

MICHAEL S. SORENSEN

I HEAR
YOU

THE SURPRISINGLY
SIMPLE SKILL BEHIND
EXTRAORDINARY
RELATIONSHIPS

I HEAR YOU

The Surprisingly Simple Skill Behind
Extraordinary Relationships

MICHAEL S. SORENSEN

Publisher's Note

This publication is designed to provide insightful information in regard to the subject matter covered. It is sold with the understanding that neither the publisher nor the author is engaged in rendering psychological, medical, or other professional services. If expert assistance or counseling is needed, the services of a competent professional should be sought.

While many experiences related in this book are true, names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals.

Copyright © 2017 Michael S. Sorensen

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, please contact to the publisher at the email address below.

Autumn Creek Press

inquiries@autumncreekpress.com

First Edition

CONTENTS

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Introduction](#)

Part I: The Power of Validation

[Chapter 1: Why This Is Worth Your Time](#)

[Chapter 2: Validation 101](#)

[Chapter 3: Common Misconceptions](#)

[Chapter 4: It All Starts With Empathy.](#)

Part II: The Four-Step Validation Method

[Step 1: Listen Empathically.](#)

[Step 2: Validate the Emotion](#)

[Step 3: Offer Advice or Encouragement](#)

[Step 4: Validate Again](#)

Part III: Putting It All Together

[Real-World Situations](#)

[Final Thoughts](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Endnotes](#)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book, and my own understanding of the principles therein, could not have come about without the wisdom and counsel of my mentor, life coach, and friend, Jodi Hildebrandt. I owe much of my understanding of healthy relationships and effective communication to her and the several years she spent guiding, teaching, and mentoring me.

I also owe much to my parents who taught by example the importance of honesty, generosity, and compassion in my daily interactions. I would not be where I am today without their patience, support, guidance, and inspiration.

INTRODUCTION

“Remember that everyone you meet is afraid of something, loves something, and has lost something.”

– H. Jackson Brown, Jr.

“Are you from around here?”

“I grew up in California but I’ve lived here for the past fifteen years. You?”

I had just picked this woman up for a first date and we were headed to a local frozen yogurt shop. She’d had a long day at work and I figured I’d keep it short and casual—take a half hour, get to know her a little better, and ask her out for the weekend if all went well.

Typical small talk ensued, but I immediately felt like she didn’t want to be there. It seemed like more than just disinterest—she felt closed off. She was slouched back in her chair; gave short, almost inaudible answers; and kept looking around as if searching for a clock or an excuse to leave.

When I’d first met her a week prior, she had been friendly, outgoing, and amazingly chipper. The woman sitting across from me now, though, was anything but. It didn’t seem to matter what I said or what I asked her about; she made it quite obvious that she wasn’t in the mood to talk.

I continued trying to keep the conversation afloat for another ten minutes or so before finally giving up. We hopped back in my car and headed back. As we drove, I asked about her family. She paused for a moment, then indicated that it was a sensitive subject. “Ah,” I thought, “that might explain things.” I expected her to just leave it at that, but, to my surprise, she began to open up.

“My parents are in the middle of a divorce,” she said.

“Oh . . .” I replied, suddenly feeling tremendous compassion for her, “I’m *so* sorry.”

“It’s okay,” she muttered, putting on a pretty unconvincing tough-girl face. “I’m fine.”

“Uh . . . no? Having your parents divorce isn’t ‘fine,’” I said. “That’s got to be *incredibly* hard.”

“Yeah, it actually really sucks,” she quickly confirmed, letting go of her façade.

“And then on top of it, I just found out that my dad is getting married to another woman and I’m not even invited to the wedding. They just separated like a month ago!” she said.

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah. It sucks. He sends money occasionally but it just feels like a slap in the face, like he thinks money will fix everything. Like he thinks he can just move on and leave me and my mom behind. And then suddenly I hear that he’s getting married in Hawaii on top of it all, and his children aren’t even invited?!”

“Wow . . .” I said, feeling a mix of shock, anger, and sadness.

I listened as she continued to talk for several more minutes, venting and becoming surprisingly open and honest with me. After a brief pause, I spoke up.

“Ah, Rachel, I’m so sorry. Honestly, I can’t say I know exactly how you feel, because I don’t. I haven’t had to deal with divorce. And I can only imagine how painful that must be.”

