

Web-Based Radio Show

Maintaining Healthy Relationships

Healthy and Therapeutic Relationships Part II

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Good morning. This is Dr. Greenspan welcoming you to our web-based radio show. We're starting a few minutes late today, and I thank you for bearing with us. We were having a little bit of a technical glitch, but we are live and we are ready.

Today's topic is going to be a continuation of last week's topic. If we have time today, we'll go into a new topic. So here is the "hope for" agenda for today: To complete our discussion of therapeutic or growth-producing relationships. In other words, the characteristics in all relationships that enable them to help children or any human being for that matter, grow and develop psychologically. This means emotionally and intellectually.

As you know, this is not an easy process. Relationships are two-way streets. Sometimes they help us grow and develop, and other times relationships can undermine healthy development. If we understand the factors that promote health and promote psychological growth, then we can create those relationships – especially with our children and in our families, but also in our relationships with our spouses and our friends and all those whose growth and development we want to facilitate. Those of us who are therapists, we'll find that these same relationships; these same factors that characterize relationships, also characterize healthy therapeutic relationships. In other words, they are the ingredients of why certain types of therapy help individuals mature and grow.


If we have time today, we'll cover the second part of our agenda, which will be how to work with children who have visual deficits and how to work with children who have hearing deficits. Many children with autistic spectrum disorders either have some of those patterns in relationship to a hearing deficit or a visual deficit, or simply the two coexist. But, they provide important special challenges for working with children with autistic spectrum disorders. If we don't have time this week, that will be our topic for next week.



To get back to our main topic, last week we talked about the critical ingredients of therapeutic or growth-producing relationships. The model we presented was one in which our very definition of mental health is the same as the factors we want to promote in a healthy relationship. That sounds vague and a little bit obscure, but as you recall, a healthy individual is one who can do the following:

- Can focus and attend
- Relate with real warmth
- Read and respond to their own and other people's emotional signals and gestures
- Problem solve with others both implicitly through exchanging gestures as well as with words
- Use words to think about feelings and their inner life and who can express those feeling and wishes in words
- Can think logically
- Can distinguish reality from fantasy
- Can judge and evaluate or discuss their own feelings logically.

So those are part of the characteristics of how we define mental health. It may sound overly simplified to say that relationships that are healthy are those that promote those characteristics. Yet, that's the only logical conclusion we could make. However, as we talked about last week, it's not so easy to promote those characteristics in relationships, especially when the other party in the relationship is making it difficult, such as a child with special needs where for no fault of their own but for biological reasons may find it harder to form that relationship; to learn about intimacy and trust; or may find it harder to read and respond to emotional signals; or may find it harder to form words to express feelings and ideas or even to be aware of feelings and ideas. So at times it can be difficult and many adults have relationships with other adults where they feel the other adult makes it hard for them to relate, where every time they get close, the other adult pulls away and they don't know if they should chase them or play hard-to-get themselves, or is there some other third alternative that is even better, such as consistent warm nurturing and availability. Or there are adults who every time one expresses a warm feeling, they express a hostile feeling back. They don't pull away, but they attack, discouraging one from exploring warmth, comfort, and dependency with that adult. Whether this happens again in the therapeutic relationship or in any growth-producing relationship, it can be a real challenge. So, having said that healthy relationships – therapeutic or in life – are those that promote these very characteristics is easy to say, but harder to do, especially when the other party is “not cooperating.” The “not cooperating” can take many forms and it may not be, again, deliberate on the other party's part.



Everybody is a product of their own upbringing and their own background. That's the chemistry that makes for life and relationships, why some work well together and some don't work well together. For example, an individual who is shy and aloof when they get anxious and another individual who is shy and aloof when they get anxious may find little common ground to learn how to relate to each other because they each use the same coping capacity or the same way of handling anxiety and stress. On the other hand, an individual who reaches out when they are anxious, when they are insecure, becomes extra, extra nurturing, provides extra chicken soup, and another individual who becomes more shy and a little bit aloof, they may be a perfect match for each other. As each one gets anxious, they compliment each other and can still relate to each other.


