

Turning Toward – A Vital Tool to Stay Connected to Your Partner

When I meet with couples to discuss their problems and concerns, one of the most important questions I try to determine is this: how often and how well do they turn toward each other? In this article I will discuss the concept of turning toward as well as why it is so important in a significant relationship.

What is turning toward? In a general sense, it refers to any attempt by one person to make an emotional connection with another. In a marriage or committed partnership, turning toward occurs when one partner makes an attempt to communicate or connect with the other (known as a “bid”) and that partner acknowledges the attempt (known as a “successful bid” or turning toward). A bid can also be ignored or not acknowledged (turning away), or met with ridicule or sarcasm (turning against), which, as you might suspect, is crushing to the connection attempt, and makes future attempts less likely. Who wants to try to talk to someone who ignores you or greets your attempt with a “smart” remark?

Turning toward is an essential part of a sound relationship. It is a crucial element in what John Gottman refers to as the “friendship” in the relationship. The friendship in a relationship is also considered to be the foundation of a relationship. So, you could think of turning towards as strengthening the foundation of your relationship, because that’s exactly what happens when you choose both to make a bid for connection and to respond to the bid attempt, thus making it a successful bid.

Bids occur in many types of relationships every day – at work, while you’re shopping, talking with a friend, or perhaps a neighbor. Most people have many opportunities each day to make a bid for connection. Bids, when acknowledged, bring people closer together. Conversely, failed bids can contribute to negative perspectives on the relative strength of the relationship. It can erode the level of friendship in the relationship.

When I work with couples, I encourage them to pay attention to bids that are sent their way, particularly by their partner. I also encourage them to respond to the bid in a respectful way that lets their partner know they are invested in the relationship.

Turning toward is a choice, and there are times when one partner just might be less enthusiastic about choosing to respond positively to the other. Perhaps there was a recent argument or lingering resentment that hasn’t been resolved. I think at those times it is especially important to take the initiative and reach out to your partner. Making such a choice is potentially risky because it could be rejected.

Think of each successful bid as a deposit in the “emotional bank account” of your relationship. Those deposits contribute to a more positive outlook in the relationship and strengthen it against future potential occurrences of turning away or turning against.