

## Why Content Solutions to Process Problems Don't Work

"How to" advice given to couples to solve their problems is not just wrong, it can lead to despair about ever "getting it right" and to premature giving up on the relationship. Simply put, it leads to the feeling of "We've *tried* everything and nothing works. We're just not right for each other."

Couples who believe they have tried *everything* have only done so on a content level, and content solutions *cannot* remedy process-created problems: i.e., those coming from polarization and the defensive over-reactions, distortions, and rigidities they generate.

If a woman's low self-esteem comes from the fact that she has unconsciously rendered herself "helpless" by being a *reactor* rather than an *actor*, and an accommodator who doesn't draw boundaries in her need to be "nice" and to avoid conflict and disagreements, the content solution of bolstering her self-esteem by having her partner say positive, supportive things to her, buying new clothes, or her losing weight, won't work, even though they may create a temporary, misleading "feel good" moment.

The effect of content solutions, like all temporary escapes, will fade and the on-going process-generated feelings will return. Each time they do, they will be accompanied by a greater sense of pessimism and hopelessness about ever really getting a lasting solution. For the woman with low self-esteem due to her reactive, accommodating process, there will always be something to make her feel criticized, put down or triggered to not feel good about herself, until the denied process behind her experience is identified, acknowledged, and altered.

Deeper relationship feelings are generated by relationship process, not by its content. A man may do everything right (content) and still alienate his wife and children if his process is one of seeming to be emotionally unavailable, disinterested, or controlling, all of which he is in denial of. The faithful, hard-working, responsible, and caring father all too often discovers, too late, that in spite of having lived up to the image of being a good husband and father, his wife is unhappy and blames him for her feelings, while his children have no feelings of closeness to him.

If a man feels bored, smothered, and irritable because he is disconnected in his process, causing him to have no capacity for personal interactions or awareness of his own feelings, nothing beyond momentary excitement and external stimulation and distraction will cause him to feel connected, interested, and happy about any personal interaction. Content solutions, such as leaving him alone, not interfering while he's watching sports or paying his bills, giving him space, or doing exciting things, will be no more than a temporary fix. His ongoing response, caused by his denied externalized process, will continue to return, causing those around him who "tried" to make him feel better to give up trying. Even he himself who "tried" to solve the problem with external, logically created remedies will ultimately decide that "it's no use" trying to relate and feel close, and he will give up on trying. The attempts to change matters in the form of content solutions only make things worse by generating false hopes, which are repeatedly dashed until they grind everybody down to a level of "giving up."

The answer, which involves altering his process, may occur to him after it is too late and loved ones have abandoned him. At that point, it might occur to him that it was how he was to be with, not anything specific that he had done, that caused his personal downfall.

If a woman continuously feels attacked and abused because of his harsh and insensitive impact, and it causes her to want everything to be 'nice,' and to cry and become defensively over-reactive when things aren't, then no matter how he tries to be 'nice' and 'gentle' with her, it won't work. Even when there is no obvious cause, she will 'find something' to construe as hostile, hurtful, or abusive, even an 'innocent' or playfully-intended comment or joke on his part. Nothing short of her identifying and acknowledging *her* overt power, and learning to express and be comfortable with that part of herself, will make any difference in her process-created problem.

Similarly, the common 'how to' advice about couples needing to take time to "really listen to each other," to "really try to communicate," and to carve out quality time to do something romantic in order to breathe life into a deadened interaction will fail because the miscommunication and the boredom and the misinterpretations between them are not coming from 'not trying.' They are by-products of a polarized process that produces a different interpretation of the identical event for each. She may experience him as not caring when he really does, while he may see her as being pressuring and emotionally out of control when she really isn't, or is simply being triggered into a response of desperation by his emotional detachment. If they follow 'how to' advice, they will come to feel hopeless.

Likewise, she might feel a lack of romance and intimacy because, unknowingly, she longs for a fusion that can never exist between two healthy people, or he might feel an absence of sexual excitement because his lack of personal involvement has created a need for intense sexual stimulation to replace his emotional and personal deadness. Only a manipulative, ego-feeding sexual novelty can fill that 'need' and 'turn him on.' Until his process is changed so that he finds pleasure in closeness and not just exotic stimulation, all the 'how to' efforts to arouse him sexually will become progressively less stimulating until he finds himself unable to be aroused at all. The 'cause' is him, it is not 'out there.'

In all these instances, "how to" content solutions will only lead to the despair that comes from having done *everything* the experts suggested, and seeing it not to be effective. There is no change without awareness of our own defensiveness, anxiety, discomfort, and confusion over changing something that generally reassures us. The tendency is to seek short-cuts and a panacea in the form of:

- *Information and advice.*
- *Trying:* giving the other person what they say they want.
- *Attitude change:* "not being sexist," or "lightening up," and "having a sense of humour" or a "positive attitude".

In a polarized relationship, the above are useless. They represent the beginning of the end because each person will be convinced they "really tried" and therefore, it's hopeless to continue.

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women.

*Dr. Goldberg will be offering a lecture in Ottawa on the New Male-Female Relationship on May 6. See [www.everyman.org](http://www.everyman.org) or call 828-7058 for details. Dr. Goldberg will also be the keynote speaker at the annual Everyman/GRIP Gathering May 5-7, see [www.everyman.org](http://www.everyman.org) or call 832-2284 for details.*