Why Is It So Common in Relationships that People Criticize, Minimize, Exaggerate, Take More Credit Than They’re Due, or Otherwise Do All Sorts of Niggling Unfair Things That Are Inconsistent with Being Loving, Honest, or Fair?

or put another way,

How Do You Achieve Harmony In Your Relationships?

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**Relationship Harmony**

**When we are not in harmony – in relationship balance – we become uncomfortable and will act to make things become balanced again, consciously or unconsciously.**

**This is a basic human tendency, as universal and powerful mentally as gravity is for us physically.**

The goal of harmony balancing is that when faced with some particular form (action, choice, situation, etc.) both sides see it as having the same intensity and polarity – that they are in agreement as to whether it is bad or good, and then also as to how good or bad it is.

**Most of the “problem behaviors” we find in relationships aren’t mysterious habits that seem to come from nowhere or from lapses in empathy, honesty, or fairness. Instead they are attempts made unconsciously to create harmony – to agree on how intense something is when there is a difference in how each person values the thing in their own individual reality.**

Each person’s individual reality has a balance point we use to measure whether some particular thing (action, choice, situation, form) is positive/good or negative/bad, and just how intensely (how much) good or bad it is.

In a relationship we need to agree on the goodness/badness and intensity of things in order to know how to balance things out, decide what is fair or unfair, and determine whether we, me, or they are taking full ownership of the particular choice or action.

*(Please note that when I refer to relationships I do mean ANY relationships, not just marital/couple relationships. The concepts below are applicable to ANY HUMAN-CREATED or INVOLVED ENTITIES. That’s one advantage of a systems perspective. You can apply them to friendships, jobs, international relations, whatever. As long as the essential decision-making is being done by human beings, the same structures should apply. If they don’t seem to, contact me and we’ll see if we can figure out why.)*

**Unconscious harmony balancing**

We almost never do this by directly discussing it. Instead we typically employ a vast variety of ways to “correct” the other person’s valuation of the intensity (and goodness/badness) of things to make it match our own. We rarely are aware we are doing this – it is largely something our unconscious initiates. We rarely consciously DECIDE to criticize or be sarcastic, or to overly praise or exaggerate – we just find ourselves “automatically” doing those.

We also even more rarely understand why we are doing these things. We see them negatively as “character defects” or “things I learned growing up” or “bad habits” or “cognitive distortions” or positively as “being optimistic” or “being encouraging” or “not falling into the trap of seeing things through rose-colored glasses.”

**How we usually deal with unconscious harmony balancing strategies**

If we act to eliminate one behavior – say we stop criticizing as much – something else often seems to crop up to take its place. I stop criticizing but I “think less” of them or their views, or I believe they just “don’t perceive things they way they really are” or I “accept that they just exaggerate,” or something similar. Often I (or they) simply change an overt behavior into a covert one.

I think it’s past time that we realized that all of these are symptoms of a very basic systemic issue, and not each an unrelated, individual problem behavior. I think it’s also time that we recognized that all this happens to create something good – that all these are attempts to establish something that is essential and valuable in an effective relationship – agreement on how to treat the things experienced in common (what I call harmony).

**Harmony vs. Equality**

Exact agreement – equality – is ONE KIND of harmony, but not the only kind. As in music, harmony is about acting in a way that each part interacts simultaneously with the other to create a pleasing combined result.

Harmony involves “a lack of conflict”, “agreement”, “a situation where things exist without destroying each other”, and “the orderly and pleasing combination of elements in a whole,” to use some common dictionary definitions.

The focus in a relationship is that both parties act simultaneously, in coordination with each other, to produce a pleasing result.

Harmony balancers are attempts to get both parties playing in the same key and agreeing on the specific sound that defines a particular note. Two musicians or singers need to agree on how many notes are in an octave, how one defines intensities within a range. They need to agree on what the “whole” is that they are co-creating. We’ll look more closely at these concepts later – for now let’s focus on the methods for getting to such agreements.

Harmony balancers are the ways used to “define the notes.” A couple doesn’t need to play the same notes, but they do need to understand and respect what the notes “sound like” to each person and get those to agree.

