

Deepening your Relationship: Dating and Beyond

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Tova Klapper **interviews Dr. Sara Barris to learn how to deepen one's relationship during the dating process, engagement and marriage.**

Tova Klapper (TK): *What is the best way to build an emotional connection with someone you are dating?*

Dr. Barris (SB): Marriage has been studied all over the world and there is a lot of empirical evidence on relationships. Researchers have looked at couples who are really getting it right over the long haul and those who are not doing well. A compelling research finding is that a significant predictive factor of excellent marriage is the power of connection and the ability to be good friends.

TK: *What do you mean by friendship and how do you develop that?*

SB: Actually, we can talk about friendship in a skills-based way. Flourishing relationships build upon thousands of mundane interactions, tiny little pebbles again, and again, and again.

If you want to break down the pieces of a committed friendship, one of the first things you can look at is whether you can talk about what is on your mind and feel like you are being heard.

Marriage research expert John Gottman has coined the term “love maps—knowing and being known.” This can be described as sharing tiny little details about one's life, from what games you played as a kid and what kind of candy you like, to things that are much more profound, like what scares you in the middle of the night and what *really* scares you in the middle of the night. It

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doesn't have to be in any specific order, although we want to see a relationship unfold a little bit before we start sharing more vulnerable information.

TK: *I understand that really getting to know one another is important, but what about couples who are different from each other professionally, or couples where one is more emotional and one is more intellectual? How can they bridge that gap?*

SB: These are great questions. Our family spent a weekend with a couple where the husband was an international real estate tycoon. They had a number of sophisticated guests at their Shabbos table who were intrigued by what he was doing. The man's wife, who was sitting next to me at the table, leaned over, giggled, and said, "this is way over my head! I am totally clueless about his work." That is not amusing. We want to have a sense of what the other person is doing so that we don't lead parallel lives. That doesn't mean that we have to know all the intricacies of what the other is doing professionally, but we want to have a basic idea of what's going on so that we can connect and be supportive. "Good luck, I'll be thinking of you today. I know that you have that nerve-racking meeting—call me when you're done and let me know how it went." I have a friend who is a nuclear theoretical physicist—her husband is in Jewish education. He doesn't really get physics the way she does, but he absolutely appreciates the politics in the lab, and is aware of the pressure involved in research grant deadlines. And he is right up front ready to celebrate the successes. Likewise, his wife is keenly aware and sensitive as to the nuances of being a Jewish educator. Being aware of the details of each other's lives helps keep the friendship on track.

Sometimes it's hard to be able to share things with each other. When we are hearing information it can feel like, "oh, that doesn't sound good" or "that worries me." What we try to do in establishing an emotional connection is to adopt an attitude of non-judging acceptance. You work on that, not only during dating, but throughout marriage and the rest of your life. There is a place for expressing our concerns, but the timing has to be right. When I work with couples and tell them that *knowing and being known* is important, sometimes they say, "We did that! We're good, we really know each other well." However, at the end of the day they begin to realize that it takes the rest of their lives to know each other because things keep shifting and deepening as life unfolds. So this is a lifetime commitment. When we say go on dates after you are married, it is not just to have a good time, but to continue to deepen and connect and get to know one another.

TK: *Many people say, don't worry about deep philosophical discussions because after marriage all you'll be doing is cleaning chickens and changing diapers—what can you say about that?*

SB: I believe that this is a myth and I disagree. Relationships that work over the long haul and that are resilient have a deep friendship and a lot to talk about. True, life can be frenetic at times and it can be a challenge to make space for time to talk and to continue to get to know each other. I have to laugh when every year I come across articles in magazines around Thanksgiving time. The suggestions are typically: on day one you buy the canned goods, day two buy the vegetables, day three buy the bird, day four—it's ok, get support, get help, let someone bring the yam pie and cranberry sauce. You're almost there ... day five—have a glass of wine, calm down, breathe, spice that bird, congratulations—you made it! As observant Jews, we do that every Friday night, every Shabbos, not to mention Yom Tov and every other celebration that we have!

