

KEEPING YOUR SANITY BY BUILDING A FOUNDATION OF SAFETY AND TRUST

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There's a vow that, if taken by romantic couples,

would go a long way toward establishing safety and trust, and limiting much of the pain that couples commonly experience – much of the pain that couples commonly inflict upon one another.

There will be pain in any relationship, we hurt each other without even trying. There's plenty of conflict in the very best of relationships. John Gottman has found in his research that in successful marriages about 69% of conflicts never get resolved. So a happy marriage isn't about the absence of conflict, or an absence of hurt.

It all comes down to how we treat each other *given that there is* conflict, and that there are times we unintentionally hurt each other.

In other words, it's what we do or do not do *intentionally* that makes the difference.

The vow that I suggest to make between the two of you is this: *never do anything to deliberately hurt one another.*

That means you don't call each other names, you certainly don't physically harm each other, you don't *say* things on purpose that you know will wound, and you don't *do* things on purpose that you know will cause pain to the other.

This can seem very weird to some couples. Some people have a philosophy of emotions that says that we should express whatever we're feeling or thinking, regardless of whether it hurts or not, in order to be "honest" or

“authentic.” It can feel like you’re not being genuine if you don’t express your emotions however they come out, or say what’s on your mind – even when that includes harsh attacks, criticisms, and bitterness.

But, to be blunt, *that’s a rotten philosophy of emotions*. Our feelings are not wise, all knowing guides. At best they are clues to check something out with the other person. At worst they are reflections of old habits or indulgent impulses.

What’s more, if we’re angry and worked up to the point where our heart rate is above about 100 beats per minute, we’re probably switched over to our sympathetic nervous system and we don’t have full access to our higher brain functions – so what we say in the heat of anger can *feel* essential to express, but the chances are it’s just a primitive impulse, the fight part of our sympathetic nervous system aiming to inflict damage on a perceived threat; and that’s not a good communication strategy between two people who love each other.

Our emotions are important, of course, and we don’t want to ignore them. But emotions without thought are worse than useless; *bringing consciousness* to our emotions is essential. I might be angry about something my partner does or says, but then I need to take responsibility for what I’ve brought to that reaction, and how I express myself. I might be angry because what she said or did *reminded* me of something that hurt long ago, but was not intended to hurt now. I might have misunderstood or misinterpreted what he did or said. I may be stressed out or troubled by other things that put me on edge completely aside from what she did or said.

How I express myself in that moment can determine whether we find greater understanding and closeness or disconnection and distance; whether we increase trust and safety or undermine it.

If I react with attacks and name calling, I’m assaulting the character of and deliberately hurting this person whom I supposedly love. On the other hand, if my anger is directed at the specific action or words said and what bothers me about them, then I’m addressing a problem that can be solved. These are two very different responses with opposite consequences.

Attacks and name calling are most likely to elicit shame in the other, if they are susceptible to it. In contrast, expressing anger toward a specific behavior that affected us is more likely – if merited – to elicit a feeling of guilt for having crossed a boundary or otherwise hurt us.

Shame in general is mostly a destructive emotion, leading to worse behavior, greater rigidity, and, over time, symptoms such as depression. It’s an evaluation in a global sense of the person themselves as bad.

Guilt, on the other hand tends to be focused on a specific behavior, and, in manageable doses, leads to improved behavior and growth.

Attacks are words or actions intended to deliberately hurt, and they predictably bring defensiveness, disconnection, and distance. Identifying a problem to be solved is an opportunity to work together to bring greater understanding and closeness.

In our closest relationships, the goal should always, ultimately, be greater understanding and closeness. Sometimes that takes going through conflicts and pain to get to the understanding. There will *always* be conflicts in a love relationship. The essential difference between successful relationships and unsuccessful relationships, is how couples treat each other *given those conflicts*.

Deciding together to never do or say anything to *intentionally* harm one another creates a protection around your relationship that builds trust and safety between you, which is the bedrock of a successful, loving relationship.

PS: My new course, *Mastering Emotions, Moods and Reactions* can help you with this part of your life in much greater detail, with deep understanding and practical skills for mastering these systems and living well. You can get it now with a deep discount, for \$99, if you use this code: LB99.

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