

T.O.U.C.H.

Five things you can do right now to make your relationship strong and passionate

Trust - Make trust an integral part of your relationship.

- * Build trust by agreeing on the standard of truth you will use together.
- * Create an atmosphere where each partner can trust that it is safe to speak their truth.
- * Trust that you both operate from a place of good intent.
- * Create trust that you will be there for each other during the difficult times.
- * Keep the chemistry of trust active.

Ownership - Take ownership of the relationship, i.e., recognize your personal ability and responsibility for making the relationship work.

- * Own your own words, actions and emotions.
- * Own your ability to support your partner when they are not ready to own their own stuff.
- * Own your authentic self.
- * Own the roles you have accepted in the relationship and your responsibilities if you want to change them.

Understanding - Bring understanding into every aspect of your relationship.

- * Start by getting a good understanding of yourself.
- * Understand what fulfills your partner's needs and desires.
- * Recognize basic gender differences and how these may apply in your relationship.
- * Understand your own and your partner's limits and how to adjust for them.

Communication - Develop communication styles that work for both of you.

- * Make communication safe.
- * Be clear with yourself on the purpose of your communication and share that purpose with your partner.
- * Use scheduling to facilitate important or delicate communications.
- * Develop your own "language" to shortcut discussions or facilitate discussion of difficult topics.

Humor - Use humor effectively to create connection and diffuse stress.

- * Learn how to make your partner laugh and teach them how to make you laugh.
- * Develop humorous interrupts to derail arguments.
- * Understand when humor is the wrong tool to use.
- * Avoid using humor as a weapon.
- * Be clear about your own intent when using humor.

Trust - Make trust an integral part of your relationship.

* Build trust by agreeing on the standard of truth you will use together.

Trust and truth are so intricately intertwined that it can be difficult to separate them from each other.

We are unlikely to trust someone if we feel they are not being honest with us. A lie can be the kiss of death for trust. But on the flip side, honesty can be very broadly defined. Many of us draw distinctions between lying, telling a little white lie, and lies of omission. It is not the definition itself that is most important but the agreement between the people involved as to what constitutes honesty and what is considered lying. Having a clear understanding of how you and your partner define truth is vital to building trust in relationship.

I was coaching a couple who were experiencing major issues around honesty and trust. As I listened to them argue, it became very obvious that Mike held an extremely high definition of honesty and was meticulous to live up to his own standard. Sue had a far more liberal definition that allowed her to be comfortable with omissions and misleading statements as long as there was not a clearly stated lie. While each partner had their own precise definition of what constitutes dishonesty, the divergence in their definitions was a source of huge trust issues for Mike as he felt Sue was consistently lying to him. Meanwhile, she felt that she was constantly under attack and being accused of lying when, by her own definition, she had not crossed that line and was, technically, being honest.

* Create an atmosphere where each partner can trust that it is safe to speak their truth.

While it can be very obvious how honesty impacts trust, it is easy to overlook the fact that trust also influences honesty. It is one thing to say that you want your partner to be totally honest with you. It can be quite a different thing to build their trust enough that they are actually willing to take the risk of being honest. If the reaction to honesty is attack, it is unlikely that the truth will continue to win out.

My husband and I have had to deal with this issue in our own marriage. Preston holds a very high standard for honesty, but came out of a thirty year marriage where telling the truth was almost guaranteed to result in an argument. It was not a situation where he was doing something wrong that he needed to hide, but responses to simple questions like, "How do you feel about this?" or "Why are

you late getting home?” If his response was not the one she wanted to hear, he would be berated and told he was wrong. This is a pattern that is almost guaranteed to result in answers being crafted to be what you want to hear rather than the truth. I realized very quickly that if I wanted really honest answers to my questions, Preston needed to feel safe telling me the truth. He now knows that if I don't like the answer, I will say, “That is not what I was hoping to hear, but thank you for being honest with me.” Then we calmly talk about whatever issue may have come up for me in hearing his truth.

* Trust that you both operate from a place of good intent.

Trust does not mean trusting that your partner is going to do or be everything that you wish they would do or be. We are still human and are still subject to the foibles and mistakes that all humans make. When we start a relationship our intent is to love and support each other. Over time we begin to realize that we still have to meet our own needs. In the process, it is easy to interpret our partner's actions as being designed to hurt us, or at least as not taking care of us the way we expect them to. When we take our partner's actions as personal and directed against us, we are easily hurt and tend to pull away from our partner. If, instead, we can start with trusting that we are each acting only out of positive intent, we can support our partner in meeting their needs and create even deeper trust in the relationship.

Connie and Brett were both doula and coaching clients nearing the end of a difficult pregnancy. As Connie was talking to me one day, she was telling me that Brett was not supporting her but was instead being very distant and withdrawn. She felt that he did not care at all what she was going through. As we talked, she made a reference to something in Brett's history that caught my attention. As I asked more questions, I learned that there had been a series of events in Brett's past where each time there was a birth there was also a death of someone close to him within a fairly short timeframe. Once Connie was able to see this pattern she was able to understand that, on some level, he had made an association between birth and death. As her delivery date drew near he was responding to a subconscious fear of impending death. Seeing this totally changed her perspective which, in turn, gave Brett the support he needed to reconnect with her.

* Create trust that you will be there for each other during the difficult times.

Many of us have an underlying fear that the person we love and need most will leave. This may come from a lack of confidence that we are lovable or from old relationships where we felt abandoned. Whatever the cause, the fear tends to be there. How we deal with this fear can make all the difference in your relationship.

For some of us, we respond to this fear by subconsciously pushing our partner away. We may act out our worst thoughts about ourself, almost as if we are testing our partner's resolve to stay. When you find yourself reacting in ways that make you not like yourself, look to yourself for the underlying issues and fears. Talk to your partner and let them support you. Likewise, if your partner is acting irrationally, be extra present and give them extra support. Sometimes just knowing you are willing to be there with them at their worst is enough to help them come back to a better, more loving place.

