

Building Trust

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Often couples talk about rebuilding trust. The idea of rebuilding something you had before is a critical mistake in thinking. When you imagine you need to "re-build" trust, what you really need is to create something completely new. If your relationship fell apart, then it is going to need a new foundation to thrive.

If you are deciding to build trust with your partner, then there are some key distinctions to make. First, you want to ask what it is that you already trust your partner about.

Trust is contextual. You may trust your partner around many things; for example, to drive safely, to fix the plumbing, and to be a caring parent.

Second, ask what you would like to be able to trust? Here are some things I have heard couples name over the years:

- to tell the truth
- to manage anger rather than giving vent to it
- to listen with attention and curiosity
- to identify reactivity when it comes up
- to consider how one's behavior will impact family and partner
- to work through judgments and get to feelings and needs
- to express love in a way that meets the need for love
- to see each other's core goodness

Third, once you have named the kind of trust you want to build, check-in with yourself about how you are blocking or cultivating that trust.

Let's use the first one as an example. When I have worked with couples who are suffering from one partner's infidelity, the other partner usually says, "I want to be able to trust that they will tell the truth."

Tragically, I often see that when one partner dares to share the truth of a hurt and unmet need the other partner reacts with his or her own pain and unmet needs. The conversation quickly spirals into a contest in suffering. Telling the truth in this kind of dynamic does not create trust.

If you are asking your partner to tell the truth, ask of yourself, "What am I doing that makes it easy or difficult to express the truth?"

Truth telling happens at many levels. If the mundane truth telling of present moment experience is embraced, trust is built for more complex or vulnerable truths to come forward.

For example, when your partner expresses his or her truth about hating their job, you have the opportunity to respond with compassion rather than offer advice, make your own complaints, or tell him or her to be thankful to even have a job. Responding to your partner's sharing with your own agenda, advice, opinion, analysis or judgment, blocks the building of trust. Just a simple

response like, "Sounds like you were miserable today at work, huh?" Builds a safe space for sharing.

Lastly, it helps to make very specific requests of your partner. Let him or her know exactly what would build trust for you. For example, when building trust in regards to telling the truth, as your partner shares events from work, you might ask her to also share how she was affected. When you make these types of small and specific requests consistently and your partner responds willingly, trust is built over time.

Remember requests to your partner that sound like this, "Be more open, talk more about your internal world, be more considerate, be less reactive, etc." usually won't be helpful because they don't point to a specific and do-able action in the present moment. Instead, ask yourself: "If connection and trust were being built right now, what would be happening - what would I and/or my partner be saying or doing?"

Practice

Take a moment now to consider what you already trust with your partner, what you would like to build more trust around. Ask yourself if there any ways in which you are blocking the building of that particular kind of trust. What would it look like if that trust were being built - what specific requests would you like to make of yourself and/or your partner?