

Emotional connections. At the core, this is what creates marriages that flourish – emotional connections in the areas of roles, responsibilities, and affection in all its glorious forms. Without emotional connections, you can have a pleasant roommate experience and no more. The depth and breadth of emotional connections is what makes your mate special to you and you to them.

In my work of over twenty-five years of counseling couples with every imaginable problem, we keep returning to the core problem of emotional connection. Its absence shows up in many disguises. Feeling alone. Feeling disrespected and unappreciated. Feeling very misunderstood.

The absence of satisfying and enjoyable connections can be very painful. Sometimes people try to soothe their pain through addictions, anger, blame, depression, withdrawal, or even resentful compliance. These are misguided attempts to bring about relief.

We are hardwired to emotionally connect –it is in our genetic heritage. Banishment and shunning were particularly painful forms of punishment meted out by the tribe. Banishment often meant slow death without the protection of the tribe. Shunning meant severe emotional isolation as nobody would acknowledge your existence.

Is there a key to emotional connecting?

‘Glad you asked.

Yes, is the answer and it’s paradoxically as simple as it is difficult. It’s called understanding your partner. It means listening when your outrage meter is spinning out of control. Listening when your partner just blamed you for saying or doing some outrageous relationship crime, and you know you are innocent.

It means being curious instead of defending yourself. In other words, when you don't listen under pressure you emotionally disconnect from your partner. You are saying, –indirectly – my needs will trump yours.

Every time you interrupt with your defensiveness, your partner feels unloved, not valued, disrespected, self protective or unequal. Simply put, any existing positive emotional connections just evaporated. If both do this often enough, you each end up feeling wary and emotionally mistrustful.

There cannot be satisfying emotional connections without understanding.

Maybe you are the partner who just wants to solve the problem. “Let's cut to the chase. Get it fixed. Solve it now.” The intense focus on solving the problem is an attempt of one part of you to avoid emotional connection. While the problem solving approach can be useful in the world of business – it is demoralizing in marriages if there is no understanding.

If you want to avoid and prevent conflict you will need to understand what annoys, frustrates, bothers and inspires your partner. This will involve a big dose of curiosity, then lots and lots of listening. Sometimes the smartest person in the room doesn't have the right answers but can ask better questions.

When you each make it a priority to understand each other you set the foundation that liberates you into the best of all worlds - an effective team. Teamwork is the conviction that nobody succeeds unless we both do. Listening and understanding is the superhighway to being an effective team.

Well, you might ask, “What if we rarely argue or fight?” Doesn't that mean we have a great relationship? The surprising answer to that question is coming up in another blog post.

Keep Listening,

Pete