

The Values and Rituals of Authentic Relationships:

What the Relationship Enhancement Model Teaches Us about Marriage

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Successful, satisfying marriages involve a set of core values that enable partners to experience a foundation of security and safety, and a set of relationship rituals or practices that promote deeper connection and intimacy.

The Relationship Enhancement (RE) model (developed by Bernard G. Guerney, Jr., Ph.D.) helps illuminate the core values of authentic relationships while also recommending specific relationship rituals and practices that nurture and strengthen the emotional bond between two people. Identifying the core values you hold as a couple and beginning to incorporate actions that bond you more closely together as a couple are part of the important work you will want to do to prepare for a life-long marriage of love.

CORE VALUES

The core values of the RE model are as follows:

- Commitment to the Relationship as a Good in Itself
- Respect for Your Partner/Spouse and Your Relationship
- Non-judgmental Acceptance
- Openness and Honesty Balanced by Caring and Compassion
- Equity

Commitment to the Relationship as a Good in Itself

The value of commitment to the relationship is rooted in the recognition that marriage is an entity independent of either spouse, and that it has needs that transcend the desires of either person. This does not mean that the feelings, concerns, and desires of either person are unimportant. Instead, it means that each spouse having a spirit of commitment to the good of the marriage will affect the quality of the marriage and the confidence that each person has in the marriage.

When this commitment is present, couples experience a deeper level of connection and have a more satisfying relationship. When this commitment is absent, the marriage runs a high risk of degenerating into a type of competition to ensure the satisfaction of one's own desires regardless of the feelings, concerns, and desires of the other person. The practical application of this value is evident when both spouses exhibit a spirit of mutual accommodation. This choice recognizes

that the satisfaction of one person's desires must also encompass the satisfaction of the other person's desires if both people are going to experience a genuinely satisfying marriage.

One important implication of this value for pre-married couples is that you will benefit from talking openly about what each of you envision for your potential future marriage. The development of a shared vision for your marriage is crucial for developing a mutual commitment to pursuing and promoting goals that enhance your marriage over time. It also is important that each of you, individually and as a couple, periodically revisit your vision and goals for the relationship as each of you grow and as the relationship evolves over time. To be successful, this process of re-evaluation and change requires you both to be flexible about considering what can enrich your relationship and marriage.

Respect for Your Partner/Spouse and Your Relationship

A second value embodied in and promoted by the RE model is respect: respect for your partner before marriage and your spouse after marriage, as well as respect for the relationship itself. In a sense, this value dovetails with the preceding value of commitment and reinforces it. But the value of respect also translates into very concrete behavior choices. For example, it includes not indulging verbally in harsh criticism or personal attacks on the other person.

The value of respect also translates into doing certain things for the good of the relationship or marriage even though the choice might not match your own personal preference. An example is agreeing to take a time-out during a difficult interaction, even though one of you may prefer to keep talking about the issue. Foregoing personal preference for the good of the relationship establishes a secure foundation for you as a couple, which in turn creates a more satisfying and fulfilling marriage.

Non-judgmental Acceptance

A third value central to the RE model is nonjudgmental acceptance of each other and your thoughts, feelings, concerns, and desires, even when they differ.

Personal judgments and rejecting each other's perspectives prevent you from genuinely connecting with one another. Instead, non-judgmental acceptance helps you to empathize with one another; this, in turn, opens up communication between the two of you. Together, empathy and nonjudgmental acceptance help foster a deepened sense of security, connection, and mutual commitment to the good of the relationship.

Openness and Honesty Balanced by Caring and Compassion

Two additional sets of values function in a complementary way within the RE model: openness and honesty, and caring and compassion. The qualities of openness and honesty are essential to a healthy, thriving relationship that includes emotional intimacy. If you are feeling a strong emotion, are concerned about something, or experiencing a desire for something, it is important to communicate that to each other. This is vital communication practice for relationships and marriage. Otherwise, you cheat yourselves of an opportunity to address an issue constructively

and arrive at a mutually satisfying solution. When couples do not address key issues, the relationship suffers.

