

Madraigos

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How to Hug a Porcupine without Getting Pricked

A Discussion on Safe Communication



The North American Porcupine is the largest of the hedgehog family. When thinking about a porcupine, our minds immediately shift to the porcupine's infamous spikes and quills, the dangerous sharp hairs found all over their bodies. The upper body is covered with thousands of quills used as the animal's primary defense mechanism, their natural response to perceived danger. When this small animal feels threatened, attacked, or fearful, it will respond by raising thousands of these tiny swords in order to protect itself. It is fascinating to recognize that in actuality, by nature, porcupines are pleasant and non-aggressive animals. In fact, porcupines are known as defensive animals and have no offensive weapons at all. These quiet vegetarians wish only to be left alone to eat in peace.

The human defense mechanism works in similar ways. In researching the psychological outcome of how we relate with each other, mental health professionals have identified the first step to achieving effective communication is creating a safe environment. "Metacommunication," the term used for non-verbal messages, focuses on emotional reactions rather than the content of messages. Steven Stoncy, PhD explains, "Communication in a love relationship is a function of emotional connection. When people feel connected and safe with each other they communicate fine, and when they feel disconnected, they communicate poorly, regardless of their choice of words and communication techniques."

Let us examine this further. We have all had the unpleasant experience of being emotionally assaulted, whether it was in reaction to an unwanted question or perhaps a question to explain a behavior for which we ourselves lack clarity. Or, there might be occasions when people approached us at the wrong moment; when we were preoccupied with a job, activity, or simply deep in thought. At these moments, when we feel judged or attacked, our natural defense mechanism goes into action. We retreat out of fear, raising our own "quills" in order to protect ourselves. When our emotional barricade goes up, we are unable to continue with the conversation and often respond aggressively. This aggression, or counter-attack, is merely an expression of self-defense. It is a natural response to danger.

So, how do we overcome this difficult obstacle in our relationships? The first step in realizing safe communication is to acknowledge our own emotions and more importantly, the perspectives of the person to whom we are speaking. After identifying the psychological needs of the other individual, we can respond more appropriately and work towards creating the necessary safe environment. Perhaps, when we are faced with a situation in which we don't ap-

come through our doors have the opportunity to be heard in a safe and loving environment. They know that they will be acknowledged as individuals and given the respect they deserve. Within this non-judgmental atmosphere, teenagers and young adults feel protected and comfortable asking questions that have been bothering them for years. Once their need for protection has been removed, they enjoy healthy conversation with our staff and begin to improve relationships in their lives.

At Madraigos, we also run a specially designed weekly discussion group designed for young adults involved in serious relationships. These young adults learn effective communication techniques and how to implement them, while our staff evaluates progress and offers suggestions. With these life-changing skills, they are better equipped to develop fulfilling relationships.

At our core we all want and need the same things, love, validation, attention, and acceptance. Like porcupines, we are naturally non-aggressive, craving peace and serenity. In order to hug a porcupine or a loved one, we must first ensure that he/she doesn't feel the need to defend him/herself. We need to approach this carefully and create an environment of warmth and acceptance. As a spouse, parent, or friend, we must first make a concerted effort to ensure that the other feels safe. We need to approach with extreme caution so that their "quills" won't create an obstacle to a healthy relationship. In this way, we will be able to better connect, step-by-step, with family and friends in real and effective ways.

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prove of another person's actions, rather than passing critical judgment, we can gently express concern or disagreement about that person's behavior. If we find ourselves in the middle of a yelling match or an antagonistic discussion, we have the capability to change the tone by focusing on this need for safety.

Adolescents in particular experience extreme emotional, psychological, and physical changes. At this normal developmental stage, defense mechanisms are intensified. Teenagers constantly feel at greater risk and are prepared at all times for an incoming threat. Fear is a very normal response when not equipped with a proper answer. Therefore, establishing emotional safety is paramount, and is critical in ensuring open and honest communication.

At "The Lounge," located at Madraigos, we focus on the essential need for emotional safety. Our staff is trained to facilitate open and secure communication. Teens and young adults who regularly

Madraigos, a 501c-3 not-for-profit organization, offers a wide array of innovative services and programs geared towards helping teens and young adults overcome life's everyday challenges one step at a time. Our goal is to provide all of our members with the necessary tools and skills to empower them to live a healthy and productive lifestyle and become the leaders of tomorrow. For more information about Madraigos' programs and services, please feel free to contact Moshe Yachnes, LMSW, Clinical Director, 516-371-3250 x 2 or myachnes@madraigos.org.