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How Are Strong Marriages Like Healthy Gardens?

by Don Lasell, M.A., R.C.C.

This is a question that I often put to couples who attend the premarital workshops I present. I like the question because it requires what are called "higher order thinking skills" - a more effective way of engaging new information than simply receiving it in a rote learning format. The answers I receive to this question are often quite insightful. Following are a few of those insights.

Successful marriages, like gardens, must be *cultivated*. What sunlight, soil and water are to a garden; respect, trust and cooperation are to a marriage. Without these key ingredients neither a garden nor a marriage can survive.

Successful marriages, like gardens, need to be *tended*. One would not reasonably expect a healthy harvest by merely throwing seeds in the ground, then ignoring them. Time and effort are required to watch over the growth of those seeds. Adjustments are made depending on perceived needs. More or less water and/or nutrients may be required until the seeds mature to become healthy plants. Just like fruit, neglected marriages can also die on the vine. One need not do anything outrageously inappropriate to kill a relationship, one need only neglect it long enough for it to wither and die.

Marriages like gardens also need to be *protected*. One must be vigilant to ensure that nothing is allowed into the garden that would harm it. Fences are often put around gardens to keep intruders out. This is necessary to avoid losing what one has worked hard to create. Marriage must also be guarded. Unhealthy friendships, over involvement in too many activities,

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The Problem with Pursuing Your Passion

by Joan M. Schultz, Ph.D., R.Psych.

Christine was a 24 year old university student graduating with a liberal arts degree from a nearby university. She was in a state of anxiety over the need to urgently make decisions regarding her future career. At times her anxiety was so pronounced she felt quite panicky, with frequent insomnia, digestive upsets and continuous worry. Although she had been successful academically, she was uncertain about how her education would translate into the "real world".

Christine had been given the advice to "follow her passion", which she was told would lead her to a great job and ultimate success. This confused her because although she did enjoy travelling, cooking and rock climbing, she wasn't sure if these "passions" could translate into a meaningful career. She also was unsure of what "success" looked like. Although she wanted to be able to provide for herself, having a large bank account or enviable lifestyle were not goals she envisioned for her life.

Where should she start?

The many changes that have occurred over the last number of decades in North American society have resulted in greater job and career possibilities than ever before. With the multitude of options available to young adults, career choice

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excessive use of technology and social media can all threaten the sense of connectedness between spouses. Instead of making each other the first priority, these activities and interests can take precedence. Like an unwanted vine entering the garden, the wrong influences can choke the marital relationship. When such influences have slipped in, they too must be weeded out.

Some marriages, like plants in a garden, occasionally require *pruning*. When part of a plant becomes unhealthy, the unhealthy piece may need to be removed to ensure that the healthy parts of the plant receive the full nutrients. This is necessary to ensure the ongoing survival of that plant. In the marital relationship, boundary setting may occasionally be required. This setting of boundaries is in a sense, a type of pruning. Any activity or behaviour which is perceived to be harmful to the relationship must be cut off. Those behaviours which threaten relationship respect, trust and cooperation, the very foundation of what makes a marriage healthy, are especially damaging. Under these circumstances, one may even need to sever the connection for a period of time until such destructive behaviours have stopped.

Finally, marriages and gardens both require *nurturing*. The ongoing investment of love and care for something is often directly proportionate to the outcome one receives. When one loves and cares for a garden, one reaps a healthy and bountiful harvest. Again, I think there are similarities to nurturing one's marital relationship. Plant lovers will often tell you that by attending and talking to your plants you help them to grow. I believe that the same principles apply to our spouses.



Upcoming Workshops

Living Through Grief

Date: Fall 2017

Stress, Marriage & Rock 'n Roll (Faith & Family)

Date: Fall 2017

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advice has often been to "Follow Your Passion". This advice is limiting in that it focuses on the individual, instead of looking at the world around, seeing what is needed and how meaningful contributions might be made. Christine's first step is to *consider a larger perspective of the world around her, understanding where there are needs to fill, and see how she might use her skills to meet those needs*. With Christine's travels, friendships and education, she has already begun this process; however she needs to refocus her perspective to see possibilities for contribution to an existing need.

