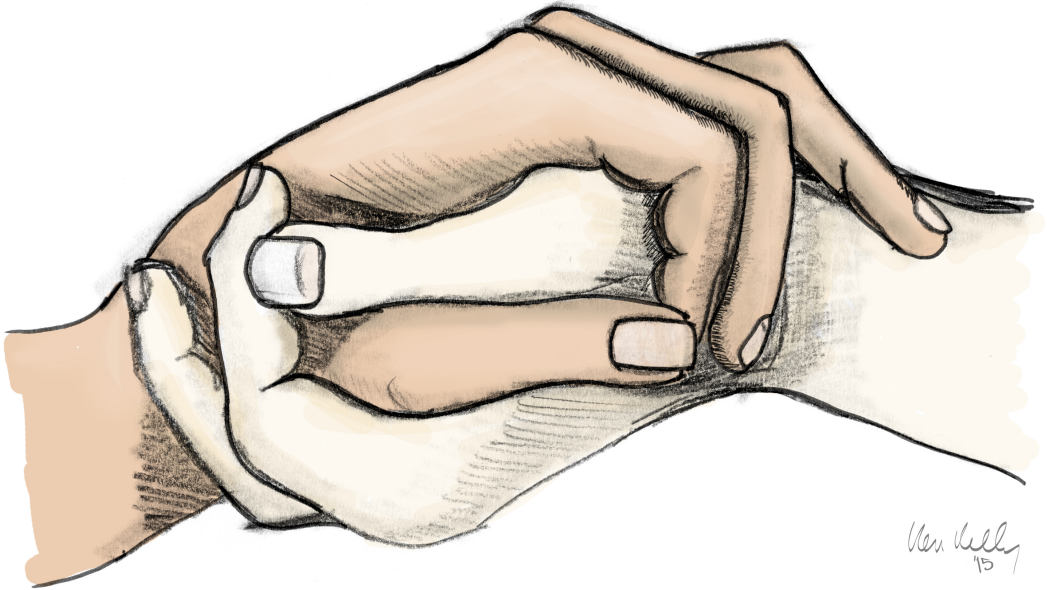


## CHAPTER THREE



### POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

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Positive Relationships make us feel safe and trusted. With the support of one another we can make hugely positive changes in the lives of those around us. But how do we keep our relationships positive?

## Positive Relationship

Our greatest strength is other human beings<sup>1</sup>. From early on in life we thrive through closeness to at least one other person. When we are tiny infants closeness is experienced from one or two adults. 'The 'Rescuing Hug' true story illustrates that a caring connection to a sibling can also make all the difference:

*This incident took place in Philadelphia Hospital when twins were born prematurely and one of them was dying in her incubator. Her twin sister on the other hand was thriving<sup>2</sup>. Nothing worked to make the dying twin better. A clever nurse, in spite of hospital warnings of cross-infection and threats of being sued for malpractice, decided as a last resort to put the dying twin into the incubator with her stronger sister.*

*Immediately the stronger twin put her arm around her weaker sister. Within minutes the weaker sister's heartbeat became normal. Within days she recovered and they both are healthy and strong today.*

*Medical practice has since changed and twins are now kept together after birth even if one of them is unwell. The positive connection that twins have created in the womb is now viewed as an asset to their well-being.*

## **Our trust in others is determined by our early childhood experiences**

Early childhood experiences greatly influence how much trust we have in people later on in life. The safer we felt in our childhood the more adventurous we could be because we knew that if something went wrong we could run right back to someone trusted<sup>3</sup>. We reached out and made positive connections with people around us.

Ideally we should all have experienced an abundance of positive communication early on in life but sometimes that did not happen due to our parents' or caregivers' illnesses or all-absorbing life-challenges. Also, some of us may have experienced traumatic abuse that destroyed or overshadowed the good connections which were there.

Many of us are wounded in certain areas of our emotional life. Some are deeply wounded by the lack of love connections. However it is never too late to heal and connect<sup>4</sup>.

*We can learn to build positive relationships which can nourish and compensate for our initial lack of love.*

## **The Positive Connection of Friendship**

Friendship is one of the most positive relationships a person can experience. A caring friendship connection gives us a positive self-image, a passion for life and the courage to care for people around us.

