

CONTROL

Last week I pointed out that in any committed intimate relationship there are only three issues that affect couples. These three issues are freedom, affiliation, and control. I pointed out how every relationship problem and solution is a cocktail of these three ingredients. If you want to understand what is wrong or right with your relationship you need not look further than these essential human concerns. Over the next few weeks I will look a little at each of these issues and how differences in each partners needs and felt responsibilities in each of these areas is what creates serious conflict for couples.

Let's look at the issue of control in your relationship: Control is essential to your survival. Whether you like to admit it or not, you do attempt to control and influence your partner. Some people do it actively while others do it passively. The control and manipulation of our world is what makes us human. If our relationship is not giving us the safety that we need we take steps to change things. This is natural and healthy control.

Think of your own relationship and the degree to which you feel controlled by your partner. That is, the degree to which you feel your partner pressurises you to conform to his or her way of doing things. You may complain about this by saying that you feel you are put under pressure, that you have to conform, that if you don't do what you partner wants you will suffer some consequence, etc. In fact most people, in relationship, feel these things to greater or lesser degrees.

In your relationship you need to feel you have some control or influence over your partner AND you have a responsibility to accept the control and influence of your partner.

Having Influence:

Our attempts to control and exert influence over our partner can run from telling them what to do in an attempt to be helpful to trying to force them to do something against their will. Your control therefore goes from trying to dominate, coerce, and pressurize your partner to trying to influence your partner in a positive caring way. So there is negative and positive control. The former involves the domineering and disrespectful attempts to gain your partner's compliance and the latter the respectful attempts to positively influence your partner's behavior.

Therefore, control is vital because to feel you matter in your relationship you need to feel that you have influence and that your partner is willing to accept it. You know you have this when your partner says things like "You know, I never thought of that, that's a really good idea" or "Thanks for your help with that, I really did not know what to do!"

Accepting Influence:

But not only must you feel that you have influence or control, you must also accept influence and control. You must not only respond to positive control like taking your partners good advice, you must also be somewhat tolerant of his/her negative control like being told what to do! Some of you will have great difficulty in accepting influence or control and will respond defensively to many of your partner's ideas or

suggestions. You might do this by quickly quenching their ideas or suggestions and re-asserting your position as the one who is in control. We all know control-freaks – people who are so insecure about their authority and strength of character that they need to diminish their partner’s contribution and influence at every possible opportunity. Just as men can be controlling and abusive of their partners, women can become shrews who scold and patronize their husbands. Hyacinth and Richard come to mind!

This is particularly important advice for controlling and self-righteous men who imagine that their partners are supposed to submit to them as it is for compulsively controlling women who imagine they are married to weak and ineffective men

The controlling individual rarely says things like “You know, that is a great idea!” or “I am really interested in what you are saying. Tell me more.” Etc.

So control is about how you accept and exert influence and it can be positive or negative. .

Therefore you will notice that most relationship problems are framed in terms of power and control struggles. For example: “He just does not listen to me anymore” means he does not accept my influence. “We can’t communicate or talk about things without fighting” means we reject each other’s influence and seek to enforce our own. “He just does his own thing separate from me” means either I have lost my ability to influence or he does not accept it. “I am afraid of his abusiveness and anger.” means he uses negative control and coercion.

So how you and your partner regulate issues of control is vital to relationship stability. Your job is not just to accept influence but also equally to exert influence in a positive and assertive way. Some women I work with find this latter responsibility very difficult. I sometimes find that when a client complains about her partner not listening to them that some of it is due to her reluctance to use her power in a positive and influential way. This can equally apply to parenting and how a parent may be reluctant to exert assertive influence.

If you have difficulties in this area you are normal and healthy. Everyone does. It is when it becomes a predictable and increasingly negative cycle of you feeling either powerless or of having too much power that you need to change things.

For now just try to get a sense of how the management of control is so critical to domestic harmony.

Freedom

Now when we talk about control we are also talking about freedom. This is so because, in behavioural terms, the opposite of controlling someone is setting him or her free. Control and freedom are opposite ends of the same continuum. When we resist control we are fighting for freedom. So just as the need to have control over our environment is vital, so too is the need for freedom. The issue of freedom is spoken about in terms of human rights and dignity across the world, although it has been somewhat neglected when we consider its place in committed relationships because, in some way, people might equate marriage and commitment as a loss of freedom. However, I will be emphasising here that rather than being a peripheral concern for people in relationships, it is central. As the flip side of control, it arises in virtually every relationship struggle.

In your own relationship think about the degree to which your partner promotes your freedom. To what degree does your partner encourage you and set you free to be the person you are meant to be? It is amazing how often I hear metaphors of freedom and control being expressed by couples in distressed relationships with the following kinds of statements: “I feel trapped”; “This feels like a prison”; “We need to break free”; “I need to escape”; “He is a control freak”, “I can’t get her to do what I want”, “She has never set me free really.” Etc.

Balancing control and freedom

How a couple balances the needs for control and freedom is one the three most critical tasks faced by any couple in a committed relationship. Our concerns about control and freedom are not abstract intellectual concerns but deeply emotional needs that cut to the heart of what is at stake for most couples in relationship. At the most elemental of levels people need and ache for freedom and, at the same time, people seek to control and pressurise others.

When we appreciate how central and deep are our concerns about control and freedom we get a sense of how many relationship problems are symptoms of this deeper struggle to find the right balance between control and freedom. When the issues go unresolved they pop up in a hundred different disguises that *feel* like a different problem every day.

Later we shall look at these issues in detail and help you to assess the degree to which these issues are problematic in your relationship or within yourself. (For example we can project our need for freedom onto another because of our inability to self-emancipate.)