

Negative Patterns Undermine the Emotional Closeness in a Marriage

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Many things impact the marriage. Work stress, money worries, personal insecurities and other issues may bleed over into your relationship. Most people experience task overload for time to time. Parenting, caring for aging parents, and any number of other conflicting demands can create a sense of being overwhelmed as you are pulled in different directions. When you have conflicting demands among various important relationships, you cannot do it all, and you begin to feel overwhelmed, resentful, and guilty for not gladly doing whatever you are being called upon to do. Your inability to meet everyone's expectations undermines your self-confidence and self-esteem. Many people get cranky and or emotionally withdrawn as they seek to deal with these stresses, insecurities, and other internal issues.

Ideally, a marriage is a place where you can talk about the issues that are bothering you and allow your partner to listen, accept your feelings, and still love you. Often the marriage is not a place where this can happen. Sometimes, a general lack of acceptance of each other, creates an unsafe environment for taking risks, seeking help/reassurance. A lack of acceptance often creates a climate of resentment, argument, and/or punishment. Sometimes there is a reciprocal pattern of feeling hurt and punishing.

Couples often get locked into a perception of scarcity or deprivation and take a self-centered stance of "what's in it for me". They may take a defensive personalization of any partner complaint and begin to deflect any blame or criticism with blame and criticism of their own. All behavior, regardless of how destructive, is justified in the mind of the

person engaging in it. Almost every interaction begins to take on a negative tone with expectations of more hurt, lack of support, and a guarantee that taking a risk with the other person will end up with feeling punished.

Many couples believe that they can communicate well, and yet they still cannot effectively solve the problems in their marriage. There may be a difference between knowing how to communicate well and actually using good communication skills when they are most needed—in the midst of conflict and tension. When the atmosphere is one of "every man for himself", the future of the relationship seems bleak. It may feel as if there is no way out of the hurt that you are experiencing. As you are trying harder and harder to make yourself understood by your partner, they are doing the same thing--stepping up their own demands--virtually guaranteeing that neither is being heard by the other. Each feels misunderstood and unimportant to the other. Each partner is working so hard to be heard by the other, that they lose all perspective about the importance to listening to the other partner. The sense of connection and identity of "us" gets lost in the process. It cannot be regained in the context of narcissistic self-interest. Sometimes you have to stop demanding to be heard and understood long enough to listen and seek to understand. When you are able to put the other person's feelings and needs first the emotional connection can be restored.

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