



Solutions for Life

from **Solutions Counseling & EAP**
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Metaphors I Have Known and Loved

Remember talking about metaphors and similes in school? I can remember having to hunt out as many as I could find in a story for one class. Geek that I am, I thought it was fun! I have always particularly loved authors that use metaphors; they paint such a picture in my mind!

Over the years, I have apparently developed the habit of using metaphors in therapy. I noticed it a few weeks ago when I was giving the same explanation for the third time in as many days. It was not a conscious decision. I really think it was born from desperation – trying to get my clients to understand their behaviors and patterns, while introducing healthier concepts.

In the spirit of the Month of Love, here are my favorite metaphors for relationships:

Relationships are like a Solar System.

Each person in the relationship system is a planet. And each “planet” has its orbit. And each planet’s orbit is dependent on all the other planets in the system. (I know – moons, etc. affect things too, but let’s keep this simple, shall we?) The only way the “system” can maintain itself is if everyone in the system stays in their exact same orbit at all times. If one “planet” shifts, the whole system has to shift in some way.

I use this metaphor when I am working with only one person in the relationship. Many people believe you can’t make the relationship better if the whole relationship doesn’t participate in the process. Certainly, it is easier if all parties join in, but it is not the only way. See, if one person makes some changes

and sticks with them, the system must accommodate the change. I’ve watched this very thing happen over and over with my clients. She wants to go to marriage counseling. He refuses (or vice-versa.) So she comes in anyway. As she begins to address the issues in the relationship and make changes in the way she handles things, he balks at first (attempting to keep things the way they have always been) but eventually makes the needed changes on his end (which many times means he ends up heading to my office to see what the heck I’m telling his wife!) Obviously, things don’t always work out. Sometimes the system cannot sustain the change and collapses in on itself. Sometimes the person who made the changes gives up and returns to old ways because they can’t handle all the pressure from the rest of the system. This “becoming healthy” stuff is hard, people!

Relationships are like a See-Saw.

Remember see-sawing? The only way a see-saw can really work is if you are at equal places on either side. Relationships are like that, too. The further away I think you are on an issue, the further away I have to be on my own side. So, the more laid back I perceive you to be, the more uptight and rigid I have to be to balance things out. I see this played out a lot in parenting situations. One parent is the Commander in Chief while the other parent allows free-for-alls. Each parent feels he/she must maintain their stance in order to keep the children from being damaged – either growing up too rigidly, or growing up too loosely (depending on the parent). I work with the parents to begin inching in. Helping the stricter parent to lighten up and be more playful,

and helping the loosey-goosey parent tighten up and begin to implement schedules and rules (and children truly need all of the above). As the parents move towards each other on the see-saw, they become a united front. United fronts are not so easily manipulated by children.

Relationships are like a Garden.

This one is my favorite and the one I use most with couples. It’s so easy for people to look at their relationships and see that they have allowed weeds to enter in because of their neglect. When explaining that marriage is a living, breathing thing that is always either growing or in the process of dying, I see light bulbs begin to go off. Your relationship is a garden that requires tending. You have to plow through issues to make sure you develop good soil so roots can take hold. If you have a “surface” relationship, never truly being connected, having very different values, and/or avoiding dealing with issues, everything you plant may live briefly, but will eventually die just as plants die when they are planted too close to the surface. And it doesn’t matter how good of a job you do preparing your garden’s soil; if you do not pull out the weeds regularly, you will find yourself with a useless garden. Therapy is one way of weeding a garden. Couple time is another. Spending time together to reconnect and remember why you love each other is a must. (Seriously, how long has it been since you two went on a date?!)

I hope my metaphors give you some perspective on your relationships – when you are riding your see-saw that’s placed in your garden in your solar system!