

Not everything should be disposable



THE DOCTOR IS IN
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A recent conversation with a colleague moved quickly from disposable cutlery and plates to appliances. While we still love our 23-year-old washing machine and dryer, things are not built to last the way that they used to. Nope, she said, “now things are built to last one month past the expiration date of the warranty.”

And jobs. Remember those days when one had a job and stayed there for 10, 20, or 30 years or more? Not today. Everyone has an itch. People stay a maximum of three to five years, and off they go looking for something bigger and better. Stay and you may be considered boring and burnt out.

And how about relationships? Young people swipe, swipe, with their fingers when looking for a dating partner, always in search of better possibilities. What happened to the vow “until death do us part” and working on things when the going gets tough, instead of going when things get tough? Relationships are now often fraught with little investment or effort. Elsewhere in our personal lives, there’s little concept of brand loyalty to a store, an item, a synagogue or a friendship. All are now considered disposable. If it’s not perfect, toss it. If someone doesn’t meet your needs, they, too, are out the door.

What you can give to the situation seems unimportant. In our post-COVID world, more than ever, people seem to have even more limited staying power and even less energy to work on fixing or improving something. It seems easier to just give up and move on. Commitment is no longer a given.

As we get older, the days and weeks seem to get shorter

Have you made resolutions for January 1st and already waned in your enthusiasm with respect to working on relationships with others? You’ll need to remind yourself that something worth having is worth working for. While it is so easy to make a list of all that is wrong with your loved one and to decide that he/she needs to change, the first thing to recognize is the need to focus on you because that is really what you can actually change. It’s not about changing the world. Work on changing yourself, and you will see the world differently.

You will have to decide who you are, who you want to be and how you want to be seen by others, separate from who others are and how they behave. Your goal is to understand what you want in a relationship, how you can achieve it, what you value and how you incorporate this into your relationships.

Working toward lasting change requires a healthy sense of balance and accountability first to yourself and only then to others. The adage “if you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem” is true. You need to own what is yours to own and take responsibility for what you are able to change.

Think back to those resolutions and ask yourself what you can do differently. Remember, your goal is to see things from someone else’s perspective. This may require your being more flexible and open to new possibilities. Given that most of us get stuck in our ways, it will require a shift in thinking.

AT LEAST 90% of couples I see in my practice have communication issues. With my husband’s permission, I’m using this personal example.

The first and only time we, a city guy and country gal, went camping, my husband accidentally smashed the tent peg into his finger instead of the ground. As he was dancing in pain and debating whether he needed a tetanus shot – he’s a physician – I, ever the caregiver and emergency responder, swooped in to help.

Well, that was a big mistake. He apparently needed silence until he was ready to initiate conversation and decide what was best. I needed to view and discuss his situation in order to try to fix it. Neither of us got the other person’s memo telling the other person

what was needed. My conversation was more than his frontal cortex could handle, and I perceived his silence and withdrawal as rejection.

If I had only said, “What would be helpful for you now? What do you need?” we would have avoided several hours of my giving him the silent treatment. Several decades later, we know that in certain situations when he is stressed, I need to hang back quietly; and when I’m stressed, he needs to be present for me and willing to just listen. In other words, what works for me doesn’t work for him; and what works for him would feel bad for me. This was just one of the many lessons I needed to learn.

We all need to feel respected, needed and appreciated, yet we often don’t appreciate others and all that we have until it is gone or too late. This requires you to give of yourself while finding a way, even when you may be hurting, to also give someone else the benefit of the doubt. Judging others favorably and in the way in which you would like to be judged, and seeing the good from within, without blaming, is not always easy. It takes work.

If your partner is generally a good person, you may have to take a step back from his/her actions. Anyone can have a bad day, and it’s easy to forget that it may have absolutely nothing to do with you. Remember, too, that being a perfectionist not only increases your anxiety but may place unrealistic expectations on your partner and sets you up for failure.

I recently arrived at an event requiring that we wear name tags. While my husband was parking the car in the rain, I went in to register. I first wrote out my name and then, upon seeing a blank sticker, wrote his name. The person at the desk looked at me and commented, “He’s a big boy. He can write out his own name.” Of course he can, but isn’t it nice when someone takes care of you through both big and small loving gestures, by making life just a bit easier?

