

# Revaluing **FAMILY** **RELATIONSHIPS**

One impact of the increasing stress many of us are experiencing is strained family relationships. Ironically, a number of sources are reporting that since September 11, 2001, we are cherishing these same relationships more. In fact, many who seek counselling are looking for practical ways to take their relationships off autopilot and find expression for this renewed sense of value.

## **Begin By Acknowledging What You Have**

How do you do this? Take an inventory by asking yourself: *Does the presence of this person in my life contribute to my well-being? Is this a person I can count on? Can you rely on this person to be aware of and respond to both your joys and distresses - to be there for you when you are troubled or frustrated and to share your successes.*

## **Be Grateful For What You Have & Show Your Appreciation**

The more consistent your expressions of fondness and admiration, the stronger your relationship will become. Respect and show interest in the other person's life - their hopes and dreams, their successes and failures. Try the following-

- First, you listen - then, you communicate
- Allow the other person's thoughts and feelings to influence you.
- Make plans together - this includes setting goals for both the immediate and long-term.



## **Allow Your Affections to Find Appropriate Expression**

Too many people stop touching, talking, and being intimate (the closeness between people who truly care about one another). Sometimes the reason given for lack of expressed affection is modeling (how you were brought up) or cultural influences. More often it is a symptom of habituation. Or more seriously, it can also mean that the relationship has changed to such a degree that not only is affection absent, but it is not even worth discussing. The elderly, in particular, suffer many losses - one of which is the loss of physical touching from their families.

You might discuss with members of your family what demonstrations of affection they find appropriate and would appreciate. Be mindful that demanding demonstrations of affection from your family is much like demanding respect. To be genuine, they have to be freely given.

## Let the Other Person Change or Grow

Recognize that, with time, people change - as does their role in the family. And with a change in role can come a change in the balance of power. Acknowledge the decisions of others and respect their right to make their own decisions, even if the decisions are not what you would have wanted for them. If you cannot grant your approval, focus on accepting their decisions.

In family relationships, if the only options you offer are either compliance or defiance, individuals will usually choose defiance. This is reason to ensure that in non life-threatening situations, you do not frame decisions in either / or terms. For example, should you choose to constantly rebuke your adult child for their choice of a life partner, they may defend their choice and choose the other person over you. Another example, in the case of a couple, occurs when the dynamic of either / or crystallizes into the dilemma of a choice between being right and abandoned versus being happy and together.

## Why Do We Resist Doing Something?

The reasons are varied and can include:

- **It is not bad enough** - alternatively, the amount of effort (time, energy, and money) it would take to improve the relationship is seen as too great relative to the return.
- **Embarrassment** - you feel out of step with your friends, who are not going to counsellors or reading self-help books.
- **Pride** - due to our training or position in the family, some of us would prefer to view ourselves as either valiant or martyrs.
- **Fear of rejection** - we can reason *If I make myself vulnerable, I risk being stomped on or being placed in a situation where I have to take action I do not want.* The status quo may be more comfortable than separating from or severing the relationship.
- **Rewards of resistance** - the stress or pain we experience may have its own rewards. Some function is served when we perpetuate a painful or difficult situation.

## Do We Need A Counsellor?

All relationships have a set of irreconcilable differences. There are arguments that families have over and over again. This does not include physical or emotional abuse. Any kind of abuse will kill a relationship by destroying trust.

You have to decide if that particular difference is something you can live with. Can you pause, reflect, and say *Oh yeah, that one again!* and drop it? If it is not something one or all of you can live with, then it is time to seek outside intervention by a counsellor.