Christine also *needs to identify her transferable skills*. Sometimes referred to as 'soft skills', these are the skills that are adaptable to multiple situations. These include problem solving, effective oral and written communication, time management, attention to detail, technological proficiency, among others*. Her skills can be legitimized through references from professors, coaches and work supervisors. She can also reference any recognition she has received through her past volunteer and extra-curricular activities. Although Christine's degree reflects academic proficiency, it is her *skill set* that will make her a meaningful contributor. Thirdly, Christine needs meaningful purpose.

Martin Seligman**, a well-known psychologist, suggests there are two ingredients of happiness. The first is achievement or mastery – becoming excellent in what you do. Mastery, according to Anders Ericsson of Florida State University, takes 10,000 hours of deliberate practice. Individuals with true mastery are those who have spent at least 10,000 hours honing their skills to excellence in their profession – whether it be a concert pianist, a surgeon, a teacher or chess player. World class performers in any field have become so due to the sheer amount of "time on task" they have had. If one's goal is to be a "master" in one's field, perseverance pays off! Seligman's states the second ingredient of happiness is *being engaged in a meaningful work that impacts others for good*.

If Christine strives to do something more than just make herself happy, she will be looking for meaningful ways to contribute to her world. When she looks for ways to resolve unmet needs or solve existing problems, she has the potential of creating the passion she so desires for herself. She may even have the side benefit of others wanting her to succeed because her focus is altruistic. Benjamin Todd*** echoes these thoughts in a recent TEDx lecture. He states that by addressing a pressing problem in the world one is contributing something "valuable". *Doing what's valuable* will motivate Christine, creating a passion that leads to the success of having a meaningful and fulfilling career. This is what Seligman refers to as "Flourishing": *Being wholeheartedly engaged in our world and committed to the betterment of others*.

*A man's true wealth is the good he does in the world.
(Kahlil Gibran).*

For further reading and viewing, check out:

* *CNBC.com Five soft skills that will get you hired.* (2017)

** *Seligman, Flourish* (2011)

*** *Benjamin Todd at TEDx @ Tallin.* (2016); also website at <http://80000hours.org/>



Using Pop Culture to Impact Positive Change - PART 2

by Chris Boyd, M.A., R.C.C.

Welcome back! In Pop Culture Part 1, I discussed how, when connecting with children/youth, I utilize pop culture to: 1) develop and enhance rapport, and 2) gather information in regard to values, traits and indicators of resiliency. Please go to www.psychhealth.com if you haven't had a chance to read Part 1; it would be like watching the Empire Strikes Back without watching Star Wars! In Part 2, I will discuss the third way I have utilized pop culture: to help facilitate positive change.

Working with children and teens can be a humbling experience. I can prepare for a session for hours and then watch the plan fall flat within seconds or minutes. To help avoid this happening, I try to creatively get the message across by using an avenue the client is interested in. You may not be able to personally use the following examples, but I'm hoping they will spark some creativity when connecting with your child or teen.

A 14-year-old client was referred to me by his social worker but truly did not want to be in therapy; his lack of participation during our sessions reflected this. One day he came into my office wearing a Tupac shirt. I was pleased to see this because I knew that Tupac's music has several messages of strength, resiliency and advocacy in the face of adversity. When asked, my client shared what he knew about Tupac and his other favorite rappers and what he respected about their music. For the next session, I decided to create a game. I gathered 20 different lyrics from various rap songs and had the client guess what rapper sang each specific lyric and the message he or she was trying to convey in that lyric. For the first time in 4 sessions my client was engaged and interested in the task at hand. He did well with the guessing game and spoke effectively about the themes. He decided, as a result, to start creating a song of his own that described some of the challenges he faced in his own life. Writing is a beneficial, cathartic way to process past situations and the counselling sessions progressed well after this break-through.

A 9-year-old client was referred to me, along with a diagnostic list of various mental health disorders, including oppositional defiance and attention deficit. The little guy would get angry and say horrible things to his mother, teacher and peers. This was extra distressing for the boy because he felt regret afterwards for saying and doing these things, especially for his behaviour towards his mom. One day he saw a 'Where's Waldo' book on my desk. We ended up having a look at it and I was impressed by how patiently and systematically he scanned each page. Upon finishing I provided him with some positive feedback and explained how he can use these great scanning skills to notice sensations and thoughts in his body, a great lead in to a mindfulness exercise. A few weeks later my client and his mother came in for a session and his mom said that the yelling and extreme reactions had decreased significantly. Although I can't take credit for the improvement (there could have been many confounding variables), my client did mention that he now notices the thoughts popping into his mind but now he chooses not to say them.

