

Web-Based Radio Show

The Healing Relationship I: Growth Producing Relationships


Discussing the principles that facilitate growth in family relationships between caregivers and children including those with lots of challenges and special needs, as well as with children without apparent challenges

Stanley I. Greenspan, M.D.

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Welcome to our web-based radio show. Thank you for joining us this morning. Today we're going to initiate a new series, one we talked a little bit about way back, many, many months ago. Some of you may have forgotten, and some may remember, but we're going to go into a little more depth and try to complete this series of ideas through a number of our web-based radio shows. The overall topic is "The Healing Relationship." Another way of talking about this would be "growth producing relationships." These are the principles that facilitate growth in family relationships between caregivers and children, including those with lots of challenges and special needs, as well as with children without apparent challenges. I say "apparent challenges" because everyone has challenges. It also characterizes good relationships that produce growth among adults – among married couples, among friends – and, most importantly, they are the characteristics that lead to healing and growth when people do have problems in therapeutic relationships because therapists want to have as their goal not just overcoming the problem, but opening up the doors to overall growth and development. So these are the characteristics of the relationships that we all need and we should all have, but it's not always easy either to provide or to be a part of. Hopefully by making these principles or characteristics – that for many are intuitive – more explicit, we can increase the range of healing relationships in the world and have a healthier and better world.

We've talked about this before, so some of these general principles may be known, but now we're going to go systematically through them. Today we're going to cover some of the beginning features of them and then in subsequent radio broadcasts we'll go into some of the more advanced features.



Healing relationships begin with establishing a sense of security, a sense of warmth and connectedness or relatedness, and opening the doors for interaction and communication. Those are the three initial goals and these tend to be overlooked very easily as one strives for “more advanced” goals of relationships. Let me give two illustrations. A colleague – a mental health professional – was talking with me the other day about a patient who was being “very resistant.” When I asked what they meant by “resistant” my colleague said, “Well, he won’t talk about his problems. He comes in, he’s willing to attend the sessions, but he won’t even acknowledge he has problems and he seems just want to chitchat about politics or about other daily events or about what he ate that day or what happened in traffic getting to my office, but he won’t go into why he’s coming to see me, what his problems are, what he’s doing about it, and what he wants my help with, and it’s very, very frustrating. I’ve tried many ways to help him talk, like, ‘You must have a good reason for being here, etc.,’ and he just kind of looks the other way or gets silent for a while and then seems to go off on a tangent. I don’t know what to do.” That was one situation in a professional relationship and this person, my professional colleague, then added, “I’m thinking of maybe telling him that because of my busy schedule and long waiting list that we can’t work together and he should come back when he has an idea what his problems are and he’s willing to talk about them if he’s not ready for therapy.” I cautioned him not to do that, but we’re going to come back to what he should do in just a second.

Another situation was with a friend who was talking with me about his teenage youngster and how the teenager, who we’ll call Robbie, “won’t tell me anything about what’s going on in his life. I don’t know who he’s hanging out with, I don’t know whether he’s going to parties and drinking. We let him go out until 12 o’clock on Friday and Saturday nights and he’s pretty good about coming home, but I never know what he’s doing or where he’s been. I don’t smell alcohol on his breath; he doesn’t act funny. I think he’s got sound judgment but I worry and he won’t tell me what’s going on in his life. Also, he doesn’t talk about his studies or what’s happening in school. Fortunately, he gets reasonably good grades so I’m not alarmed, but I’d like to know what he’s studying and what he’s doing and any time I ask him questions he kind of gives me the silent treatment or kind of changes the subject and then is off in his own room and the door is closed and he’s sending messages to his friends by the computer or listening to music or I don’t know what. I’m frustrated. He’s on sports teams and I go to all his games and I watch and I take an interest in what he’s doing and so does his mom, but he seems to shut us out – more so me than his mom. He lets in his little brother a little bit,




but like all little brothers he tends to be a little bit of a pest and sometimes when he's got nothing else to do, he'll play with his brother; other times, he'll close his door and not let his brother in either. What do I do? How do I get him to open up to me?"

