



**“RELATIONSHIPS ARE AT THE CORE OF EVERY ISSUE ANY CLIENT HAS EVER BROUGHT INTO MY OFFICE.”**

**-DEB SMITH**

## **RELATIONSHIP SERIES: THE HEART OF THE PROBLEM**

### **THE HEART OF THE PROBLEM**

One would think relationships would flow naturally for us simply because we are born in relationship. Yet that isn't the case at all. Relationships are at the core of every issue any client has ever brought into my office.



Our first relationship is with our mother and the complications begin before we are even born. Our mothers are living, breathing, fallible

beings just as we are. They have the same experiences of joy and pain, bliss and sorrow, satisfaction and remorse. All of these emotions and the countless others she has experienced, trigger chemical responses in her body. These chemicals are floating around in every nook and cranny crossing the placenta and bathing her fetus with the result of her experiences.

Imagine during her pregnancy her partner dies in a tragic accident, or her home burns down, or she is in a life threatening situation? What if she is in a domestic violence relationship fearing for her life and the life of her fetus daily? What if this pregnancy is unwanted or wanted yet she is unable to keep her baby?

***What impact do these chemicals have on her fetus and on the connection between mother and child?***

We see that impact first in the nursery. Why is it that some babies appear content while others appear restless and agitated? There could have been a traumatic birth experience or medical emergency, yet more likely it is due to the environment in which the fetus developed. The nourishment its mother provided, the safety and the emotional stability all lay the foundation for that very first relationship. And that foundation is the building block for future relationships. Of course there are windows of opportunity for change. Unfortunately that change can go in either direction – mom can either maintain the healthy environment she has established, make significant changes to provide the environment necessary for healthy child development ... *or not*.

There are numerous attachment theories all outlining a determination for future relationships based on the initial relationship and its attachment style. The bottom line is if your mother was stable and nurturing then you have a pretty good chance of being able to connect with people in a healthy, fulfilling manner and establishing and maintaining a healthy intimate relationship.

If on the other hand your mother was unstable and deficient when it came to nurturing then you have a pretty good chance of struggling with your relationships. Of course there are numerous mitigating factors. The most impactful of these being an intervening adult who is loving and nurturing. It only takes one yet with all the relationship issues we have as adults it is easy to see how challenging finding that one adult can be.

***Throughout childhood the ability to connect and maintain healthy relationships is continuously impacted and challenged.***

Children who experience love as conditional, abandonment, neglect, or addicted parents will often as adults strive for perfectionism, have a very loud inner-critic, tolerate or over invest in unhealthy relationships, lack autonomy and/or believe their value comes solely from the approval of others. Children who experience threats of violence, witness violence or have violence directed upon them not only experience disruption of their developing brains which will be explored further in the trauma series, they often have issues involving trust, safety, isolation, abandonment, security, powerlessness and overwhelming fear. Children of parents with personality disorders, such as narcissism, often only feel safe with the approval of their mother numbing themselves to protect her ego and to avoid the resulting wrath from their expression of self.

Now imagine any of these children as adults trying to establish and maintain a healthy relationship with anyone ... it's not very likely.

***Every experience that child has will impact and predict their ability or inability to connect.***

Many of these outcomes overlap and interchange leaving children with a limited capacity for resilience and regulation. These

skills are learned with the child's first teachers – the family.



When a child is born into a loving and supportive family, typically they learn not only how to verbalize and express their emotions in a healthy and appropriate manner but equally as important it is safe to do so! Yet when a child is born into a family that is abusive, neglectful,

addicted or where mental illness is present this learning process can be significantly thwarted. In these situations the deficits of emotional resilience and regulation leave the child unable to make sense of their internal world, unable to express this confusion and disorganization, often engaging in tantrums and outbursts or withdrawal and numbing in an attempt to gain some sense of control.

