

Web-Based Radio Show

The Healing Relationship IV: Additional Levels of Communication


How healing relationships and growth producing relationships need to also embrace additional levels of communication to be truly health producing and growth producing

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Good morning and welcome. Thank you for joining us on our web-based radio show. As many of you know – but for those who don't – we're in the middle of a series on relationships, particularly healing relationships. We're focusing on how relationships create opportunities for growth for both parties, be it parents and children, spouses, good friends, teachers and students, doctors and patients, as well as any other relationships you can think of. In the past we've reviewed the importance of the basics that growth-producing relationships and healing relationships have, including relationships that help people overcome difficult events or trauma. We find that these kinds of relationships have the following elements: They have security; they have engagement and warmth and trust; they have the ability to express jointly a wide range of emotions – the full range of emotions, from anguish and anger and disappointment to love and joy and pride – all with facial expressions and gestures, so people are understood implicitly; they have the capacity for both parties to create together the full range of ideas that have to do with human life, including all feelings, so that these feelings are expressed implicitly and understood and communicated and deeply felt, I should add, because the deep feeling part is what conveys the gesture, the gleam in the eye, the deep smile and they can express these in words or pictures or other symbols, as well, and share those. As we pointed out last time, there are many who will show an emotion on their face, but then can't speak the emotion because anger is off limits or sexuality is off limits or lust is off limits or embarrassment is off limits.


Today we're taking it one step further and we're going to look at how healing relationships and growth producing relationships need to also embrace additional levels of communication to be truly health producing and growth producing. We're going to consider that those in healing relationships and growth producing relationships have the ability to understand feelings and behaviors in terms of logic and reality. Let's take an example of a couple. They can examine together what is causing them to be irritable with



one another or annoyed with one another. Or, if they want to – they may not need to – they can examine together why they’re having a particular good day or a joyful day. In other words, they can do this in a logical way, “Gee, I think I’m stressed out because my mom’s ill” and the other member of the spousal team is stressed because, “Our kids are all starting school at the same time and having to get everything all ready has got me in a turmoil. I guess that’s why we’re being snappy with each other.” They have an ability to logically examine these relationships between events and their feelings and behaviors in a logical way - they can make sense of the world.

We should contrast this with the opposing tendency, which we frequently see instead of what we might call making sense of the world or dealing with feelings and behaviors logically and in a reality based way, and that is to engage in magical thinking or irrational thinking. Many couples or parent-child relationships or other relationships create irrational explanations for things. The first idea that occurs to them may become an excuse for feelings. So maybe they feel angry because they got up on the wrong side of the bed – they’re just feeling irritable that day – but their spouse doesn’t smile at them first thing in the morning because their spouse is preoccupied with getting organized for work or with some work problem that they’re anticipating happening that day and so instead of saying, “Gee, you look a little troubled. What’s cooking? You don’t seem yourself this morning,” they jump to conclusions and get angry and say, “You’re never warm in the morning! You’re never nice to me! When I need you, where are you? You’re not there!” and start a whole accusatory trend of all past accusations and past “crimes and misdemeanors,” including, “You’re always in your own world!” That would be an example of having a need and then trying to invent a reason for it, as opposed to the alternative, which would be to be logical and say, “Gee, sweetheart, I’m feeling pretty lousy this morning. I think I got up on the wrong side of the bed. I need to talk to you.” This logical alternative is contrasted with an irrational alternative. Or the thinking can even get more magical, where the individual simply invents a reason for their feeling, even further removed from reality, saying things out of the blue like, “Your mother must be coming to visit us soon because I’m feeling lousy today” or some other extraneous thought that they’re having. The key here is to make sense of feelings in a reality based and logical way.


Now another alternative that we see that’s also antithetical to being logical and reality based is to use actions rather than words and to take an action oriented approach. In this approach the person acts out their feeling rather than logically making sense of their feeling. So to use the same example we’re using, one member of the spousal team wakes up on the wrong side of the bed and instead of wondering, “Gee, why am I feeling



irritable today? Why am I feeling upset?” or asking their spouse for extra support, they just start an argument. They just start a fight. In very extreme circumstances, you may even get spousal abuse in a couple where one member just hits another person, but feelings are acted out. Anger is felt, so an argument is started. The argument might be over something not even logical at all or even just trivial, “Why didn’t you wait for me to get out of bed with you? Why did you get out of bed first, you rotten, lousy SOB,” and blah blah blah blah blah, and all of the sudden you’re into a fight where the feelings are acted out. Or the person acts out their feelings by becoming an alcoholic or using drugs or taking it out on the kids by being hostile. Another example of an action oriented approach is when one member of a spousal team goes out and has an affair when they feel the least bit neglected. There are many forms of “acting out” the feeling rather than examining the feeling.