One of the most damaging things that couples do to each other is threatening to leave. Threats to leaving often appear to be an attempt to control the partner. More frequently they arise from the fear that the relationship is breaking up and the belief that it would be easier to be the one to leave. I am not big on "rules," but I do believe that one important rule for relationship is "never threaten to leave." If you really feel the relationship is in trouble, it is time to talk about it. Threatening to leave almost always makes the problem worse.

In my first marriage my husband was constantly threatening to leave. It kept me scared and on edge and did give him a great deal of control...until it backfired on him. After years of living in fear, I was finally convinced that he might actually leave. Being a person who practices for whatever I think I might have to face, I started rehearsing what I would do if he left me. Having lived with arguing and constant fear, I discovered that my "practice life" was more appealing than the one I was living. The result of his threats to leave was that I ultimately left.

Alternatively, my current husband and I had a financial crisis where we had to consider the possibility that we could lose our home and much of the stability we had worked so hard to achieve. Throughout this time, whenever we would discuss what might happen, we always included the assurance that, whatever happens, we will get through it together. Everything resolved, and we were even stronger in our relationship than we had been before. Knowing that you and your partner are able to face the hard times together is one of the strongest pillars a relationship can have.

* Keep the chemistry of trust active.

Trust has many factors, but science has found that it is not just emotional or intellectual: it is actually largely chemical. For years oxytocin was thought of only in terms of its role in childbirth and maternal instinct, but we now know that it plays a major role in how we experience trust. Keep trust strong in your relationship by maintaining closeness.

Orgasm is a great way to up your oxytocin levels but certainly not the only way. York psychologist, Professor Arthur Arun, did a study where he had complete strangers spend 34 minutes together. During the first 30 minutes the couples simply shared intimate details about their lives. Then they spent four minutes staring deeply into each other's eyes without talking. Many of the couples felt deeply attracted to each other after the 34 minute experiment. Two of his subjects later got married.

Ownership - Take ownership of the relationship, i.e., recognize your personal ability and responsibility for making the relationship work.

* Own your own words, actions and emotions.

One of the most difficult things to do is to accept full responsibility for what we say, do or feel. It is so much easier to blame someone else.

“I said this because you...”

“You made me do that.”

“You hurt my feelings.”

The reality is that no one else is responsible for how we feel or for what we do or say. That does not mean that circumstances have no impact on us. They do. But ultimately we decide how we will respond.

I worked with a couple whose marriage was being destroyed by vicious arguments and blaming. The marriage did not survive, but the husband did continue to work with me, a psychotherapist and a support group. Over time he came to see that it was not his wife triggering his emotions: the same emotions emerged even when she was not there. Recognizing this, he resolved to work with the issues and find a way to enjoy life again. This brought his emotional reactions back under his own control. He still has frustrations in his life, as we all do, but he has learned to work with himself to find the peace that creates a harmonious life.

* Own your ability to support your partner when they are not ready to own their own stuff.

Part of relationship is taking responsibility for yourself. Hand-in-hand with that is being willing to step up for your partner at those times when they aren't quite able to step up for themselves. As I was writing this, a storm knocked out the electricity. My husband was asleep but needed to get up and start the generator. He was angry - very angry - not at me, but at the circumstances. I suggested the anger wasn't helping. He acknowledged that it wasn't but that he wasn't prepared to curb it for the moment. It was my turn to step up for him. Once we got the generator working I put on some soothing music and rubbed his feet while he calmed down enough to go back to sleep. If this sounds like me being selfless, think again. He often steps up for me in very similar ways. It is knowing we back

each other up in this way that builds the trust to be ourselves and own our own stuff in the relationship.

* Own your authentic self.

Our society, whether through fairy tales or media, provides a model of what we should be, do and look like to have a good relationship. The one thing they don't portray is the importance of being ourselves. Consequently many of us come to relationships trying to be what we think the other person wants. We dress, say and do the things that we believe will make the other person want to be with us. If this approach succeeds at all, it succeeds in causing the other person to fall in love with someone who is not our authentic selves. Ultimately we will revert to who we really are. If our partner objects, we may resent them for expecting us to be something other than ourselves even though we were the ones who created the false identity.

This is not to say that we should not strive to grow and be the best self we can be. If you are being bitchy or rude or unkind, that is not about being your authentic self. You may want to take another look at your attitude before trying to create a strong relationship. Being honest with yourself on this point may help you attract a partner who is willing to work with you to overcome those things you really want to change in your life.

Striving to be our best incorporates who we really are and is very different from trying to be someone we are not in the hopes of attracting a partner. If you have spent much of your life trying to please others, you may find it difficult to identify your authentic self apart from pleasing others. Think of who you are when you are with your closest friends, just hanging out and relaxing, or even when you are just relaxing by yourself. Who is the person that shows up in those times?

There is a pretty common philosophy that we are most likely to find our ideal partner when we are not looking for a relationship. I believe that the main reason for this is that when we are not looking for a partner we are willing to be ourselves. In this state we can attract the person who truly matches us and can love us for a lifetime.

* Own the roles you have accepted in the relationship and your responsibilities if you want to change them.

If this writing or some other source has prompted you to think about your authentic self, you very likely discovered that there are many aspects to you, all of which are authentic. When we get into relationship we draw on the aspects that coordinate best with our partner and, ultimately, we fall into roles with each other. These are the patterns that help our relationship function on a daily basis. Our relationship becomes a dance. I do this and you do that. The assumption of roles can be intentional or completely unconscious.