**A quick and hopefully fairly comprehensive look at common harmony balancers, when each is used , and what purpose they are meant to achieve**

Let’s look at specific situations and the harmony balancers that each uses. The essential idea is that of matching the intensity – agreeing on the “pitch” or sound of the specific note. **The goal of the balancing is that both persons work together to create a pleasing whole – something that most persons in any relationship would say was a worthwhile goal, a description of what they want.** Although it can often become disbelieved, that is still almost always the goal of BOTH parties even in failing relationships.

ALL of the harmony balancers are essentially tools. Like tools of other kinds, how we use them determines whether they are helpful or unhelpful. Using a hammer to cut a board in two can be done – with great effort and very messy and inexact results. Better to use a saw…. but don’t use the saw when hammering in nails. Many of the tools below are more commonly misused than used correctly.

Criticism can be immensely helpful, when it is “constructive” and respectful, not coercive and disrespectful. Demeaning something is good if that something is wrongfully inflated – think of editorial cartoons and stand-up comedians taking on the pretentiousness and exaggerated statements of some politicians. **So it is with all of the tools listed below.**

I focus in descriptions more on the incorrect use of the tools, because I want to emphasize what is going on when the tool is being used – what the underlying purpose is. **The purpose is highly likely to be valid** – an attempt to harmonize where there is a real disagreement on how to define the specific “note,” the specific situation/form both parties are looking at (OK, allow me the mixed metaphor – “listening to” sounded worse.)

**If you are experiencing yourself doing these or your partner in the relationship doing these, especially if it seems a wrong use of the tool, understanding why it is being done can allow you to switch to a more helpful tool or to use the existing tool in a more helpful way. That is the underlying point behind the following lists and examples.**

**Harmony balancing techniques for “too intense” positives**

**If we perceive the other person as giving something** **too much** **intensity** (from our standpoint) we will do things overtly or covertly to adjust the balance downward, to lessen the intensity, **to make good things less good or bad things less bad:**

* Some overt ways to make good things “less good” are by:
  + minimizing its importance,
  + criticizing,
  + attaching/ linking it with something negative from the present,
  + demeaning it or its source,
  + denying appropriate praise or rewards,
  + proclaiming it not good enough,
  + attaching it or linking it with something negative from the past,
  + questioning the other’s perceptions,
  + sarcasm
  + being dismissive of it
  + rationalizing why it is less significant,
  + denying its reality or
  + presenting it as a deception or distortion.
* Some covert ways are:
  + deciding the other person is a braggart, liar, self-important, pompous, or overly influenced by some current or past event.
  + Discounting what they say but not directly telling them you’re doing so.

Examples of this abound:

* *“No, I don’t really deserve the award – I should have done better.”*
* *“Yes, you got an ‘A’ on that paper, but you didn’t do as much studying on it as you should have, so you just got lucky the teacher was giving “A”s to everybody.”*
* *“I know I promised you $20 for mowing the lawn, but you really should have known to edge it, too, so I’m only giving you $15. Next time show more initiative.”*

OR

* *Geez! She always makes things sound better than they really are. She’s just way too naïve and unrealistically optimistic. It wouldn’t help to tell her – but I’m sure not going to act like she’s right. Someone’s got to be level-headed here.*

**Harmony balancing techniques for “too intense” negatives**

* Some overt ways to make bad things “less bad” are by:
  + minimizing its importance,
  + attaching blame to something or someone else,
  + attaching/ linking it with some offsetting positive from the present,
  + discrediting it or its source,
  + attaching inappropriate praise or rewards,
  + diminishing appropriate negative consequences,
  + attaching it or linking it with some offsetting positive from the past,
  + questioning the other’s perceptions,
  + rationalizing why it is less significant,
  + being dismissive of it
  + denying its reality or
  + presenting it as a deception or distortion.
* Some covert ways are:
  + deciding the other person is a worry-wart, depressive, alarmist, catastrophizer, or overly influenced by some current or past event.
  + Discounting the intensity of what they say but not directly telling them you’re doing it.

