



The Millennial Life

podcast
with Liz Higgins

Episode 42: Five Qualities of Healthy Relationships, with Liz Higgins

Liz Higgins (00:02):

Hi, everyone! Thanks for tuning in today to the podcast with me... I am looking forward to sharing with you today five qualities of a great relationship. And this is something that's been on my brain lately, as I've been in the midst of lots of conversations with couples and clients about creating these ideal relationships that they want to be a part of. And, um, if there's one thing that really stands true, it's that creating the kind of relationship you want to be a part of... It takes work. It takes intention, um, intentional action and lots of effort. It really does. So, I don't know... let's dive right in and talk about five qualities that I think are some of the most important ones, and the ones that I see in action when I'm with a healthy couple. (And being that I'm a relationship therapist, and coach, and all that good stuff...)

Liz Higgins (01:05):

I, I feel like I do have, um, a certain level of awareness in my own life and relationship for when I'm quote unquote, doing things right, as opposed to doing things in a really unhealthy and more maladaptive way. So, I'm looking forward to talking about this with you today. So the first quality that I have here that I think is incredibly important is attunement. And really being attuned in a relationship. It's like the art of dance. You learn each other's cues over time, you learn each other's stories. You learn about each other's wounds, your core needs, and you learn to become attuned to those things. Um, I feel like attunement in action is empathy, and I just really love how therapy can help couples and individuals dig into this internal process in themselves. But then, when you see partners really reflect back each other's stories, it's truly amazing.

Liz Higgins (02:14):

It's really, really amazing. Um, I'll talk about communication later, but a lot of times people come into the therapy process naming poor communication as the, the thing. The problem, the issue. But a lot of times, it's not that you don't know how to listen, that you don't know how to speak or communicate effectively... Say what you're thinking or feeling... It's just that, A) we don't like what we hear, and B) we don't, we're not practicing active attunement in conversations. Most of the time with our partner, we operate behind walls a lot. Defensiveness, I think, is huge for our culture (for humans in general.) I mean, for our generation, honestly, we've learned to prioritize the self in many, many ways. And so our default is not necessarily to practice attunement in every interaction or conversation. But when couples do learn to do this, like I said, it's amazing. It's amazing!

Liz Higgins (03:18):

So another way I think about being attuned is really just, like, having a radar for your partner. You see them struggling, or seeming huffy, and you become attuned. It's like, 'Hey babe, what's going on? You seem off today. I want to know what's going on.' And that kind of leads me to the second half of my first one. I sort of split it up into two. Attunement, and the second one being responsiveness. Healthy couples and great relationships have partners that are responsive. And attunement is just kind of this dance of awareness of each other's moves... Where you tend to go and what that looks like, what that sounds like, what you... How you see your partner displaying their emotional being in the relationship. Responsiveness is actually the, the act of showing up. It's how you show up. It's being responsive. It's being an active participant in your partner's experience, in the dialogue.

Liz Higgins (04:28):

It's responding to them when they need something, when they're asking for something. And I think we can get kind of literal here too, and acknowledge the importance of eliminating distractions in relationships. Healthy couples know the appropriate times to do that. Um, you know... I feel in my own relationship that has been its own journey. It's like the thing that, you know, you shouldn't do, but when you're not really thinking about it, you, you lose consciousness and you just end up finding yourself distracted a lot of the time. I'm personally thinking about phones, and technology, and just pulling those things out as a decompression tool. That really pulls me away from being able to be attuned and be responsive to my partner. And I don't know about y'all, but I'm, I am definitely the worst with multitasking. If it has to do with my phone, there's something about being plugged in to that device that I can't hear anything happening around me.

