

The Recipe for a Successful Relationship

In my clinical practice, people often attend therapy to deal with problems. But as an observer of the human condition, I am privileged to learn from my clients on a daily basis. I have often said I learn more from experience than my textbooks (sorry, professors). Often my work is "problem focused", and relationships are often problematic. But I have also encountered significant success in relationships witnessed on a daily basis, and have often wondered what "ingredients" in individuals contribute to positive and successful long term relationships. On a personal note, I have just celebrated my 22nd wedding anniversary. So either my wife is incredibly patient, or we're both doing some things right (or both!!). So I am trying to pull data from my professional and personal life to help determine the ingredients of a "**Relationship Recipe**".

First, start with the most foundational ingredient **love**, which would be the key component of any relationship I have encountered that is happy, positive, and lasting. So many books, songs, movies, poems have been devoted to defining the puzzle/magic of love, but that is not my goal here. Suffice it to say that love is vital for a relationship to last, and the most key ingredient. Other factors that sustain love, or prevent love from being eroded, are important to recognize and work towards. Initially, falling in love can often be colored with infatuation, new-ness, sexual attraction, and many pheromone related sensations. What happens after pheromones wear off, or people slip into a routine, or time simply passes? In order to maintain a long term relationship, you'll need to mix in:

- **Empathy** Simply put, empathy is walking in the other person's shoes, seeing things from their point of view; immersing yourself in their world, attempting to understand what it would be like to be them in the moment. Often, people want to state their opinions, change their partner's mind, and tell them how to feel, or try to fix them. These processes are typically mistakes that negatively impact relationships. In my experience, I have never had a couple come into my office and say: "my spouse is too empathic!" The importance of the ability to listen empathically to one's significant other cannot be overstated!! Empathic listening is the apple in apple pie. I have been surprised how often people don't truly understand the meaning of empathy. Often partners become anxious when spouses complain, and might rush to try to "fix" their feelings or make them go away (i.e. "You shouldn't feel that way").

I think empathic listening is an art, and takes a lot of work, energy, and patience. We especially "drop the empathy ball" when we are angry, tired, frustrated or impatient. It is exactly during these moments, when we are not at our best, that it's important to focus on the need and importance of empathic listening. Empathy is not encouraging the other person to whine incessantly, but creates significant meaning and connection for your significant other. A spouse's conscious or unconscious recognition that you care enough to walk in their shoes typically validates their emotional perspective. The bottom line is that empathic listening is vital to maintaining the loving aspects of a relationship. Understanding, practicing and valuing empathy is HUGE!

- **Assertive communication** Passive or aggressive communications are common pitfalls. Often individuals want to avoid conflict and “let things go”. Sometimes individuals respond from the other end of the continuum, and aggressively argue their points in an intimidating fashion. I recommend that people develop broader assertive skills, typically utilizing “I” statements, followed by the statement of a feeling.

Most of us want to be heard in a debate or argument, but often, as the temperature goes up, listening goes down. I usually discuss with my clients that a more achievable goal is to maximize the probabilities of being heard through assertiveness. The goal is to maximize the probabilities. We might not always get our way, but if we “set the table” the right way, we increase our chances of being heard. I often feel like I’m a voice-teacher, because I work at my clients having a voice and getting heard.

Another aspect of assertive communication is that our feelings are our feelings. They aren’t judged on their factual nature, but how we feel about the particular topic. Our partners can’t tell us that our feelings are wrong. But we can hurt ourselves and the process of communication by under-reporting (passive) our feelings, or over-stating (aggressive) them. Assertiveness helps lower our partner’s defensiveness, but isn’t perfect. It is a habit that needs to be practiced and maintained.

- **The Seasoning** - Lowering **defensiveness** in yourself and your partner, combined with increased **flexibility**, and a dash (a large dash) of avoiding being over-**controlling**. Similar to empathic listening, no couples have complained to me that their significant other is too flexible. The ability to bend, act in a patient manner, hold your tongue, wait your turn, etc. is significant. Seems opposite of over-control, doesn’t it?

We all need control in our lives, but working to diminish an over-controlling nature is an effective goal. “Mutuality” is a word that often comes to mind when I work with people who have excellent relationships. Couples who “take turns” with ideas, conversations, choices often seem to do well in life. Lastly defensiveness does little to create bonding or connectedness. If you’re too busy guarding your own ego, or putting your partner off balance, how can you bridge gaps, side step traps, or become closer to the one you love? Being right or avoiding being wounded is over-rated, and does little to preserving love.

- **Respect** When discussing respect, I find that couples do well when they recognize that the differences in their partner are not evil or bad, but part of what makes their partner unique. Valuing your partner’s world view, values, culture, gender differences helps develop the “**friendship**” of the relationship. When we combine mutuality, respect, and acceptance, we take great effort in creating openness in our heart to our partner. At the same time, communicating this acceptance increases our partner’s comfort.

Too many couples try to force their opinions on the other party, or become terrified that differences will tear them apart. Shared values often contribute to diminished conflict, but last I checked, cloning is illegal. Do we want clones of each other? Or are we typically afraid or confused by the concept of

different? A significant other-clone sounds boring, and embracing each other's differences should help to improve the friendship that is the foundation long term relationships. Friendship is the crust of the apple pie...it holds everything together.