Examples of this abound also:

* *“You’re being too pessimistic – it’s not nearly as bad as you’re making it.”*
* *“You think this is bad? This is nothing.”*
* *“This shouldn’t have happened – yes, you made a mistake but they didn’t own up to how much was their fault.”*
* *“It’s those damn cops – they’re just out to get you.”*
* *“This was a bad choice, but you acted like a real man – I’m proud of you.”*
* *“I know the rule is that you lose your phone privileges for a week for this, but let’s just make it for a day instead. It wasn’t really THAT bad.”*
* *“Well yes, you really hurt her – but remember how you helped that other girl last year? That makes up for this.”*

OR

* *“Man, he is SUCH a downer – everything he says, I just know it’s only half as bad as he says. I won’t say anything, to him, anyway – I’ll just act knowing he’s always wrong this way.”*

**Harmony balancing techniques for “not intense enough” positives**

**The other case is if we perceive the other person as giving something too little** **intensity** (from our standpoint) – then we will do things overtly or covertly to adjust the balance upward, to increase the intensity, **to make good things better or bad things worse:**

* Some overt ways to make good things “more good” are by:
  + - exaggerating its importance, value, or morality,
    - offering excessive praise or rewards,
    - giving more credit than is due,
    - attaching / linking it with something positive from the present or past,
    - questioning/challenging the other’s perceptions,
    - rationalizing why it is more significant,
    - presenting it as a deception or distortion which falsely minimizes its real value,
    - idolizing it,
    - otherwise “boosting the other person’s negative attitude or self-esteem.”
* Some covert ways are:
  + deciding the other person lacks self-esteem, is hopelessly negative or has a poor/pessimistic view of themselves and the world, is being falsely modest or unassuming, or is/has been overly influenced by some current or past event.
  + exaggerating the importance of what they say but not overtly telling them so

Examples of this abound:

* *“You really deserved the award – what you did was far more important.”*
* *“You served in the military – you’re a hero.”*
* *“I know this was a team effort, but we both know that you were really the one that made it happen.”*
* *“Is that a picture of a cow? No, a rhino? Wow, you are so good at drawing – you could be the next Leonardo!”*
* *“You’re just not seeing this for what it really is – this is stupendous!”*
* *“You are just like your grandfather the famous football star. You don’t think this is much, but it’s another sign of how good you really are at this.”*

**Harmony balancing techniques for “not intense enough” negatives**

* Some overt ways to make bad things “more bad” are by:
  + - exaggerating its importance, catastrophizing
    - offering excessive condemnation or blame
    - making consequences more dire than appropriate
    - seeing this as the first step in a serious decline into negative outcomes
    - attaching / linking it with something negative from the present or past,
    - questioning/challenging the other’s perceptions,
    - saying this makes the person loathsome or worthless
    - rationalizing why it is more significant,
    - presenting it as a deception or distortion which falsely minimizes its real value,
    - demonizing it,
    - otherwise attacking the other person’s character or self-value instead of their choice or actions
* Some covert ways are:
  + deciding the other person lacks morality, is a sociopath, refuses to take full responsibility for their bad decisions, is worthless, or should be ostracized
  + exaggerating the importance of what they say but not overtly telling them so

And once more, examples of this abound:

* “This just proves what a good-for-nothing you are.”
* “This is the first step on the path to hell.”
* “I don’t care who or what else is involved – you are he one fully to blame for this.”
* “You stole something as a child, too – this is a pattern. You’re defective.”
* “You don’t think this is that bad? That just proves what a scum-bag you are.”
* “Only a bitch would see things that way.”
* “But this could mean we won’t have enough money if an emergency came up – Suzy could get sick and die all because you squandered away this $50.”
* “Can’t you see how selfish this is? If you don’t go see her your mother will feel you don’t love her.”

**Are there other ways to harmony balance?**

OK, the above lists involve a nice litany of a lot of nasty-feeling techniques and statements. Please remember, though, that ALL THESE ARE USUALLY DONE TO CREATE HARMONY! And often done without much conscious awareness of doing them. Don’t be too quick to decide that they are deliberately and consciously (intentionally) being chosen to be mean, dishonest, disrespectful, or unfair. (Please see my paper on INTENT for more discussion on that topic.)