These roles play an important part in keeping the relationship running smoothly. When one partner finds themselves in a role they resent, the relationship can easily become strained. It is not unusual for us to fall into roles based on what we saw our parents do, what we have done in previous relationships, or what we think is appropriate for any other reason, such as gender, income or education. When one partner finds themselves in a role they resent, the relationship can easily become strained. Being aware of the role we are in and why we chose that role or allowed ourselves to be assigned that role can go a long way towards addressing the issue.

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When it became obvious to me that Preston and I were moving towards a more serious relationship, I voiced my decision not to be cast in the roles I had accepted in previous relationships. I stated in no uncertain terms, "If we are to get serious, you need to understand that I am not your housekeeper, and I don't do laundry or salads." I must admit that he looked pretty startled at my pronouncement, but it was not lost on him. Over the years we have been together I am still not the housekeeper, but I do almost all of the laundry and frequently make the salads we have for dinner every night. The difference is that

it is now a choice I make and own. It also helps that he frequently acknowledges and thanks me for my contribution.

The other circumstance is when roles change. Sometimes one partner simply realizes that what they are doing is not working for them. More frequently a major life event or transition causes a change in one or both partner's priorities. The changes can be as small as a decision to quit being the one making salads or as great as deciding to change one's gender. These may seem extreme, but I have worked with more than one couple dealing with gender transition. I have also seen that even a minor role change can disrupt the harmony of the relationship.

This is not to say such changes are inappropriate, only that they are easier when they are acknowledged. The partner making the change has some responsibility to help the other understand, and hopefully, accommodate.

My late husband and I met at a time when I was building my career as an actuary and he was building an actuarial computing firm. Our relationship was both business and personal right from the start. We both focused long hours on building and supporting the business. It was a structure that worked well for both of us. Then a family member died. My attention changed to more spiritual avenues while his attention shifted more towards enjoying the later years of his life. For the first time in our marriage, the twenty-two year age difference was having some impact. As soon as I recognized that I wanted far more time to pursue personal growth, I let him know I had changed. I was pretty clear about stating that I knew I had changed the rules for our marriage and wanted to work with him to make this new paradigm work. It took much longer to recognize that his role had also changed, very possibly because he did not recognize it himself.

Changing roles can create a big hurdle in a relationship. With ownership and attention, they can produce growth where there might otherwise be strain or even devastation.

Understanding - Bring understanding into every aspect of your relationship.

*** Start by getting a good understanding of yourself.**

We actually started talking about this when we discussed owning your authentic self. Many of us tend to live our lives on auto-pilot: frequently startled and confused by our own actions. We are blessed to live in a world where there is a wealth of information and a plethora of tools available to help us understand better what motivates us. Personal growth is more than just a new age airy-fairy concept. It is a means to gain increased understanding of ourselves and be able to make conscious choices about what we choose to experience and how we best interact with the world around us.

In relationship there is another good reason to understand yourself: so that you can help your partner understand what you need. Have you ever been in a relationship where you felt like you needed or wanted something from your partner that you weren't getting but you couldn't get a handle on how to ask for it? This can happen when our needs are not being met.

One of my clients was recently feeling conflicted and frustrated as she was supporting her partner through a major life transition. We used an archetype approach to help her get a clearer understanding of the aspects of herself and the relationship that were creating the conflict. With this new perspective she can make more conscious decisions about when it is optimal to focus on meeting her own needs vs putting her attention on her partner's process. In the absence of such knowledge people have a tendency to react in extremes and then judge themselves for the choices they make.

*** Understand what fulfills your partner's needs and desires.**

When we first fall in love we are fascinated by our partner and can't seem to get enough of them. We want to know everything there is to know. This is a fun and fascinating time when the whole world revolves around this one person we love.

With advances in medicine and technology we have come to learn that this is more than just an emotional state - it is a hormone induced high. It turns out that during the first six to eighteen months of a new relationship we actually shift our hormones to be more like each other and to be more compliant with each other. Testosterone levels in men actually drop in early relationship while they increase

in women. We actually are more alike during this early phase. Simultaneously oxytocin levels are higher for both genders, increasing our sense of connection, trust and love. Adrenaline, dopamine, serotonin and vasopressin also contribute to the “love cocktail” that makes the early stages of relationship so exciting.

But ultimately the hormones return to more normal levels and the day-to-day stresses of life make their presence known again. We fall back into our habitual patterns.

This is the time to take a new look at your partner. Who are they really? What motivates them? How are they like you? Maybe more importantly, how are they different from you? Understanding your partner’s needs, likes, personality quirks and what motivates them helps you relate to them in a way that is more satisfying for both of you.

A couple came to me for coaching. They opened the session with the question, “We need to decide whether this relationship is worth trying to save.” He proceeded to describe her as being totally ungrateful and selfish. He said that no matter what he does for her, she never says thank you. Knowing a little about her background as an EMT, I turned and asked her, “When you do something for someone, how important is it to you that they thank you?” As I expected, she shrugged and indicated that receiving a verbal “thank you” really is not important to her at all. Her concern in the relationship was that she was feeling very insecure.

Using the Six Human Needs model developed by Tony Robbins and Cloe Madanes, I helped them see that he has a very high need for significance which, for him, can be met by making him feel appreciated for what he does. When asked how he responds to her lack of gratitude, he said that he questions their relationship and whether he should just leave. Turning our attention to her, we determined that her highest need was for certainty, to feel secure and safe.

They immediately saw what was behind the conflict in their relationship. Realizing that what their partner needed was very different than their own needs allowed them to understand how to meet their partner in a way that enhanced the relationship and completely turned the relationship around. They are getting married in October.

I frequently hear the complaint, “I gave them everything and nothing was enough.” When we give our partner what we want or need, it can feel like

everything and they can still feel empty. When we understand what makes our partner feel fulfilled, building a strong, happy relationship comes much more easily.

