

EMOTIONAL ARCHITECTURE: THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF A SUCCESSFUL ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP

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How do people achieve it? How do they develop a successful romantic relationship, when so many odds are stacked against them? Witness the high divorce rate, single-family households, stresses of everyday life. The world is increasingly complex, making effective communication difficult, long-term commitment illusive.

“Emotional Architecture” is written with this dilemma in mind. As a psychotherapist in private practice in New York City, I have spoken with many patients longing for stability and life-long love. For many, it appears to be an unattainable fantasy. Their families were not role models that presented this reality, nor were others, be it extended family or friends’ families. The positive template was missing in their conception of how a positive relationship develops, functions and thrives. In “Emotional Architecture,” I put forth 10 underlying building blocks that represent my core beliefs and have helped individuals and couples I see forge more satisfying, loving relationships. These 10 components are respect, love, sex, trust, listening, communication, empathy, support, appreciation and apology. These important concepts can be developed in couples, once their awareness increases and they demonstrate a desire for change.

Respect. I believe respect is the most important foundational element of a successful relationship, for without respect, all other factors become difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. By respect, I mean consideration or thoughtfulness. Respect for difference. No two people are alike. Differences are not deal breakers but can infuse life into a relationship. Carol said this to me in session: “Once I get his commitment, then I want to change things about him. Then he’ll be the partner I want him to be.” This does not work, and our goal is to appreciate the person for whom he or she is, not as we hope him or her to be. People change when they’re ready to change, if they want to change, not when we want them to do so.

Love. A key element is love: warmth for another, affection, generosity of spirit, regard for the needs and wants of another. We all love that feeling of being in love. The first blush of romance is intoxicating, but long-term love needs care and attention to ensure its longevity and good health. Love changes over time and deepens intimacy and commitment.

Sex. The warmth and tenderness of emotional and physical closeness can enhance the good feeling and commitment to another. And can defuse arguments and help a couple reconnect. Couples need to be honest with each other about what each wants and needs, be desirous of self-enjoyment and the giving of pleasure to one's partner. Too often, sex becomes a bargaining tool, one of control and power. This is a dangerous game to play, and it has little positive reward.

Trust. Erik Erickson, the well-known psychiatrist, wrote in the 1950s about the eight stages of man. He presented the steps of social and emotional development, each of which should be managed and completed to proceed satisfactorily to the next stage, from childhood through adolescence and adulthood. Erickson's first developmental task was basic trust versus basic mistrust. Trust allows one to feel safe and secure in the world, to be loved and to believe that his/her wants and needs will be attended to. As adults, trust is earned and should not be freely given. Only when someone demonstrates that he/she is trustworthy shall we feel confident to trust our deepest thoughts and feelings to that person.

Listening. One may think that just hearing what another says is listening, but that is but half of the equation. Listening with full attention, double-checking our understanding of what the other has said, not assuming that we know what the other is thinking or feeling. Being open-minded and respectful. Being fair.

Communication. Speaking, listening, being attentive and confirming the accuracy of what someone has said to be sure the meaning is clear. As one dictionary entry defines it, "a sense of mutual understanding and sympathy." An open dialogue free of judgment or recrimination. A "time-out" can be an effective device before a disagreement escalates. This self-imposed break gives each person a chance to decompress before regrouping to discuss the issue and will enhance the ability to communicate more effectively.

Empathy. Being able to put yourself in someone else's shoes. When one can empathize with another despite a difference of opinion, one can respect and validate someone's feelings or thoughts. Then there is a better ability to understand. Empathy may not be inborn and may need to be learned, but I believe one can become empathic toward another through awareness and practice.

Support. Being loving and supportive of one's partner is critical to the long-term health of a relationship. We may not always agree with our partner's decision or thought process, but we support the right of

another to have a difference of opinion. Supporting one's partner in time of need, life transition or family crisis will yield huge dividends for the future. One is supportive not with a scorecard being kept. We all need someone, and life is too difficult to go it alone. Being dependable and consistent are traits of enormous value in demonstrating support of another.

Appreciation. Expressing one's appreciation for what another has done for us, or appreciation for whom our partner is as a person, is underappreciated as an important value in a couple. Perhaps it's a particular behavior one wants his or her partner to change. When the partner notices this behavioral change, thank the other. Acknowledge that it meant a lot to see one's concern taken seriously. This will reinforce positive change and will likely promote other changes.

Apology. Saying you're sorry and meaning it are important behaviors to foster in a relationship. We all make mistakes, and acknowledging them to our partner, without judgment or criticism, are of immeasurable value. Heartfelt, sometimes with humor. Few things can clear the air as quickly as an honest apology. I have seen this demonstrated in my work with couples, and this apology can validate one's feelings and thoughts and ease the defensiveness one may be harboring.

I often say to patients I see that a satisfying relationship should not be so hard. Drama may keep some relationships alive and indicate that one cares, but constant crises are not desirable traits in most relationships that last. Respect is your foundational support. If you can incorporate this and the other nine building blocks into your relationship, you are well on the way to having the loving, committed partnership you seek.

References

Erikson, E.H. (1968). *Identity Youth and Crisis*. W. W. Norton & Company.