

tom,

dick

and

harry

the three types of people
and why they matter

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Start here.

How much do we really understand about the people in our lives?

For my most recent experiment, I delved into the world of relationships and discovered there are three types: life-giving, lifetime and purposeful. We experience them all at some stage in our lives, and understanding them is the key to making them even better.

Of course, we don't just want to change our current relationships. We want to get a grip on previous ones too. We'll look how to find the purpose in relationships, leave behind any pain, learn the lessons and flip our stories.

And if your relationships are already great? That's fantastic! Because understanding them can make them even better.

Reading time: 11 minutes

The 3 types

of relationships.

I like to think of relationships as something connected to (and I know this word makes some people cringe, so just stay with me!) synergy. Synergy is the interaction or cooperation of two things to produce a combined effect greater than their individual parts.

How awesome is that? That's an ideal relationship: you and the other are better for having met; you're better together.

Lisa Nichols, one of my inspirations, suggests that all our relationships can be divided into three types of relationships: life-giving, lifetime, and purposeful. Let's take a closer look at each.

Type 1 Life-giving relationships - find balance.

Life-giving relationships are the ones that last maybe an hour, a day, or perhaps up to two years (if you can handle it). You see, these relationships are so full of energy, impact, power and excitement, that it's a wham bam, sex, drugs and rock'n'roll situation. Think holiday romance or a one-night stand.

Yet so much is going on that after one or two days — or two years — we realise we can't keep at it. The relationship is just too much.

Let me give you an example.

A few years ago, when I first started getting into fitness, I made a close group of gym friends. The group was led by "Tom". We hung out all the time, partied together and I really enjoyed being with them. But it rocked me off my path. After too many late nights and 48-hour binges, I realised I wasn't being true to myself.

I had to get off that rollercoaster.

Some people call these kinds of relationships ‘toxic’, but that’s not always the case. A life-giving relationship shows you something (like you’re cool, smart, fun) but they’re not meant to last forever. A toxic relationship starts as life-giving, then drags on until we begin to lose our values and ourselves.

It’s like a dessert. A little bit is fine. Too much and too often, and we feel sick.

Type 2. Lifetime relationships - learn acceptance.

Lifetime relationships are people like your family: your parents, your children, siblings and so on. They’re also the childhood friendships you have until the day you die. These kind of relationships may not always be great or awful. They’re just there. These sort, you just get on with.

These show us and teach us things too, particularly about acceptance.

In relationships, we can’t control other people’s behaviours. We can’t control their stories. People are just the way they are.

This is an issue many of us often struggle with in lifetime relationships.

Even I've had to learn and relearn this. Growing up, my uncle "Dick" was always critical of my small, occasional bits of success. He came from a well-off family. Mine was the opposite. And there were always little put-downs, like if I got a good grade he'd say the exams were getting easier, or if I had an A he'd ask why it wasn't an A* (A+). When my mum died, it was almost like he upped the intensity.

It kind of hurt and I struggled with the relationship for a long time.

Today I've just come to accept that my uncle will always be in my life and I will be in his. I'll be civil and polite, but I don't need to invest in that relationship. I just need to accept who he is, how he is and move on from there. Be understanding. Ultimately his story, is his story, and comes from the sum of his own experiences. Who am I to change his story? Hurt people hurt people, right?

Type 3. Purposeful relationships - allow for growth.

This category makes up around 80 percent of our relationships. Huge, right?

And these are the relationships that teach us the most.

Everyone who comes into your life, whether it's a fleeting encounter on a plane or a soulmate, is there to show you something. To teach you something. To fulfil a purpose.

It's your job to discover this purpose.

Now I know saying 'someone's there to fulfil a purpose for me' can sound a bit selfish. But it's not like that.

What I mean here is that we're all constantly learning, changing and evolving. Every little interaction with someone else shifts us, even if it's in the tiniest of ways. In that sense, these relationships serve a purpose — even when it's not immediately clear what purpose that is or was.

I could give a hundred examples of these, but I want to share one that's really dear to my heart.

I volunteered in rural Nigeria for six months when I was 23. I spent a lot of time with my friend "Harry". He was a local who, to put it simply, rocked my world and taught me so many things. He helped me on many occasions. When I left, to thank him, I bought him a grain grinder as a gift. Bobby used the grinder to make a small profit, then he bought another one, then another. Eventually, he became a successful entrepreneur and used the cash to fund his children's education. I'm still grateful I got to be part of that.

A few years later, around the time I fell in with that group of party-focused friends I mentioned earlier, I was at the gym pumping iron. And I get this call.

It was Harry, telling me he had a little boy. The boy's name? Phil.

I burst into tears.

This relationship taught me so many things on many levels, humbling me, reminding me of what really mattered, helping me move towards who I wanted to be. It also served as a wake-up call

and helped me to shift my life around. In other words, it was a lesson. It was purposeful.

What sandpaper teaches us.