*** Recognize basic gender differences and how they may apply in your relationship.**

Men and women are different. Even within same-sex relationships, we each tend to react in more masculine or feminine ways. To further complicate things, we move up and down the scale of gender traits depending on what we are doing, on how supported we feel and any number of other factors, both conscious and unconscious. To further complicate the dynamic, we vary our own gender traits in response to those around us, especially to those most significant in our lives.

A great starting point is to get some education on gender patterns. There are lots of resources on this topic. Here are some that usually come up in our “Communicating the Male and Female Brain” workshops:

- Tunnel vision vs seeing everything
- Compartmentalizing vs integrating
- Logical vs emotional
- Fighting vs negotiating
- Identity determined by job vs identity determined by relationship
- Thinks about sex and work vs thinks about love and relationship
- Fixing vs comforting
- Sexual vs loving
- Prefer written to spoken
- Avoid emotions vs talk out emotions
- Standard operating procedure vs moving target
- Direct vs indirect in communication
- Procedural vs artistic
- Instant libido vs slow turn-on
- Visual vs romantic
- Simple vs complex
- Functional vs seductive clothing
- Orgasms drain energy vs build energy
- Interest in sex declines vs increases during times of high stress

Rather than assuming that one’s gender defines these patterns, it is more valuable to drop the gender association and look at how you and your partner respond on these and other “gender-based” traits. For example, the general pattern is for women to be more verbal, wanting to talk things out while men tend

more towards short answers and wanting to fix whatever problem is being discussed. While statistically that may be true, I work with quite a few couples where it is the man who wants to talk things out and the woman who wants to just fix it and move on. The same is true for every trait that has been classified as gender-based.

The reason there are so many resources, such as the book, **Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus**, is that knowing how you and your partner differ on any of these traits greatly facilitates your interaction. You may find that dropping the gender reference and thinking in terms of sets of traits or masculine and feminine energy makes it easier to recognize which traits apply to you or your partner at any point in time.

My assistant and I, both female by gender, had such an interaction today. Sometimes writing flows easily and sometimes it takes real effort. With a deadline facing me, today was a day when things just weren't flowing. I sent a quick chat message to my assistant to let her know why I had not been in touch. She quickly responded with questions about what I was struggling with and how she could help me over the slump. My first reaction was a mild irritation that she wasn't getting the point, then, I realized that she is a "fix-it" person, a trait frequently considered more masculine. I sent back, "Not a 'fix' issue. Just information." She acknowledged with a smile, and we both got back to our work.

It is also important to recognize the dance we do within these roles. When one partner shifts on a given trait, the other may counter-shift to fill the void. The most classic example of this happens in couples when the husband or predominantly male partner takes a softer stance in response to his spouse. This may be because he sees her as fragile or because she has in some way intimidated him. As he steps back, she steps forward to provide the strength she sees as missing from the relationship. The maneuver takes both of them out of their natural roles and upsets the polarity that is one of the underlying sources of passion within a relationship.

*** Understand your own and your partner's limits and how to adjust for them.**

We all have our comfort zones and our limits and only we can determine which is which. One of the best ways to grow is to push the boundaries of your comfort zone, but it generally has to be our own choice. Being pressured to stretch your comfort zone can easily turn it into a limit.

So how do we deal with our own limits? How do we decide when it is okay to push the boundary and when it must be maintained? Not surprisingly, it goes back to that first concept of understanding yourself. When you find yourself feeling pushed, note what the issue is and where the pressure is coming from. Using this data, you can make a reasoned decision to allow your self to stretch your comfort zone or to hold firmly to your limits. In the absence of a clear understanding we tend to become irritated at the person or thing that we feel is applying the pressure. When the choice comes from us, we can more easily respect and support it.

This practice is central to respecting your partners boundaries. As you become more in tune with defining your own comfort zone and limits, you will find it easier to make space for the people in your life to do the same. When someone does not respond the way we would like them to, we frequently make it about us and take offense. When we have practiced making peace with our own boundaries, we can more easily identify when our partner is going through a similar process and provide them with the space and respect to do the same for themselves.

Recently a friend and I were meeting my husband for dinner before a meeting. As I was driving I asked her to text him telling him we were running late and asking that he order dinner for us. We arrived to find him waiting, wondering where we were and why he hadn't heard from us. I showed him the text message on his phone and started a little campaign to get him to watch for text messages. The next evening Preston let me know how frustrated he was with "this whole text message thing." It was pretty clear this was not something he was comfortable with. While it seems simple enough to me, I had to accept that it was a stretch he prefers not to make. At this point we are in a compromise position. I don't push him to use texting, but I do warn him if he is meeting someone who might use a text message to facilitate them finding each other. As with most compromises, neither of us is getting exactly what we want, but we are both honoring what the other needs.

I was in a coaching session with a woman who had met a man and hit it off with him. He matched every criteria on her "ideal partner" list. Her concern was that she wanted him to court her and wanted to get to know him and become friends before progressing to sex. Her question was, "How do I communicate that to him?" I suggested some general wording along the lines of, "I really like you and the way we are interacting with each other. I like the direction our relationship seems to be moving. I'd like to make sure, before we get distracted by hot

passionate sex, that we get to know each other as friends.” I loved her reaction.
“Wow! It never occurred to me I could just say that to him.”

Communication - Develop communication styles that work for both of you.

*** Make communication safe.**

We hit on the topic of safety relatively strongly when discussing trust, but I'd like to take it a little further as a basic principle of communication. Preston and I teach a broad range of topics as diverse as animal behavior and training, massage, relationships, childbirth, sexuality, and many others. If I had to sum up any class we teach in a single word, it would be "communication." It seems that everything in life hinges on communication.

It's relatively easy to see why communication is so important. But why is it so difficult? If we are open to real communication and not just the facade of talking, we make ourselves vulnerable. Will my partner understand what I'm trying to say? Will they make fun of me? Will they ridicule me? Will they get angry? Will I lose their love or respect?

