

Web-Based Radio Show

The Healing Relationship V: Processes that Promote Healing Relationships


A few of the principles in the relationship itself that will help you be therapeutic and will help you be growth producing

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September 19, 2007

Good morning. Thank you for joining us on today's show. As you may recall, we're doing a series on healing relationships and how to create growth facilitating relationships with friends, spouses, children – anyone you can have a close relationship with – and how to make that relationship into one that enhances the other person's growth, as well as your own, in the process. This is also an essential characteristic of the therapeutic relationship, so whether you are among those who are doing formal psychotherapy, i.e., trained psychotherapists, or just regular folks – like most people – it's the relationship that creates growth. We will continue discussing what it is about that relationship that creates growth so that what's intuitive for some and seems to happen easily for some people can happen for even more people. We notice that some families and some people always seem to have good relationships and that they seem to grow together and grow healthier in their emotional and even their physical status. As a side note, there is evidence that emotional health does support physical health – it's not the only factor, but it is an important factor. So we want to create growth facilitating relationships, ones that can enhance growth.

In past shows we've talked about the elements that do this. So we want to see if we can create those circumstances in as many relationships as possible – hopefully in all relationships. In the past we've covered most of the groundwork for this. We've talked about the elements that are necessary, namely security and intimacy; warmth and relatedness; reading and responding to the other person's emotional signals and helping expand them; and problem solving together across the full terrain of emotional challenges. We've also talked about helping each other express in words or with ideas, including using pictures, to dramatize feelings so there's a full expression of the full range of human feelings, not just happiness, but also anger and jealousy and




disappointment and humiliation – the whole gamut. We’ve also talked about making sense of feelings together –being logical, being reality based, being able to go back and forth between being creative and being reality oriented. We’ve also talked about the higher levels of reflection – being able to be a gray-area thinker together and being reflective together, meaning being able to look at the subtleties of your relationships and your feelings with one another, not just thinking in all-or-nothing terms or polarized terms and not going back to irrational or magical thinking, but staying reality based and appreciating the subtleties. Finally, we talked about being reflective, which is being able to take step a back and look at what you’re going through together and problem solve together, but in a reflective way that takes into account your current circumstances, including each of your histories and your future.

Today we’re going to focus a little bit on some of the processes that tend to enhance or facilitate this – that make this possible. They’ve already been implied as we’ve covered these elements. We’ll also talk a little bit about why these processes and these elements are therapeutic and are so helpful to people. It’s not easy to be therapeutic, often; it can be difficult at times. It can be difficult to create circumstances for growth. Here are a few of the principles in the relationship itself that will help you be therapeutic and will help you be growth producing.

One, and it’s already been implied, is to be there for the other person, to always be reaching out and not to stand on ceremony. In other words, don’t measure, don’t say, “Have they given me what I need? Well, I’m not going to give them what they want!” and don’t play games, such as playing hard to get in the relationship itself. Be warm and be giving. Create that nurturing atmosphere we talked about in the relationship part. That’s hard to do if the other person isn’t reciprocating, but if it’s an important person – a child, a spouse – that you really care about, be the giving one, be the one who reaches out first. Also, let them know implicitly and explicitly what your expectations are, but always give first and establish that pattern. Like in a parent-child relationship, you’re there for the child when they need you, but you’re also reaching out even when they don’t need you, just to be with them. Yes, you need to let them know what’s expected in terms of rules, but all relationships have rules – to be mutually respectful, for example – so they have to know the rules in order to abide by what you’ve agreed upon. So enforce the expectations, but against the background of that giving. Whenever you have to emphasize the expectations, give even more to let them know you’re not standing on ceremony, but that you’re reaching out.


The second general principle that will help facilitate all the others is to always look to bring out the best in the other person. This requires knowing the other person,



knowing their strengths, knowing their weaknesses, having a realistic look at them and saying to yourself, “Rather than focusing on criticizing them or focusing on getting them to admit their mistakes or getting them to admit their foibles, how do I bring out the best in them?” With a spouse or close friend or in an intimate relationship, if the other person is always feeling insecure maybe they’re worried you’re not going to love them enough. Ask yourself, “How do I bring out the best in them? How do I help them feel secure? What tends to make them feel more secure? For example, is it just listening and being empathetic? Is it giving them a call every day, which may be more than I’m used to doing? How do I bring out the best in them? How do I help them feel secure?” If the other person is working on a project, ask yourself, “Does praise bring out the best in them or does giving them a helping hand bring out the best? Or is it just letting them work it out and giving them the time to do it and not competing with my own needs?” But bring out the best in the other person, which helps them feel secure and be a better partner to you and then they’re able to carry out these steps we’re talking about more easily. So always bring out the best in the other. Again, don’t stand on ceremony; assume they’ll return the favor in due time.

