



Relationships *The Adlerian Team*

Achievement or Attachment

By Susan Prosser

Our culture worships and promotes achievement, money, beauty, material possessions and all forms of competition. While these things can be interesting and fun, they do not bring sustained fulfillment. The moment our team scores, the bonus is received or we buy that car or outfit we get a rush of endorphins into our brain and like the feeling and thus, want to keep having it.

Conversely, attachment to loved ones is more of a challenge to sustain. We try to be loving to our partners but being loving when we are stressed and not feeling love does not come naturally to most of us. We love our children but when they misbehave our frustration can take over. Loving behaviors may be challenging to master but finding ways to open our hearts, even in the difficult times, benefits us and our loved ones. Love is the one thing a human being needs for inner peace and brain stability. When we have stable, meaningful attachments to our loved ones, the benefits are immediate and long term. We are more resilient to stress, less prone to destabilizing anxiety and depression, biologically healthier and live longer. A new pair of shoes or a job promotion just won't do that for us!

Increasing Attachment with Loved Ones

There are many ways to improve attachment but the focus of this article will be emphasizing the importance of making time with your loved ones.

First, let me explain a little bit about how the brain is affected by our ability to be intimate. There are three main parts of the brain: the thinking brain, the feeling brain and the old brain. The thinking brain is what our culture values most highly as it enables us to reason and analyze. The old brain regulates body function and the fight/flight response. The feeling brain has been degraded as warm and fuzzy and therefore not worthy of attention. Recent brain research demonstrates that without attention to the feeling or limbic brain, we cannot survive as individuals nor can we survive as a culture. Our feeling brain is what regulates our entire being and it actually affects the brains of those around us.

Healthy attachments create what is called limbic regulation in our brains. The limbic system is in charge of emotional regulation. When we are tuned into the limbic system of our partners, children and friends, we actually change their brain functioning. Your limbic system affects my limbic system. If you love me and want the best for me and take time to know me to the depths of my being, you have the capacity to improve my physical, emotional and psychological health.

In a book focused on the latest brain research and relationships, 'A General Theory of Love', the authors (a team of psychiatrists)

point out that time is the most important underpinning of healthy relationships. The authors are clear about setting priorities "...the skill of becoming attuned to one another's emotional rhythms requires a solid investment of time....our busy lifestyle makes us feel like everything is urgent, but such an existence is too expensive to bear. When launching a life raft, one would not toss food overboard and keep the deck furniture. If somebody must jettison a part of life, time with a mate should be the last on the list. We need that connection to survive." Time to a relationship is like oxygen to the cells!

Creating Time With Your Partner

My first suggestion to couples who seek my counsel is to start spending time together. I suggest they start by spending 15 minutes per day together. Inevitably they return to my office convinced that they just couldn't find that time. As a culture we have not yet understood that without time, the quality of relationship we want and need won't happen.

Consider these options to enrich your couple relationship:

- Wake up 5 minutes early and cuddle
- Go to bed at the same time
- Do the dishes/lunches together
- Hold hands when watching television
- Call each other during the day just to say hi
- Find several things you are grateful for about each other and express them
- Spend 15 minutes every day chatting about your day, your dreams your ideas
- Shower together
- Find a hobby or joint activity and commit to it
- Go on a date once a week or at least once a month
- Do favors for each other
- Leave voice messages or email messages
- Buy little gifts just to let the other know you are thinking of them
- Hug at least 6 times per day for six seconds.

When I know someone wants to spend time with me, I also know that I bring meaning to their life. That is a powerful message and it makes a difference in how we treat others and how they treat us. It is within our power to improve our relationships – it takes conscious effort and a reorganizing of priorities. It is a balancing act but one we must address in order to have healthy, loving and enriching relationships.

References:

- A General Theory of Love, by Lewis, Amini and Lannon
- The Relationship Cure, by John Gottman

Susan offers counselling to individuals, families, and couples, and conducts workshops and courses on parenting, relationship issues, self esteem and communication at the Adlerian Counselling and Consulting Group, Inc. The holistic approach of the Centre is congruent with Susan's approach to working with people.

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