

The Importance of Healthy Relationships at Home and On the Job

By Susan Dutton Freund

Whether you are married or not, the health of relationships affects your workplace, your community, and the nation! That's a big statement, but as you examine the facts about healthy marriages in this article, you will have a greater understanding of why it is important for people to take relational wellness seriously. This month's Brown Bagger will address:

- ❖ Why marriage is important (regardless if you're married yourself);
- ❖ Characteristics of a healthy relationship; and
- ❖ Some healthy relationship tools that you can use both at home and on the job.

Why Marriage is Important

The institution of marriage is an important part of your life in some way, shape, or form. Statistically, you are either married yourself, divorced, or you have a close relationship with someone who is married. Consider the following statistics:

- > 54% of those 15 and older are currently married.
- > 27% of Americans have never been married.
- > 90% of Americans will marry at least once in their life.
- > 40% of all babies are born outside of marriage.
- > 60% of all families are stepfamilies.
- > 18% of Americans are widowed, divorced or separated.
- > The highest percentage of divorced individuals is those ages 45-54.
- > *At the current rates of family fragmentation, only one-third of children will personally experience an intact marriage before they reach adulthood.*

These trends make what is happening in the family a societal, rather than an individual, issue. Everyone is paying the price in terms of increased taxes, crime, substance abuse, and juvenile delinquency; and in decreased physical and emotional health, academic achievement, job performance, and personal wealth.

What would be the impact to our lives if there were more marriages, and a higher percentage of those that could be termed "healthy?" Let's explore.

Characteristics of a Healthy Relationship

With so many opinions being aired today, the definition of "healthy" may seem elusive. In addition, what is comfortable for one relationship may seem distressing for another.

However, there are some basic guidelines that are universally applicable to all romantic relationships. The list below provides a solid foundation for understanding what healthy means. Notice how many definitions are equally applicable as guidelines for professional behavior on the job:

Non-Threatening Behavior:

- ✓ Talking and acting so that each person feels safe and comfortable doing and saying things;
- ✓ Listening to each other non-judgmentally;
- ✓ Being emotionally affirming and understanding; and
- ✓ Valuing each other's opinions.

Trust and Support:

- ✓ Supporting each other's goals in life; and
- ✓ Respecting each other's right to his/her feelings, friends, and activities.

Honesty and Accountability:

- ✓ Accepting responsibility for one's own behavior and emotions;



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- ✓ Acknowledging past use of violence and/or emotionally abusive behavior, and taking steps to change the behavior;
- ✓ Admitting infidelity, and ending any such relationships;
- ✓ Acknowledging being wrong when necessary — and apologizing and asking for forgiveness to restore the relationship;
- ✓ Communicating openly and truthfully; avoiding lies, deceptions, and secrets; and
- ✓ Seeking help for negative relationship patterns.

Responsible Parenting:

- ✓ Sharing parental responsibilities — mutually agreeing on a fair distribution of work and making decisions together; and
- ✓ Being a positive role model for children.

Relational Wellness and the Bottom Line

It is easy to see from these lists that unhealthy behavior in the home is likely to overlap into unhealthy behavior at work. Conversely, a person with the skills and character to succeed at home will often be a productive and valuable employee. In fact, what happens at home affects the bottom line directly. Here are the facts:

- One notable research project estimates that U.S. businesses lose **\$6 billion** each year due to decreased productivity stemming from marriage and relationship difficulties.
- Failed home relationships can lead to affairs in the workplace, and up to **25%** of these relationships lead directly to decreased productivity.
- Divorce can disrupt the productivity of an individual worker for as long as **three years**.
- A 2005 study found that in the year following a divorce, employees lost an average of over 168 hours of work time — the equivalent of being absent **four weeks** in a calendar year.

What's the Solution?

While divorce may be necessary in cases of abuse, addiction, mental illness, or adultery, research reveals that 70% of divorces occur in marriages that do not report serious issues like these! Rather, these couples lack skills in commu-

nication and conflict resolution. It is worth the time for anyone to learn these two keys components of relational wellness.

As stress is decreased, and the relationship becomes happier and more gratifying, job success often becomes an added benefit. For employers, relational wellness also benefits the bottom line. **A \$1.50 to \$6.85 return on investment is reported for every dollar spent on relationship skills training.**

Communication is the Key!

Good communication is satisfying to the soul. Unfortunately, we are not born with these skills. Many people just “wing it” and do what comes naturally; imitating what parents or peers modeled, however ineffective their methods. Many people have modeled one or more of the following behaviors, known as the WINE signs, each of which erodes the quality of the relationship over time:

Withdrawal/Avoidance: Avoidance occurs when one partner is reluctant or refuses to discuss important issues, while withdrawal involves “turning off” or “shutting down” during similar important discussions.

Invalidation: Occurs when one partner either subtly or overtly puts down the thoughts, feelings, or character of the other person.

Negative Interpretations: One partner consistently believes that the motives of the other are more negative than they actually are.

Escalation: Partners respond negatively to each other — they continually “up the ante” with increasingly negative emotions and actions.

Couples with good communication skills avoid these behaviors. They are less prone to escalation, and more able to stop the negative process before it erupts into a full blown, nasty fight. They avoid using thoughts and feelings against their partner, as they recognize that this type of behavior will prevent honest communication in the future.

Relationally healthy couples do *not* assume statements are negative or made with ill intent. In other words, they don't read between the lines to try to negatively see things that aren't there. Instead, as they seek to clarify meaning, healthy couples look for a positive, instead of the worst interpretation.



