

Relationship Dynamics

The following contains a brief overview of three concepts that I hope will help increase your understanding of how relationships work in order to identify areas for change.

From, Lexi

Introduction

When it comes to relationships, we can't control others, but we *are* a part of the equation. As part of the equation, we have the potential to influence the relationship and possibly the other person through our words and behavior. Increasing our **knowledge** of relationship dynamics may help us move differently within relationships, which can help shift focus away from negatives, improve the clarity and quality of communication, and prevent or reduce conflict.

Potential Side Effects of Change

Regarding influencing others, I use the word "possibly," since making changes in our lives and in the way we interact may have little to no impact. Making changes can also have unintended effects, such as other people becoming uncomfortable and responding negatively, thus increasing the risk or frequency of conflict. I do not recommend applying these concepts within relationships that pose a risk of inciting emotional or physical abuse (please see information regarding professional assistance below). ^[1]

1. Bids For Connection

Psychologist and author John Gottman^[2] describes a type of communication (or way of interacting) as "bids for connection." My understanding of this concept goes as such:

Making a bid for connection involves one person asking another person to: Talk, listen, pay attention, answer a question, show interest, engage in an activity, be physically close, give or receive affection or otherwise meet a **need**. Relationships can be harmed when one person is approaching another who consistently responds in unhealthy ways.

When we make a bid for **connection**, we can picture ourselves as metaphorically holding out our hand to someone. That person then has three options for responding:

- 1) The person can ACCEPT the request, essentially "taking your hand."
- 2) The person can REJECT the request, symbolically "swatting your hand away." ^[3]
- 3) The person can IGNORE the request, "disregarding or turning away" from your hand.

Relationship Dynamics

One idea for improving a relationship is to **notice** if you are responding to a request (bid) as described in #2 or #3 when someone approaches you. If so, you can identify (with help, if needed) alternative behaviors that show more receptivity, interest, and consideration. You could also ask another person to share their perception of how you respond to their bids. A third idea is to consider initiating a conversation with someone to share your observations about how that person responds to you (again, do this only if you feel safe in the relationship).

2. Pursuer-Distancer

The Pursuer-Distancer relationship dynamic refers to mutual influence within our relationships, particularly between two individuals. When this **dynamic** occurs, people (whether purposefully or not) develop a cause-and-effect behavior pattern that goes like this:

1. When one person PURSUES, the other tends to DISTANCE.
2. When one person DISTANCES, the other tends to PURSUE.
3. When a pursuer STOPS or BACKS OFF, the distancer may stop distancing or may move back toward the pursuer.

For Example: I compare this to having birdseed in your hand, crouching down and holding it out to a wild bird. If you move your body or your hands toward it, the bird gets frightened or intimidated and might fly away. Conversely, if you hold still or back up slightly before holding still, the bird is more likely to **trust** you enough to eventually eat out of your hands. Notice that this process takes some patience!

What do these different behaviors look and sound like?

PURSUE: Nagging, hounding, obsessing, insisting, pressuring, pestering, chasing, threatening, forcing, etc.

DISTANCE: Ignoring, disregarding, avoiding, lying, leaving, hiding, fleeing, etc. ^[4]

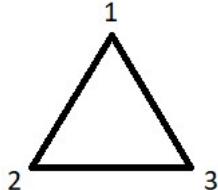
BACK OFF: May include apologizing, voicing your intention to **respect** another person's physical/emotional space, asking the other person to come to you when they are ready.

STOP: Stop pursuing and wait. (This means no interaction for a chosen period of time.)

Being able to "spot" an active pursuer-distancer dynamic provides both parties with a chance to intervene by changing their own behavior (which may create positive influence on the other person) and by promoting communication once the distancing has sufficiently subsided.

Relationship Dynamics

3. Triangles



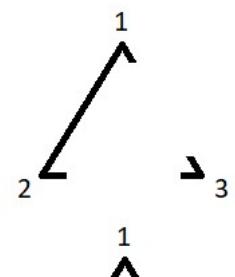
Relationship triangles involve interconnections between three people.

The three people can interact in the following combinations:

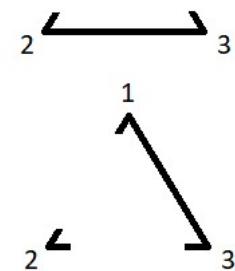
Persons 1, 2 and 3.

The triangle above represents three people communicating in an open and healthy manner. Dyads (subgroups of two) may develop so that when two people interact separately, it leaves the third person out. On the triangles to the right, you will see that the solid line represents the two people who are communicating while leaving the third person (single arrowhead) out. This can lead to misunderstandings, confusion, and distrust (i.e., there may be secrets or information withheld by the subgroup). Keeping a triangular relationship healthy is largely based on clear **communication**, agreed-upon “rules” and conditions, plus respect and consideration toward each group member.

Person 1 and Person 2 only:



Person 2 and Person 3 only:



Person 1 and Person 3 only:



Summary

By examining relationship dynamics, we can expand our options for thoughts and behavior by increasing our understanding of “what’s going on” and “why.” The three examples above illustrate how clear, direct, and respectful communication can help prevent or reduce misunderstandings, conflict, and potential harm. Such **healthy** communication also aids in facilitating compromise when conflict can’t be avoided. I hope this overview of three common relationship interaction styles and dynamics will help you increase **insight** into your own and others’ thoughts and behavior so that you can create meaningful change and experience warm, loving connections.

Relationship Dynamics

NOTES

1. If you are in an abusive relationship or are having difficulty making effective changes in these or other areas, please consider working with a qualified psychotherapist. I recommend using the **PsychologyToday.com** website, which lets you search for clinicians (including psychologists, social workers, and marriage & family therapists) using filters such as presenting problem, type of treatment interventions, geographical location, and insurance plan.
2. See more information about psychologist and author John Gottman online at: **Gottman.com** I recommend reviewing Dr. Gottman's "Four Horsemen" blog posts which outline four communication styles that, per his research, "can predict the end of a relationship." Thankfully he also provides "antidotes!" Read the article here: **www.gottman.com/blog/the-four-horsemen-the-antidotes**
3. Regarding "bids for connection," please note that "rejecting" a request in a cold or hostile manner differs from "declining" a request in a healthy and respectful way.
4. An offshoot of distancing may occur when the distancer temporarily turns into the pursuer to make the original pursuer back off (e.g., by picking a fight, verbally or physically attacking). Maintaining safety is key with this dynamic, as well, if a distancer has the potential for emotional or physical volatility.

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