

Three Big Mistakes That Successful Couples Can't Afford to Make

By Mirel Goldstein, LPC 2016

Being successful as a couple is not always easy, although most people in committed relationships would acknowledge that this is something they want. While each couple defines “success” differently, we all have ideas of what we want our significant relationships to look like. Some of us are better at articulating our desire than others.

While some people can easily put their needs and values into words, many others draw a blank when asked to verbalize their hopes and dreams for their relationship, as well as what their image of an ideal relationship looks like. But despite having difficulty describing what they want, most people do have some idea in mind. When your relationship doesn't live up to your expectations, it can be very disappointing. This can also be a great opportunity for change and improvement.

Did you know that “coupling” with your partner effectively actually takes great skill? Many people assume that it's easy and natural to know how to *be* a couple, but for many people this is in fact a great achievement. A healthy couple relationship is not just the sum of two parts, two separate individuals. Healthy couples work together to create a magic that is so much bigger and better than the sum of each person's strengths and weaknesses. But knowing how to tap into that magic involves a lot of steps involving our communication styles, expectations, independence, ways of approaching feelings of weakness, and the ability to open up about our feelings and thoughts. It also involves tolerating uncertainty. Intimacy is fueled by surprises and unknowns, and for those of us afraid of the unpredictable, we may have some internal work to do to be open to the rewards a well-functioning relationship can offer.

Most of us develop our ideas and dreams for our relationships based on what we've seen in our childhoods, or from idealized notions inspired by movies, fantasies, and wishes for what we didn't have growing up. Passionate fighting in one's family of origin may lead to an image of a relationship in which only intensely passionate emotions are considered legitimate expressions of one's love, even if sometimes this includes passionate expressions of hostility, anger, or anxiety. For others, such fighting in childhood may lead to a wish for calmer waters and to seeking out the opposite of what was seen at home. The same could be true for any type of family dynamic or experience, whether it's an idealization of simplicity versus a wish for material affluence; ideas about the meaning of family vacations, gifts, and birthday parties; or even just something ordinary like what it means to have fun. We learn from experience and we hope and wish for the things we've longed for but never had.

When our relationships fit well with our templates for the ideal relationship, all seems well with the world. When our partners do the things that we expect them to do, it's easy to feel successful in the relationship. But, of course, things don't always go as planned. And even couples who seem to do well for a while sometimes run into trouble when thrown a curveball in the relationship, in life circumstances, or in expectations. And that's when couples have to revisit their expectations and desires. That's when it becomes crucial to be able to name your needs and desires and to reevaluate your hopes and fears. Couples who do that can get back on track. They can either redefine success or do things differently to get back in line with earlier definitions of success. And while the process is not always easy, and sometimes couples wish they didn't have to struggle through to get to what they want, couples who do the work are usually happy they did. Struggle brings us closer.

So, here are some important mistakes that you can't afford to make. These are mistakes that I've seen unhappy couples make, and more importantly, mistakes that healthy couples tend to avoid.

1. Covering up vulnerability with anger.

Yes, it's hard to be vulnerable, especially when you feel hurt, raw, and betrayed. It's easier to fight and it's easier to blame. Saying "I'm sorry", or "I need your help" is much harder than saying "It's your fault". Saying, "There's something I need from you that I'm not getting and that makes me feel so scared...or lonely...or sad" is so much harder than saying "If only you would stop doing x,y,or z, then I would be happy". Yes it's harder to say those things, but it makes all the difference. Couples need each other. Couples who cover up hurt with anger don't end up getting what they need and don't end up getting through. Couples who can let down their guard and stop being self-protective or defensive start to respond to each other in ways that create success. Soon I will share with you some guidelines for successful sharing of emotional vulnerability.

2. Trying so hard to be heard that you forget to listen.

This one sounds easy but it is really so hard! We hear something we don't like and get so defensive that we don't even listen long enough to understand what our partner is actually saying! We choose "being right" over *listening to understand*. The successful couples that I see actually listen to each other, even when they're hurt, angry, or confused. The partners have the patience to let each other talk, before each one jumps in with his/her own comeback or self-defense. Just try noticing how long *you* actually listen before you start to speak and you might just be surprised!

3. **Judging your partner's feelings.**

It's easy to tell a person not to feel what he feels, that he's wrong to be upset, or that he imagined all the things that are bothering him...but this shuts communication down.

Feelings are not right or wrong, but couples *do* judge when things get heated up, and this is so destructive. Intimacy is about feeling safe to share things that we don't usually get to share. So, if we have to worry about being judged by the one person who is supposed to be the safest for us, how can we truly connect? Being told not to cry, not be angry, not to be hurt, or that our feelings aren't logical or don't make sense is one of the deepest wounds that a partner can inflict on us...and successful couples know how to listen without judgment. It might take practice to get this one right, but believe me, it's worth it!

Here are some tips for making your vulnerability work for you:

1. **Start small.** The everyday things that feel a little vulnerable to us are great places to start; small things like a passing feeling of sadness, a fear, a moment of embarrassment, an unmet need, or even anger. We tend to avoid sharing these things because we don't want to "mess up" the status quo. But these small pieces of vulnerability are key to closeness and emotional intimacy in relationships. Pick something that feels a little bit vulnerable but that isn't so raw that you'll never want to open up again if you don't get the exact response you are looking for from your partner, and dive right in to share it.
2. **Be willing to explain.** It's great when our partners can read our minds, especially when we're sharing something we feel sensitive about. But it's really not that often that our partners are truly able to be successful mind-readers! Be willing to clarify what you mean and don't expect it to be obvious. If you're sharing something personal and your partner takes it the wrong way, for example as a criticism, be non-defensive and willing to listen and to try to say what you mean in a new way.
3. **Be a safe person for your partner to share with.** Don't ever take a vulnerable disclosure and "throw it back" at your partner during a fight. Sometimes we hide our vulnerability when we're feeling it the most. Your partner may share something and look completely calm and comfortable, only to be feeling completely sensitive or raw on the inside. Learn to look beneath the surface and learn to read your partner's signals so you'll know where to be most sensitive.

4. **Both partners have to share!** Someone has to go first, but if one person is doing all the emotional risk taking and the other is playing it safe, then it's going to turn into a power dynamic rather than a safety zone where both of you can constantly discover more and more about the other.
5. **Remember that there is always so much we don't know about the other!** People are constantly changing in their minds, and are always becoming aware of things that were not previously conscious. If your relationship is a safe place and both partners are sharing on a regular basis, there won't ever be a need to look anywhere else for a sense of excitement and allure! The fact that there's so much we don't know about someone we have been with for so long is a good thing, the key to a sense of constant rediscovery.
6. **Keep a vulnerability journal.** Each person can share one thing each day that feels a little bit hard to share. Whatever goes in the journal gets treated as sacred.
7. **Practice listening without fixing.** Ask permission before you respond, react, or give advice.

It doesn't really matter *how* you define success, *what* you want, or *where* you've been until now as a couple; if you can learn to listen *long enough*, to listen *without judgment*, and to say what you *really feel* in a way that your partner can feel it too, then you can be one of the most successful couples out there and you just might be surprised at how good that can feel!

Want to talk more? Feel free to contact me at mirelgoldstein@gmail.com to discuss setting up an appointment.