

Acceptance:

No matter how much we have in common with the one we love, each of us remains a unique human being. And no matter how much we love each other, the differences between us will eventually lead to conflict. We feel hurt, ignored, resentful, or angry. Our arguments often make the problems worse. Something's got to give, and we usually nominate our partner as the one that has to give.

Sound familiar? If so, you are not alone. Trying to get your partner to change when strife seems to be pulling your relationship apart is human nature. It is easy to understand your own point of view; it is much harder to see where the one you love is coming from. That your relationship would improve dramatically if only he or she would see things your way and make a few little alterations in behaviour seems like an obvious conclusion.

As you undoubtedly know, however, trying to change another person, even when motivated by love and loyalty toward you, is a tall order. Eliciting change from your spouse without demonstrating acceptance of his or her unique position is difficult, often impossible, as I have learned after 20 years of practice in the area of couples and family counselling.

Most of you probably think that most of your problems can be solved with communication skills and problem-solving. We usually believe that with these efforts positive change will ensue. Most couples I meet state that communication problems are their core problems. Good communication and good problem-solving skills work.

However, we know from research and experience, that despite our best efforts problems often do not go away. In fact, in one out of every three problems, communication and problem-solving appears not to work.

What is more important with these problems is to be focused more on acceptance than on change. Every person in an intimate relationship has to discover ways of accepting the normal incompatibilities in a relationship. If you can find a position of acceptance of another person's vulnerabilities and inadequacies then many needs for change evaporate.

In a movie called *The Blue Sky*, with Tommy Lee Jones and Jessica Lange, she plays an emotionally volatile wife of an army officer. In one scene, they and their two daughters enter a dilapidated house that will be their new home in the army base. Upset at the move and the condition of the house, Lange has a major emotional outburst and tears down the curtains, knocks furniture around, and then jumps in the car and screeches away. Tommy Lee Jones runs after her, eventually rescues her, and brings her back home. The next morning, as she sleeps, the girls are still upset about the incident. Jones tries to comfort his daughters and explain his perspective to them. He assures them of his own and their mother's love for them. He uses the metaphor of water to explain their mother. Just as water can be liquid or steam or ice, so their mother has many shifting properties, he says. He tells them "I made a decision a long time ago to love her basic properties".

His explanation dramatically illustrates what we mean by acceptance. Jones clearly experiences pain from his wife's emotional outbursts, yet he is able to tolerate that pain, recover from it, and accept it. He sees her specific behaviour in the large context of her

whole life – as just one of her shifting properties. He sees her behaviour in the context of their life together. In dealing with her outbursts, he never seems weak or submissive, but strong and loving.

To accept someone is being able to tolerate what you regard as unpleasant behaviour in order to understand the deeper meaning of that behaviour. Acceptance does not mean being submissive which comes from a position of weakness. Submission means enduring something when you feel you have no alternative. We must not accept abuse or degradation, but we must find noble ways to accept the human imperfections of those we love.

Acceptance comes from a position of strength because you know who your partner really is.