She didn’t outwardly acknowledge my comment, but she appeared noticeably more comfortable and continued to talk.

“And you know what’s worse? When your best friend tells you that you just need to ‘smile because it’ll help you feel better.’”

I shook my head in disapproval. “Like that helps,” I said with empathic sarcasm.

“Seriously!” she continued. “And other people say similar things! ‘It could be worse,’ or ‘you’ll get over it eventually.’ I’m not stupid. I know I’ll get over it eventually. But that’s not what I want to hear right now.”

“That’s so frustrating,” I said. “That’s the *last* thing you want to hear when you’re going through something like this.”

“YES,” she sighed.

For the next hour, we sat in the dim lighting of my car as Rachel completely opened up to me. On top of the divorce, she had been in a car accident just weeks prior (remarkably escaping unscathed), and her younger sister had just been diagnosed with cancer. Divorce, a major car wreck, and

a sister with cancer—all in a month. And I sensed this was the first time she was really opening up about it all to anyone.

As we talked, I did what I could to show her that I recognized how she was feeling. Not just that I was listening to her stories and feeling sorry for her, but that I was connecting with her experience. That I saw her pain, and wasn't going to try to fix it, offer advice, or tell her to move on. In that moment, all I could do was help her see that her hurt, anger, and confusion was okay. It was understandable. She had every right to—and very much needed to—*feel it*.

As our evening came to a close, she paused for a moment. “Thank you,” she said. “I’m sorry for throwing all that on you. I guess I just haven’t really felt like I could talk to anyone about it. This is the first time in a long time that I’ve actually felt some relief.”

I thanked her for being so open with me and walked her to her apartment. As I got back in my car, I sat for several minutes, thinking back on what had just happened. What started as an awkward, one-sided, thirty-minute date ended up being an amazingly connecting and powerful experience. Not only did this new acquaintance come to feel safe confiding in me, I came to feel a very real sense of love, care, and compassion for her. In an hour. Now I’m obviously not referring to romantic love here, but the feeling of seeing and caring about someone on a deeper level. Later that night, I wrote the following in my journal:

“It was so amazing to see how she just opened up, how she felt safe, and how she, I believe, felt my love for her because I knew how to *validate* her. I could tell it was like a breath of fresh air. That she could finally breathe. That she felt *heard* and *understood*.”

MY ‘AHA’ MOMENT

That experience was a turning point for me. I saw more clearly than ever before just how powerful validation could be and I was beyond excited.

I first learned about validation—which is, in essence, the act of helping someone feel heard and understood—from my therapist and life coach. I met with her twice a week, in both one-on-one and group settings, over the

course of several years, and worked through everything from work drama to relationship issues to day-to-day stressors. Her approach to counseling and coaching focused on teaching people how to live honest, powerful, and *connected* lives. (Side note: I'm now of the opinion that everyone should have a good therapist. Seriously. Life-changing). I quickly found myself waist deep in principles and practices that ran counter to how the majority of the world lives their lives, and the more I practiced them, the more confident and connected I became. Validating, as you may have guessed, is one of those practices.

By the time I went out with Rachel, I was fairly familiar with validation. I knew how to recognize requests for it and I had some experience offering it. What I didn't know, however, was how *starved* people are for it. Seeing how it almost magically melted away Rachel's walls of anger, frustration, and hurt was eye-opening, to say the least.

Over the months that followed, I had similar experiences with family, friends, and colleagues. Topics of conversation ranged from dating and marriage to major business decisions, and I found myself navigating many of these exchanges with clarity and connection.

As I continued to practice this newfound skill, the benefits became more and more noticeable. People began saying things like, "You're so easy to talk to" and "You're a great listener." After observing several of my interactions with others, one of my mentors said to me, "You really have a gift for putting people at ease." Coworkers told me they appreciated how approachable I was as a manager and how impressed they were with how I handled interpersonal and interdepartmental conflict.

I share these comments not to stroke my ego but to illustrate the fact that 1) the skill of validation has noticeable and far-reaching effects, and 2) it's a skill anyone can learn. What these people saw in me was something I had learned, not something I'd instinctively known how to do. Realizing that I'd stumbled onto something quite valuable, I began searching for ways to share it with others. Knowing how to validate was improving nearly every area of my life—my friendships, my conversations with co-workers and my boss, my dating life, my family relationships, and even my interactions with strangers. I had to pay it forward.