Strong positive connections build up a store of positive memories that helps us to feel at 'home' within ourselves. We feel supported and nourished and we grow in the awareness of having a positive influence in someone else's life<sup>5</sup>.

Having this 'safe haven' in somebody who accepts us for who we are, someone who wants to listen to us and help us through difficulties is a great gift:

**18 year old Ann-Marie feels extremely stressed due to exam pressure. She is also worried about what to do after the exams, but her positive relationships help her to cope:**

*For the moment I go out a lot at the weekend and have fun and I don't really mind myself that well - I should really be at home doing the assignment that is stressing me out but it is as if I need breathing space. It is wonderful to be out with*

*friends. It is my friends whom I go to if I have problems and they in turn come to me. We mind each other. I have a core of five solid good friends with whom I can share everything.*

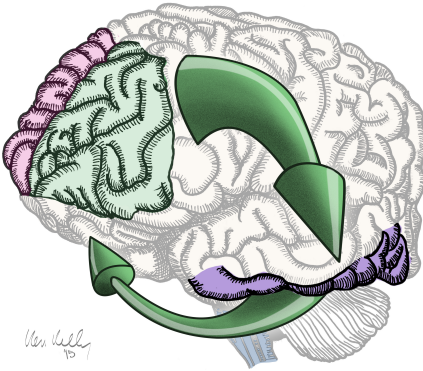
*I talk to friends but also to my mum and dad, they have so much more life experience than I have, they might have been through something similar and are able to view it from a different angle. Also my parents are so different from each other that I get a good variety of inputs. I then mull it all over and decide how to handle it. I might get inspiration from what they say and decide that perhaps my idea was a bit daft and needs to be adjusted - ever so slightly.*

**Incidentally, Ann-Marie did really well at her exams.**

## **Activating our Social Brain**

A small part of the brain is dedicated to social IQ. Activity in the Fusiform Gyrus is all deciding regarding our social skills (see next page for a visual image). This little centre helps us to discern what is going on with other people.

Lack of activity in the Fusiform Gyrus can get us into some very awkward situations.



The Fusiform Gyrus (purple brain area) helps us to be sensitive to other people's feelings. It helps us to know when to modify our behaviour, for example not to start dancing on the table or throw food around just because we feel like it. We sense when other people might not appreciate something just because we do. People with autism have less activity in this centre but it can be stimulated with special care.

When two open-minded people communicate with each other seemingly the Fusiform in both people starts vibrating with a similar energy, tuning into each other beyond verbal language and understanding. The more interested two people are in each other the greater the activity in this area.

The Amygdala (see chapters one and two) is very quick to signal alert/stand-by to all our organs, but this can be reversed when we create caring connections with people around us.

Positive relationships make us feel safe which affects our brains in a way that 'social' messages from the Fusiform

Gyrus can flow freely back and forth to the management centre at the front of our brains (see image opposite).

*When we are upset or stressed it is difficult for information to travel freely to the management centre which helps us to make wise decisions.*

The Fusiform Gyrus informs us of how people are feeling and what they might expect. It helps us to tune in to what is needed in order to create a positive connection with somebody.

People with good social skills have a lot of activity in their Fusiform Gyrus. They might have had good role models as we tend to model ourselves on people near us. Or they might have made a personal decision to develop an awareness of their own and other people's feelings in order to know how best to connect with them.

### **Overly concerned about other people's feelings?**

Funnily enough too much consideration of Fusiform Gyrus messages can become inhibiting and depressing. We can become so aware of other people's feelings and needs that we forget to listen to our own.

A person with an over-developed Fusiform Gyrus (like me) needs to learn to be more self-aware and assertive so as not to allow other people's needs to take up so much attention that one's energy and personality become non-existent.

*Self-awareness and assertiveness are imperative skills for the person who is overly concerned about other people's opinions and needs.*

Good friendship can be a great help to learn to set boundaries within this safe environment. There is a balance of give and take. In friendship we develop social skills and automatically improve these as we interact with one another.

