Special Report:

How to become an expert on your partner

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If one day you learned that your partner was allergic to peanuts, when you bought food or cooked, wouldn't you take their allergy into consideration? Making a change in response to a need your partner as, or even just considering their need in your decision, is a basic example of learning how to love them. If you are going to love your partner and communicate that love, it means you first must know them. You must be an expert on your partner in order to be responsive to their needs and wants.

There are certain fundamental needs that we all have in relationships. The need to be connected to someone, the need to feel secure, the need to believe we are not alone in the world. These are needs, not wants, and just a little less important that food, water and oxygen. Having these needs does not make us "needy", they make us human. Getting these needs met is so important to us that when we think and feel we are not getting them met, we become emotional.

Emotions are part of our basic biological system. They are important because without them we wouldn't move. Just think if you didn't have emotions, when a bear jumped out of the bushes you wouldn't be scared. If you didn't get scared you would get eaten! Emotions compel us to move to go get our needs met and survive. Often in distressed relationships those same emotions that save your life, end up leading to a fight because of how we react to our emotions. Emotions then, are important signals that we have an unmet need. These needs motivate us to enter relationships; to not be alone, to survive.

When we enter a relationship and agree to become a committed partner, we are actually agreeing to the following statement, come hell or high water:

I have your back

Think of your relationship as a separate entity between you and your partner. To understand this idea, an image might help. Imagine a giant Valentine's Day heart floating between you and your partner. That heart is your relationship. When things are going well the heart is vibrant, a beautiful shade of red and a wonderful thing to have in your life. You're your relationship isn't going well, the heart isn't so vibrant and more of a dark brown.

Together the heart (your relationship) must be nurtured, cared for, fed, soothed, comforted and protected. For this to happen, you both must be living your life in a way

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that balances your own needs and wants with consideration and prioritization of your partner's needs and wants. There are many times when a younger couple is struggling because one or even both partners are not ready to support a marriage by prioritizing the needs of the relationship over their own. They are still too busy being single. That won't work.

If you want to do your part to keep your relationship's heart healthy and vibrant, it means being responsive to your partner's needs and wants. For you to become responsive, to become sensitive, you must be an expert on your partner and know what matters to them and what they need. You must know things about them and act upon that knowledge in a way that communicates, "You matter to me. I have your back."

To see how much of an expert on your partner you are, I am offering six key questions that will test your knowledge. If you do not know the answers, go figure them out. Reflect on past arguments, reflect on things your partner has told you or complained about, and even sit and talk with them to ask. Along with each question, I will explain exactly how to utilize that knowledge to help you better meet your partner's needs and become more valuable to them. When you are valuable to them, when they need you, your partner will be motivated to work on becoming an expert on you, and better meet your needs. Through these efforts, you will be ensuring your relationship's heart is a beautiful shade of red.

How to Work Through This Report

My suggestion is to work through each question and spending a day or two on each. Think about your answers and then talk with your partner. Have a conversation to learn what the need looks like, where it came from, how does it help motivate them in the relationship? Then make efforts to follow through with what you learn. Focus on actively strengthening your relationship by shoring up the foundation with knowledge you gain. Remember, knowledge is not power. Applied knowledge is power.

Trust is built by following through with your promise – being reliable. Work on following through with meeting your partner's needs and your relationship will flourish with a vibrant red heart beating between you.

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1. What two things does your partner need to hear from you on a regular basis?

We all seek external validation of our existence. In my book, Fix Your Partner in 10 Easy Steps or Less, I talk about attachment needs. These are the needs that drive our behavior and emotions; these are the needs we fight for underneath the arguments we have. In my book there is an entire chapter on understanding these needs and determining which ones you each hold most dear. For now ask yourself what your partner has complained about, especially during an argument? Have the said things like, "I'm not important to you." Or, "You don't appreciate me." Statements like these are the signals you must tune in and respond to. Have they expressed fears or doubts? "I worry I'm not a good mother." "It is really hard for me to ask for help." Are you listening? They are gifting you their answer.

For now consider that as an expert on your partner, you must know what your partner needs to hear from you to confirm that you see them and/or they are valuable to you and to the world. When you can answer this question, it means you know what you can say to your partner that helps them feel accepted, understood, close, important, or appreciated. It means you will know how to communicate your love and respect. Taking action as a result of knowing this will communicate to your partner that you have their back.

How to put this into practice

In thinking about the answers to this question, you will eventually zero in on what your partner needs. Next, you have to "operationalize it", to put it into practice and make it something you can do. So once you have an idea what your partner needs to hear, ask what communicates this to my partner.

