

Being a Cheerleader More Important Than Being a Nurse

By Lorraine Banfield

Everyone wants to feel like they have a soft place to land, as Dr. Phil has often pointed out, but a new study shows that it's actually more important how your spouse, significant other or friend treats you when something good happens to you. It's your triumphs that need the most support, not your bad times.

A study by Shelly L. Gable, PhD, an associate professor of psychology at UC Santa Barbara has found that the way you respond to your partner's good news may be more important than how you react to their disappointments. Couples who celebrated each other's happy events (like promotions or raises) reported greater satisfaction in their relationship and were less likely to break up than those who offered support only during rough times. This study was done on married couples but my own research shows that these concepts go across all relationship types from romantic couples to friends and colleagues.

This was a surprise to the researchers but not to me. What I find is that for most people it's easy to give support to someone who is feeling bad or has recently sustained a troubling life event, but we're not always as easy with our support for something positive. We give lip service to the positive but we really get into being there for the bad times. Most of us prefer to be a nurse rather than a cheerleader.

We have a natural response to pain in another person. We feel compassion, sympathy and a desire to make it better. I call it the "Poor baby" response. If you are sick people want to help you get better, they will make suggestions for over the counter remedies or ask you if you've gone to the doctor. If it's some other misfortune or problem, the same kind of sympathetic response is usually forthcoming. Now of course if you are a constant complainer who tries to elicit the "Poor baby" response too often then you will begin to be either ignored or avoided.

What Gable and her colleagues found however was that it was the response to a individuals positive events such as a raise, a promotion, a new opportunity, or even a compliment that created the glue to keep a relationship alive and harmonious or when this didn't happen an insidious poison that could eventually destroy the desire to be in that relationship. Gable and her researchers found that there were four different styles to how a significant other responds to your good news.

Passive-Destructive responses are ones where you get no response or the person changes the subject and begins talking about something else.

Active-Destructive – In this response you get an obvious negative response. For example you come home from work and tell you spouse or best friend that you have this opportunity for a promotion or you were asked to do a presentation for an upcoming conference and the response is "Are you sure you want to do that – that's sounds like a lot or responsibility." Or "That sounds scary, don't you hate public speaking?"

Passive-Constructive responses fall into the category of sounding as if they are giving a positive response – I call this category the "That's Nice, Dear" response. It's not actively negative, but it's not great either.

Active-Constructive responses are the ones that feel the best – this is where your partner or friend says, "That's great! I knew you could do it." Or they say "I think you'll do a terrific job, let's go out and celebrate."

The finding that praise boosted a relationship more than a sympathetic response to bad news surprised Gable—as did the results concerning passive support, like smiling vaguely, saying, 'Great,' and returning to your newspaper. 'We assumed when we started this research that passive support would be good—not as good as active-constructive, but

certainly not bad,' she says. But time and time again, Gable's team saw that passive responses negatively affected relationship satisfaction.

The passive constructive response is a veiled way of discounting the partner or friend and keeping them in the same place as you without active discounting. It's subtle and insidious. The reason people do this is complex but the most obvious one is they don't want you to change or grow away from them. Good news is often the message that change is in the offing. If my spouse or friend gets promoted what does that mean for the relationship? If they are recognized in some way, how will this new experience affect our friendship? Good news for one may seem like bad news to the other. I tell people if they feel this it's time to take stock.

First - what I suggest that people look at their own response to their spouse, significant other or friend when something good happens to them. How do you feel when they come in and tell you about something great that has happened to them? Check in with yourself and see if you experience any fear or concern about how this will affect the relationship you have with this person.

Second - if you do experience a sense of fear or concern, check that feeling at the door and look at it later. If you value this relationship, then in the moment, it is important to be there for them by being their cheerleader and having a little pep rally for them. Get up, give them a hug, tell them how proud you are – just make sure to do something that shows your support and belief in them.

Third - if you can't do this then it's time to take stock of the relationship and yourself and ask some questions. If you have fear that this will upset the relationship in some way, then by all means talk to them about this – we all have an obligation to be honest with the people in our lives. If it's more about you and your own concerns with accomplishment and self esteem then begin a process to deal with this – on your own.

Happy, successful, fulfilling relationships, whether they are romantic or platonic have one thing in common – they are between people who are psychologically healthy. They want the best for the other and act as the cheering section for each other's growth and development. It's the support we give each other to grow and become our best selves that is the juice that makes a relationship meaningful. Without this crucial attitude we risk not only holding our friends and partners back but limiting our own self development in the process.

So if have trouble letting your significant other, partner or friend be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and famous then maybe it's time to take a long hard look at yourself and ask the question "Why not?"