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A wellness newsletter from your local EFAP.

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It is possible that nothing in life is more important than our relationships. Relationships with family, friends, colleagues, and even with ourselves – these are the aspects of life that tend to be the most valuable, challenging, surprising and complicated. In this issue of live.work.well., we offer some ideas and perspectives to help you make the most of the different relationships you may have in your life. And, as always, please know that Upper Island Counselling is here to support you and your family with any life challenges you may be facing.

Relationship foundations: put on your own oxygen mask first

When most of us hear the words ‘fostering healthy relationships’, we likely think about how we can care for, attend to, and love those around us. We might ask ourselves how we can listen to our partner more fully, encourage open communication between us and our children, or show empathy to a close friend in need. It’s less likely, however, that we will think about our inner world and how it impacts our connections with others. This is unfortunate, given that our relationship with our self is truly the foundation for all other relationships in our life.

If you’ve ever taken a flight, you’ve likely heard the phrase “put on your own oxygen mask before putting it on anyone else”. Well, this applies to relationships too. So, how do we do this?

A critical place to start is with basic self-care. Eating, sleeping, drinking, and exercise are the first steps to putting on our ‘oxygen masks’. After the basics are taken care of, we can start to engage in self-care practices that nurture our emotional, spiritual, and psychological wellbeing. (For more about self-care read our July 2019 newsletter posted on our website www.uics.ca/newsletter).

Once we have established self-care as a priority, it’s time to consider practices that truly cultivate self-love and self-compassion. For those of you thinking, “I’ve heard of self-love, but what is self-compassion?!”

Self-compassion encourages us to:

- Be mindful of our moment-to-moment experience (because without that, we can’t do the following...)
- Be kind and understanding towards ourselves, even when times are tough. Rather than judging and criticizing ourselves, we offer ourselves acceptance, love and warmth.
- Acknowledge our experience as part of the larger human experience (you are not alone)

For those of you hearing about self-compassion for the first time – hang in here with me, there’s some serious research backing its benefits.

Self-compassion has been linked to lower levels of depression, anxiety, and stress as well as higher levels of life-satisfaction, self-confidence, and physical health. And in terms of

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Relationship foundations: put on your own oxygen mask first (cont'd)

external relationships, self-compassion has been linked to healthier romantic relationship behavior (i.e. being supportive and caring vs. controlling or aggressive) and healthy compromise and boundary maintenance in romantic and non-romantic relationships.

So, how do you actually do self-compassion? I'm glad you asked! There's a great online resource for those interested in this practice: <https://self-compassion.org/>. You'll find an in-depth description of self-compassion, activities to do, and meditations to guide you.

"Through self-compassion we become an inner ally instead of an inner enemy" K. Neff.

And, if self-compassion doesn't sound like your 'thing' - there's lots of other ways to foster self-love and self-acceptance. We can recommend readings and practices to help you develop a healthy relationship with yourself. Ask us!



The Changing Nature of Parent-Child Relationships

Relationships are almost always complex and parent-child relationships are no exception. One aspect of the parent-child dynamic that makes these relationships especially complex is the fact that one of the members is continually changing and developing at a rapid rate for the first 20 or so years of his or her life. For parents, this can feel like trying to play a game with constantly changing rules: just when you think you've got it figured out, the rule book changes and there's a whole new game to learn.

In addition, there's the fact that every parent and every child is unique. Therefore, there is no one-size-fits-all approach for parents to use at any given stage of child development. That being said, there are also some broad guidelines that can be useful for many parents to navigate the unpredictable terrain of child-rearing.

One way to make sense of the ever-changing nature of the parent-child relationship is with the use of three metaphors: the manager, the teacher and the advisor. For parents of very young children, it is usually necessary to approach the parenting role like a manager. Parents in this situation typically need to relate to their young children by doing things for them that they can't do for themselves, telling them what to do when the kids don't know, and generally managing and scheduling the various affairs of their lives.

As kids get older and more developed, parents can begin playing more of a teacher role. This includes helping kids learn new practical, "hands-on" skills as well as social, emotional, academic and critical-thinking skills, as appropriate. Of course, there may also be times during this broad, developmental phase when "the manager" still needs to play a role.

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PARENTING WAS MUCH EASIER WHEN I WAS RAISING MY NON-EXISTENT KID HYPOTHETICALLY.

- Mommy on Purpose

The Changing Nature of Parent-Child Relationships (cont'd)

For parents of mature teenagers and young adults, it is often best to play the role of an advisor. This means that the job of managing and teaching is more or less over. The kids are now out living their lives and the role of the parent is to offer advice if and when - and this is key - the kids ask for it. Nothing gets the hackles of an adult child up quite like the unsolicited advice of a parent!

