

# Feeling Like Partners

When it comes to romantic relationships, empathy is essential, but it isn't always easy, say family researchers **Philip A. Cowan, Carolyn Pape Cowan, and Neera Mehta**. They explain the obstacles couples face—and how to overcome them.

RICK AND ANNA MET ON A BLIND DATE and immediately became enchanted with each other. They moved in together four months later, and after two more years they decided to get married. They planned to have kids after four years, and that worked like a charm. Jason came along right on schedule and his sister Debby arrived two years later. Unfortunately, somewhere over the years, not everything went according to plan. As we look in on Rick and Anna after they've been together for almost 10 years, their early enchantment seems to exist only in wistful memory.

Rick returned home from work about half an hour ago. He's slumped on the couch when Anna sees him in the living room.

**Anna:** How come you didn't put your stuff away after you came home?

**Rick:** I'll do it in a minute.

**Anna:** It's been a whole bunch of minutes already. Now I've got your sweater and papers dumped in the dining room, the kids' toys in the kitchen, and me tripping over everything while I'm trying to make dinner.

**Rick:** Give me a break, Anna. I had a horrible afternoon at work and I'm just fried.

**Anna:** You haven't asked about *my* afternoon. Your mother kept me on the phone for an hour, yelling about some cousin of yours who insulted her.

**Rick:** And I suppose you were your usual sweet and patient self, trying to help her calm down?

**Anna:** (No answer)

**Rick** (voice raised): I've had it, Anna. You're out of control.

**Anna:** Maybe you need a more patient wife.

**Rick** (leaving the room): Maybe I do.

It didn't take Rick and Anna long to go from a small complaint about putting away

"stuff" to a discussion about the survival of their relationship. Readers familiar with self-help books or the professional literature on couples therapy will probably say that Rick and Anna need to learn more effective communication skills. After they recover from their heated exchange, Rick and Anna will probably say the same thing.

We think their problem goes deeper than that. In our careers as family researchers and couples therapists, we have conducted long-term studies of more than 300 families, following many from their first child's birth through the preschool, elementary school, and high school years. We've seen couples confronted and even overwhelmed by the challenges in their relationship, but we've also seen many partners find ways to overcome these problems. We've found that it's simply not enough to teach couples like Rick and Anna the "right" thing to say in the middle of a fight or ask them to follow communication "rules," such as "summarize what your partner just said before responding to him," or "make 'I' rather than 'you' statements." Couples' relationships suffer less from a failure of words than from a failure of imagination—an ability to imagine what a partner is thinking and feeling. We believe that the key ingredient missing from Rick and Anna's conversation—and from the relationships of countless other couples—is empathy.

