



355 Metropolitan Avenue
Boston, MA 02131

CONNECTING WITH YOUR “COUPLE-NESS”

Andrew L. Miser, Ph.D.

The Heart and Soul of “Couple-ness”

The foundation of a partnership rests on a set of shared values that guide the partners’ choices and actions in life together. The values a couple shares together can be seen as intrinsic to their “couple-ness.” These values reflect the very heart and soul of their relationship, from the couple’s point of view, their “us-ness.” Some couples value mutual understanding, validation, openness, compromise, and friendship. Other couples value individuality, expressiveness, and passion. Still other couples value harmony, common ground, and autonomy. Couples who share and co-create shared values can have a very successful partnership in their marriage over the long-term (Gottmann, 1994)

When a couple co-creates and embodies shared values in their daily lives together, they express what is fulfilling to their relationship (Whitworth, Kimsey-House, & Sandahl, 1998). The couple expresses what is important to them through their words, their actions and their accomplishments. People around them, their friends and families, experience their “couple-ness” in palpable and real ways. The qualities that make their relationship unique and special communicate and radiate to everyone around them.

Whitworth, Kimsey-House, & Sandahl (1998) wrote that a valued life is a fulfilling life and a life lived as a “radical act.” When one thinks of the word “radical,” one thinks of going to an extreme; however, this is not what is meant in this context. The dictionary definition of “radical,” as an adjective, is “of or from the root or roots, going to the center, foundation, or source of something; fundamental; basic: as a *radical* principle” (Webster’s New World Dictionary, 1957). Couples who articulate and generate their core values are able to co-create a foundation for their relationship that is strong and durable. They share their “couple-ness” powerfully with others. Their alignment around what is important to them contributes quietly, gently yet powerfully to everyone they touch. As partners in life, their gift is giving the possibility and value of “couple-ness” to others.

Three Stable Forms of Marriage Partnership

There is no one set of values that a couple can adopt that will form the basis of an enduring, fulfilling marriage partnership. Each couple co-creates the values that are

important to their relationship. It is interesting however, that John Gottman (1994), a marriage researcher and expert, studied 2000 different couples and found that there were three stable forms of marriage, each formed on the basis of a different structure of values.

1. The “validating couple” listens to each other’s point of view, attempts to understand the other, and then finds a compromise. These couples tend to value friendship and emphasize the “we-ness” of their relationship. They value communication, openness, displaying affection, and sharing their time, activities, and interests with each other.
2. The “volatile couple” communicates from their own points of view and attempts to persuade each other. They are less interested in understanding each other’s point of view. They value openness and self-expression and they are willing to share both negative and positive emotions with each other. They value equality and independence in their relationship.
3. The “avoidant couple,” values peace and harmony in their relationship. When in conflict, these couples agree to disagree and avoid conflict where they feel they are going to get stuck. They minimize conflict and value a common understanding of marriage where their commitment to each other is very important, but sharing and companionship is less important.

Couples in successful marriages create a structure of values that forms the basis of their “couple-ness.” Gottman (1994) has found that all three kinds of couples above can have very successful marriages if they are true to what was important to them and if there is a healthy balance of positive and negative feelings and actions towards one another. When a couple is aligned in what is important to them in their relationship, their interactions with each other will be an expression of those values they hold dearly. When their behavior with each other is not in accordance with their values, they will experience a misalignment between what they say is important to them and how they behave in their relationship. If this misalignment is great, serious problems can present themselves for the couple.

The Values of Partnership

I have interviewed many couples about what they say are the central values that constitute their “couple-ness.” It is interesting that you can’t find the word “couple-ness” in the dictionary, yet they all know what I mean. They have shared with me those values that are central to their being a couple and those qualities that give them their experience of their unique relationship as a couple. Here is a list of some of those values couples have said have contributed to their sense of “us-ness” in their partnership:

- We are equals in the relationship.
- We stand that our relationship must work for “you and me.”
- We are committed to each other’s growth and to the growth of our relationship.
- We are friends in our marriage.
- We value listening and understanding each other.
- We appreciate the unique skills and abilities we each bring to our partnership.
- We have a common vision for our marriage and partnership.
- We actively co-create a vision of the future and of our life together.

- We are committed to being constructive in problem-solving and conflict resolution.
- We will not be intentionally hurtful or critical of each other.
- We are committed to collaboration and the sharing of tasks and responsibilities .
- We value fairness and equity in the relationship.
- We will be authentic and real with each other.
- We love, trust and respect each other unconditionally.
- We will share difficult and challenging times together.
- We will plan and work together to fulfill the vision we have for our future .
- We will see our relationship as “creative, resourceful and whole.”¹
- We are committed to being self-expressed in our relationship.
- We are committed to both our Individuality and the unity of our relationship.
- We are committed to contributing to our community and to society itself.