Sometimes it's hard to even see the purpose in a relationship. This is particularly true if the other person hurt you, you hurt them, or things ended badly.

The thing is, many of our biggest lessons are wrapped up in the roughest of sandpaper, bringing tears, disappointment or anger. It's important that we don't hold onto all these negative emotions. These things can weigh us down, even onto our deathbeds.

Laura, one of my best friends, is a nurse who used to work in a hospice. She helped people make the transition through the final stages of their lives. These people were approaching the end of their days. Laura told me that often they were absolutely eager to talk. They had stories, so many stories and emotions. But every single person that talked about their past brought up their regrets — and the regrets tended to be about relationships.

Usually Laura would ask them why don't they just call the person, if they could. Why not have a quick chat? And for those who did, it was a game changer.

She also worked with people who had regrets over a relationship that couldn't be changed, often when the other person had already passed away. So Laura helped them look at ways to change the story, to understand things differently. In the best case scenarios, they allowed themselves to let go and to forgive.

This story brings me to an important point.

When we hold onto negative memories or past anger, how can we be our happiest? If we are keeping frustration close, how can we be free flowing? Releasing this baggage lets us soar higher and be abundantly fulfilled.

When we forgive, life becomes a lot more juicy, delicious, and energetic. It makes us lighter.

Finding the lesson of the relationship lets us understand the purpose. It helps us release the heavy 60kg baggage of emotions and pain that we're lugging with us, but keep the useful insight and growth. Think of it like downsizing to an easy carry-on filled with

tools! So it's crucial we try to understand the purpose even in — or especially in — the most difficult situations.

The only constant, is change.

Time to embrace change. Because the truth is, in life and in relationships, people are always shifting.

Every experience that touches us, everything we see, hear or watch, all of it makes us different from the second that came before. We leave a room different from who we were when we entered. Change is amazing. It's part of what helps us grow and feel fulfilled.

But where relationships are concerned, change can be scary. It can lead to distance between two people (particularly romantic partners) or to confusion. It can cause us to forget our values. It can even result in terrible pain where we feel like we're connected to someone who has become so different from the person we once knew. It doesn't have to be this way!

Leave space to grow.

Mel and I have been friends for years. I'd say the relationship is pretty much always in a state of growth, change and expansion as we continue to evolve as individuals.

After just two days at Phuket Cleanse, co-owner Mel had told me I need to stay. She wanted me there as an employee. Just like that. What could she possibly want from my engineering skills? Did she want another building designed perhaps? No. She saw something in me. She wanted me around for who I was, not what I could do. She just had a feeling about me, and that was enough.

Over the four years I've now known Mel, the nature of our relationship has changed. The roles we have played for each other has changed numerous times, together with our ever-changing personal values, priorities and desires. We've been co-workers, best friends, a manager and employee, a coach to each other, a mentor, and so forth. The strength in our relationship has been deeply rooted in the allowance for space between us that we have nurtured, so we can both grow freely along the way.

The joy of these kind of steadily evolving relationships is that we are both developing as individuals while simultaneously growing as

friends. It's a constant creating and recreating process, fueled with ideas and excitement.

When we let it, growth within a relationship can be an amazing thing. It allows us to support each other, pushing one another to new heights. It helps us win and succeed.

Who doesn't want that?

Afterall, isn't that what a successful relationship is? An interaction between two people that makes each person greater!

Float, swim or jump?

Ultimately, if you're in a relationship that isn't quite working for you, you have three choices:

1. Float along and possibly compromise your values.
2. Swim against the tide, fight and perhaps get tired.
3. Jump into a boat and find someone else to row with.

Take a moment to imagine we are all swimmers bobbing along in the ocean. The mainstream, society-driven current goes one way. Most of us float along with it and that's absolutely fine. You buy a smartphone. I buy a smartphone. But suddenly, your partner decides to swim against the current, and not buy a phone at all. This is a shift. You're not swimming together. Then you realise you don't want a phone at all. You build your own boat, invent a new technology and sail into the horizon. Again, it's another shift.

Now imagine this happening a dozen times a day, hundreds of times each year.

This is a silly and admittedly small example. I'm not saying that phone shopping can lead to the death of a relationship. What I'm stressing here is that everyone swims differently and has different paths to take. There's so much pressure in relationships that couples take exactly the same path, but that's rarely how humans work.

In fact, when we try to force ourselves to swim exactly the same as someone else, things can get rocky. We either hold on so tightly to the other person that we stop them from swimming, or we cling and get carried along in their path. Then we wake up one morning not knowing who we are any more, what we want, what our values are.

Relationships are all about compromise. Sometimes we shift together, swim together, and we take the same routes. Sometimes we don't. What's important here is we're conscious of this. Acknowledge it, respect it, accept it, and no matter what, grow from it.

End here.

We've all had people in our lives, past and present, that we've tried to make sense of. By understanding whether they're a Tom, Dick or Harry, we begin to appreciate why they matter.

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