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We Decide Our Responses

It is only human to become critical of others when we suffer from our own shortcomings. Then we become interested in the faults of others. Ordinarily our natural social interest enables us to see and enjoy the good qualities in our fellow men. Everyone has virtues, just as everyone has faults. Whether we emphasize his faults or his virtues indicates our attitude toward a person. That is true for human beings as for life in general; both are so rich and colorful that we can single out whatever we want—the good or the bad. It is not a question of whether disturbing or pleasing experiences are more frequent; the advantages and disadvantages we find in life and in persons reflect only our own attitudes.

How much it is up to us whether we resent or accept is demonstrated by the following case:

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A patient lived in a very peculiar marriage. He had had no sex relations with his wife for many years, although both were rather young. She did not excite his fancy, he said, and he disliked her physically. He made no secret of having mistresses and bragged about their gifts and other signs of enchantment. How did this equilibrium develop? He had grown up in competition with an older sister, trying from childhood on to demonstrate his "masculine superiority." Unfortunately, his desire to feel that he was a strong man was never satisfied. The dominant father he tried to imitate gave him too powerful evidence of his own inadequacy. Consequently, he developed a peculiar system of tyrannizing and charming others to give in to his whims, avoiding very carefully any situation where his dreaded inferiority might become apparent. He married rather young, when he found a girl deeply devoted to him and willing to live and die for him. She was a wonderful housekeeper, and provided for him a comfortable "temple" where he was enthroned as a



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god.

After a few years, however, he became apprehensive and rebelled. As high priestess of the sanctuary, she exerted certain pressure on him-for his comfort and benefit, to be sure, but creating in him a sense of being pushed. Her concern for his welfare repelled him. Her moral superiority threatened him and increased his fear of being

dominated. Abruptly he decided to leave her. She became hysterical and literally fell on her knees, embracing his legs, and implored him to keep her as a slave. He could do whatever he wanted, as long as she could stay with him and serve him. His feeling of superiority was saved-and he stayed. To test his power, he ignored her domestic efforts by entering the house with dirty shoes and by similar offenses. It broke her heart, but she suffered in silence. He went out with other women, not without telling her of his experiences and successes. She was hungry for his love and affection so he denied her both.

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During therapy he understood his mistaken conception of superiority and the fallacy of his effort to avoid any pressure from the outside world, expressed in various nervous symptoms which had induced him to seek medical attention. One day he came in and reported, obviously amazed an unexpected sexual relationship with his wife the night before. He did not understand himself.

For many years he had considered her distasteful and sexually repulsive. How could he suddenly feel sexually attracted? Had she changed? Certainly not. It was he who had changed, not alone in his attitude toward her, but toward life in general, so that he looked at her differently and became willing to commit himself again, no longer afraid of losing status.

From this moment on, normal relations continued. He gave up his girl friends whose admiration-and even gifts-he no longer needed as proof of his masculine superiority.

Marriage is no Heaven

It is difficult for two people to be friends day and night, to agree, and to cooperate in all turns life may take. In view of the complex and almost unsolvable problems he faces, nobody can feel thoroughly adequate. Many carry the hostility and apprehension from the external world back into the home and return to the world unrested, with increased tension. The disappointment is the greater the more one expects to find a haven in marriage. It is a grave mistake to look upon marriage as a solution. It is a task. People, especially women, discouraged in life, hope to find

security in marriage, only to experience frightful disillusionment. In former times, marriage was a solution for a woman's problems. Without a husband, women did not count-and nothing mattered once she was married. Today it is different. Advising a discouraged girl to get married is harmful. Whoever feels inadequate in regard to work and social obligations faces failure in the even more exacting cooperation demanded from the close human relationship in marriage. Not that people should be discouraged from marrying. They cannot run away from sex and love without becoming more deeply disappointed. The point is that whatever one does in anxiety and cowardice, one has to pay for. Whether one tries to escape from marriage or to escape into marriage, the curse of cowardice follows him. Courage and social feeling, if not previously developed, must be deliberately fostered, in order to prepare for marrying or to make the best of an already contracted marriage.

The Spirit Counts

It seems futile to give specific recommendations for a happy life. Many books advise what to do and what not to do. The pity is that the suggestions, regardless of how good they are, generally do not help. A courageous person with sufficient social interest does not need advice, and a fearful, hostile person will fail to heed even the best advice. Therefore, we have stressed in this chapter fundamental attitudes more than specific techniques. No technique alone can preserve marital happiness-no rule in handling economic, social, or sexual problems can prevent failure. The spirit counts and not the technique. The willingness to cooperate can overcome every obstacle, and without this fundamental willingness, minor obstacles can become overwhelming. Whatever intensifies, between husband and wife, the feeling of belonging strengthens their resistance to perils threatening from within or without. Any outlook on life based on faith and confidence-religious or secular-increases aptitude and competence for harmonious cooperation and generates an atmosphere of genuine kindness and tolerance. The problems overtly blamed for the disruption of marital happiness provide only test situations through which erroneous attitudes can be brought to light.