

David Richo, in his book "How To Be An Adult in Relationships", talks about the Five A's that help relationships flourish and deepen into real fulfillment. Too often, I think, we don't really ask ourselves, "What do I really want in my relationships?" Usually we know what we DON'T want or DON'T like, but that doesn't help head us in the right direction.

Richo's Five A's are:

ATTENTION

ACCEPTANCE

APPRECIATION

AFFECTION

ALLOWING

ATTENTION refers to being aware of others, being aware of ourselves and being the focus of someone's loving attention. Caretakers are often very good at being aware of others, but they are very lacking in being aware of their own needs and wants. In addition, Caretakers don't expect others to give them loving attention. Too often Caretakers form their primary relationship with someone who expects to get all the attention and give little in return. For many Caretakers, getting attention feels unsafe because the self-focused partner tends to give the Caretaker their attention only when s/he has a complaint, is angry or looking for someone to blame.

We all need someone who really listens to our deepest feelings and needs, who can validate our efforts, and who understands our intentions and needs and fears. If you are noticing that you are feeling ignored, invalidated or invisible, start by giving yourself attention. Pay attention to your real feelings, identify the things you like and don't like, and listen to what you are thinking. Perhaps you could start writing these things down so that you can go back and really look at them and learn to understand who you are and what you want in life.

Begin to notice what you are saying and doing as you go about your daily activities. Are you being the person you want to be? Are you living the life you want to live? Are you in loving, caring relationships where you feel seen and heard? If not, why are you putting up with less than you deserve? Everyone deserves to have loving attention, and we all need that kind of attention to thrive and be the best we can be.

ACCEPTANCE means being seen with mercy, love, respect and understanding. In order to be intimate, we have to feel safe, accepted, relaxed and worthy. Are you getting these things in your relationships? If you are feeling anxious, needy, wary, self-conscious or intimidated, you are not receiving the acceptance that you need to function. That lack of acceptance may be coming from others and/or it may be coming from yourself. Acceptance of yourself is what gives you self-confidence, good self-esteem, hope, and deservability. Acceptance from others gives you a sense of stability, safety and calmness.

Our ability to accept others is also important. Too often, however, we interpret acceptance to mean agreement or acquiescence, or putting up with unacceptable or hurtful behavior from others. Acceptance means that you see the truth of the other person, the truth of your relationship with them, and then act on the basis of that truth rather than pretending the person and relationship are what they are not. This means that when someone is loving, or hurtful, or angry, or resentful, or caring, or kind, that you acknowledge the behavior for what it is, not what you wish it to be. By acknowledging the real interactions we are experiencing, we can figure out how to interpret our relationships, and how to respond to them from an adult perspective. We have a right to ask others to treat us kindly, but we don't have the right to demand or coerce others to be what we want. Acceptance means seeing and acting on the truth.

APPRECIATION is essential to our feeling loved and accepted. Too often we don't give others the appreciation that would make the relationship feel fulfilling. Acknowledging our gratitude and validating the efforts of others on our behalf cements good relationships. If we feel undeserving or don't give ourselves appreciation, it can end up being very difficult to give it to others. Most anger, hurt and resentment in relationships comes from a lack of, and a need for, more appreciation. Appreciating yourself and appreciating others makes us feel good and increases our love and connection to others.

If you are feeling unappreciated in your relationship, look to see if there is a general attitude of not paying attention or accepting each other. Is the other person capable of giving you the appreciation you need and want? Are they withholding it for some reason? Are there unresolved hurts and angers that need to be addressed? Can these be overcome? Does your offering them appreciation trigger a positive or a negative response? Without reciprocal appreciation, relationships wither, become resentful and eventually die.

AFFECTION comes from the word "affect" or feeling. As humans we need emotional, spiritual and physical affection. Infants who don't receive affection can die. Affection includes the three keys of attention, acceptance and appreciation, but it also requires some direct behaviors that show us the proof of these things.

Affection is often a code word for sex, but there can be sex with no affection whatsoever.

Does your relationship feel intimate, caring, warm, safe, magnetic, and loving? If so, then affection is going to be included. Many people have relationships that feel distant, inconsiderate, unkind, and manipulative. In those instances, loving affection will be missing, and no amount of sex can make up for the missing intimacy.

Affection is listed fourth in these keys because it grows out of the previous three. Without the other three, affection will not feel safe.

ALLOWING means letting yourself and the other person be who you are. Too many rules, requirements and expectations push us into becoming who others need us to be rather than being ourselves. Allowing means that we don't try to control the other person, and we don't allow the other person to control us. We don't deny the individuality of either person. Allowing has many similarities to acceptance. We don't try to change the other person's feelings, or force them into doing things they find intolerable or humiliating, we don't try to change their personality or beliefs, or blame them or judge them for mistakes or differences. Allowing is the essence of unconditional love.

Allowing does not mean that you can't set limits in relationships. Setting limits on intolerable behavior is not the same as trying to control another person. Setting limits is done to protect yourself; while controlling is meant to make another do what you want.

What do you do then, when you find yourself in a relationship where the other person is highly controlling or you find yourself needing desperately for the other person to be different than they are? That is the time to really assess the relationship. Can you in good conscience follow the Five A's above or has the relationship disintegrated to a non-loving, non-caring, non-considerate interaction? Can you both fulfill the Five A's or has the relationship gone beyond repair? Only you can decide. Sometimes the most loving thing to do in a relationship impasse is to let it go.

The Five A's can guide healthy people into reciprocal adult relationships. Applying the principles of attention, acceptance, appreciation, affection and allowing can upgrade your participation in any relationship, and using these guidelines can help you assess if this is a relationship that is truly functional, loving and adult.