## **Building a store of Positive Connections**

Sometimes due to past negative experiences which we have not fully processed we expect something bad to happen again even though we find ourselves in a completely different situation. However when we build a memory bank of positive connections with trusted people around us a brain pathway is created that enables us to say:



*'Okay, maybe someone will not like what I say, but that does not matter, lots of other people might find it helpful'*

*'Perhaps someone will laugh but that is their problem not mine'.*

*'Perhaps someone will put me down but at least I will know to go elsewhere with my ideas'.*

*'Maybe that person is not much of a friend anyhow, but that does not mean I cannot be friendly'.*

## **Holding on to Relationships**

John and Julie Gottman, a U.S. professor couple, have investigated the 'secret' of couples who stay together<sup>8</sup>. One of their methods is to invite couples to spend time in a cosy little flat which is equipped with cameras and microphones that record the couple's interaction. The couple would be asked to sort out some ordinary house chores and bills together over a couple of hours. They would soon forget the cameras as there

was no one else around. Afterwards the Gottman's would analyse the recorded interaction of the couple to see if they could find a pattern.

The Gottman's followed a large number of couples for over forty years and they found that there were mainly three types of couples:

- **The passionate couple** who were very vocal and dramatic in their communication, for good and bad.
- **The independent couple** who tended to lead separate lives.
- **The dependant couple** who were rarely seen apart and seemed to do everything together.

Furthermore the Gottmans discovered that no matter which type of the three relationships, the couples who stayed together had one common denominator namely that:

**IN LASTING RELATIONSHIPS**  
couples communicate with a  
Ratio of 5 : 1 of  
Positive to Negative Interactions

**The passionate couple** might have hurtful arguments but as long as the passionate loving was five times more frequent the relationship would flourish.

**The independent couple** might grow apart but as long as they kept up a positive communication that was five times stronger than their lack of unity, the couple would have a thriving and lasting relationship.

**The dependent couple** might tend to avoid conflict in order not to upset one another but perhaps suddenly explode, but as long as their confrontation was followed by five times more positive interaction their relationship would last.

This research was mostly done in the U.S. where divorce is quite acceptable when one falls out of love. In other parts of the world couples may stay together for social or economic reasons.

## **Caring Relationships**

130,000 people of various ages and from a number of countries were asked in a Gallup Survey what made them happy. Most participants gave two answers: 'learning

something new' and 'having someone you can count on in your life'<sup>7</sup>. But what is it that enables us to count on somebody?

These are the positive communication skills professors Harvey and Omarzu<sup>14</sup> and many other researchers observed that people in caring friendships and relationships use :

- 1      Sharing of Good News
- 2      Looking Up to One Another
- 3      Supporting 'Crazy Dreams'
- 4      Sharing a Vision
- 5      Helping Someone to Fulfil Their Goals
- 6      Talking About Personal Concerns
- 7      Honesty
- 8      Having Fun
- 9      The Power of Touch

## **1. Sharing of Good News (responding constructively)**

Even the best of friends or partners will experience negativity from each other due to stress, past negative experiences and human nature. But when they communicate more about the good experiences in their lives, past negative

experiences fade into the background and negative memories start to heal.

When two people are happy for each other's good, positive experiences they both benefit. One of them will feel truly supported and appreciated while the other one will feel uplifted from supporting a friend in their good fortune - it is almost as good as experiencing it oneself. Or is it?

*Something as simple as being happy for the success or good experiences of one's friend or partner is more predictable of a lasting relationship than the sharing of bad events although that has its place.*

## **What about feeling jealous and envious?**

It is a common human reaction to feel jealous or envious when we see someone else succeed at something or get something that we would have liked for ourselves. This can be a humiliating feeling which makes us feel uncomfortable. Rather than admitting to our feelings we might either criticise the other person involved or start feeling sorry for ourselves. Being happy for someone else might not come easily but honestly facing our own negativity might be the most productive in the long run.

**My story:**

*Personally I've struggled with feelings of envy and jealousy to the point of shaking and feeling sick but I have reached a stage where I welcome these feelings because it points out to me when I am not fully engaged in my own life.*

*This is an opportunity to ask myself what I really want and look at what I need to do to get it.*

*If for some reason what I want I cannot have, I ask myself what I then would want instead?*

*If I cannot answer this question at least I know that there is something missing in my life and that I need to be on the look-out for something.*

*Instead of jealousy being a negative experience it becomes a kick-start to engaging myself more deeply in my own life.*

## **Four ways of responding to a friend's enthusiasm<sup>12</sup>**

Keeping in mind our tendency to self-centredness and negativity it is easy to identify with the four different ways that we might respond when somebody shares something good that has happened to them:

- 1 'Oh yes, that's great' (and not meaning it)  
**passive encouragement**
- 2 'Oh yes that reminds me of when I...'  
**passive discouragement**
- 3 'That could turn very bad..... '  
**active discouragement**
- 4 'I am delighted for you. Tell me more!'  
**active encouragement**

## **BRAIN TRAIN**

**Create multiple positive connections  
with people around you<sup>13</sup>.**

**Which of the above four responses describes your reaction?**

**For one day try to respond with active encouragement whenever someone tells you something they are excited about.**

**Take an interest in someone and ask them about what they love doing, listen actively by nodding, smiling and showing that you are interested.**

### **BRAIN TRAIN+**

**In a group, classroom or youth club**

**In groups of 5 play this game five times rotating the roles to allow everyone to experience each of the roles (write each role on a piece of paper to pass on at each change of roles):**

1. The person with good news who excitedly shares with the group (can be made up or real)
2. The person who encourages but with a tone of indifference
3. The person who advises against being so happy, pointing out what could go wrong
4. The person who starts talking about their own experience ignoring the news
5. The person who is interested, asks questions and congratulates



This is usually a fun experience but also educational as we might feel deflated by another person's lack of interest or negative attitude when we are sharing our 'good news'. Also we might not want to be a 'spoil sport' but it is good to take on the different roles as it will remind of us of how easy it is to fall into a disempowering response.

## 2. Looking Up to One Another

Choosing people near us who are better than ourselves helps us to develop positively as we tend to take on the qualities and moods of people close to us<sup>2</sup>. Consequently, we need to choose our company carefully.

Sometimes we might hold on to a friend who really isn't a friend any longer as they may not respect us or make us feel good about ourselves.

**Imelda who stays with her grandmother due to her mother's inability to deal with her heroin addiction explains:**

*My uncle due to my granddad (his dad) dying, was not in a good place. He became a heroin addict. My mum who was*

*his younger sister left home to help him but she ended up an addict herself. She spent most of her time in the pub and when she came home she would beat me up. I asked myself what would happen if I stayed with my mum. I definitely would not be able to finish school.*

*I hope she gets better but she kept hurting me by what she said, she was never pleased with what I did. She rang me once when she was trying to commit suicide and I just can't handle that so when my phone broke I got a new number which she doesn't know.*

*My boyfriend recently told me that he is an alcoholic. I've given him an ultimatum, if he does not get a job and find a way to stop drinking within the month I will leave him. I have feelings for him and I love him but I am not going to let him drag me down. I left my mum to get away from this.*

**Thankfully Imelda is in a good place today, she works with young people who have impaired hearing and associated problems. She loves this work and is much appreciated by those who run the organisation. Imelda seems to have a special gift in this area, having had hearing problems herself.**

Good friends create vitality and excitement about life and its challenges. Research indicates that viewing another person as an expert or as having qualities we admire and want to learn from is another sign of a positive friendship.

### **My story:**

*I mentioned earlier that I tend to want to please other people to the point of ignoring my own needs and feelings and running myself down. This is deeply ingrained – possibly inherited from my mum.*

*I am fortunate though to have a very close friend who is the opposite to me in that respect. He believes in what he does, and 'tough' if other people have a problem with that (of course that can go too far also). I admire that quality – it reminds me to be strong and not to obsess about getting other people's approval. Spending time with this person helps me to be more balanced in my approach to life.*

### 3. Supporting 'Crazy' Dreams

Sometimes we under-estimate the power we have to fuel or quench someone's dream. When couples grow apart they have stopped listening to each other's dream or sense of purpose in life.

What can bring a couple close again is the skill of sitting down and listening to each other's dream no matter how crazy or far fetched. Dreams are what get us up in the morning. Dreams give meaning to our lives. So unless we believe someone's dream will hurt others, we can make all the difference in someone's life by taking their dream seriously.

We do not need to have the same dream or vision for the future, although it can be wonderful if we do. Indeed we might share one part of our dream with one person and another part of our dream with another. The positive connection is the listening, the believing and the emotional support that we can give - that is what makes the difference.

#### **BRAIN TRAIN**

**Listen to and**

**Share in other people's dreams**

**Once a week ask someone about their dream or goals in life.**

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