So both the action oriented approach and the irrational or magical thinking approach are alternatives to making sense of the world logically. I want you to think about that as being a very important component of healing relationships – being able to make sense of feelings and behaviors together, to examine things. Remember, this is not just an intellectual exercise – this builds on what we talked about before: the security, the engagement, the warmth, the deeply felt and expressed feelings through facial expressions and gestures, the ability to verbalize or symbolize these feelings in shared creative endeavors where the full range of feelings are shared and no feelings are off limits, and now you can make sense of them and examine them a bit, too. That truly creates a healing relationship, a healing context, and a growth producing context. You’re always trying to expand. The other element that makes this growth producing or healing is you’re expanding the range of feelings that can be examined logically and made sense of – the range of behaviors. We see this in parent-child relationships. As children get older they can look at more difficult feelings, like loss and humiliation and embarrassment and separation, which they can’t do when they’re two-year-olds – they can look at joy and anger, maybe. But a seven-year-old can certainly look at embarrassment and disappointment and a 15-year-old can look at loss in a different way than an eight-year-old would. So these are constantly expanding as we go up the ladder.


Growth producing and healing relationships have yet another feature. It’s great to make sense of your feelings and behaviors and do that jointly. I should add that sometimes individuals can do that alone when they’re thinking just between themselves and their own brain, but it’s hard for them to do that as part of a relationship – they can’t do it with their spouse or their friend or their child. It’s harder to do it as part of a twosome or part of a family group, for example, which has multiple relationships. So



sometimes the relationship will operate at an action level or an irrational or magical level where individuals may operate in a more logical or reality based way, so it's a harder task to do that in a shared way. That's an important caveat for all these qualities. We're talking about doing this in a shared way. This is especially difficult for the next quality we're talking about and that's the ability to take this capacity to make sense of your feelings and behaviors in a logical and reality based way and to be able to look at – what we should underline as – shades of gray, rather than get lost in the alternative, which is all or nothing or polarized type thinking or patterns.

So we see, for example, our couple: They can be a little miffed at each other and as they experience it together at the level of their deeply felt feelings they're both aware that they're just a little bit miffed at each other, that it's not the end of the world and that this happens periodically when they're both under stress and they've been more miffed at each other when they've been under more stress and they've regrouped and come together and they may be able to talk about this while they experience it when they have a few moments. This ability to experience feelings in the subtle gray area and communicate them to one another – that they're feeling a little bit miffed or moderately miffed or very miffed or that this is a little disappointing and, “I wish that you could do this with me and that I didn't have to do this thing for work,” or “Gee, wouldn't it be great if the kids could have sleepovers at their friends' houses so we could take advantage of this opportunity to go to the beach this weekend,” so the couple can experience disappointment or anger or joy or happiness in degrees and feel it that way together and also discuss it that way together.

Again, this is contrasted with the all-or-nothing experience, where feelings get polarized. When feelings get polarized the slightest degree of disappointment is, “I never get my way! I'm always disappointed – this is terrible! I'm terribly depressed.” Or the slightest bit of anger is, “I'm furious! I could cut your head off! You've always been a rat fink and a scoundrel.” We see this all-or-nothing thinking all around us – we see it in the newspapers and it often fuels action oriented thinking and sometimes can have elements of irrational thinking in it. Even if it's somewhat reality based, it takes the extreme and doesn't see the subtle grays of feelings – it only puts the feelings in their extremes. So whether it's disappointment and loss – “This is the biggest calamity of my life. I've never felt more depressed,” or whether it's anger, “I've never felt more furious at you,” or whether it's even happiness, “Oh, you're the most wonderful person in the world. I'm so happy, I've never been happier in my life! This is glorious!” individuals who experience only the extremes and do this as a shared couple often may, when they first meet as a couple, idealize one another. “Oh, he's the most wonderful man in the world” and “She's




