

Problem Solving in Couples

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This is how I've come to see the situation.

Problems

Everyone has problems. Problems are situations that cause a person distress - frustration. A problem is avoided when you do not experience the situation any more. A problem is solved when the situation occurs, and you no longer get upset or frustrated.

Example: Someone criticizes something you did, and you get upset. You avoid this by staying away from all critical people. You solve this problem by learning how to effectively set boundaries, and affirm your presence and position in all decision processes that affect you.

The Problems You Have Left

Over time, everyone works on solving problems. The ones you have now are the ones you have left over – yet to be solved. I like to think of this by using the image of a single day's work. In the morning you build a list of chores. You work on them all day. You work on the easiest ones first. By the end of the day you have left the chores you don't know how to solve or the ones that are very hard. Thus as I see it, by the time you are in your twenties, I think you have solved all the easy problems in your life. The ones you have left are either difficult to solve, or you don't know how to solve them, or both. The tough ones are all you have left.

You Pick a Partner with Problems

When you go out dating, I think part of one's brain (the problem counter part) examines the people you date, to see how many problems they have. Let's say you're a guy. You know you have some problems.

You meet Sally. After a few minutes or hours you realize she has many many more problems than you have. "Holy cow! I'll be working forever on her problems. Perhaps you label her as too needy or too high maintenance." So you don't date Sally long.

Then you meet Carol. Carol seems to have almost no problems at all. She seems really put together. "Holy cow! She'll never put up with me. I'm too messed up for her." So you don't date Carol for long.

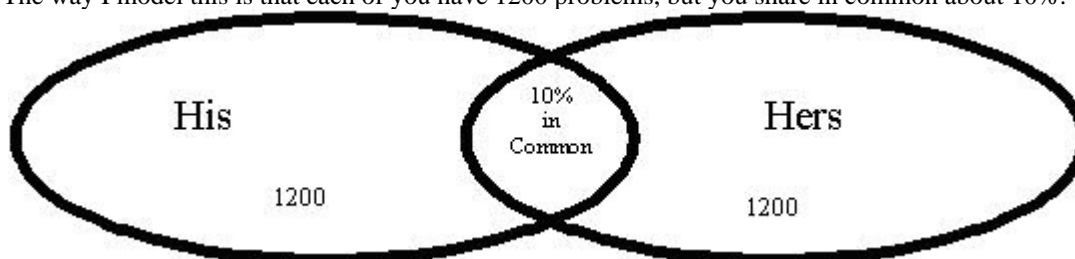
At last you meet Alice. Now, Alice seems pretty normal to you. She seems to have problems, but no more than you do. You feel secure with her. And two months later you move in with each other.

My general awareness is that people pick people with the same number of problems – somewhat equally needy and equally high maintenance. Seems to happen all the time.

You Don't Have the Same Problems

Now, while you were starting to date Alice, another part of your brain (the problem examiner) noted, happily that she had solved many of the problems you had and that you knew how to do many of the things that troubled Alice. She could help you and you could rescue her. Wow!

The way I model this is that each of you have 1200 problems, but you share in common about 10%.



That is both good news and bad.

The good news is that there are a finite number of problems, and collectively you have some idea of how to solve most of them.

The bad news is that while you have 2280 problems to work on, and 120 of these neither of you has any idea how to solve, all the problems you have left are tough problems.

The bottom line is that you are going to be working on problems for quite a while.

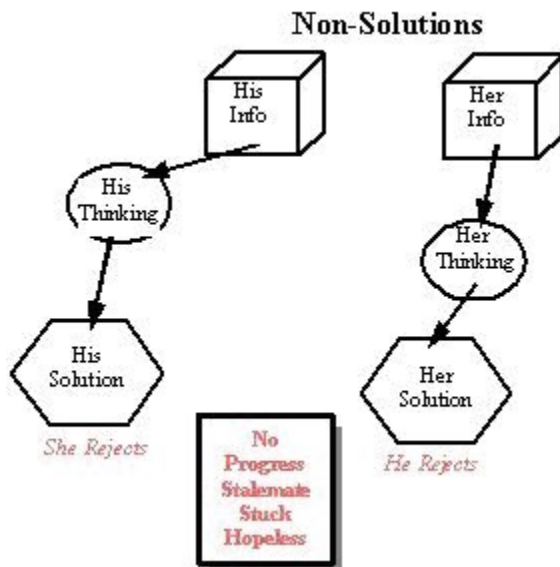
Making Progress

Couples work together, or against each other, trying to solve problems. If both believe that progress is being made, then they will feel “hope”. The amount of progress can be very small, and still there will be a sense of “hope”. When progress stops or moves backward, people feel hopeless and couples often don’t stay together long after hopelessness arrives. Progress is very important.

Solving Problems – The Great Mistake

Let’s look at the problem-solving situation. Usually one person notices a problem, thinks about it and then raises the issue and proposes a solution. The second most common situation is that one person notices a problem, mentions it to their partner, who then offers a solution. In either case we can say that there is a problem that needs solving – at least one. And in either case, the mistake in problem-solving occurs when a solution is suggested by someone and the other person rejects that solution.