The same factor operates with children and families. Some parents naturally pursue and offer more nurturing support to the shy child who requires some pulling in, or the child who chooses to withdraw into his own world. Or the child who doesn't choose to do it because of low muscle tone and under reactivity needs extra wooing to be in a relationship. On the other hand, a child who is very sensory over reactive and extra sensitive may find it hard with a caregiver who has too much energy and overwhelms them. He may need someone who is more soothing and lower key, but nonetheless warm and persistent.

The fortunate thing about adults and children is adults often have flexibility to adapt their relationship to the profile or needs of the child. As you know, we've been talking about that for many weeks now, about how we create learning relationships based on the child's individual characteristics.

Just in summary, last week we talked about the basics – how relationships can promote attending, relating, reading and responding to emotional signals, using ideas creatively, to express feelings, and also using ideas logically, to examine feelings and to distinguish reality from fantasy. Today we are going to talk about the higher levels of mental health and the additional levels of relationships that promote it.


Once an individual can be logical and reality-based, their mental health depends on being able to view the world in more complex ways. We have divided these into a number of additional stages or capacities that on the one hand constitute mental health and the other hand constitute healthy or growth facilitating or growth producing relationships.

The first of these has to do what we call “multi-causal thinking” or being able to look for multiple reasons for events. Here, in individuals who can do this, can examine reality not just in terms of one causal relationship – why does the moon come out at night – but can look at many factors that may influence the moon coming out at night.



Similarly the same individual can look at many reasons why they are angry or sad, not just one. So to become a subtle thinker, one needs to be able to look at multiple reasons for things. Some relationships promote this. The caregiver or the parent to the child with special needs or the child without special needs is curious and wants to get the child's opinions. So when the child says they are mad at something, or even if they just say they want to go outside, the parent or the caregiver asks, "Oh that sounds great, but why?" The child says, "Well, I want to play." "Gee, any other reasons?" The child might add, "Well, it's a nice day and it's warm and it's healthy to get some fresh air." Now we have a child who is being helped to be a multi-causal thinker and that is a growth-facilitating aspect of that relationship. Similarly, if the child says they are sad, inquiring as to how come or why. "Because Johnny wouldn't play with me." "Are there any other reasons, Sweetheart?" "Well, Daddy left this morning in a hurry and he didn't play with me either. And Mommy, you are too busy also now and none of my friends are around." So now we have a child who is giving four reasons.


So whether it's the world of feelings or the world of going outside to play or understanding the moon shining at night, the multi-causal thinker is an intellectually and emotionally more advanced thinker than the individual who can only think of one thing at a time. We often, in recent years, have talked about individuals and groups who get involved in polarized thinking – all-or-nothing; seeing the world in black-and-white terms. You are either good or bad. To be sure, some aspects of reality are black-and-white; are all-or-nothing. But, many aspects of reality are not so simple. The polarized thinker gets locked into much more simple systems of receiving the world, including the world of feelings as well as the world of external reality of the physical world. So to help individuals move from polarized approaches where they get furious or angry or sad or depressed because there is only "my way or the highway" to being able to think more subtly and in a more complex fashion about feelings and about events that requires becoming a multi-causal thinker. This requires, again, a growth-producing relationship within which this can occur. Now in the therapeutic situation or the parenting situation, it's easy to facilitate this by simply a curious, inquiring attitude, one that always seeks more and deeper answers to questions. The attitude, however, can't be one of there's a right answer or a wrong answer. So when you are asking a child his opinion about something, it should never be where you know the answer in advance like, "How much 4+5 is" or "How much 17+19 is" or "What did we do this morning after we had breakfast? Where did we go? Don't you remember?" or "What was that animal we saw at the zoo? What was it called? What was the other animal?" Those are factual questions with a right and wrong answer. What we are talking about here is getting the child's opinion so the child becomes a thinker or the other adult becomes a thinker in our growth-producing relationship.



To be a multi-causal thinker, however, the tone of our voice has to be not one of that we expect a certain answer, even if it is an opinion, like we know the right opinion and you better have it or else, but rather we really want to know your opinion. How do you feel about this? Now obviously, if this discussion is occurring in an intellectual realm or on a school activity, like “What are the different reasons for the Civil War?” we are going to be asking the child or the other adult to bring in facts to support their reasons. So we’re going to say, “What do you think the most important reasons and the less important reasons for the Civil War were?” the person has to know some facts in order to support their argument.