All of these are risks we take when we communicate on a deeply personal level, the level at which we hope to connect with those who mean the most to us. Frequently we become so focused on the risk we are taking that we don't recognize that our partner may feel similar fears around being vulnerable.

What is he/she really trying to say? Do I understand correctly? What is the right response? How do I answer that without getting in trouble?

And when we feel vulnerable we tend to take things more personally than we might in a less important conversation.

The common humorous example is the wife who asks, "Does this dress make me look fat?" Frequently the person feels that they are being set up, that there is no safe answer. Among the best answers I have heard are, "I love that dress. You look beautiful in it." or alternatively, "It is not my favorite dress. I like this one much better." The addition of, "You look drop-dead gorgeous in it." never hurts either, and can be used in reference to whichever dress you like.

But going beyond the favorite example, how do we keep communication safe?

One of the best tools is honest curiosity. Drop any preconceived notions and delve deeper into what is being said. Consider using questions like these:

- It sounds to me like you are saying, “...” Am I hearing you correctly?
- You seem uncomfortable. Is there more that you’re trying to say?
- I think I might be missing your point. Could you try saying that differently?
- I’m not sure how to respond. What response were you hoping for or expecting?

If you find your emotions are running too strongly for you to stay in curiosity, but you are able to stay calm, explain calmly what you believe you heard and why it is creating an emotional response. Frequently further discussion can either clear up a miscommunication or help the two of you get clear about an emotional trigger.

If your response is so strong that you need to deal with that before continuing the conversation, say so. Something like, “I’m feeling very emotional (even better if you can state the emotion, i.e., sad, angry, accused, etc.) I need a few minutes to look at why I responded that way. Can we pick this up again in a few minutes?”

Allowing yourself or your partner time to process emotional reactions can go a long ways towards diffusing communication stress and arguments.**

More often than not, one partner needs space to deal with their emotions while the other has a strong drive to delve into the feelings and resolve the issue. It is important to honor both by taking a break but also scheduling a time to come back and complete the discussion.

For several couples I have worked with, this is a major issue. One partner really needs to step away from an angry exchange while the other feels it is vital to stay in the room and finish the discussion. For sake of clarity, and because it seems to fall into this pattern more often, I am going to refer to the one who needs space as male and the one who needs to hold the connection as female. When the woman blocks the way and forces the man to stay in the room, he can easily feel trapped and become even more angry. More than one man has put a fist through a wall or door in this situation. Conversely, if the man walks out without an agreement to continue the conversation more calmly at a later time, the woman feels abandoned and even abused. Left alone without clear hope for an acceptable conclusion, some women feel the relationship has been irrevocably damaged and begin making plans to leave.

The best course, however, is to try to resolve things with curiosity and clarity before emotions become explosive. Cathy’s husband, Ronald, has a bad habit of blurting things out with a bluntness that can be unduly harsh, or just mindlessly

misstated. She learned to simply look quizzically at him and ask, “What did you really mean to say.” This was enough to cue him to review what he had said and clarify. Almost always what had sounded like an insult was actually a compliment that was missing a key phrase or just turned on it’s head in some bizarre way. For example, early in their relationship he proudly commented that he used to only date beautiful women. When Cathy inquired, he realized what he had implied and stated more clearly, “I used to choose women only on physical beauty. I am so pleased that I have grown enough to recognize how important it is to have depth and intelligence as well.” Rather than becoming an argument, it became a point of humor and connection.

*** Be clear with yourself on the purpose of your communication and share that purpose with your partner.**

Whether or not we realize it, most of us have some sort of agenda behind our communication. In his book, **The Relationship Cure**, John Gottman simplifies it down to the idea that all communication is a bid for connection. On a basic level, this is the truth, and I highly recommend his book for anyone who would like to improve their communication.

But on a more conscious level, we usually have some outcome in mind when we begin a conversation. We might be looking for an answer to a question, or sharing an idea we had that we think is particularly meaningful, or asking for a favor, or offering support, or venting, and the list goes on and on.

The issue that comes up in communication is that we either don’t think about why we started the discussion or we believe that our intent is obvious. Even if we are very clear about our purpose, the person listening is not privy to our thoughts. Giving them a heads-up about our intention for the conversation makes their job much easier and goes a long way towards getting us the outcome we are seeking.

Last night my husband and I were packing for a trip. I started commenting on what I was packing and why, with a question interjected here and there. After a rather long string-of-consciousness monologue, I snapped at him for ignoring me and failing to respond. In the moment it seemed obvious and clear to me that I was excited about us going on this trip together. I wanted to take clothes that he would enjoy seeing me in, and I wanted to pack everything perfectly. Mainly, I wanted his attention. What I failed to recognize was that he was quietly wrapped up in his own packing process and not following what, in retrospect, must have

sounded more like a conversation with myself than with him. Once we were both clear about my need to connect and share my excitement with him, I was able to more clearly ask for the feedback I wanted and he was able to be more present to me while continuing to do his own packing.

One of the most common scenarios tends to play into a gender stereotype, but Preston and I turned that all the way around a few days ago. He was venting about a situation at work. As I listened, I began to craft a solution. This time I was able to see what I was doing and take a step back. Instead of jumping right in with advice, I asked, "Are you in the feminine venting role?" He shot me a startled glance and then a relaxed look that indicated he appreciated being understood. He answered, "Yes, that is what I'm doing, just venting." Then I asked, "Would you mind if I step into the masculine and offer a fix?" And we proceeded with a fix that he appreciated, along with plenty more chance for him to vent.

When we need to vent, being offered a solution can seem preemptive and make us feel totally unheard and misunderstood. Acknowledging the venting shows a depth of understanding that can make room to clear out emotions and possibly also work out solutions, if and when that is appropriate. But being the one listening, it can be very difficult to know whether the communication is primarily to vent or to get advice. Many a well-meaning spouse has been read the riot act for failure to recognize the difference.