the most wonderful woman in the world.” Or “We’re so deeply in love,” and each one is idealized and each one can do no wrong, “You’re perfect, you’re perfect” and it’s a glorious honeymoon phase, but we know that this phases doesn’t last very long and at the first disappointment the fall from this idealization can be as big and as powerful as the idealization itself, leading to the opposite end of the extreme, the opposite polarization. So those who live by idealization also can suffer from the idealization when they experience the other extremes. So there’s another characteristic of experiencing things in the extreme, even when they’re in a positive direction because what happens when there’s the first loss, the first disappointment? We see this sometimes in parent-child relationships where a child is idealized. Susie and Johnny are just the perfect children. They’re obedient at home, they’re good students, they’re great at their hobbies – be it sports or dance or music – and they’re just wonderful. But the first time they fail a test or the first time they’re naughty in school it’s a major calamity and the family can’t handle it. Mom and Dad are very disappointed and they may yell and scream at their child; they may show extreme forms of disapproval, including rejection and being cold, but even more importantly the children themselves, who are used to being idealized and everything being perfect, don’t know what loss or disappointment or sense of failure – however temporary – feels like and it’s an alien feeling. If this happens for the first time in adolescence with no preparation it can lead to depression and one regresses to polarized feelings.

So it’s important to look at whether or not the relationship can embrace this subtle gray area thinking rather than just the all-or-nothing thinking – just the polarized thinking. This is a very, very important distinction for us to make.

Now what we have been discussing so far – making sense of feelings and behaviors, being able to rather than acting them out or getting involved in irrational or magical explanations as well as being able to see subtle shades of gray in feelings and behaviors rather than getting involved in all-or-nothing or extreme kinds of explanations or feelings. These are important qualities of healing relationships.


We are going to come back to an important point that I’m going to mention briefly now after we talk about our next level, and that is in healing relationships, each member of the team – parent/child, two spouses, two good friends, teachers/students, doctors/patients, psychotherapists/patients – they are constantly helping each other with these different qualities. So they are constantly helping each other expand the range of feelings that can be, for example, understood and experienced at the subtle gray area level rather than the polarized level, or made sense of, or just deeply felt and expressed through gestures, they are constantly helping each other expand those and constantly helping each



other add another level on to that relationship. So if one member of the spousal team tends to be a little more polarized than another member, that member offers a lot of security and warmth and availability to help their less fortunate partner become more gray area in their thinking – take a step back, calm down – so when Jane is yelling and screaming and being polarized because Brad is working late and it is a major calamity, when he comes home, instead of getting involved in a counter-attack, he is calm. Basically he conveys that they should settle down and look at this. Tell me how you felt, sounds like today was a rough day for you. Then he goes to look at the gray area – it may be this is the only day this week that he has been working late so we keep this in context and it helps Jane put this in a gray area context. Or vice versa. So they are helping each other do this and do it for different feelings. We all find in all relationships that we are better at some feelings than others; some behaviors than others. Some of us can be better gray area thinkers when it comes to love and warmth, but not when it comes to anger, disappointment, or humiliation. Others it's the opposite. So we are always helping each other with the feelings that are more difficult for us, to expand into those feelings, to bring these additional levels to them.

We are going to return to this theme of how we help each other, but now let's look at the next level, and the next level has to do with being able to reflect on feelings together, not just experience the subtlety of feelings without getting polarized or making sense of feelings, or experiencing them very deeply, but actually reflect on feelings. What do we mean by reflecting on feelings? We mean reflect together as a couple, not just as an individual. We don't mean this as an intellectual process but more as an emotional and cognitive process together.


What do we mean by this? Let's take an example, first in the abstract. Mary is able to have a sense of who she is in the present – what kind of person she is, what her values and goals are. But she also has a sense of where she came from – what her history was. So she can reflect on how she got to be who she is and what she is. She has a sense of the future, of where she is going based on where she has been, what her history is, who she is now, and where she is going. She can see how these three factors – her past; her current feelings and behaviors, her sense of self and sense of identity; and her future plans affects the way she perceives and interprets relationships and events now. So when she is with John, her husband, she is able to understand, for example, why his need to play baseball conflicts with her desire to go to the museum. She came from a family of museum-goers who every weekend had a special event that was more intellectual in nature and John came from a family where sports was the big thing on the weekends and just having fun. She finds it, therefore, difficult to just go and play baseball or just go



watch John play baseball without doing something “enriching for the soul” as she puts it. But she has a sense of that in a reflective way. She can take a step back and see the kind of person she is and why she feels disappointed or even a little annoyed. That enables her then to discuss this with John and say, “Let’s take a look at this.” And John is able to do the same thing. He is able to look at the past, use the current feelings, behaviors, and attitudes and the future and he is able to see the context. With this, they were able to work out a compromise where, roughly speaking, Saturdays were devoted to sports and Sundays to more intellectual activities or half of each day was devoted to one or the other, but they tried to do a little bit of each on the weekend because they liked to be with each other and share the event with each other is great from their perspectives. Also, they are broadening a little bit and seeing it this way so it is a plus-plus situation for both of them. That is a very mature attitude, but it is a reflection of their ability to reflect together.