Now once you become a good gray area thinker and you have growth facilitating relationships that help produce this – I should add one more characteristic of these growth-producing relationships. In the world of feelings, the other person has to be willing to hear the feelings. So, if you are, for example, asking someone why they are angry and you have a thin skin and you don’t really want to hear why they are angry, or you are too quick to defend yourself, saying “That’s not true, I never did that to you!” you’re not going to hear many reasons why someone is angry at you. So whether it’s two adults discussing anger or a parent discussing with a child or a therapist discussing it with a patient, you’ve got to have an accepting attitude where you want to learn; where you are eager to find out more and where your own thin skin doesn’t get in the way. Where you don’t jump in to defend yourself or say, “Well, that’s not true!” too quickly. Listen fully and then you can have a debate on the merits of the other person’s point of view or argument; or in the therapeutic situation on why they feel the way they do feel. The key is then to have a certain listening attitude and an inquiring tone to the relationship in order to promote this level of multi-causal thinking which is a characteristic of intellectually and emotionally healthy individuals. That fact is probably the single factor that gets in the way the most in all relationships. It’s the personality of the other person in the relationship who is doing the inquiring. So our own personalities sometimes get in the way of our being growth-producing or facilitating.

Nowhere is this more important than with children with special needs. Many children with special needs have worked very hard to develop language and have worked very hard to get to the point where they can give their opinions and talk realistically and logically. But many children don’t progress to these higher levels of thinking where they develop multi-causal thinking and the higher levels I’ll talk about in just a few minutes. The reason is not because they can’t. Not because they don’t have the capacity, but because the growth-producing relationships are not sufficiently present in their life in the form that would help them advance. In other words, we, the helpers, whether it is therapists, caregivers, or educators, tend to relate to them more in a factual way, more in




an all-or-nothing way, more in a rule-based way. We don't go after opinions enough. We aren't curious enough. We don't challenge them enough to think, whether it's about their feelings or about the real world.

Now, that's a hard pill for all of us to swallow and to acknowledge that we may not do this sufficiently. But, we all have "thin skin" in some areas of life. We're unlikely, in those areas, to be as inquiring and as opinion-generating as we might be. Now, whenever I mention this, I always get the question, "Yes, but don't children need rules, don't they need to know some things are just right and some things are wrong, don't they need discipline?" The answer to that is, absolutely yes. They need all of those things. But, they need it in the form of guidance, and they need it in the form of discussions of understanding why these rules are important. But, when push comes to shove, things like hitting, hurting, or breaking things have solid, clear rules and solid, clear consequences. That doesn't preclude getting the child's opinions. He may have opinions about the rules, about the consequences, about the guidelines, even though he has to follow them or she has to follow them. So the inquiring attitude is not at odds with having clear, firm guidelines and rules and discipline. Actually it promotes it, because a thinking child can cooperate willingly once they understand the reasons. Even if they are not doing it totally willingly, at least they understand real reasons for setting these rules up. As they get older, they may come to understand the wisdom of some of those rules.


Now what is the next step after multi-problem or multi-causal thinking? The next step, as we have talked about in the past, we call "gray area thinking" and "comparative thinking." Here, individuals are helped to see the world in terms of shades of gray, not just the many reasons for something, but the degrees to which each reason works or doesn't work. If there are, again, three or four reasons for the Civil War, what is the degree to which the first reason is more important than the second reason? Does the first reason account for 80% of the Civil War and the second one for only 10% and the third for another 10%? If it is feelings, how angry are they? A little bit, a medium amount, a whole, whole lot, the most they have ever been in their whole life? If they are happy, again, is it textured? Does it have subtlety? Does it have nuance?

Now gray area thinking is very important for the world of feelings - for mental health. Feelings exist in shades of gray in gradations and if we only see them in all-or-nothing terms, we tend to be either anxious, or depressed, or angry, or withdrawn. In other words, we operate like a very, very little baby operates with extreme, catastrophic feeling states. On the other hand, if we can experience the world in terms of shades of gray and various degrees, we are now able to negotiate and enter into a much more subtle set of relationship patterns.



