

Using Differences to Strengthen Your Relationship, Not Drive You Further Apart

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Human beings, we all want to feel important, loved, respected, and appreciated. The need to experience these emotions is particularly true in our intimate relationships, where we seek emotional safety and support. However, when couples experience conflict, it is common for one or both partners to feel as though they are not receiving the level of positive regard they need to feel fulfilled. Taking your partner's concerns seriously without dismissing or correcting them, can go a long way toward problem-solving. If your behavior towards your spouse does not match your feelings, some work to improve the congruence will help your relationship.

Letting go of the need to be correct is a powerful step you can take to make changes in your relationship. You will see positive changes when you are more concerned about maintaining marital harmony and less focused on your ego. When you try too hard to make your point of view or frame of reference understood by the other person, you can become frustrated and resort to dirty fight tactics that guarantee you will not be heard or understood. It is essential to avoid browbeating your spouse into submission or feeling the compulsion to make them see things your way because this will only drive you further apart.

Accepting your spouse for flawed but beloved person they are is another essential step towards improving your relationship. Despite any resistance you may have to identify and own your flaws or imperfections, first admit them to yourself. Everyone has flaws and wants to be accepted for who they are, imperfections and all. Give up trying to change your spouse and instead learn to negotiate for change in the relationship while respecting their individuality. Take responsibility for your deficits and work to change your behavior regardless of whether your partner seems to be doing the same.

Working together to accomplish your long-term goals is crucial for a healthy relationship. Remember that you can choose not to let the differences you initially found attractive become a source of distress and conflict now. Instead, problem-solve at the intersection where those differences meet. An example might be to identify when the most productive parts of the day are for each of you and aim for complementarity of fit rather than always being engaged in the same task simultaneously. Use your differences instead of fighting about them. Identify your strengths, talents, and deficits and work with what is rather than some vague notion of what "should be." Find ways to work together to compensate for individual deficiencies rather than blaming or scorekeeping.

Working on meeting your spouse's needs is also vital. Identify where your needs are alike and where they differ, acknowledging and accepting "different" as "different," not as "wrong," "selfish," or some other displeasing trait. Watch for counterproductive, circular patterns created as individual partners pursue closeness or emotional distance and eliminate your part in that pattern. Grant your partner the personal time, space, or other essentials to recharge, de-stress, and be happy. Give compliments freely and complain rarely and only to problem-solve specific problems or behaviors.

Make time for the two of you without kids, TV/computer/phone screens, work, or other distractions. Pay attention to each other and honor your spouse's love languages. Learn to listen by not planning your following comment while your spouse speaks.

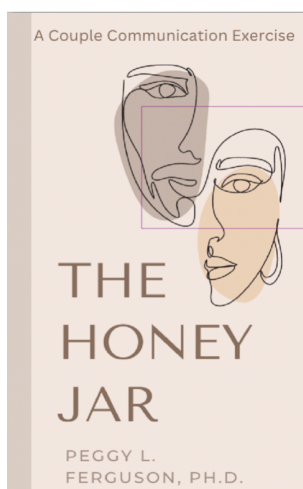
Collecting gratitudes by the boatload and letting go of grievances is also essential to a healthy relationship. Learning to forgive and not take everything personally is crucial. Remember that you are not the center of the universe, but treating your spouse like they are the center of the universe probably would not hurt.

Break up circular patterns of blame. The blamer becomes the perennial victim, and the person receiving the blame feels like they can never win. Taking personal responsibility for your feelings, behavior, decisions, and reactions breaks the pattern.

Keep it first and foremost in your awareness that it takes effort to maintain a healthy relationship. It's not enough to love your partner; you must actively show it through your words and actions. Showing love involves taking the time to understand your partner's needs and desires and making a conscious effort to meet them. Being willing to compromise and work together to solve problems rather than trying to "win" arguments or be right all the time creates the closeness you seek.

In conclusion, feeling loved, respected, and appreciated is essential for a healthy and fulfilling relationship. It's important to pay attention to your interactions to ensure that your behavior matches your feelings. Let go of the need to be correct. Accept your partner for who they are; work together to accomplish your goals. Meet your partner's needs. Collect gratitude. Give up blaming and old games. Check your assumptions and judgments and work on regaining your shared language. By incorporating these changes into your relationship, you can create a stronger bond with your partner and enjoy a more satisfying relationship.

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