

Aspire Newsletter

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Common Relationship Mistakes

What follows are some of the most common mistakes I have found couples to make in their relationships.

Lack of Skill

Every couple brings a background of skills to their relationship. Since relationship skills are typically not taught in school, and most folks say their parents weren't all that knowledgeable, what they bring is usually insufficient. Thus, when couples first enter treatment, I frequently encounter frustrated people who have tried very hard to improve their relationship. However, because they lack effective tools they do not make progress. Often things get worse because they feel they are trying but nothing is changing so the situation must be hopeless. By mastering essential skills couples can work smarter, not harder and get excellent results.

Expectations

In America we have "worship of love," the expectation that love will solve all of our problems. We have naïve ideas about love; we expect it to happen to us. We feel that if we have to do anything to achieve it, it is somehow defective, inferior or second rate. People typically enter marriage unskilled with naïve, overly simplistic ideas about what it takes to have a great marriage.

Taking Partner for Granted

Research shows that partners in committed intimate relationships treat each other with less kindness and tact than they do total strangers. If a neighbor does us a favor we tend to thank them graciously. Do we do the same for those we have committed relationships with? Partners tend to take each other for granted.

Contribution

We tend to deliver less to our partners than we expect to receive. This goes along with the above notion that love is something that should happen to us while we sit passively and enjoy. The idea that we are 50% of the chemistry is a strange notion to most of us.



Negative Focus

We have a tendency to notice what goes wrong, what we feel is missing rather than noticing the good and making an effort to create more of what we want. Interestingly, most expect their partners to know what pleases them, yet these same people usually do not know what makes them happy themselves! We can learn to identify what our partners can do to meet our needs. Then, most importantly, it must be expressed; our partners are not mind readers. Many have unfortunately decided their marriages were hopeless based on past unpleasant experiences without ever trying to change their relationship. Others have tried but lacked knowledge of what and how to change, simply perpetuating old, unproductive patterns. Some unfortunately find the idea of having to do something to improve their relationship unappealing; they believe the myth (largely perpetuated by television and novels) that great relationships just naturally happen and stay great on their own. The vast majority of couples I

have seen, after receiving basic couple counseling, have stated their relationship became what they wanted after learning a few simple skills.

Confusing Individual and Couple Issues

Once we are happy and complete individuals we are then in a good place for a great relationship. If we don't take care of our individual needs we may be tempted to look to our partners to fill in the gaps in our lives – which will drain our relationship.



Expressing Needs & Desires Ineffectively

Needs and desires do need to be expressed. Your partner is not a mind reader. We can learn to express our needs and desires in ways where we not only have them met but enhance our relationships in so doing.

Personality Overhaul

I have frequently heard one partner say to the other, "This is who I am. I can't change. If you don't like me the way I am you shouldn't have married me." Changing one's personality has never been needed to greatly improve one's relationship. Changes in behavior are all that is needed.

Thinking Win – Lose

Win – Lose situations occur most frequently when a couple disagrees. One (or both) partners think they are "right" and the other is "wrong." They then try to get their partner to think and feel as they do. This is fruitless. Your partner is not a clone of you. I have never seen trying to make one's partner think and feel as they do produce any good results.

Seeing Disagreement as Abnormal

Many couples seem to feel that they should agree on most things. In two decades as a couples therapist I have not found this to be true. Couples disagree frequently. Disagreement is normal. Couples need to learn how to handle disagreement. It is perfectly normal for others to have different feelings and perceptions of events we experience together. After all, we all come from unique backgrounds and have different experiences so we will see things our own way. Don't expect the other person to be a clone of you. Avoid the misconception that in order to have a great relationship we have to feel the same.

Mind Reading

Mind reading refers to those situations where we expect others to know (without telling them) what would make us happy. Don't assume others know what pleases you unless you know yourself! I have noticed in my twenty-three years of practice that many people are expert complainers. That is, they are very good at pointing out to their loved ones what they are doing wrong, what's not working or what's missing. If I then say, "O.K., we know what isn't working, now let's talk about what would work," the response is generally "Gee, I don't know," or silence. Yet the expectation is that our loved ones should know how to please us when we haven't even identified what needs to be different in order for positive change to occur.

Overfunctioning

We try to do the other person's part in making a relationship work. Relationships are not like work, sports or other areas of our lives where the harder we work the more results we see. In relationships we can only do our fifty percent. We have to be met half way if the relationship is going to work.

Blaming

We put the burden of responsibility for change on the other. We see ourselves as victims. Finger pointing creates defensiveness. When we blame we stay stuck. What works much better is to say to ourselves: "How can I change myself to get more of what I want?"