

Web-Based Radio Show

Living Life in the Gray Zone:


More Essential Truths of Successful Relationships

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Welcome and thank you for joining us. Today we have an interesting topic. We're continuing our series on the essential truths or principles of successful and healthy relationships. These are things we've touched on before, but we've had lots of questions about them, so I thought we would amplify them.

The first thing we're going to talk about today is living life in the "gray zone." What do we mean by living life in the gray zone? Well, the gray zone is the opposite of "all or nothing" thinking. All of us are familiar with a pattern that I think, unfortunately, we all do too much, particularly when we're feeling very, very strongly about something or we're feeling very emotional – we get involved in all or nothing thinking patterns. It's either "my way or the highway." It's either the red states or the blue states, when referring to a political statement. Who among us hasn't, for example, when we think a friend betrayed us because he or she gossiped about us and told something we told them privately to someone else – and we'll characterize this friend as, "I can't trust him at all. He's just a bad person and I'm never going to talk to him again." Who hasn't said that about even a family member that they may love down deep? Yet, we also know – when we're calm and not feeling so extremely angry at somebody or so extremely disappointed or betrayed and when we're in a more contemplative mood – that people are complex, that people have many different sides to them and that, yes, that person may have betrayed us in telling our secret, but he may have many good qualities, too. He may be supportive and warm and nice and kind at other times, and we may not even know all the circumstances surrounding the "betrayal." Yes, maybe he or she had a bad moment, but maybe they're not all bad and maybe we can forgive them this time because of the context of the fact that they came over and helped us take care of our mother when she was ill or that they lent us an empathetic ear when we were upset about our child. They are good people, basically, also, even though who knows what motivated them – maybe envy, maybe competition, maybe just a weak moment. We




give them more of a gray area designation – evil some of the time, but good most of the time – and they’re not either one color or another color, or all one way or all another way, but they’re a shade of gray and, like most of us, they’re complex people. Aren’t we, for the most part, that way? Haven’t we sometimes acted nice and supportive and warm and empathetic and at other times acted mean and sinister and evil or undermining? Haven’t we at times been altruistic and at other times been terribly self-centered? Or, often, aren’t we somewhere in between those extremes and polarities?

If you live life in the gray zone you try always to think in terms of shades of gray rather than all or nothing. Take familiar international situations – it’s easy to portray another country as a danger and a threat. Take the United States’ relationship with Cuba, for example. In the days of the Cold War and when communism was evil and wanted to dominate the world and take over, Cuba was portrayed as all bad. Was Castro’s motive that different from our own? Were there any redeeming qualities to it? On the one hand, he didn’t support freedom, a principle we believe in. He didn’t support democratic elections and a free press, and this is what we believe strongly in. That was, from our point of view, negative. At the same time, did he want good health care for his citizens? Did he want to bring up the standard of living for the poor and make sure everyone got fed and housed? So that was a positive goal. Even though we disagreed with his political philosophy and wanted to create incentives or a political climate for democratic reform in that country and in the communistic government, would we have been better off seeing him in terms of shades of gray rather than all or nothing? Could we have come up with better strategies that might have accomplished our goals because now, at the end of the Cold War, there is still a communist regime in Cuba, although many people are now thinking it’s time to unthaw the ice and look through more of a gray area lens, which is why I’ve used Cuba as an example. Many politicians feel, still, though, that we should paint them with one broad stroke; as long as they’re not for democracy and complete freedom they should still be seen as a negative influence and a threat and as a seeding of communist tendencies in all of Latin and South America. But, even within the seasoned diplomatic corps, there are different opinions. Since I’m not a scholar in these matters, I only raise it as a question without any firm conclusions, but the question is a simple one: Would we have been open to more subtle strategies and ones that might have accomplished our own goals and aims of encouraging democracy if we had looked through a gray area lens initially, rather than an all or nothing lens?



And how about other countries and nations? Do we need to take more gray area? This doesn't mean that there are no situations that require all or nothing thinking. To continue the international analogy on the international scene, there are "bad actors" and leaders whose positions are so extreme that to see them in anything other than an all or nothing light would be to deny reality. Certainly the example that comes to everyone's mind is Nazi Germany. There is no gray area in their behavior, in their goals, and in their ambitions and the world needed to see them for what they did. There are current threats that probably deserve that same designation. On the other hand, do we sometimes use that same brush for other situations?