Liz Higgins (05:37):

So I have to remind myself, 'Hey, put it down, like tune in. He's talking to me right now. Can I stop this and be present?' But I've also encouraged my partner to remember that that's a struggle for me, and that it's not personal if I mess up. And sometimes I might need his help to remember that. And it's not a dependency as much as it is... We help each other out. We are in the throws of entrepreneurship, running a business, him working all these hours a week, and then parenting two little kids through this pandemic, and all the things going on in our world. Like, it's a hard time for us to really be intentional about spending quality time together at the end of our days, when really what we want to do most is just veg out, and kind of chill and have some... For me, I need, just like, silence and peace within myself to, to gear up for the next day.

Liz Higgins (06:38):

But anyways, uh, working on not being so distracted in your relationship is huge and will go a long, long way in helping each other feel like a priority when you are spending that time together. Okay. So number two, healthy couples have a growth mindset. They really do. And a growth mindset is just recognizing the fact that things can change, and they can be better, and that you can grow and develop within your relationship. Um, you have to believe that things can change, that they can improve. And I can relate to this as an entrepreneur actually. Um, there was a time I wasn't really sure. I did not know with certainty that I could do this - create and run a business.

Liz Higgins (07:28):

But there is a really clear delineation for me from the time that I felt that way to how I feel now. Where no matter what adversities I face, I know I can do this. I AM this because I've decided I'll do what it takes to make it work. So for me, it doesn't matter if I can or can't, I will. And having that growth mindset has helped me stay grounded in the fact that setbacks aren't final destinations, and obstacles are not a definitive status of me as a person or my worth. Um, I know that I can grow and transform forward and maybe even level up! So we have to believe the same is possible for our relationships. If we can do these things on an individual level, you better believe we have the capacity to level up our relationships. We have the capacity within us already to create a better, healthier, more fulfilling relationship dynamic than we are in right now. It's just a fact! So, healthy couples embrace this mindset. And when you are functioning from that kind of framework, it's a lot, it's a lot smoother to embrace new ways of relating new ways of communicating and just adapting healthier behaviors.

Liz Higgins (09:05):

The next one is personal accountability. So it takes two to tango in a relationship, but we really can do so much on our own. Intimacy is an inside job. Um, as we love to say in the relationship world, intimacy - into. me. I. see. First I have to see me and know me, and then I can share me. It's incredibly important. We have people all around us in this world that do not know their self. They don't have a relationship to self, and they pined for external validations of this false sense of self and trying to be who the world is saying they should be, rather than get back to the core of their own essence, and their own uniqueness. And owning that, and being that, and bringing that to their life, and their work, and their relationships. So it's incredibly important and it is hard.

Liz Higgins (10:14):

The personal accountability piece is hard. If we're with a partner who isn't doing their own work to be the best version of themselves (and let's be real here, mental illness or mental health issues, physical ailments, grief, loss, anxiety, depression, current events, a pandemic, right? All of these things make it so hard to be our best all the time. So please hear me when I say this is not about perfection...) But if our partner struggles with this, or we struggle with this, it really makes intimacy harder. It does. So we've got to at least have space in our relationship to acknowledge the individual journeys that are co-occurring. And what you do to take care of yourself matters. It really matters. Um, this is where I love how I see people working on their relational health as couples, but also individually, like alone. It's so great. It's great.

Liz Higgins (11:19):

And as a therapist, um, I feel like it's such a beautiful thing when people come in by themselves and they're like, you know, my partner didn't want to come or, you know, they can't come or we're not in a place of crisis. I just want to explore me a little more deeply. Um, that is incredible, because that's the pause that we all never learned to take, but all need to take if we are truly trying to prioritize relational health and wellness. Because it, it takes a healthy you to contribute to a healthy way. And I personally, I feel that it keeps me on my own toes to stay plugged in with my own therapy. It's, it's such a good thing. And yeah, I'll just leave that there, but it's, it's been hugely important for me to stay aligned with myself and just keeps me coming back to my relationship so awake...

