

Building a Partnership in Your Relationship

by Leah Travis, Marriage & Family Therapist

The word partnership is used in so many ways in our world, but what does it mean to you? We often talk of partners for school projects or business arrangements, but what about at home? Is your spouse truly your partner? Do you talk to and support each other, have shared goals, and trust that your spouse is working toward those goals alongside you? Or are there times when you feel that you and your partner are living parallel lives that just happen to occur under the same roof?



The defining characteristics of being in a partnership are likely to include a sense of being *valued, respected, and of being a part of a team*. Being in a partnership isn't about one person 'being in charge' or always getting his/her way, it is about two people listening to each other and working together to accomplish a common goal. In a true partnership, respect is present, and power is shared. This idea is discussed beautifully in a book by Tim & Anne Evans, "Real Life Marriage: It's Not About Me," which I often recommend to couples.

John Gottman, author of "The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work," lists "Letting your Partner Influence You" as the fourth principle. This doesn't mean complying with your spouse's every whim, but instead focusing on taking his/her thoughts and opinions into account. In fact, Gottman's research suggests that a marriage is at risk especially when a man struggles with accepting influence from his partner, showing an 81% likelihood that the marriage will end in divorce.

Sharing power is not the same as giving it up. Accepting influence is not the same as not being 'allowed' to make your own decisions. It means that your partner's thoughts and feelings are taken into account when you make decisions, and vice-a-versa. Making an intentional effort to share power and accept influence in your marriage is one of the most vital steps you can take toward building a true partnership. We show our spouses our support by listening to their needs and purposefully incorporating that into our decision-making process.

Gottman refers to this as 'yielding to win.' When challenges or disagreements occur in our relationships, we can take one of two approaches: (using a traffic analogy) "One is to stop... and insist that the offending obstacle move. The other is to drive around it. The first approach will eventually earn you a heart attack. The second approach... will get you home." This is where that 'common goal' element comes in. Building a partnership requires us to focus on our goals, and occasionally that means yielding to our partner's needs or desires, even if they conflict with our own, in order to accomplish that mutual goal.

One other note; being in a partnership does not mean that you and your partner have to do everything together or share responsibility for every minor task. Sometimes in a partnership two people will take up complimentary roles to make sure that they are moving in the desired direction. Sports teams give us a great visual reference. A football team wouldn't do well if everyone on the field was doing the same thing. The team works best when everyone has complimentary roles. Cultivating that team atmosphere is vital to this system functioning well.

If you feel isolated from or at odds with your spouse, maybe it's time to start thinking about building a partnership. Starting small, talking and listening to your spouse, looking for the value in the contribution he or she makes, and cultivating an attitude of respect will go a long way toward that goal.



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