***Now imagine these children as adults.***

What happens when we cannot adapt to the challenges of life – family conflict, financial stress, health problems, threats, trauma or even the daily occurrences such as a flat tire or a wrongly deleted email? I can tell you ... ***catastrophe!***

***Now let's dive in head first!***

**LET'S LOOK AT HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS AND HOW THEY DIFFER FROM THE UNHEALTHY...**

Let's first look at the components I have observed in healthy, loving relationships in my practice. And when I say relationships included in that would be parent/child, co-workers,

friends, intimate partners, siblings, extended family and the like.



The first thing I notice is the high regard and respect each has for the other. This is noted in both verbal and non-

verbal language and cues; their communication is non-judgmental, compassionate and non-violent. They don't feel threatened in the relationship, abused, dismissed or devalued in any way; they are not held together by fear, anxiousness or co-dependence. They possess well developed resilience and mature emotional regulation and they are not in competition for power and control in the relationship instead there is a sense of equality and equitable contribution. Typically these clients are coming in for support and/or guidance during a particularly stressful period in their lives. They want to be present for each other during periods of pain, sorrow and loss. ***They are seeking tools not a referee!***

Those in healthy relationships have mastered resilience and regulation. By that I mean they can adapt to change and crisis and can identify and experience their emotions in a healthy manner. It may be that they did not have the advantage of a loving and supportive family yet somewhere along their journey they learned these skills and internalized them as if they had.

Emotions are viewed as messengers, they are identified and tolerated just long enough to be able to explore and evaluate the thoughts that created these feelings. The thoughts are then challenged for accuracy and completeness. As outlined in ***THE OXYGEN MASK SERIES***, if we are basing our beliefs on faulty or incomplete thoughts we will then experience inaccurate emotions. This leads us to behavior that is not

in alignment with truth and reality. This is where we trip and fall.

### ***How can we be aware of our needs if we aren't aware of our personal truths and reality?***

Simply put ... we can't. Those needs are shrouded in fear, anxiousness, unhealthy attachment, loss of self or have been numbed to satisfy the needs of others and maintain a false sense of safety. Too often people maintain relationships because they fear what the loss of the relationship will bring – possible isolation, loneliness, disconnection, financial loss, social abandonment to name a few.

The feelings of anxiousness and panic can be overwhelming and literally crippling. There may be an awareness of the loss of self or of the need to numb oneself in order to maintain the relationship. Yet fear, anxiousness and/or panic prevent them from expressing their needs and ultimately from acting upon them.

There is too much risk in such behavior so there is an over investment in the relationship and/or submission in order to maintain it or there is constant conflict and chaos cycling with euphoric highs and devastating lows.

They tell themselves:

- *Well we are family*
- *He is my father*
- *She is my mother*
- *This is my son or daughter*
- *We have been together for so long*
- *But I love her ... But I love him*

There is no thought to the possibility of changing, healing or ending the relationship. Such thoughts would be overwhelming. There is no thought of the possibility of ending these unhealthy relationships with the knowledge and confidence that new and healthy relationships can be created. Faulty beliefs replay over and

over “... *You aren't good enough ... You aren't lovable ... You get the crumbs ... This is what you deserve ...*”

So, let's start making the positive changes to make your relationships healthier and more fulfilling.

I highly recommend you complete ***THE OXYGEN MASK SERIES***. There is useful information in the series regarding self-care tools and resources in order to build the strength and confidence required to move forward. Not to be repetitious for those who have completed that series, you will need to find balance in the following areas – your diet, sleep pattern, exercise routine, and your social connections.

What was not explored in that series was finding balance in your environment.

***Is it possible to create balance, peace and contentment within a space of chaos, disorganization and uncleanness?***



Take a look at your home environment, your work environment, and the passenger seat and floor of your car! Would

cleaning them up require a shovel and a dumpster?

