

DEVELOPING TRUST: PART I

By Frank Mancuso, Ph.D.



It was one o'clock in the morning. Phil had to get up in five hours for the start of a long week at work, but he was restless and couldn't sleep. He'd spent the weekend alone, again. The emptiness was starting to get to him, but his fear kept him from looking for another relationship.

The sting of broken relationships left him suspicious about anyone who attempted to get close to him. Trust never came easily, and it inhibited him from being as social as others seemed to be. To Phil, trust was only a temporary guest in any social situation. To protect himself from being hurt again, he kept his distance from others by dismissing compliments, breaking promises, and being angry and cynical.

Inevitably, Phil would cycle back to feeling overpowered by his desperate need for friendship and love. Once more he would give in to trying again, with almost paralyzing fear tagging along. He always swore the next relationship was going to be different. Yet, within a few weeks, he would find himself traveling the same tired road of disappointment, distrust, anger and hopelessness.

He asked me, "Is that the way my whole life is going to be, just miserable and lonely? Why can't I learn to trust? Why are people so hurtful? Why does God let this go on?"

Most people have experienced feelings similar to Phil's, and asked some of the same questions. In the beginning, they are willing to try out new relationships, but that willingness diminishes over time as the pain of loss takes its cumulative toll. For those like Phil, it is common to experience depression and, at times, perhaps even suicidal thoughts.

We are not made to go it alone. Yet, the fear of abandonment and pain of loss can leave people in a conundrum, wondering what to do. "Can't live with 'em, can't live without 'em," we've heard people say. Perhaps the first Adam thought similarly.

Adam was lonely.

Adam lived in a world without sin and talked directly with the Creator. Despite this ideal relationship, God saw that he was lonely. How could that be? He had God! Nonetheless, God created Eve for lonely Adam (Genesis 2:18-23).

Going it alone is painful, but going it with others involves risk and possible pain, as well. Adam and Eve experienced ongoing conflict between their sons, especially when Cain murdered Able. As a therapist, I wondered if Adam and Eve experienced guilt over the death of their son, because they couldn't protect him. Did the profound grief they had about losing two sons (Cain left home as a wanderer) significantly contaminate their marriage? Trusting others was likely more difficult for them after they'd been wounded by those closest to them—just as it was for Phil.

Psychological Considerations of Trust and Distrust

The Oxford College Dictionary defines trust as a “firm belief in the reliability, truth, ability or strength of someone or something.”

In the field of psychology, trust can be viewed as one of a series of developmental stages through which everyone must pass. It is a struggle we begin immediately, with the first stage of Trust vs. Distrust occurring during the first year of life, according to Eric Erikson’s psychosocial theory.

Since infants are caregiver dependent, they fully rely on them for all their needs. If the caregiver is consistent, attentive, safe and meets the essential needs of the infant, he develops trust. Conversely, if caregivers do not provide the nurturance required, distrust is experienced. In either situation, the infant grows up and transfers these experiences, feelings and thoughts to the world at large. This is similarly reflected in Freud’s first oral stage of psychosexual development. It is probably safe to say that every childhood psychological theorist holds trust to be essential to healthy personality and relationship development.

Many people believe one’s relationship with his or her parents, especially the father, greatly influences the person’s relationship with God. The theory is that a child learns from his or her earthly father and transfers the experiences (thoughts and feelings) to God. However, both parents contribute to the mental and spiritual growth of a child. The one closest to the child has the most impact, and that is most often the mother. Many of the learned traits and attitudes from the mother are eventually transferred to other people and God, along with the lessening influences of the father, friends, teachers, etc.



Phil’s relationship to his parents left a lot to be desired. His mother lived in fear and anxiety. She was socially awkward and critical of the “immoral people” and “unloving users of the world.” She refused to breast feed and instead propped him up in his crib with a bottle. His father was withdrawn, rarely talked and was likely depressed. About the only thing his father connected to was his work as a tool designer, an isolating and logic-oriented profession.