There is a lot of beauty, but also stress, and many people feel like it's hard to make time, but it's important not to use this as an excuse and simply cop out and say that no one is really talking anymore. Despite their hectic lives, the couples who are doing well, *are* talking to each other and are continuing to deeply connect.

TK: *Are there any specific tools or skills that couples can employ in their relationship?*

SB: In addition to these love maps and moving toward skillful friendship, I'd like to focus on the buzz words of gratitude and appreciation. Gratitude isn't just about positive thinking. Rather, on a deeper level we are trying to fight off the negativity bias. Martin Seligman and many psychologists, sociologists and neuroanatomists have talked about the fact that human beings are wired toward negativity. Noticing what is going wrong in the environment and the people around them has helped with survival. However, research is telling us that this kind of brain process isn't exactly the healthiest for the survival of long-term relationships. Research experts Barbara Fredrickson and Marcial Losada have discovered that a high positive-to-negative statement ratio (approximately 5 to 1) was highly predictive of well-being in couples.

TK: *What if you show how you feel using actions, but not words? What if you are in a space where you're just not feeling it?*

SB: Actions and acts of kindness are very important. For example, filling up your partner's car with gas when he is stressed out. Taking over a chore for your spouse when she is trying to meet a deadline can be very supportive. Buying chocolate, gifts, etc. is great. But actions do not replace putting thoughts and feelings into words either spoken or written. This is precisely the point that Rashi makes regarding the bringing of the first fruits to the kohen. The *pasuk* (Devarim 26:3) says, "*ve'amarta eilav*," you should say to him. so as not to appear ungrateful. The *Alei Shur* (Vol. II pg. 279) adds to this Rashi by punctuating the point that gratitude in thought alone, without its verbal expression, falls terribly short. Neuroscientist Norman Doidge tells us that verbalizing thought kicks it up a notch, combats that negativity bias and helps rewire the brain.

You asked though, what if you are not feeling it. As I mentioned earlier, life becomes very hectic so we don't want to just rely on that moment of inspiration when we are feeling the "love." Those moments are gifts. They may come every so often as punctuation points, but we want to fill in the space in between and deepen the infrastructure. A seamlessness in the relationship. We can call it scaffolding. We want to build it and keep it up, not just for the first year of marriage, but for the rest of your lives. It is not about being unauthentic but rather about getting out of your comfort zone. We do not necessarily have to rely on deep poetic dialogue here. Evidence tells us that tiny pebbles of positive affirmation play a powerful roll in maintaining an excellent relationship over the long haul. Like, "I love the way you play with the baby," or "If I had to choose again it would be you!" or "Your chavrusa told me the other day how lucky he is to have you, I feel so lucky too." Those are the kind of things you want to repeat again and again. And don't be afraid to overuse the love word.

Generally we are afraid to be corny. It makes us feel uncomfortable and vulnerable. For many it is much easier to roll their eyes and remain cynical and sarcastic. But it is precisely that soft space that is the kernel of emotional intimacy in the relationship. We encourage people to move beyond their automatic habituated response to rewire their negative habits. We are not relying

on a fleeting feeling of good emotion but rather we are going for the larger truth of cultivating a conscious response toward building authentic connection. We are not talking about fabricating a compliment that is completely untrue. Psychologist Dr. Nathaniel Branden claims that this leads to a false sense of self-esteem. Rather, the intent is to be able to discern and speak to those inherent strengths in your partner. We are talking about leaning your cortical real estate toward positivity and safeguarding your relationship.

TK: *It seems like gratitude is crucial, is there anything else that is important that a couple can employ?*

SB: One famous researcher, Shelly Gable, talks about ACR, which is Active Constructive Responding. This research has shown us that how we celebrate is actually more predictive of strong relationships than how a couple fights. When your partner shares good news, how you respond can either build or undermine the relationship. Gable talks about different ways couples respond when one comes home with good news. Passive constructive responding might be, “Oh, that’s so nice, what are we going to eat for dinner?” Active destructive might be, “Oh, so are you actually going to take that promotion, because now you are *really* not going to have time with the children; now we’re really going to be stressed.” Yes, there is a time and a place to speak about the concerns, but the way we respond in the heat of the moment is very important. An active constructive response would be to say, “I’m so happy for you! Tell me where you were when you heard. Tell me again! How did you feel at that time? Let’s celebrate!”

