



Caregiver Support Line Audio Recording - Transcript

Series: Care for the Caregiver

Topic: Leaning into Love: Building Strong Relationship Bonds

Hello. I am so pleased that you were able to set aside this time to listen to this presentation.

We all know how difficult it can be to take the time to focus on you and your own needs, so I hope this presentation will be a worthy use of your valuable time.

The topic for this presentation is, "Leaning into Love: Building Strong Relationship Bonds." I want to start by giving you a bit of an overview that describes how we will focus our time.

Why was this topic title chosen? Well, it was chosen to underscore the notion that in order to get the benefits of a loving relationship, we must be willing to lean in. We must be focused on the act of loving as something we do, something we give, as opposed to something we get. It is a bit of a paradox that you have to give, in order to get, but in fact it is true.

In a culture that has such Hollywood expectations of love, it is easy to get convinced that love is something that we just receive, something that does something to us rather than it's something that we must invest in.

The Hollywood version is a love that "knocks you off your feet, makes you starry-eyed, and takes your breath away." The reality is, sure there are moments of magic, but one thing is for sure, every loving relationship requires that each partner invests. Each partner must lean in, must contribute, and must feed the relationship in order to keep it strong and growing.

With all the challenges our love relationships face, how do we keep investing in this partnership, particularly if we are caring for someone with medical, and mental health concerns, our own health challenges, financial, and work stresses, caring for children, and a home? It is a challenge to balance all this and continue to invest in our relationship. Truly it is an amazing testament to this love commitment that we are able to endure, given how many ways a partnership could be tested.

We will look at some practical tools that you might incorporate into your daily practice so that you might better negotiate the expected conflicts and differences, and identify some



simple tangible skills you can engage in to build, restore and maintain the love that brought you together in the first place.

Okay, let's get started.

There is no doubt that all relationships are confronted with struggles that are challenging to negotiate. I guarantee that no matter how wonderful your relationship, all relationships can expect conflict.

Some of the differences that are inherent in any relationship may be perpetual sticking points or reoccurring conflicts, and some will be resolvable conflicts.

We all choose a mate not only for what we love but also choose the one whose differences will teach us, or balance us, in ways that are very important for us. As a result of these differences, all relationships will have both perpetual conflicts and resolvable conflicts.

It is a normal and expected part of every relationship to have differences and conflict. Relationships work when you are willing to learn from your differences, and navigate them without being destructive to one another.

If you and your partner's conflicts have escalated to the point of threats or violence, it will be most helpful first, to get help individually to sort out what you need to do in order to free your relationship from the threat of violence. There is help available at the Domestic Violence Hotline. They can be reached at 1-800-799-7233. We encourage you to reach out for this support if this is what you are struggling with. Safety is the priority and always comes first.

A particular researcher, named John Gottman, has studied couples interactions and wrote a wonderful book for couples named *The Seven Principles for Making a Marriage Work*.

He identified particular behaviors that couples engage in during conflict that are destructive and some rules of fair play that couples can engage in to preserve their relationship.

There is a wealth of wonderful and practical direction offered in his book and we will touch on just a few of them in this presentation.

First, I do think it helps to know that it is normal to have conflict and normal to find there are some differences that will remain even in the best relationships. Secondly, given



that conflict and difference is an expected part of every relationship, the important thing is how you engage in this expected conflict that is critical.

There are certain strategies that people engage in that will most definitely keep the conflict escalating. The destructive strategies that I will describe and that you may recognize will take a conscious decision to stop in order to avoid this behavior draining the love and closeness that you might enjoy.

Research has shown there is a direct correlation between one's ability to use rational, logical, problem solving skills and the degree to which you are distressed, feeling threatened or emotionally flooded. The more distressed someone is, the less clear and less rational their thinking will be. One important thing to keep in mind is that although you may be angry, annoyed, disappointed and hurt, it is really helpful if you can try to be calm enough to make your upset feelings known in a way that doesn't come across like a tidal wave or explosion.

Furthermore, if your partner is feeling so stressed that they can't have a reasonable response to your feelings, both of you would be better off at that point to take a break until you both calm down.

When people are emotionally flooded or threatened there are things that we can look for, behaviors that show that on the inside, that tell us the person feels overwhelmed. Notice the signs of being flooded. For instance, maybe you see their eyes flutter or close. Maybe they start right in with a defensive remark. Maybe they tighten their jaw or raise their voice or hold their breath or sigh. Maybe they turn away, or act like they are doing something else.