I’m sure you noticed that, despite my attempts to focus more on the wrong use of these harmony balancers, some of the statements were ones which might have been actually true or helpful – after all, sometimes other people actually ARE seeing things incorrectly: as too good, too bad, not as good as they should, or not as bad as things really are. Again, please remember: all these tools can be used correctly as well as being used incorrectly.

**So what are the generally more POSITIVE WAYS to balance out disharmony?**

These tend to be less of a specific technique than a general approach. For example, most of the above techniques can be used effectively under the general approach of humor, or communication. **And all of these can also be misused as well, so please don’t mistake the tool for its intended use, as far too many self-help lists tend to do. Focus on the purpose – the meaning, the intent – of what you are trying to accomplish, and judge the tool by whether in the current circumstances it will help you achieve that purpose or not.**

**Just because these are more often seen as useful in relationship balancing doesn’t mean that they necessarily are or will be for you.** A real danger is that precisely because they are so often labeled as “good” the harm they can do may be hidden (“Hey. Can’t you take a joke? Humor is good for a relationship!”) or their failure to help may be taken on as a failure of one or both persons in the relationship or of the relationship itself. (We tried all those good techniques and they didn’t work. I guess this relationship just isn’t meant to be.”)

**If you both want relationship harmony – “the simultaneous combination that produces a pleasing whole” -- you CAN achieve it.** A bagpipe and a harp isn’t a usual musical duo, but they still can be in harmony – and may produce music that is all he more amazing because the combination is so unusual. If you are stuck, get help – and take your therapist this article (or contact me). This is a new way of understanding how this all works and I’m still working to get this word out.

OK then, here are the “usually seen as positive” harmony balancers.

**Humor** – Usually humor is a great leveler, letting us laugh AND point out where others are exaggerating or underplaying the intensity of things, or themselves. Humor can, of course, be mean-spirited; it often is used that way by children in their early teen years, for example. There’s a fine line between humor and humiliation. But when well used, humor lets both sides laugh at imbalances.

**Agreement to see things differently** – This seems obvious, but it’s a bit tricky. The key to it working well is not simply to accept the difference but to also respect it – to agree that there can be two “right answers” to some things. That avoids the nasty covert processes that say “I’ll go along with their craziness – but there’s still crazy, and I’m still the one that’s really right.”

**Discussion and compromise** – Sometimes we can talk such differences out. Most often this requires identifying some OUTSIDE source which both sides agree to use when dealing with this issue. Sometimes this is a religious or moral code, but it can also be the cultural norms, scientific evidence, or the advice or research of experts or other authorities. Sometimes this changes personal/individual ways of seeing reality, but sometimes it only establishes how reality will work for this individual relationship – on my own I would, or do, do things differently. Either way, it works.

**Translation** – It’s also possible to do a simple translation on things, although this works best when the shared interactions are limited and formal. I can know that when the other person gets face to face with me from 3 inches away, they are being friendly, not intimidating – and they know that when I stand 3 feet away it means the same thing. We both know how to translate the actions to interpret the intensity that is intended. Clearly if we had to act together to show we were being friendly to another person, we’d have a problem – 3 inches? 3 feet? 19.5”? Translation doesn’t solve everything, but it can be useful.

Communication – Another obvious approach, but again, not as simple as it sounds. Most relationships have a lot of communication – criticizing, blaming, etc. are all communications, after all. What we’re really after here is finding the ways to understand and be understood, to learn how to tell others how things work in our reality and learn how to find out how things work in theirs. This includes the remarkable skill of not judging their intent and fairness by what their actions would mean if we intentionally chose them. It means not attacking and defending our separate realities, but exploring and learning from them.

**Final comments (for now)**

We are compelled to try to create balance and harmony. Balance and harmony don’t have to be sameness – in fact they are much richer when they are NOT exactly the same (think a symphony orchestra or stage band with everyone only playing the exact same notes!)

If we are unaware of this automatic harmony balancing we engage in, we can unwittingly do a lot of damage to each other – and all, again, with the best possible intentions, that we should be in a relationship with balance and harmony, where things are fair and can be predictable, where we achieve a “pleasant whole.”

We often end up doing the wrong things for the right reasons. This is often one of those situations. With understanding, we can achieve the right results with less pain and a whole lot more joy.

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Last revised: April 25, 2015