Names used in this column are changed to honor client confidentiality.

Hiking Trail Lessons

Paralyzed with fear, Kathleen stopped suddenly in her tracks. The trail she was hiking with her husband, Zach, had come to an unexpected fork. They were assured, back at the visitors center, that all trails would be clearly marked. For the most part, that proved to be true, but definitely not now.

Zach motioned to the right. “Let’s go this way,” he pressed.

Kathleen didn’t budge. “I just want to go back,” she said meekly.

“No, let’s keep going,” Zach insisted. “It’ll be alright.”

Kathleen—reduced to the emotional age of a six-year-old—started crying. “I felt he wasn’t listening to me,” she said in our counseling session.

In truth, Zach was baffled. The intensity of her fear didn’t seem to match the circumstances. He tried to get her to snap out of it. “I told her she was being silly,” he said.

That tactic backfired. Her state of distress didn’t subside; in fact, it worsened. What Kathleen really needed at that point was supportive understanding—empathy. The same soothing attention a six-year-old would need.

Kathleen’s reaction isn’t all that unusual. It can happen to all of us when we venture too far from our comfort zone. Any significant threat to our sense of security can trigger our automatic fight-or-flight response. Instinctively, our bodies prepare us to do battle or run. Kathleen’s automatic response was to flee. She turned to go. Zach went with her. “I felt myself calming down,” she said, “even before we got back to the car.”

Unfortunately, Zach’s inner six-year-old wasn’t happy. “Living in Indiana, we don’t get a chance to hike in the mountains very often,” he said. “I felt it was a rare opportunity and that we should take advantage of it.” Because Zach is adventuresome, he felt the thrill of a challenge when they came to the fork; the exact opposite of Kathleen’s experience.

In their therapy session, Kathleen was critical of Zach for taking risks, and Zach was critical of Kathleen for being too cautious and rigid. For the sake of their relationship, they need to stop the criticism and appreciate how the other is different. Kathleen seeks security and predictability, while Zach seeks adventure and spontaneity. Neither is wrong—they’re just different.

In fact these differences attracted them to each other in the first place. She liked his daring adventurous spirit along with his optimistic, confident and light-hearted nature. He was drawn to Kathleen’s practical, down-to-earth side. She’s an avid planner, and she’s structured versus

spontaneous. He likes how those very qualities keep him grounded and focused.

I'd say they're well-matched. All they have to do is learn how to collaborate. It's a skill they could have used on the mountain, and who knows, the final outcome may have been a win-win instead of a joint loss. For starters, Zach could have utilized a more effective approach in helping Kathleen "snap out of it." He would have used empathy.

People who are in a near-panicked state, cannot engage in an objective, problem-solving discussion. Their brain and their emotions must be calmed first. They can do that for themselves by walking away for a few minutes or by being comforted by another person.

Empathy naturally comforts. It entails stepping out of the brain and moving into the heart. An empathic ear seeks to understand someone at the emotional level. If I feel empathy for you, it means my heart goes out to you. I'm not detached from your pain; I'm with you in your pain. At the foundation of empathy is listening. Looking warmly into Kathleen's eyes, Zach could have asked, "What's wrong?"

As she explained her fear, he wouldn't interrupt, he wouldn't downplay, he wouldn't advise, lecture, attempt to fix, insult or criticize. He would simply listen attentively. He might not understand her fear of unmarked trails, but he does understand fear. That's where he can connect with her experience and express understanding.

In their counseling session, Zach listened and in so doing learned the underlying cause of Kathleen's intense reaction: Her sheltering mom never let her venture far from sight. "She was always warning me," she said, "telling me what awful things could happen to me."

Kathleen also conveyed a painful incident when she was a young child involving a Ferris wheel. "I didn't want to go on," she said, "but my family made me." She remembers being petrified and seeking refuge by lying face down on the floor while her stepfather shook the car and laughed at her. Her mother did nothing.

Her feelings weren't listened to. She wasn't comforted.

By the end of our session, Zach was able to do what her mother couldn't.

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