives, the well-being of the relationship suffers. Keeping the sanctity of a relationship alive and well simply requires a subtle but powerful mindfulness: Being thoughtful and considerate, honoring the relationship as a priority and realizing that what we put into our relationship is what we're likely to receive in return.

Familiarity, as we can see, isn't the problem. Becoming familiar with negativity assures discord and unhappiness in our relationships. A long-standing relationship doesn't need to degenerate into the self-fulfilling prophecy of contempt. We simply need to make the familiar loving and if we do so, time becomes not our enemy but our ally, as our intimacy grows.