Number three – we’ve talked about this before –always try to counter balance the other person’s mood. If they’re agitated or hyper or irritable, create a counter balancing atmosphere by being calm, collected and easygoing. If they’re withdrawn, try to be a little more energetic. If they’re depressed, empathize but try to be a little more positive and get them out and doing things. In other words, counter balance. The correlate to this is, “don’t throw fuel on the fire.” Don’t join the fire. While the other person is in the midst of a tantrum it’s not the time to yell. When someone is feeling really down, it’s not the time to jump on them and explain why they did this to themselves, as many of us do, saying, “You have only yourself to blame for this,” etc., etc. In other words, create that atmosphere where you’re counter balancing what their mood is with your mood as best you can. You’re not going to be able to do this perfectly; you’re going to have your own moods, but do it as best you can. If you’re a therapist this is very, very important. You do this with the rhythm of your voice and you do this in the activity you bring to the interaction. Many therapists do this intuitively and are great therapists because of it, but all relationships can have this characteristic.

Also, another characteristic that tends to facilitate all the others is empathy. Always try to empathize with the other person’s point of view and remember not to project your own feelings onto them. Don’t make it your issue; let it be their issue. Try to get into their heads without thinking, “Well, this is the way I would feel,” but ask, “How do they feel, based on what I know about them and recognizing they may be different




from me?” So recognize differences between the two of you and use that to empathize. Again, this makes it important to know the other person. Let them know you understand, not just with your words but with your tone of voice and with your gestures. Empathy and listening is a critical component of all good relationships and something everyone wants more of. It makes them feel cared for.

Another quality of all good relationships is respect and limits. Have guidelines, have limits and let the other person know what they are, gently over time, whether it's a child or an adult. Let them know the line that can't be crossed or shouldn't be crossed. But this needs to be against this background of always giving, of always helping them feel secure, and then they'll want to please you – they'll want to respect those boundaries. If they can't, face that with them. If they have a hard time doing it, work on that with them. So limits and respect and mutual respect are very, very important in facilitating these relationships.

Also what's very important is to maintain that separation that we talked about earlier between fantasy and reality. Respect each other's castles in the sky, respect each other's irrationalities, know their Achilles' heels. I mentioned this before when we talked about strengths and weaknesses – we all have private, secret fantasies that we're going to be the greatest this or the greatest that or that we're going to make the greatest this or the greatest that or that we're going to win the lottery, but we have to respect each other's castles. Don't poke holes in the castles, but try to help the person live in reality but always against the background of knowing where their castles are. This is a very, very important principle. Again, with children, too, this is the same. Know where they're coming from.

Now these are some of the elements that will facilitate healthy relationships. Some of these are redundant with the principles we've talked about, but they require a little extra emphasis. The most important ones are the giving attitude without counting what the other person's doing; bringing out the best in the other person; showing empathy and mutual respect; and setting guidelines and limits. Those are the key ones. Knowing the other person facilitates all of them, especially the empathy.


We were talking about why this is so important and what it is about these growth producing relationships and the therapeutic components of these relationships, which are one and the same – and why they produce growth. Why do they create emotional growth? We've heard different theories about growth and there are different therapies that are supposed to help people grow. There's cognitive behavioral therapy where you re-image feelings, so instead of being depressed you try to think of positive images, for example.



In psychodynamic and psychoanalytic work, hopefully it's insights into your unconscious wishes that help you. In supportive therapies it's the encouragement to try new things in a supportive relationship or to just keep functioning reasonably well in a supportive relationship. The question is, do all these therapies have certain elements in common? Are they a different size of an elephant but none of them has all of the elements that are needed? What is it about these principles that may be more far reaching – that may be more useful to people in producing growth and in the therapeutic relationship – for helping therapists who hopefully become expert at this, even more than us common folk – and some therapists do, but I guess I join both groups – in facilitating these healthy relationships?

The growth of human beings is like a plant that grows in soil. The soil has to be watered and it has to have proper nutrients; the soil has to be just right for the plant to grow. Human beings are the same way and there are many elements to what produces growth in human beings. In our studies of babies and young children and older children we've found that there are common factors that let the human nervous system, as well as the human emotional, social, and intellectual systems grow and these have to do with relationships and emotional interactions. They are the very elements that we've outlined – not so much in this show, but in the prior show – of security and warmth; relatedness and reading and responding to emotional signals; problem solving together; sharing of feelings together and making sense of feelings together; and then taking a step back and reflecting on one's relationship and feelings and the subtleties and especially being able to constantly expand the range of emotions that one can incorporate into these different interactive processes. This is what produces growth. People naturally grow in this fertile soil.