If you notice this in yourself or if you notice your partner doing this you may want to take a breath. Maybe even say, "OK I see you're getting upset," or "I am getting upset. Why don't we take a break and talk about this in a half hour or so when we calm down?"

Maybe you realize your approach was rough and you want to start over. Say that. "Maybe I said that the wrong way. I'm sorry. Let me try again."

If you let yourself and your partner have a break or get some space, often times you can both say what you're upset with, but also work through it better if you are both a bit calmer.

There are also some very typical destructive behaviors that people engage in during conflict that Dr. Gottman's research identified. These behaviors will most definitely



contribute to getting stuck in conflict, and can contribute to a loss of love and connection.

Listen for them in your next conflict and try to put the brakes on them. These behaviors which I will describe in more detail are: criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling.

The first one I will describe is criticism. Criticism is when you take a complaint, which by the way we will all have with one another, and you go from one individual behavior or incident and you make this a global accusation. By that I mean using, "you always do this or you never do that." Then to make matters worse you add a personal criticism such as, "You are this kind of person," or you make a reference to them having a bad character or bad intentions.

So let's say the complaint is that there was no gas in the car. "I thought you said you were going to fill it up?" This is a simple, straight forward complaint of a onetime event. No assumptions of bad character are made, just a statement of fact. Versus -

"I thought you said you were going to fill up the gas tank. Why can't you ever remember anything? You are so selfish. The only one you care about is you!"

Do you hear the difference? So when you have a complaint go ahead and make it but be careful to make it a specific, a onetime event. Keep the judgments of the person out. Name calling such as, "You are so selfish," or assuming that you know someone else's intentions are negative, is unfair and destructive.

The next destructive behavior is contempt. This is when you make your upset feelings or complaint known with sarcasm, mocking, eye rolling, and name-calling. This is very corrosive and really is relationship poison. It is sending the message to the other person you are disgusted with them.

Now, there may be a whole lot of hurt or disappointment or frustration that one feels to get to the point where you behave this way but, it is not going to get you anything but stuck in conflict and a loss of closeness.

So start by noticing when you do that, and put the brakes on. Apologize and find a respectful way to share that you're upset.

Next is defensiveness. This is when you or your partner rushes to explain, deny, or fend off any acceptance of responsibility for what the person is saying.



Defensiveness is really an argument or explanation back that says there is no truth or validity to what your partner is saying. It is taking the concern and tossing it back at your partner.

This will keep the argument going because the person isn't going to feel like you hear them.

If you feel your partner is being defensive or if you find yourself being this way, it's ok to name it. Try to simply pause. Try to take some responsibility for that grain of truth, or ask your partner to look at things from your point of view.

Finally, the fourth defensive behavior is called stonewalling.

Stonewalling may happen as the end result of an individual feeling criticized, or attacked. It is an attempt to just retreat, tune out the distress, and close yourself off.

Because stonewalling is often the result of feeling overwhelmed, it is really helpful when this is happening to find ways to calm down, soothe yourself, or soothe your partner so they are not so compelled to disappear.

While this defense may avoid the conflict, it also ultimately contributes to people shutting one another out and living separate lives, becoming lonely and disconnected.

So look for this shut out. Look for ways to try to calm down and then find ways to get back together; to not let the distance remain.

Now, let's focus on building the love.

What researchers have found is that it isn't the conflict, per se, that is the major factor that contributes to relationships falling apart or the primary cause of divorce. What is the major cause in relationships falling apart is a loss of friendship, a loss of connection, feeling isolated and alone in your relationship.

There are very tangible, positive, realistic ways to bring that connection back. It truly is within the power of every committed couple to contribute to, to build or restore their loving connection.

I want to share two quotes that I liked which reinforce our focus. The first is by philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. He states: "It is not a lack of love, but a lack of friendship that makes unhappy marriages."



The next quote by author Anais Nin also confirms this point. She says, “Love never dies a natural death. It dies because we don’t know how to replenish its source.”

Does this seem too simple? Couples that remain together are not without conflict but are those that in many small ways every day are “leaning in,” contributing to and maintaining their attention, affection and friendship for one another on a regular basis. This is not magic, but it is the magic that makes relationships work!

Many times our hurts and disappointments cause us to pull back, to hold out, and to wait for the other. This, while understandable and protective, really just will result in more of the same distance and lack of connection.

