

## Chapter 5

### Visioning Your Relationship

The essence and purpose of relationship is to share and to grow. How do we put sharing and growing into practice? How do we make sure that we are headed in the right direction?

Think of relationship as a life journey, one we take with our partner. To move ahead and not wander in circles, we need a sense of direction and agreement on what path to take. We have to decide where we are headed and how to get there. To that end, we create a vision of our future relationship.

A relationship vision does not specify an exact fixed goal or destination. The journey is too complex and unpredictable for that. Vision has to be dynamic and flexible to adjust to shifting circumstances as the relationship changes and deepens. It is important to clarify our intentions and creates a pathway for progress. Like a glimpse of an enticing peak on a long hike, vision gives us hope and energy to keep going. We begin with a rough set of directions and end up with a well-developed map to guide the way.

As life experience changes, as we grow, so our vision adjusts to changing needs. What we believe is essential in a new relationship will be different from what we value as it matures. Our understanding grows and so we envision different and often more expansive possibilities.

What does a relationship vision do? It captures our hopes and dreams and is a reference point for how we wish to be together. Vision includes intentions, expectations, and values. These guide daily interactions and decision-making. Most often in relationships these guiding factors remain unspoken and unconscious –yet they are still there, invisibly influencing our feelings of connection, satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the relationship. A vision brings these powerful guiding principles into full awareness and uses them to steer our life path.

The best vision statements are inspiring, challenging, and oriented to a positive future. They grow out of the primary questions: Why are we together? What do we want from the relationship? What do we aspire to do and be?

## **Vision Statements**

To clarify and communicate your vision, you create short, positive statements describing what you intend to have happen, for example: go dancing together; forgive each other after a fight; share financial decision-making. These statements should capture both what you value and feel is important in the present and what you want from the relationship in the future.

There are no restrictions for possible topics of vision statements. They can address anything you feel is significant. Intentions will be different for different couples, but you should consider and include some of the following *Essential Aspects of Relationship*:

- Intimacy and sex
- Wider family connections
- Children and parenting
- Communication
- Conflict and conflict resolution
- Work activities and career planning
- Core beliefs (religion, politics, environment) and lifestyle
- Leisure activities, vacations and hobbies/interests
- Finances, budgets and retirement planning

## **The Visioning Process**

How do you get started with your shared vision? Begin by sitting down separately from your partner and asking yourself the questions in the quadrants below and noting your answers. There will be revisions and changes down the road, so don't try for the perfect answers. Jot down your first thoughts but come back later to make them clearer and more relevant.

A compelling and comprehensive vision takes time and effort—but is not meant to be a chore. Think of it as an artistic creation that emerges out of your hopes, aspirations and intuitions. Be playful rather than dutiful. Be alert to possibilities coming to you in dreams or some chance encounter that sparks your curiosity. The raw ingredients of your vision may rise unbidden from the depths of your being and surprise you. You might look around to discover inspirational models of relationships encountered among friends, books, or movies. These

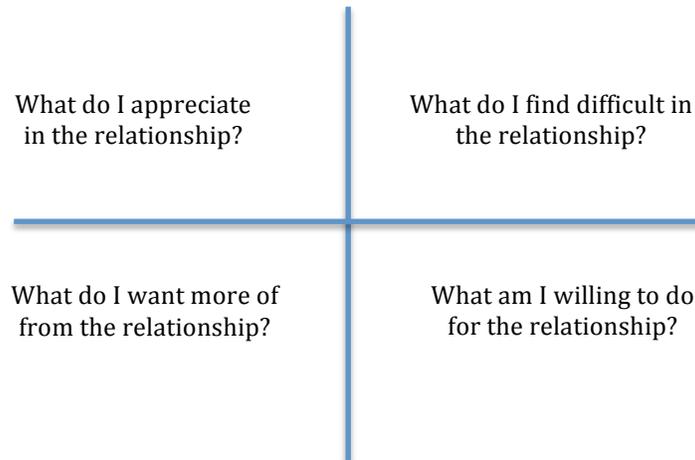
can be helpful but adjust these examples to what you and your partner need.

Approach your visioning tasks with enough time to complete each step. Do not rush or skim over the surface superficially. Weigh each aspect honestly and clearly. It is helpful to check that you are in a 'neutral' mood (not too pessimistic or optimistic) before you begin. Most of all do not use the visioning exercise to control or change your partner, or rehash old arguments.

**Step 1: Clarify what you appreciate and need**

Below are four quadrants with different questions to assist you in the Visioning process. Take a large blank sheet of paper, divide it into four and use those spaces to write whatever occurs to you in response to those questions. Think about specific instances and examples as well as more general subjects. Check the *Essential Aspects of Relationship* above to open up or refresh your thinking.

Take your time, but do not over-analyze the questions—first reactions are important, but sometimes you may need time to mull things over. This is a private process so don't add pressure by thinking you must share initial answers with your partner. Allow yourself to write anything that comes to you without editing or dismissing something as impractical.



## 2. Summarize the topics and themes

Read through what you wrote in the four quadrants to make sure you have captured whatever is important to you. Now summarize the main topics in a series of statements or phrases. List these statements on a separate sheet of paper to share with your partner.

Express the statements positively. Say: *More loving cuddles and touch* rather than, *It does not always have to be about sex*. Say: *Accept each other as we are*, rather than, *Don't judge me*, or, *Stop trying to change me*. Focus on helpful intentions and solutions rather than complaining about what is wrong. Realize that each statement also includes your own intention to change—not for your partner to change.