Of course, as with most things related to parenting, the application of these three roles is not simple and clear-cut - the boundaries are often blurry at the edges. That being said, as a general rule, it may be useful to err on the side of playing the more mature parenting role when things are unclear. This means that if you are unsure if a given parenting situation calls for a manager or a teacher, try playing the teacher role first. Likewise, if you are debating between teacher and advisor, put on your advisor hat and see how that goes.

In summary, the parent-child relationship is complex and ever-changing. Simply trying to keep up with the changes alone can often seem like a full-time job. That being said, remembering the three roles of manager, teacher and advisor can help parents stay more-or-less on track. In doing so, regardless of what game is being played at any given time, you at least have a decent chance of being in the right ballpark!



Online Resources



For some additional reading on relationships check out these links:

www.gottman.com

<https://www.5lovelanguages.com/>

<https://www.whimn.com.au/love/intimacy/the-5-words-bren-brown-taught-me-that-changed-my-relationship/news-story/9e46020b8eda5903bad0b248ccf97d4e>

<https://www.parentingni.org/blog/parent-child-relationship-why-its-important/>

<http://www.kidsareworthit.com/>

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/lifetime-connections/201809/6-rules-healthy-friendships>

<https://www.fix.com/blog/health-benefits-of-friendship/>

A great relationship is about two things: First, appreciating the similarities, and second, respecting the differences.

We've got this gift of love, but love is like a precious plant. You can't just accept it and leave it in the cupboard or just think it's going to get on by itself. You've got to keep watering it. You've got to really look after it and nurture it.

- John Lennon

If you want a love message to be heard, it has got to be sent out. To keep a lamp burning, we have to keep putting oil in it.

- Mother Teresa

Love: We Don't Necessarily Speak the Same Language

John grew up knowing he was loved. His mom and dad rarely, if ever, told him, "I love you" but John knew they did. He knew because they were there when he needed them to help him with schoolwork, they took him to every one of his ball games, and they provided a safe, stable home for him and his younger brother.

John's wife, Erika, also knew she was loved while growing up. Her dad was very vocal about how proud he was of his family and he was sure to tell his kids and his wife he loved them on a regular basis. Erika's mom wasn't nearly as vocal about her love and Erika longed to hear her mom say, "I love you". She intuitively knew her mom loved her, but she had a stronger sense of love from her dad.

After she and John had been married for a few years, Erika began to feel unloved by him. He used to work in camp and when he didn't have phone service, he'd send her emails every time he had access to a computer. She loved to read his short but sweet messages. He told her how much he missed her and always signed off with "love you".

John took a different job that allowed him to be home with his family every night. When Erika eventually told him she felt unloved, John was very hurt and confused. Of course he loved Erika! Didn't he change jobs for her? Didn't he come straight home from work every night? Wasn't he a good dad, rushing home so he could be there for their many activities? Didn't he call Erika every day to ask her if she needed him to pick up anything at the store, and didn't she notice he took good care of their home and property? He was devoted! What more did Erika want?

She wanted to hear the words, "I love you," occasionally.

In his book, *The Five Love Languages*, Gary Chapman explains that people express – and perceive – love in different ways. The five love languages he identifies are (1) quality time, (2) words of affirmation, (3) gifts, (4) acts of service, and (5) physical touch. Erika's number one way of perceiving love is – you guessed it - words of affirmation. Hearing words of endearment, affection, and appreciation (or reading them in a note, a text or even a post on Facebook) speak straight to her heart. (This explains why she more readily perceived her dad's love for her than her mom's.) After they took the time to identify their own love language and that of their partner, they began to make consistent efforts to (a) let the other know what they needed and (b) show love and appreciation in ways their partner best perceives it.

John's primary love language is acts of service followed closely by physical touch. John began telling Erika he loved her every night before they went to sleep, and Erika offered to give him a back massage at least a couple times a week (both an act of service and physical touch).

Whatever type of love relationship you may be in – spouse, parent, child, close friend – you may find it very helpful to consider if the way you express love is the way your loved one feels it best. It can be very useful to learn what your loved one's love language is! You can get to know and understand each other better and make efforts to convey your love to them in ways they most readily perceive it. The more we feel loved, the more loving we become.

Take this online quiz (<https://www.5lovelanguages.com/quizzes/>) to get a sense of what your love language is and encourage your loved one to do the same. Then have a chat about your results. Chapman's book provides more in-depth information. We have it in our lending library at Upper Island Counselling and have found it to be a helpful tool for couples and for parents. So don't assume your loved one will really feel loved by the roses or chocolates you buy on February 14th - maybe they would prefer a walk to Elk Falls (quality time) or dinner at home (act of service and quality time combined). You may be surprised by the benefits of finding out!