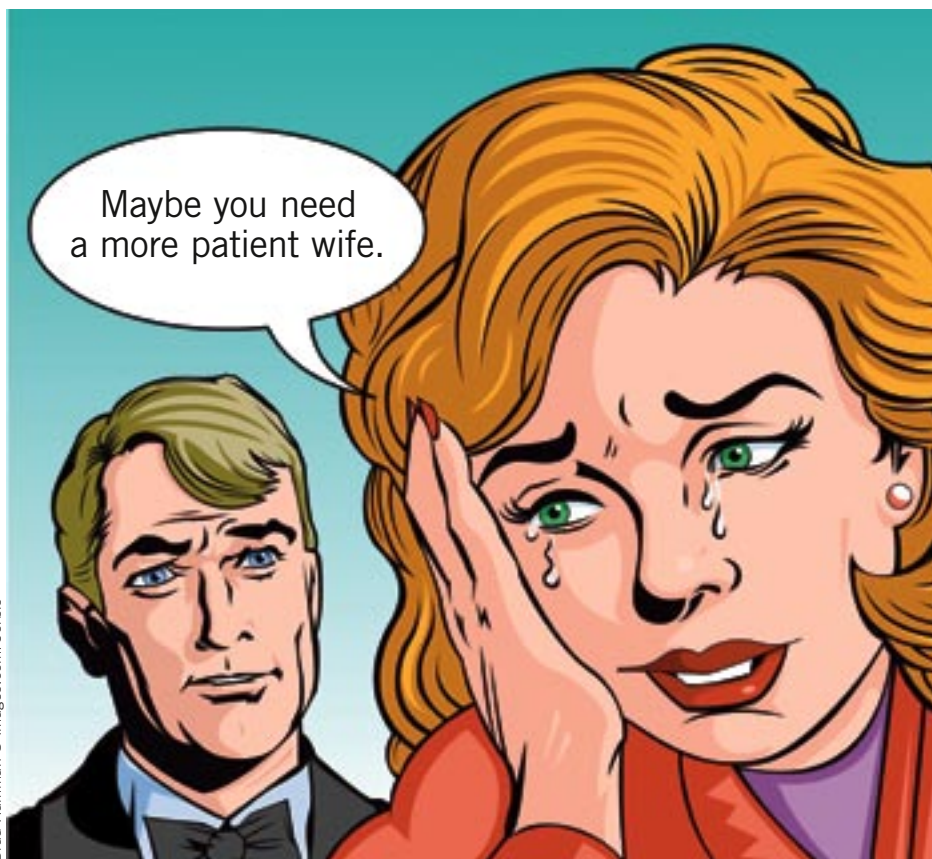
## Beyond words

What do we mean by empathy? There's a thinking component of empathy that involves the ability to take another person's point of view ("I can see why you find it so hard to talk to my mother when she complains all the time") and an emotional capacity to feel what the other is feeling ("Oh honey, it hurts when I see you so upset"). Both of these aspects describe what might be going on inside

one partner when the other is feeling intense emotions—often negative (sad, angry, frightened) but sometimes positive (elated, delighted, joyful). Another important aspect of empathy involves *behavior* consistent with that empathic position. The simple statement "I feel your pain" isn't really evidence of empathy unless the speaker actually does something to show a true understanding of the listener's experience. If Anna had explained to Rick how overwhelmed she was feeling about caring for the children and taking care of their home, Rick could have shown her that he "gets it" by helping to pick up the toys or working with Anna to prepare dinner.

A number of researchers have investigated whether accuracy in "reading" one's partner is an important ingredient of couple satisfaction. Are partners happier in their relationships if they can conjure up an accurate picture of what the other person is feeling and experiencing? Indeed, studies have found that people who gauge their partner's thoughts and feelings more accurately during disagreements are generally more satisfied with their overall relationship. But for empathy to be truly beneficial, *both* partners need to experience it. If Rick had responded empathically to Anna's frustration about her conversation with his mother but Anna ignored or dismissed his response, Rick would likely have been left feeling even less empathic and more distant from his wife.

Clearly, both Rick and Anna failed to demonstrate empathy in their exchange. Rick discarded his papers and sweater on the floor and didn't move to pick them up when Anna complained. Anna didn't respond to Rick's statement about his terrible day, and, in turn, Rick was sarcastic, almost contemptuous, of Anna's description of her conversation with his mother. As their hostile exchange quickly escalated,



the specter of not being the right partners for each other overshadowed everything else. In a more empathic mode, Anna might have greeted Rick before complaining, asked about his day, and softened her complaint once she heard how difficult it was. If she had done that, Rick might have been more inclined to place his belongings out of the line of traffic and ask about Anna's day the next time he came home.

That's often easier said than done. As we all know, it's especially difficult to take other people's point of view, feel what they're feeling, and act on those feelings when we are stressed ourselves. Some people seem to be not very good at this at all, but even the most empathic people occasionally find it psychologically difficult and emotionally taxing to empathize with their partner—and the tone of family relationships often reflects those difficulties.

The good news is that there are ways partners can learn to empathize with one another. Our own research and clinical experience, and that of a number of colleagues, suggest several methods for fostering empathy between spouses. While there isn't one recipe that guarantees partners' empathy in every situation, we believe there are enough tools to help couples like Rick and Anna not only survive adversity,

but use it in a way to strengthen their relationship.