However, the RE model recognizes that openness and honesty must be balanced by the values of caring and compassion. These qualities help each of you to stay aware of the effect of what you say and how you say it on your partner. The qualities of caring and compassion help you to avoid personal attacks on each other's character. These attacks destroy your relationship by prompting the recipient to feel defensive, to shut down emotionally, and either to withdraw from the relationship or to reciprocate in equally destructive verbal attacks.

Combining all four of these qualities helps you communicate your feelings, concerns, and desires in a respectful manner that creates a positive atmosphere in all your interactions. You will say what you need to say caringly and compassionately, or you won't say it at all.

Equity

Finally, the RE model also embodies and promotes the value of equity in relationships and marriage. It encourages balance between sharing your own perspective and listening to and acknowledging your partner's or spouse's perspective. This is best accomplished through a structured dialogue process that permits the safe and equitable expression of your respective points of view. (See below for recommended guidelines.) In this way, the values of openness and honesty are further promoted and reinforced, and your relationship is strengthened.

RELATIONSHIP RITUALS AND PRACTICES

The core relationship values explained above are given concrete expression through three relationship rituals or practices recommended by the RE model:

- Daily Time Talking Together
- In-Depth Dialogue
- Having Fun

Relationship Ritual 1: Daily Time Talking Together

Commit to spending a minimum of 15 to 20 minutes each day where you connect with each other – in person if possible. A wonderful way to begin this daily check-in time is to share a “partner appreciation” with each other. This means sharing something you like or admire about your partner as a person, or something that you appreciate that they did. Then you can each share how your day went, how you're feeling at the moment, or small points that you'd like to catch up on. You can also use this time to suggest a fun activity for the future. However, this is not a time for complaints or big issues. Keep it positive.

Relationship Ritual 2: In-Depth Dialogue

Structure into your schedule a weekly dialogue time where you sit down together for an extended conversation lasting at least 30-60 minutes. At this time, focus on a significant issue, a potential or real problem area, a major life decision, or ways to enhance your relationship. The key to a successful dialogue is to follow a few simple guidelines:

- Only one person talks at a time, and the listener does not interrupt.
- The person who is talking shares their feelings, concerns, and desires regarding the issue at hand, but subjectively and respectfully.
- The other person tunes in empathically, listens intently, and then verbally acknowledges what the speaker has shared. This should be done without adding any commentary from the listener's point of view. However, careful listening with a "third ear," and noting facial expressions and tone of voice, will help you to "hear" beyond the words to the emotions and needs the speaker is experiencing.
- Repeat the above steps, perhaps several times, including encouragement of full expression, until the first person completes what they wish to share.
- Change roles so that the person who was the listener has a chance to share their feelings, concerns, and desires about the issue at hand. It is helpful for the new speaker to begin by expressing what makes sense to you about what your partner has shared (without necessarily agreeing with it).
- The partner's job now is to tune in empathically, listen intently, and verbally acknowledge the new speaker's sharing.
- Repeat, going back and forth as long as necessary, until both of you feel well understood.
- When appropriate, reach a concrete decision or agreement about actions to take that leave both of you feeling that your concerns and desires have been taken into account, creating a win-win solution. The "secret" here is to commit yourselves to meeting your partner's or spouse's needs as much your own.

Relationship Ritual 3: Having Fun

Do something fun with each other at least once a week. It is all too easy to allow the external pressures of work and the demands of day-to-day life to take over and push nurturing your relationship into the background. Be proactive and commit to keeping your relationship vibrant and alive through fun activities.

Help from Others

One final recommendation: If you have not already done so, attend a skills-based marriage preparation seminar in order to learn how to communicate and dialogue more effectively. Couples of all ages and levels of relationship experience are increasingly turning to marriage

education to help increase the odds of having a loving marriage that endures. Careful skill-building will help you to deal effectively with the inevitable issues that come up in any relationship or marriage, minimizing hurt feelings and disappointment and maximizing the satisfaction of being able to deal with issues in a constructive and respectful manner. Learning how to have a successful marriage will also reinforce the five core values that make for an authentic – and fulfilling – relationship.

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