

Go 'green' in relationships with empathy



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What do you say to:

• The couple who was foreclosed on a dream home after working two jobs to keep it?

• The man who lost his job after reliably working for a company he

loved?

• The woman who wants to have a child, yet all attempts fail?

• The child who is bullied and desperately feels alone?

What do you say?

Can you slow down from your rapid pace and be emotionally available to your family or friend who is experiencing a hardship? Can you empathize with their toll? Not sympathize, but empathize. Not avoid, but empathize.

All of us experience hardships, yet many people weather their personal storms

isolated. When asked about receiving support, often people reply that they fear disclosing their story and being perceived as a "loser" or "failure." Often people go to great lengths to hide their difficulty.

For example, I have known of many individuals who headed off to work long after being laid off. The hiding, or shame, associated with hardships may be due to our highly competitive culture that boxes us into bins of either successful or unsuccessful.

We are beginning to see how the lack of empathy affects our relationships. The importance of rekindling empathy is evidenced by the profound increase in childhood bullying and the extent of shame exhibited by adults facing hardships alone. Both adults and children are experiencing more isolation when dealing with severe emotional pain.

Empathy is the core of a healthy connection and is the

heart of relating. Empathy, as defined by Kohut and Jordan, is "the accepting, confirming and understanding human echo. A psychological nutrient without which human life as we know it could not be sustained." To be empathic requires listening to another, trying to understand his/her experience and exhibiting compassion.

Two recent Boston Globe articles (May 2, 2010) spoke to the issue of strained relationships and individual isolation. The first addressed the increase in bullying. Norway and Finland's front running research and programs were identified. They are attempting to decrease bullying and increase relational harmony by relying more heavily on the peer group. In essence, the emphasis is on diminishing the bully's power by encouraging the peers (bystanders) to walk away when witnessing bullying behavior. Finland's

program instead of focusing on all the peers that are bystanders, addresses the bully's sidekicks. The article reveals the limitations of these solutions because peers are so frightened of the bully turning on them.

The solutions tend to focus on external behaviors versus confronting underlying themes. Bullies lack empathy and connections are primarily about gaining power through hurting others. The peers who are bystanders or sidekicks may join the bully to counter this fear of retaliation or they too may be lacking in empathy for the victim. I am suggesting that our children gain a stronger sense of empathy for others beginning at an early age in their homes and schools.

The second article speaks to the growth of McMansions as lessening neighborhood interactions. The large yards and focus on working more for material gains is perceived as

interfering with establishing neighborhood contacts. The remedy is to refocus on developing and recreating relational connections in one's community. It speaks to sharing, giving and cooperating more.

We are more isolated and our children are bullying. Much like the rest of our lives we need to rethink and "go green" in our relationships. By going green I am suggesting we rekindle basic relational tools and values. I believe we need to refocus on connecting more fully with others and at the heart of our relationships nurturing empathy. Going green with empathy means strengthening our own internal compassion and teaching our children the following:

1. To strive to understand others, including those from varying economic backgrounds.
2. To respect differences. This does not imply that chil-

dren need to be best friends with everyone, but rather that they have the capacity to see the other's human value.

3. To refrain from verbally putting others down and explain to them when they are being emotionally abusive.

4. To help them understand the difference between the healthy and unhealthy use of power.

In summary, when we fully connect with someone it is a gift. When someone listens to us and we feel understood, it is a gift. I am recommending that for us and our children that we connect more fully and make empathy a way of life.

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