

Self-esteem in relationships:

When people get involved in emotionally committed relationships they tend to think that maintaining a decent relationship is a rather routine thing. Partners and spouses, we tend to think, go about their business in a down-to-earth and matter of fact way. We tend to assume that, in a normal intimate relationship, there should not be much at stake in everyday interaction. But we would be wrong. What we find in intimate relationships is that a person's view of themselves is often hopelessly dependent on the reflections they receive back from their partners.

The fundamental task that every emotionally committed relationship is faced with is truly monumental – it must protect both partners at their sorest points; their fragile self-esteem. In intimate relationships you expose for scrutiny and possible intolerable undermining the one thing you need most: the positive self-valuation we have so painstakingly fashioned through our life. With stakes of this magnitude there can be nothing routine about family or intimate life. Every encounter is a hallowed event.

Every marriage has its “face rituals”. Each partner, initially at least, entrusts her face to the other, and has the right to expect that they will handle it gently. ‘Face saving’ and ‘face handling’ is not a kind of vanity or insecurity but a basic anxiety-buffering function of relationships. When we show ‘face’ we are offering to the other person our sense of self for scrutiny and possible sabotage. We must appreciate that nothing in life is riskier than this.

There are two needs to be met: to offer one's self to the relationship while at the same time maintaining a sense of being a separate person. On an everyday basis we present ourselves to our partners through simple dialogue, greetings, and disclosures. At the same time, we know and respect their separateness. Certain codified distances are necessarily kept – we don't blow our partners nose nor take them to the toilet! Nor do we feel their feelings or know their daily thoughts. So there is a delicate tension to be balanced in relationships – between approaching and withdrawing. It is a recognition of our partners separate self and at the same time feeling one has some claim on it.

We help maintain this balance by a necessary degree of self-containment. When we feel hurt by our partner it is because they have not acknowledged and taken care of our self.

For example, rituals of farewell and greeting become very important because they are symbolic recognitions of one's precarious self. When we say goodbye to our partner we are releasing them from the relationship container. This release must be gentle and not an ejection or escape into isolation. Watch lovers saying goodbye and the gradual prolonged transition from togetherness to separateness.

Emotionally committed relationships have to show the self the proper deference; even in intimacy one has to maintain an appropriate demeanour and code of conduct. We must be mindful of ourselves and of the other. We must be honourable and proud. We must still be sensitive to boundaries of separateness while involved in intimacy. You don't just say what you think or feel. You don't submerge your partner in your private indulgences. Social sensitivity is as important in adult intimate relationships as

it is in everyday life. Goethe said that there was a “courtesy of the heart that is akin to love”. The courtesy is the delicate handling of the partner’s self. The love is the control of oneself so that the relationship can endure and thrive.

We must respect not just our partner’s body but also the aura of their personalities. Surprisingly, couples need ceremonials for distance as well as ceremonials for engagement. Having such rituals recognize the necessity of closeness and distance. If our partner offers us a cup of tea in the evening we don’t just say “no” – rather we intuitively realise that this simple everyday gesture involves an intimate ceremony of engagement which if honoured is responded to with respect. “No thanks, I had one earlier, but thanks all the same,” you might say. This, very simply, is the courtesy of the heart. We miss the point entirely if we assume that we do not need such sensitive rituals.

In family life, marriage, and emotionally committed relationships, words are one of the primary ways we control our happiness and self-esteem. The proper word or phrase, properly delivered, can be the highest attainment of interpersonal character. We realise that everything can hang on the proper sound. We see therefore the power that comes simply from “I am sorry” or “It is wonderful to see you!” or “I am so proud of you.” You know this to be true because just think of how much time you spend in anguished self-recrimination because of saying the wrong thing at the wrong time. “If only I had not said that”.

A fundamental task of marriage is to see the other person as someone of primary value. Without this we cannot love or act. If we say the wrong things, if we shirk from the responsibilities of sensitive care of the other person, we frustrate the possibility of having a meaningful relationship.