What do you do or say that communicates you appreciate them? Or, accept them? Or, understand them? You might need to have a conversation to be clear about what this looks like to them. If you do, first tell your partner your intention is to work harder at meeting their relationship needs. Share these questions and make it a conversation about new or renewed intentions to be a good partner; to have their back.

Putting this into practice might just mean making an extra effort to tell your partner thank you. Or, "you look nice today." You might do something for them and let them know, "I want to make sure you know how much I appreciate you." Or, "I am doing this because I want you know I see how important this is to you." These words and actions can be powerful. It might also be something as small as reminding them you

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believe they are a good and loving mother. Do not underestimate the power of these words, and if you are already thinking these types of thoughts but not verbalizing them, start right now.

2. What are two things in your partner's past that are still hard for them and you need to stay sensitive to?

The sad truth is that far too many of us have traumatic experiences while growing up. A time or times when we were little or just younger and had a really big challenge. This could range from being criticized for being shy, to teased by other kids, to a car accident, to a family member's death, to something traumatic or tragic that happened to us. What often makes them difficult is being alone in that hugely painful moment. The memories and emotions that arise from these past experiences are like a dragon that comes to torment and terrorize us.

When we agree to commit to another person, deep down we have the hope that they will fully accept us, warts and all. Your partner wants that too. Your partner wants to believe that you understand what is hard and will offer protection from the dragon that comes for them. When you can answer this question, it means you are aware and sensitive of what to look out for and what they need protection from, by you. Taking action as a result of knowing this will communicate to your partner that you have their back.

How to put this into practice

The first step is becoming aware and sensitive to something your partner is vulnerable to. The second step is being alert and be ready to protect, or express empathy and care. Let's say your partner's grandfather just passed away last month. Now you're watching a movie together and in that movie someone's parent dies. Being sensitive might mean asking if they would like to watch something different. It might mean holding their hand and asking if they are okay.

Perhaps your partner was teased at school when they were little. You would have to be aware of what constitutes teasing to them and if you see they might be feeling teased or even see others being teased, be ready with empathy, compassion and maybe

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protection. This isn't walking on eggshells stuff, this is looking out for your partner's vulnerabilities, and this is protecting your relationship's heart. You may not have thought about this when you agreed to commit to the relationship. Yet, the unstated and un-negotiated contract said, "I will have your back."

3. What are two things that quickly and easily upset your partner?

We all have triggers. Triggers are anything that quickly sends a powerful surge of anger, sadness, fear, anxiety or guilt coursing through our veins. A trigger often gets a lot of traction in our body and propels us to act in self-defeating ways. You may or may not give in to that urge, yet it is still there.

Being reminded of a past painful moment could create one. Experiencing painful moments over and over in the present can create them. Intense fears about the future can create them. Things that have happened, are happening or might happen, leaving your partner feeling powerless, not heard, not important, not appreciated or not accepted will most likely lead to an emotion. If they have not learned to manage their emotions and instead react with some volatility or severe form of withdrawal, that's a trigger.

When we are with a partner who seems to have a lot of triggers, we describe it as walking on eggshells, which is never fun. If you are with a partner who leaves you walking on eggshells, you might consider counseling to collaborate on a way both of you can learn how to manage things together, better. Caution: if you look for a counselor, find someone who specializes in couples, not just someone who says they work with couples. (Visit www.fixyourpartner.com for help on criteria for selecting a relationship counselor).

Irrespective of whether your partner has two things that upset them, or twenty-two, today just focus on the two biggies. What are two things that quickly and easily upset your partner? Upset could be angry, but it could also be sad, scared, anxious or guilty. What two things does your partner become emotional about? When you can answer this question, it means you know what two things to be on the lookout for and be proactive in managing. Taking action as a result of knowing this will communicate to your partner that you have their back.

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How to put this into practice

This one does seem to paint the picture of walking delicately on eggshells so as not to trigger or upset them. Let's talk about how to make this workable. The first goal here is to be aware of what easily upsets or triggers your partner. Once you have them figured out you will need to know what to do. Keep in mind there is no way you are going to learn and know about every possible thing that might upset your partner. Managing these moments is the work of relationships. However, the goal is to become more aware and better and helping them. On the other hand, if you are always blindsided by their emotions, perhaps you are not paying enough attention.