I didn’t say that the mistake is the partner rejecting the proposed solution. I said the mistake occurs when the solution is proposed and rejected. I think the Great Mistake is what happens next.



In the most common situation, the proposer will start pushing and persuading, while the rejector will start defending and withdrawing. This may end up in an argument, with two solutions put on the table, and both people pushing for their solution while their partner continues to reject. Or it may end up in a separation, and, typically, the problem that needed solving will go underground and not be solved at this time – saved for later. This pushing, persuading, arguing, withdrawing is the Great Mistake and will lead to increased frustration and to more distress building in the relationship.

To avoid this mistake, whenever a solution is proposed and you hear the “sound of rejection”, stop and take a breath.

Fatal Flaw

In a couple, when there are just two of you, all solutions need to be Win-Win solutions. Both people must like the solution or it isn't any good. What goes wrong? Lets look at this.

When your partner rejects your solution it is because your solution has a Fatal Flaw. To your partner your solution looks like a Win-Lose. Now, you wouldn't have proposed it, if you thought it had a Fatal Flaw or Win-Lose. Thus the Fatal Flaw is currently invisible to you. The only clue you have to the existence of that Fatal Flaw is your partner's "rejection".

On the other side when you reject your partner's solution, it is because some part of you can sense a Fatal Flaw in their proposal. Their solution seems a Win-Lose for you. Your partner doesn't know the Fatal Flaw is there, but you do. Your sense of some mistake in their suggestion is quite valuable. Don't loose it.

Source of the Flaw

Where did this Fatal Flaw come from? It arose, along with all other parts of the solution, from the proposing partner's database. This is all the information that person currently has about the world, themselves and their partner. Somehow, in this database, some information is missing. Where is it? The critical information is in their partner's database – their knowledge of the world, themselves and of their partner.

Both want a solution

My experience shows that both partners want solutions to all the problems they face. Both are often quite eager to find solutions. And so, the situation where the Fatal Flaw appears, when one partner rejects a proposed solution, is a wonderfully good one - two hopeful and helpful partners.

Great Mistake

But when one starts to push or persuade the other, or when both start to argue, all is lost. It only takes a split second for this to happen. And so I say "breathe."

Correcting the Mistake

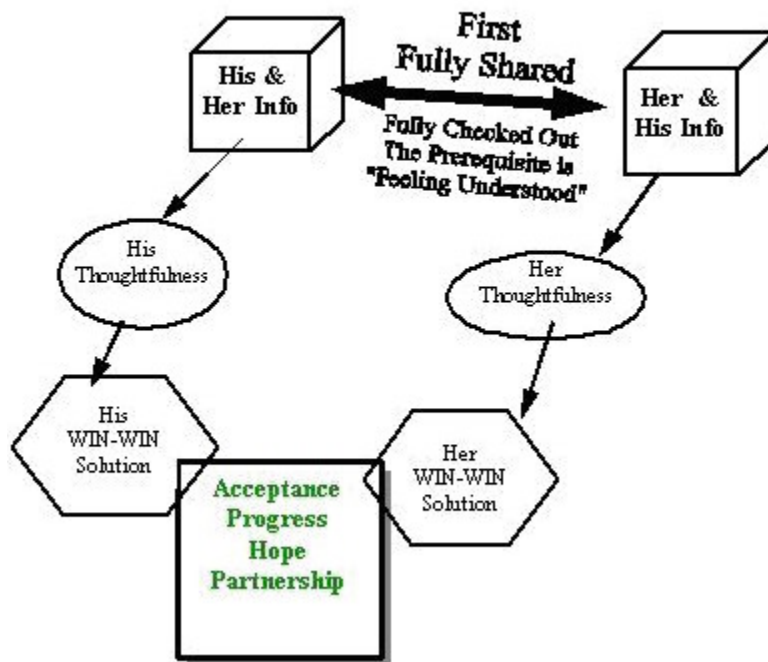
Whenever you are in this situation and take a breath, the next step is to thank your partner for rejecting your solution. Does that sound crazy! But it is very wise. Your partner has shown the courage to let you know that you have proposed something with a Fatal Flaw. Do you want your flawed solution to be adopted, or do you want a Win-Win solution? It's your call. Learn to see the "rejection" as a favor.

The next step is to put your solution on the shelf. You may need it.

Finding the Solution

Then, connect your databases. Use dialogue to carefully find out what was in your partner's database that you didn't have, and share with your partner what was in your database that they didn't have. When you have finished this, you can both brainstorm, thoughtfully develop new solutions that are a Win for both.

Making Progress



Simple Steps:

1. Notice rejection
2. Breathe
3. Put solution on hold
4. Connect databases
5. Develop new solution(s)
6. Look out for "rejection" and start again.
7. If no "rejection", move on with life.