While I found several short articles online that touched on validation, I was unable to find anything that taught it on the level and in the manner I

felt was most practical. There are books on everything from how to swear effectively to crafting with cat hair (no joke), yet very little on the versatility and power of validation. So, short of recommending four years of therapy to people, I was having a hard time figuring out how to share the wealth.

About six months after my date with Rachel, I received a call from my brother. He was going through a bit of a tough time and was looking for some advice. He filled me in on the situation and then paused. My first impulse was to jump right in with a solution, but, as I thought back to my recent experiences with validation, I felt like there might be a better approach. I put my advice aside and simply said, “Man, I’m sorry. That’s gotta be *super* frustrating. I remember dealing with something similar to that just last month and yeah . . . it’s rough.”

Sure enough, that simple comment helped my brother release a significant amount of frustration. When he spoke next, the relief was already audible in his voice. He shared with me his thoughts on the situation and how he intended to handle it. To my surprise, he was already considering the very solution I was planning to offer. It seemed that, even though he called asking for advice, all he was really looking for was validation. We talked for a few minutes longer, then wrapped up. He told me he felt significantly better and thanked me for taking the time to chat. As I hung up the phone, I sat for a moment and reflected.

“This whole validation thing is amazing,” I thought.

Then came the thought I *never* expected.

“What if I wrote a book about it?”

“*Funny*,” my inner critic shot back, “who are you to write a book?”

Yet the thought persisted. As odd as it may sound, I almost felt *compelled* to write something—like I owed it to somebody. I felt selfish for not sharing with others the principles that were so clearly benefiting my life.

“I’m not an author, a researcher, or a therapist,” I thought. “Why would people even listen to what I have to say?”

Honestly? They may not. Yet as the days and weeks went by, it seemed that every experience, every conversation, and every moment of silent reflection pointed back to writing this book. I had to write it. I had to at least *try* to pay it forward. If one other person benefited from the attempt, it

would be worth it. Finally, one sunny Saturday morning, I opened my laptop and began to write.

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM THIS BOOK

So, no, I'm not a psychologist. I haven't counseled celebrities or big-shot CEOs, and I do not have professional letters after my name. Honestly, I doubt I'm any different from you in terms of intellect, talent, or ability. What I do have to share, though, is the knowledge and insight I've gathered from over four years of therapy and coaching, and ridiculous amounts of trial and error. I've compiled insights and best practices from over a dozen related books, distilled key principles from over 500 hours of discussion with licensed professionals, and have practiced, tweaked, and proven these approaches thousands of times over. You may have to trust me a bit until you get into it yourself, but I assure you: this is good stuff.

As you've no doubt noticed, this book is pretty short. I was tempted to add additional (read: unnecessary) chapters, stories, and other fluff in an effort to make the book longer, because a longer book looks more impressive on the shelf, right? Yet few things bother me more than reading a book that takes 300 pages to explain something that could have been covered in fifty. This will not be one of those books.

Instead, I'm going to get right to the point so you can get on to actually trying things out. Because, when it comes right down to it, the only way to know that the principles in this book are as powerful as I say they are is to try them. Practice them. Apply them. I've included stories and research where I felt they added value and held back where I felt they would not. My goal has been to make this book a quick read; something you can blaze through in a weekend and revisit as needed.

Now, before we dive in, know that these principles will not suddenly fix every problem in your relationships, cure you of all disease, or make you better looking. But they *will* improve your relationships, increase the likelihood that people listen to your advice, enhance your ability to support others during difficult times, and help you more easily navigate emotionally charged situations. I've seen them work magic in my own life and in the

lives of countless others. Time and time again, these principles come through. If you take them seriously, you will not be disappointed.

PART I

THE POWER OF VALIDATION

CHAPTER 1

WHY THIS IS WORTH YOUR TIME

“Being listened to and heard is one of the greatest desires of the human heart. And those who learn to listen are the most loved and respected.”

– Richard Carlson

Most people will read the above quote and say, “Sure, people like to be listened to—no surprise there. If I’m a good listener, people will love and respect me more.” While that may be true, there’s a little more to it. Notice the second (and, I would argue, more important) part of that first sentence: “Being listened to *and heard* is one of the greatest desires of the human heart.” That distinction suggests that there’s a difference between being *listened to* and being *heard*, and that we as humans crave both.

