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A.R.E. you there for each other?

When I ask couples what they struggle with in their relationships, their responses vary from disagreements about money and parenting to squabbles about in-laws or sex. Although these issues may be important, it is important to ask: "What is underneath all of this?"

Dr. Sue Johnson, widely recognized as the foremost expert in couples counseling, has answered the question in this way: "The key question in our love relationships is, '**Are you there for me?**'" This question can also be expressed in the "**A.R.E.**" questions:

- **A: Accessible** - Are you emotionally available to me?
- **R: Responsive** - Can I rely on you to respond when I need you?
- **E: Engaged** - Will you engage with me, give me your attention?

When we know that the answer to these questions is "yes", our love relationships become a **safe haven**--a place we can turn to for acceptance, belonging, comfort, and safety. When we know that we deeply matter to our loved ones, we can usually find a way to work through even our most difficult challenges.

But when we feel that the other person is **not** there for us, even small issues can cause huge upheaval in relationships. Not only are we frustrated by our inability to effectively address the "issues" at hand, but we are also left with the deeper hurt of feeling misunderstood, unimportant, and lonely. Until these deeper feelings are addressed, most people find they are frustrated in their attempts to really move forward together.

The following "A.R.E. Questionnaire" (developed by Sue Johnson, as found in her book "Hold Me Tight", p. 57-58) will help you to evaluate ways that you can improve in truly being there for those who matter most.

Note: In its original form, the questions were phrased to ask about a person's view of their partner's emotional accessibility, responsiveness, and engagement. Although that is a valuable point of view, I've found it more helpful to start with asking these questions about oneself. Of course, in really secure marriages, both partners are emotionally accessible, responsive, and engaged. Also, these can be valuable questions for us to ask about how we relate to other important people in our lives, e.g., children, friends, etc..

ARE Questionnaire (used with permission from Sue Johnson)

From your viewpoint, are you emotionally accessible to your partner?	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. My partner can get my attention easily				
2. I am easy to connect with emotionally.				

3. I show my partner that he/she comes first with me.				
4. My partner doesn't feel lonely or shut out in this relationship.				
5. My partner can share her/his deepest feelings with me, and I will listen.				
In your opinion, are you emotionally responsive to your loved ones?	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
6. If my partner needs connection and comfort, he/she knows I will be there for them.				
7. I respond to signals that my partner needs me to come close.				
8. My partner can lean on me when she/he feels anxious or unsure.				
9. Even when we fight or disagree, my partner knows that he/she is important to me and that we will find a way to come together.				
10. If my partner needs reassurance about how important she/he is to me, she/he can get it.				
In your opinion, are you positively emotionally engaged with each other?	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
11. My partner feels very comfortable being close to and trusting me.				
12. My partner can confide in me about almost anything.				
13. My partner feels confident that we are connected to each other even when we are apart.				
14. My partner knows that I care about his/her joys, hurts, and fears.				
15. My partner feels safe enough to take emotional risks with me.				

These are some of the key questions in love and marriage. To give our loved ones a lasting treasure, we can commit ourselves to living in a way that lets them know, now and always, that we are truly there for them.