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The Essential Ingredients for Peace in the Heart and Home

THE ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS

Here are the essential ingredients for thriving. They are all forms of social and emotional, not cognitive, intelligence. How many of us can say we experienced or witnessed our parents behaving in these ways more times than not?

- Showing interest in *every* family member's hurts, fears, longings and emotional needs
- Expressing emotions and needs in ways that are non-threatening to family members
- Responding to every family member in ways that provide deep reassurance and soothing
- Managing one's own emotions so as to sustain a general sense of well-being
- Retaining or regaining one's composure when a family member is upset and behaves poorly or insensitively
- Repairing emotional injuries caused to a family member either inadvertently or in anger

My experience has taught me that the vast majority of us have not been blessed with such security-enhancing relationships. If these ways of relating weren't lived, they weren't wired into our brains. The only way we would be able to practice them in our own adult family would be if we actively and consciously worked at developing them and letting go of the habits that had been established during our formative years. Most people don't realize that deprivation of these skills and experiences is the most likely source of the physical, psychological, behavioral and relationship problems that are so prevalent. We could have the perfect house and body, impressive talents, stimulating activities, high achievement at school or work and dozens of friends. But if our childhood relationship with a parent, our parents' relationship with each other or our adult relationship with our own partner is precarious, painful or empty, our lives are likely to fall flat.

THE PAST PERMEATES THE PRESENT

As we walk down the aisle, we have feelings of love, hope and possibly trepidation. We also have abstract concepts such as love, patience, loyalty and forgiveness. At the same time we have, but are blind to, potent, unconscious, emotion-saturated memories that will be running the show. These are the memories of how we, our parents and siblings dealt with strong emotions in daily life. They include the gut-level beliefs we learned about our self and what we can expect from relationships. This is the instruction manual that will have us repeating the past with our new family, despite our lofty goals and even heart-felt intentions. As much as we would like to believe that we are in charge of our lives and making conscious decisions, the reality is quite the opposite. Family life, especially, is fueled by compelling

underground energies and lessons. The last several decades have produced abundant scientific and clinical evidence that human beings are driven by unconscious childhood attachment bond memories and our survival-motivated, anxiety-prone nervous system.

It isn't even the content of our conversations that has the strongest impact on our feelings of security and happiness in family life. Whether we are five or fifty-five, our biology speaks louder than words. We human beings are tremendously reactive to others' non-verbal signals, particularly those people whose approval and responsiveness mean the most to us. A vast amount of that communication transpires at lightning speed without our consciously processing it.

THE BODY SPEAKS AND RULES

The architecture of our brain, especially our limbic and autonomic nervous systems, was predominantly shaped by how adults and other significant people (e.g. siblings, classmates) behaved when as children we felt vulnerable and in need. These implicit, procedural memories are automatic, just like riding a bike; they kick in without thinking. So the less we experienced empathy and physical soothing, the more our nervous system registered threat and became wired to anticipate threat in significant relationships.

Our unconscious mind is powerfully attuned to the behaviors of whoever we depend upon the most for our social, emotional and biological needs to be met. The major player, but not necessarily only one, is our partner. His or her posture, physiological quirks, gestures, facial expressions and tone and speed of voice can signal safety, comfort and kindness or danger, judgment and in-sensitivity. Additionally, our children and authority figures can unknowingly trigger emotional reactions and dramas reminiscent of when we were young and vulnerable.

Whenever we feel threatened, our stress response provides us with three knee-jerk possibilities: fight, flight or freeze. Fight could be excessive or loud talking, expressing of intense emotion, whining, clinging, complaining, criticizing, blaming or attacking. Flight could be withdrawing and compulsively investing in other relationships. The other relationships might be with a lover, a child, the internet, hobbies, work, travel, alcohol, drugs or needy people and vulnerable animals. Freeze could be shutting down, zoning out, appeasing or submitting. Having a family member who flees or freezes can be just as distressing as having one who fights.

THE NEOCORTEX TO THE RESCUE

The good news, also coming from the latest neuroscience research, is that we can train our mind and brain, particularly the pre-frontal cortex, to become conscious of our inner world and our interactions with others. Just like strengthening muscles, we can access and increase our innate capacity for calm, equanimity, mental clarity, open-mindedness, acceptance, non-judgment and compassion. Increasing numbers of researchers, psychotherapists, physicians and educators are recognizing the enormous physical, psychological and social benefits derived from cultivating this state of being called mindfulness.

During mindfulness meditation we learn to observe the flow of thoughts, images, emotions and body sensations. We reduce our absorption of the thoughts we've accepted as authoritative truths. Our disturbing thoughts are, after all, predominantly the misguided lessons and beliefs of a childhood without sufficient adult nurturance and guidance. Our greatest wisdom arises during mindfulness from the integration of our heart, gut, and both

brain hemispheres. The left brain provides language as well as adult reason and perspective. The right brain's strengths are emotion and body awareness, holistic perspective, imagery, intuition and creativity.

We can bring this mindful, inquisitive attention to the present moments within our daily life, especially when we are interacting with those with whom we are interdependent. We can recognize how we get trapped in a negative cycle with each other and discover what elicits the best in each other. We also can mindfully savor what's right about the world we live in so that the beauty and joy we experience provides a cushion for the challenges of life.

THE FATAL ATTRACTION AND THE TREASURE HUNT

What makes intimate relationships especially difficult is that nature has designed us to be drawn to the very partner who is most likely, eventually, to trigger our deepest wounds and insecurities. Partners will feel the other is the perpetrator and they are the innocent victim. Making it safe for the lamb hidden within each lion to emerge is the challenge that many couples would consider ridiculous or impossible. Each partner will instead feel tempted and entitled to cling to familiar defenses acquired or witnessed in childhood, thereby keeping the relationship clenched tightly in an undermining stranglehold.

The only way out of this Chinese finger trap is to do what is counter-intuitive, to utilize with our partner faculties that are undeveloped and behaviors that are out of our comfort zone. We may have access to these faculties and behaviors with everyone but our mate, the one person who our unconscious has anointed as the heir apparent and reminder of our childhood attachment bond emotional legacy.

To meet this heroic challenge requires sustained consciousness, effort and risk as we relinquish the safety net of our favorite defenses. We gradually replace those self-defeating behaviors with reflection to discover and then share our deepest fears, sensitivities, vulnerabilities and needs. We rely more on the tenderness of our lips, eyes, arms, hands and heart. As our defenses dissolve away, so do many of the symptoms with which we struggled for years. We become the loving caregiver we always longed for and elicit the same from our mate. We create the marriage our parents never had nor imagined.

Nature, in its wisdom, provides us with the incentive to grow into true love, which involves extending ourselves for the well-being of another. As we find the commitment, courage, open-mindedness, understanding, tolerance and compassion necessary to provide our loved ones with the essentials they require to thrive, we evolve into full emotional and spiritual maturity. The more we meet our loved ones' most essential needs, the easier and sweeter life becomes.

Charlette Mikulka is the author of Peace in the Heart and Home: A Down-to-Earth Guide to Creating a Better Life for You and Your Loved Ones.
www.peaceintheheartandhome.com