

## Avoid a Backup of Your Relationship Septic System

A few of weeks ago our exchange daughter, Viktoria, came out of the bathroom. “Edwin, you need to see this!” The shower stall was filled with water backed up from a clogged drain, the sink was filling up as well, and the toilet was leaking water from underneath the base. Oh, great! Yep, you guessed it. Blocked up septic system. (Special thanks to Keith Ward for getting out of bed to come figure out what was going on since Linton was safely in Florida.) The septic guy came out Friday morning, cleaned it out, and said we should think about using different toilet paper or perhaps not quite as much. I got to thinking about how this mirrors a lot of troubled relationships.

I hope I can develop this illustration without sounding crass or gross. But what was going on with my house’s plumbing? The problem was we were stuffing junk down those pipes, but apparently not the right kind of junk. Above the surface everything seemed to be fine, but underneath a problem was brewing. All the while we just kept stuffing and stuffing and stuffing too much paper down the pipes. Eventually, the system just couldn’t handle it and big problems erupted to the surface.

Isn’t that what happens in a lot of relationships—whether husband/wife, parent/child, brother/sister, employer/employee, labor/management, neighbor/neighbor, etc.? Perhaps somebody said or did something to hurt us, maybe they have a habit that bothers us, perhaps they repeatedly do something that we believe takes us for granted. However, we are afraid to rock the boat. The relationship is going smoothly so we just stuff it down the pipes. On the surface, everything seems to be fine; but underneath, trouble is brewing.

Sooner or later, however, all that stuff is going to come back up the pipes. No matter how hard you try to stuff it and ignore it, eventually it is going to erupt all over the “floor” of your relationship. You just can’t stuff this stuff and expect it to stay stuffed. It has to go somewhere and when there’s too much of it in the plumbing of your relationship, the septic system will back up. That get’s nasty.

So, what do you need to do? Learn how to talk about stuff as it’s happening. This is why **Ephesians 4:26-27** says not to let the sun go down on your anger. It gives room for the devil to come into the relationship. Instead, deal with it early. When something bothers you, learn how to bring it up. Learn how to express yourself. Do it with gentleness, of course (cf. **Galatians 6:1**). But also do it with firmness that says you are allowed to have your feelings and you need to be able to talk about this. The great thing is if you learn to bring up stuff that bothers you as it happens one at a time, the backup doesn’t happen. Most people can handle it when you bring up one thing that bothers you. It’s when the eruption of all the stuff you’ve been stuffing for weeks, months, maybe even years finally comes up that real problems and destroyed relationships happen.

If it bothers you that someone touches you every time they talk to you, let them know. If someone’s habitual tardiness is causing you problems, talk about it and develop a plan. If someone’s pet nickname for you doesn’t make you feel loved and appreciated, let them know. If someone is repeatedly dropping the ball on their part of the project, have a conversation with them.

Do it early. Do it gently. Do it firmly. Develop good boundaries. As **Ephesians 4:15** says, speak the truth in love. Yes, there are some people who are so wounded that they may not be able to handle it. But I guarantee that no matter how healthy they are, if you wait until you’ve stuffed too much of that stuff down in the pipes, when the septic system erupts, the relationship will be damaged. So figure out how to have that conversation now.

--Edwin L. Crozier