

The Values of Authentic Relationship: What the Relationship Enhancement Model Teaches Us about the Meaning of Marriage

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What values are likely to support not just the institution of marriage, but the creation and sustaining of genuinely satisfying marriages?

The Relationship Enhancement (RE) model offers a useful framework for reflecting on this question. First created by Dr. Bernard Guerney, Jr. in the 1960s, RE is one of the best researched psychoeducational programs and therapy intervention models available. The research has also consistently shown its power to improve relationships in a variety of ways.

But the question for the moment is: What might the RE model tell us about the meaning of marriage and the values that contribute to having a genuinely satisfying marriage?

The foundational value of the RE model is this: Marriage is an independent entity that transcends either spouse. This does not mean that the feelings, concerns and desires of either person are unimportant. Instead, it means that each spouse having a spirit of commitment to the good of the marriage will impact the quality of the marriage and the confidence each person has in the marriage.

In my experience, when both husband and wife have this commitment to the good of the marriage they have a deeper, more committed, and more satisfying relationship. When this commitment is absent, the marriage runs a high risk of degenerating into a kind of competition over ensuring the satisfaction of one's own desires regardless of the feelings, concerns and desires of the other person. The practical application of this value is evident when both spouses exhibit a spirit of mutual accommodation that recognizes that the satisfaction of my desires must also encompass the satisfaction of your desires if we are both going to experience a genuinely satisfying marriage.

A second value embodied in and promoted by the RE model is respect: respect for one's spouse as well as respect for the relationship. In a sense, this value dovetails with the preceding value and reinforces it. But the value of respect also translates into very concrete behaviors. For example, I do not permit myself to indulge certain behaviors such as harsh criticism or personal attacks. The value of respect also translates into my doing certain things for the good of the marriage even though it might not represent my own personal preference, such as agreeing to a time-out in a difficult interaction even though I would prefer to keep talking about the issue.

A third value central to the RE model is nonjudgmental acceptance of the other person and his or her thoughts, feelings, concerns and desires, even when they differ from your own. From one point of view, nonjudgmental acceptance constitutes the precondition for being able to empathize with another person. The reason is that if I am judging you in my mind I will not be able to connect empathically with your experience. From a different point of view, nonjudgmental acceptance is one of the goals of an empathy-based dialogue process in that one person's ability to empathize with another will tend to foster increased nonjudgmental

acceptance of the other person and his or her perspective. It is worth noting, in this context, that one of the goals of empathy is to leave the other person *feeling* understood and accepted.

Two additional sets of values function in a complementary way within the RE model: openness and honesty, and caring and compassion. The RE model believes that openness and honesty are essential to a healthy, thriving intimate relationship. If you are feeling something, are concerned about something or desire something, it is important to communicate that to your spouse. Otherwise, you cheat yourself and your spouse of an opportunity to address the issue constructively and to arrive at a mutually satisfying solution. That, all by itself, can be harmful to a marriage.

However, the RE model recognizes that openness and honesty must be balanced by the values of caring and compassion. The reason is that an exclusive focus on openness and honesty can result in a psychologically unhelpful (and now rightfully discredited) attitude of “letting it all hang out” without regard to the impact of what one says and how one says it on the other person. This is where the expression of one’s feelings can degenerate into personal attacks on the character of the other person.

By balancing the values of openness and honesty with the values of caring and compassion, the RE model helps people understand their responsibility to communicate in a way that minimizes the likelihood that the other person comes to feel defensive. Conversely, it helps people learn how to create a positive atmosphere in their interactions that makes it easier for the other person to listen without becoming defensive. This, in turn, increases the likelihood of a more positive interaction. As I like to put it, if you combine the values of openness and honesty with the values of caring and compassion, then you can say just about anything you want to say because you will say it caringly and compassionately, or you won’t say it at all.

Finally, the RE model also embodies and promotes the value of equity in marriage. This it does more implicitly than explicitly in that the dialogue process that is central to both the RE Program and RE therapy encourages equity and balance in sharing your own point of view and in listening to and acknowledging the point of view of your spouse. It also promotes equity in so far as the RE dialogue process also involves both spouses following a common set of guidelines that are designed to keep the dialogue process safe for both of them.

There are other values embodied in and promoted by the RE model, but these are the values that I regard as most central to an understanding of the meaning of marriage and how to be in marriage in a manner that is conducive to promoting and sustaining a marriage that is genuinely and deeply satisfying.

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