Now how do helping relationships promote gray area thinking when it comes to the world of feelings, or when it comes to the world of events? Here, too, growth-producing relationships have to have within the framework of that relationship, an emphasis on subtlety, complexity, nuance, and degree. This again may sound simple, but it is very hard to implement it. Take a concrete example of a parent and a child. Let's start with an example of a child with special needs. The parent tends to feel firm limits are important. So the child misbehaves and the parent goes from being warm, sweet, and supportive to being very firm and annoyed – “I told you not to do that.” Then gets angry with the child and then punishes the child. The child doesn't experience their world as a subtle, gradual buildup. It's like they are going 10 miles per hour and all of a sudden the parent is going 70 miles per hour. That the child should mimic this would be no surprise. On the other hand, the child begins misbehaving and the parent goes up gradually with their tone of voice with a seriousness and the look in their eyes, gives the child a few warnings, helps the child try to calm down and contain themselves, and then leads up to a firm and persistent limit which may include a time-out or may include some other limit that will help the child realize that this firmness and structure and guidance that can help them contain themselves. But the parent who is gradual in their buildup, but firm and persistent at the end is very different from the parent who goes from 0-60 in two seconds. So the quality of gray area thinking that we have is not just inquiring to a child about how angry he is, or how sad he is, or how excited he is, or inquiring about the degrees to which this or that factor caused the Civil War. It is also in the tone of the relationship. Does the relationship have that subtlety and complexity in the way the therapist, parent, or the facilitator of the growth-producing relationship negotiates states with the other party? In other words, is it characterized by this subtle, gray area, complex qualities? This is not easy to evaluate in ourselves, whether we are producing growth-producing relationships. So we have to look and explore our own personalities. Know where our buttons are. Know where we go from 0-60, where we can be more gradual, more regulated, and more soothing.


We need to always examine ourselves. We need to do this for all the different emotional themes of life: dependency, security, assertiveness, anger, fear, anxiety. All of us have some buttons that can be pushed in any of these areas and when someone pushes our buttons, we tend to not be a subtle, nuanced, gray area, soothing thinker. Again, I want to emphasize here too that being subtle and gray area doesn't mean not having firm limits or guidance, or not having clear discipline. The two go hand-in-hand, actually, and children who grow up in families that provide this kind of growth and this kind of facilitation, actually become much more disciplined because they have a calm internal voice guiding them than in children who grow up in all-or-nothing type families or all-or-nothing type relationships with others.



So the most important factor in producing gray area thinking in relationship to the world of feelings and the relationship to the world of events as a feature of mental health and as a feature of growth-producing relationships is that the relationship itself has to be characterized by an emotional tone, which is soothing and regulating and builds up gradually in different areas, where there is a lot of tolerance of emotional expressiveness and a lot of calm, regulated exploration of different subtleties and textures of emotions and feelings. In other words, it's not enough to simply to get at the reasons for someone having a feeling in therapy or in life. We're helping them discover why they feel a certain way. It's the way you help them discover that. It's that soothing, warm, textured tone that helps them look at the intensity and flavor of their feelings and the way you negotiate your feelings as you are doing that so that they experience the other person (you) as a textured, nuanced, subtle, regulating, calm person, but someone who can also build up to firmness and guidance and limit setting as needed. It is important to do this for all the different emotional domains of life – from dependency to assertiveness and anger.


With children with special needs, this becomes especially important because the children who have done very well and develop lots of language often graduate to where they have behavior problems at school such as pushing children, shoving children, having tantrums, getting into situations where they get frustrated. In a sense, many parents who are delighted with the progress their children have made intellectually, verbally, and in academics come in with a new set of concerns that for many are more difficult than the original set of concerns which had to do with, “Will my child ever speak?” or “Will my child ever relate to others?” Now we are dealing with “graduate level” problems – emotional regulation, behavioral regulation, impulse control problems, mood variation problems. This all has to do with dealing with this world of subtlety and gray area thinking. In a sense, we welcome it when our children graduate to this level of problems, but in a sense it challenges us in a new way as growth providers in terms of growth-facilitating relationships.

