



■ Dr Aju Abraham

Negative assumptions

Challenge the obstacle to your healthy relationship

In my last month's column, I wrote about how negative assumptions are formed and how it undermines your relationship with your partner. The core issue with negative assumptions is that, it helps you to maintain your role of being a victim in the relationship, which rewards you with the sense of being right about your negative feelings towards your partner. Whilst it is important to have this understanding of how your negative assumptions damage your relationship, it is often not sufficient to make significant and positive changes, if it is not accompanied by the necessary knowledge and skills to challenge them. This is because negative assumptions are often difficult to break, in spite of correctly identifying them, as what you have to give up may seem more than what you could gain by giving them up. By breaking away from the feeling of being a victim and by giving up your sense of 'being right' in having the negative feelings towards your partner, you have to look elsewhere, i.e. deeper in to your own thought processes and behaviours, to find an explanation for the disharmony in your relationship. Most couples going through relationship crisis avoid doing this as it can initially lower your self-esteem when you stop externalising the blame and start to look internally to correct the faulty dynamics in your relationship. This, if not taken in the right spirit and attitude, can result in depressive emotions which have the potential of further damaging your relationship as you are very likely to attribute those negative feelings to your relationship with your partner. However, if you are honest with yourself, and gather the courage to assert against your own negative thought processes, it is possible to change these circular patterns in your thinking, resulting in major breakthroughs in your relationship.

How to identify and start challenging negative assumptions

As a start you have to try to identify your negative assumptions whilst they

are occurring or before they cause a lot of damage. Understand that, what you see as fair need not be seen in the same way by another person. Try to accept that there could be a different perspective that your partner may have on an issue and that he or she may be behaving in certain ways for an entirely different reason than what you may be assuming it to be. Consider that you could be wrong in your assumptions and stop trying to prove that only your thoughts, opinions and actions are correct. Instead of trying to look for ways to reinforce your negative assumptions, try to find ways to transform them in to positive thoughts. Do not expect that your partner will change to suit your needs and do not depend on this change for your happiness. Acknowledge that you may not be automatically rewarded for what you consider as your sacrifices and hard work.



Techniques you can use to challenge your assumptions

There are various techniques that can help you to challenge your assumptions once you are able to identify them. You should look at the evidence for and against your negative assumptions by asking several meaningful questions for you to examine their accuracy. You could use the technique of 'turning it around' by asking questions such as: "Can I be absolutely sure that it is true?", "If not,

what are the alternative possibilities?", "Could it be that my negative assumption towards my partner is derived from a self critical view that I have always held towards myself?", "What would my closest friends tell me about my assumptions?", "Had there been times in the past where my assumptions towards my partner turned out to be wrong?" etc.

What could you do if you find it difficult to challenge your negative assumptions using the above techniques?

More often than not, couples find it difficult to follow the above methods without significant help and support. In such instances, you could talk to someone that you trust, to clarify the accuracy of your assumptions. If you feel that your negative assumptions are causing significant strain in your relationship, in spite of your attempts to challenge them yourself, you are much better off to raise them and clarify them directly with your partner. Whilst this might put you at risk of not being 'right', it will still help you to make a significant shift in the unhealthy and unhelpful behavioural patterns in your relationship. When you use this approach, it is important to clarify your intentions with your partner in a non confrontational manner and explicitly state that by asking certain questions to him or her, you are prepared to correct any misinterpretations that you had towards him or her. Mention that you do not want to assume the status of an accurate mind reader and encourage your partner to follow the same approach as you. Eventually, it will help you to break the circular thinking pattern that was jeopardizing the future and happiness of your life with your partner. Finally, do not give up easily on these challenges, as behavioural patterns between couples are often established over a protracted period of time and in turn may take more than just a few attempts to rectify them.

Dr Aju Abraham is a Consultant Psychiatrist running his own exclusive psychiatry clinic in Doha. For further information or any questions related to emotional problems, you can email him at editorthewoman@gulf-times.com