

Validation: Perhaps the Most Powerful Tool in a Man's Relationship Toolbox.

By Chris Garner

I don't know about you, but other than the 'book learning' in school, I had little formal training in life. My father thought that if I helped him fix things around the house, I would become adept at repair work. He didn't train me to fix things and he didn't have me use the tools; he had me watch and help him use the tools and so, I became adept at helping; I can anticipate which tool a mechanic might need or a carpenter might require as they go about their work. I didn't learn much about actually doing the work myself. Sure, I might be able fix many things around the house, but it is an ordeal for me because I didn't learn to fix things, I learned to help.

My experience in the world of relationship was much the same, except that there wasn't even the formality of 'watch how I do this so that you will learn.' I learned to interact with people in the world by watching my parents and those around me attempt to communicate and relate with the people around them. I have to pause here to say that my parents were great parents; they were involved in my life and attempted to expose me the world in positive ways, but like most parents, they did not have the training themselves to attempt to teach me about relationships. They didn't have the tools to give to their children to build healthy relationships and I didn't learn healthy ways to work through relationship issues.

I entered adulthood with a built in mechanism of shutting down when communication got emotional and I didn't understand that I needed to remain engaged to work through the problems people in relationship experience. When things got tough in a relationship, I would withdraw until the problem was forgotten and then resumed the relationship. Sometimes the relationship didn't resume and that was alright with me, because I wasn't emotionally healthy enough to work through the difficulties relationships experience. It worked reasonably well until I married and hit the brick wall of reality that marriage *requires* connection and working through the tough issues. When I withdrew, the problems didn't go away and it didn't take long for the relationship to die and the marriage end. So, what did I do? I jumped into another relationship although I still didn't possess the relationship tools to make a life-long relationship work.

As you might well guess, this relationship also headed in the wrong direction. I continued my withdrawal pattern of dealing with problems, except that my wife, Carmen did not relent from her attempts to work through the problems we had. She kept working at it, but things were so bad that I couldn't deal with the pain I experienced in the relationship, and not understanding how to stop the pain in healthy ways, I retreated from the relationship to the point of leaving. But God had other plans! An acquaintance would not accept my attempts to withdraw, relentlessly pursuing meeting with me and when I finally did meet with him, he told me in no uncertain terms that I could not leave my wife. I went home and told Carmen that I wasn't leaving, but I didn't have a clue of what to do. I bristled at her suggestion of counseling, but acquiesced because it couldn't be worse than the dysfunction we experienced already.

We sought counseling and began a journey that included some pain and trials, but has led to a relationship that I wouldn't trade for anything in the world. We don't have a perfect marriage relationship (no one does), but it is amazing what can happen when one learns a few relationship tools and puts them into practice. I've learned a lot in the twenty-five years since my wife and I almost split up, but it all begins with a willingness to change; realizing that is not necessarily about the other person, but about me making changes to improve my relationship.

Changing the Way We Interact

Some men are different, but most are like me; 'when the going gets tough, the tough get going.' And I don't mean that in a positive way. Men tend to run from confrontation and withdraw from emotional connection. Or if they don't withdraw, they use power to batter the "opposition" into submission. They intimidate their wives (or children, family, subordinates, co-workers or friends) into seeing or do-

ing things their way. Withdrawal or intimidation may work for a while, but neither will build a healthy, fulfilling relationship. Nor will it be fulfilling for the man who *thinks* he has control of the relationship by his inappropriate behavior (i.e. physical, verbal or emotional abuse). We can learn to interact with our wives, and everyone we are in relationship with, in a way that works for both parties in the relationship. It first requires a dose of humility; acknowledging what we are doing or not doing isn't working, realizing that things must change, and believing that *we* need to change. Men, relationship tools are not passed from generation to generation by osmosis. We must learn the tools and apply them to build healthy relationships. Are *you* willing to change? I challenge you to learn one tool and begin using it in all of your relationships; especially your marriage relationship.

