

The Relationship Triad

Introduction:

I cannot take credit for creating the components of this exercise, but it did occur to me that assembling these three relationship tools could be effective. In a way that has exceeded my expectations, the results have been extraordinary. In my years of working with couples (my own marriage included), most relationships fall into one of two categories, those who do this exercise and those who do not. The latter group remains stuck with the same struggles until the relationship is shaken apart or each person accepts a life of quiet desperation. The couples who practice this exercise, take ownership of it, and make it their own are the relationships where emotional satisfaction and personal growth flourish and where transcendence from the power struggle to true partnership occurs.

The process contains three parts. Each part can be practiced ala carte, but for the sake of ingraining and ritualizing the experience, it is encouraged to practice all three in one setting. The triad can be completed from start to finish in 25-30 minutes and ought to be done at least three times a week for the first month of practice.

The triad should be held at an agreed-upon time and place. If a couple shares a calendar, the triad should be scheduled ahead of time and only delayed or rescheduled for reasons beyond anyone's control. These scheduled times should be held as sacred as if the relationship depends on keeping this vital appointment- that just might be true! Ideally, the triad ought to be done at the same location within the home. Maybe the kitchen table, a sofa, or the front porch. A place where distractions are minimized and a sense of reverence for the process can grow.

Part 1: Shared Listening Time

Using a timer, each person takes 10 minutes to share about themselves, their day, their challenges, their victories, or anything they wish to talk about. The main intention is to allow themselves to be known more deeply to the other. Imagine driving with your mate and having them lean over to see something through the windshield from your unique vantage point. That is the essence of what we do when we share during our turn. We are aiding our mate in more fully understanding who we are by sharing our unique vista on life and on the things that matter to us. Most of us fall victim to the fallacy that most people and indeed the person closest to me must surely see the world as I do. It can be disastrous to assume this. Personal responsibility must be taken to share about all aspects of life which occupy our thoughts. No matter how trivial or boring or contentious the subject might be, if it occupies your mind, you have a duty to share it in a good way during your turn.

For some, ten minutes will seem like not nearly enough time to share about what is going on. That person will probably need to thoughtfully consider what is most valuable to share, given the spirit of connection this exercise is seeking to deepen. Others may find ten minutes to be difficult to fill. That person is likely repressing thoughts and emotions that need space to come to

the surface and be shared. Moments of silence are perfectly alright as the next thought or feeling comes up to be shared.

Of course, during the ten minutes, the other partner is doing an important task as well. One that few of us are skilled at doing; listening. Listening without interruption, listening without reaction, without questioning, and perhaps most challenging, listening with delighted attention. Delighted attention is listening to and looking at someone as if what they are saying is the most interesting thing going on in the whole world at the moment. It means we offer gentle eye contact, open body language, and a spirit of receptiveness to what our partner is sharing.

It is important to note that most people have to approximate delighted attention. Most have never experienced being listened to with delight or listening to someone else in this way. Often, when we listen at all, it is for logistical reasons (i.e. what time to pick up the kids or did you feed the dog?) or we listen for rebuttal as if we were in some unending courtroom drama. Listening to prove someone wrong is vastly different from listening to understand. Certainly, we are striving to listen to understand our mate. With practice, this contrived way of communicating will become second nature.

After the ten minutes have expired, the roles are reversed. Stand up, take a stretch, yawn, get a drink of water, or whatever is needed to transition the focus to the other person. The second person to share should avoid the trap of talking about the same things or using their time to respond or dispute what the other person said in the first share. If an issue is such that there is nothing else more pressing to talk about, keep the focus on yourself using "I feel" or "I think" statements to help minimize direct reference.

It is important to maintain the sanctity of this exercise. If someone does not share about themselves in a meaningful way because they are concerned their partner will simply contradict, combat, or minimize what is shared, then the hope of this process working is lost. This is designed to create closeness and safety to share ourselves with our mate. This process ought not be hijacked and used to carry on the power struggle.

In rare instances, there is something shared that requires clarification or more information. In those situations where not speaking up will create larger problems, it is worth crossing the line. After that person has completed their turn, ask if they are willing to hear more information about what was shared. Asking empowers the person to maintain their autonomy. Once permission is given, we proceed with care. This type of clarification is needed far less than you might think.

An additional word about how who goes first; alternate. In most relationships, there is one person who is more willing to talk while the other feels more comfortable listening. The person who finds comfort in the passive role needs to have equal turns sharing first. Much like using a timer to ensure time shared is equal, this is another way to demonstrate mutual respect and breaking of old habits that keep a couple stuck.