When we are clearing emotionally we need to also clear physically. It is a dual process. I suggest starting with small commitments to yourself. “... I will clear the floor of my car by the end of the week ... I will clear the passenger seat by the end of next week ... I will dedicate 30 minutes a day to these tasks!” Your goals need to be realistic and achievable so keep them small. Hoping to have the entire house sorted and cleaned by the end of the week will only

leave you feeling defeated and even more down on yourself. So set yourself up for success!



The benefits of a clear and organized environment have a direct impact on your physical, mental and emotional health.

Coming home after a long day at work or looking around the house after a long day with the kids seeing mounting chores and unfinished projects contributes to your levels of stress, depression and fatigue. During these periods of stress we look for comfort foods. So when you are making meal or snack choices you are more likely to reach into the cookie jar and not the fruit basket. You get the picture.

**RECOMMENDATION:** *I suggest trying to establish a cleaning routine. Once it is in place you are more likely to have other routines in place as well such a work out routines, relaxation routines and sleep routines.*

***What happens when you just can't motivate yourself to start the process?*** If you have tried to self-motivate, have enlisted a friend as your coach, have planned and canceled gatherings hoping embarrassment would kick in yet nothing seems to help I suggest consulting your vitamin guru we first met in ***THE OXYGEN MASK SERIES***. There are supplements that help boost and maintain mood which could be beneficial. If these efforts do not assist I suggest consulting with a health care practitioner. Your depression/sadness may be leaving you with feelings of depletion and lack of motivation. Boosting your mood while engaging in the outlined practices and gaining more control over your physical space will assist in promoting a feeling of having more control over your decisions, your outcome and your emotional well-being.



**RECOMMENDATION:** *Speak with your healthcare provider or local vitamin guru about supplements which can support, enhance and boost your mood.*

Another aspect of balance not discussed in **THE OXYGEN MASK SERIES**, is permission. This is a very broad and inclusive topic. It may begin here for you but it certainly doesn't end here.

Let's first explore giving ourselves permission to forgive. What do I mean by forgiveness? It is not condoning of behavior, it is not allowing continued behavior, and it is not allowing a relationship to continue that needs to end because of the behavior. Forgiveness is your release – release of the anger, pain and suffering you have been carrying around because of the actions of another. Think of it as bricks in a backpack you carry around with you every day. How incredibly draining! Let's unload those bricks one by one.

**RECOMMENDATION:** *Give yourself permission to forgive yourself and those around you and end unhealthy relationships you are in.*

Start with your first relationships – your mother, your father, your family. I don't believe blaming or bashing our families helps anyone rather it fuels the fire of anger and resentment. I do believe people should be held accountable for their behavior with the basic understanding that in general people do the best they can with the limited tools and skills they possess.

Can we blame someone for having a history of abuse and never obtaining the necessary parental coping skills not to repeat the pattern? No but we can hold them accountable for not doing so. Just as we need to hold ourselves accountable for our own behavior – with the same understanding. We are all pretty much doing the best we can with limited tools and skills. I am not excusing behavior here nor

attempting to rationalize it away but rather opening the door to create an environment of compassion and healing.

This compassion and healing is not only to be directed towards others but towards ourselves as well. We are all struggling, all striving to be better, and all searching for peace and contentment. This is not to say that there aren't those who are deeply disturbed – abusive, violent, mentally ill, or vindictive. What I am saying is most people are simply repeating patterns and operating with limited skills. You have permission to end these relationships! Let me say that again just in case you missed it – ***You have permission to end unhealthy relationships!***

Forgiveness does not imply continuation of the relationship, it can actually be the end of it. So give yourself permission to end the relationships in your life that are painful. They can be with your family of origin – parents or siblings – with extended family, with friends, with intimate partners or with your guitar instructor who belittles you week after week.



painful relationships.

***Give yourself permission to forgive and to close the door on the relationship.***

We have to remember that we cannot change the behavior of another – we can only change our reaction to their behavior. Sometimes ending a relationship is a wakeup call for the person involved. Sometimes defenses are reinforced and healing is unlikely. Either way give yourself permission to be free of



This process will likely result in uncomfortable feelings – anxiousness, panic or

depression/sadness. You might feel alone, abandoned or isolated.

