

**How to Be an Adult in Relationships:
Working with the Five Keys to Mindful Loving
Taught by David Richo**

Talk One: Recognizing That the Past Is Present

Welcome to our first class. Before I begin talking about the actual topic, I'd like to say that I respect the fact that you wanted to take this class because not everyone would be interested in making an investment in how a relationship could work better. So I think it's important for me to give you credit for that choice and for you to give yourself credit. Most of us have had a hard time with relationships, and yet the belief that there are certain skills that you can learn that will help you improve the way you relate—that has a wonderful hope in it, and the fact that you have that kind of hope is something to be proud of. So I wanted to begin that way and make that my true welcome to you.

Our first topic, of course, is how our early life affects our relationship. We might even say that our relationships as adults begin in childhood, because it was in the earliest moments of our life that five specific needs arose: a need for attention, a need for acceptance, a need for appreciation, a need for affection shown physically, and a need for allowing. And we brought these needs to a specific person—that is, our main caretaker. For most of us that would be Mother. Somehow it snapped into our minds that you bring your needs to one specific person, and it all began in that childhood or even infancy bond.

The reason we needed attention was because we couldn't tell our needs, and we had nowhere else to go to bring our needs. We had no resources, so everything depended upon a trustworthy holding environment that was meant to happen in our home. A holding environment is one in which your needs are paid attention to: someone understands your needs—knows, for instance, whether your cry means you need to be changed, you need to be fed, or you need to be held—and not only understands your need but even responds to it and takes care of you in the way that you require.

Secondly, you had a need to be accepted just as you are, rather than be with parents who were trying to force you into what they needed you to be.

The third quality of this holding environment in which we grow in a healthy way is appreciation, which comes from a Latin word meaning "price" or "value." You needed to feel that you were really valued and cared about.

Fourth, you—and all of us—needed affection shown in a physical way. We needed to be held, cuddled, played with—nonsexual, but certainly with a lot of touch. In fact, now we know that one of the ways that our brain develops is through touching and holding in those early months and years of life.

And finally, when the time came for us to be a little less dependent on our parents—which began when we crawled, so we no longer needed to be carried; which continued when we went to school rather than stayed home—we needed the kind of parents who were OK with that, who could let us go. That’s called allowing, and as life went on, we needed more and more allowing, especially when we became teenagers. And even as adults, we need partners and friends who support us in our taking the steps that represent our own deepest needs and wishes. It’s not as if we’re not free, it’s only that when someone endorses our freedom, we feel much more supported and believe that our need for freedom is legitimate.

The same five needs that we had in early life are the ones that we bring into our adult relationships. When the needs were fulfilled in early life, not only do we feel that we were taken care of in a good enough way, but we also have a capacity to be satisfied ever after—that is, in all the later decades of our life—with moderate need fulfillment. As adults, we’re not looking for the partner who will give us the 100 percent need fulfillment that our parents gave us; we’ll be looking for partners who just give us enough to help us have a life that feels fulfilled, but we’ve learned to go to many other resources: ourselves, our friends, our family, our career, nature, a higher power.

We have many resources that we go to looking for our five A’s. These five A’s—attention, acceptance, appreciation, affection, and allowing—were the needs that we hoped our parents would fulfill. If they did not fulfill them, we don’t have a capacity to be satisfied with a moderate dose, shall we say. We have instead a bottomless pit in regard to whichever of the five, or all five, was not fulfilled. And so we keep looking for more from others while at the same time not being able to be satisfied with the more that we receive.

That’s where the work begins. We recognize when we have that lack of a capacity to be fulfilled, when we have that bottomless pit for one of these five A’s, and then the work becomes grieving the past, grieving how we weren’t fulfilled in the way that we believed was coming to us. This way, of course, is biologically known, so that’s why it will feel like a loss. It’ll feel as if we were supposed to be getting something and we didn’t in early life. When we grieve and let go of all our resentments and our attachments to what our parents were supposed to give us, that is what makes us ready for a healthy relationship in adult life.

So this is the overall topic of our first chapter or module in our course, and it’s really important to see the connection between what happened in early life and what’s going on in relationships right now. It would be a rare person . . . in fact, hardly possible at all for someone to emerge from childhood totally ready for a healthy, mature relationship. Most of us bring what is called baggage. What is this baggage?

It's the unfulfilled needs. There's something very touching about looking at ourselves as somehow wounded in early life, but there's something very enlightened about no longer blaming anyone for what happened to us. When we let go of that blame because we have grieved our past and moved beyond it, we're ready for the kind of commitment that is required in an adult relationship.

What are we looking for from another adult? The same five A's: the attention, acceptance, appreciation, affection, and allowing. (*Now the affection is sexual, if that's appropriate.*) When we both give and receive these five A's—I give these to my partner, my partner gives these to me; I receive them, my partner receives them—we have intimacy. What is intimacy? The giving and receiving of the five A's at the same time with the same person.

In addition, a commitment in a relationship requires an interest and a follow-through, working on the conflicts that come up. So when I work on issues that arise in the relationship—when I try to address them, process them, and resolve them—that is the meaning of a commitment.

And secondly, a commitment means that there will be an agreement that I'm willing to make so that the relationship can get better, and in fact I keep agreements in the relationship. So what is a commitment? A combination of keeping agreements and of working through conflicts.

And finally, I'd like to mention trust, because we've often heard that a relationship is based on trust. The way I put it is, a relationship is certainly based on trust but not based on trusting the other person: I trust myself to receive the trust of someone else when it is shown to me, and I trust myself to handle a break in trust or a lack of trust when that happens. So instead of saying, "I have to have a partner whom I can trust," we turn that toward ourselves and say, "I want to build my own sense of self-esteem so that I know how to base my trust on what the record shows rather than foolishly trust someone who is not trustworthy. I trust that I will be able to know when someone is trustworthy and receive that with gratitude, and I trust that if there's a break in the trust—a betrayal of some kind—I will be able to handle it, which means I will confront it directly, say "ouch," try to work through it, and not retaliate."

Now we can say that this combination of the five A's, commitment, and trust is the equivalent of how to love someone in a relationship. How do I know I love someone? I pay attention to him or her, I accept him and her just as he or she is, I show appreciation, I show affection, and I allow my partner to make the choices that fit with his or her deepest needs and wishes, and I stay committed within the bond, and I am trustworthy in how I act toward the other person, and I gladly receive the trustworthiness of the other. Putting all this together, we see that there's a big connection between the past and the present

and that no matter what happened to us in childhood, there will be a way of working with our story so that we are now fit for a relationship that can really work.

I'd like to end with a short quotation from our chapter. I am on page 24 of the book, in chapter 1. And these are just some kind of rhetorical questions, but I think they really set the mood and set the tone for what our topic has brought us into.

Have I been afraid to grieve what I did not get from Mom and Dad and so have demanded it from partners, strangers and innocent bystanders? Am I unable to find it in myself because I have been investing all my energy in looking for it in someone else?