You can find common themes by noticing connections between items in the quadrants. Think about those connections and then write or re-write statements that capture your true intention. For example, your items might be: *I like when we work together on a project*; *I find disagreements difficult*; *I want to feel more relaxed together*; *I am willing to share more time together*. Combining these various items together, the theme might be: **Share activities with relaxation and tolerance.**

Another example: *I appreciate when he/she notices the things I do*; *I want to feel more appreciated and accepted*; *I would like more cooperation*; *I am willing to more appreciative myself*. The combined theme might be: **Express appreciation for what we do for each other.**

A further example: *I like it when we have fun together*; *I find bad atmospheres difficult*; *I want interesting conversations*; *I am willing to be less busy and distracted*. The theme might be: **Spend interesting, light-hearted, fun times together.**

Make a list of all your positive statements; these are your intentions for the shared vision. They are also what you take responsibility for and are willing to personally put effort into. Put a star next to the most important ones on your list.

### **3. Share your intentions**

Once you each have completed your list, set aside a special time to share what you have written. Read out your intentions, taking turns, starting with the most important. Listen attentively to what the other is saying and accept each other's intention as significant and valuable, even if you do not agree. Stay open, and don't use the other person's statements as a jumping off point to defend or argue. Help each other clarify what you each mean and put a check mark against any intention you both share, even if the wording is somewhat different.

Note any statement or intention you do not fully agree on and put it aside for later discussion. When your main list is complete, take time to feel good about what you have accomplished. Then or later, talk about your differences of opinion, one statement at a time. Do your best to reach a compromise. If that is not possible, agree to disagree and keep working toward a better understanding and acceptance of each other. This is an exercise in cooperation, so resist being competitive or obstructive. If that happens, take a time-out and agree to come together to try again later.

### **4. Shape the vision**

Using the checked list of intentions, talk about and reword them so they truly express the desires, values and needs of both of you. The pithier and more memorably these core intentions are, the better. Compile a master list of intentions with the most important shared items at the top.

Those ideas/items you do not quite agree on can be added to the list at the end. It is okay, and expected, to have differences of opinion. Over time, you may find these differences lessen or even disappear. Be patient with yourself and your partner and remember that being 'right' is not as important as understanding each other.

Congratulations! You now have a relationship vision. Post it where you can readily see it so it does not slip out of daily awareness or memory. Consider recording it as a note on your phone or write it on your appointment calendar for the start of each week. Remember, you can and will expand, adjust and

develop the vision at any time, provided it is discussed with your partner.

### 5. Put the vision into practice

Your vision sets out guiding intentions for the relationship. The next step is to put those intentions into practice. Go from your general vision intention: *Create a safe connection with each other*, to specific actions: **Hug each other more**, or, **Listen to each other without interrupting**. Look for all the different ways to implement your vision. Be creative, realistic, and consistent.

Once a week, take ten minutes to check in with how you are doing with the vision. If nothing is changing in your day-to-day experience, then perhaps your vision statements are not compelling or realistic. Be honest with yourself and each other. Aspirations should stretch both of you but not be so difficult it would take a miracle to attain them.

If you have a statement about sharing activities around the home, invite your spouse to do something specific: *It is really helpful when you put the kids to bed. It would be great if you could do that twice this week*. Keep requests explicit and achievable.

Start with appreciation for what is going well—then build on the positive. These are invitations to improve life, not demands you put on each other. You cannot force each other to do what you want—that is not a part of loving. Similarly, do not use the vision intentions to attack or criticize your partner. Generosity and appreciation makes change easier and more enjoyable.

It works well if each person decides for him- or herself to practice an intention and not wait for the other to go first. Also allow room for your partner to practice small steps rather than go the whole hog. For example, a guiding statement in the vision might be: *Show appreciation for each other*. One partner might decide to say, *Thank you*, for small actions the other does. The other partner may decide to bring home a gift of flowers. Each is showing appreciation in his- or her-own way.

Occasionally, maybe once every few months, schedule a time to gauge how you are doing with the vision. Always begin with what is going well. Talk about what you have tried and how successful you have been. Be appreciative and mark even the smallest steps forward. This is not an excuse for criticism or score

keeping. Assume each of you both have good intentions, but recognize that change is never easy. Strengthen each other's intention to do better. Positive feedback and pats on the back strengthen our enthusiasm; criticism decreases it.

At these meetings, discuss your vision statements and decide if they are still relevant. Celebrate your successes by doing something special. Remember, your relationship is a sacred journey, not a trip to the local store. Take the long view; be patient and persevering. Loving is a life-long practice

### **Summary**

- A relationship vision captures our hopes and dreams and is a reference point for how we wish to be together. It includes intentions, expectations, and values.
- The visioning process captures vision statements to guide the development of the relationship and consists of:
  - Clarifying what you appreciate and need using the four quadrant questions.
  - Summarizing the topics and themes from the four quadrants.
  - Sharing your intentions with each other.
  - Shaping the vision together.
  - Putting the vision into practice.

### **Practice**

Think about your experience of the visioning exercise.

- What things were easier than I expected?
- What things did I find difficult?
- What did I learn about myself from the exercise?
- What did I learn about my partner?
- What was most important for the relationship?

Have a conversation with your partner.

- Share your insights from the questions above.
- Discuss: What might get in the way of really putting our vision into practice? How might we slip back?