

“Perceptual Synergy” For Relational Respect and Understanding

A few months ago I introduced the concepts of **perceptual dissonance** and **perceptual synergy**.

Cognitive dissonance is known as an uncomfortable feeling caused by holding two contradictory ideas simultaneously. Parents are often caught in the contradiction between what they expect of their children and what they do themselves. How many times has it been said, “Do not do what I do. Do what I say.” For ages, children have been baffled by this cognitive dissonance.

Perceptual dissonance occurs when differing feelings are unconsciously applied to the same idea or experience. Perceptual dissonance only occurs in the context of relationship, and because our feelings are often very different, we frequently have different perceptions. Perceptual dissonance is usually experienced as uncomfortable and even painful. For that reason, it is important to learn how to transform perceptual dissonance into **perceptual synergy**.

The first step toward perceptual synergy is to understand there is no such thing as an incorrect perception. This is hard to grasp because we are inclined to automatically assume our perception is the correct perception, and therefore, a differing perception must be incorrect. We fail to account for the reality that a conflicting perception is simply filtered through different and sometimes incompatible feelings. This is why it is often very difficult to discuss religion and politics. Religion and politics are two topics that can carry intense and powerful feelings that greatly influence perceptions.

Creating perceptual synergy is not about creating agreement or endorsement. Perceptual synergy is about creating understanding and respect. In our marriages and families perceptual synergy is essential for relational survival. Therapists are often mocked for our constant interest in feelings. Awareness of feelings is the first step toward perceptual synergy. Also, feelings can never be wrong. Our feelings are attached to all of our memories and experiences and therefore are simply **true** and not **right or wrong**. When perceptual dissonance generates conflict we experience the pain of rejection because our feelings are unthinkingly being invalidated. We become angry, and we are not consciously aware of why we are hurting or angry. We mistakenly think perception is solely a cognitive process. We are wrong!

Perceptual synergy is achieved by seeking to understand one’s own feelings and the feelings of others as they come from the experiences of their life. Because the process is unconscious, it is incredibly difficult to achieve perceptual synergy. Marriages and families that do achieve perceptual synergy survive and thrive.

There is a key indicator that perceptual dissonance is contaminating a relationship. This indicator is a pervasive feeling that respect, understanding and validation are gradually disappearing. It is time create a new framework that seeks awareness, understanding and care for the feelings behind our perceptions. It is a time to “listen.”
