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Curiosity: The Spice of Life

By: Michali Friedman



As I sat rocking my infant to sleep, I noticed that her hands were caressing her pajamas sleeves and the side of my shirt. She was clearly enjoying the textures of the fabrics and exploring the sensations they brought her as she ran her tiny little fingers across them. And as I watched her, I realized that I was learning about her just as much as she was learning about me, and I wondered to myself about what my relationship with my daughter would be like if I always regarded her with this same level of curiosity. This made me recognize how central curiosity is to learning about others and developing closeness. It is the secret ingredient for growth in our relationships.

In his seminal book on parenting, *Planting & Building: Raising A Jewish Child*, Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe explicates what it means to parent as if one were growing a seed. He explains that the planting half of parenting is about developing an awareness of our children by paying attention to their preferences, quirks, personalities, interests, and strengths, and the building half of parenting is building upon those observations by acting on them so that each child is raised according to what he or she needs. It is curiosity that drives the planting phase of parenting because the very act of wondering about something sets in motion the process of discovery; and this is true of any relationship whether it's parental, social, or marital.

In fact, there is no relationship whose success is more dependent on curiosity than marriage. Getting married pushes two completely different people up a steep learning curve to understand

each other's values, feelings, and preferences. And the rewards reaped from successfully navigating this daunting challenge are a sense of unity, stability, and routine. As welcome as that may be, this accomplishment can also diminish the couple's sense of curiosity for one another since they can now rely on what they have already learned to get along.

Married couples often share with me in session that they experience continuous fighting regarding a particular issue and that they know how their spouse feels about it. Perhaps, when they initially stumbled upon this area of disagreement it did come down to a difference of opinion, but over years of preconceived notions and falling into behavioral patterns, their views on the issue and of their spouse have solidified and hardened. At the root, this demonstrates a loss of curiosity as neither partner believes there is anything new to discover about the issue or the other's perspective.

A lack of curiosity can also take the form of stagnation in a marriage, with each partner feeling bored, unstimulated, or resentful simply because they believe that there is nothing new or exciting between them. This assumption negates the reality that we all continue to grow and evolve our whole lives, and if we are willing to abandon this way of thinking and pull back the thin layer of familiarity that has grown between us and our spouses, we might uncover a whole world teeming with life and excitement underneath. Besides, boredom assumes that we have "won" the game of marriage and are resting by the finish line, but to borrow a term from public speaker Simon Sinek, love is an "infinite game," meaning there is always another round, and unfortunately many people don't realize that when it comes to marriage, there is no point where we are finished exploring.

In the famous 1993 movie, *Mrs. Doubtfire*, the main character Daniel responds to his wife's request for a divorce with "but we love each other, Miranda we love each other, don't we?" Daniel thought that the love he felt for his wife was enough to keep his marriage together. What researchers like John Gottman and Sue Johnson have taught us since is that even if mutually felt, love is not all you need. Perhaps it takes feeling in love to jumpstart a romantic relationship, but ultimately it takes a commitment to attunement and responsiveness to make a marriage thrive. In her book, *Hold Me Tight*, Sue Johnson discusses how staying *attuned* to what our partners need and then *responding* and doing our best to give them what they need is crucial for creating deeper connection and intimacy in a marriage. And I believe it is curiosity that precipitates it all.

Curiosity means not making any assumptions about our partners or their thoughts and feelings about a topic or experience. It means opening ourselves up to the possibility that there are parts of our spouses that we do not fully know yet, or that have changed, and it means allowing them to educate us about themselves.

So when we find ourselves right back in the same argument about in-laws or money we may be surprised what we discover when we proceed with questions rather than assumptions or judgements. We can start by asking our spouses to share what they are thinking and feeling, and when they share we can ask them about the beliefs, values, and fears underneath. These kinds of questions create a safe space for vulnerabilities to emerge, and as Brene Brown preaches, when we share our vulnerabilities, empathy and deep connection are born.

Here are some questions that demonstrate curiosity and deepen a conversation:

What does it mean for you when x happens?

What do you hope to get out of y?

What it like for you when I do z?

Michali Friedman, LCSW is a New York licensed clinical social worker specializing in the treatment of anxiety, divorce, life transitions, and sexual issues as well as premarital counseling and couples therapy. She creates and facilitates workshops on many topics such as assertiveness and conflict resolution. In addition to her practice, she served as a therapist for Yeshiva of Central Queens for the past seven years. For more information, you may visit her website <https://www.embracetherapy.net>.