Give yourself permission to feel these feelings. Part of what we are trying to do here is build resilience. Feeling your feelings is part of that process. Feel them only long enough to get the thoughts behind them and to challenge them. Once you have acquired an accurate thought allow the message from the adjusted and more accurate feeling to emerge. I'm lonely – I need to call a friend. I'm sad – I need to journal. I'm feeling anxious – I need to do my breath work. I have been taken advantage of – I need to stand up for myself. I'm feeling restricted – give yourself permission to release the pain and the tears. Get the message from your emotions and act upon it.

Mind body interventions increase resilience and emotional regulation. There are exercises and techniques that can assist you in this process. Any of the techniques outlined in **THE OXYGEN MASK SERIES** would be effective and calming. One very effective tool is **EFT – Emotional Freedom Technique**. My favorite instructor and advocate of this tapping process is Gary Craig. His website is filled with free and easily accessible information on the technique. (<http://www.emofree.com/>)

Another is **TRE – Trauma Release Exercise**. There is a great instructor/facilitator I have worked with in New York, Patty DeCarmine, who not only works face to face but also via video conferencing. Her website is also filled with useful and accessible information on the technique.

(<http://www.trelongisland.com/about-patty.html>)

Both techniques are designed to release stored pain and suffering from the past. Both can be learned and utilized on your own at any time. This release is vitally important to bringing in the quality relationships you long for and deserve. I can't promise that it won't be uncomfortable nor that you won't have doubt or even lapses in judgment returning to these unhealthy relationships. But I can promise that once you work through your issues from the past – forgiving and releasing, once you learn how to identify and regulate your emotions - working through feelings of anxiousness, panic, depression/sadness etc..., once you build resilience – maturely responding to the stressful events life throws at you then you will be ready for permission to say no!

**RECOMMENDATION:** *Give yourself permission to set up healthy boundaries and say no!*

Why is saying no so important? Typically we don't say yes, we simply remain silent giving permission and consent passively. The very act of verbalization can be terrifying. We don't want to take the risk, don't want to be judged and don't want to face the possible conflict and consequences. The most prevalent of those consequences - rejection.

Once we figure out that we are likable and lovable because of who we are not what we do, then from that perspective we will be able to say no when we want to say no and to say yes when we want to say yes. We won't fear the rejection or the consequences. We will be more focused on how saying yes when we wanted to say no will negatively impact you!

If you can't or won't say no, eventually your body will do the talking for you! There is a great book on this topic - *“When The Body Says No: Exploring The Stress-Disease Connection”* by Gabor Mate. He goes into great detail about

how the body responds when we say yes but really want and/or need to say no.

Practice saying no with low risk requests. Say no to the sales person in the mall who wants you to try a free sample of hand cream. Then step it up to the PTA president who wants you to run the bake sale. Practice with family saying no to babysitting requests or hosting holidays.

Once you start to feel comfortable with situations, start listening to your body and acting upon it's guidance in your intimate relationships. I can't tell you how many clients have come in over the years and said:

*"... I knew he was no good for me from the start ... I knew on our first date she was trouble ..."*

Then why did you continue the relationship?

***Typically FEAR!***

Imagine how much pain and suffering we could avoid if we simply listened to our bodies saying no to unhealthy relationships. Imagine how fulfilling our relationships would be if we listened and waited for healthier partners. You no longer need to submit to secure an intimate relationship. The emotional and physical costs are too high.

If you found this series helpful and would like to dive deeper into healing yourself and your relationships, be sure to continually return to my website, **[www.debsmithlifecoach.com](http://www.debsmithlifecoach.com)** to download additional segments of this and other series.

I wish you the best of luck on your healing journey.

***You are worth the time and effort needed to give yourself the tools to live a happy and fulfilling life!***

Love and Laughter,

*Deb*