

Relationship Building

1. Start with the end in mind – the relationship vision exercise

Developing some sense of what we want is a good place to start. Naturally this will be adjusted along the way. We need the vision to aim for and establish whether we are on the path we want. Similarly, we need an intention to be able to work to get there. No point having the vision if you don't have the intention or commitment to try and get to your destination.

2. Establish commitment

Understanding the key issue – willingness and commitment – is this relationship worth the effort? Are you willing to try? Can you make a commitment? Commitment is important because it provides the essential energy and determination to power through the rough spots in a relationship.

3. Setting a course – develop a plan

As your therapist I will work to help you tailor your plan to your circumstances and adjust it as need be. However your plan will include five key elements:

- Understanding, awareness and monitoring of relationship processes
- Developing and practicing five key skill sets (see below)
- Developing the ability to recognize (and step out of) negative interactions
- Understanding and practicing the process of building positive cycles
- Establishing a practice of regular discussions about the relationship

4. Understand relationship processes

Study the key reciprocal processes involved in relationships such as pursuer/withdrawer, victim/villain and attack/defense

The ability to understand negative cycles is essential for preventing stalemates and hostilities. The more you can detect negative cycles as soon as they occur and develop strategies for effectively stepping out of the cycle the more major disputes can be managed. Positive cycles can also be facilitated by understanding the dynamics involved.

Positive cycles

1. Generosity – making deposits in the ***love bank***
2. Respect – diplomacy – dignity – always strive for this
3. Communicate adult to adult (rather than parent to child)
4. Give Attention – it is the small change of love
5. Mutual Validation (feelings are not right or wrong)

Negative cycles

1. The power battle (a competition for dominance)
2. The negative cycle of attack and criticism (recognised by repetitive fights of attack and counterattack and a feeling of “stuckness”)
3. The drama triangle (the feeling of being a “victim” where the other is seen as a persecutor or “villain” – can entrench to negative cycle as a feeling of “righteous indignation” grows and fuels the anger – leading to greater conflict)
5. Pursuer – distancer (The hailstorm and turtle)

5. Develop and Apply the Five Key Skill Sets

1. Mindfulness

Awareness of what is – this is the reality that needs to be addressed, we need also to be aware of our beliefs, assumptions, expectations and fears. These are not the same as “what is” but rather “what we believe” or “what might be”.

2. Listening

The key concept is “active listening” – *listening to understand, not to prepare your reaction*. Involves three components: *Respect *Attention and *Validation

3. Slowing down and creating an environment of emotional safety

Slowing down provides emotional space for being more careful and handling volatile emotions. Consider the strategic value of “time out” and the 24-hour rule. Both parties need to feel “safe” to express and experience feelings in a respectful way.

4. Respond rather than react

Breaking negative cycles requires skill and attention to detail. It requires that we interact thoughtfully and even if we are feeling strong emotions that we take responsibility for our behaviour and consider whether it is helping or harming the relationship. Choosing words carefully e.g. the THINK technique (Before speaking ask: Is it **T**True? Is it **H**Helpful? Is it **I**Inspiring? Is it **N**Necessary? is it **K**Kind?)

5. Knowing how to let go

Here again, we need mindfulness. Effective relationships require lots of forgetting and forgiving. As much as possible forget the small things and, when sufficiently processed, forgive the big things – this does not mean becoming a doormat – but rather looking to see how harmony and ease can be created in everyday affairs.