

Strategies for maintaining healthy relationships.

- **I-Statements not you-statements**– Experiment with speaking from I-statements and from your feelings. E.g. I feel hurt, confused or angry etc., as this is a practice of taking responsibility for your experience. A you-statements directs the blame onto the other and makes them completely responsible for your feelings e.g. *You made me feel this way; or You're a selfish, lazy, so and so...If you didn't do that then I wouldn't have got angry!!* Remember the principle that your partner may trigger your feelings, but they didn't cause them. They are caused by the fact that you already have a pre-existing wound or pre-disposition to feel these feelings.
- **Be curious what you do that keeps you both stuck and unsatisfied** – Notice the ways you communicate with your partner that may sabotage any resolution or satisfying contact and ends up escalating the problems in your relationship e.g. Not listening, criticizing, making automatic assumptions and accusations without checking them out first, getting off the topic of importance, trying to prove your right, counter-opinions, justifying and arguing, bringing up the past, put-downs, being dismissive or sarcastic etc. Keep in mind that all relationship issues are co-created to some degree, which means you will always have some part to play in the relationship conflicts. See if you can do a u-turn and get curious about your part, and then to own and communicate this with your partner.
- **Notice the ways you protect yourself that doesn't serve the relationship**– Do you – Blame the other to avoid your own shame, vulnerability or responsibility; counter-argue to enhance or justify your own position; try to be right and make the other wrong; criticize, mind read, accuse, name call; withdraw affection and don't communicate; become physically aggressive or verbally abusive? *There is nothing inherently wrong with setting boundaries or protect yourself, but do you do it in a way that sabotages any chance of resolution or respectful communication.* Be curious what this pattern of self protection does for you and what it is helping you avoid feeling. Often under our self-protective strategies are deeper feelings of fear and vulnerability. Can you be curious what these fears are and to consider the possibility of

communicating them more directly, authentically and clearly e.g fear of being controlled, fear of abandonment, rejection, judgement, or loss?

- **Avoid blaming** – Many couples get caught into the pattern of blaming the other for their own pain – making the other the bad one. Although your partner may contribute to your experience, they are not responsible for your feelings or happiness – you are! You have agency for how you relate to, manage and communicate your feelings and thoughts. Blaming never works to support a deeper understanding and connection if that's what you're valuing and wanting. Experiment with taking responsibility for your experience – this means *reflecting on and not judging or rejecting your own experience*. Nothing will change until you are willing to discover your own agency for soothing and understanding your own experience and choices. This means taking radical responsibility for soothing your own wounded parts of yourself rather than wanting your partner to take care of them. In the end, you are the only one who can be completely there for these parts in a consistent way. No partner will have the capacity to be always there for you!
- **Check out your assumptions and conclusions** – Quite often couples react to what they assume is going on in the other partner, without checking it out and asking. This is a case of mind-reading. Experiment with being really curious and asking about the others motivations, behaviour and intentions before you accuse or react to them– ask them - what were you intending when did or said that - rather than mind read them.
- **Listen deeply to each other** – Experiment with understanding the other from their perspective before you respond or react – you'll be surprised how much more likely you then have a chance to be heard properly too. You don't have to agree with the other person's perspective, but it helps if you hear and acknowledge your partners feelings, needs and thoughts, and to actively validate it as real for them. Most couples stuckness, hurt and conflicts are a result of not feeling acknowledged and heard by the other.
- **Allow differences in perspectives** - Many couples want their partner to agree with their perspective and or expect them to share the same values, interests and priorities, This is a nice fantasy, but in reality, it's

often not always realistic. Trying to get your partner to be like you or agree with you, or what you want often leads to arguments. Experiment with allowing, validating and appreciating your partner's differences in perspective, and to drop your expectations for them to be different than what they are! Try not to interpret differences as a sign of conflict. You can validate your partner's differences without having to agree with them. What happens if you stop fighting them, and start letting each other be the unique and different human person that they are?

