

## The Games People Play

Many couples find that, at least on occasion, their interactions get mired down in a variety of unhealthy interaction patterns that push the love and respect they feel for each other to the side. This happens when one or both partners resorts to criticism, defensiveness, pouting, sarcasm, manipulation, “the silent treatment,” walking out, shouting, and/or temper tantrums. Most of the major issues that drive these less than functional interactions have their roots in negative experiences that one or the other partner has had in the past, usually with their families, schoolmates, authority figures, and exes.

For example, Amy may walk into the kitchen and notice that the sink is still filled with dishes. Amy may assume that because Beth didn't do the dishes that Amy doesn't matter to Beth. As a result, Amy may immediately feel angry and yell, “Beth, you said you'd do the dishes. They're still in the sink.” Beth may react in a positive manner by kissing Amy on the cheek and saying, “Oh honey, I'm sorry. You're right. I got caught up watching *Will and Grace* and just forgot. I'll do them right now. Thanks for reminding me,” and do the dishes. More likely, Beth, hearing the anger in Amy's voice, will hear Amy channeling her mother telling her all the ways that she's managed to fail at being an acceptable human being, and feeling criticized at her very core, lash back defensively, “Geeze, Amy. Don't get your panties in a wad. It's only been a day. I'll do them when I'm done watching TV, all right?” Unfortunately, this defensive response is likely to exacerbate Amy's feeling that Beth doesn't think she matters. At this point, Amy is even less likely to take a deep breath, calm herself, and remember that Beth worked a double shift at the hospital and is generally much more conscientious about doing the dishes, at least when asked. Feeling even more hurt and angry, Amy is likely to lash back, probably with a more general criticism like, “You never do anything around here except play video games and watch TV. I'm sick of being your maid. No wonder Barbara dumped you.” Obviously, by this point, Beth is not likely to stop and say, “Amy, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. You're right; I've been a jerk. I'll do the dishes now.” Instead, she's likely to lash back with an emotional barb of her own and the conflict will escalate until either one or both partners comes to her senses and apologizes or stomps out of the room in a huff.

At the most immediate level, both Amy and Beth get stuck in one of the most painful and dangerous patterns that couples face: they make assumptions and act on them. In part they are experiencing a communication breakdown. Neither partner stops the conflict from escalating to check out their assumptions. Both get absorbed in their own pain and lose touch with their compassion for the other. Neither gives the other the benefit of the doubt. If Amy and Beth often find themselves lost in this sort of negative spiral, it might be a good idea for them to seek counseling so that they can work through some of the root issues that trigger the spiral.

At a more general level, couples are more likely to fight when negative sentiment rules the relationship. Put differently, Amy is probably already not feeling all that loving towards Beth, or she wouldn't get so upset about the dishes in the first place. Similarly, Beth is probably not feeling all that loving towards Amy or she wouldn't react so defensively when Amy calls her out about the dishes. When relationships get stuck in a negative pattern, partners tend to interpret even relatively neutral acts or statements as negative. For example, if Amy buys skim milk at the store, Beth might say, “What's with the skim milk? You think I'm getting fat, don't you?” When couples get locked into this sort of pattern, it's almost a no-win situation. Unless the pattern changes, eventually, these sorts of relationships tend not to last, especially in our community, because there's not enough to hold them together.

Both partners have to make a concerted effort to break out of this sort of negative pattern. As a first step, Amy and Beth need to think how committed they are to making the relationship work. If they are both willing to at least try, it might be a good idea for Amy and Beth to make a list of all the wonderful qualities they can think of about each other, including what attracted them to each other in the first place, and then set aside a time to talk about the list. If this goes well, they might spend an evening reminiscing about the good times they've had together as a couple. This exercise sounds cheesy, but it's important. When couples get mired in a negative pattern, they often lose track of their partner's positive qualities and forget about the good times that they've had together.

Once Amy and Beth have reconnected to their passion, the real work of rebuilding a relationship begins. When couples get stuck in a negative pattern, they tend to quit listening to each other, so Amy and Beth need to start working on their listening skills. Active listening is one of the best exercises to work on this. In this exercise, partners take turns actively listening to each other. One partner is the designated speaker and the other is the designated listener. The designated speaker tells her partner how she feels about specific things that her partner does for a specified period of time (say, ten to 20 minutes). It's good to include positive behaviors as well as negative ones. For example, Beth might tell Amy, "When you made chocolate chip cookies for my birthday, I felt really loved." And she can say, "When you complain about the dishes, I feel criticized. I try really hard to get the dishes done, but sometimes it just feels like too much with my work schedule. I feel like no matter what I do, it's not enough. I appreciate that you are a gourmet cook and that you do most of the cooking, but sometimes it would be nice to just order pizza and throw away the paper plates when we're done."

The listener's job is to listen and affirm that she hears what the speaker is saying. And then, when time is up, the listener repeats back the essences of what the speaker said. For example, Amy might say, "I heard you say that you felt loved when I made chocolate chip cookies for you, and that you feel criticized when I complain about the dishes. I also heard that though you appreciate my gourmet cooking, you sometimes feel overwhelmed by how many dishes it takes to cook that way, and would rather just order pizza." The listener then checks in with the speaker by saying, "Did that capture it?" If not, the speaker clarifies what felt misunderstood. When the speaker feels confident that the listener heard her, they switch roles. The listener takes the role of speaker and speaks for the same amount of time, and the speaker takes the role of listener.

In this exercise, it's important for the speaker to speak from her own experience about specific behaviors, without blaming, in a neutral, compassionate tone of voice. It's also critical that the listener listen respectfully, using body language to indicate that she has heard the speaker but without sending signals of anger, disagreement, or contempt. Criticism, sarcasm and mocking are not allowed in this exercise. If a couple tries this and finds that they cannot follow the rules, couples counseling might be a really good idea.

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