



Relationship Solutions NJSM

Building Trust & Improving Connections

The Car as a Metaphor for People

“When a guy talks about his car, listen carefully. He is actually telling you about himself. If the car is running well, so is he. Likewise, if the car is having problems, he is too.” A supervisor gave these instructions to me when I was a psychology intern at the Institute of Psychiatry at Northwestern University Medical School in the late 70’s.

These amusing instructions proved true in my three decades of practice as a psychologist. However, as a metaphor I discovered that the car is an excellent metaphor for all people. A car has numerous tanks: gas, oil, radiator, transmission oil, etc. We rarely forget to properly maintain our cars regularly and we make sure to put the proper fluids in each specific tank, and that all the tanks are properly filled. We would be horrified by the idea of putting water in the gas tank, or putting gas in the oil tank. Like the car, people actually have multiple tanks that need to be filled differently: One tank • requires the camaraderie of friends; • Another tank requires love and affirmation from our partner; • intellectual stimulation from meaningful activity fills yet another tank; • Self-affirmation, self-compassion and self-love fill a final tank. It is easy for all of our tanks to become depleted as we expend energy managing the demands of daily life. When we have a “free moment” we reach for the computer, TV, books and other escape maneuvers to re-charge our tanks. And, as we zone out, we silently and magically expect our spouses to fill all of our tanks, even as we neglect truly re-charging our own multiple inner tanks. The problem is that our partner is equally as exhausted and depleted and is expecting the same. This can be a recipe for disaster, as each person relies on the other to do the impossible and magically fill all of his or her own inner needs.

Therapy helps couples distinguish between the inner tanks that need to be filled by their loved one, and the tanks that need fulfillment from other sources. And, therapy helps individuals learn constructive ways to fill inner tanks, lessening pressure on relationships and thereby improving the nature of the relationship. So, if you feel dissatisfied in your relationship, and have a sense of inner loneliness, speaking with a psychologist will help you feel increased contentment with yourself and your partner.

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