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Pia Mellody, The Meadows, is known and respected as a preeminent authority, lecturer and educator in the fields of addictions and relationships. Her work in codependence, boundaries, and the effects of childhood trauma on emotional development has profoundly influenced the treatment of addicts and people with issues around forming and maintaining relationships. She is the author of several extraordinary books, including *Facing Love Addiction*, *Facing Codependence* and *Breaking Free*.

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Honesty and Accountability in Relationships

By Pia Mellody
The Meadows

“What is this thing called love?” The title of an old song is still a persistent question. We would like to believe that love is the essential ingredient in relationships and that love will get us through all difficulties. Unfortunately, while love is important and makes it all seem worthwhile, the nuts and bolts of relationship longevity are more about value systems, boundaries, honesty and accountability.

If I am honest and accountable, I will keep my word and commitments, accepting responsibility for my behavior without trying to justify it based on another’s behavior. It is, of course, appropriate to confront the other’s behavior and to own our feelings about that behavior. It is very different to say, “When I witnessed this behavior, I had this feeling,” than to say, “Your behavior caused me to feel this or caused me to behave in this manner.” Inappropriate behavior is inappropriate. If my boundary system and self-discipline are so poor that I rage, demean, call names, etc., it is my responsibility to protect you from me. My emotional reaction to you or to a situation does not lessen my responsibility to be appropriate. Blaming and whining are close relatives. It is manipulation if I try to affect the outcome by blaming others or by trying to evoke pity so that I am not held accountable and consequences disappear.

Making apologies and amends, essential in a personal recovery program, does not mitigate the normal consequences of our actions. If the offended person chooses to lessen the consequences after we apologize, that is part of his program. Accepting responsibility and being accountable can set the stage for better times in the future. Establishing a record of being moderate and appropriate is certainly a major ingredient in allowing trust to develop.

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Honesty and Accountability in Relationships

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To believe that the power balance in a relationship is even is naïve. Value is constant; power fluctuates. One person always will have more power than the other. The balance is not the same in all situations, so one may have more influence around money and the other around social issues. It is important to recognize this and to know that, while one has more power in an area, that the other does not lose value in the exchange. If you know more about a subject, mutual respect will allow that knowledge to come to prominence. If one demeans the other about the difference, that is a boundary violation; it is abusive and serves as a major contaminant to intimacy.

Honesty and accountability are particularly important in the battles we have with partners. It is illogical to think that we enter into a fight with any intention other than to win. If we are not in a battle to win, we are not in a battle. Arguments are not fights; they may turn into fights, but they do not evoke the emotional energy that a fight does. When we fight, we tend to throw caution to the wind, saying and doing things that are neither in our personal long-term best interest or in the best interest of the relationship. Arguing and discussing become fighting when one or both parties discover that territory is being threatened, a feeling of abandonment takes over, or one feels insulted or belittled by the other.

This is about verbal fighting. If there is physical violence in the relationship, it is an entirely different matter. In such cases, the priority is to establish a condition whereby physical harm will not happen. This entails taking whatever action is necessary to assure personal safety.

In the general course of a fight, one person takes offense at the words or actions of the other, and then engages. If the other engages, too, the battle is on. The issue is hotly debated, then disappears as each party drags up data from the past and tries to inflict as much emotional pain as possible. At this point, one or the other decides to disengage and walks out or goes silent in an emotional walkout. In either case, the issue remains unsettled and joins the pile of other unresolved issues festering within the relationship.

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Don't walk out on a fight! If we stay in there and don't walk out, we find that we can maintain a high level of negative intensity for a relatively short time. (There are times when the intensity is out of control, and it is necessary to take a five- or 10-minute break to let it subside. This is not walking out; it is just recognizing that you need to cool off a little.) After the intensity dies down, the issue reappears and several things can happen. We can agree to a course of action, we can try to get more data to clarify the situation, we can offer each other positive regard and carefully listen to each other's view of the problem, or we can agree to disagree and accept that the other has a right to believe as he or she chooses. That is acceptable even if it is not comfortable.

Don't keep score! We cannot justify our present behavior by citing the past behavior of another. We must learn to accept that the consequences we experience are the results of our own behavior – and not because of someone else's behavior. This is true even when it is the same behavior. You being late for an appointment with me last week doesn't justify me being late today. If I had feelings about your lateness last week, I should have dealt with it last week. Keeping score prevents us from learning to be accountable for our own behavior and sets up a fertile area on which we tend to grow resentments.

Establish boundaries! Arguments often start in places that don't have enough physical space for us to feel safe. Bathrooms and cars are examples of places that are too small to contain the energy developed in the conflict. In such cases, if the couple agrees to move into a bigger room or to stop the car and get out, they can respectfully ask for more personal space without walking out.

Emotional and intellectual boundaries are essential to effective fighting. Each person must perceive that his or her personal worth and integrity are being challenged by the other. Without effective boundaries, each person starts to doubt his or her own worth, and self-esteem drops precipitously. Perceptions of worth – of oneself and of the other – are usually what the conflict

is really about. If we allow what the other says to challenge our beliefs in our own worth, we are losing the internal battle. Most of our important battles are fought between our ears; if we can learn to consistently win those, and not drop into self-doubt, we are better prepared for the less important fights with our mates.

Don't argue facts! Once each person has related his/her version of the facts, there is nothing else to say on the subject. We can argue about the meaning of the facts and how we interpret the probable outcome of a situation. Repeating facts does not change anything but does heat up the discussion. If two people agree to meet at a restaurant and each remembers it – and shows up – at a different restaurant, the pain is about the feelings of rejection and abandonment. Yelling the name that each remembers does nothing. Recognizing the error and not having to establish blame solves the problem and allows for mutual tolerance to develop.

Agree to disagree! Sometimes we come to the realization that we have had the same fight over and over and that we are not reaching a solution. Usually this happens over a difference in value systems. Often it is over matters such as how to spend discretionary money, rear children, deal with in-laws, etc. When the conversation is so repetitive that either of us can recite both sides without the other being there, it is time to look at it as a subject on which progress will not be made. The choices available are to agree to disagree or to ask a third party (preferably a therapist) to mediate, and then to either accept the recommendations or decide to let go. This really becomes problematic when the value in dispute is of a very serious nature or held very highly by one or both parties. If, for instance, there is a difference in spiritual paths – one parent wants the children to be born-again Christians while the other holds fast to the ancient rites of Zoroaster – a non-negotiable situation will end in divorce, a decision to not have children or continued conflict.

No fight zones. Some places are not safe for fighting. Cars, small airplanes, small boats, etc. Any place in which the energy of arguing increases the danger of the activity. Agree not to fight in these kinds of places. When a fight starts, put it on hold until you arrive at a safe place. This is not as hard as it sounds, and it gets easier with practice.

Delay a fight. Sometimes a fight is just inconvenient. We can't expect our mates to miss a plane or important appointment to finish a fight. At this point, a delay is in order, and an agreement to finish later is made. If this is done with respect and a sense of personal worth, it works. Often the subject seems less important later, but the two people have made a decision as a couple that the delay was necessary, and no disrespect was intended.

If we are honest and accountable in relationships, we will find that trust is implicit and that, in the final analysis, we are both on the same side. The mutual goal is to support each other without losing individuality. We accept the other for whom they are, and we use boundaries to protect ourselves and for containment to protect the other. ∞

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