

## Difficult to live with?

I was having a conversation with a friend about the break-up of his long-term relationship. "Apparently," he said, "I'm difficult to live with."

Well, he's my friend. So I won't hear a word against him. But it did get me thinking about why it can be hard for two people who love each other to share a home without driving each other crazy. Or at least, one of them driving the other crazy.

I think that it all comes down to Strategies. That's Strategies in the NLP sense, not the business sense.

In the NLP sense, a Strategy is a 'programme' of thinking and behaviour that achieves a specific result. For example, you have a Strategy for learning, a Strategy for remembering, a Strategy for taking a shower, one for falling in love (and out of it!), another for getting motivated, one for relaxing and so on.

In fact, you have a Strategy for absolutely everything you do. You're never NOT running a Strategy. One follows the other in a seamless flow of thoughts and actions.

So, when you live alone, you have Strategies for relaxing alone, for cooking a meal alone, for tidying the house alone, for going to sleep alone and everything else that you do alone. Even down to little things like locking up the house when you go out.

Now, enter the Love of Your Life. Who presumably also lives alone at first.

You begin to spend together and at each other's homes. At first, the person whose home it is might take the lead and do things 'their way' – which means they still run the same Strategies. In the other person's home, both you and your new love might be inclined to go along with whatever the homeowner wants.

At this stage, the fact that you HAVE to tidy the kitchen before you leave for work or that you leave the ironing until the weekend is irrelevant. Your habit of leaving a light on when you go out in the evening is your affair. And let's not even talk about toothpaste!

So, everything is going wonderfully well. Time passes and you and the Love of Your Life decide to move in together.

If you've ever moved in with a partner at their house or had someone move into yours, you'll know that this can be a very challenging time. This is when you have to learn to do a lot of those things you used to do alone all over again – this time with someone else either involved, watching, present or not involved when you think they should be.

For example, I remember that when my husband moved in with me I used to get quite irritated because every time we left the house together he would ask me, "Have you locked the door?"

Once or twice this isn't a problem. But catch me in a hurry or stressed about something and I'd react: "Of course I've locked the door. I've been living here for 9 years. I don't need reminding to lock my own front door."

So what's going on here?

Well, I'm running the same Strategy for leaving the house that I've had for a long time. I'm doing it on autopilot.

My husband is in a totally different position. He can no longer run his old 'leaving the house' Strategy because now it's a different house, different keys and so on. He's trying to create a new Strategy that works.

His old Strategy (I later discovered) involved locking the door, then checking it by trying the handle and leaning hard on the door to see if it would open.

If I'm the one wielding the key, I'm depriving him of the opportunity to do this. The next best thing he can do to reassure himself that the house is secure is to ask me as wielder of the key, "Have you locked the door?"

Do you see?

This is a really trivial example, but the perfect demonstration of how learning to live with another person is an extended process of learning how to do what you do with that other person around, involved or taking over. As well as retaining the ability to do whatever it is alone and unaided.

The reverse is also true. When you break up a relationship, you have to remember – or learn – to do lots of things alone. This is why people who have been together a very long time sometimes feel a bit helpless when they're first faced with the single life. They keep starting to do things and finding that there's a bit missing in their Strategy – the bit their partner used to supply.

Now, I'm not suggesting that adapting your Strategies to the presence of another person is something you need to do consciously. Mostly it will evolve naturally.

What I do recommend, is that if you find yourself thinking your partner is 'Difficult to Live With' or your partner's having that thought about you, that you look at the specifics of how each of you wants to accomplish some everyday activities. Get right down into the detail. Have a good laugh about the absurdity of human nature. And then agree a compromise.

And in case the thought hadn't yet occurred to you...

The same principles can be applied to working in a team. Or with a colleague you find 'challenging'. Or with a supplier who annoys you. Or, in fact, anyone else with whom you share some of your daily life.

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