
You, Too, Can Enhance Your Relationships

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Relationships are a part of everyone's life. A large part of my professional life has focused on helping clients have healthy, happy relationships whether it is with their co-workers, spouse, children, parents, or friends. Having healthy relationships is also an important sign of Emotional Intelligence. How do you express caring, appreciation and/or love to the people who are special to you?

When you are with someone you care about (adult to adult or adult to child), you tend to say and do things for the other person that makes you feel cared about, appreciated, or loved. This is your primary "love language."

To me, it is like having a target with a bull's eye. When I ask couples to tell me three things they say or do to communicate appreciation or caring for each other, often only one item hits the bull's eye. This means most of the intent of the message is lost.

In my experience, usually people are putting effort into saying or doing the things they hope will make the other person feel appreciated and/or loved. However, unless you know what makes the other person feel valued, the effort is wasted. You are not connecting. If you are not connecting, the message is lost; your effort is in vain.

Gary Chapman believes there are five different patterns for communicating caring and appreciation. He wrote *The 5 Love Languages* and two more books which apply his theory to children and teens. According to Chapman, the five different ways people give and receive messages of caring and appreciation are:

* Time - This has to be quality time in which you give undivided attention. You might think of it as one-on-one time doing activities that emphasize togetherness more than "what" you do.

* Touch - While this is not appropriate in work settings (except for a hand shake), it is important in families, especially at times of crisis. Cultures vary on how much touch is appropriate. In some cultures, people are offended if greetings do not include a hug or some form of touch.

* Affirmation - Encouraging words inspire and give courage.

In addition, words of appreciation are especially meaningful in the work setting. Supervisors and team leaders need to be able to identify and be comfortable giving genuine feedback about employees' strengths.

* Gifts - These are visual symbols of appreciation or caring. It can mean "you were thinking of me." It is important to not get carried away with this area to the extent that you disregard the other languages. Gifts may be made or purchased and are especially important in a time of crisis. Many of our soldiers in Iraq carry with them small gifts that remind them of being loved and valued.

* Acts of Service - These are things we do for someone else because we care or love that person. We might think of these actions as "giving a helping hand."

We all have a primary love language. Most of us have a secondary or back-up language. When that is the case, we are bilingual. We tend to do for others whatever our primary or secondary language is. If it happens to also be that person's primary or secondary way of feeling appreciated and loved, the communication hits the bull's eye. If not, we did not achieve our goal.

When each person knows his/her primary language as well as the other person's primary language, there is clear communication between two people in the area of giving and receiving caring and appreciation.

To determine your primary love language, think about what you most often request or want from someone you care about, i.e. more time, affirmation, etc. You might think about what hurts you the most when you are thinking of someone you care about. You might also think about what your complaints are with that person; then, the opposite would likely be your primary language.

The following tips will help you become more proficient in using love language in relationships:

1. Rank order from 1-5 (1-most important) how important each of the five love languages are to you.
2. Think about your spouse, a friend, or child. Rank order the importance of the love languages for that person. Talk about your choices with that person to confirm your selection.
3. Observe how others express love or appreciation to you.

Listen to what they request most often. Notice what they frequently complain about not getting. If half the complaints fall into a pattern, focus on that language with them. It might be their primary love language.

4. During the early years of infancy, touch, kind words, and quality time are especially important. The general rule of thumb for young children from birth to five years old is: use all of the love languages because it is too early to figure out the primary one.

5. To determine love languages for children five years or older or other adults, offer choices, i.e. would you like to spend some time together or have you help them with something?

6. With children, you are trying to develop self-discipline. Respect their love language by not selecting it as a method of discipline because it will cause extreme emotional pain. They will feel painful rejection instead of love from you.

It is important to speak as many of the five love languages (bilingual to multilingual) as you possibly can. The mark of a mature adult is the ability to give and receive appreciation and love through all the love languages.

Start with your primary and secondary languages. Practice them for several months. As you see the benefits of using someone's love language, you can add others later. In a work or team setting, the leader can keep people motivated and feeling appreciated by getting as close to the bull's eye as possible.

It is wonderful to know the effort you put into showing caring for someone will be received as you intended or hit the bull's eye. Knowing another person's love language will enhance your relationship. It can build trust, help heal past hurts, provide a sense of security, self-worth, and significance.

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