Coming back to the more typical, everyday situations, let's take an example of a young man who was dating a very nice young lady. They had a basically good relationship where they cared for each other, but one night she became a little bit too inebriated – she'd had too much to drink – and she went off and had a one-night stand, so to speak, with another gentleman who was part of the same social network, though he wasn't a close friend of the person with whom she was in a serious relationship. The boyfriend found out and he then saw his girlfriend as all evil and all bad and completely not to be trusted. She tried very hard to explain that she hardly even remembered what had happened, that it wasn't her typical pattern to over drink, that she'd been upset that day because at work her boss had come very close to firing her because he blamed her for something that actually turned out to be the fault of someone else on the project they were working on, and that it wasn't her typical behavior. But the young gentleman, whom we'll call "Joe" to disguise his name, couldn't forgive her and considered her as "bad" and someone who "couldn't be trusted" because she'd betrayed him and he saw her in these extreme terms. Their three years of warmth and sharing common interests and shared empathy and good deeds for one another were thrown out the window because he was feeling so betrayed. Now this is natural and to be expected at the moment, but he couldn't let go of these feelings. He broke up with her and a year later, when he finally came to his senses after not finding anyone else and feeling the sense of loss and running into her at many social gatherings where their paths would cross, he wanted to rethink his position and began seeing her more in gray area terms. Yes, she was someone who had betrayed him, but yet she was this warm, sweet, nice, empathetic person and he hadn't found anyone else like her. Also, he thought, who amongst us hasn't done something bad, so he tried to see her in terms of shades of gray but, unfortunately, it was too late. He tried to ignite the friendship but by this time she now felt betrayed and was dating somebody else and she felt she couldn't



trust him because he had been unable to forgive her. She still harbored warm feelings for him and remembered their wonderful times together. It was an unfortunate circumstance because now she painted him in all or nothing terms and couldn't see him in gray area terms, even though she still harbored some positive feelings for him. So both individuals suffered and they still suffer until this day. The drama of the story is still unfolding and maybe they will use their gray area thinking to get back together – let's hope they do.

What we want to do is contrast gray area thinking where you see shades of gray versus thinking in all or nothing terms. Almost all people are complex and we always need to remind ourselves to think in the gray zone, to think in a balanced way and to look at subtlety and nuance, to look at the positives and the negatives, to look at degrees of feelings. For example, we need to ask ourselves, "Does this person deserve all my anger or just a little bit of my anger? Is there still a little warmth and empathy and love there?" There are a series of questions you can ask yourself to help yourself get into the gray zone when you find yourself slipping into the all or nothing zone. Ask yourself, on a one to ten scale, does the situation or this person deserve the 10 level of my feeling? Is this the angriest I've ever been in my life? Is this situation the worst and most anger-provoking situation in my life? Or does the situation deserve a 10 on the stress scale? Or the opposite – does this person deserve a 10 on my trust scale or on my love scale? So if we're infatuated with someone new, we can ask ourselves, "Is this the best and most wonderful person and am I sure of that? Is this the one who is finer and better and is more deserving of my love in the whole world than anyone I've ever met and ever deserve to meet? Or is this a story that's unfolding, so I should think of it as a 6, rising toward a 10, but I still need to give it some time?"

So whether it's on the love side of the equation or the anger side of the equation; on the suspicious side of the equation or the trust side of the equation; or whether it's about a job or a person, ask yourself some of these rhetorical questions. Take a step away and say, "Where would it fall on that proverbial or hypothetical one-in-ten or one-in-a-hundred scale? What are the degrees of my true feelings?" Separate the enthusiasm or the anger of the moment so you can see it in perspective. This way you can enjoy the rush of the moment – the rush of passion, of love, of joy – and you can even enjoy the outlet of anger at the moment, but take a step back and have a more seasoned judgment so that you also have a gray area of perspective. The two can exist



at once: the longer-term gray-area perspective, which is a more stable view, and the extreme feelings of the moment.