Well, in both these situations – with my professional colleague and with my friend – they were facing a similar situation: how to establish that security, that relatedness and warmth and connectedness that leads to trust and openness that establishes the beginning basis for interacting and communication which both of them wanted more of in their respective relationships – in one case the therapeutic relationship, and in the other case the father-son relationship. Well, my advice to both was rather explicit. First I tell you what I told each of them and then I'll go into the theoretical reasons why and how this is actually more complicated than it might appear.

I told both to relax, that the first step in relationship building is to follow the other person's natural interests and lead and rhythm and rapport and to establish a basic ability to be together in a warm, nurturing, secure atmosphere where they feel you're interested in what they're interested in – where you're following their natural interests and their natural lead. I gave them both examples in the extreme: If all they're interested in is humming, you can hum along with them and see if you can form a duet or ask their permission whether you can hum. If they're looking at something out the window, you might empathetically comment on all the interesting things out the window and see if there's some sharing of the interest in flowers or trees or birds or bunnies, or whatever they happen to be looking at. So follow their natural interest and lead and their rhythm. If they're slow and easygoing, try to match rhythms with them. If they're excited, try to be excited with them or talk about what they're interested in – not just from a content point of view, but from almost a more basic point of view in terms of the example of the humming. There's no content there, but you're taking an interest in the sounds the person's making and trying to show that you can make sounds, too, or you're finding out if they want you to make the same sounds or if they want you to be balancing their sounds with other sounds, so maybe you're humming a song where they have the high notes and you have the low notes – whatever. It may sound silly, but you're basically establishing an interactive context where they're the boss.

I said to the father about his son, "Just remember. You're the boss of when he comes home at night; whether he does his homework; whether he's practicing good




safety precautions in driving and other things like that. He's the boss of the conversation; he's the boss of the interaction and the communication."

I said the same things to the therapist about his patient. I said, "Okay, you're the boss of the time of your sessions and whether the bills get paid. He's the boss of what happens during the session within the framework of communicating, rather than breaking up your office or hurting himself or hurting you." So that sounded like an easy guideline.

I said to my friend, "Just talk to your son about whatever he wants to talk about, whatever seems to be his interest." He gave me an example, saying, "He likes certain kinds of music and he's always talking to his friends about the music, but I hate the music he likes. I like some of the old show tunes and some of the old country and western and rock-n-roll classics and he's into all the new stuff and I don't like that new stuff at all." I said, "It's his nickel. It's his hour. Let him educate you about modern music, about what's fascinating about it. So if he's in his room listening to it and he leaves the door open a little bit, you can slip in and just listen with him and say, boy, that you don't know much about this and it has an interesting sound to it and see what he can tell you about it. Again, let him educate you. Don't be the one to intrusively ask him questions."


Much to my pleasure and enjoyment, my friend – who I ran into the following week – said, "I tried that and he's already talking to me and seeking me out." (Interestingly, I had guaranteed my friend that within two or three months his son would be seeking him out for conversations if he did this.) "He's also giving me an education about music – I still don't like his music, but I'm learning at least about the key people and what it is that he likes about it." He found it interesting that his son liked the pace of the music, which alternated between very fast and then very slow and included rather offbeat rhythms, which was how the father felt the son was – that he couldn't get into a structured conversation. The father was a very structured, organized person. I said to him, "So his music is like him – very unstructured from your point of view, although from his point of view it has structure," and he smiled sheepishly at me as we talked about this.

