

Five Secrets to a More Loving Intimate Relationship this Year

Sue Parker Hall

Intimate relationships are potentially our greatest source of comfort and pleasure but when our relationships aren't functioning well they are a source of the most profound pain. We can lose our precious sense of identity and forget who we are, feel impotent, unimportant, useless and unlovable. If we don't express our innermost feelings and thoughts regularly there are several disadvantages; they accumulate inside us putting distance between ourselves and others, we may obsess unhealthily, lose our sense of reality and, more seriously still, become overwhelmed with raw unprocessed emotion that spills out in the form of hot rage or we enter a state of cold rage, withdraw and become unreachable and unavailable to our partner.

The five secrets below will support you to understand any difficulties that may be present in your current intimate relationship and to achieve the maximum joy and personal growth from it.

1. it takes two!

The most crucial element of improving an intimate relationship is that both partners are committed to the process. Each one needs to take some responsibility for the current state of the relationship and for changing it for the better; without this, prospects for change are very poor. If our partner is unwilling or unable to enter into this process then it is vital that we grieve, that we go through a variety of emotional stages in order to come to terms with this fact.

According to Kubler-Ross (1969) the grieving process usually starts with *denial* about the problem. Once the denial dissolves it begins to dawn on us that there is a problem and then we then usually feel *anger*. Human beings like the status quo and often resist and resent change and feel angry about it because of the necessary emotional adjustment that we need to make to accommodate it. After the anger comes a period of *bargaining* where we yo-yo between accepting and not accepting saying things like "it's bad", "it's not that bad" or "I won't survive", "I will survive"; at the same time having 'if only' thoughts such as "if I just try a bit harder, say the right thing or be nicer then it will work out". This is an exhausting stage, at the end of which we run out of steam and fall into a state of *depression*, what I would call sadness, where the reality of our situation begins to fully sink in; our partner is as they are and there is nothing we can do to change them. Then we are in the final stage of grieving, we have moved to *acceptance*. When we are in this state we can make a choice about our relationship; we may choose to stay, accepting that we may never get what we want from it or to leave and seek what we need elsewhere. Without completing the grieving process we get stuck in any one of these stages and feel profoundly unhappy and powerless and our relationship is stuck and frustrating.

2. prioritise the relationship

If both of us are committed to improving our relationship then the next secret is to honour it and make it a priority. Many couples struggle because they don't know how to do this; they give their

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relationship 'scraps', the 'leftovers' in terms of energy and attention; caring for our children, going to work, participating in education or pursuing interests can all get more attention. If our relationship is not just to survive but to thrive, we need to maintain it in the way we care for ourselves, our children, garden, car or home. It is not true that "if you have to work at a relationship then it's not right"; the opposite is true. If our relationship is to be the great source of love, joy, comfort, support and security in the world that it could be, it needs at least as much consideration as any other aspect of our life, if not more.

3. get connected

OK, so we want to improve our relationship and we are willing to make it a priority, what now? We need to get connected. Being connected is an energetic exchange that makes us feel very alive and vital. It is so interesting to me how many couples tell me "oh yes, we talk a lot, we're always talking" but, when they reveal the content of their conversations, it is all about practicalities (who is going to put the bin out or do the school run? What home improvements are necessary, where to go for a holiday or money issues). It is important to settle these matters, I'm not denying that, but these kinds of conversation do not connect us beyond a very superficial level.

We connect at a deeper level by sharing our innermost experience with each other; expressing feelings such as joy, delight, sadness, fear, anger, disappointment or jealousy; expressing what we think and appreciate about the other, hearing what they think and appreciate about us and through sharing touch. In our busy lives it is easy to ignore what is happening inside us, believing it to be unimportant; however, it is through listening to our inner selves and being willing to share what with our partner that we enter a more deeply connected state. For example I could reveal my vulnerability and say to my partner, "I'm struggling to like myself today" or "I'd really like a hug right now"; I might share my anger saying "when I speak to you and you don't reply I feel discounted" or articulate my fear, "I'm scared that my boss doesn't like me" or express my love, "I love you".

4. avoid the fantasy bond

Paradoxically, truly intimate relationships constitute such a safe and loving environment that distressing relational issues from the past, which could not be processed at the time because there was a lack of emotional support, come roaring to the surface, unleashing a whole raft of negative feelings and beliefs which get transferred onto the current situation.

Our early associations provide an unconscious blueprint for adult relationships and they colour our beliefs about others and our expectations of them. If our first relationships were not supportive then we may find it difficult to trust our partner at times; we may doubt that they will care about us or be there for us or believe that they will abandon or abuse us.

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This can lead to a highly problematic form of relating; when we see our partner through the distorted lens of our early relationships, we enter a fantasy bond; we 'put a face' on them and behave towards them as though they were the person who hurt us. Our partner is not seen for who they are and ironically, if we treat them as if they were unloving, neglectful or abusive that can trigger the very reaction that we most fear; our misunderstood, despairing, hurt or angry partner may tell us that they don't like us, may walk away or become abusive.

This damaging relationship dynamic is at the heart of most of the difficulties that couples present to my practice with. In order to address this issue it is necessary for each partner to think about their early relationships and to identify the content of their personal relationship blueprint. Just having this awareness alone will immediately reduce the likelihood of slipping into the negative relationship pattern and, if the worst does happen, it enables each party to recognise what is going on and to do something different.

5. Folks need strokes

A positive stroke is a term from Transactional Analysis; it is a unit of attention which feels good to receive; it may be a verbal statement which conveys love and respect for a particular quality or behaviour or it may be non-verbal in the form of touch or a facial expression. The regular giving and receiving of positive strokes is vital for a relationship to stay alive; it involves an energy exchange which enlivens both the giver and the receiver and each one binds us closer together. Strokes about *who* we are such as "you have a kind nature" or "you're such good fun" have a higher value than more conditional strokes about what we do like recognition for washing up or feeding the pet, though these are valuable too. Finally, it is essential to express our love and appreciation to our partner regularly and to feel appreciated by them. Finding at least one thing everyday to say "thank you" to our partner for helps to keep our heart open, ensures that we are connected and make us feel really good. There is increasing evidence that the offering and receipt of kindness plays a role in maintaining good mental health and in the prevention of physical disease.

A life enhancing relationship takes the commitment and effort of both partners to make it their highest priority; to invest their time and attention in order to get and stay connected and to experience their partner as the real person that they are; to take the time to process wounds from earlier relationships so that old blueprints don't get transferred to new relationships and to give and receive strokes which enhances both partners emotional and physical wellbeing. If we are well supported in our intimate relationships all other aspects of our life are enriched too.

For more information or face-to-face or Skype psychotherapy, counselling or anger management 'phone 01736 753410 or email sueparkerhall@btconnect.com