



creating greatness in relationships

Four Relationship Antidotes

By Jonathan D. Sherman, LMFT

In a previous column I identified four poisons that kill relationships. Now we will examine the four antidotes to these toxins. John M. Gottman, Ph.D., in his groundbreaking book, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail; And How You Can Make Yours Last* identified four keys to communicating effectively which when used collectively act as antidotes to the four poisons. They are 1. Calm down; 2. Speak non-defensively; 3. Validation, and; 4. Overlearning



Say how you feel. This kind of language is an art form that usually includes speaking with a soft voice, beginning with "I feel..." statements rather than "You..." statements, and the trust from the listener to be able to communicate effectively without eliciting defensiveness.

Don't mind read. Don't practice mind-reading by saying how the other person feels. Most find this disrespectful and rarely accurate to their experience. Instead, keep it focused on what you know about how you feel.

No armchair analysis. Do not criticize or try to analyze your spouse's personality. Trust me: people rarely want advice even when they ask for it, let alone unwanted advice they didn't ask for.

Play nice. Don't insult, mock or use sarcasm.

Be direct. Bringing up a complaint about a specific issue or behavior is actually one of the healthiest activities a couple can engage in. Complaints are about what's getting between the two of you in your relationship, not criticisms of the person. For example, "When you fail to call me to let me know you are going to be late, it makes me feel like you aren't considering my feelings and the fact that I will worry about you."

Stick with one situation. If "too many cooks spoil the broth" then too many issues ruin the conversation. Keep it simple. Address one situation at a time. It is far better to take a long time to resolve one issue well than a short time to try to resolve many issues and not resolve any.

See my article "Nine Rules for Fair Fighting: Everybody Wins" at bardos.net/resources for more strategies.

1 The First Antidote: Calm Down

However obvious this may seem it is rarely practiced. When we get upset our body is flooded by adrenalin and the electrical signals from the emotional part of our brain (limbic) transmit two times faster than the electrical signals from the reasoning part of our brain (neo-cortex). This is called "flooding."

Gottman explained that, "Calming down is the exact physiological opposite of flooding. When you're flooded, you are extremely upset and physiologically aroused. By calming down you take a direct step toward reversing that distress. Calming down is especially important for men since . . . they are more likely to feel physiologically overwhelmed sooner than women during a heated marital exchange" (p. 176).

Calming Down Strategies

Take a time out. It takes about 20-25 minutes for a person to really calm down both physiologically and mentally. If we re-engage too quickly into a conversation it is easier to get emotionally charged and say hurtful things.

Rewrite your self-talk. Most of us tend to rehearse negative thoughts and distressing events, which maintains the

very distress we don't want. Instead, use soothing and validating thoughts.

Try relaxation methods. Calming the body is one of the most effective ways of soothing distressed emotions as the body and emotional center of our brains act as hot-lines to each other. Three of the most effective methods are: 1. Sitting quietly; 2. Deep muscle relaxation, and; 3. Aerobic exercise.

2 The Second Antidote: Speak non-defensively

The best way to speak non-defensively is to use praise and admiration. Gottman stated, "The single most important tactic for short-circuiting defensive communication is to choose to have a positive mindset about your spouse and to reintroduce praise and admiration into your relationship" (p. 181-182).

Makes sense. So do it. Plants grow with water, not vinegar. Relationships grow with praise and appreciation, not criticism and defensiveness. See my article "Building Strong Families with Appreciation" at bardos.net for more ideas.

Strategies for Speaking Non-defensively

Remove blame. Remove the blame from your comments.

3 The Third Antidote: Validation

Gottman explained that validation "... is an antidote to several of the [poisons]—criticism, contempt, and defensiveness. Instead of attacking, or ignoring your partner's point of view, you try to see the problem from your partner's perspective, and show that you think that viewpoint may have some validity. . . . Validation is a real art and has many gradations. At the top of the scale is true empathy and understanding"(p. 195). Remember my equation that validation does not equal having to agree with the other person (Validate ≠ Agree).

Validation Strategies

Take responsibility. Don't say "You made me mad." Own your own feelings. Your anger is your anger. You make yourself mad in reaction to others not because of others. Don't blame your anger on others.

Apologize. When you say you are sorry don't ruin the apology by saying, "I'm sorry, but...." "But" is the great invalidator. Avoid it like the plague. Instead, say "I'm sorry." With the emphasis on the "period."

Compliment. Seek out opportunities to praise and encourage. For example, give honest praise for handling a difficult situation well.

Keep it simple. Do the minimum as Gottman suggested by, ". . . simply listening to and acknowledging your partner's point of view, even if you don't share it, can work wonders (p. 196).

Listen to understand. Gary and Joy Lundberg, authors of *Married for Better, Not Worse*, explain that to validate another person we must: 1. Listen by giving full attention; 2. Listen to the emotions being expressed; 3. Listen to the needs that are being expressed; 4. Understand from the other person's point of view. See my article "Listen Deeply" at bardos.net/resources for more validation strategies.

4 The Fourth Antidote: Overlearning

Gottman cautioned that, "When you've had one successful fight using these techniques, you may think you've mastered the strategies" (p. 199). While encouraging, we must take care as this early success can set up a false sense of security. Instead, remember that, "Each time you rehearse being non-defensive or validating is new and different and it's important to keep trying, even when you're tired and don't feel like it. Eventually these strategies will become more automatic. . . . The idea is that if you overlearn a communication skill, you'll have access to it when you need it most—during an argument or heated fight.... That's when all of this overlearning will pay off" (pp. 199-201).

Overlearning Strategies

Practice. Overlearning means to master these above skills as well as the skills of creating awareness of the four poisons and practicing being committed to avoiding/refusing the use of those poisons.

Practice. Overlearn so that you can use them habitually, even when we are not at our best, tired, stressed, upset. Just as in sports or music we practice a lot more than we actually play or perform so that we are able to be our best in the moment of trial.

Practice. Some people think that just learning the principles is enough (i.e., all the great self-help books that people only read part way through before going on to the next book instead of reading a little, practicing it a lot, reading a little bit more, practicing a lot, and so on). This is likely the most overlooked and underused principle I see in the process of human change.

Practice into habit. Don't stop practicing when things get better. Keep practicing, training, etc. Stay on the top of your relationship game knowing that that which is perpetually maintained, improved upon, and enhanced not only doesn't wear out it actually appreciates in value.

When we identify the poisons in our relationships we can avoid them. When we discover the antidotes we can apply them. Both help us not only effect a cure but with them we can create truly great relationships.

Visit bardos.net/resources for more articles and strategies for creating greatness in your relationships. The *Great Relationships Workbook* which is full of articles, worksheets, exercises and activities to help you create a truly great relationship is now available at bardos.net



Jonathan Sherman is a Licensed Marriage & Family Therapist and Relationship Consultant specializing in creating "greatness in relationships." His focus is on self-mastery, couples work, and parent training. He is experienced in assisting people learn how to improve their marriages, their parenting and themselves through skill development, life coaching, overcoming depression and anxiety, stress and anger management, and addiction recovery. He teaches extensively on a wide range of relationship topics. He is the founder of Bardos Relationship Consulting and The Relationship Wellness Series™. He is married to a lovely and skilled husband trainer. They live in eternal bliss (okay, fairly peaceably) with their four children in the Rocky Mountains of Utah. You may reach him at 801.787.8014 or jonathan@bardos.net. You can also find many FREE articles and relationship resources as well as subscribe to the FREE Great Relationships eZine at www.bardos.net.