They can do this in many different realms of life. They can be reflective about their happiness, their anger, their disappointment, their humiliation, their pride – all their different feelings they can look back at historically to understand these feelings in context. It doesn’t make them any less valid, it makes them more valid. They see who they are not just in a moment to moment everyday sense, or every moment sense, but they understand who they are over time. And the time is the past, the present, and the future. They understand who they are in terms of the full range of feelings that they experience and the full range of relationships that they have had. And they understand who they are in terms of space, in terms of different settings that they operate in – work settings, home settings, family settings, educational or school settings, with different groups, and even with different cultural groups with their Asian friends or with their friends from South America - their Hispanic friends. In other words, they have this core sense of who they are and can reflect, take a step back from that and see themselves in these different contexts from historical and future ones, to different feeling contexts, to different groups that they operate in with different individuals with different cultural orientations. Being able to do this gives them a stronger sense of their own identity.

Now what is interesting here is, when individuals can do this and they can do that at the couples level, or the group level – even a whole family can do this together – this creates a wonderful healing context and growth producing context because you are experiencing the full sense of your humanity; a full sense of being a human being in this reflective way. It is experiential, not just intellectual. It is not just pontificating about or speculating about your past and your future. It is not a highly intellectualized process, it is a deeply felt process.



Now here is what is especially interesting about this. In psychodynamic psychotherapy, this is often the role of an insight or interpretation or in psychoanalysis. There is a concept in psychoanalysis called the mutative interpretation and that was when the therapist would say something to the patient about the feelings they were having in the moment – usually in what is called the transference - a feeling toward the therapist that might be a reflection of something in the patient’s past, like feeling rejected by a parent and now feeling rejected by the therapist because the therapist went on vacation. Now at the moment that the patient can bring together that feeling of the moment – that feeling of being rejected by the therapist with the feelings from the past when they felt rejected by their mom or dad, and experience that at the deeply felt level, and see all the ways in which that plays out in our life with spouse, children, or people at work, and even see how it affects future plans and see how it affects them in different groups – recreational groups as well as work groups, they are putting it all together. They have this deeply felt sense of their own identity. Well that kind of experience when it is precipitated by the therapist making a comment is called a mutative interpretation. Now psychodynamic or psychoanalytic therapies have been criticized for not having enough proof or evidence behind them for dealing with hypotheticals. But what is interesting here is, the role of the insight is to create this reflective attitude; this reflective capacity. When we look at this reflective capacity as part of a healing relationship and growth producing relationship, we see that this ability to experience oneself in a historical, current, future, multiple feeling behavior and multiple relationship context, where the core sense of who you are and be able to reflect on all of that in a deeply emotional way, is the definition of a full and healthy human being. It is an excellent definition or it makes for a deep and full human being rather than a human being that only experience one dimension of life at one point in time. So this gives a different basis; another basis for the importance of healing relationships, including therapeutic ones that help an individual reach this level of mental health.

Now again, to the degree that spouses can help each other with this, broaden the range of feelings that they can apply this reflective attitude to, help them stabilize this range of feelings, so to the degree to which friends, spouses, parents, and children can help each other achieve this reflective attitude, and I should add that for children they are not capable of this until they get to ages 10 through the teen years, but adults are all capable of this if they are capable of it. But you can help each other broaden that range of feelings; broaden the context, look together and experience this in a relationship way, that is what we are looking for.



Next time we are going to go into a little more detail how members of a relationship team can help each other achieve making sense of the world in a reality way; the gray area as opposed to polarized, the logical versus action-oriented or magical, and the reflective rather than the more aggressive or polarized or action-oriented or magical way of relating. But when you can achieve that reflective way and you can keep broadening it with new life experiences because as you move into parenthood and as you move into middle life and even the aging process, you deepen and enrich those experiences that are part of your reflective attitude for the part of the way you reflect, the way you integrate your sense of identity; your sense of self. So to the degree that this could be part of your relationship and your relationship embraces all of these, it becomes a broader, more fulfilling healing relationship and growth producing relationship.

So next time we will talk more about how the members of the team can help each other with this. Such as one example I can give you quickly – counter regulating, when your other member is experiencing an extreme emotion or getting polarized, you counter balance it. You are especially calm and soothing. When they are down, you help bring them up a little bit. You are always helping broaden them a little bit and they are always helping broaden you.

We'll talk more about this next time. Thank you.