

Validating vs. Condoning

Look at the picture below and describe what you see:



Did you see an old lady, or a young lady? If you saw both, which did you see first? Now assume your partner saw the old lady in the picture, and you saw the young lady. Which of you would be 'right' and which of you would be 'wrong'?

Obviously, neither is 'right' or 'wrong.' You're both just looking at the same picture and coming to different conclusions. Suppose you can readily see the old lady, but have a hard time seeing the young lady. Further suppose your partner can readily see the young lady, but has a hard time seeing the old lady. Even though you're not seeing the same thing your partner sees, would you be able to readily agree that your partner sees it?

Validation works in this way. You can validate your partner's way of seeing the picture without having to agree with what your partner is seeing. Now let's apply this to the concept of feelings.

How many times have you told yourself not to feel angry, or to cheer up, or to snap out of a depression? How successful were you at changing your feelings? We're sometimes conditioned to believe that certain feelings are 'bad' or 'unacceptable' while other feelings are okay. But the truth is that there is no such thing as a 'bad' or 'unacceptable' feeling. Feelings are feelings. They exist. You cannot help the way you feel about a thing or a situation. Often when we tell ourselves or others to 'snap out of it' or to try to repress certain feelings, what we really mean is to repress certain *behaviors*. Simply feeling anger is entirely different than feeling anger and then acting upon it in negative and destructive ways. If you or your partner is feeling angry, that's okay. But if you or your partner choose to act on that anger by saying or doing hurtful things, that's *not* okay. Both you and your partner have a right to feel what you feel. You just don't have the right to act on those feelings in negative or destructive ways...especially when others are involved.

If your partner is experiencing negative emotions like anger, sadness, or depression, you can validate their feelings without having to understand and agree with those feelings. You can do this by saying things like, "I understand you're mad right now. I may not understand *why* you're mad right now, but I respect your right to be entitled to your own feelings."

Notice that this does not mean that you have to validate, condone, or even tolerate bad or negative behaviors. You are simply validating the feelings, and not necessarily the behaviors that come after the feelings. You and your partner can choose when and how to respond to those feelings and act upon them. You may also choose not to act upon them at all, but to simply acknowledge their presence and sit with them quietly, knowing that they will eventually subside.