

How To Be In Relationship

Rev. Gabi

How to be in relationship - that seems to be really easy, right?
Or, really difficult?

Sometimes I wish we humans came with a manual; you know, like the booklet you get when you buy a washer, or a new car. Preferably with alphabetical entries, and a glossary at the end. Alas, there is no such manual. Neither are there YouTube videos on the topic. Therefore, everything we learn about being in relationship we learn as we go. We learned about the relationships to our parents and to our siblings as we grew up; later on with teachers and peers in school; always trying different approaches. Most often, we learned by mistakes. Like, "**oops**, I guess I should not have taken his candy bar away," or, "**oops**, I guess I should not have called him a bad name!" Or, "**oops**, I guess I shouldn't have had that much to drink."

We learn how to be in relationship by observing the ethics, morals, and traditions in our society. By the time we are young adults, we usually have figured out most of it. And we're bumbling along quite well. Occasionally, there will be some heartbreak; occasionally, we will have to apologize profoundly for putting our foot in our mouth. But overall, we learn to get along quite well.

However, and I'm sure you realize that there would be a "however" in this sermon, there are people among us with whom it is very difficult to be in relationship, despite everything we have learned and experienced so far in our life. I'm talking about being in relationship with people who have a mental illness. Can anybody do that?

Let me start answering this question with my conclusion: if you are an ordinary, "normal" person just like me, you can't! At least, that's what it feels like most of the time. When a person you care for, a person you love, constantly hurts you, breaks your trust, violates agreements or covenants, is destructive or self-destructive - you eventually just want to give up, run away, or try to "get rid" of the source of your disappointment and pain. What do you do?

When, if at all, are they responsible? When, if at all, are they culpable? What is the difference? Who cares?

On the other hand, if you are a saint (and there are a few of them around!): you will be able to say, again and again, "yes, dear, it's okay." Or, "excuse ME for breathing – caring – expecting.... fill in the blank."

Or, "I'll fix it for you; I'll lie for you, I'll protect you yet again from the consequences of your behavior."

Again and again....

Let me introduce one of those saints to you - here is Nicole.

Nicole's first story:

Slam Poem by Brittney Smaila – "Dating Mental Illness"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tBU-Lphverk>

Rev. Gabi's first story:

I clearly remember a phone call from my sister in Germany, about two weeks before Christmas. She was sobbing, and telling me that she was ready to either kill herself or her husband of 35 years, Helmut. I don't think I ever experienced my sister in such despair, and so serious in the treats she uttered. Helmut had fallen into a deep depression about six months earlier, after one of his colleagues had killed himself. He was eventually diagnosed with clinical depression. Months later, when I visited my family in Germany, we were able to connect the dots to several of his relatives who had appeared overly melancholic to the families. Like many Germans, Helmut was hesitant to take medication until it came to this climactic breakdown of my sister, shortly before Christmas. I suggested to my sister she contact the family's doctor; and a few days later, my brother-in-law was transferred to a sanitarium. After six weeks, the medication he was prescribed started to work, and he returned home. He is now stable.

Nicole's second story

Rev. Gabi's second story:

I am currently accompanying a dear friend on a major roller coaster ride of relationship problems with her daughter. A few months ago, the young woman was diagnosed with borderline personality disorder.

My friends had been discouraged for many years because they just could not be in relationship with their daughter. She's extremely self-focused, lies and manipulates, with a strong sense of entitlement, abominable manners when she is with her parents, and unable to show gratitude or appreciation.

But worse than that, she seems to be unable to form relationships with anyone outside the family. As long as people reach out to her, she is perfect: happy, enjoying everything, and taking active part in all the work required. But she is never able to invite others, give gifts, show real gratitude. In other words, she is the exact opposite of her parents.

It made a big difference for her to realize that her daughter's behavior was - at least partly - caused by mental illness. Now her actions can be explained, although not necessarily excused. For my friend, the biggest difference is that now, when her daughter hurts her with her hostility, she is able to visualize her as someone who is

limping through life (her words). This makes it easier for her to detach, to take a step back, and then respond instead of reacting to the attacks.

Only this morning, I read an article in the “UU World” that started with this paragraph: *“How do I keep my heart open?” The fear is having a heart become so hard that it can no longer connect – the hope is to remain open and not cease engagement with the difficult person, or the world.”*

There are so many questions when you are confronted with the fact that this important person in your life has a mental illness. Often the diagnosis helps you to be more tolerant and accepting, as in the story I just told.

I cannot end this sermon without saying that sometimes, you just have to let go. You have to let go of your own longing to be in a reciprocal relationship with this individual. But you know, it is possible to give love without expecting love back. Maybe you can make sure that they take the medication, maybe you can restrain them when necessary, maybe you can call social service agencies or the police when you're out of your own resources. But in order to preserve your own sanity, and to be able to be in relationship with others around you, you will have to let go. If it comes to that, keep the words of Rumi in mind, who said: *“Goodbyes are only for those who love with their eyes. Because for those who love with heart and soul, there is no separation.”*