



Relationship Basics

Divorce, drug and alcohol problems, various types of emotional disturbances, and even common loneliness indicate the need for improved interpersonal relations in today's fast-paced world. Friends, co-workers, and family members often have difficulty relating because of communication problems or personal conflict.

So many of life's joys, fun, excitement, and personal fulfillment are dependent upon a fulfilling relationship with other people. Making new friends, falling in love, and our general happiness depends upon how well we relate to other people. The ability to relate to others is at the heart of our humanness.

Even the foundations of all civilizations depend upon cooperation with other people. Laws, customs, religion, education, and most work depends upon interpersonal negotiation and agreements.

One would think that things as basic as friendship, love, caring, kindness, and helpfulness would come naturally, almost like breathing. However, the tough reality is that the skills needed for effective interpersonal relationships are learned. Some people learn these skills easily as children, allowing them to be warm and friendly for the rest of their lives. Most people are not so fortunate. Lacking "people skills," they relate to others as best they can, but they may endure a lot of hurt feelings and conflicts, which they do not understand. Many such people experience loneliness and depression; they want to have good relationships, but don't know how to go about it.

For those who work with people, be they,

teachers, extension agents, social workers, or volunteer leaders, effectiveness and success depend on good relational skills. Training in interpersonal relationships can prove very helpful in developing such skills.

What is a Helpful Person?

Most of us like to think of ourselves as friendly and helpful. Yet most of us, at one time or another, have difficulty in relationships. We may experience a broken friendship, a falling-out with a co-worker, or frequent arguments with family members. We probably feel baffled by the attitudes and behaviors of those other people. Yet, in reality, we may need to look at our own inner resources for the answers to our problems. Noted psychologist Carl Rogers suggests certain questions, which help determine our ability to relate well with others:

1. Am I a person learning the skills of interpersonal relationships? The person who thinks he knows it all may not be very understanding of the rest of us "mere mortals."
2. Can the other person see me as trustworthy, dependable, and consistent? This means listening, keeping confidences wisely and being available when needed.
3. Can I let myself experience positive attitudes toward this other person—attitudes of warmth, caring, liking, interest, and respect? A person who can communicate a feeling of warmth has mastered a major communication skill.
4. Can I respect my own feelings and my own needs while respecting another's? Am I strong enough in my own separate-

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ness so that I will not be downcast by her depression, frightened by her fear, or engulfed by her dependency?

5. Am I secure enough within myself to permit her separateness? Can I permit her to be what she is—honest or deceitful, infantile or adult, despairing or overconfident? Can I give her the freedom to be? Or do I feel that she should follow my advice, remain somehow dependent upon me, or mold herself after me?

6. Can I let myself enter fully into the world of his feelings and personal meanings, seeing these as he sees them? Can I step into his private world so completely, that I lose all desire to evaluate or judge it?

What Are Our Goals?

Goals expressing the kind of people we are trying to become are somewhat personal. Where there is not one list with which we can all agree, the following example expresses the wishes of many people. We wish every person could:

- Develop all inborn abilities and talents. Some refer to this as “self-actualization” or “self-fulfillment.”
- Become a responsible and useful citizen. We want fulfillment without giving up achievement.
- Relate to friends, coworkers, family members, and people of different cultures with warmth and understanding.

The person who achieves these goals will enjoy life even in times of difficulty. This person has linked the past with the future and is living almost totally in the present. She is happy with her community and culture, but not bound by it. Her values let her look to the future as she works in the present. She is effective and happy because of the skills she has already developed and is still developing.

Important Interpersonal Skills

In order to develop and maintain a fulfilling interpersonal relationship, each person should be:

- Knowing and trusting of others, which involves acceptance of yourself and others, self-disclosure, self-awareness, and trust.
- Accurately understanding of others. This involves listening, expressing feelings, and the communication of warmth and liking.
- Mutually supportive and helpful. This means making oneself available when needed and spending time with another person.
- Learning how to resolve problems and conflicts, handling anger and problems.

Learning New Skills

Learning new interpersonal skills is usually easier in a group that can give approval and help supply motivation. People who want to improve these skills should try to “sell” some group they belong to into having some programs for this purpose. Sometimes a new group set up to learn interpersonal relationships is needed. Any type of support group—for widows, singles, mothers, etc.—can generally profit from such learning.

Awkward feelings are natural when one is practicing a new interpersonal skill. Many people report that it feels mechanical or like playing a role and is unreal. They are correct. But practicing any new skill feels this way. Learning to make a speech, play the piano, or write had to be mechanical or awkward at first.

- To learn new interpersonal relationship skills, one must:
1. Become aware of the need for such a skill.
 2. Learn and practice behaviors involved in the skill.
 3. Receive feedback on how well one is doing on the skill.
 4. Slowly but surely integrate the new behavior into daily relationships with friends, co-workers, and family members.

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