

Five Ways to Invest in Your Marriage

Introduction*:

In our debut edition of Mother Knows Best, June-August, Ron Heilmann outlined five ways couples can invest in their relationships. For the next several issues of Syracuse Parent, we will feature an article on the five ways he suggested: Be Intentional. Spend Time Together. Resolve Conflict in a Mutually Acceptable Manor; Use Reflective Listening Skills; Forgive the Other Person for Going Back to their Default Behavior. This is the first part of the series.

*These articles were written for the Syracuse Parent and we thank them and Brittney Fiourini Jerred for their generosity in allowing us to re-print them here. We would also like to thank Ron Heilmann, for his sage advice and for helping make these available.

Article 1 **Being Intentional**

By Ron Heilmann, Marriage and Family Counselor

By now we are all pretty much aware of the definition of insanity: "Doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different outcome." Nowhere is this wisdom more applicable than within the context of a committed relationship. If we are going to make a difference we are going to have to DO something different.

Now let us draw a distinction between how one feels and how one acts. The rock performer Lynyrd Skynyrd takes pride in the fact that "Lord knows, I can't change!" Well, we often cannot change who we are or change how we feel because neither of these attributes are under our direct control. However, our behavior IS under our direct control. We can change our behavior and it is in this sense we are talking about being very intentional about how we handle our selves. We have to clearly intend to modify what we DO if we want to improve the quality of our relationships.

Here is another simple fact of life: One cannot cohabit with another person and expect to live in the home as if we were living there alone. If we are going to get along, we are going to have to modify how we live together. While we each have our own separate values we are going to have to have to make an adjustment in how we handle our selves. Moreover, if we want to improve our relationship we are going to have to DO something or STOP doing something to address the

problems that surface between us as we blend our lives.

It is not uncommon for partners with children who have been together for some time to feel like they are drifting apart. As men and women, we drift to interests that concern us most. Stereotypically, men gravitate to earning money and women focus on raising children. If we want to improve the intimacy of our relationship we are going to have to intentionally DO something different, something that may be contrary to our very natures. This means we intentionally "agree" to do something no matter how our feelings are running, or what we think is important at the time.

When we got married the clergy person did not ask us to take vows if we "felt like it." No, it was a cognitive process. We "decided" to marry. We "decided" upon our vows. We made promises that were based upon rational considerations even though this all took place in the middle of a whole range of feelings. We made a decision and pledged our behavior, not our feelings. Even when it comes to "Love," we cannot promise our feelings of love because these are not under our direct control. However, we can pledge to "Love" one another based upon how we treat each other. We must be very cognitively intentional about how we live together. It does not happen automatically.

Article 2 **Spending Time Together**

By Brittney Fiorini Jerred, Editor Syracuse Parent

There is a lot of ground to cover on a weekly basis in a household with children. It includes getting the kids to school or to daycare, completing projects for work, making sure there is food on the table, running the kids to various activities and so forth. As a result, Ron Heilmann has noticed that couple time is a last priority for many married people who come to his counseling practice.

"Priorities are such that couples put their relationship last," says Heilmann. The modern-day lifestyle of running a home can be all consuming. Relationships suffer because, in many cases, quality time for partners comes behind the family and work and then, if there's time, people get together as a couple, says Heilmann.

"In contemporary households, there are often two-career families," said Heilmann. "What happens is the quality of time we make for one another is very limited. Mostly by default, couples just don't spend enough time together."

In order to span this bridge, Heilmann recommends planning time together as a couple at least once a week. Whereas our forefathers and mothers may not have had to plan for as much time together, it is essential to the health of the modern-day relationship.

"Men experience things through activities," says Heilmann. "So you have to come up with an activity that appeals to both. My wife and I hit on the activity of riding bikes together." Every Sunday the couple bike rides up the Erie Canal. He knows bike riding is not for everyone but he's noticed that since they started this activity that they both enjoy, they are more in tune to one another. That helps them deal with conflict or problems that arise within their relationship with more understanding and concern for one another's feelings.

"People absolutely have to be intentional about setting time aside," said Heilmann. Without it, passion and intimacy start to wane and eventually, one or both partners will start to lose interest sexually in the other person.

"The key is to pick something that is mutually enjoyable so both people get to experience the enrichment," said Heilmann. "If you don't set aside time, it won't happen and the quality of the relationship suffers."