The idea is that what we appreciate, appreciates. It is not just about making the other person feel good, but it cushions the relationship so that when we need to, we can have a safe place to talk about the difficulties and have conversations about issues that are not working so well.

TK: *I understand that spontaneity might be overrated and it is important to scaffold marriage and build a relationship in a focused way, but what about people who seem to just have magic in the beginning and it happens naturally, like you may see in postings on Facebook?*

SB: Generally, comparing your relationship to others can be counterproductive. Dr. Barry Schwartz, an expert on the paradox of choice, points out that people walk around starry-eyed—not looking into the eyes of their partner, but over their partner’s shoulder in case there might be someone better walking by. This is not the path to a successful long-term relationship. Sometimes seeing “proposal productions” and relationship details on Facebook can be misleading. As a therapist I can tell you firsthand, no one really knows what’s going on behind the curtain.

There is a concept called adaptation that many psychologists, such as Sonja Lyubomirsky and Ed Diener, write about. Adaptation is described as the force in human beings that pulls us back to our baseline. Even though there can be emotional highs over time, adaptation will drag you back to a neutral mood. So even for those couples who start off in a dreamlike state, saying “It’s incredible, we knew we were right for each other from the moment we laid eye on each other,” sooner than later reality sets in. But this is not bad news. Evidence tells us that romantic, thriving marriages over the long haul are alive and well. It is what we have been talking about. It is building the emotional intimacy, a culmination of many small acts, sometimes subtle and mundane, over the long haul, which has the best predictive value of success.

TK: *How do couples in a good relationship manage conflicts?*

SB: It is clear from couples research that conflict is definitely necessary for relationship. A lack of conflict means that you are not dealing with issues that matter and important concerns are kept under wraps. Keeping everything buried has poor predictive value for the relationship.

The question, though, is how do we have these arguments? The good news, according to John Gottman, is that the scaffolding, mentioned earlier, helps to protect the marriage so that couples can repair and recover without wounding each other.

Dr. Daniel Wile feels that the argument is a necessary entry point for a needed conversation. He talks about communication “booby traps” such as using “you” statements instead of “I” statements, digging up old grievances, or lumping all the conflicts into one ball, etc. As mentioned above, he stresses that conflicts are absolutely necessary; however, the initial fight may be ineffective. Dr. Wile explains that the majority of time during the argument the communication rules are often broken (this applies to the communication experts themselves!). The initial conversation will probably not go too well, and turning it into a marathon can make things even worse. Wile suggests taking a “time out,” or exiting the dispute, can be helpful. That doesn’t mean we are going into stone-walling but rather coming up with a time when the issue will be revisited. Wile calls this the “conversation after the conversation.” At that point the partners may be less emotionally flooded, and are ready to take some responsibility so that they can move forward.

TK: *How can we stay focused on all the useful skills you shared during times of vulnerability?*

No one is immune from vulnerability, no matter how great a shidduch and marriage. We value perfection, strength and competence, and when things don’t appear that way it is very scary. We can discover more compassion when we intuit that we are all part of humanity and no one is singled out from difficulty. In our relationships we don’t have to shrink back from the suffering of our partner. We don’t want to avert our gaze and cross the street when our partner is going through a hard time. We want to provide a sanctuary for their unwanted parts, for the piece that they feel vulnerable about, and to give them permission to be human. It is ok not to be perfect. We wish for the same acceptance and care of our own vulnerabilities and flaws as well. When we do that, and provide a sanctuary for unwanted parts, we discover more beauty in ourselves and discover undetected goodness in one another. And it is precisely at those outer limits, when things are hard, that we discover and rediscover our strength, faith, hope and connection. And it is at that place, with the lightest of touch and the deepest mercy, we begin again and again, one pebble at a time, to promote that sweet, loving relationship for the long haul.

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