It is also helpful for women to understand that they tend to be the communicators and that male avoidance is aimed at the conflict and not her. Men do well to understand that they tend to withdraw, and to recognize that she doesn't want to fight but to connect. Try to put your conflicts in perspective. It is more helpful to see them as isolated difficult moments than as indicators of the overall relationship.

Recognizing and Changing Negative Patterns

The first step in dealing with negative patterns is to recognize their existence. To build and keep up a great relationship here's a great strategy: **stop, reduce**, or better yet, **never start** the WINE signs. These are three of the most effective things you can do to counteract negativity in a relationship.

Some researchers estimate that a couple must communicate between 5-20 positive statements for every negative one to maintain a happy marriage. When you are positively connected, the negatives will not be as noticeable, and you will move on more quickly. The following are some additional recommendations:

Work on managing your emotions — There are two important times to manage your emotions: when you are upset; and when your partner is upset.

Steps to managing your emotions — 1) Recognize when there is disturbing amount of tension, and visualize a poison sign. 2) Next, visualize a stop sign and say, "We need a time out." 3) Do something healthy to calm yourself before you resume the conversation.

Activities to calm down your emotions — Brainstorm five healthy ways to calm down that work for you. (Examples might include exercise, playing a game, reading, listening to music, or praying). Whatever they are, write them down!

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

While you're taking a break, do not rehash the argument in your head! You'll only remain upset. Instead, deliberately focus on something else until you calm down. When you have both achieved a calmer state of mind, call a mutually agreeable "time-in" to finish the discussion. Time-outs are destructive if there is never a time "back-in." Come back together ready to listen.

Speaker/Listener Technique*

The Speaker/Listener Technique is a structured way to communicate safely and clearly. It allows both individuals to achieve clarity about what is really being communicated. It is equally effective in personal and business relationships. (*The Speaker/Listener Technique is adapted from the PREP Educational System. For more information on PREP — state-of-the-art tools for an extraordinary marriage — visit <http://prepinc.com>.)

Rules for the Speaker:

➤ Speak for yourself; don't mind read! (For example, it's mind reading to say, "You don't care what I want." To speak for yourself, say "I don't feel cared for," or "I feel disrespected." These are known as "I statements.")

➤ Keep statements brief; don't ramble on and on. (Make one or two points only. This way, the listener won't get confused or overwhelmed.)

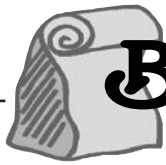
➤ Stop to let the listener paraphrase. (See the next point on page 4.)

(Editor's note: To review more rules and practice the Speaker/Listener Technique, see the handout section on page 4.)

Summary

The techniques described in this month's article are among the methods available that can improve relational wellness — both at work and at home. As in anything, practice makes perfect. The more you implement these proven techniques of communication and conflict resolution, the more skilled you will be in their use when you need them. Check with your EAP to find out about additional opportunities to learn and practice these skills. ■

Susan Dutton Freund is the Executive Director for thinkmarriage. Her passion to promote healthy relationships is fueled by her own rewarding marriage, which includes three children ages 25, 23 and 7! For a complete list of references used in this article, contact Susan at susan@thinkmarriage.org. For more information on thinkmarriage, visit www.thinkmarriage.org.



More Speaker/Listener Technique Rules...

Rules for the Listener:

➤ Paraphrase what you hear. (Thoughtfully restate what you hear the speaker saying, using “*So what I hear you saying is...*” and ending with, “*Is that right?*” Wait for the speaker to agree or alter what was said. Continue until the speaker agrees with your paraphrase.)

➤ Focus on the speaker’s message. Don’t rebut. (This skill involves good listening, which means you must put aside your own thoughts and reactions for the moment. For instance, say, “*So, you feel angry about me being late. Is that right?*” But don’t say, “*So, you’re being anal about time,*” or “*So, you’re mad just because my meeting ran late!*”)

Rules for Both:

➤ The first speaker has the floor. No interruptions, unless the speaker forgets to be brief.

➤ The speaker keeps the floor while the listener paraphrases.

➤ Share the floor.

After the speaker has made one or two points and the listener has correctly paraphrased, the speaker should politely pass the floor to the listener so the roles can be reversed. The goal of this technique is not necessarily to reach agreement or solve a problem immediately.

Rather, the goal is for each person to feel clearly heard and understood.

...Practicing the Speaker/Listener Technique

Partner Activity:

Take a moment and practice the Speaker/Listener Technique using a common scenario from work or home. Be sure to choose a low-conflict topic that you both feel comfortable sharing. Some ideas might include:

- ❖ What would you do for a dream vacation?
- ❖ What would you do if you had an extra \$500 to spend on something just for fun, in the next two days?
- ❖ What was your favorite age as a child?
- ❖ What makes a good friend?

When each person feels understood the conversation can move to conflict resolution, if necessary. The goal should be to find a WIN-WIN or mutually acceptable solution. At this point, each person needs to clearly understand and express what he or she **wants**. This is best done using a **specific, constructive** request according to the following pattern:

I would like _____, because _____, it would make me feel _____.

Partner Activity:

Build on the conversation you just had by making a specific request to your practice partner. Imagine presenting your dream vacation request to your spouse, or asking for the next two days off. For instance, you might say something like: “*I’d like to make an appointment for lunch because it’s been a while since we got to talk and it would make me feel like we’re still connected.*”

Summary

As in anything, practice makes perfect. The more you implement a proven method like the Speaker/Listener Technique to improve communication and better resolve conflicts, the more skilled you will be in their use when you need them. Check with your EAP to find out about additional opportunities to learn and practice these skills.

Source: Susan Dutton Freund, Executive Director for thinkmarriage. For more information, contact Susan at susan@thinkmarriage.org. For more information on thinkmarriage, visit www.thinkmarriage.org.