

## Trust

“I figure you should approach life like everybody's your friend or nobody is. Don't make much difference.” Kevin Cline as “Paden” in *Silverado*, 1985

Yes at the beginning of a relationship it doesn't make much difference whether you think you trust the other person or you think you don't. Either way is okay as long as you keep your own counsel and as long as you recognize that you are jumping to conclusions based on woefully inadequate information. At the start, you don't know enough about the other person to decide whether or not to trust them, or more accurately to know how to trust them.

In thinking about the topic of trust there are several things to consider. What do we mean by trust? How does trust develop? How do we earn or build trust? How is trust lost? How is trust regained? Is it “blind trust” or are we really talking about something else? So often when I hear clients use the word “trust”, it feels like we need to stop and define our terms. One says, “I can't trust him anymore.” Or, “I trust her completely.” I think it's not as black and white as this makes it sound. It is foolish to totally trust or to totally mistrust. When we totally trust we deny shortcomings and when we totally mistrust we deny areas of functionality. Either way we are distorting the reality with which we are trying to deal. This puts an unnecessary strain on us.

I propose that we define trust as knowing a person well enough to know what they will do in a given circumstance. If a person is always on time, we trust them to be on time. If they are always late we trust them to be late. If you can accept my definition, then the rest falls into place. Trust develops as we get to know someone. We earn trust by consistently behaving well. We lose trust by behaving badly. We regain trust by not letting it happen again. However, other factors come into play. There is the matter of intermittent reinforcement being stronger than consistent reinforcement. If someone is inconsistent, we don't know what to expect. Therefore it is harder to feel a sense of trust for what they will do. We tend to feel less kindly disposed towards the person who is late half the time than toward the one who is always late.

In the case of those of us with histories of trauma, our history comes into play. There were people who abused us, misused us and confused us. They probably are the primary source of our confusion about trust as well as of our tendencies to see issues of trust in black and white terms. Mostly our trust issues are really about trusting our own ability to correctly size up a person or situation. It is this lack of trust in our own assessment abilities that is at the core of most of the difficulties that we have with trust.

We try to remedy our lack of confidence in our own abilities to assess what another person will do by replacing our judgment with a set of rules. We decide to trust everyone until they prove themselves unworthy. We decide to trust no one unless they prove themselves worthy. We trust someone completely until they make a misstep and then we don't trust them at all. We decide to trust blue-eyed people but not brown-eyed ones. Then we don't know what to do if someone has hazel eyes. We make up tests to assess someone's trustworthiness. We trick him into lying to us just so that we can prove that he's not trustworthy.

I think that we would do better if we recognized that we know what we know, and that we can make an adequate assessment if we have enough data. If we can't make up our minds or if we are indulging in black and white thinking, then we probably don't have enough data. We need to keep our minds open and our options open until we do have enough data. We need to keep our senses open to receive additional input so that we can make the most informed decision possible.

As we consider how we trust people, it is helpful to be clear about what trust is, the role it has played in our lives, and how our sense of trust has been impacted by our trauma. We need to realize that what we have learned through our experiences colors how we think about and make decisions about trust. Being more open minded about people is crucial to having successful relationships. It is helpful to realize that trust is based on knowledge. Paying attention to the need to collect as much knowledge as we can, will help us in all our relationships.

**Exercise:** Examining your own life experience, consider the following: What happened to your sense of trust as you were growing up? If you had trauma, how did it impact your sense of trust? Who in your life have you trusted the most and who the least? Did your sense of trust for these people change and if so what changed it? Who and how do you trust today? Would a new concept of trust help you to deal better in your relationships?