



Solution Oriented
Creative Coaching©

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ENHANCING YOUR RELATIONSHIP Part one

Emotionally committed relationships bring excitement and passion into our lives, especially when they are new. Over time, however, we come across roadblocks based in personal issues that can distance us from our partners. When we first enter into a committed relationship, we may think that we have found the answer to life's problems, that we have a partner to share in daily turmoil, that we will never be alone again, that it will be smooth sailing from here on out. If we base relationships on these assumptions, however, we may be sorely disappointed when our partners fail to live up to these expectations. There is a strong probability that if we look to another person to provide fulfillment, we will begin to focus on the failings of that person as the cause of our own disappointment. This pattern is the reason for a great deal of discord in committed relationships. Many people who come in for relationship therapy actually hope that the therapy will change their partner because they are convinced that the partner is the source of the problem.

Over time many relationships enter a stage where the partners feel distanced from each other. The initial passion, sexual freedom, intimacy, and feelings of connectedness with the partner fade. Either person may begin to feel that, although they love their partner, they are no longer "in love." At the same time, both partners may feel that they have lost themselves in the relationship. They have given so much to the relationship in terms of their time, their energies, and their emotions that they have lost what made them feel unique as individuals. They have abandoned old friendships, hobbies, and activities that brought interest and excitement to their own lives in order to devote time and energy to the relationship. When a feeling of distance comes to define the relationship, resentment toward the partner may emerge. How does a relationship, which may have once shown such promise, end up in a place where the two partners feel distant and may not even like each other very much (even though they feel that love is still there)? The answer lies within. Two people who come together in an emotional commitment carry with them a legacy of their own fears, anxieties and unresolved problems. It is sometimes uncomfortable for us to come to terms with our own baggage. It is, in fact, so troublesome that we are unable to look within ourselves. When that happens, we tend to attribute the problem to our partners, a process called *projection*. Rather than accepting the fact that our partners are just being themselves and probably have the best of intentions, we define the source of our own anxiety as lying within the other person. When we feel uncomfortable about something our partners say or do, we may not realize that our discomfort may derive from a source that we have not examined within ourselves - like our own control issues, our insecurity, or our fear of dependence or independence. Our partners may simply be triggering our own unresolved difficulties. The clue is to search within our own lives to see why we have difficulty with these issues. And this is no small task.

Differentiation

David Schnarch, Ph.D., the author of *Passionate Marriage*, suggests that in order to grow within an emotionally committed relationship, we must experience the process of "differentiation." This means

holding onto yourself within a relationship, staying true to what you want out of life while sharing your life with a partner. Differentiation allows us to break free from the negative processes that happen between partners in any relationship. It allows us to take a time out from arguments in order to comfort ourselves. It leads to self-control, which means that we can stop trying to control our partners. The differentiated partner is able to soothe him- or herself rather than pressuring the other person to change in order to make the first one feel better. Paradoxically, when partners differentiate, they actually have the ability to achieve more intimacy, while undifferentiated partners can stay locked in their emotional standoff. And when one partner differentiates, it upsets the old equilibrium that had developed so that the other partner is prompted to make changes as well. In short, a healthy relationship is one in which two people, each of whom has a firm sense of self, come together and celebrate both their differences and their similarities.

In next month's Newsletter I will list what Schnarch identifies several activities that happen when a person differentiates.