- **Positive Habits** I have found Brent Atkinson's (1) concepts based on his work with couples have been some of the most effective strategies people can develop. A number of positive "habits" have been found to be effective in developing relationship success, and I'd like to add these to the recipe. One concept is that resentment can be the cancer in a relationship, often leading to a love relationship's demise.

Expressing and resolving resentment is like stirring the sauce in good spaghetti. If you don't identify and express resentments on a regular basis, they build to the point of an exploding mess (think over-cooked sauce). Most people think that expressing resentments is dangerous, or something to be avoided, like "why pick a fight?" In my practice, the opposite is true. Individuals who diplomatically assert resentments with the expressed goal to eliminate or process poisonous emotions do better in long term relationships.

Another habit Brent supports is to "**avoid judgments**". Judgments seem to be natural and can't be avoided entirely, but as a rule of thumb, diminishing the frequency and depth of judgmental behavior/opinions is a fantastic habit to pursue, and a tasty ingredient in the recipe. When we judge we often don't get all the information, or just entertain our own perspective. Often, we can nullify our partners through judgments. Over time, after we experience repeated nullified feelings or thoughts, we are at risk to develop resentment. And resentment is the cancer of relationships.

One habit recommended to help avoid judgments (thereby circumventing resentments) is to "**find the understandable part**". I have found that clients who utilize this habit withstand the frustrations of conflict better. They can often say, "I'm upset, but help me understand why you're screaming at me", or "let me help you understand me". Personally, with my wife or friends, I've had to grit my teeth, but ask "help me understand where you're coming from". Most often this is a communication aid, because people like to be understood, and become less adversarial when explaining their side. Developing understanding can help dissolve judgments, subsequently avoiding the process of feeling nullified and eventual resentment.

- **Self-awareness** Often, people that struggle in relationships feel out of control. They don't feel connected, valued, embraced, understood, etc. They often want the other person to change, act better, stop being difficult, etc. The only problem is the only person we can be in charge of changing is ourselves. If we change how we interact, we can effectively change the system. Waiting for the other party to change, or becoming mired in blame, places the dynamics of impacting the relationship beyond our control. Instead, changing one self can guarantee something different in the process of relating.

Self awareness can help us learn about our responses and our expectations. Often significant others can evoke an unconscious reaction from us. They can

confuse and confound us, disappoint, or stir us up. I feel that in my work with clients, it is their responsibility to learn as much as they can about their emotional blue-print to more effectively interact with their spouse or significant other. It wouldn't hurt to have an understanding of your significant other's emotional blue-print as well.

Every family we come from has its own unique dysfunction, some worse than others. It's not that our parents or parenting figures set out to fail, but they are inevitably bound to their own human imperfections. All parents make mistakes. Often we look to the adult love relationship we're currently in to undo the disappointments or hurt from our developmental years. The only problem is that the ideal unconditional love of childhood doesn't exactly fit in an adult love relationship. Our significant other isn't supposed to parent us, and there are conditions in marital relationships (fidelity, division of labor, safety, etc.).

Often couples need to be aware of "fear versus fact." Self knowledge can help us determine if our fears (of being hurt, disappointed, etc.) match the facts of the relationships. Understanding where our fears come from, processing these concerns via introspection, and discussing our needs and wants in the relationship is significant in sorting through the muck of our emotional past.

When we are aware of our blue-print (i.e. I feel insecure regarding abandonment because of my parents' divorce at age 10), we can react less automatically or irrationally and know what our spouse is stirring up in our emotional make-up. We need to allow for the ebb and flow in the relationship, be aware of our panic buttons, and guard against these alarms dictating our feelings and actions. Individuals who struggle with their reactions to their spouses, and feel, "You're just like my Father/Mother!", are often good candidates for psychotherapy. Understanding our emotional make-up and where we come from often helps us successfully experience where we are going in life.

- **Embrace change.** I had a recent discussion about the importance of change in a relationship. Many people fear change, and I think another ingredient in the recipe is to **embrace change**. We can always get better in our relating, and strive to grow in our relationship everyday. I think to aspire to evolve in the love relationship is a necessary goal as we go through many phases in life (dating, marriage, children, college tuition, more tuition, children's marriage, retirement, grandchildren's tuition, etc.). I think openness to change is important to help surf the waves of change. Demanding sameness and status quo may seem akin to stability, but can make us dangerously fragile and brittle. Try to embrace change!!
- **Sexuality and fun** There are many perspectives about frequency of intimacy, types of intimacy, cuddling and hugging, nonsexual intimacy, etc. I don't think my computer has enough memory for me to answer all the questions about sexuality, but I do think couples need to have fun. I've met so many people who can't answer the evaluative questions "Do you date?" Just as we evolve throughout our marital history, we need to allow fun and play into daily life. Dating and falling in love typically involve more pleasure

oriented dinners, movies, discovery, romance, etc. Just because you're married or cohabitating doesn't mean this needs to stop. Sure kids, work, etc, can get in the way, but I think it's vital to keep the ingredient of fun in a marriage. Positive statements, joy, sense of humor, "lightening up", are all dynamics to encourage in each other and to maintain in our lives.

These are some ingredients in my perspective on the Relationship Recipe. But like any good recipe, I'm sure there are other ingredients I could add in the future!!

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(1) Atkinson, Brent. Emotional Intelligence In Couples Therapy. 2005