## Fostering empathy

Empathy seems to come more easily to some partners than others. Yet although we tend to describe some people as empathic and others as lacking empathy, empathy is not a fixed trait—a stable characteristic that a person expresses similarly in all situations. We believe that under ideal conditions, everyone can be at least somewhat empathic in the moment. We see five main conditions necessary for fostering empathy in couples' lives. These are when both partners: (1) are reasonably mentally healthy; (2) have grown up in empathic families; (3) work collaboratively in parenting their children; (4) have relatively low levels of stress external to the family or sources of support to cope with the stresses they face; and (5) have what they consider to be a fair division of labor and an effective way of solving the problems that confront them. Even if they don't meet one or more of these conditions, partners can still work on ways to overcome that problem and empathize with each other.

The first major impediment to understanding “where a partner is coming from” is either partner's serious cognitive or

emotional problems. These problems can prevent them from reading others accurately, or may trigger disabling levels of anxiety or symptoms of depression. For example, one aspect of depression is the tendency to see and expect the worst in other people. It is extremely difficult for a depressed person to understand that a loving partner can do something hurtful unintentionally. It is also hard for the non-depressed spouse to understand why the depressed partner is reacting in such an unrelentingly negative way. One option for couples that find themselves in the middle of escalating negative exchanges is for one partner to talk to the other about seeking outside help as a couple to deal with the emotional problems. Empathy may come easier once the couple has started to address these issues.

Many researchers and therapists also look at how childhood attachment to parents affects partners' abilities to empathize with each other as adults. Studies of attachment across generations suggest that parents who make their children feel secure and reassured during times of stress prime them to feel empathic in their adult relationships. Adults whose childhood experiences led them to expect caring, understanding responses from loved ones when they were upset find it easier to be optimistic and empathic when relationship problems stir their emotions, even if their partner doesn't act empathically in the moment. By contrast, partners whose caretakers dismissed their childhood fears feel anxious and not worthy of care. They are then more likely to feel threatened and react negatively to a spouse who doesn't seem to understand their feelings.

Also, for many partners, the relationship *between* their parents has provided a salient model of what they can expect from couple relationships. If both partners' parents typically disparaged and insulted one another, it will be more difficult for the couple to establish a civil way of solving problems. Some couples whose parents were always in high conflict tend to mirror that pattern, while others try to avoid upsetting conversations altogether. In a couple where one partner experienced constant shouting and arguing in his family and members of the other partner's family never raised their voices, neither partner has a useful model for tackling the differences that partners inevitably need to resolve. Although it isn't possible to change what happened to us when we were children, it is not too late for adults to understand more about their own and their partner's early relationships. This

## The View from Above the Fray

BY DAN WILE

When couples fight in my office, as a therapist I try to create a compassionate vantage point above the fray—what I call a platform.

Here's an example of how it works. Judy and Bob had been fighting in my office for a while. After watching them wrangle back and forth, I said to them, "Is this the kind of fight that you've come to therapy to stop, or are you getting something out of it—a chance to say a few things, or to hear a few things?"

"I hate this," Judy answered. "This is what we do all the time."

"This could be our living room," Bob added, "and it wasn't always this way." For the moment, Judy and Bob are no longer fighting and, instead, are commiserating. With my help, they have escaped the fight by gaining perspective and talking in a non-fighting way about the fight.

But is it possible for couples to take such a compassionate vantage point while talking about the subject of their fight? The fight began when Judy criticized Bob for something he did in the distant past. "That's ancient history," he said. "Can't you let it go?" "No, because you never listened to anything I said about it then, either," she answered. "You always get so defensive."

The stumbling block—what keeps these partners from climbing up on a platform—is that it is hard in a fight to empathize with the other unless you have been empathized with first. So I tried to empathize with both partners simultaneously. I said, "Yes, Bob, you understandably don't like Judy's bringing up that incident from so long ago; it makes you feel she'll never let you live anything down. And Judy, it's understandable that you're bringing it up, since it's the clearest example of what you want Bob to see is still happening in more subtle ways today."

