

Resolving Conflict – Session Seven

Strengthening Relationships

Good relationships are central to the happiness and fulfillment one feels in life. Those who have satisfying and emotionally meaningful relationships, with spouses, children, family and friends, have found one of the greatest riches of life. Studies show that people who enjoy good relationships have less stress and live longer. They have better health, higher resistance to infection, stronger immune functioning, and recover better from illnesses. They have more interest in life and can cope with difficulties and problems better. Bonding with others is a great factor in improving the quality of life.

It is no wonder that Islam has stressed the importance of good relationships for a believer. Many hadith emphasize the importance of characteristics that enhance relationships, and condemn those qualities that weaken or destroy relationships. The following hadith show the importance of good friendships:

1. *Whoever does not hope to increase his friendships is in a loss.*
(Imam as-Sadiq)a)
2. *The best of you are the best in manners, those who are close to others and others are close to them.* (Holy Prophet (s))
3. *There is no good in one who has no close relationships with others.*
(Holy Prophet (s))

A good relationship is one that brings happiness and joy to both partners. It brings with it harmony, peace, fulfillment and emotional satisfaction. It allows the partners to trust and rely on one another. Although even good relationships have problems sometimes, the problems are not chronic and can be solved.

A good relationship does not happen automatically. We have to work on it, and put in time and effort to improve its quality. We have to work on ourselves, and see what we are doing to weaken it, or prevent it from becoming the type of relationship we want it to be. By being mindful of how we interact in relationships, how we respond and react, we can be conscious of our own contribution in the strengthening or weakening of the relationship.

Elements of Good Relationships

What most people want out of a close relationship is the fulfillment of some basic emotional needs. We want to be loved and cared for, to be respected and affirmed, to be listened to and understood. These are needs ingrained in the human being. Being deprived of these can be harmful to emotional development, and can make a person feel empty and dissatisfied with life. To strengthen our relationships with others we must try to pay attention to the following qualities:

1. Affection. The need to be cared for by others is exceptionally strong in all human beings. From childhood to old age, humans want to be loved by those around them. Love

connects people in the strongest of ways. It brings joy to life and eases difficulties. In close relationships people need to know they are loved by the other partner. Love should not just be assumed. It must be expressed and demonstrated, both in verbal and non verbal forms. Islam believes in demonstrating affection. *If you love someone*, says the Holy Prophet (s), *you should let him know*. Most people respond positively to affection. They feel good, and enjoy the relationship through which they know they are loved.

2. Attention: In close relationships, the partners need to pay attention to what the other person is saying, or even implying. Sometimes we are too busy to take notice, or pay attention to others. We do not take interest in what they are saying. Other preoccupations prevent us from getting directly involved in their world. Paying attention includes:

- a) Being interested. Because we care about the people we are close to, we are interested in them. We want to know how they feel, what they think, and what makes them act the way they do. By showing interest, we will encourage the other person to open up and communicate better with us.
- b) Listening. Active listening means to listen with all of one's mind. We need to show that we really want to listen, and have put aside other thoughts and ideas. We have also put aside preconceived ideas about the person which could be barriers to really listening. Sometimes we may be listening but are actually referring to past experiences and encounters to give meaning to the present talk. That is not true listening.

3. Understanding. In close relationships people often assume they know how the other person feels. They believe they have inside knowledge of the person and are able to make an informed opinion of his feelings. But really speaking, no-one knows exactly why people say and do what they do. Human emotions are very complex, and the motivation that trigger certain thoughts and actions are more complex than to be understood completely by someone else. Sometimes they are not even understood by the person himself.

When the partners in a relationship try to understand the concerns and perceptions of others, it makes a great difference to their relationship. It does not always mean they are happy with it, but at least they understand it. Understanding means to put oneself in the other person's shoes for a moment. It means to be tolerant of their actions even when you don't like them, because you understand the reason behind it. It takes a lot of selflessness to be understanding of others, but that is how close relationships are maintained and enhanced.

When we have good relationships with others we feel emotionally connected. These connections give strength and meaning to life. The closer the relationship, the more the emotional satisfaction derived from it. Emotional connectedness reduces the likelihood of harsh conflicts and makes it easier to manage the conflicts that do occur. The emotional rapport built up is a rich bank of good feelings that can be drawn upon when conflicts do occur.