Now it's time to move to the next level of complexity that defines both mental health and defines therapeutic or helping or facilitating relationships. That's the ability of the individual to reflect on their own moods and feelings and their own internal experience. This is the ultimate level we help individuals reach. Many children have a hard time getting to this level, but also many adults who consider themselves reasonably emotionally stable and secure have a hard time achieving this level. This is the level where an individual can say, “Gee I'm angrier than I should be in this situation” or “Gee, I'm sadder than I usually am when something like this happens” or “Gee, I'm more confused than I ordinarily get or I don't quite feel myself today.” This is where the



person evaluates their own mood, their own feelings, and they evaluate the textures of their feelings that they have mastered in gray area thinking, and can wonder why today is different than yesterday. They can anticipate how tomorrow might be different than today. So this ability to reflect on one's self, literally to think about one's own thoughts and think about thinking is a very advanced human capacity. It's one that really separates very, very mature reflective individuals who have a high degree of psychological health from individuals who still have challenges. Once you have this ability to judge, evaluate, assess, and observe your own feelings in its full range of complexity and subtlety, and where you don't have many feelings that are taboo to understand, then you have a wonderful tool for mental health. You can figure out things on your own. You can wonder why you feel towards this person this way and towards that person that way; why you had a hard time with this interview for this job but a really great interview for another job. Now, obviously none of us achieve this capacity for this degree of reflectiveness completely. We all have our buttons, we all have areas that due to our own family upbringing are tougher for us. For some it's anger. For some it's love and dependency. For some it's sexuality. For some it's excitement. For some it's curiosity and exploration. We all have areas of intellect where we do this better than others. For some we can do this better when it comes to thinking about literature, for others we do it better when it comes to thinking about politics or social studies. So in intellectual areas and emotional areas, we're usually stronger in some realms than others. Some of us can do it better in things we visualize. Others in things we hear. So none of us are going to be perfectly even in our ability for this highest level of reflective thinking where we can evaluate our own thoughts and our own behaviors and our own feelings. But, with this in mind, we can think about this as always occurring on a continuum. We're always striving to broaden the range that we can use in our reflective thinking. We can broaden the richness and fullness of our emotional lives and our intellectual lives that we can apply this wonderful tool to. So this becomes a live-long endeavor.

Now growth-facilitating relationships – how do they promote and help this along? Well, growth-facilitating relationships promote and move this along by again, creating in the relationship the ability for more and more self reflection. So the growth-facilitating relationship not only goes after the other person's opinions, but tries to challenge the other person to be reflective. For example, in working with a child with special needs who is working to achieve this level, and we have now many children with special needs including autistic spectrum disorders who have achieved this highest level. Incidentally, many have believed historically that even some children were unable to achieve this level, that once a child was diagnosed with an autistic spectrum disorder, this level of reflective thinking where they could make inferences and come up with creative new ideas and reflect on their own thoughts and feelings and empathize with others, was out




of their reach. We have discovered that this is not the case. There are at least some children with autistic spectrum disorders and other very severe special needs conditions that can achieve this level. We're hoping to figure out ways to help more and more children achieve this. The children who we found can achieve it, actually is a very sizable number. We just don't know what percentage it is in the natural population, even though we know in the group we work with that it is a very healthy percentage of the children.

Moving away from that to the more general issue, is how we promote this. We promote it by going after opinions, but then taking it one step further. In the growth-facilitating relationship, asking the person not just what they think about how they are feeling towards me or towards your friend or about this or that subject, but what they make of that feeling in relationship to how you usually feel, or in relationship to how you wish you could feel. In other words, we ask for a more complex judgment, and we ask people to start reasoning about how this fits in with their life pattern, with their history, and how they hope to be in the future. So as the person is challenged to reflect on feelings in a more complex way, take those gray area feelings they have already mastered and look at it in relationship to the way they are ordinarily – their evolving sense of who they are as a person, how does this compare, where did it come from, where is it going in the future – those kinds of opinion-oriented inquiries challenge individuals to get to this level of self-reflective thinking that characterizes a high degree of mental health. Also, it's negotiation, the interactions that promote it, characterize growth-facilitating relationships, be it in therapy, be it in spousal relationships, be it in relationships between parents and children.

