

WHAT COVID REVEALS ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS

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I: An Opportunity for Connection and Transformation

Second wave feminism, building on the accomplishments of the first wave suffrage movement, proclaimed that gender equality and justice should be the ethic of every culture in the world. In the tragedy of Covid-19, many of us are quarantined at home with our spouses, partners, and families. Perhaps we could view this time as an opportunity to transform our domestic relationships and help actualize this feminist vision. What my husband, Harville, and I are doing at this time is distributing a process called Safe Conversations® which fosters mutual respect towards greater global equality

For the first time in history of the world, the relational sciences are teachable due to advances in neurosciences in the 1990s. Safe Conversations allows anyone in a relationship to shift from judgement to curiosity, from conflict to connection, and from criticism to wonder.

II: Feminist Relational Thinkers

In the 1980s and 1990s, a group of feminist psychologists, sociologists, and theologians¹ heralded the fact that the world needed to be transformed from the current domination-subordination culture to a more relational culture. When this was done, it would promote greater gender equality. Our current culture has a value system that fosters “being the smartest,” and “knowing the most.” The feminist psychologists suggest, however, that while “knowing” is important, it’s also important to take time to “not-know.” That being curious about who someone is, giving space to listen to others’ thoughts and feelings, and “not knowing them” contributes greatly to healthy relationships.

III: The 3 Steps of Dialogue

Safe Conversations offers a simple 3-step Dialogue process to help us with difficult relationships. When a person wants to send a message, they become “the Sender.” The person receiving the message become “the Receiver.” Once the Sender has shared their thoughts, the Receiver mirrors the Sender, repeating back what they have said to make sure they understood, thus demonstrating active listening. The Receiver then asks the sender “Is there more?” before responding with their own thoughts. When this happens, the Sender instantly relaxes. They feel like the Receiver cares about what they are saying even if the Sender has a different point of view. This first step in the Dialogue

¹ These feminist scholars include Carol Gilligan, Jean Baker Miller, Gen Vaughn, Carter Heyward, Beverly Wildung Harrison, Ada María Isasi-Díaz, Kwok Pui-Lan, and Riane Eisler.

process—this act of “wondering”—creates the conditions that allow the participants to stay connected even when discussing a challenging or contentious topic.

The second step of the process helps the Sender feel further understood by having the Receiver validate what they are feeling. After hearing what the Sender has expressed in the first step, the Receiver responds with “that makes sense” (from the view of the Sender). In the final step, the Receiver moves from validation to empathy. The Receiver put themselves in the Sender’s shoes and say something like “I imagine when this comes up, it makes you feel x,y, and z...Is that accurate?”

Each of these steps helps the Sender feel heard and understood while giving the Receiver the tools to listen more effectively. The structure of the dialogue slows down the conversation to help both participants remain fully present without giving into their instinctual ways of reacting when things get difficult. Our instinctual reactivity fights for “I win, you lose.” Our Safe Conversations’ Dialogue helps two people create “a win-win.”

IV. Heathy Relationships Foster Gender Equality

The everyday challenges of human relationships are now exacerbated by being unable to leave the house and the additional stress of living in a global pandemic. Our Safe Conversations process can be seen as dismantling the patriarchy one couple at a time. The dialogue process allows people to enter into meaningful conversations that strengthen and equalize relationships. It does this by creating a conversational structure that:

- Allows partners to stay connected in conversation, while accepting difference
- Helps people shift from judgement to curiosity
- Cultivates empathy

By empowering people to talk without criticism, listen without judgement, and connect beyond differences, the Safe Conversations process can help build a culture of connection.

V: Relational Health = A Stronger Immune System

Safe Conversations can strengthen our physical health during this stressful time. Productive and caring conversations, like those created through the Safe Conversations’ Dialogue, release neurochemicals that stimulate body systems and change our body chemistry.² When a conversations feels safe, the brain releases the neurochemicals of peace and calm—dopamine, acetylcholine, and norepinephrine—which also strengthens the immune system. Scientists are increasingly finding a link between healthy relationships, healthy brains and healthy bodies. All of this strengthens our immune systems which can help fight Covid-19. One study found reduced immunity in couples

² <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/conversational-intelligence/201905/the-neuroscience-conversations>

while they were fighting³, and by extension, we know that finding ways to navigate disagreement without it turning into an argument maintains immune strength.

VI: Moving Towards a Relational World

The work Harville and I do, *Safe Conversations*, teaches people equality starting in their domestic relationships. Once this is done, *Safe Conversations* can also be used in the workplace. When enough people adopt this relational model in their homes, it can become a part of the global transformation that needs to take place at this time.

As a deadly pandemic threatens lives around the world, *Safe Conversations* can be part of the healing process. Our entire global family is being asked to come together in new ways. If we can connect in our homes and learn to communicate better, we can be the beginning of ripple effect that transforms our culture one relationship or one family at a time. By increasing love and connection in the world, it brings us that much closer to the relational world envisioned by second wave feminists.

If you are interested in reading more about the power of *Safe Conversations*, our book *The Space Between* is available for download on the website. All proceeds go to helping families in need! <https://relationshipsfirst.org/product/the-space-between-ebook-and-kindle/>

³ https://www.health.harvard.edu/newsletter_article/the-health-benefits-of-strong-relationships