Liz Higgins (12:11):

So aware of how I can be when I'm not at my best, and when I'm stressed, and when I'm tired. And when I'm tapped out! It's really insightful to, to know what that looks like and what that's going to be like, and then to share and vulnerably educate your partner on those inner workings going on with you. Um, another thing that I think about with personal accountability, it's that like, you are a part of the solutions you want in your relationship. A lot of times we can look to our partner and identify all the things they're not doing for us that we need, or their shortcomings... All the ways they've missed the mark... But what are we actually doing to help them give us those things and meet those needs? It's one of my favorite questions that Terry Real puts out there - 'What can I do to help you give me what I need?'

Liz Higgins (13:12):

So do we create an environment for our partner to safely give us what we need and want from them? It's like, I hear a lot of, I hear this dynamic come up a lot with couples. This has totally happened in my own relationship. And there's probably something to the, the gender dynamic here with this, when you think of heteronormative relationships, but this pops up all over the place. It's this dance of, you know, I tell my partner all the time the things that I want and need them to do for me. But sometimes the partner says, well, yeah, but I'm just not going to do that. Because if I do, it's going to be met with criticism or a narrative of, like, not good enough, which hits oftentimes to their core wound. And so couples get stuck in this crunch where needs are not being met, but it's not really safe enough to try and meet those needs because people don't want to feel criticized or less than, or whatever.

Liz Higgins (14:12):

And so we're stuck. And I've had to think about that for myself, because when I am not at my best, I can get a little controlling. I can get pretty demanding. I can see all the areas where my partner didn't, didn't make the mark and didn't show up in the way that I expected. But upon deeper inspection of myself, it's like, okay, well, I wasn't really doing a great job at creating the environment for him to, like, succeed at that. So it's not about perfection. I keep saying that, but it is important to look at these things because you are a part of solutions you seek in your relationship. Okay. The fourth one. Healthy communication. Yeah. For any therapist listening, you're probably like, 'Oh gosh, really?'

Liz Higgins (15:07):

But, you know, I mentioned earlier, a lot of times couples come into counseling or some kind of relationship help situation, um, naming poor communication as the problem. And that could be true, but we've got to break down what that really means, right? Because I think healthy couples that do have a good communication thing going probably means that they've identified what unhealthy communication looks like for them, where they actually go in conflict. And I think to know how to get it right, we have to know where we uniquely go when we don't get it right. We also have to think about healthy communication relationally. Relationally. It is a it's, it's a two part dance, and we've really got to identify what the goals are, what the intentions are through communication. Because there's lots of different expectations floating around out there that we bring into dialogue with our partner. Um, it's really not about the two sides of the coin. You know that saying 'there's two sides to the coin' or whatever, two sides to every story. But when we're

communicating from a relational way, we're not having objectivity battles, we are not focused on who is right about the content. We're attuned.

Liz Higgins (16:42):

We've created a bridge that starts in our hearts and we walk over it into our partner's world. We seek to understand, to hear, to learn, and to compassionately tune in. That is empathy. And I have to tell y'all, one of the best dialogue processes I've come across all these years as a therapist, um, has been the IMAGO Dialogue process. And it's so incredibly beautiful, because it's this practice of allowing your partner to speak, um, carving out the time to share, showing up for that dialogue, and then mirroring back what you hear your partner saying. It's like, you're just reflecting. You're just reflecting it back.

Liz Higgins (17:35):

'Oh, so you're saying XYZ, and you were really feeling upset about that.' And this process is so... It's just so great. It has you just trying to get more, more of your partner's world. You ask these questions - 'Is there more about that? What else can you tell me about that?' I mean, do you experience that in your relationship? Because I am telling you when you do, I've seen it happen in sessions. You just see people kind of melt back into their chair, and just the ease and the relief of 'Wow, I'm literally being heard right now. You are trying to know me.' It's beautiful, it's healing. It really is healing. And so this empathic dialogue really transforms the way that couples show up with each other. And this is something that healthy couples integrate. They integrate this into their relationship. It is a skill, so it can be learned. It's okay if you didn't come out into the world born doing this. Most of us didn't. In fact, most of us have a lot going against us to really succeed at this without conscious and intentional effort. Again, just think about this world we're living in - fierce. Independence is valued. It's prioritized, you know? It's like, what works for me is the most important thing. And if it doesn't, I'm out. And being out is easy, it's easy to leave.

