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How to Invest in Healthy Relationships

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How to Invest in Healthy Relationships

CRITICISM IS DESTRUCTIVE TO RELATIONSHIPS. MATTHEW 7:1-2 TELLS US THAT WE SHOULD NOT JUDGE UNLESS WE WANT TO BE JUDGED IN THE SAME WAY AND WITH THE SAME HARSHNESS WE JUDGE OTHERS.



▲ BRAD HINMAN

In any relationship, whether it's between partners, parents and children, or work colleagues, unabated criticism will injure the bond that is forming between two or more people. Criticism, in any form in a relationship, is pernicious as it builds over time and results in resentment, distance and indifference in relationships. Soon, the person being consistently criticized begins to shut down verbally, physically, and emotionally to protect themselves from what they begin to perceive as a threat to their sense of self.

Let me be clear, as a licensed marriage and family therapist, I would never suggest that you remain silent when you have something to say to your partner. If your partner has not done what they said they would do, or if they have done something you didn't want them to do, you have every right to say something, set a boundary, and ask for them to do better next time. So, what should you do when you have something to say to your partner that they are not going to like, and will likely interpret as criticism? The solution to criticism being destructive to relationships is not to remain silent: It is to make sure the person you are criticizing knows that you care about them, understand their intent (if you do not know their intent, ask in a non-judgmental way) affirm their value to you, and then criticize them.

I often tell my clients that relationships are like bank accounts. You must make deposits before you can withdraw. Of course, you can make a withdrawal before you make a deposit, but that can cause problems, and may result in the termination of your account (or relationship) if it happens too often.

Deposits to your relationship account may be in the form of quality time spent with this person, words of affirmation, physical touch (holding hands, hugging, etc.) and other things that will result in the relationship growing stronger and elicit positive feelings from your partner. If you do something positive (make a deposit) toward your partner and then give them a gentle, well-thought-out criticism it will be easier when that criticism hits your relationship bank account.

For example, if your partner forgot to take the trash out when you specifically asked them to, and they agreed to, instead of getting mad and yelling at them, you could start with "I know you work hard, and you have a lot on your mind (deposit), but I am confused because I asked you to take the trash out and you said you would, but you didn't (withdrawal)." This allows your partner to explain, and maybe apologize, without getting defensive, rather than trying to ward off a verbal attack. ■

It is important to note that this article is not intended to take the place of medical advice or to diminish the effects of mental or personality disorders.

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