Part 2: Affirmations

Once both people have taken their full time to share and are both present, part two of the triad occurs. We affirm the goodness we see in the other. Whoever went second in the shared time gets to go first with this exercise. Reciprocation follows.

In studies of marriages that have lasted a lifetime and contain two reasonably fulfilled people, there are certain shared features. One is that each person in a natural way shows or speaks their appreciation of the other. In some relationships this lovely ritual has come about through no discussion or agreement, it just happens. The sad truth is that for many of us who grew up in families that did not practice acknowledging the goodness in others regularly, this healthy habit never formed.

To affirm someone quite literally means to convey that the way they navigate life, their personality, and their struggles are seen and appreciated; what they stand for matters. It implies that our partner sees us as we are, a wonderfully imperfect assemblage of our experiences and spirit. Affirmation, followed by listening is perhaps the most wonderful gift we can give another person.

It seems we live in a culture of criticism. When we make a mistake or miss the mark, there are many ways in which we are reminded of our shortcomings. Whether it is a sarcastic remark or an outright attack, most of us have been dodging criticism our entire life. It hurts us and keeps the walls around our hearts.

For all these reasons, affirming our mate is so powerful. It builds esteem and closeness. It heals past upsets. It provides a safe haven from the trials and tribulations of the world.

The speaker of the affirmation receives a gift as well, a gift that may rival the recipients. It calls us to open our heart and mind to our partner; to give words to *why* we love and cherish them. How often do we become blinded by the hardships of life or shortcomings of our mate? There is always more to hold in the conscious light of truth in order to maintain a proper perspective on this fellow human being with whom have the privilege of sharing life. The affirmation does not negate the aspects that are difficult to accept or require attention. Rather it helps us remain balanced and objective in our pursuit of meaning and fulfillment in our relationship.

Many find it daunting to affirm another. Oddly, it is an act of vulnerability especially if there is strife in the relationship. It can feel like we will somehow lose if we offer kindness first. Sometimes we may feel inadequate or compare ourselves to our partner's ability to affirm. Of course, this is not a competition nor is this an opponent. We aim to speak from our heart to the heart of our mate.

If you are new to affirmations, spend some time looking up how to give them or the language to use. Affirmations can be synonymous with compliments, so long as we are speaking about the person's character, mind, personality, ethics or anything that is not fleeting or tangential to our mate. Short and sweet is best.

Part 3: The 20 Second Embrace

The final piece of the triad is the twenty-second embrace. This closes out the process and aims to imbue each partner with a sense of physical closeness. This hug can certainly last longer than twenty seconds, but should not be cut short. Less than twenty seconds diminishes the process of our mind and body fully coming into union with the other.

From our birth to the present time, physical closeness is a fundamental need for all humans. Due to reasons of nature and nurture, some of us crave it and others struggle with receiving a prolonged loving embrace. In either situation, this part of the triad is very useful. Each person will have their own experience with the embrace. Stay present and aware as you feel your body more deeply melt into the embrace. For results, don't let this be a prelude to a sexual experience.

There is good biologic reason for the twenty-second embrace. It activates the bonding response within the primitive part of our brain. This part of the brain sees every person as either friend or foe and compels us to respond accordingly. When we hold a lovely embrace long enough, the chances of this person registering as a 'friend' increases substantially. This primitive brain programming is an essential part of ending the power struggle and allowing a couple to experience a true loving partnership.

Conclusion

I have been teaching this process to couples for many years. Many dozens of these couples have made it a part of their relationship while some have not. It is obvious the relationships that practice this triad have made it their own. These are the couples who don't become bogged down in the power struggle. They learn how to listen to each other and deeply appreciate each other's differences. They grow happier together over time and find their relationship as something to be proud of and defend. Those couples who don't practice predictably stay stuck.

For those couples who wish to incorporate this process into their relationship, it is suggested to practice the triad at least three times a week for a month. Put it on the calendar and make it a priority. Follow as closely as possible the format as described. Be gentle with each other as mistakes are made. After a month, discuss how the process is working. Do alterations need to be made? Any changes made should work for both partners and not take away from the sanctity of the experience.

Over time, couples adapt to this process and make it their own. Hopefully, the three parts will become part of the everyday fabric of a relationship. Listening, affirming, and loving touch are the remedy to nearly all martial upsets or relational power struggles that can befall a couple. Beyond that, these skills can be applied to our children and any other relationship where it would make sense.

“Where love rules, there is no will to power; and where power predominates, there love is lacking. The one is the shadow of the other.” Carl Jung