Ideally communication is fun and easy. A moment spent setting the stage goes a long way towards creating that result.

*** Use scheduling to facilitate important or delicate communications.**

While it is ideal to have fun easy communication, sometimes real life communication has to be about topics that are not fun and easy. Finances, jobs, illness, family, and so many other aspects of life require serious communication. Too often we put off these difficult discussions until they become bigger than life, and instead of going into the conversation relaxed and prepared, it seems to jump out of our mouths unexpectedly and at inconvenient times.

The best way to avoid catching yourself off-guard in this way is to address issues while they are still small annoyances. This can be something of a difficult balance, since we don't want to be picking on every little thing that comes up. But sometimes addressing issues is not about talking to the other first. Sometimes it's

about looking into ourselves to determine why we find it annoying, and whether it is of more value to talk about it or to adjust our own perception on it.

Wabi Sabi Love tells a wonderful story about a woman who had an ongoing issue with her husband. He loved poppy-seed bagels and would have one for breakfast every morning. And every morning she would get a wet paper towel and wipe the poppy seeds off of her beautifully spotless white tile floor. One day, as she was on her knees cleaning up the poppy seeds, she thought to herself, "What would have to happen for me to never have to do this again." The thought threw her into tears as she realized that if she no longer had to wipe up the poppy seeds it would mean that her beloved husband was no longer in her life. Suddenly the daily task of wiping up the poppy seeds became a celebration of their life together.

Sometimes we can shift our perspective and resolve the issue. Other issues must be put on the table and resolved as a team. When the family is in flux, which is generally at least from the beginning of the first pregnancy until well after the last child leaves home, and more likely well into retirement, it may be advisable to have a regular family meeting, or private parent's meeting, to discuss the events that are coming up in the family. Knowing there is a regular time and place for discussion helps keep the peace between times and guarantees that no issue stays unaddressed for very long.

Cloe Maddanes uses this strategy for couples that are having frequent disagreements. In her version, no complaints can be raised outside the regular meeting. If something comes up, each person makes a note of it and keeps it for the scheduled discussion. There is much to be said for such a structured approach, especially if a relationship is in jeopardy.

Having a specific schedule may not be imperative, but being sensitive to timing can make a phenomenal difference. Catching your partner as they walk in the door from an intense day at work and a frustrating battle with rush-hour traffic is a sure formula for a conversation to go off track and end badly. Any time you are not sure of your partner's mood, or if you know it is already in a bad place, it is better to postpone any non-emergency stressful conversations. Much better to have some quiet time to relax and reconnect, and then later to suggest that you'd like to plan a time to discuss the topic in question.

A common joke is the trepidation associated with the phrase, "We need to talk," probably because it is so frequently the introduction to a tense topic. While it may

sound very similar, how much easier is it to hear, “Could we plan a time to discuss X topic?” No sense of ambush. No need to respond in the moment except to acknowledge and possibly suggest a time. No fear of an unknown topic. Granted, there may be fear of the topic, but at least the topic is on the table.

*** Develop your own “language” to shortcut discussions or facilitate discussion of difficult topics.**

When we are with someone for any length of time we begin to develop our own language. It may sound like the same English our friends speak, but listen carefully and you’ll notice that each couple has their own little phrases or words that have special meaning to them. We can capitalize on this normal process to facilitate communication and short-circuit communication catastrophes.

The first step to developing your mutual language is to notice that you each have your own individual language. This may be generational, regional, from your family, or just your own twist on things. You may find that you have words and concepts in common, and there may be words for which you have some really opposite meanings.

My assistant likes to communicate via text, chat and other non-vocal devices, which eliminates being able to hear inflection, tone and other voice qualities that help clarify communication. From time to time she sends me some little tidbit that she thinks I will enjoy to brighten my day. I would respond with “cute” or even “very cute.” I have since come to learn that it is likely that more than half of my audience will join her in feeling I was being dismissive or even patronizing. Meanwhile, she was using “aww” in much the same way I was using “cute,” and I was responding to it much as she was responding to “cute.” When we finally discussed it, we shared in some depth what the words mean to each of us, including pictures, Wikipedia definitions, quotes and personal examples. We still use “aww” and “cute” with each other, but now they have become special words that carry a deeper meaning and even affection that enhances our communication.

One of the most valuable shortcut tools is a key phrase to interrupt destructive patterns. In addition to our private language, we have whole discussions and behavior patterns that we act out over and over. While some can be fun and playful, all too often these patterns are destructive.

Karen and Ron had a habit of arguing in front of the kids, and most often the arguments were about something that was happening with the kids. Beyond being damaging to their relationship, these encounters were disruptive to the children and were creating even more behavioral problems. When we discussed this in coaching, we set up weekly parent meetings as described earlier, but sometimes something would trigger the old pattern. In addition, the kids who were in their early teens had learned how to initiate these arguments to get a result they wanted.

I suggested they agree on an interrupt phrase that could be used as soon as either of them saw that they were going into pattern. They chose the phrase, "Did you just see that monkey run through the room?" It worked like a charm. The phrase itself was humorous enough to make them both stop. Even better, the kids would get confused and preoccupied with trying to figure out what their parents were talking about. The last I heard, the young teens still did not know what the phrase met but had figured out that once that had been said, Mom and Dad acted as a unified team and could not be played off against each other.

It can also be useful to have special phrases that you can use in public that sound fairly insignificant to everyone else but that your partner knows have special meaning. For instance, I might say, "When do we need to leave for that appointment?" to mean, "Get me out of this conversation." or "That headache is kicking up again," to mean "I really need to go home now." or "Were you going to show her how you do that thing?" to mean "I need you to leave and take anyone else with you so I can have a private conversation with this person." These communications do more than help you deal with awkward conversations, they also create a bond with your partner that says, "We have each other's back."

