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Relationships? Let's Be Smart

WORDS: Dr. Victor William Harris

It was Friday the 13th of May in 1994 when a rabid bat crawled through my eight-year-old son's bedroom window, fell on his bed, and crawled under his dark warm covers for refuge. Little did my son know when he went to bed that night, that forgetting to make his bed would turn out to be a hair-raising experience.

He went to bed about 9:30 pm and slept with the bat for almost six hours, before it bit him on the right foot, on the toe next to his big toe, and held on! He pulled it off his foot, could see this hairy little beast was moving around, and then threw it on the ground before he came running into our bedroom to offer what he considered was both exciting and very cool news.

During the 28 days worth of rabies shots that followed, I encountered the stark realization that without the antidote to this destructive rabies viral disease, we could have lost our son to the poisons injected into his body through the two tiny pinprick holes that were barely visible after "the bat incident."

What does this story have to do with healthy couple and parent-child relationships? There are a lot of unhealthy

relationship poisons out there that can negatively harm you and your children, often without even realizing it. Negativity, according to Dr. John Gottman, is the number one poison, or predator, to your couple relationship.

For your couple relationship to thrive, you need to have at least a 5-to-1 positive to negative interaction ratio. For your parent-child relationship to be healthy and happy, this ratio looks more like 8-to-1. Criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling, according to Gottman, represent the four biggest poisonous threats to your relationships.

Criticism includes attacking your partner's or child's core self, usually with accusation and blame using statements like, "You are so selfish," or "Why don't you think about someone besides yourself," or "You just can't quite get it together, can you?" Defensiveness often occurs in response to criticism, or when we simply refuse to take responsibility for actions, using statements like, "It wasn't my fault," or "I know I said I would get it done, or be home on time but..."

Contempt often occurs as the negativity

escalates, using poisonous strategies such as name calling, mocking, rolling the eyes, and other verbal and non-verbal expressions. Stonewalling happens when one, or both of you, simply refuse to communicate. When stonewalling occurs on a habitual basis, the relationship becomes viral, diseased, and very fragile.

Escalating negativity often leads to a mud fight where you and your partner, or you and your children, start slinging social and emotional mud (hurt, blame, accusations) at each other. When the mud fight is over, regret often follows with an accompanying honeymoon period.

But eventually, something triggers the cycle again, and the poisonous relationship rabies virus is allowed to spread. If left unchecked, the unhealthy patterns of criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling can override your relationships and leave them in a diseased and dying state. Most relationships that dissolve follow this predictable pattern.

Fortunately, there is hope, and most importantly, there is an antidote to these poisons. Using I-messages,

accepting responsibility for our actions, speaking non-defensively, and validating our partners and children, according to Gottman, are just what the doctor ordered to combat the poisons of criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling.

Learning to use I messages instead of criticism with phrases like, "This is how I *feel* when this *behavior* occurs *because...*" is the first step. It is perfectly reasonable to say something like "It hurts me when you don't call or text when you are late, because it makes me feel like you aren't thinking about the fact that I will worry about you."

Regarding accepting responsibility, it is important when someone brings up a complaint or even a criticism that we are able to respond with statements and questions like "I now understand," or "Can you help me understand how I

could do this differently in the future so we both feel good about it?" Speaking non-defensively is easy to talk about, but hard to do.

When we speak defensively, we put our partner or children "on guard" through emotional threats and loud or hurtful words. Speaking non-defensively requires us to lower the emotional intensity and the tone of our voices. Validation is the one word that encompasses the essence of what healthy communication is all about. It requires us to truly listen with our eyes, minds, hearts, and hands. It is the antidote to contempt and stonewalling.

So what does all of this mean for you, your partner, and your children? It suggests that there is a lot you can learn to strengthen your relationships by taking a SMART Couples relationship class today. The classes are fun, discreet, and taught by the University of Florida's trained

instructors. And they are FREE, thanks to a multi-million-dollar federal grant.

A light meal will be served, and up to \$70 per couple in gift cards are available for completing all five sessions. You can sign up at smartcouples.org, or call your local Extension office. As you become stronger and healthier in your relationship skills, you will naturally pass them on to your children and those you love. It is one of the greatest gifts you can give them!

• **Dr. Victor William Harris is Assistant Professor, Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences at University of Florida. Smart Couples, It's the ultimate "us" time.** 🙌

Source: Harris, V.W. (n.d.). smartcouples.org: 9 Important Communication Skills for every Relationship. Retrieved from <http://smartcouples.ifas.ufl.edu/married/communicating-with-your-partner/>