Now if this was as easy to do as it is to say, everyone would be a high level reflective thinker, yet we know that's not the case. Again here too, we each have our own buttons so it's hard for those of us who are trying to be growth facilitators to be patient and inquiring and supportive of this type of exploration in all emotional areas. Some of us do better for some than others. Some of us do better for certain intellectual realms than others. So we don't always challenge our colleagues or our children or those we are working with or close friends in this way.

Also, there is another factor. We have to be able to think this way ourselves in order to engage others in this type of relationship. Again, as I have been mentioning, we all have areas where we don't think this way ourselves or where it is just very, very hard for us. Also, the hustle-bustle of life and stress and anxiety leads us to want to be more concrete – quick, act out of reflex; act out of instinct, not out of “the examined life.”




Also, another factor in promoting and creating the framework or creating the relationship patterns that promote this level of thinking is to not get too caught up in the strictly intellectualized version of this. This can sound like everyone is trying to be a therapist – “Well, how does this compare with what you did yesterday?” and “How does this compare to the way you usually are?” and “Where did this come from in your past?” and “What do you want for the future?” Even though those are the realms, if you do them in a highly intellectualized way where you are pretending to be a therapist, you’re going to annoy the other person and it becomes a pain in the neck, and you’re going to promote irritation and annoyance and rejection and anger, not the qualities of growth producing relationships we want.

How do you actually implement this? How do you actually challenge the person to become a self-explorative, inquiring individual who is able to do reflective thinking on their own, even in subtle and complex emotional arenas? Even to the level where the person can acknowledge that there are certain areas that are hard for them to be reflective on, that they have their own buttons when it comes to anger or rejection. So for example, there is an individual I know who now can reflect on the fact that when it comes to relationships with someone from the opposite sex, they are extra rejection-sensitive. They see red more quickly than they wish they did. But in that situation, they feel they can’t control it or that they know they have this tendency. So even though they can’t quite figure it out yet, they are aware that this little island of more all-or-nothing thinking still exists for them when it comes to this particular type of social relationship. Well, that’s a real advance. That’s very reflective, even though they haven’t gotten to the bottom of the pattern yet. But that gets you about 80% there, identifying that it is a pattern as opposed to just living in that pattern. So in a sense the ability to identify your castles in the sky and not live in them is 80% of along the way of this self-reflective thinking we’re talking about. That constitutes a high degree of mental health. The lesser mental health is when you build your castles in the sky and you decide to live in those castles or you are not aware they are castles in the sky – you think they are castles right down here on the earth that were built for you and you’re supposed to live in them. So that is an important ingredient.

How do you actually create this and promote this in relationships? Again, we don’t want to highly intellectualize and cross examine where you’re a therapist or a lawyer with your children or with spouses, or even as a therapist. Therapists who come across this way are not very helpful to their patients. So how do you create it? Again, just like with gray area thinking, it’s created in the tone of the relationship. What is that tone? What is that quality in the relationship?

1. It has a wide degree of acceptance of all feelings.




It distinguishes between acting out a feeling, such as behaving aggressively and verbalizing the feeling or feeling it. So it tolerates a wide range of feelings in the relationship in a verbalized and in a feeling tone, but not necessarily in action. So there is a difference between a person who is saying they are angry and who is grimacing angrily and maybe talking in an angry tone of voice, versus a person who is hitting. The ability to experience the other person's feelings is one characteristic. In other words, the tolerance, experience, and the communication, which is often covert and implicit, that you can accept the full range of the other person's feelings, be it dependency, be it anger, be it frustration, be it curiosity, be it excitement, etc. So, that is step one – having a high degree of tolerance for experiencing with the other person a wide range of feelings in the feeling tone and in the verbalization, but not necessarily permitting acting out of the feelings.

- 2. A healthy attitude of curiosity about the person who you are relating to and their feelings, but in an interested, timely way that helps the person talk about feelings when they choose to, as opposed to when you think it's appropriate or want to; so following the other person's lead.*

Over time, whether it's in therapy or in a family or in a friendship or in a marriage, the person gets to all their feelings. Follow their lead, be timely, don't intrude your agenda onto their agenda, unless it's your time to talk. In most healthy relationships that are not therapeutic where it's more one way, have a nice rhythm and balance to them, where each party kind of talks about their own agendas, and each one is sensitive and empathetic and facilitating. That gets to the third quality.

