

Names are changed to honor client confidentiality.

Relationships Thrive On Kindness

“Get macaroni!”

Those coarsely spoken words jolted me out of my mindless, shopping-for-groceries-stupor. Turning around, I saw a woman sternly pointing to a shelf containing boxes of macaroni. The command was directed at her male companion. It didn’t end there. In the next aisle, I had the good fortune of running into the same couple. This time, she ordered him to get her purse, which was in their cart a few feet away from them.

Quite possibly, she was concerned about having her purse stolen. But any fears she might have had about me as a purse-snatcher were groundless, because instead of wanting to steal her purse, I was fighting the urge to hand them one of my business cards.

I assumed the man was her husband, because potential mates aren’t generally treated so disrespectfully. A crucial ingredient for a long-lasting relationship is kindness—people treating each other with the same respect, courtesy and gentleness that characterized the beginning stages of the relationship.

John Gray, author of *Men are From Mars, Women are From Venus*, points out that we’re inclined to stop working on the relationship once we’ve “caught” the object of our affections. Gray says, “But just like being on the job, in order to keep it, we expect to still apply the same effort it took to land the job in the first place.”

Being in a relationship is not a managerial, put-your-feet-up-on-the-desk kind of position. It is blue-collar hard work, and kindness is the most basic component. As a therapist, I see many clients who are seeking relief and advice on how to deal with their partner’s unkindness. Some are so rundown by it, they’re entertaining thoughts of divorce.

Hannah is a prime example. She spoke of a particularly humiliating incident in which her husband called her “stupid” in front of their friends. “I wanted to crawl under the table,” she said. On another occasion, he swore at her for ordering the wrong soft drink for him. And while she’s watching TV, it’s not unusual for him to change the channel without consulting her. He justifies his rudeness by saying he paid for the TV. Hmmm, I wonder what would have happened if Hannah’s husband treated her this way within the first month of their meeting. Odds are against her wanting to marry him.

And then there’s Michelle. She finds it difficult to be around her husband’s angry eruptions. She described an occurrence while they were driving somewhere. Sitting in the passenger’s seat, she was peacefully absorbed in her thoughts—taking in the scenery—when suddenly the actions of another driver ignited him. His irate reaction jarred her from her tranquil space. Many such outbreaks had occurred previously during the trip.

Finally, speaking up, Michelle asked him to refrain from expressing his anger. She pointed out that being confined to a car left her devoid of options. "I can't just walk away," she said.

"This means I can't be myself!" he said, annoyed.

"No," she said calmly, "I only ask you to be your best with me as you are with friends and even strangers. You subdue yourself in front of others, so please grant me the same respect."

Freedom of expression is his right, but he's failing to take into account how it can affect the one he loves. Admirable as personal freedom might be, it shouldn't trump a higher code called compassion. Compassion for his wife should move him. An enduring and positive relationship cannot flourish in an atmosphere that lacks an abundant supply of kindness.

Long-term devotion blossoms where you have two people experiencing kindness. Not to say that there won't be snags and obstacles added to the mix, but those things will be dwarfed when placed up against a backdrop of kindness and consideration.

Relationships require ongoing maintenance and nurturing, like keeping the plants watered. Putting our best foot forward should become a habit, not something reserved for creating a good first impression.

Ty Wenger, a magazine writer and editor, provides a whimsical spin to preserving relationship well-being: "A good marriage is a bit like a pet boa constrictor: either you feed it every day or bad things happen."

As for the couple in the supermarket, in hindsight, a fitting response from me would have been: "Hey, in the total scheme of things, how important is macaroni anyway? Isn't it smarter to be shopping for a deliriously robust and thriving relationship?"

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