Phil hadn’t bonded to either of his parents. There was only enough in his parents’ tank to meet his basic physical necessities. As a result, he was distrustful and

suspicious of God’s and people’s motives and love whenever they showed any interest in him. Not surprisingly, he saw others as takers who keep their distance and cared only about what he could offer. Consequently, Phil grew up very lonely, isolated and overly independent in order to survive. Even though these hard experiences forged a remarkable strength in him, Phil still suffered from depression like his father, and social anxiety like his mother.

Most of us learn that relational trust is like a fragile piece of glass. If broken, it may be restored, but it is rarely ever quite the same. If it is shattered, the relationship often dies and a new one must be formed under new terms and conditions, if it is to continue at all.

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If a friend atypically strikes out in anger, the problem may be resolved, but it will take time before the offended person feels safe again. The memory may never be forgotten. On the other hand, if little offenses continue over a long period of time or if the offense is traumatic (threatening one's life or relationship, such as abuse or infidelity), the people in the situation will likely experience the death of the relationship they once knew. The book of Song of Songs in the Bible describes this as having "failed to capture the foxes," which leads to the ruin of the vineyard or the relational life (verse 2:15). Whether or not a new relationship will be established is a question to be answered by those involved.

Expectations and Beliefs About Trust

Broken trust happens to us all, in every relationship. Misunderstandings, forgetfulness, insensitivity, inattention, self-centeredness, evil and unrealistic expectations can all lead to a breakdown of trust. Here are a few of the common unrealistic expectations and beliefs that can set the stage for the growth of distrust:

- Our feelings about our relationship are the same.
- Our conflicts will be minimal or nonexistent, since we respect and care for one another.
- My partner will always treat me like I treat him or her.
- Our relationship will never change for the worse over time.
- Our needs and fantasies will remain stable.
- Loyalty to and staying power in a relationship is the same for each of us.
- Our commitment will always see us through.
- Neither of us could betray the relationship.
- Our loving feelings can't die.
- Our love will always be willing to sacrifice for the other.
- Our love will conquer all.

Our relational wants and needs can blind us to the realities of how life really is in that relationship. Unrealistic expectations may initially provide a mental safety net from relational insecurity and anxiety. However, when reality fails to live up to the standard, it can threaten or devastate trust and the relationship's future. When trust hangs in the balance, people begin to fantasize about an ideal relationship and strive to give it life. Fantasizing is a symptom or a potential sign of trouble; reality isn't measuring up. It should always raise a yellow caution flag in a person's mind when it crops up.

Expectations: Can love conquer all?

All of the above expectations would be realistic if we didn't possess a sin nature, or we were in heaven. Read each item in the opposite way it is written, and see if you can find examples that support the new realistic, but less romantic expectation. To illustrate, the last expectation, "Our love will conquer all," is read as "Our love will *not* conquer all." Though love covers a multitude of sins and is powerful, it is not absolute. God loves every person, but His love will not save

every person. Love has its limits. If love conquered all, we would not have a 50% divorce rate in America. This process lends to other helpful questions, such as, what are the general limitations of love and what limitations exist in me and my friend or partner?

Having realistic expectations is a safeguard to good and healthy relationships, but unreasonable expectations lead to great disappointment and hurt for the receiver and guilt and frustration for the one trying to meet those false expectations.

Don't let distrust rule your life. Instead, determine to resolve its past influences, as well as trust that is broken in present relationships. Like Phil, being without relationships may be safe, but it is lonely and depressing. On the other hand, being in a distrusting relationship is anxiety provoking and also depressing. Although there is no perfect solution to distrust because sin and evil exist in us and the world, there are several things that can be done to minimize the damage.

One thing you can do is read, **“Developing Trust: Part II”** (located under “Therapeutic Articles” or in our shop). This article presents biblical definitions of trust and faith, discusses whether or not we should only trust God, reveals whether or not God trusts people, and how to overcome much of our distrust to establish healthy relationships. If you struggle with trusting God or others, this article would be helpful to read.