- **Do a U-turn when your triggered - Keep your eyes on your own experience** – When you begin to feel reactive towards your partner, the first impulse is to focus on what's wrong with them! This may feel good for you (you get to feel right, right!!) but it often doesn't help bring about lasting change and deeper connection. *Whats more important – being right or being connected?* Often you end up overlooking what's going on in you and losing a chance to build your own self-awareness and emotional tolerance muscle. So next time you're triggered, ask yourself, what parts of me are activated?

Take a few slow deep breaths as soon as you notice yourself feeling reactive (e.g angry, hurt, disappointed, not heard). Be curious about what is really happening in you? In your body sensations? What are you feeling in relation to your partner? What are you thinking and believing? What judgements about yourself or them are you having? See if you can identify and allow your feelings to be there and reflect on what they are about first. Is something in your past triggered for you by your partner? How do you relate to your feelings and what you do with them is what makes all the difference? Do you reject them, react against them or allow them to be there? Once you have slowed down to self-reflect and bring mindfulness and self-compassion to your own feelings you are in a much better place to communicate from a wise adult place - of calmness, wisdom and softness rather than from reactivity and your young parts and old adaptive survival strategies. Awareness helps us to respond rather than react.

- **Watch out for your inner critic activity** – often the reasons why we need to defend ourselves is related to underlying feelings of shame we need to protect ourselves from. If your partner does judge you, the reason it triggers a reaction is because it activates your own inner judge. If you can identify your own inner judge - and understand its impact and job, you're in a much better position to then manage your partners

criticisms without reacting. It is often your inner critic that is feeding your shame and shame defences. See if you can find out how the qualities and behaviors you dislike about your partner might reflect what you criticize in yourself. Or, notice if you are also projecting your critic onto them, that is assuming they are going to judge you the way you judge yourself and then defending against this perceived attack.

- **What do you really want and yearn for**– ask yourself what do you really yearn for from the other that you haven't expressed? Do you need more understanding, nurturing, validation, appreciation? What support do you really wish for? What stops you from expressing these needs in a more direct, vulnerable, clear, non-demanding way? Ask yourself – is there a way that you don't nurture, validate, respect or appreciate yourself? Is there a way that you could be more loving and caring towards yourself in relation to the issues that cause you suffering? Sometimes the challenge in relationships is to hold onto our sense of self, to sooth and validate ourselves and our anxieties in the face of our partner's differences or lack of attunement to us. If you can do this, again your in a much better position to communicate your feelings, needs and boundaries non-reactively.
- **Learn to tolerate disappointment** –Often when couples feel disappointed the first reaction is to blame them in some way. Sometimes the greatest freedom comes from learning to tolerate disappointment and the imperfections of each other, while still being clear about your core values and bottom line in how you want to be treated. This doesn't mean tolerating physical, emotional or other abuses. It simply means appreciating that learning to tolerate disappointments is part of being in a relationship. **Your partner will never be perfect enough to meet your needs all the time, and the challenge is to learn to sit with the disappointment when they don't,** rather than to try to change, control or blame them.
- **Learn to repair ruptures** - Learn to say Sorry and find out how your behaviour impacted your partner – Often learning to say sorry is an important, courageous and humble act in acknowledging to your partner that you behaviour may have hurt them. Often a simple, heartfelt 'Sorry' helps us repair a rupture and communicates that we care about them. The next step is to ask them, how did my behaviour make you feel and then to really hear and validate their feelings. If you

can do this, more often than not you can repair the rupture and get back to connection.

- **Practice a two person psychology mindset**– for many of us who have grown up in a western individualistic cultures, we are likely to be trained to think as an individualist. That is, to more likely to be focused just on my needs and wellbeing, forgetting how we impact on others we are in relationship. Cultivating a two person psychology mindset means holding in mind how my behaviour and ways of being are impacting on my partner (or children), and keeping their needs and wellbeing in mind equally to your own needs and wellbeing. Your in the foxhole together!! This simple shift in attitude can have profound positive impacts on your relationship and give your partner a sense that your holding them in mind, considering their needs and wellbeing, and thinking collaboratively as a team.