Liz Higgins (19:08):

Um, so it's, it's just, it's a skill. I want you to hear me say that because you can learn it! And practice makes perfect, right? So you just practice it more, you integrate it more into your life, and you reap the benefits. Because there are a lot! If you're interested in learning more about that dialogue process, definitely hit me up. Send me an email, or a DM, or something. And I'm, I would be more than happy to share it with you. The last one that I have on this list of characteristics of healthy couples and relationships... Vulnerability. I know, I know, I know. Right? But it's so true. And I love that we are living in a day and age where (at least in my field) we are promoting vulnerability in relationships. It's crucial! And think back, think to past generations, right? Like, this wasn't necessarily the emo that we were promoting in our culture and society to be openly vulnerable.

Liz Higgins (20:09):

And there certainly was a different, uh, narrative going for men versus women in terms of the permission there was to be in touch with our vulnerabilities, let alone express those vulnerabilities. But we are living in a time where we've got new rules going on for relationships. And couples want to feel intimacy. They want to experience belonging, and connection, and a

sense of nurturing from their partner. And that requires vulnerability. It really does. The best definition, I still believe, of vulnerability is from Brene Brown a few years back. She said that vulnerability feels like courage, and sounds like the truth. To be able to stand in your truth in your relationship, and claim that, and own that. See that's acknowledging the, the me part of the equation. These are the things true for me. These are the needs that are mine, that I have... And owning those things.

Liz Higgins (21:14):

And standing in my truth in relationship is first of all, an empowering experience. When you are, when you're met with attunement as you do that, and a responsiveness from your partner as you do that, that is transformative. That is healing. And the best relationships I see are not the ones where couples agree on every single thing under the sun, from politics to favorite sexual positions, to religion, to how you're going to discipline your kids. It's not that they agree on all the things! It is that they have consciously chosen to allow space for their differences, to allow dialogue on those differences, and to practice cherishing each other through those differences as they navigate those challenges in life. We're not going to agree on every single thing.

Liz Higgins (22:21):

And I, I just love when we can get to that space in our relationship where all of you is free to exist and thrive, and all of your partner is free to exist and thrive. And you can do that from such a vulnerable place - and authentic place. Really, really huge! And I smile as I think about this stuff, because I really truly see it happen. So if you're listening and you're like, oh my gosh, all these things are not happening in my relationship right now, you know, it's okay. It's okay. What I'm trying to do here is help whoever's listening feel empowered that these things are possible, that they're not outside of your reach. They are within reach and, and these things can begin to shift. Now, if you just say yes to you, say yes to a relational life, say yes to learning some things that you maybe don't know or haven't embodied yet in your relationships, get going! And learn the tools! And find a therapist or coach that can really walk you through this kind of work.

Liz Higgins (23:34):

That's incredibly important too. There are millions of therapists out there. There are not, though... They are not all relational therapists. And it's sad, but it's just the truth. So you want to be able to find somebody that can actually help you walk through this stuff. And so that's where, of course, I have to pitch my incredible team! We're in Dallas, in the state of Texas. We are providing services for these very things, for couples and individuals. So if you want to learn more, click the link in the Show Notes, head to our website, download our free e-Books. I have two on there. One is the Five Relationship Mistakes You're Making and What to Do About Them. And I will say it's definitely practical, um, tips and skills that you can pull into your relationship and life right now. And the other one is a checklist for premarital couples, just skimming over the most important subjects you want to talk about before, before you get married, or even after you get married, but really, you know, pre... preemptive and preventative conversations are always great to do so check those things out. And in the meantime, I hope this was helpful for you. And I look forward to talking with you again in a couple of weeks. Alright, bye!

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