

What is more important – yourself or your relationship? By Marlene and Bob Neufeld

Most of us have heard the question “would you rather be right or be happy?” Dr. Phil has popularized this question. Couples in our office sometimes respond with, “but I am right, it’s just a fact” or “being right makes me happy”.

We then ask the question a different way, “Would you rather be right or have a relationship?” Being right is a lonely place. It’s rare that someone responds with, “yes, you are right, thanks for pointing it out.”

We recently spent two days in training with Dr. Stan Tatkin. He has written a number of books; the one written in lay terms is “Wired for Love.” In this book, he talks about creating a couple bubble. He says that the “couple bubble is an agreement to put the relationship before anything and everything else. It means putting your partner’s well-being, self-esteem and distress relief first. And it means your partner does the same for you.” (p. 17)

People misunderstand this concept. It is not about one person walking on eggshells or giving themselves away for their partner. It is not about dropping your inner sense of who you are as separate from your partner. It is not about being a martyr or sacrificing your self. It is not about taking more than 100% responsibility for your partner’s needs. It is definitely not about ignoring your own wants and needs, thus leading to resentment. In fact, focusing on the relationship should increase your own well-being, self-esteem and relieve your own distress. If it doesn’t, then something else needs attention.

Focusing on the relationship means knowing what matters to your partner, knowing the few things that really bug him or her and knowing what makes him or her feel safe and secure. Marlene has learned that non-sexual touch is the magic move for Bob. When he is frustrated, agitated, defensive, or scared; gentle touch on a shoulder or knee or his chest will almost always calm him down. Couples have responded to us saying that touching him is manipulating him. “No,” we reply, “it’s just giving him what I know he wants. And it doesn’t cost me anything.” We recently explored with a couple who has difficulties around this concept. One partner would (rarely) ask for something. The other partner would typically resist with “if you ask, I don’t want to give it, don’t ask me.” We were curious about where this person had learned that it wasn’t a good idea to respond generously to a partner’s request. After further exploration, we uncovered issues in both their families of origin around not asking for what you wanted, and not getting what you ask for.

Sometimes people say, “what if my partner isn’t this way towards me? What if s/he isn’t willing to be generous with me?” We recommend you do it first, and see what happens.

Ask yourself, “What am I willing to do to reach towards my partner, to help them feel more loved, more safe and more secure? What would be the most generous way to approach my partner?”