

You Ask Too Many Questions!!

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This is in response to a question I recently received from a listener from my NVClife podcast:

Dear Rachelle: One topic that causes a lot of distress in my relationship are questions, in particular “why”-questions. Generally speaking I have a great abhorrence of them, my partner loves asking them and seems to have an insatiable appetite for me to explain myself beyond my consent. Have you got any material on this thorny topic or would you turn it into a podcast?

I absolutely think this is a podcast worthy subject and I'm confident that the author isn't alone on this matter. There are many couples out there who struggle with this very same dynamic.

So let's dive in!

The first thought that came to me was something Marshall Rosenberg often said at his trainings:

“Never ask a question without first revealing what's in your heart.”

He would especially stress the importance of this if the questioning person has a position of authority. Lawyers, workers in the police force, bosses, parents, teachers... these can all be intimidating figures in our lives and it's hard to trust that answering a question asked by authority figures won't get us into trouble. So any resistance or skepticism is perfectly understandable. As well, the skepticism can be easily transferred to other relationships where the imbalance of power is perhaps negligible. A spouse or partner asking us, “*why didn't you pick up some ice cream*” or “*how did you get that stain on your jacket*” or even “*What time are we expected to arrive?*” .. any of these could ignite a heated exchange between two people. “*I'm just asking you a simple question! Why the hell do you always have to get so defensive?!*” Of course that last one isn't really a question is it!

In fact, beware of questions that sound like questions but aren't really questions: “*What were you thinking?*” “*How could you have said that to me?*” “*Why didn't you call me?*” When a person asks those kinds of questions, they don't typically want an answer to the question they're asking. To respond with “I didn't call you because I was in a meeting” doesn't address the underlying need for empathy.

You'd be better off responding with, “*I apologize for not having given you notice that I was going to be 20 minutes late.*” The person wants to know that you understand the impact of your being late. Your explanation, while probably valid, will only increase the person's level of frustration if it's the first thing you say.

In “*What were you thinking?*”, an empathic response might be, “It sounds like you're pretty upset that I accidentally ran the red light .. that you want me to know how scared you were? Am I close?”

In “*How could you have said that to me?*”, an empathic response might be “*Are you shocked and disappointed about what I said? Would you like me to exercise greater care and respect in my choice of words?*” Notice that I'm not using the classic NVC formula but a more relaxed version of it instead. The OFNR formula would sound more like this: “*Are you feeling shocked and disappointed because your need for respect and consideration hasn't been met in how I just spoke with you?*” You can say that as well of course but I personally find the former response more fluid and less stilted. It's entirely up to you though. The point is to try and connect more viscerally to what the other person is saying and somehow convey that you get them, even if you don't entirely agree with their perspective.

I've just spoken about how one might respond to these questions that aren't really questions. They're actually accusations more than the questions they pretend to be. But how about we look at how those questions might have been more honestly expressed to begin with? Remember: *"Never ask a question without first revealing what's in your heart."*

So let's revisit the question *"How could you have said that to me?"* If we reformulate this one using an NVC approach and coming from our heart, we might say, *"Hearing you say just now that I came across as cold and indifferent at the restaurant earlier with your family, I feel shock and disappointment. I would love some understanding for how much I was struggling in that moment to digest your what you were telling us about how challenging it's been for you to see your mother declining so rapidly each time you see her. I'm wondering if hearing this from me helps you to frame my silence at the dinner differently?"* I'm giving some context to the statement so that we have more to work with. Hopefully you can hear the difference between the two ways of engaging? One is a direct question that doesn't reveal what's going on whereas the second response is a full reveal. I'm hoping you can see how the manner of approach will impact the outcome? What we say and how we say it will either bring us closer or drive us further apart.

I think it's important to say at this point that not everyone feels drawn to conversations where people are being honest and vulnerable .. where a person is revealing themselves in the context of their feelings and their needs. So stay alert to the often fluctuating levels of openness and desire for close contact, both within yourself and others. As the two sayings go: *familiarity breeds contempt* and *distance makes the heart grow fonder*. The idea isn't to be in perpetual deep connection with others .. better is to be in connection with life itself and to have some regard for its various seasons.

