



■ Dr Aju Abraham

Negative assumptions

Understand its role in undermining your relationship

“ Denise was snappy on the phone when her husband Harry called her to inform that he would be coming home late that evening. She was very tired dealing with Callum, their 4-year old son. She had just picked him up from the school and on the way back he was demanding and showing a tantrum for not stopping at the cake shop. When Harry came home later that evening, Denise seemed very angry as she was shouting at Callum for refusing to switch off the television and come to the table for dinner. Harry assumed that Denise was angry with him about something and that was why she was irritable and angry around him the whole day. He thought that she was disrespectful towards him by showing this behaviour and felt angry about it. He decided to go out for a walk to calm down as he started feeling quite agitated. Denise was very upset with Harry’s behaviour as she was feeling very stressed managing Callum and preparing dinner at the same time. She assumed that he left the house as he did not care about her difficulties and that he did not value the effort she was putting in to take care of the family. They remained uncommunicative towards each other for the remaining day. The following day, Harry went out for dinner with his colleagues from work without informing Denise. When he returned home, Denise confronted him about leaving her alone in the house to cope with the chores and Callum’s tantrums. Later that night, they had a major argument, shouting at each other and accusing each other of doing hurtful, unjustifiable and unforgivable things.”



This is an example of a defective interpersonal communication that tends to occur quite often amongst couples going through relationship crisis. Quite surprisingly, such significant breakdowns in communication can be seen even in couples who have been together for 3 to 4 decades, and it is intriguing to see how couples make the same mistakes repeatedly. The core issue that can be observed in these situations is that very often one or both the partners jump into conclusion by making negative assumptions about the other. In the above example, you can see that at one point both Harry and Denise were making strong negative assumptions about each other, following which, their communication broke down and spiralled in to very unhealthy behavioural patterns in a short span of time. This raises the question: Why do people repeatedly make such negative assumptions about each other?

The origin and development of assumptions

Assumptions are formed primarily from what you have learned to believe from your experiences in your childhood. In children, this learning occurs mostly by observing the

communication of adults towards them and others. Later on, as children grow up they acquire the ability to think abstractly. During these stages, i.e. adolescence and early adult life, their observed learning from their childhood is often consolidated by their ability to selectively abstract the supportive evidence in favour of their assumptions that have already been ingrained in their belief system.

How negative assumptions are formed, and their consequences in relationships

For some individuals, as a result of numerous early negative life experiences, the way you have learned to judge the world around you becomes distorted through a concrete thinking pattern that leads to a very strong and negative core belief system. This in turn can reflect in your assumptions and perceptions of events occurring around you. In this case, your assumptions could be biased towards what you want to believe based on your core belief system, rather than what you have to believe based on the facts. If you have had numerous painful experiences in your past, it leads you to be apprehensive and expectant of frequent negative experiences in your future. For example, if you have been abused and neglected in childhood, you tend to have a core feeling of being “worthless” or “damaged and carry a general mistrust towards others, expecting the world around you to be a cruel, unfair and unforgiving place. As a result of these negative core beliefs you are likely to take a self-protective approach in situations vulnerable for conflict and pain, which helps to give you a sense of being ‘right.’ This results in you getting trapped in a circular thinking pattern, expecting others to be ‘wrong’ and unfair towards you. Hence, your assumptions give you a sense of unrecognized worthiness and a reason for self pity, justifying your negative emotional states such as anger, irritability or sadness. Between couples, these negative assumptions often lead to a vicious circle of misinterpretations and miscommunications, making the relationship cogwheel go out of control. They eventually have an enduring and damaging effect, and end up sabotaging your relationship, as they close off any possibility of an exchange of accurate information, which normally helps you to connect with each other in a healthy and meaningful way.

Whilst you now have an understanding about the obstacles these assumptions bring about in your relationship, it is also important to know how you could overcome this, to maintain your relationship in a healthy state. We would be looking at how you could challenge and overcome these obstacles in my next month’s column.

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