- 3. In addition to tolerating and embracing a wide range of feelings, and following a person's lead, is the capacity to empathize; to put yourself in their shoes.*

That capacity for empathy, to put yourself in their shoes, enables you to help them delve further into the feeling. It helps you get to a deeper level of the feeling. So, for example, if a person is feeling rejected by somebody who simply was too busy, but wasn't actually rejecting, putting yourself in those shoes, remembering a time when you were feeling rejected by someone who really was just kind of too busy, but wasn't doing anything personally to you, helps you kind of experience their feeling. It helps you experience the lack of reality to that feeling in that situation. That's a kind of balanced empathy, where you don't necessarily get overly caught up in the person's feeling with statements like, "Oh boy, that must have been horrible and that person deserves to never hear from you again, how could they be so mean?" Your emotional tone will be a more balanced tone. It will be that empathetic to the sense that you understand how the person felt, and yet you are curious about what was going on in the other person's life at the same time. That balanced empathy is




conveyed as much in your emotional tone as it is in the words you choose, or the comments you make. In one sense, if someone or a friend of yours has been treated outrageously, you might share their outrage. In another sense, if you think it is a more complicated situation where they are overreacting to something, you are invested and involved and you're caring to them, but you are not as outraged with them. They sense that difference in your tone and that difference in your tone helps them wonder if their rage may have been over the top a little bit, and maybe they are misperceiving the situation. It's that subtlety of emotional tone, through your empathy, that helps them get at this level of self-inquiry, where they can wonder, "Gee, was I over the top on this one? Did I misperceive it? Did I overreact to this guy who is just busy and I took it as rejection? Or maybe the computer didn't work and I didn't get the email that he was supposed to send me and maybe it wasn't an out-and-out rejection, etc., etc., etc." So here, the third element is the quality of empathy that you convey through your emotional tone as well as through your words. Again, we all experience this in some relationships – with individuals, close friends or spouses, or family members who we can just talk to, we feel accepted, we feel understood, we feel just the right balance of empathy. There are others who we never feel quite "get" us. So it's this balanced, full range of empathy that is very, very, very important for promoting this level of self reflection.

There is another quality in the relationship. It is the quality of curiosity and a quality of inquiry and a quality of almost adventuresomeness. The adventurous, curious, inquiring quality is one that you convey, again, through your emotional tone, which suggests there are no forbidden territories. Nothing is off limits. Again, we make a distinction between behavior and the world of feelings and the world of ideas. So, when it comes to behaving, there's off limits, there's guidance, there's firm boundaries. But, when it comes to the world of feelings and the world of ideas, there's a sense of inquiry and a sense of observation. So the relationship itself conveys an observing tendency that's adventurous and spirited and knows no boundaries. Whether you're talking about philosophy or politics or the world of feelings, that spirit is conveyed where you are explorers together, observing what you are exploring, but knowing no boundaries.

That capacity to observe your own adventures, again, is conveyed in the emotional tone of the relationship, whether it is a therapeutic one, or a friendship, or spousal, or helping a child with special needs achieve this high level.


Now as we are discussing this highest level, I'm aware that as we describe the qualities in the relationship, they are not easy to define. We talk about empathy, we talk about an adventurous spirit, we talk about observing while you are on your



adventures together, we talk about high tolerance for different feelings. Now we talk about firm guidance and firm limits so that behaviors are different from feelings or words. These are all qualities that promote this highest level of reflectiveness. Perhaps what needs to be underlined here and emphasized, is this last quality. This adventuresomeness, this curiosity, this boldness of thought and feeling, coupled with the ability to observe that is contained in, again, the texture of the relationship; in this spirit of inquiry that you embrace together as you talk about the world, or about feelings, or about friends, or about mutual experiences. This tends to produce this level where you can observe and think about your own feelings.