If you are counting what you give, and making sure you get back, you may not find the result you so desire. If however, you can risk giving to your partner in small ways each day, you can build and rebuild the connection that will help you both.

So, how might we start this “leaning in?”

Well, one way maybe is to remember. When was the last time you thought about your initial meeting? What attracted you? Was it their beautiful eyes, or smile? Was it the way they carried themselves? What did you admire about them? What was the magic that drew you together? Let yourself reminisce.

These are the embers that need to be tended. Neglecting, not attending to these embers will result in the fire going out. So why not remember? Reminisce with your partner about your beginnings. Return to the original story.

How else might we fan the flames?

Well, another way is by knowing your partner, being that best friend, being aware of what matters to them, asking about it, knowing what they like, their friends, their goals, their desires and really paying attention to this over time.

We all change day to day so we need to keep updating our knowledge. How does it feel when someone really knows you, knows what you are up to, and up against, knows what you may need or how you are feeling?

We can update this knowledge any time. Check in at the start of the day and ask, “What’s on your plate today? What is your plan? Is there anything you are looking forward to or anything that you are concerned about?” Simply by being curious about our partner, we are building the connection. There is so much to be curious about and



this can be the building blocks that contribute to your foundation of friendship and a more vital, loving connection to one another. So, consider learning more about your partner.

Another way to build your resilience and grow your love connection is to remember and revive your attention to the qualities in your partner that are the qualities that you are attracted to, the qualities that you admire, the qualities that represent the values and characteristics that you appreciate.

If we have forgotten or neglected to mention appreciation to our partner, letting days or weeks or months go by without a compliment, it is easy to see how the connection can fray. It is easy to see how quickly one can feel like they are not special or valued. We can commit our attention to recognizing and speaking on a daily basis what we love and value in our partner.

See what happens if you decide once a day that, "I am going to think about one quality that I admire in my partner. I will not let a day go by without some form of compliment or appreciation."

Pay attention. Maybe your partner is interesting, fun-loving, elegant, attractive, strong energetic, caring, affectionate, organized, handsome, gentle, sexy, sweet, relaxed assertive, or protective.

Think of your partner and the situations in which you admire or appreciate them. What keeps you from sharing them when you notice?

Certainly all relationships require that both partners contribute to the commitment, but oftentimes people hold out waiting for the other to reach out, give in, and commit. Think of all the compliments and notes, special meals prepared, the phone calls and flowers and special attention you showered on your new relationship. That is why it felt so wonderful in the beginning. It was because you were so attentive and so generous in giving of yourself, and attending to your love. It is within your power to bring that attention back and to receive the inherent benefits of such giving.

Focusing on the negative, will get more negative. Giving compliments, affirmation, giving your loving attention, not only will build our partners up, it will also build a bond. Nurturing this bond with attention is like magic.

There is so much we can do to restore the freshness, desire, friendship, and loving connection with our partner. While certainly our relationships may have many



challenges, there are clearly very real and simple ways that we can fan the flames of connection that have the power of magic and that can turn disconnection back around.

Maybe you will take the leap of faith to lean into your love. Maybe you will decide to begin to remember and notice and commit yourself to your loved one.

In closing, I want to share the findings that I think are so hopeful in Dr. Gottman's research. He found that the couples that were doing well, that remained successfully connected long after attendance at his weekend workshop, hadn't dramatically overhauled their lives. They were simply engaging in what he calls the magic 5 hours a week. This is what the magic consisted of:

Partings Say goodbye in the morning and make sure you learn one thing about what is happening in their day.

This takes 2 minutes a day.

Reunions A stress reducing conversation at the end of each work day that takes 20 minutes a day.

Admiration and Appreciation Find a way to communicate genuine affection and appreciation.

This takes 5 minutes a day.

Affection Kiss, hold and touch when together and kiss each other before going to sleep.

This takes 5 minutes a day.

Weekly Date A relaxing low pressure way to stay connected.

This should take 2 hours once a week.

Grand Total =5 Hours.

A seeming small investment in keeping your partnership happy and sound.

I hope that these tools have been helpful and I encourage you to read further about John Gottman's hopeful and practical research in *The 7 Principles for Making a Marriage Work*..



I hope you found this presentation a worthy use of your time. Thank you for listening. If you are a Caregiver of a Veteran and would like to discuss any of the ideas offered during this presentation, I invite you to contact your local Caregiver Support Coordinator. You may also contact a social worker at the Caregiver Support Line at 855-260-3274.

Thank you for all you do.