

THE IMPORTANCE OF ATTITUDE/INTENTION

By Marlene & Bob Neufeld

In the book "Getting Real", Susan Campbell talks about two main attitudes or intentions with which we can approach each other: the intent to relate or the intent to control. We have found that exploring our attitude and intention are essential when wanting to make changes in our relationships. We can learn wonderful tools, but when we use them with the unconscious intention to control or keep ourselves safe, then our relationships will not change. In our work with couples we sometimes talk about this as "openness to learning."

Openness to learning includes an attitude of appreciation, wonder, curiosity, and discovery. Openness to learning is about connection rather than separation. It involves taking response-ability, the ability to respond in the here and now. When we are open to learning we have the intent to relate, or to simply and directly share our own experience with someone else and to be open to hearing about their experience. This is motivated by the wish to know and be known, to open ourselves to another so they can see and perhaps empathize with our experience and so we can see and perhaps empathize with their experience. Relating involves revealing, it is about shared learning and mutual understanding.

Being closed to learning includes attitudes of expectation, judgment, someone being right while someone else is wrong, entitlement, defensiveness, attacking, justifying, assigning blame, going silent or withdrawing, getting edgy or snappy. When we are not open to learning; we often have the intent to control in some way. We are trying to control someone else's thoughts, feelings, behaviour, choices or actions – all things we can't control. Controlling comes from the need to be comfortable and safe, to avoid feeling awkward or uncomfortable. The paradox is that true safety comes only from within, not from anyone else. Once we totally let go of our ability to control others, then we find safety in ourselves.

As Campbell says, "Control-oriented communication tends to backfire on you; it often leads to the exact opposite of the result you were hoping for. It also leads you away from your present experience."

Relating does not mean that others will always agree with you. But when you are truly relating you do not have to have others agree with you all the time. When you are truly curious about yourself and others, you'd rather speak and hear the truth, even if it's disappointing or uncomfortable. Relating is about focusing on and sharing your experience of whatever is happening in the present moment, what we call the "unarguable truth." You observe what is going on in the present, you notice your thoughts, feelings, and body sensations. You report them as yours, not as something anyone would agree with. For example, if someone is an hour late meeting you, instead of saying "You're rude, you always show up late, you never really want to get together with me, do you?" you would say "I heard you say you would be here at 6 pm and it is now 7 pm and you have just arrived. I notice that my shoulders and jaw are tight and I feel angry. I am making up a story that you didn't really want to get together tonight."

By using the phrase, “I am making up a story...” or “I’m imagining that...” you claim your perceptions, thoughts and stories as your own. You open up a possibility that your partner might agree or not. Your partner might respond with the intention of controlling by defending themselves or justifying their behaviour. That then gives you another opportunity to relate by once again reporting your thoughts, feelings and body sensations. On the other hand, if your partner is also interested in relating, they might respond from that intention and say something like, “I am an hour late and I did not call you. It makes sense that you would be angry and be making up stories. I am happy to see you and am open to hearing more of your feelings.”

In our work with couples, we frequently hear one person say to the other, “I feel that...” (with emphasis on the word “feel”). What they are really saying is that they have a perception and that there is some emotional content. However, somewhere they learned that if their perceptions and emotional content was shared as a “feeling” then it could not be disputed. But, our partners do often tend to want to dispute it, as their perceptions and emotions may be quite different. A useful question we might ask ourselves is “Do I want to be right? or to love and be loved?”

When we realize that we have been not open to learning, or control-oriented, we have found the best thing to do is love and accept ourselves as we are. Then we do whatever we can to get open to learning and interested in relating. Some suggestions for that are:

- ♥ Exhale deeply
- ♥ Move our bodies
- ♥ Become mindful and notice what is going on inside of our bodies
- ♥ Place our non-judgmental attention on a body sensation until it changes
- ♥ Look at the issue from a different perspective
- ♥ Do something creative

We invite you to gather examples of where you and/or your partner were open to learning or were relating rather than trying to control each other.

Marlene & Bob Neufeld practice body-centered Coaching and Psychotherapy. They are a couple who help couples learn life-changing skills and create closer, more loving relationships with one another. To learn more, see www.marleneandbob.com or call 613-594-9248 to arrange a complimentary 1-hour introductory session.