It's also great to have little phrases that can be used anytime, public or private, to lift the mood and let your partner know they are super special to you. And sometimes it's not words at all. It can be a touch, a certain look, a gesture. For instance, I lightly stroke the palm of Preston's hand, which is both a relaxation trigger for him and the message that I love him and am here for him.

And one of the most valuable language concepts may not be special words at all, but where they are used. So many couples, whether seriously or in jest, say demeaning things publicly about their partner. What hurts in private can be devastating in public. At the opposite extreme, praise given in public carries many times the weight of praise given privately. There is so very much I cherish about Preston, and very high on the list is how he talks about me in public. It is

rare that I meet someone who has been talking to Preston that the conversation does not start with them mentioning some wonderful thing he has said about me.

It's very interesting how this concept works. It does make your partner feel prized, but it can also encourage more of your favorite behaviors. If you like having your husband open a door for you, the next time he does, compliment him. And if there are people nearby, comment loud enough for them to hear you on what a wonderful gentleman he is. You'll certainly see more doors opening. And, guys, women are just as susceptible. Publicly praise her for that wonderful meal or any other thing you love, and you're very likely to see it more often.

Humor - Use humor effectively to create connection and diffuse stress.

*** Learn how to make your partner laugh and teach them how to make you laugh.**

Humor is a very individual thing. We each have our own style and a lifetime of experience that has shaped what we do and do not think is funny. Luckily, the early days of relationship, before the realities of life come back into view, are a great time to laugh together and establish some common humor. It is also a great time to start taking note of what your partner finds humorous.

Another way to learn where to find your partner's funny bone is to watch movies and television shows together and see what makes them laugh. If you don't understand why something made them laugh, make a mental note and ask about it. Many people love to explain what they think is funny. Just be very clear that you are not challenging their humor but only want to understand it better. Starting with the statement that you didn't see anything funny may cause them to be defensive, especially if they have been criticized for their humor in the past. But being truly curious and appreciating what they find funny can build a great connection.

One of the best ways to learn about your partner's humor is to pay attention when the two of you are with pre-relationship friends. This is likely to be an easy time for them to drop into the humor that has historically been fun for them. Some people feel a little left out in these situations because they can't follow the jokes and inside stories between their partner and their partner's friends. Be patient. When appropriate ask for explanations. If that seems disruptive or might side-track the humor, pick a couple times that seemed funniest and ask for the back-story when the two of you are alone. If you are sincerely curious without any judgement, this can be a great bonding time with your partner and help you find the nuggets of laughter that you can return to again and again.

Similarly, be attentive to interactions with your partner's family. This may be a totally different humor. As well as spotting what is genuinely funny, you may also note places where humor has an uncomfortable edge. These can be little red flags that indicate land mines you want to avoid or explore with caution. If you pick the right time and go slowly, you may be able to unearth these land mines. Being sensitive to areas that have previously been poked raw can increase trust and take the relationship even deeper.

In addition to understanding your partner, you also want them to be able to enjoy your humor and play with you in that arena. When you find something amusing and your partner doesn't respond, take a moment to mention why you find it funny. You may be able to get them to see the humor, or you may just be learning where your sense of humor differs from theirs. Unless your partner shares your interest in learning each other's humor, you may have to accept the disconnects, or at least move very slowly as you teach them more about what is humorous to you.

*** Develop humorous interrupts to derail arguments.**

We all develop patterns in our behavior. When couples pay attention to arguments that come up over and over, they almost always find that there is a clear pattern of interaction that they follow repeatedly.

In our household a pattern may look something like this. I come into the kitchen and notice that Preston has left the pantry door open again. I go over and close it and comment on the fact that I don't like the pantry door left open. He acknowledges and goes on with what he is doing. I proceed to explain the importance of keeping the pets out of the pantry. He acknowledges again. Somewhere along the way I realize that he simply forgot, and that I am headed down the path of nagging. I glance over and see from the expression on his face that he can also see where the conversation is headed and is looking for the easiest way out.

At this point it can be difficult to try to break the pattern. It's not that much fun to say, "Oh, whoops. I'm nagging again." That can also leave him in the awkward situation of figuring out how to respond. "Yeah, you're nagging again." is not likely to leave either one of us feeling very good about the conversation.

What I've learned to do when I see this happening is to go over and playfully poke him in the arm with one finger while giving him a mischievous look. He knows that it is my recognition that I was nagging. He turns and pokes me back. The result is we start giggling like a couple of little kids.

You may remember another example of this when we talked about Ron and Karen using a reference to a monkey running through the room. It was not only a

great use of their own “language” to remind themselves when they were going into a destructive pattern, it also was quite humorous and frequently shifted them quickly from arguing to laughing.

I believe one of the first times I saw this used was with my own teacher and her husband. Sometimes it just came out of the blue, and I was not even aware of the trigger. Other times it would pop up when there was just the slightest edge to the conversation. She would look at him, tilt her head, and in a slightly silly voice say, “Ricky, are you going to be bad again?” He would make a face and in his own silly voice reply, “No, I’m not!” They would continue into an obviously patterned conversation until they would both start laughing. I remember how endearing it was each time I witnessed it.

*** Understand when humor is the wrong tool to use.**

While humor is a great tool, it can be disastrous when used in the wrong situation.

This was a recurring issue between me and my late husband. He knew that he could usually lighten the air with a little humor. He knew exactly how to poke at me verbally to get me joking around and laughing. Where the issue came up was when I had a migraine. I learned very quickly to warn him and even to state specifically that this was not a good time to try to get me to laugh. But he was so convinced that he could always cheer me up with humor that he would continue to joke around and poke fun at me in his charming way until I would finally get angry and tell him to leave me alone.

