

Accountability Work

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When you get triggered, your brain is using the fight or flight mode. That means, you are making split decisions and acting on them without input from the rest of your brain. Long ago, humans could not afford to fully process a variety of choices when a saber tooth tiger was about to attack. Today, we need that part of our brain to act fast when the microwaved popcorn catches on fire. However, the amygdala is not the best decision maker when it comes to relationship issues.

One way to slow down your automatic pilot when you perceive “danger” is to do accountability work. This tracks your automatic thoughts, along with engaging your more advanced brain, and takes into consideration your emotional state.

Another way to look at accountability work is that we are reparenting ourselves. People do this naturally when they allocate budget items for responsibilities and play money, or when they set limits on how many activities to commit to during the work week. It’s about self-care. In order to get to the underlying need, accountability work helps you dig deeper, and then set healthier structure or limits to support your goals. This way, you are far less likely to sabotage yourself.

Consider this example.

Frank planned a getaway weekend for him and his wife. When she saw that he had packed the sports car for camping, she looked less than thrilled but went along with it. “Knowing” she wasn’t thrilled (wanting her approval), he drove an extra-long time to get a “perfect” spot on the lake with a mountain view and thought for sure she’d melt by firelight. As they unpacked, she complained about how late it was and not having enough cookware or utensils. He defended by saying she said she liked being right on the lake and wanted to keep it simple so he didn’t bring all of it (to protect himself from feeling like a failure). She thought he was being inconsiderate expecting her to cook with minimal tools and felt totally misunderstood since “simple” to her meant she wouldn’t be cooking. After dinner, she washed the dishes and didn’t seem as relaxed as he had hoped. She assumed he didn’t value her time or care if she had relaxation time since he didn’t pack paper plates. He assumed she didn’t appreciate his efforts. Neither was communicating the stories they were telling themselves. So, each built up defense and withdrawal. As the fire burned, they each felt little enthusiasm to engage with each other. Their conversation stayed on the surface about mundane things rather than the opportunity for deeper understanding and shared dreaming each had hoped for. Neither was willing to take the risk and the fire burned out. As they drove home, she thought it was a lot of work and not much fun and he thought nothing is good enough for her so why bother.

There are many mistaken beliefs, assumptions, unspoken expectations and disappointments here. To build intimacy and improve self care, the accountability work could begin like this...

“When I saw your face react to the car being packed for camping (non-judgmental statement)
I thought you didn’t appreciate that I planned a getaway (immediate reaction)

So I spent more time driving to find a perfect spot so you would be happy (resulting action)

Underneath that, I felt sad (emotion)

Because I told myself that I failed and I’m not good enough (story)

Instead of feeling appreciated and that you are happy with me (longing/disclosure)

I want us to find activities we both enjoy together (solution focused)
I will set a time to brainstorm specific ideas so I can plan more accurately in the future (specific problem solving)”

Frank’s message of what is underneath is profound. It is much deeper than wanting to have fun at shared activities. It sounds like he longs to be her hero, or feel like he has influence to create joy between them. With so many minor breakdowns in their communication he is likely to wind up thinking it is hopeless and trying less or criticizing her for being so picky. She is likely to withdraw and think it’s hopeless because he doesn’t understand her. Yet, without communicating the hurts along the way (with personal responsibility rather than blame, guilt trips, etc.) there is opportunity to build trust and intimacy. Sound familiar?

If they had been practicing more responsible disclosure, she may have been able to understand his intent and appreciate his effort.

“I love that you took the time to surprise me and pack the car. (inviting open communication)
I feel tired (body state) and scared (emotion) that I’ll spend the weekend cooking and cleaning rather than feeling relaxed and open to you. (being vulnerable and talking about herself rather than pointing fingers)

I’m sad that I wasn’t specific when I said I wanted to keep it simple and I don’t expect that you could read my mind. (personal responsibility)

When we camp, it’s hard for me to give myself permission to relax when there are meals to prepare or dishes to wash. I long for a getaway where I am relaxed and think that I’m enough even when I’m not doing anything.

(more vulnerability is likely to influence partner and invite listening and open hearted contact)

I’d love to pick up dinner at the deli on the way out of town so we can snuggle by firelight. And, while we are at it, can we pick up some oatmeal (just add hot water breakfast) and disposable dishes? (proactive and clear)”

Accountability Structure / Tracking Triggers

When _____ (name the action as if describing a movie scene, no labels or judging)

I thought _____ (your immediate reaction – calling our automatic thoughts/assumptions)

So I _____ (owning your maladaptive coping skill)

Underneath that, I felt _____ (emotion: mad, sad, scared)

Because I told myself _____ (the meaning/story you attached)

Instead of _____ (what you desired)

I want _____ (idea for practical solution or abstract wish for relationship)

I will _____ (your action plan/personal responsibility to avoid repeat behavior)

It takes some practice to leave out habitual items like blaming, mindreading, criticizing, judging, defending, explaining, etc. Effective communication is one of the skills I can help you with during couples therapy.

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I help people bring structure and calm to chaos.

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