IT IS exactly through these loving acts of kindness that we make donations to the “goodwill bank.” These small acts of gratitude and appreciation, especially when time is a rare commodity, help carry the relationship through more difficult periods of stress and actually make us feel good.

As we get older, the days and weeks seem to get shorter. Time literally feels like it speeds up. And with a pandemic in the background, how we spend our time has assumed even greater importance. Now, when at this moment you need to find a way to let go of past hurts, dig deeper and find a way to put yourself out there. You need to find a way to show that you care and your relationship has value and meaning. It is not always easy, but holding on to something good is well worth it.

Working on a relationship takes the investment of time and planning. While being in the same room and both being on your screens may be a pleasant activity, it hardly qualifies as time well spent. I beseech all of the couples I see to have regular dates. Go out, leave the conversation about the children behind, turn off your phones and for a few hours, make eye contact as you hear your partner’s thoughts and dreams and share yours. You might just discover that you refuel in a very nice way, both grow as a result. And in doing so, you make more donations to that goodwill bank.

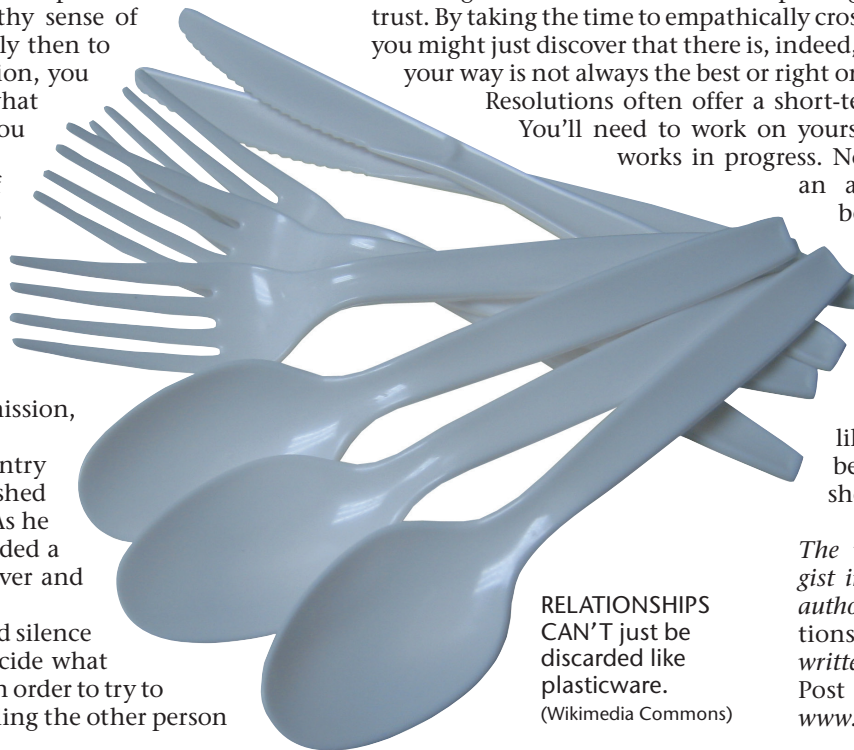
Feeling connected in a relationship brings a sense of comfort, safety, ease and trust. By taking the time to empathically cross the bridge into someone else’s world, you might just discover that there is, indeed, another way to see the world and that your way is not always the best or right one.

Resolutions often offer a short-term fix but not a long-term solution.

You’ll need to work on yourself and your goals, viewing them as works in progress. Notice the good all around you, adopt an attitude of gratitude, and work to become more patient, kind, giving and understanding. This will show you how rich you really are. By taking the time to decide how you will respond to others, you can ultimately be the best version of yourself. It doesn’t get much better than that.

If things are not going the way you’d like, before you throw in the towel don’t be afraid to seek professional assistance. It shows just how strong you really are. ■

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RELATIONSHIPS CAN’T just be discarded like plasticware. (Wikimedia Commons)