With my therapist colleague I suggested he take an interest in traffic patterns. I said, "Maybe through the metaphor of traffic, actually you've been hearing about his life," but I recommended he not even try to generalize or abstract or make an



interpretation or offer an insight. “Right now you’re just establishing rapport and relatedness and interaction.” So he tried it. When his patient came in and talked about how the traffic was terrible and how hard it was to get to his office and he didn’t understand why, since my therapist-colleague was in the suburbs; the patient thought he should have been going against traffic. My colleague commented, “Well, it seems to be busy in all directions these days. I can see how it is frustrating when you’re hoping to move quickly and all of the sudden you’ve got to contend with all these obstacles.” That led the patient to talk about what a “pain in the neck” it was to encounter these “obstacles” - the traffic and then parking and getting in on time and how he has to leave a little early and how he hates to get up earlier, how he likes to do things in a certain routine and now his routine is interrupted because he’s got to take into account the fact that there’s more traffic, etc., etc. But he was talking and he was talking about problems, indirectly, with breaks in his routine. He’s a structured person who likes routines and likes to have things a certain way and it’s very frustrating for him when things don’t happen that way. He wasn’t getting into how that affected his marriage or his children or why he came to therapy, but he was chitchatting and opening up and conveying feelings in doing it. I encouraged my colleague to keep it up. The next session might be about how there are too many mosquitoes around or the weather’s too muggy – who knows what? I told him, “Stay with it, march to beat of his drummer, focus on his natural lead; remember, he’s the boss. He’s the boss when it comes to the rhythm of the interaction; he’s the boss when it comes to the tone of voice to match or compliment his tone of voice; he’s the boss of the way in which you look at him or don’t look at him, depending on whether he’s inviting you for eye contact or looking your way directly sometimes; he’s the boss of the intensity of the emotion, whether it’s kind of low-key or enthusiastic. He’s the boss of all these things and you take your lead from him.”


Now this begins defining what we mean by creating an atmosphere in the healing relationship for those first elements of security, of relatedness, warmth and connectedness, which lead to trust and openness and the beginning stages of interaction and communication. In these examples it’s important to recognize that the therapist or the person who’s in the relationship trying to establish a healthy or therapeutic or healing or growth producing relationship (use whatever descriptive you want to – they’re all the same) – what you’re trying to do is, first you’re trying to get to know the other person in terms of what we call in a technical sense their “regulatory profile” or characteristics. Everyone is different. Some people like loud noises; some get



overwhelmed by them. Some like high-pitched sounds, some like low-pitched sounds. So we all have different ways of feelings secure with different sound patterns. It's the same thing with sights: Some people like bright lights, some like dim lights. Some like a lot of movement. Some want you to be more stationary, so with some person you might be very animated, moving your head up and down a lot; others you might be slower moving. There are different visual patterns. With family members or friends, there is different sensitivity to touch. Some like firm pressure or a back hug or a solid handshake; others like light, tickly touch; others don't like either. Different patterns of touch wouldn't involve the therapeutic relationship as much, except in the initial handshake, perhaps. Some like to be real close; some like to be a little further away when they're talking. Again, some like to look directly at you; some like to look off to the side a little bit because direct contact is too emotionally overwhelming.

These are all different regulatory characteristics. Some individuals process sounds very well – you can talk rapidly and include many complex ideas in a sentence and they get it quickly and it's a back-and-forth rhythm of two quick minds exchanging ideas. Others have trouble with sequencing ideas. One idea in a sentence is plenty for them or at most, two, and you want to be slower or in a sense less complex in your sentence structure because the auditory processing may not be as well developed and this might be a very, very bright – even a brilliant – individual – even a Nobel Prize winning physicist – but he doesn't process the sequence of sounds like others do. You may notice balance and coordination differences. Some are very balanced and well coordinated as they walk in and sit down; others have a more awkward pattern, where simple movements are harder for them to sequence. The kind of chair you have in your office as a professional, the kind of activities you do with a friend or a colleague or a child will often determine their comfort level and security level in terms of movement pattern.