Article 3 **Resolve Conflicts in a Mutually Acceptable Manor**

By Brittney Fiorini Jerred, Editor Syracuse Parent

When people got married 25 or 30 years ago in a church, the vows read "love, honor and obey." Today, the vows read "love, honor and cherish." According to Ron Heilmann, practicing family and marriage counselor in Syracuse and author of "Loveworks: Coming to Terms with Intimacy and Equality," there's been sort of a shift in authority. That means today's couples are in a relatively new era: resolving conflict mutually as partners seeking equality.

"Mutuality is a relatively new concept," said Heilmann. But entirely possible.

Cooperation is the key to resolving conflict. Simply put: Keeping the peace takes cooperation.

"Most couples almost always argue about what happened. 'Yes you did, No I didn't,' kind of talk," said Heilmann. "There's a sense that two people feel like they have to agree on the problem before they find a solution."

This is a misconception. What you need from each other is cooperation and a willingness to help each other with the problem. For example, if one of you were having a problem at work, the other might try to listen and help, not argue about the problem.

"People waste time and destroy relationships when trying to get consensus on a problem." Everyone has their version of a problem and to one, it may not be a problem at all. Therefore, he encourages couples to work toward resolving conflict within the relationship. To do so couples need to get behind the problem. If you're taking a position, people need to understand the interest and concerns of the other's position. For example, say one wants the children homeschooled and the other wants them in public school.

You have to understand the interests and concerns from both people, said Heilmann.

"I have to understand why homeschooling is so important to you and you have to understand why public school education is so important to me," said Heilmann. "From those interests and concerns, we can begin to arrive at a solution to our problem." Maybe one parent is concerned about not enough social interaction with homeschooling. Maybe the other agrees to establish more of a social life for the child. Whatever the case is, if you gather three or four major reasons from both position, you can begin to understand your partner's viewpoint.

Couples must try to move together consensually. "Everyone takes a position based upon something," said Heilmann.

Editor's Note: To receive a copy of Heilmann's book "Loveworks: Coming to Terms with Intimacy and Equality," write to rheilmal@twcny.rr.com or visit syracusemediations.com.

Article 4 Reflective Listening

By Brittney Fiorini Jerred, Editor Syracuse Parent

About 75 percent of all people who Ron Heilmann sees in his family and marriage therapy practice have a communication problem.

A large barrier to communication quite often, is our society's refusal to acknowledge one another.

The word acknowledge means to "accept knowledge." Unfortunately, Heilmann said, in our society, we equate acknowledging with agreeing.

"When someone else acknowledges you, you feel like you have visibility in their world," said Heilmann. "When you feel acknowledged, it allows emotional healing to begin."

Our society is considered a litigious one--one that is concerned with proving a court case and winning. This, unfortunately, trickles down into intimate relationships.

"Our culture is steeped in this kind of thinking. You might be articulate and well-versed and linguistically skilled at proving your case, but that doesn't mean you are communicating with the other person, whether it's your husband, your children or your parents. It means you are proving your point," said Heilmann.

He encourages couples and families to use what he calls reflexive listening skills. When emotions run high, it's easy to become defensive and shut the other person out. He says this is a technique, that when people use it, works toward healing relationships and prevents arguments from escalating.

"Any time anyone speaks, we filter it through our own unique experience," said Heilmann.

When couples have to deal with emotionally charged issues this distortion is prevalent. Also, because things are emotionally charged, people get defensive when they "feel" like they are being accused of some kind of behavior that is causing the partner some kind of pain. "Being defensive" prevents communication, says Heilmann.

Reflective listening skills are the antidote to this problem.

Here's how it works: Couples should come up with a hand signal when they're going to use it. It slows the process down but does work. You wouldn't use this in most communications, until they become emotionally charged.

After one person offers their communication the second person repeats what has been said in one's own words (not mimicking word for word, but after digesting the meaning of what has been said and repeating it back.) Rarely, on the first pass does the receiver get it right because it was interpreted in light of the second person's experience. The second person tries again, and again, until the first person says, "Yes, now you've got it!"

Then it is the second person's turn to give a response and the first person does the same process of paraphrasing what was communicated.

This slows things down considerably and gives the best chance of communicating which is defined as: hearing a message; repeating the message until confirmation is given; then, a second message is transmitted and return paraphrase is accepted. This constitutes one "communication loop."

Heilmann equated this to the infinity symbol.

It is not necessary to do this with every communique; only when things are emotionally "loaded."

"Imbedded in this process is the experience of being acknowledged which is the healing energy for emotional injury," said Heilmann.

He's witnessed couples use this method in his office. Where people get tripped on the most is either their refusal to try this at all or they repeat verbatim what the other party says, not digesting what their partner says.

Article #5 will be appearing soon...keep watching!