

## Managing Our Differences

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Most of us like to think about ourselves as being reasonable and compassionate, informed and fair-minded. However, it often doesn't take much to see our fair-minded reasonableness fall by the wayside when we are confronted with viewpoints or attitudes that differ from our own.

Social psychologists point to research on "attribution theory" as a way of explaining these shifts or inconsistencies in our attitudes and behaviors. Studies reveal that we are far more likely to over-emphasize attributes that reflect our positive qualities, even to the point of overinflating the positive, while we tend to overlook or minimize our own short-comings or mistakes. What is interesting is that the reverse is true in terms of our attitudes toward others. We tend to place more weight on the negative or what's different about others rather than giving credit to what's positive, particularly if that places us at a perceived disadvantage. A perfect example of this is gender. In spite of the numerous studies which show that there are no significant differences between men and women in terms of temperament, aptitude, or overall intelligence, we persist in emphasizing the areas where we can point to difference, usually toward the end of secretly trying to prove that "my gender is better than yours."

How are we to understand this very human but dangerous tendency to drift toward the negative? Obviously, it deeply affects our ability (or inability) to get along, and common sense tells us that we should work very hard to be mindful, taking care not to jump to negative conclusions. However, it seems as though we are actually encouraged to take a bizarre sense of pride in the fact that we can make fun of, discount, or over-exaggerate what's negative or different about others. Just look at the drift in media reporting to more and more sensational negative coverage.

It is far easier to feel more comfortable around people who are similar to us in race, gender, ideology, and values. It is also easier to reduce things to simple black and white answers, rather than demanding more of ourselves to struggle with complexity and nuance. It is far too easy to say, "This is right or wrong, good or bad, and if you disagree with me, you're bad." It's easier and, unfortunately, it doesn't get us anywhere that's productive.

Of course, it is difficult to feel close to someone if we find ourselves in the middle of a disagreement about something that is important to us. On a psychological level it is a bit unsettling or frightening to embrace or even tolerate differences if we perceive that our values or personal needs are being questioned by another. Rather than attempting to learn something new about what that person's perspective has to offer, we often try to convince the person to accept our viewpoint in order to feel more comfortable.

I find that in working with couples in therapy, many people commonly confuse closeness with being the same or holding the same viewpoint. Many couples believe that intimacy is created by the merging of two separate individuals into one shared viewpoint. When differences are encountered, it is likely to make them feel a variety of negative emotions: anger, anxiety, and fear of separation, isolation, or disconnection. However, what couples often learn is that it is

only through encountering and accepting differences that we learn and grow as individuals. If we only encountered people exactly like us, our growth would come to an abrupt halt. This is true not only in intimate relationships, but it applies to most situations where we feel threatened or find ourselves forming judgments that fuel contempt or negativity. Whether we're confronting differences in race, religion, politics, or any arena where values, traditions, or customs may be foreign, growth of self comes when we increase our understanding and acceptance of others.

The bottom line is that people *are* different and use different filters to experience the world. Sooner or later, every relationship encounters difference, disagreement, limitation, or disappointment. Successful relationships evolve when we are able to embrace our differences as well as the things that connect us. When this occurs we discover a new kind of hope and optimism that only comes when we are able to see another's perspective and maybe even change our minds about something or someone.

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