

Relational Madness

"**H**ow did we get so angry and defensive? Our relationship started out so well. We saw others acting like their mate was their enemy and said 'That will never happen to us. We love each other too much to treat each other that badly.' But here we are; saying such rude, hateful things to each other." Relational madness can really happen to anyone, even us."

Maybe this is where you are in your marriage, or close. A relationship with someone you love has become negative, unhealthy and (maybe) even destructive. Turning angry patterns around or staying out of the downward cycle of defensiveness is not a simple matter. Though the suggestions below have helped many, no article can replace a Professional Counselor if violence or abuse exists in your relationship. If this describes your home life, there IS help available; it's just a phone call away! 1-800-799-SAFE (7233)

Many relational interactions, however, have not escalated to that level of '**RELATIONAL MADNESS**.' Though a Relational Life Coach or Marriage Counselor might be definitely helpful, your conflicts are still in the 'normal' range for problems (if there's such a thing); dealing with problems most couples encounter. For these couples, the following relational suggestions are among the first most often considered when an individual or couple seek out my services as a Relational Life Coach. Though not exhaustive, the following may help lower the MADNESS and improve the RELATIONAL connection in your marriage:

AWARENESS - Though you might assume a person has self-awareness if s/he seeks help for their relationship problem, actually, the opposite is often true. Sometimes an angry partner's attention has been so laser-focused on the failures, mistakes or 'what's lacking' in their spouse, their self-awareness is almost non-existent. This can be a result of many things too complex to consider in a short article, but certainly worth your personal self-examination: an Externalized locus of control, Shame-Blame Pattern, Unmet Emotional Needs, Over-Controlling Personality, Fear-Fight Response, Unrealistic Expectations, Co-dependency, etc. This short list mentions only a few, common causes of losing touch with your own 'inner world' (i.e. lack of connection with who you are, why you're doing what you're doing, your feelings, motives, unresolved issues and - most important - what God is doing in your heart).

Occasionally, but not always, focusing exclusively on our spouse's downfalls is a way we unconsciously avoid dealing with our own pain, grief, unresolved issues and the FEAR that can take hold of our heart. It's possible our actions ... that look like **RELATIONAL MADNESS** ... are communicating instead, "HELP - I need you to get your life together because I am falling apart - I need to lean on you!!!" AT other times, we may unknowingly be making a desperate attempt to control something in our life (anything), because we feel so out of control yourself - in our inner world. Unfortunately, attempting to control others actually raises our internal anxiety, rather

than reducing it. Self-control is really the only 'control' within our reach. That requires shifting our focus to ourselves.

ACCEPTANCE - When we make a focal shift, rather than externalizing all the blame to the other person, we begin to realize both parties have (most often) contributed to the current situation. Recognizing that toxic, relational dynamics are usually co-created is not meant to blame or shame you. Many times, we fall into the 'either/or' trap (e.g. It's either ALL your fault or ALL mine). That's rarely the truth. Usually, a pattern is co-created. For example, your spouse may 'avoid/not address' problems; this makes you angry or fearful, so you 'pursue & push' him/her to deal with them. Consequently, s/he shuts down and avoids more' which raises your fear and anger. You can see how patterns/cycles continue, even worsen, because the REAL problem is never addressed: FEAR. The fear that tells your mate 'to avoid conflict at all cost and the fear that drives you 'to pursue a solution no matter what.'

By accepting each of you have (in all probability) contributed in some way to the current 'madness' and realizing you are both driven by fear and past patterns, rather than any desire to hurt one another, you take an important step away from blaming/demonizing your mate, falling into the 'Powerless Victim' trap or critically judging each other. Acceptance is not resigning yourself to an unhealthy relationship, pretending there isn't an issue or choosing to passively avoid problems. Instead, healthy acceptance, in relationships, is acknowledging that both parties are 'human' (not perfect).

This mature understanding of our 'humanness' is a recognition that each of us have a complex mixture of strengths and weaknesses, successes and failures; wounds and patterns from childhood as well as choices and responsibility in adulthood. An acceptance of this 'humanness' in ourselves and others keeps us from judging others too harshly; we humbly come to terms with our own 'clay feet.' We resist 'good and bad guy' thinking - our tendency to think only in black/whites - and stop ourselves from saying 'never' and 'always.' In reality, if we really wrap our minds around the 'human' in each of us, we might toss out the 'should statements' we use to condemn ourselves and others, lower the resulting, defensive anger and relationally connect in caring ways.

ADJUSTMENT - Yes, acceptance is a critical element to eliminate MADNESS in our relationships. It requires the most fundamental, of all, adjustment in the relationship. Every relational interaction is experienced by each of us as primarily 'for' or 'against' ourself (our person, interests, plans, etc.) Often, when **RELATIONAL MADNESS** is present, one or both individuals EXPERIENCES the other person as against, or 'not for' them. This may be expressed in numerous ways: "Don't you care about me - my goals, needs, feelings?" or "You aren't interested in me; it's always about you." Sometimes it isn't verbalized at all. It look like 'throwing in the towel' or a passive-aggressiveness (underlying) anger that gets expressed as criticism, contempt, defensiveness, refusal to help the other person, etc. WHATEVER it takes, this area of your relationship must be restored if a healthy relationship can be realized.

