

**Recharging Relationships, Part III:
The Relationship Two-Step: What happens when one person changes the rules?**

This is the third of a three-part series on improving our close relationships.

*Part 1 was on MEANINGFUL APOLOGIES.

*Part 2 was "Responding with Enthusiasm When Your Partner Shares Good News:
How 'Active Constructive' Communication Will Energize Your Relationship"

To download those articles, go to www.contracostamenscenter.com and click on "Articles."

In our work with men on their intimate relationships with women (* see footnote) at the Contra Costa Men's Center, there is a point we are hearing about with increasing frequency when the relationship reaches a critical crossroads. It often looks something like this:

THE WOMAN LEADS:

Throughout the relationship the woman has been the social secretary -- arranging the kids' play dates, sleepovers and birthdays; arranging the adult fun time such as dinners/movies for the couple with other couples; planning vacations. She's also the one who keeps her husband informed about everything going on.

THE WOMEN STOPS LEADING:

After playing this role faithfully, sometimes for many years, she gets tired of providing the emotional glue that keeps the marriage and family together and requests that he be more involved. "Occasionally YOU be the one to make a reservation for a special dinner or an anniversary weekend at a B&B. Join more actively in setting limits with the kids." And finally, the most threatening request of all, that he be more expressive emotionally. "Share more of your emotional life -- what you're feeling and thinking, what you're happy about, sad about, concerned about -- and be interested in me!"

THE MAN FEELS BETRAYED:

While many women tell us in couples therapy that they've actually been asking for these things for a long time, commonly the man's experience is that the rules of the marriage have abruptly changed. "You've been OK with this and now suddenly you're not. You knew this is who I was when you married me" is the guy's reaction.

THE MAN WANTS TO FIX THIS BUT IT FEELS UNNATURAL:

He's in a quandary, because guys like to fix problems, yet he fears he'll never be able to fix this one. He'll never be the conversationalist his wife's friends are; he's uneasy about arranging a meaningful Valentine's Day or birthday celebration. Down deep, he feels that whatever he tries is destined to come up short and his wife will be even more dissatisfied.

To the man it's a LOSE-LOSE SITUATION. If he tries to please his wife by doing these things, he's destined to fall short and disappoint and anger her. If he doesn't try, she may leave him or, at the least, start putting her energy elsewhere into new activities, her woman friends -- or, most terrifyingly, into another romantic relationship.

HOW CAN A COUPLE NAVIGATE THROUGH THIS?

HERE ARE THE KEY STEPS WE RECOMMEND TO COUPLES WE WORK WITH:

1. THE MAN NEEDS TO TAKE THE LEAP!

The man must step up and show more initiative. How?

- sharing details of his work day
- asking his wife about her day
- asking his children about their school activities and friends.
- arranging to take his wife out on a date, ideally weekly.
- Perhaps even organizing an evening with another couple.

In short, he needs to furnish more of the social, interactive juice.

2. THE MAN NEEDS MENTORS:

Are there any men friends to call on who have developed these skills? They can be a great source of ideas and encouragement. Could be a relative such as a brother or cousin. For some, it could be a life coach or therapist.

3. IT'S SKILL-BUILDING NOT A PERSONALITY MAKEOVER:

Both people need to adopt this attitude. When trying out any new skill such as learning a language or playing an instrument, we often are awkward at first. However, men are used to being good at what we do and it can be hard to accept being a learner. And we may feel especially clueless about communication and relational skills with our most intimate partners. It can feel awkward to take the lead in "dating" your wife again. So both need to be easy on the man as he builds skills on this relational learning curve.

4. AT FIRST, THE WOMAN MUST ACCEPT APPROXIMATIONS OF THE GOAL:

She needs to support her husband's imperfect attempts at what she would ideally like from him. That means being sensitive to the leap she's asking him to make. If he risks sharing more or arranging a "date," she needs to receive it supportively by placing more value on the EFFORT than the RESULT.

So if he makes reservations at a restaurant she's not so keen on, she needs to applaud him for the initiative and let go of it not being her favorite. Otherwise, if she holds him to the standards she is used to with her women friends, he is doomed to fail and he'll feel humiliated and give up.

5. THE WOMAN NEEDS SUPPORT, TOO:

She may have to fight the urge to dismiss his efforts as "too little too late." If she genuinely wants the relationship to prosper, she, too, can turn to the support of close friends or a therapist/coach to help her have realistic expectations and to vent her understandable disappointment.

CONCLUSION:

Over time, any two people grow and change, and their needs in the relationship may well change also. For men, whether we like it or not, the rules that we've played by may change, and not always by our own choosing. It takes work to keep a long-term relationship vital and joyful by making meaningful adjustments along the way.

(* Similar dynamics can also occur in some same-sex relationships for men but this article focuses on relationships between men and women)

FUTURE EVENTS:

"Couples Who Play Together Stay Together": An Afternoon Workshop for Couples To Revitalize Your Relationship

Led By Catherine Freemire, LCSW, and Steven Freemire, MFT
Saturday, October 10, 2009 • 1-5 pm East Bay Location (TBA)

Cost: \$199/Couple

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