"Is that true?" Bob asked Judy, adopting a softer tone of voice. Judy nodded, her body relaxing. For the moment, each was appreciating the logic of the other's position. They were reviewing their fight from a shared compassionate perspective.

I know couples have reached a platform when they believe that their position makes sense, and, at the same time, appreciate that their partner's does, too.

often leads to insight about how partners' styles of responding to conflict may be a reaction to the way they were treated by the closest figures in their lives years ago.

Working from this perspective, psychologist Susan Johnson talks about how strengthening a feeling of security in romantic relationships can compensate for old wounds and allow partners to be more empathic and flexible in the meanings they attribute to their partner's behavior (e.g., "Rick must have had a difficult day and that's why he just dumped his stuff when he got home. It's not that he doesn't care about what I need."). As a therapist, Johnson uses empathy herself to help couples feel more secure. In exploring the roots of each partner's reactions, she acts as a model for how to be an empathic partner. She might say to Rick, "It sounds as if you can't imagine that anyone will take your needs and desires seriously. So you feel as if you have no choice but to agree when Anna says you may need to find someone else rather than work it out with her." In this way, Johnson explores Rick's fears and reformulates his negative reaction as an understandable position, with the goal of strengthening both Rick's and Anna's feelings of empathy for one another.

## New challenges for couples

Becoming parents increases opportunities for disagreements between partners, especially when new parents discover that they have some different ideas about parenting. Some disagreements can be resolved by having discussions when things are calm, rather than when emotions are running high. On some issues, it may be possible to let each parent handle the children in a different fashion, so that each parent has a unique relationship with them. On other core issues, they may need to work out a way of responding to their children that satisfies both of their instincts.

Either way, when partners are parents, as Rick and Anna are, the conditions for empathy can be difficult to create because time and attention gets shifted from the couple to the children. Modern parents who are typically juggling at least two jobs and care of the home and children have few occasions when they are alone together and reasonably well rested. Because they are already working away from home for so many hours, parents feel guilty about stealing time as a couple. Yet family research with parents of young children reveals that children suffer academically, socially, and often emotionally when their parents are

unhappy. The results of our years of working with partners who are parents have provided a clear message: If you feel you can't take time to work on your relationship for yourselves, *do it for your children*. We know that children will reap the benefits of their parents' more satisfying exchanges—both because they'll have models of empathic behavior to emulate and because they'll be more free to concentrate on their own learning and development, instead of becoming preoccupied with their parents' distress.

Inevitably, all couples also experience stress outside the family that spills over into their lives at home—strain at work, with friends, in the neighborhood, and so on. Partners who are distracted by these stressors find it difficult to listen fully, to place themselves in each other's position, or to imagine how the other person is feeling. There are no simple solutions to this problem. What we suggest is that partners develop an experimental attitude and try small changes that might bring some relief. When Rick comes home from work, Anna could support his having 10 minutes to "chill out" while she ignores the belongings he dumped in the living room, as long as he has agreed to pick them up and join her in the kitchen to help afterwards.

Although these examples illustrate that many of the conditions that support or interfere with empathy don't start with the couple, the final condition—partners' division of family work and care of the children, and their effectiveness at solving problems—focuses more specifically on aspects of the couple relationship.

In our longitudinal studies, we have found that these issues play a critical role in both partners' satisfaction with their overall relationship. Some researchers and couples argue that the secret of satisfying relationships is a traditional arrangement of roles, with separate, well-defined tasks for men and women, whereas others argue that modern marriage calls for an egalitarian arrangement of a 50-50 division of family tasks and care of children, based on the partners' available time, skills, and preferences. Our research suggests that more important than the specific arrangement of "who does what" is whether each partner feels that their arrangement fits their ideals and is *fair*.

Another key to couple satisfaction is the partners' confidence that they have effective ways of tackling problems when they do arise. When partners are unable to work collaboratively to meet the challenges

of family life, they are likely to be less empathic with one another and less satisfied with their overall relationship.