The second goal is managing the situation. First, make sure you talk with them about what you see (report your observation without judgment or this will backfire) and ask how they want help managing the situation if and when it arises. If they see you as helping and being compassionate when they are in a panic mode or extra angry, they may be able to take your cue to go calm down in the bedroom or however you both have agreed as a way to manage their issue.

If you see the trigger coming, let them know you are concerned about this happening. "I am worried this is going to happen and upset you." That won't always stave off the event, but it will help your partner be less blindsided. They can tune into their feelings and take action to self-manage their emotions before they get bigger. Their willingness to own and work on changing their emotional reactivity to things will be a sign the relationship's heart is important to them.

Being aware of things that trigger them may help you have a little more patience when they react to their emotions. You will realize this is their "stuff" coming up – it is about them, not you. This can aid the repair process, especially if they can own their part quickly.

Where this won't work is when their triggers start to confine and restrict you. For example, let's say they desperately fear that you will abandon them, so as a result you are not allowed to leave the house or visit friends. Besides resulting in you hiding things – because humans will always fight and take their freedom – it is not a healthy relationship for either of you. A counselor might be helpful if coming up with a plan is difficult to find and agree on together.

If you have triggers (and we all do), identify them, ask your partner for feedback about what they see upsets you, and start some personal work to change your response. Your willingness to protect the relationship from your emotional triggers will communicate that you care and want to protect them.

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4. What are two things that quickly excite your partner?

We hang around people that help us feel good about ourselves. When you decided to enter your relationship, didn't you do so because you enjoyed being with your partner? Didn't they say and do things that led to you feeling happy? The choices they made, the things they talked about, the way they supported you; these are ways that your partner probably demonstrated they wanted you to be happy. What a wonderful thing to be with someone who not only wants us to be happy, they will work to facilitate it!

Over time couples move away from prioritizing each other's happiness and instead fill their days and time with tasks. Life happens; work, kids, the house, etc., drain all the time and energy and the relationship ends up on the back burner. This is a common mistake. This is a huge mistake.

Do you still know what excites your partner? You can't bring excitement and joy to their life if you don't know what will do so. Do you know what you can suggest, talk about or plan for that will bring a smile on their face? Do you know what will make them jump with excitement that you can facilitate and support? If you leave them alone to go find their own happiness, then they are probably feeling alone.

When you can answer this question, it will mean that you are aware of what brings happiness and excitement to your partner. Knowing is only half the equation; taking action is the other. Taking action as a result of knowing will communicate to your partner that they matter to you; you have their back.

How to put this into practice

Asking them outright is often the easiest way to collect your answers. However, if you ask and then do not follow up with action, they might be upset at some point. It hurts to express our needs only to be ignored or forgotten. So asking, talking about what it looks like for them and finding a way to facilitate their happiness is what needs to happen.

If you were going to build a relationship with someone new, a lover or a friend, you would be taking action to let them know you are thinking about them. When you send them a card, buy flowers, call, buy them a gift and more, you are taking action to

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say, “You are in my thoughts.” Are you doing things and saying things to let your partner know that they are in your thoughts?

If you know your partner loves tennis, then to be supportive you will communicate this in various ways. You might watch a match with them on TV, you might buy them a gift certificate at a tennis show, or you might offer to watch the kids why they go play. All these things say, “I know what you love and I want to support what makes you happy.” What this also says, though unstated, is that because I love you and want you to be happy in this relationship; because I want to want to stay I am paying attention because you matter to me. I have your back.

5. When your partner is having a tough moment, what can you do and/or say to help them feel better?

Emotions are a signal that a need that is not getting met. When your partner is angry, sad, scared or feeling guilty, somewhere there is a need longing to be fulfilled. When they were little, mom and dad, or whoever their primary caregiver was, hopefully stepped in to help soothe and comfort them. After all, when all of us were little, our experiences were happening for the very first time, so we needed help. Your partner needed someone to step in and protect, soothe and offer comfort. This means when a caregiver saw their emotions, they moved towards your partner to help, at least ideally.

Their emotions are actually a signal for both you and them. If your partner can recognize their need and feel safe enough to reach for you, that’s a good thing. At the same time, it is important for you to see their emotional signal and move towards them to communicate you are available. If you can see their distress, do you know what to do to help them feel better?

Yet, what does is it mean to your partner, when you see their emotions and don’t move towards them to help? Do they notice? You bet. What does it mean when in the middle of having an emotion and a need, you criticize or belittle them for having an emotion and that need? What is it like for you to feel upset and be criticized? It is basically a rejection that chips away at one’s self-esteem. If this has happened to you, don’t you start to lose the trust that they will be available to you?