I used to work with a 10-year-old client who had significant feelings of depression and anxiety. He had a hard time connecting with peers and spent a lot of time alone at school. During our sessions, he would routinely give me one word answers or stare off when I started talking about techniques. One day I asked him to explain 'Pokemon Showdown' to me, a video game he frequently played in his spare time. He lit up as he shared his expertise. In this game you select a team of 5 Pokemon characters, then select a range of abilities and moves for each character. Once you have selected these preferences, you go head to head with another player and their team of Pokemon characters. Pokemon Showdown became a metaphor for assisting my client navigate through challenging situation at school and home. Using the same framework, we came up with abilities and moves that he could use when facing difficult moments or adversaries. It made sense to him to conceptualize life circumstances in this way and it increased the probability of him using the techniques we discussed in our sessions.

Pop culture can be utilized in many ways to assist the ones we care about. The possibilities are endless! Thanks for tuning in!





Empathy and Mirror Neurons

by Maureen Chapman, M.A., R.C.C.

Empathy differs from sympathy. Sympathy reflects an understanding of another person's situation- but viewed through your own eyes. In contrast, empathy is what you feel when you can step outside of yourself and enter the internal world of another person. You experience the other's emotions and conflict without abandoning or losing your own perspective. It involves being able "to see with the eyes of another, to hear with the ears of another, to feel with the heart of another" (Alfred Adler).

Two people have a disagreement. They lash out or walk away from the other. It is possible that due to each of their life experiences, they learned that anger can do harm, cause a dissolution of a relationship, become an attack upon their views, or create some perceived threat of which they are not fully aware. With empathy they would STOP, and try to understand and experience the other's position. A baby cries, the caregiver is upset and angry the child can't stop the screaming and crying. Stop! Imagine what it is like to be in the baby's position, who is feeling emotions or discomfort they cannot describe. This is empathy.

Research has shown that individuals have what are described as "mirror neurons". When we witness or hear another's experience, these mirror neurons trigger memories in the brain of the listener. This may stimulate emotional experiences connected to those memories. If the memories are negative we may respond in anger and fear consistent with our own experience with respect to what we observe in other's behaviour. At the same time, if we can suspend our own experiences, and try to see it through the lens of another person, then these neurons contribute to the deepening of an empathic understanding of individuals.

Mirroring helps dissolve the barrier between self and others. It is the way nature facilitates caring about other people. One could ask why we experience tears when someone is kind to us? Why do we feel at peace when someone understands us? Why that simple "are you ok" can so move us? It is because empathy validates and lends to a deeper understanding of another's experience.

Empathy can be used when we seek to understand someone better, argue unproductively, have difficulty connecting emotionally to another, or when trying to calm our temper and manage our own emotions. A loved one who is experiencing depression, anger or any conflicted emotion shows greater healing when levels of understanding are deeper through empathy. Being told to 'get over it', or lashing out, by a loved one, does not reveal empathic understanding.

Think of an upset child, partner, stranger, anyone for that matter. Instead of responding in anger, use those mirror neurons that generate empathy. What is happening with that person in this moment of time? Don't judge, just imagine. Are they frightened, did they receive bad news, are they feeling unwell, stressed, did their partner break up with them, etc.? Are their views of life or behavior different from yours?

Do not become threatened by the differences; it does not mean either of you are right or wrong. Think of ways you are similar to that person beneath the surface differences. Empathy does not mean letting them walk all over you. Rather, empathy gives you a stronger and wiser base for resolving conflict. You can bridge differences more effectively and with less destructiveness.

Empathy allows us to be mindful of our commonality and connection with fellow humans, rather than emphasizing the differences between yourself and others. Try to understand or imagine the feelings and attitudes of others by reflecting who he or she is and the forces, influences and choices that have shaped their life. Even if you do not know that person, just imagine.

The more one practices empathy, the more it is reinforced to become a natural response. While a person's empathy can be attributed to genetic factors, research shows us that empathy can also be taught and learned.

The result in not applying empathy is personal conflict, communication breakdown and the development of adversarial attitudes – even hatred – toward those who differ from ourselves. Without empathy we exist inside a self centered world, that can breed emotional isolation and disconnection.

Instead seek to understand first before ensuring you are understood. Ask "How are you doing...What is that like for you"?

People don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care. (President Theodore Roosevelt).

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