

TOWARD A LASTING
ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP
(PART II)

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Toward A Lasting Romantic Relationship, Part II

Good Morning, Ladies and Gentlemen:

As you know, this is Part II of my lecture *Toward a Lasting Romantic Relationship*.

In Part I, just to remind you briefly, I dealt first with problems which occur in the process of selecting a romantic partner, and I touched on a variety of reasons which often result in a couple being mismatched. In the bulk of my lecture, I covered the major requirements for a lasting romantic relationship, such as admiration, trust, intimacy, and the need for clear and explicit terms agreed upon by the partners about how to conduct the romantic relationship.

I gave examples of some of the important terms, such as a commitment by both partners to treat each other as romantic allies and soul mates; the need for honest communication of emotions and needs, including sexual ones, and the importance of accepting the partner as he or she is. I named other important terms which promote the romantic relationship, such as the necessity of conducting it on the basis of equality between the partners, the right of each to pursue his or her needs and values in life, and the right of each to expect full support from the other. I urged that couples make important decisions by agreement, that each partner assume the responsibility for his or her intellectual and emotional growth, and that each seek to develop optional values in which both can participate. I emphasized the need to keep problems which occur within the romantic relationship private, and the need to be courteous to each other, keeping in mind the context and the feelings of the partner. I briefly touched on the role of the self-esteem of the respective partners in promoting or hindering the romance. And, finally, I embarked on a discussion of some external influences which have a major effect on the romantic relationship, by pointing out how the arrival of children changes the romantic context.

I want to begin today's discussion by dealing with another external influence, namely, the effects parents have *in the present* on the romantic relationship.

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The current relationship between the romantic partners and their respective parents varies from case to case. You may be surprised to hear, however, that in the majority of cases I deal with, the parents continue to seriously affect the everyday lives of couples. In many cases, the parents cause major dissension. Couples put up with parental interference mainly because they are psychologically dependent on the parents. As a result, they continue to be afraid to stand up to their parents—a habit carried over from the past. And often they are confused as to what behavior toward parents is appropriate.

In my practice, many sessions are spent on stresses and arguments between the partners caused by the parents or concerning the parents. Issues that come up most often are: how to deal with the anger one or both partners feel toward their parents or in-laws as a result of past or present improper treatment, how to handle parental criticism and interference in their lives, how to confront the parents, and especially how close or distant the present relationship with the parents should be.

Obviously, a close and healthy relationship with parents is desirable. By a close and healthy relationship, I mean one where both the parents and the grown child are sufficiently separate psychologically and are willing to change the naturally unequal relationship that existed between them in the past to a relationship approaching friendship between equals, based on mutual love and respect. This can be accomplished when the parents have their own lives and pursue their values independently of their children. Such parents usually have a fairly good romantic relationship themselves. The grown children respect the parents, who are careful not to encroach on the children's lives. Such parents do not criticize the children's life styles if they are different from their own and they usually are very fond of their grown child's partner.

Under these circumstances, the grown children look forward to being with them. Instead of causing dissension, such parents enhance the lives of the partners. After all, the common history between parents and children can be a powerful bond. Parents can provide love and emotional support, share in their grown children's happiness and sorrow, and, when appropriate, help out financially. In addition, grandparents can be a great advantage to the couple's children, providing them with love, an extended family to grow up in, and additional models to emulate.

Unfortunately, such a close and healthy relationship between parents and grown children is rare. The majority of cases I deal with fall into three categories in which problems exist between the grown children and their parents.

At one extreme, are those couples who continue to cling to one or both sets of parents, with practically no social interaction outside their families.

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Such couples often permit the parents to make decisions for them, criticize them and their partners, and, while they are resentful, they passively accept the interference of the parents. And often one or both partners become preoccupied with the marital or other problems of the parents to the extent that they do not pay sufficient attention to the needs of their own partner. It is clear that the partners in such cases have not psychologically separated and individuated from their parents and did not develop sufficiently on their own to have learned how to form friendships with their contemporaries. They will offer such explanations, obviously learned from their parents, as “blood is thicker than water” and therefore, “you can only trust your parents or immediate family.” Interestingly, in many such cases, the grown children are not really very loving. On the contrary, they harbor many resentments and angers toward the parents, but never confront them, and continue to maintain the facade of “closeness” with them.

Another type of couple belonging to this group are partners who put up with interfering and nasty parents because of the guilt that such parents have inculcated in them. After all, they say, the parents sacrificed so much to educate them, which is what made it possible for them to be successful.

In reality, however, these are parents who are ignorant and often vicious. Whatever they may have appeared to do for their children, they actually did for themselves. And now they live through their grown children for their own aggrandization. In such cases, the grown children know on some level that the parents are wrong. Nevertheless, they are unable to see that the parents wish to hold a mortgage on their children’s lives. They do not see that the parents give approval only if their ignorant and often harmful advice is followed and only so long as the children continue to see them as victims for having done merely what all responsible parents should do, namely, educate their children.

Because of the guilt, such grown children are afraid to be critical of the parents and consequently are unable to stand up to them. As a result, they inflict years of suffering on their helpless partner, who can never please such in-laws, and even on their children who have to put up with unloving grandparents whom they are nevertheless supposed to love.

In many cases of such emotionally enmeshed families, I have discovered that despite the grown child’s feelings of gratitude, the parents were severely physically or even sexually abusive to him in his childhood. Equally surprising is the fact that the grown child is ready to consider their advice on romantic matters even though such parents have had and continue to have the worst possible romantic relationship themselves.

The real reason for being enmeshed, of course, is that such partners continue to function as children, never viewing themselves as adults who could require that the parents treat them as such.