

Why we struggle in our relationships

By Mel Schwartz

From my experience, a relationship that goes unscathed and unchallenged is the notable exception. Conflict and struggle become ordinary facets of our partnering. What often begins as a loving and intimately connected partnering tends over time to wither and fall from grace. It is rather a common denominator that relationships are a challenge for almost all of us. We might well consider why that is the case.

Regrettably the tendency is to blame our partner or ourselves as we spiral down in disappointment and frustration. Yet, the simpler and more valid consideration might well be that we are simply unschooled in the art of relationship. The divorce statistics are only the tip of the iceberg. More shockingly, we might reflect as to how many intact marriages are fundamentally happy. At best, we can conclude that the majority of relationships do not succeed. Yet, it would be illogical to personalize these struggles. Why would we succeed in something that we're totally unprepared for? Very few individuals speak of the wonderful modeling of relationship that they received from their parents. And we certainly received no schooling in relationship.

Nowhere else in life do we expect to do well without some education or training. We are well schooled in history, math, language and science for the purpose of advancing in our life skills. These subjects demand a certain degree of literacy so that we might prosper in our lives. Yet, there is one intrinsic and fundamental skill that is omitted from our curriculum; relationship. And this is why we struggle so and disappoint one another and ourselves.

How can we possibly expect to thrive in our relations if we are illiterate in this most vital area? From this premise we might at least begin to remove the blame factor from our relationships. It's not our fault if we've never been shown the way. When I work with couples who share this perspective, it frees them from the blame game. This doesn't suggest that we're off the hook, but that we might elect to begin our learning. Contrary to the lyric from Lennon and McCartney, love isn't all you need. It's a great start, but we need to understand the subtleties and nuances of relating, lest we lose that loving energy. I can't recall ever working with a couple where one was completely faultless and enlightened and their partner was completely responsible for the problems at hand. More often there is a curious synergy at play, whereby one's needs or challenges are entirely entangled with the other's potential for growth. When one person begins on their path of personal evolution, it invariably opens new possibilities for their partners. This doesn't guarantee a happy ending, but it does enable us to come out of the groove in which we're stuck.

Isn't it a pity, isn't it a shame

Recalling another Beatle, George Harrison sang:

Isn't it a pity, isn't it a shame,

How we break each other's hearts, how we cause each other pain

Yes it is a pity and it needn't be that way. If we come to appreciate that we're all in this together and we need to learn the art of relationship. This is an art form that is teachable and rather than pointing fingers we might begin our relationship education. There are many paths to this process, but I'd beware of quick fix solutions. In fact, the goal is not to fix a relationship. It's not a piece of technology that is broken. At times, I've had people ask me if their relationship is salvageable. That very question points to the problem of lowered expectations. We should not seek repair or salvage, but joyfulness and fulfillment. Begin to read, attend workshops, do some individual therapy and of course, couples therapy. In fact, the healthiest perspective would be to engage in therapy prior to marriage. Engage in this process not from a perspective of fault, blame or dysfunction, but with a motivated eagerness to learn. Embracing the art of relating is the best assurance to a joyful life.

Mel Schwartz LCSW is a visionary psychotherapist, thinker and author who earned his graduate degree from Columbia University. He has been a keynote speaker at Yale University. Mel is the author of *The Art of Intimacy*, *The Pleasure of Passion* and is currently writing, *Emergent Thinking*®. He is the founder of the *Emergent Thinking*® Process. He is in private practice in Westport, CT. and Mt. Kisco, NY. Visit his web site at www.MelSchwartz.com.