

The Habits of Highly Successful Couples: Part II

In the last issue of Alaska Wellness, we explored the conflict resolution habits of highly successful couples. These couples were defined as having unions that 1) endured for a lifetime and 2) reported that they remained quite happy together. Fortunately for us, there's a large amount of research available which identifies the traits and habits that these couples have in common. In part one of this two-part series, we discussed what these couples do when they're in conflict; in this segment we'll explore the habits that highly successful couples have in common when they're not in conflict.

Me, You, and We: A Three Part Juggling Act

I find it helpful to think of two-person relationships as being comprised of three distinct entities: each of the individuals ("I" and "You") and the space between them ("We"). When two people become emotionally intimate with each other, it's sometimes difficult to strike a balance between these three entities. For example, many people can become emotionally intimate with another person but lose their sense of self in the process. Others are able to establish and maintain a solid sense of self, but lack the flexibility and boundaries necessary to become emotionally intimate with another person at the same time. However, people in highly successful unions are able to maintain a solid sense of self that is not threatened by their emotionally intimate attachment to their partner. This balance requires a good feel for the boundaries of each of the three entities. "What am I responsible for, what are you responsible for, and what are we responsible for?" Ask yourself these questions to get a better feel for the balance of "I", "You" and "We" in your relationship:

- Do I allow my partner to have his/her feelings, without taking responsibility for them?
- Have I given up an important piece of myself to be in this relationship?
- Do I find myself in power struggles, rigidly protecting the "I"?
- Have I isolated myself in any way, so that I can protect my autonomy?

Allowing for Shared Meaning

Allowing for shared meaning is about supporting the "We" entity. Highly successful couples are good at using the relationship to explore and experience life together. This often means that each member of the union will grow in ways that they may not have ever anticipated, if not for the

unique dreams of their partner. Shared meaning sometimes happens on a grand scale, as is the case when a couple works to make their hopes and dreams around retirement a reality. It can also happen on a daily basis, as is the case when a couple discusses what role they want the TV to play in their lives. In each of these situations, shared meaning happens as a function of each person's ability and willingness to accept influence from their partner in ways that don't feel like a denigration of the "I" entity.

Investment in Your Partner's World

Investment in your partner's world is about being familiar with the "You" entity. Research is clear that individuals in highly successful unions tend to be much more knowledgeable about their partner's world than people in relationships that are ultimately unsuccessful. John and Julie Gottman, two of the leading researchers in this area, call this network of knowledge a "love map". Most people establish a pretty good love map of their partner during the initial stages of the relationship. However, highly successful couples understand that this map changes frequently as a function of new experiences and maturation, and therefore maintain curiosity about the "You" entity throughout the relationship. To assess your knowledge about your partner's world, ask yourself (or him/her) the following questions:

- What is your partner currently most concerned or fearful about?
- What are the top five things your partner wants to do before he/she dies?
- What is your partner's biggest weekly annoyance?
- What brings your partner the most satisfaction?

Creating a Foundation of Trust and Security

Bids for connection are those subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, attempts we make to connect with our partners. If we think about the three entities, a bid would be one person making a shift from the world of "I" into the world of "We". People in highly successful unions tend to do two distinct things regarding these bids for connection: 1) they're great at recognizing when their partner has made this shift and they respond in some manner to that event and, 2) they make lots of small bids that are meaningful to their partner. When these two things happen frequently and consistently, eventually a strong foundation of trust and emotional security is created. Besides being rewarding in its own right, this strong foundation is much more likely to withstand a crisis in the relationship.

Notice that in making frequent bids for connection, people in highly successful unions often reach out in ways that are meaningful to their *partners*. Not everyone wants to be loved in the same way. Some people crave physical affection, some people want to be taken care of, some people appreciate gifts, while others want security. One of the benefits of having an updated love map of our partner is a good understanding of what makes him/her feel loved in the relationship. Once this understanding is in place, providing frequent bids that are meaningful to one's partner is just a matter of making a commitment of time and energy.

Keeping the Positives in Mind

Being consistently mindful of the positive aspects of one's relationship, both during and outside conflict, is a habit that highly successful couples have in common. They tend to spend more time noticing, pondering, and discussing the aspects of their relationship that are particularly rewarding. Here's an exercise in mindfulness: During the next week, take mental notes about the time you spend thinking about your partner or your relationship, without trying to change your thought patterns. How much time do you spend on the positive aspects vs. the negative aspects? How about in private discussions with your friends? In discussions with your partner? If you'd like to pay more attention to the positive aspects of your partner and the relationship, try coming up with a list of the top 20 things you appreciate about him/her. Challenge yourself to find examples of those things every day; better yet, find opportunities to thank your partner for bringing them to your life!

There are many things we can learn from couples who stay together for a long time and still describe the relationship as fulfilling. While it's important to engage in conflict in ways that feel honorable to each member of the relationship, we can also promote intimacy and stability in other ways as well. By establishing and maintaining good boundaries, creating shared meaning, being interested in our partner's world, making and responding to frequent bids for affection, and frequently celebrating the positive aspects of the relationship, we can create an atmosphere of intimacy and security in our relationships and emulate the habits of highly successful couples.

Chris Reynolds works in private practice in Anchorage, where he specializes in individual therapy, couples therapy and sexual issues. He can be reached through his website at www.reynoldstherapy.com.