Validation is one tool that is one of the most important emotional skills a person can acquire in life, but it requires a willingness to change the way we respond to others. Validation is; “*Confirming that another person has specific feelings or thoughts and that those feelings or thoughts are legitimate and reasonable for that person.*” Not right or wrong, just legitimate for the other person based on his or her perception or feelings. Validation is a skill that can be learned, but we must work to build it into our lives as an integral part of the way we interact with other people. Validating a person's feeling does not mean that we agree or that we are ‘rolling over’ and just giving in. It is saying that ‘I value you as a person and even if I don't agree or see things your way, I am willing to affirm your point of view.’ Validating someone's feelings is accepting those feelings and that person for who he or she is as a person. When you validate a person you acknowledge and accept their unique identity and individuality. Learning this skill *will* improve your relationships.

Validation allows others to safely share their feelings and thoughts with us. We assure them, through our validation, that they are valued and have the freedom to express themselves without being rejected. When we do not validate a person, we communicate rejection, disregard or judgment of their thoughts or feelings and hence, their individual identity. If there is a communication breakdown or a wall between our self and another person, very likely, invalidation is at the root of the problem. The other person feels judged or unable to freely share his or her feelings. Validation makes a person feel heard, acknowledged, understood and accepted. It opens people up, helps them feel free to communicate with us and breaks down walls between us.

Using the Validation Tool in Your Relationships

Validating another person first requires a serious attitude adjustment in our own hearts and minds. We must set aside our prejudices and preconceptions of what others mean in their communication and we need to respond rather than react. Too many men expect to be served, think that they should not be questioned and believe everyone should see the world as they do. Very few men would actually verbalize their arrogance, but we often tend to act this way. If we honestly look at our reactions to situations and people, we *are* very self-serving, self-focused, selfish beings. We must not think more highly of ourselves than we should.

Being humble enough to acknowledge that another's emotions and responses are legitimate and reasonable is an enormous step in the right direction. Validating another person means that we will not rush to defend ourselves or put the blame back on her. It is acknowledging the other person no matter how her reaction may sound. For instance; I might say something harshly to my wife and she reacts back to me with; “You always do that to me! I am tired of your meanness and putting me down.” I could get defensive and argue that don't *always* say things that way. Or I could attack her oversensitivity or say, ‘what about you – your reaction isn't so great either!’ Or I could validate her by responding; “I can see that you are upset by the way I spoke to you. It was harsh and wrong and I am sorry. Please forgive me.” Do you see how responding in this way would completely change the dynamics of my interaction with my wife?

We validate another person when use phrases like; ‘I understand,’ ‘I can see,’ ‘It makes sense,’ or ‘I probably would think (or feel) the same way.’ While we may not understand where she is coming

from, we can communicate that her view is valid for her. I may not have meant to be harsh with my wife, but validating my wife's view communicates that I've heard her and care about her feelings. Validation usually involves speaking to the other person, but it also involves listening, perhaps a nod or sign of agreement or understanding. It may be a hug or a gentle touch or may mean just being patient with the other person when she is not yet ready to talk. Most of all, it is an attitude of, 'I care about what you think and feel.' It is remaining engaged and attempting to see things from her point of view, rather than withdrawing or resolutely holding to our own point of view.

Validation requires that we be present in the situation; that we do not physically or mentally withdraw. We have to listen to the other person, participating in the conversation through verbal and non-verbal indications that we are listening and seeking to understand the other person. We are to practice 'normalizing' the other person's emotions – indicating that it would make sense that the person feels that way. Finally, validation requires a genuine caring for the other person. We validate him or her because we care. Again, it does not necessarily mean that we agree or even understand, but we care about that person and desire to communicate our acceptance and love for the person. It is relationship changing – even life changing.

Men, I am not here to tell you that I have it all together, that I am truly humble and validate my wife, children, friends and co-workers all the time. The fact is that I still *tend* to withdraw, defend or attack, but I continue to work at remaining engaged, humbling myself and seeking to validate the other person. It is not easy to change many years of unhealthy communication, but by God's grace, I can do it and I know that, with God's help, you can also learn to incorporate this important tool into your communication. You must be intentional about validating others; make the commitment that you will do it and ask a couple of people to hold you accountable to your commitment. And may God bless you abundantly for your effort.

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www.fortifiedmarriages.com.