I want to restate listener's question at this point because there's another layer that I perceive: *"One topic that causes a lot of distress in my relationship are questions, in particular "why"-questions. Generally speaking I have a great abhorrence of them, my partner loves asking them and seems to have an insatiable appetite for me to explain myself beyond my consent."*

What stands out for me here is: the place where *"insatiable appetite"* meets *"beyond my consent"* which could easily be described as *"discrepancies desire"* .. a term typically applied to sexual intimacy but it can apply equally to levels of desire vis-a-vis internal or external pressure a person might feel around revealing oneself.

I would really need some examples of the kinds of questions being asked in order to determine if the questions being asked in a genuine attempt to better understand their partner's motives and/or behaviours. Let's imagine that the answer is yes .. your partner really wants to better know you. I would encourage anyone who finds themselves in this situation and possibly cringing at the thought of having a partner better know you, spend some time reflecting on the questions I've included below. I also want to say here that there is no just right amount of revealing .. rather we want to track how our revealing and our withholding impacts our relationships with others and with ourselves.

Consider this as well: a good number of people confess to feeling desperately lonely despite being in a stable relationship. Why is that? As much as we say we want to be close to someone, we can also fear the closeness we seek. Why? Most often, this relates to early childhood experiences .. either our primary caregiver's love, care and attention was mostly absent, inconstant, or engulfing .. or a combination of these.

And as much as we might theoretically and mentally understand how history shaped us, these fears can be deeply embedded within our bodies. *The issues are in the tissues* as you might have heard before. And so our unmet needs of being fully seen, embraced and accepted on a deep visceral level and at a time when it mattered most in our early development, can continue to afflict our interactions even decades after the injury was first sustained. We may not even have a memory of it. Our bodies remember though and that's

enough to tell us that there's more going on underneath the surface than someone reports feeling an abhorrence for questions, or conversely, feels compelled to regularly track their partner in order to know what's happening for them.

So here are some questions for people to consider:

- Where is my question actually coming from? Do I really want to better understand the other person? Or do I really want empathy? Do I want to make them wrong? Or do I want to reduce my feelings of anxiety that arise in the face of uncertainty and inability to control outcomes? What's driving my question?
- Why do I feel so threatened by my partner's questions? Do I have a story running in my head that they are trying to find fault with me? (Which may be accurate by the way) Or that they want to know more much more about me than I am ready to reveal? Either way, how might I discuss this with my partner in a manner that deepens respect and acceptance for our differences?
- Why do I feel a need to press my partner with questions that he or she clearly doesn't want to answer? What do I believe I would gain by asking or lose by not asking?
- Are the questions I'm asking or hearing somehow threatening or overly probing?
- What am I hiding? What don't I want my partner to know about me?
- How much do I ultimately trust or not trust my partner?
- Humans are complex and at times full of contradiction. There are some parts of myself that on the one hand I genuinely want to share with another person, and yet on the other hand I feel too afraid to share. Why is that? What purpose does it serve? And in what ways does it interfere with me having full and meaningful relationships?

Those are a few questions to start the ball rolling. You might want to write some of your responses in a journal so that you can deepen your insight into your own resistances and dilemmas and at the same time increase your capacity to articulate them.

I hope something in what I've said resonates with readers and supports you in your respective relationships.

I conclude this post with some fine words from the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke where he speaks of marriage. And these words also apply, in my opinion, to anyone involved in an intimate relationship irrespective of marital status:

"The point of marriage is not to create a quick commonality by tearing down all boundaries; on the contrary, a good marriage is one in which each partner appoints the other to be the guardian of his solitude, and thus they show each other the greatest possible trust. A merging of two people is an impossibility, and where it seems to exist, it is a hemming-in, a mutual consent that robs one party or both parties of their fullest freedom and development. But once the realization is accepted that even between the closest people infinite distances exist, a marvelous living side-by-side can grow up for them, if they succeed in loving the expanse between them, which gives them the possibility of always seeing each other as a whole and before an immense sky."