Demand/Withdraw Communication Patterns

Life is full of patterns. The way an atom mimics the movement of planets or the veins on a leaf looks like the branches of a tree. Patterns also occur in language, behavior, speech and thoughts. The more any behavior is practiced the more likely it is to fall into a pattern or script. We speak with a certain accent because we hear it all the time, it has been modeled for us by our peers and parents. This is true for our manners and, more significantly, our communication patterns as well.

Sometimes we learn, or are encouraged into, unhealthy patterns of behavior. Especially in our romantic relationships.

The relationship that we share with our significant other is like no other relationship in our lives. It is deeply intimate and fulfills the job of feeding us emotionally and physically. If we are in a healthy romantic relationship it acts as a mitigating factor to most stressors in our lives. It increases coping and stress management and is directly related to how satisfied we are with our lives and how happy we are.

There are, however, patterns of behavior within a relationship which are destructive. One of the main examples is that of communication. The way a couple resolves conflict is a very significant predictor of the happiness of the relationship. Some people scream at each other until they feel better, some discuss it rationally until consensus is reached, sometimes one partner just gives up and allows the other partner to have their way. Ironically, if all other indicators for intimacy are also strong, these are acceptable ways of handling conflict. Meaning that it ends up with both partners feeling better and being reasonably satisfied with the outcome.

There is a communication pattern which is devastating to intimacy however. In recent years quite a large amount of research has been conducted into it. It is called the Demand/Withdraw communication pattern. This plays out like this:

A wife feels that there is a problem that needs to be talked about (the Demand role often falls to the female but not always). She approaches the husband and starts demanding that they speak about it. She reasons that the problem will not go away if it isn’t spoken about. The husband feels criticized or confronted by the discussion and withdraws, or stonewalls. The more the wife demands satisfaction, the more the husband withdraws.

Both parties are left emotionally hurt and exhausted and no satisfying conclusion is reached. This means that normal, intimacy-building, conversations are high-jacked by this communication pattern. Communication breaks down and it may end, in severe cases, with the couple splitting up.

This pattern is not unbreakable. Because it is learned behavior it can be unlearned and improved. Different models of conflict resolution can be used to counteract the stonewalling and nagging and the relationship can flourish.

In my practice one of the main activities given to couples is more effective ways of communicating and resolving conflict. What is interesting to note is that often the relationship, with this small alteration having been made, starts to flourish exponentially and both partners experience a relief from stress and anxiety.
The point of this article is to make you aware of the patterns in your relationship. This may be what you do, what you say or what you think. If there is an unhealthy pattern in any of these then it is prudent to examine it with the help of a mediator or professional.

No situation is ever entirely lost. Love is always worth fighting for.

References