First, ask yourself, "Do you, honestly, care about your partner's interests (needs, feelings, goals, etc.) as much as your own? Sit with that thought a few minutes before you answer. It's quite easy for any relationship to, unknowingly, become a tug-of-war, a power struggle, especially when a couple hits challenges in their life and both individuals become overwhelmed. Sometimes, without realizing it, we become 'takers' or 'demanders' rather than 'givers and receivers.' Sometimes, if our mate becomes a taker, we become a 'resister' or a 'refuser.' In the midst of life-challenges, consider if the foundational dynamic in your relationship has morphed into two self-protecting individuals feeling like the other person no longer cares. Does it feel like you are pulling 'for' your partner or working 'against' each other? Remember, focus awareness on yourself, not on your spouse. Where are you? Pulling 'for' your spouse?

ANGER-INTELLIGENCE - As you consider your own actions and attitude, try to pin-point when you no longer valued your spouse's interests (needs, opinion, feelings, etc.) as highly as your own or when you felt your mate no longer had your back. Anger-intelligence, though my own term, is a vital aspect in any long-term relationship. Navigating misunderstandings, arguments, hurts, life-disappointments, unrealized expectations and human failings is NOT easy. Learning to experience anger with insightful self-control, process it with objective empathy and express it with forgiving humility is one of the greatest challenges we all face.

To top it off, it's not unusual to feel justified if we lay into our spouse in anger, rather than realizing our unskilled handling of this powerful emotion (anger) has probably made the situation worse. VENTING may release the energy we experience internally when anger builds up but, like a volcanic eruption, it often scorches everything in its path. Being INTELLIGENT about your anger suggests you find out what is fueling it; what it's connected within you. Though you may believe it's solely your spouse, and it's true - occasionally, we ARE "provoked to anger" - most often, however, something within our inner self is being triggered, as well.

Perhaps you no longer feel your spouse is 'for' you or you feel attacked, minimized, disrespected or unfairly treated in some way. Anger can also be related to unmet needs, unrealistic expectations, entitlement, poor self-esteem, grief and past, unresolved problems. Sometimes, anger is connected to bitterness, unforgiveness and/or a desire to revenge; anger is also connected to depression in a few, but not all, cases. If you aren't sure when your anger started, it may be time to involve someone who can help you. If you do know when, where or why your anger exists, it may be time to address these issues ... especially if your anger is poisoning your current relationship. 'Owning' our anger is the intelligent thing to do. Until you own it, you won't address or resolve it.

ADDRESS - Hopefully, your insight has improved and you've got a pretty good idea how your **RELATIONAL MADNESS** began, where it slipped off its track or what your personal contributions might be. You may have gained some hope, awareness, direction or motivation to improve your relationship. Where do you start? How do you address the problems you've noticed? Let me suggest you begin by addressing you. Though a relationship is co-created by both individuals, meaning one person is rarely

entirely innocent of any/all contribution, the only person you can control or change is yourself.

A relationship is as healthy as each person in the relationship is healthy. If you address any unhealthy, relational dynamics you are aware of in yourself - while still realizing your spouse is a contributor, as well - both you and the relationship have the potential of improving. This is not an admission of all-blame in the relationship nor a choice to turn a blind's eye to unhealthy contributions of your mate. In contrast, this suggests a person use their own Voice and Choice to heal, grow and change what they have both the right and the responsibility for: themselves. In relationship, this may suggest better boundaries, voicing your feelings without attacking your spouse (assertiveness) and other actions which have personal and relational ramifications. However, the focus of change is YOU and your relational contributions rather than attempting to change or control your spouse. As a general rule, when you have finished addressing your own 'inner world' issues and problematic 'relational contributions,' you are ready to humbly and gently address your mate's unhealthy contributions, choices and 'humanness' that is spilling over into your life, but not before we acknowledge and take responsibility for our own.

ACKNOWLEDGE - One of the most difficult things we do in relationship is acknowledging our mistakes, failures, wrongs, selfishness, etc. to others. Our knee-jerk is to hide, minimize or going on without repairing the relational damage we have done. Nothing, however, heals a relationship like a heart-felt apology. Yet, as reparative as it is, many things stand in our way ... the pride that says 'they started it.' The anger that says 'they deserve it.' The hurt that tells us 'were justified' and the resentment that screams, 'it's not fair!'

But what of love? What does love tell us? When your relationship began, before his/her 'humanness' became so apparent, weren't there words of love, loyalty and care. This person was your best friend; your soul mate. You had each other's back and shared each other's future. How much is it worth to get that connection back? How about acknowledging 'no more and no less' than you have done wrong? A simple apology - without justification or blame. If you aren't ready, wait until you can do it simply and genuinely. Broken bones need to be set; cuts need tending. What is true of our bodies is true of our heart. Relationships can heal, if repaired well.

ASK - After you've taken your own journey of discovery, consider asking your partner to read this article. Don't tell him/her what's wrong with them, what they need to change or apologize for. Ask your spouse for a fresh start, a non-defensive conversation and beginning again - to work together to rebuild your marriage. Ask for professional help if the suggestions here seem grossly insufficient for your marriage or relational problems. Asking for help takes tremendous courage but may save a primary relationship, keep a family together or help children grow up knowing both parents. If you are in a violent or abusive relationship, asking for help may even save your life or the life of your child. For that degree of problems, Contact the Helpline Now: 1-800-799-SAFE (7233).

For others who need a Relational Life Coach, I'm available physically in North Carolina and by phone almost anywhere: 321-277-6493. For those of you who just needed a little insight, some further encouragement, a step-in-the-right direction, I pray this article has helped. If you show signs of **RELATIONAL MADNESS**, please remember these seven suggestions:

Increase your own 1) **AWARENESS**, 2) **ACCEPTANCE**, 3) **ADJUSTMENT** and, 4) **ANGER-INTELLIGENCE** and then,

In Relationship, 5) **ADDRESS**, 6) **ACKNOWLEDGE** and 7) **ASK** to journey together to rebuild healthy, relational interactions.