Now once you achieve this level, development doesn't stop both growth facilitating relationships and our definition of mental health, embraces additional levels. These additional levels now have to do with broadening the realms of one's life experience. So the growth facilitating relationship is one that helps another person broaden their range of experiences in age expected and age appropriate ways. For example, during the adolescent years - moving into new peer relationships, moving into more intimate friendships, moving into thinking about career and education, eventually moving out of the family and going off to school – college, or for a job, living on one's own, eventually having a family of one's own, raising one's own children, taking a broader interest in one's community and world, going through the changes of midlife where we change our perception of time and the lifecycle – where we don't see life as unlimited anymore, but as having a finite end, and we see our past, present, and future in a different light, and going through the aging process with changes in health status and changes in memory, having grandchildren if we are fortunate. All of these are broadening experiences, and within each of these, there are successes and disappointments. There are job successes and job failures. There are disappointments in one's family as well as joyful moments.

In other words, the world of relationships and feelings and the challenges of the life cycle will continue to get more complex and richer and broader as one grows into adolescence and adulthood. What happens is, in our definition of mental health is, that one brings to bear on this broadening range of experience, this capacity for self reflective thinking in the world of feelings and also in the world of events in life of the physical world and of the intellectual world. So what we need to think about is how we promote in growth producing and growth facilitating relationships, the full range of human experiences at each stage of the life cycle. This is the last part of our definition of both mental health and growth producing relationships. Mental health is the individual who can broaden their realms of experience in the fullest and richest sense of the word, and use their self reflective capacities as they broaden and deepen



their ranges of experiences in keeping with their age and their own goals, and the developmental cycles of life that they are negotiating. Growth producing relationships are those that facilitate this. A spouse who helps us negotiate changes in our jobs or helps us come to grips with our feelings as our children help us re-experience some of our own stages of early development. A close friend who does the same, a therapist who does the same – all those individuals are creating growth producing relationships for us. We will be doing the same thing for them.

With children with special needs or special challenges, broadening the realms of experience, getting into new peer relationships and more intimate friendships, experimenting with sexuality, eventually leaving home for college – these all may be much more challenging. The child with motor problems or with some lingering language problems – they have a harder time and require more practice. But the basic ingredients of the growth producing relationship are very much the same. What we have to recognize is that the child will not have a chance to master these higher levels unless we do two things. One, gradually expose the child to these new realms of experience, and two, expose the child to them in a way that keeps the support system cooking in terms of the building blocks we've been working on, and helps the child take more and more initiative; more leadership, and strengthen their self reflective abilities as we broaden the realms of experience. So it's so easy, and the biggest trap we fall into as parents or therapists or just as friends, is when the person we are trying to assist runs into a hurdle, is that temptation to do for them rather than to assist them and helping them learn to think it through on their own. It's much harder to be a growth facilitator that, to use the old parable that teaches the other person how to fish, rather than supply the fish for them. Here, teaching them how to fish means maintaining that self reflective, problem solving orientation; maintaining the gray area thinking; maintaining the causal thinking; maintaining the breadth of feelings that they have while they are confronting the new challenge. So it's challenging them to meet the new challenge, supporting them to use their own reflective abilities, and to broaden it into new realms. For some individuals this will be a slower, longer process. For children with special needs, I often remind parents that the child won't achieve his highest levels of reflective thinking, often until they are into their 20's or even early 30's, and we aren't in a horse race here. We are simply on a trajectory of attempting continuing progress to the highest level the child or the adult can attain. This continues way into the middle of life – into the 50's and 60's. The brain keeps growing and developing into midlife, and so does our capacities to become mentally and intellectually healthy, and so does our need for growth facilitating, growth enhancing relationships.



That's going to be our show for today. Next week we are going to talk about how to work with children who have autistic spectrum challenges, and also have visual deficits. That will be one topic for next week, and the other will be children who have hearing deficits, where it's not simply a deficit in auditory processing or discrimination or language, but actually in hearing itself. So that will be our subject for next week – two special situations that are not infrequent. We will also talk about working with children with visual deficits and hearing deficits who don't have autistic spectrum patterns accompanying them and what we can do to help those children become emotionally and intellectually as competent as they can be.

So we'll speak to you next week and thank you for joining us today.