Have you ever talked to someone who clearly heard the words you were saying, but didn’t seem to get what you meant? Or maybe they understood your point, but were obviously disconnected from the emotion or weight of the situation? That person listened to you, but didn’t really *hear* you. Now, I know that hearing is technically a sense (i.e., our ears allow us to hear sound), but colloquially, we often use the phrase, “I hear you” to mean “I understand you” or “I get where you’re coming from.” It’s that kind of hearing—a true understanding and connection—that we crave.

So that begs the question: how do you show someone you really hear them? This is where things get interesting. The truly good listeners of the world do more than just listen. They listen, seek to understand, and then *validate*. That third point is the secret sauce—the magic ingredient.

DON’T JUST LISTEN, *SAY* SOMETHING

I dated a woman a while back who was great at listening but *terrible* at validating. As I would relate an exciting or difficult experience to her, she

would often sit there with an unemotional look on her face and, when I finished talking, look at me as if to say, “Anything else?”

I hit a breaking point one evening after sharing something I was particularly excited about. As I finished the story (and calmed down a bit, as I tend to get quite animated in my storytelling), I looked at her and saw that same rather blank look on her face. “Cool!” she said.

And that was it.

I paused for a moment longer, expecting her to follow up with “That’s so exciting!” or “Then what did you do?” or *something* that showed me she actually cared about what I had just shared. I had been talking for several minutes, so a one-word response was surely not all she was going to give.

Nothing.

She just looked back at me with that same plain (though pleasant) look on her face and eventually asked, “What?”

Okay. What was going on here? She listened to my story, didn’t interrupt, and seemed pleasant enough in her one-word response. What was I expecting?

What I was expecting—and quite literally craving at this point in our relationship—was validation. I wanted to feel like she saw, understood, and shared in my excitement. I wasn’t telling her the story because I liked talking; I was sharing it with her in the hope that she would see my excitement and get excited *with* me. I was hoping we would connect over the shared experience.

As I returned home that evening, I did as any healthy, productive, responsible human being would do and started mindlessly scrolling through Facebook. After a few minutes, I came across a link to an article on Business Insider titled “Science Says Lasting Relationships Come Down to 2 Basic Traits.” Intrigued, I clicked through and began to read.

The article discussed studies conducted by psychologist John Gottman who, for the previous four decades, had studied thousands of couples in an effort to figure out what makes relationships work. Seeking to better understand why some couples have healthy, lasting relationships while others do not, Gottman and his colleagues decorated their lab at the University of Washington to look like a beautiful bed and breakfast. They invited 130 newlywed couples to spend a day at the retreat and watched as

they did what most people do on a typical weekend—prepare meals, chat, clean, and hang out.

As Gottman studied the interactions of each couple, he began to notice a pattern. Throughout the day, partners would make small, seemingly insignificant requests for connection from each other. For example, a husband would look out the window and say, “Wow, check out that car!” He wasn’t just commenting on the car, though; he was looking for his wife to respond with shared interest or appreciation. He was hoping to connect—however momentarily—over the car. Gottman calls these requests for connection “bids.”

The wife could then choose to respond positively (“Wow, that *is* nice!”), negatively (“Ugh, that’s hideous”), or passively (“Mmm, that’s nice, dear”). Gottman refers to positive and engaging responses as “turning toward” the bidder, and negative and passive responses as “turning away.” As it turned out, the way couples responded to these bids had a profound effect on their marital well-being.

Gottman found that couples who had divorced during the six-year follow-up period had “turn-toward bids” just 33 percent of the time—meaning only three in ten of their requests for connection were met with interest and compassion.¹

In contrast, couples who remained together after the six-year period had “turn-toward bids” 87 percent of the time. Nearly *nine times out of ten*, the healthy couples were meeting their partner’s emotional needs.

Now here’s the kicker: by observing these types of interactions, Gottman can apparently predict with *up to 94 percent certainty* whether couples—rich or poor, gay or straight, young or mature—will be broken up, together and unhappy, or together and happy, several years down the road.

As I sat at my computer reading this article, something clicked. A surge of insight and validation (with a hint of vindication) flooded my body. *This* is what my relationship was missing! I was indeed making multiple “bids” or requests for connection each day, but felt like my girlfriend only “turned toward me” a small fraction of the time.

I was familiar with the concept of validation by this time and had become quite adept at offering it to others, but I hadn’t yet learned to recognize when *I* needed it. As I read the article, I realized that what