

Jeff Garson
Radical Decency Reflection #33
April 17, 2011

Couples Work – What It Is, Why It’s Important

We live in a world that heavily supports and promotes marriage. Interestingly, however, this is one instance in which our culture’s values can actually support us in doing important, life-affirming work – if we are lucky enough to stumble onto this insight. In this Reflection, I discuss the nature of couples work, its power, and its importance.

These possibilities inherent in couples work grow out of three factors. The first is biological. We humans are wired to do our most important healing and growth, not through study or contemplation, but in the crucible of relationship. The other factors are cultural. On one side is the culture’s fortuitous support for the institution of marriage. On the other is its marked absence of attention to our psychic needs in most other venues. Thus, for most of us, romantic relationship offers the best opportunity for doing the vital work of healing our childhood wounds.

From the moment of birth, we are all – all of us – confronted with an insoluble problem: How do we adapt to an environment that can’t possibly meet all of our needs. Why is this dilemma universal? Because we are raised by humans – flawed and limited creatures – who are, moreover, compromised in their focus and clarity of purpose by the incessant pressure to get by in our competitive, win/lose culture. And, if these impediments weren’t enough, remember that our needs are unbounded. Even perfect parents, in living a perfect culture, would fall short.

The result? We emerge from childhood with deeply embedded hurts, frustrations and longings. And, to deal with these wounds, we also leave childhood with equally engrained coping strategies: Demanding more – or wanting less – to deal with the pain of an inattentive mother; reactive anger – or placating behaviors – or silence – in response to a controlling father.

At one level, these adaptations are good since they allow us to survive childhood. But because they are crafted by infants and small children, they are almost always over stated and, therefore, damaging in important ways to our vitality and sense of well-being.

Given these realities, healing our childhood wounds, and replacing these early coping mechanisms with more modulated and effective strategies, are essential aspects of our adult journey.

Finding a venue in which to do this work is one of life's great challenges. In theory it can take place in the context of a nurturing community. But the culture, with its relentless emphasis on individuality and self-aggrandizement, makes it difficult to create and sustain these environments. Intent on getting ahead in the world, the time and energy left over for communal engagements is limited – carved out of already overloaded nights and weekends. And participants are, in any event, primed to leave whenever a new job or relationship beckons.

These same cultural pressures infect our romantic intimate relationships – hence their high rate of mortality. But because only two people are involved, and because they care so much, couples have a sliver's chance to create an environment in which this necessary adult work of healing and growth can occur.

Unfortunately, a roadmap for doing this work is hard to come by. So most couples do what they know best, slipping into the competitive mindsets that permeate the rest of their lives. Knowing that her way is the right way, she judges his inability to talk about feelings. With equal certainty, he judges her constant telephone chatter and neediness. The result is a stand off. Each partner tolerates the other's differences – sometimes with bemused grace, sometime with anger and resentment. Lost in the process is the opportunity to leave our childhood's legacy of hurts and fears behind – by crafting new, more effective strategies for loving and being loved.

The good news, however, is that a very different dynamic can take hold. Here's how.

Step one is to choose a suitable partner. Here, nature lends a hand – at least in the initial phase. A man goes to a bar and is attracted to a particular woman who “just has a way about her.” Why? Because, in his evolutionarily wired brain, he instinctually associates her with the people who raised him. This, in turn, feeds a further unconscious fantasy: With her, I can recreate the formative wounding scenarios from my childhood and then – crucially – craft a different ending.

So if the man in our example was raised by a physically distant mother, he will appreciate an affectionate woman. But with **this** woman – viscerally linked with his unaffectionate mother – the effect is far more powerful. When **she** embraces him, it is as though his mother reached into his crib and, cradling him in her arms, offered the physical affection he so deeply longed for and never received. This is the “bam” we feel when we fall in love. In choosing a partner, we need to trust it.

But to fully realize the deep healing and growth that marriage can provide, more is needed. In particular, there are three inextricably interwoven factors – trust, shared values, and a priority commitment to the relationship – that are the fertile soil in which this work can flower. And then, of course, the final, indispensable element is the ability and willingness to do the work.

Trust does not mean that you tell your partner everything. Instead, the touchstone is a “no surprise” rule. Because the partners have each shared their most intimate

feelings, repeatedly and in depth, no act – if disclosed – will shock the other or shake his or her emotional foundation. The obvious corollary: When in doubt, disclose.

For this approach to reach its full potential, the next two factors are also needed. When trust is not supported by shared values, couples run the risk of a permanent sense of grievance, with the wife (for example) resenting his time at the office, and husband feeling perpetually judged as a father and spouse.

When their values are congruent, however, partners can be thoroughly connected and, at the same time, feel free to express their individuality. He can work through the night to close a deal, and she can leave a party to tend to a sick relative – each confident that their choices, even if not disclosed in advance, will have the other's warm support.

Trust is also jump-started when each partner puts the relationship first: He accepts her need to fuss with her makeup when they're 10 minutes late; she listens, with warmth, to the same joke for the umpteenth time. Notice also how, in their turn, trust and shared values reinforce this "relationship first" rule. In their absence, this generosity of spirit is problematic; an invitation to manipulation by the other. With trust and shared values in place, it becomes an obvious and relatively easy choice.

These three factors, together with the strong tug of romantic love, create a setting in which more positive and productive patterns of love can emerge. And as this process accelerates, the partners' outmoded intimacy strategies – designed to protect them from their childhood wounds – progressively wither and shrink.

Note, however, that even when all of these factors exist, an ability and willingness to do the work is still essential. What does that look like? Key aspects are described in Reflections 3 and 10, and I close with a further example.

In a typical scene, 25 years ago, I arrive home from my law office and find my wife, Dale, making dinner and tending to our young daughters. Harried and preoccupied, I sit down and turn on the TV. Equally harried, Dale asks why I'm not pitching in. My response – crafted to defend myself from a mother who could lash out in anger, at any moment – is a toxic mix of exasperation and defensive: "I just got home. I had a tough day too. Give me a break."

If I knew then what I know now, my reaction would have been very different. Understanding Dale's emotional needs, I would have apologized and jumped into the tasks at hand. For Dale – who learned as a child not to ask for what she wanted – this would have been a corrective healing moment. And, for me, there would have been a corresponding moment of growth since, acting in this way, I would actually be the loving, non-defensive person I hoped to become. Consciously and repetitively practiced, these interactions – his growthful choices healing her; hers healing him – are at the heart of productive couples work.