Healthy Relationships

Letting Go of the Past

Studies show that people who enjoy healthy relationships have more happiness and less stress. Research also reveals that the way in which people think, feel, and believe in their adult relationships is a direct result of their past relationships and early experiences, extending back to childhood.

Many of us carry into our adult relationships the dysfunctional behaviors we witnessed and learned as children. If your parents separated or divorced, or if one parent abandoned the family, you could have adopted the same behavior patterns that prompted these events.

If your relationships in the past were stormy or troubled, you can start now to undo attitudes and behaviors that might have contributed to an unsatisfying personal life. By understanding how early circumstances have had an impact on your life, you can begin to overcome negative habits and thinking that can affect your relationships now and in the future.

Building a healthy relationship is similar to building a house. First, we must clear the land by doing away with the dysfunctional behaviors. This is hard work that takes time and often assistance from others. Then we must lay a foundation of willingness to communicate, care, and commit. Finally, we construct one story of the house at a time. We start with casual contact, move to companionship, then to friendship, and ultimately, if appropriate, we top the structure with romantic love and committed love.

Skip any step in building a house and the structure will be unsafe and might collapse. The same is true for building relationships. If you omit an essential step, you put the relationship in jeopardy. At first, the relationship can seem sound, but as time passes, flaws begin to show and the framework starts to sag. When a storm comes along, the relationship might break apart.

Take Time to Be a Dad Today

Strong relationships are based on shared interests, experiences, and trust that establish security and stability. Healthy intimacy allows people to feel close without fearing rejection and be vulnerable enough to show love without being mistreated. Yet even healthy relationships, in which both partners aim for mutual respect and happiness, have ups and downs, stretches of closeness and separateness, and periods of turbulence and peace. However, with a solid foundation, you will be willing to communicate because you know your views will be heard. You will be able to trust, even during tough times, because you believe your partner will not deliberately hurt you.

Maybe you have had relationship issues with people in the past and want to make a fresh start. Follow a few fundamentals to get started:

- **Be honest.** Parents are not always honest with their children, particularly when they are involved in a separation or divorce. Consequently, the children might believe they cannot trust their parents and grow up expecting dishonesty. Such lack of trust can grow into feelings of insecurity that spill over into relationships later in life. In your adult relationships, being consistently honest can create an environment in which love, forgiveness, and healing can occur.

- **Deal with uncomfortable issues.** Some parents believe children should be seen but not heard. They do not allow children to ever disagree with them, tell them how they truly feel, or bring up topics that make them uneasy. Under these circumstances, children can develop a harmful approach to communication that carries into their adult relationships. A healthy relationship thrives on the ability to talk to each other and work through conflict systematically and thoughtfully.

- **Express your feelings.** All relationships involve emotions, both positive and negative. But identifying and sharing feelings in appropriate ways can be difficult. Prevent feelings from building up and exploding into a bigger problem. Speak respectfully and try to communicate your feelings in a way that increases the chance the other person will listen. Truthful communication about your emotions, and acknowledging *their* emotions, shows your loved ones you care.

- **Have the courage to grow close.** Young people who live through the separation or divorce of their parents, or who might have been sent to live with relatives or friends, often feel ignored or abandoned. You might have interpreted such circumstances in your past as meaning nobody could ever want you or love you. The fear of being rejected again can create an emotional distance between you and others well into adulthood. Understand that relationships do not have to bring pain and disappointment. You have the opportunity to love and trust others, and be loved and trusted by them.

As fathers, how we conduct our adult relationships has a direct effect on our children and grandchildren. The way we interact with our children's mothers, our wives, our girlfriends, and other women in our lives becomes the model for how our sons will relate to their girlfriends, wives, and daughters. The opinions and actions our daughters see us demonstrate toward women shape their expectations of how they will be treated by the men in their future.

Overcoming your fears and dealing with past mistakes allows you to move forward with establishing positive, fulfilling relationships. You do not have to make the journey alone. Change and growth often are easier with the support of a trusted friend, pastor, or counselor who can help you identify and confront your emotional realities. You also might join a neighborhood or faith community fathers group where you can share your experiences with others on a similar path. Together you will discover that although building healthy relationships takes time, hard work, and patience, the rewards for you—and your children—are significant.

More About Healthy Relationships

BOOK

The Way of the Wild Heart: A Map for the Masculine Journey by John Eldredge
Available in print and on audio CD

ONLINE

TwoOfUs.org
Web site sponsored by the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center that features tip sheets, expert advice, discussion forums, and researched-based resources for individuals and couples in romantic relationships.

Take Time to Be a Dad Today

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Administration for Children and Families
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