So, how they take in sights, sounds, touch; how they negotiate movement; how they process and interpret or comprehend sounds and sights are all characteristics you want to officiate either systematically as part of their regulatory profile, particularly if you're a therapist. Certainly if it's with a friend or colleague or family member you want to try to appreciate these differences intuitively. You want to create an atmosphere where you're respectful of these differences and therefore you're creating a “secure emotional atmosphere,” just like a parent does with a baby by tuning into that baby's



rhythms. Tuning in or following the other person's lead starts off with tuning in and following his or her lead in terms of their physical characteristics.

The second step in establishing security is tuning in to their lead in terms of what they're trying to communicate and getting an interaction going. If it's humming or making sounds or looking out the window and describing what you're seeing together or just looking together, you're taking your cue from their behavior – from what they're finding interesting, not just what they're talking about, but what they're finding interesting from the point of view of what they're doing. You're joining them in what they're doing – it could be a walk with your son, it could be an excursion around your office or an exploration of traffic patterns with a patient, but you're taking your cue from them and from their behavior in following their lead – they're the boss. If you do that with respect for their physical characteristics they're going to feel warmer and more secure with you and more related to you. With that you're trying to establish a nice, related sense of relatedness. So you're mindful of the emotional tone – is it warm, is it pleasant, do they seem relaxed, do you get little smirks or smiles once in a while or at least a gleam in the eye. So you're very mindful of the emotional tone. So that's the second step – after you follow their physical characteristics and the lead of their behavior you're experimenting or exploring with the way you interact, with your own emotional tone, to see if you can facilitate a very relaxed, warm, nurturing emotional tone. If that happens – and that may be all you want to work on for the first “x” number of weeks – you're creating an atmosphere where the person's going to enjoy being with you and feel more secure and related to you.

Then we get to the third step where you're encouraging interaction and communication. This is where following the lead with the son and his music or with the patient and his traffic patterns and eventually breaking routines – where you're are following the content of what they're talking about or just further following the behavior of what they're doing. If you have a teenager who doesn't like to talk but likes to go places, you may get ice cream or hamburgers together or go look at music together. A father and a daughter or a mother and a daughter go look at clothing together or go to a sporting event together or a concert together – just hanging out and being together, not even doing a lot of talking initially, but doing things together is the key, so there's a kind of interactive rhythm, a kind of communication beginning to occur. You're not worried about the content – in your mind you're saying, “How do I follow their interests and lead? How do I help them enjoy whatever communication is



occurring at whatever level they want to?” With the father and son, it led to talking about music and the child initiating more and more and more. As part of that you want to respect the other person’s lead to facilitate their being the boss of the communication as opposed to filling the void yourself. When there’s a silence you can do or say things that facilitate communication back and you want to get a back-and-forth rhythm, but not take over – avoid being the director. So an empathetic comment like, “Gee, there are a lot of interesting things outside the window” is different from, “What do you see and what’s that and what’s that?” Don’t fall into the trap of quizzing. To a person who’s talking about traffic patterns the therapist might say, “Gee it sounds like there was a lot of traffic today and that it was worse than yesterday, from what you’re saying.” That’s a different comment from, “How did you feel about all that traffic?” which is more intrusive and more directive. So get the rhythm of interaction and communication cooking.

That will lead to our next step, where we help the person expand their range of communication, but we’ll talk about that next time. For now, we just want to conclude with why this is so important and why these first stages of establishing security, establishing relatedness, and opening the door to interactive communication are so important – because these are the first steps in building relationships that have healing or growth producing qualities. These are the nutrients of the soils – they grow healthy people, whether it’s a baby or whether it’s a teenager or an adult – these are the elements of growth. This is what everyone who’s human needs and this is what evolution has prepared us for in terms of the way in which human beings thrive and develop healthy brains and healthy minds. We explain the theory behind this in more detail in our book, *The First Idea: How Symbols, Language and Intelligence Evolved From Our Primate Ancestors to Modern Humans* and also in our book, *The Growth of the Mind*. Those two books are good as reference for those who want to go back to the theory in a bit more detail.

Next time we’ll pick up and go through the next level of establishing a healing relationship.