Collaboration relies upon, and helps facilitate, clear and honest communication. While we said earlier that Rick and Anna don't *just* need communication skills training, we hope that increased empathy will lead to more satisfying communication. Along these lines, couples therapist Dan Wile writes about how empathy isn't just an attitude that partners can choose to adopt, but develops out of the couple's interaction. As a therapist, Wile tries to help couples "get on a platform" from which they can

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look at their problems jointly and empathically and begin resolving their difficulties together. (See sidebar.) He discusses how empathy can be self-perpetuating since an empathic exchange can help partners shift from behaving like enemies or strangers to feeling like allies. For instance, Rick might have said, "Anna, I can see that I created another mess, but I'm so wiped out by how my boss stole my ideas at work that I can't move right this minute. What kind of time extension could you give me here?" This would have been more likely to put Anna at ease and take her out of an adversarial mindset. She might have found herself

responding, "I'm sorry I snapped at you. I was tense because *my* day has been so frustrating, and I feel as if *we* haven't connected for days."

How can couples get on a "platform" in order to have non-adversarial discussions? Although it may sound like the last thing to do in the middle of a fight, they could try this: When one partner becomes upset, the other can start by asking questions about where the feelings are coming from, rather than attacking the partner or defending against the perceived attack. This can lead the troubled spouse to feel the partner's empathy and be more willing to give a fuller explanation of what is upsetting about the situation.

Andrew Christensen and the late Neil Jacobson wrote about how empathic exchanges can turn problems "into vehicles for greater intimacy." According to these researchers, one way to get partners to unite empathically with each other is to get at the soft feelings, such as sadness and fear, that underlie the more frequently and easily expressed hard feelings like anger and resentment. Trying to understand where the other person is coming from can lead to both partners feeling as if their experience has been heard, which, in turn, allows them to feel safe expressing pain without blame. In this way, empathy can lead to acceptance and forgiveness. Psychologist and marital therapist John Gottman suggests that a way for one partner to understand the other's upsets is to take time to have regular discussions about each of their goals, dreams, and worries. Gottman suggests that these "Love Maps" of partners' inner lives encourage them to be aware of each other's changing needs so that they can be understanding and supportive when things go wrong.

Of course, managing to meet all five of these conditions that promote empathy all of the time is impossible, even for couples with many advantages in their lives. We know that it's not enough to simply say, "be more empathic" and "don't resort to blaming, unforgiving, contemptuous, or icy-silent behaviors." Most couples would do these things if they could. What we are saying is this: Empathy is so important to a relationship that if it appears to be low, partners must talk about ways that they can help each other to take a more empathic position. A first step in that direction might be to review an "empathy conditions checklist" to see whether anything can be done about any of the barriers to empathy that are affecting their lives.

## What if couples need help?

Our longitudinal studies of hundreds of families make it clear that life is stressful for most modern partners. Couples should pursue outside help if the partners have tried to create conditions to encourage more empathy and have failed to change the atmosphere between them. A consultation with a mental health professional might help get them started. An empathic helper who understands couples can often help improve the climate in which partners tackle their problems. Partners can learn gradually to take on this role themselves so that they can deal with future problems in more empathic and constructive ways.

Let's return to Rick and Anna. After stewing in silence in different rooms, wondering whether their relationship will survive and wishing they could avoid these hurtful exchanges, Rick and Anna considered two choices. The first was to try to use some time together, possibly with the aid of some self-help books, to try to resolve some of the issues behind their conflicts. The second was to seek the help of a professional marriage counselor or couples therapist to teach them how to communicate more effectively. We are not able to predict which alternative would be more effective for them or for couples in similar situations. We do know that their impasse at this moment doesn't necessarily mean that they've lost the chance to feel that early enchantment again. At the moment, they are struggling with demands that make it difficult for them to empathize with one another and to feel the delight that they experienced when they first met. But we are confident that there are practical and realistic steps that Rick and Anna can take to begin to work through this challenge to their relationship. If they can renew their ability to feel empathy for each other's thoughts and feelings, we believe that they will be capable of recapturing the friendship, romance, and happiness they experienced years ago.

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