Obviously, there may be things blocking it. You may be involved in repetitive patterns that are self defeating. You always pick the wrong relationships so that you always pick people who are going to reject you, rather than people who are going to accept you and provide this growth facilitating and healing relationship. Maybe you always pick people who you want to fight with or with whom you're antagonistic and as soon as you get close you get anxious and you start fighting or pushing people away. So, yes, it's not that simple in the sense that there are these interfering elements. But if you look at these factors we've talked about, they help you work through these interfering elements because as you're expanding your range of feelings – using ideas or using just emotional expressiveness or making sense of feelings – you're always expanding the terrain. So if you're the kind of person who always looks to get rejected, it may be because you're scared of being accepted, scared of what that means. Well, the acceptance



and warmth and intimacy is part of the expanding range of feelings and the therapeutic relationship is working on that and you're going to be talking about what makes that so scary or what makes that so hard as part of that healthy relationship because that's part of expanding your feelings. If every time your spouse or your friend or your therapist reaches out to be warm and to be close and intimate you push them away, that pattern is going to become obvious and you and they will need to look at it because you can't expand that feeling into the intimacy. So by keeping your eye on where you're going, you'll be automatically climbing over the fences that are blocking you. Now in doing that, particularly when you take the reflective attitude – that last element – you'll be going back over your history. What is it in my history that leads me to create fences or to look for fights or to interpret compliments as criticism or to always be suspicious? So you're going to try to integrate your history and background and your current functioning with your future plans and expectations and desires. You're going to be examining that history and the history of feelings.

Now, it's often in cognitive behavioral therapy that you're doing one thing and you're trying to re-image or restructure what you think, but in this broader approach that will become a natural consequence of growth. You'll think in more positive ways because you'll always be embracing new feelings and new ways of seeing the world. You won't have to practice it as an isolated drill and you won't be doing it without the backdrop of the security, the warmth, the empathy, the creative thinking, and the making sense of your feelings that we've talked about. So you won't be trying to do it in an overly narrow way; you'll be doing it in a much broader way. In psychoanalytic and psychodynamic therapies you won't just be looking for insights into the past to free up the future, you'll be creating the ingredients for that future; you'll be facilitating all those healthy components while, at the same time, looking at the past and looking at the hidden feelings that you've avoided. So you'll be doing both. This makes a much stronger growth producing pattern. Now sometimes only a skillful therapist will be able to help you figure out what those fences are about, but if this is done against the backdrop of this overall growth producing relationship, either with the therapist or with others, it has a much higher likelihood of success.

Now also interesting to comment on here, as we look at the therapeutic relationship and the health producing relationship and the commonalities of the two, is one of the debates that the field has gotten into, particularly the psychotherapy field. This is a debate between what kind of therapy is better – cognitive behavioral therapy or behavioral therapy or just medication, where you work on symptoms or work on restructuring thoughts, or broad psychodynamic therapies or psychoanalytic therapies



where you look for insights. Coming under particular criticism in recent years has been the psychoanalytic insight-oriented therapy, although there's a reverse of that criticism now and there is a healthy respect for these kinds of therapies. Here's a critical point to remember: Our definition of a full human being is one who can understand who they are now, where they came from, where they're going in the future, what they want, and how to do this across the broad terrain of human feelings and human endeavors, from assertiveness to loss and disappointment. In other words, this isn't a narrow person, but a broad-based person who has this integrated perspective on themselves and the world and who can grow to nurture a new family, if they choose, or who can flourish in their careers and in many different areas of life, including taking on the problems of the world, as we get older and more responsible, for new generations. Now this definition is very close to what we talked about last time, which is what we call mutative interpretation. This is supposed to produce a synthesis of current experiences with the past and with the future. The idea of interpretation in psychodynamic and psychoanalytic therapy is to free up the individual to create this by removing the fence, removing the barrier and by revealing the unconscious desires or wishes and whatever is blocking them.

The missing piece in psychodynamic and psychoanalytic therapies has been the fact that the field itself, as a whole (and I am trained as a psychoanalyst, so I'm speaking from personal experiences), hasn't realized the other factors that are necessary and that only a limited number of individuals can do all the rest themselves – have healthy enough relationships in their lives to produce all these growth producing factors. So they need more than the insight, not that the insight, itself, isn't a critical element – it is, because it removes the fence – but they need the other elements we're talking about – the security, the warmth, the emotional exchanges, and the ability to share ideas and make sense of ideas and be reflective together. They need all of these to really produce the soil that will create a healthy human being. So whether it's a child or an adult, or whether it's a patient or a friend or a spouse, these are the elements you need to focus on.

Next time we may talk a little bit more about how to remove some of these fences that block the healthy relationships.