This is not an exhaustive list. We have all been with couples who have expressed their “couple-ness” through such values and qualities. One of the central values of many successful couples is that of friendship, a quality that is often present from the first times when the couple got to know each other. You can know a lot about your relationship by exploring what is important to you both in your unique friendship.

Explore your Unique Friendship

At the core of a successful marriage and/or partnership is real friendship. The dictionary definition of “friend” is “a person whom one knows, likes, and trusts” (www.dictionary.com). In exploring the derivation of friend, “frēond,” the Old English word for friend, was the present participle of the verb “frēon” or “to love” (www.dictionary.com). A friend literally is person you love.

To explore your unique friendship, find a comfortable place to be together, such as at home in front of the fireplace, outside in the park on a blanket or at dinner in your favorite restaurant. Take a look at the following questions and share back and forth in response to them:

- As my friend, what do I “know “ about you?
- As my friend, what do I “like” about you?
- As my friend, what do I “trust” about you?
- As my friend, what do I “love” about you?

Then, you can also share together in response to these questions:

- As friends, what do we “know “ about our relationship?
- As friends, what do we “like” about our relationship?
- As friends, what do we “trust” about you relationship?
- As friends, what do we “love” about our relationship?

After discussing these questions a bit, you might want to note the central and salient qualities of your unique friendship. These are the qualities that people see in your relationship. They are an expression of your “couple-ness.”

¹ Holding another person as “creative, resourceful and whole” is a central cornerstone of the model of co-active coaching, a paradigm of professional coaching developed by Whitworth, Kimsey-House, & Sandahl (1998).

Exploring What's Important in your Partnership

Another way you can explore what is important in your partnership is to take some time and share about key times you have shared in your life together. For instance remember together a time in your lives when life was especially rewarding or poignant. It might be the time when you met or the time when you were married or the time when you had your first child. Ask yourself these questions:

- Where were we?
- What was happening?
- Who else was present?
- What were we each experiencing?
- What was the quality of our time together?
- What was valuable for our partnership in that experience?

Jot down what was valuable to you both as you share with each other. Ask yourselves the question, "What values do we see from that time that are still important to us today?"

Here are examples of other times (in the past) you could explore in the same way Remember a time when you:

- Both knew you were in love with each other.
- Both were going to marry each other.
- Were adventurous.
- Were spontaneous.
- Overcame a huge obstacle together.
- Were victorious.
- Were inspired by someone or something in your life.
- Failed and were able to learn a valuable lesson.
- Were both sad and shared an intimate time together.
- Were in a big breakdown and had a big breakthrough.
- Were daring.
- Argued about something and then made up with each other.
- Had something miraculous happen.
- Were really lost and then found your way.

Each of these questions can be an access to exploring what is important in your partnership today. Ask yourselves the questions above and keep focused on this key question, "What values do we see from that time that are still important to us today?"

Create a list of those unique values of your partnership that you reveal in the sharing. You can use that list to create a collage of your "couple-ness."

Create a Collage of your "Couple-ness"

Here is where you both can have some real fun. You can create a collage to represent your "couple-ness." To create a collage, all you need is a piece of large poster board, scissors, a glue stick and a bunch of magazines. You can also use any other materials

you wish, such as personal pictures, crayons, markers, etc., to create your collage. This is playtime! Be as creative as you want.

It is very special to do this activity together, for instance, on a Sunday afternoon at the dining room table. Each of you go through your magazines and tear out pictures that represent what is important to you in your relationship. Each of you tear out between 20 and 25 pictures. As you do this, avoid thinking or analyzing too much. Trust your instincts. If a picture calls to you, tear it out and put it aside for the next part of the activity.

After you both have from 20 to 25 pictures, spend some time, sharing the pictures with each other. Let your partner know what “called to you” in each picture. How do you see each picture representing your “couple-ness?” As you share with each other, write down the key words (values) that you have both expressed.

Next, work (play) together to create your collage. Together, choose the pictures you both want to include in your collage. Trim the pictures the way you want them in your collage. You can first lay all your pictures out on the poster board or you can create the collage as you go. Either way, paste the pictures onto the poster board. Lastly, you can write the words on the back of the poster board if you wish. Place your collage in a prominent place in your home. Share your collage with others whenever you have a chance.

Schedule Time to Explore your “Couple-ness”

You can set aside time to engage in some of the conversations and activities outlined above. Many of these conversations are ideal for times you are home alone, out on a date or out to dinner together. These conversations can be fun, romantic and inspiring. I encourage you to regularly explore what is important for your “couple-ness.” I hope that this has given you a valuable tool that can promote possibility, partnership and passion in your relationship.

Andy Miser

Contact information

Andrew L. Miser, Ph.D.
Elysian Enterprises
355 Metropolitan Avenue
Boston, MA 02131

+1 617-942-2757 Work
+1 857-204-4926 Mobile
almiser@elysianenterprises.net
www.elysianenterprises.net

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