With Preston and I, teasing is frequently an excellent way to shift his mood. Granted it has to be done carefully, but if I am silly and a little persistent, I can usually turn his frustration into laughter. Note that I mentioned it has to be done carefully. The joking has to be clearly silly and not at all an attack or criticism of him or what he is doing or going through. If I am feeling at all moody myself, there is too great a chance that my voice will have a tense edge. That would be the wrong time to use humor. For us, it is frequently so silly as to be almost a caricature of the thing that is happening, making it so outrageous that neither of us would ever take it seriously. I also have to stay extremely tuned into his mood and reactions to be sure he is going to get on board with me. If there is even a hint of a negative reaction, it is time to step back and move in with a far more supportive strategy.

Even if humor is a great tool in your relationship, it is good to be aware that others around you may have a bad history with humor and may be uncomfortable watching your interaction. One couple we socialize with has learned well in their own relationship that humor backfires when Izzy is upset. It is not always easy for them to hear me tease Preston in a stressful situation because this is such a land-mine in their own relationship.

*** Avoid using humor as a weapon.**

So many of us grew up in situations where we were teased in ways that were painful to us, then, when we got upset, we were told we didn't know how to take a joke. Even if you were lucky enough not to have this happen to you at home or in social situations, cruel humor is the norm on television and in movies. I even see it in children's cartoons.

I think this pattern develops for one of two reasons.

The most charitable one, and the one I believe is most likely, is that we think that if we can couch a difficult piece of information in a joke, it won't hurt as badly. Unfortunately, not only is it still very painful, by making it a joke we shut down the possibility of a serious follow-up conversation. This may make the delivery easier on us, but it can be extremely painful for the person who ends up being the brunt of a joke with no appropriate way to respond that honors their feelings.

The less charitable possibility is that we may sometimes deliver a joke as a "safe" way to be mean. If we are angry with someone or have some other reason we feel we need to strike out at them, a joke appears to allow for this without it being so obvious that the intent was to hurt. Again, it tends to leave the victim with no appropriate way to respond. While this may make the person telling the joke feel like they got off a free shot, most people do recognize this as a form of bullying even if they don't choose to call them on it.

The easy test here is that if the "joke" hurts someone, anyone, then it is not funny.

Having said that, this can be particularly challenging when it comes to the people we are closest to. Watch the reaction carefully if you are saying something that you consider to be a humorous jab at someone. If they laugh easily and freely, it was a good joke. If they flinch, cringe, or in any way pull back, such as going silent or not responding, it's time for an apology. It is amazing how apologizing a

few times makes one much more sensitive to recognizing when humor is not funny.

Recently Preston and I were supplying food for a social get-together. As we were packing I asked him to get the sauces and mentioned the pineapple sauce in particular. When we were on-site setting up the food, I could not find the pineapple sauce. I asked him about it, and he responded that he must have forgotten it. I laughed and commented that I found it hilarious that, with all the stuff we carried in, the only one we didn't bring was the one I mentioned by name. He immediately laughed and responded that he agreed that that was pretty funny. For us, that became a light-hearted way to connect and share humor over what could have turned into an argument.

The interesting twist on this story is that the couple that was helping us set up responded with, "That is not funny." Their response created an interesting nuance. Preston and I continued to laugh about it over the course of the evening and used it to keep the feeling light between us. Meanwhile, we were aware that what was quite humorous to us was not the least bit funny to someone else. We continued to enjoy it between the two of us while keeping it out of the face of the couple working with us.

The difference between humor and hurt is subtle. The two major factors that determine how joking will be received are variation in people's sense of humor and the intent of the person making the joke. The exact same reference to Preston forgetting the pineapple sauce could have been very hurtful if delivered in a tone that was critical rather than playful.

*** Be clear about your own intent when using humor.**

I had never really considered intent with regard to humor until a friend brought it up one day. She has a lovely sense of silly humor that I very much enjoy, but that can also be very annoying to some people, including both her spouse and mine. One evening as she and I were engaging in our typical silliness, she turned to me and asked in all seriousness, "Do you know why I enjoy really annoying humor?" I was startled and answered, "No. Why?" She went on to explain that she is aware that she can be really annoying sometimes, but it really lets her feel how much her friends and spouse love her when they are willing to be with her through her annoying humor.

That was a great insight for me. First, I was surprised to learn that her behavior, that looked so silly and frivolous to me, actually held deep and valuable meaning for her. Secondly, to recognize the value of humor as an acceptable way to get attention that we all crave on some level. Maybe more importantly, it made me stop and think about why we use humor.

My joke with Preston about forgetting the pineapple sauce was intended to both lighten the atmosphere and to create a bond between us. It was particularly effective because he knew I could have easily gotten upset about it, but instead chose to make it a source of laughter between us.

We've talked earlier in this chapter about using humor as an interrupt for negative patterns. An example of that is how my late husband used humor to shift my mood. I think this may be one of the more aware intents we have for humor, and can be very effective when used with awareness and sensitivity to the response it is eliciting.

Of course one of the biggest underlying factors in humor is that, when used well, it is just plain fun. Humor is one of the best and most enjoyable bonding tools we have as humans. Try observing people as they get to know each other. When they can find a common source of laughter, most of the tension drops away. When a couple, whether friends or lovers, are experiencing stress, if they can find something to laugh together about, the relationship moves back towards equilibrium.

So we've come full circle. Learn how to make your partner laugh and teach them how to make you laugh. Keep humor as a precious tool you can use to reduce stress, lighten the mood, pause arguments and destructive behaviors, and to strengthen your bond.

Dare I say: good humor is no laughing matter.

If you'd like to schedule a session with me or discuss how you might apply these ideas in your relationship, give me a call at 703-644-0606 or email me at beth@passionstrategies.com.

*Beth Lynch
2015*