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Since you are here and want your partner to value your ability to have their back and be comforting in their moment of distress, you have to know what you can do and/or say to help them feel better. What words will soothe and reassure your partner if they are feeling anxious? What words or actions will help calm them if they are upset? If you can answer this question, it means you know how to be the one they can turn to. Taking action as a result of knowing this will communicate to your partner that you have their back.

How to put this into practice

There will be conflict in any good relationship. Couples who lack conflict often consist of partners who do not share their thoughts and feelings and lack true intimacy. After that conflict lays the important work of repairing the relationship, at least the ones that are valuable. Part of a healthy repair process is when you and your partner talk about what happened. A conversation about what happened and what each of you could we have done differently to have helped along the way, becomes part of the healing process. Answers to these questions help you learn and grow together.

So when your partner as hurt feelings, what do you do? What can you say? The answer will almost always revolve around the idea of validation and/or empathy. Validation says, "Irrespective of whether I agree with you or not, I believe you have a right to exist." Powerful isn't it? The opposite of validation might be dismissal. However, I think a worse possible opposite it contempt. Contempt says, "you disgust me." Communicating that will never go well. Instead, learn to be validating and empathetic. I have a chapter devoted to this skill in my book, Fix Your Partner in 10 Easy Steps or Less. For now, learn just a few words to get you started.

"I know this must be really hard." "I can imagine you don't like that." Acknowledging to your partner that you see them is huge. You can do this in the middle of an argument too. "I see you are really angry right now." "I see I have upset you." Reflecting their emotions back to them is the key.

The other way you can do this is through a non-verbal action. This would be things like, if you saw your partner was sad and went to hold their hand. When they had a tough day, you gave them a hug. If you see they are upset at someone, you touch their shoulder or knee. This all says, "I am here for you. I have your back."

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6. What are your partner's hopes and dreams; what goals are pulling them into the future?

We all need a purpose in life. Whenever a client comes into my office seeking help with their depression and/or anxiety, we often come to find out they are struggling to feel a sense of purpose. Without a purpose, there is no motivation to struggle through problems, to fight for relationships, no reason to get out of bed and move towards happiness. Have a purpose is that North Star we all want to sail our ships toward. No purpose means, no rudder. No rudder means you are floating on a raft in the ocean being taken wherever direction the tide goes. Rarely does that tide just happen to flow toward happiness.

When we partner up with someone, we do so in the hopes that together our lives will be better than they would alone. However, if either of our lives become all about the other person's life, we will wake up one day feeling lost and unhappy. This is one reason why partners have to prioritize each other's happiness. Staying in the relationship is a choice. If you want your partner to believe their life is better with you than without, you are going to want to make sure their hopes, dreams and goals are on your radar too. Of course, this means you have to know what their hopes and dreams are and take them seriously. If you can answer this question, it means you know what your partner wants in life. Taking action as a result of knowing this will communicate to your partner that you care about them and have their back.

How to put this into practice

Many couples live day to day and think they are okay. Often though, one partner is unhappy and hasn't voiced it yet. You see, the problem with living day to day is that it means dealing with whatever is served as the crisis of the day. Day in and day out, wake up, work, deal with a problem or crisis and then back to the couch to watch TV before bed. This becomes the stale daily routine and one that does not attract happiness.

I had a professor in my graduate program that articulated this problem quite eloquently when he said, "most couples do not move through time and space with intention". Where does your partner want to be in ten years? What about three years? What about in twelve months? What are their hopes and dreams and how can you weave them together with yours? If you want to put this idea into practice, it means setting aside some time and having a conversation with your partner. When was the last time you went to dinner, went for a walk, or just sat on the couch and dreamed together?

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If you are going to be an expert on your partner, if you are going to help them need and value you, if you are going to help them continue making the choice to stay in the relationship, then knowing what they hope and dream about and somehow sharing in their joy and excitement is quite important. It all starts with a conversation. There is a saying, "Goals are dreams with deadlines." Show you have your partner's back by being interested in their hopes and dreams. This will motivate them to care about yours

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What's Next?

Turn each one of these questions around and them about yourself. Then share this with your partner, letting them know your intention is to learn about them and how to help them believe and feel that, you have their back. This will communicate to your partner that you care about the relationship and want to keep the relationship's heart healthy and vibrant.

Now that you have all this expert information gathered in one place, what are you going to do? I hope you will take actions that show your partner you know and understand the answers to these questions. I hope you will take action to demonstrate you have their back. If you do this, the chances of you having a happy and loving relationship go way up.

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