

Marriage Advice: The Power of Unspoken Relationship Rules

By Richard Nicastro, Ph.D.

All marriages and relationships have rules, including yours. These rules vary from couple to couple and can be spoken rules (and agreed upon--"You cut the lawn and I'll do the laundry") or unspoken (arrangements between you and your partner that just seem to happen without verbal direction). Unspoken rules often act as a powerful navigational system, informing you about what is permitted and what is off limits.

The rules that guide your relationship are not random--they stem from the rules that guided your and your partner's families throughout your childhood. Which means that you're not consciously aware of them, but they've shaped how you view and exist in relationships all the same. All families (like societies) develop rules that help guide the members in accordance with what the most powerful members of a family find acceptable or unacceptable.

For instance, many families have unspoken rules about emotions--which types of emotional responses are off limits, which emotions are okay to express, and even how to express them. So if you grew up in a family where expressing emotions was encouraged, then you will bring the rule that the expression of all feelings is acceptable to your marriage or relationship. If your partner grew up in a family that had a similar set of rules about emotions, then the rule that feelings are acceptable will easily become part of your relationship (probably without having to be spoken)—a mutual expression of feelings will flow naturally.

Relationship Rules in Action:

But let's pretend for a moment that your partner grew up in a family that seldom expressed emotion. Displays of sadness, anger and even enthusiasm and joy made your partner's parents uncomfortable. Let's get even more specific: In your partner's family, his father was very powerful in dictating what was tolerated in the household. Imagine that your partner's father would become tense and uneasy whenever feelings were openly expressed.

Everyone in your partner's family felt this tension, though no one talked about it. Instead, the tension acted as a strait jacket, restricting the expression of feelings in everyone. This became an unspoken rule of your partner's family, a rule that could easily govern your partner's experience of feelings in his/her adult relationships.

In this example, the rules that governed the experience and expression of feelings for you and your partner as you grew into adulthood were very different. As you and your partner now settle into your relationship, these behind-the-scenes rules will clash--each opposing rule will fight for dominance (you're going to be drawn to an emotionally expressive form of intimacy and your partner's unspoken rules will push him/her to short-circuit that type of intimacy).

The solution to unspoken rules that clash:

Since many of these rules remain unspoken (and therefore unconscious), it is important to identify and name these rules in a nonjudgmental way. Becoming aware of the power of the unspoken helps to lessen the influence of these rules.

It can also be helpful to trace the origin of different rules within your family and your partner's family. This will help each of you get a better idea of the types of rules that you've each transferred to your marriage or relationship.

Here are a few questions to help guide you:

What was allowed in your family? What was off limits?

How were feelings handled? Were certain feelings off limits? Were certain feelings especially encouraged?

In what way was intimacy (emotional closeness) expressed or avoided?

Based on your answers to the questions above, what rules about intimacy (spoken or unspoken) do you feel existed in your family?

After answering these questions (and any others that come to mind), think about whether or not your family-of-origin rules have been transferred to your current relationship. If so, do they conflict with the rules that govern your partner?

Finally, think about discussing the unspoken rules that govern your marriage or relationship with your partner. However, if it feels like doing so would cause significant conflict between the two of you, you might consider having this discussion with a professional who can mediate any potential problems.

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Author Bio

Over the past fifteen years Richard Nicastro, Ph.D. has helped couples build stronger, more fulfilling marriages and relationships. Dr. Nicastro has lectured at several universities and now conducts workshops for couples on a wide range of issues. His relationship advice has appeared on television, radio and in national magazines. A member of the International Coach Federation, Dr. Nicastro is passionate about coaching and believes that healthy relationships can add meaning and fulfillment to our lives. His goal is to guide individuals and couples as they implement the skills that will allow their relationships to flourish.

You can reach Dr. Nicastro via his website <http://www.strengthenyourrelationship.com>