

## The Most Important Question in Relationships

By

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Regardless of the role we find ourselves in, we are always in a relationship. The connection could be with colleagues at work, with family members or in our relationships with significant others. Importantly, *belonging* is a fundamental need and we wither without meaningful connection to others. Intuitively, we understand that relationships go through stages and ups and downs. But we seem to think and talk about relationships without considering the lens of personal development. If we don't take this perspective, we often look outside-in. And this perspective does not allow us to ask the most important question in relationships.

Now before we consider this question, it's worth mentioning the downside to the outside-in perspective. First, change happens inside-out and without asking this important question you miss opportunities to grow. Secondly, if the other individual in this outside-in relationship *does* ask this question, they will at some point figure out that you haven't. Lastly, if you don't ask this question, you and the relationship tend to become stagnant or conflicted.

So, what is this important question we continually need to ask?

*What is it like to have a relationship with me?*

Why is this question so important? How you answer tells you where you are on your personal path. If you shuddered when you read the question, there's a good chance you haven't truly noticed the feedback coming your way. You may have only sneaked peeks at how you are in relationships, much like the glances we take when walking past a window. These images are two-dimensional and don't tell the full story.

But if you really sit with this question you begin to take a journey in self-awareness *and* other-awareness—the very core of emotional intelligence. And it's a shining moment in personal growth when you can make enough space to take this perspective. Of note, the core of narcissism does not allow this view of self—or the damage inflicted on others. Nor will it accept responsibility. The only answer the narcissist has to this important question is: “Wonderful, of course!”

To be answered in earnest, this question requires true empathy, the ability to honestly place yourself in the shoes of another human being. In the beginning of the growth process, it is not for the faint of heart. But the leap leads to the wholeness and beauty of truly reciprocal, rich, and caring relationships. This honesty speaks to commitment to self *and* other and honors the innate need we have to evolve.

The answers to this question change over time. Children value relationships but developmentally are dependent and more self-centered. Teens start to get a glimmer of the currency of relationships and their personal influence. But at this stage development becomes optional.

Stunted growth at this stage (or previous stages) often speaks to the mismatch between vocational abilities or monetary success and the individual's emotional life. For example, a narcissist may be able to earn a good living but leaves a trail of damaged relationships.

The challenge of adolescence and young adulthood is forming a coherent identity which precedes the development of intimacy fundamental to reciprocal and meaningful relationships. This is challenging work requiring self-awareness and an inside-out perspective. And down the road, if it is your path in life, this important question asks you to consider extending the quality of your relationship with a wider world, and *with* life.

All this from a simple question? Yes, but the answers are never easy, always changing and becoming more complex.

Ask often.

### **About the Author**

John C. Panepinto, PsyD, LPCS, NCC, has worked in educational, clinical, and, private settings for over two decades. Presently, he balances roles as a consultant in early intervention, and as Clinical Psychologist for Carolina Developmental Pediatrics. He has maintained a private practice for over 20 years. Dr. Panepinto has written on parenting, development, emotional intelligence, resiliency, and performance psychology. He was the keynote speaker for the 2017 National Stay-At-Home Dad's convention, and blogs on fatherhood ([AFathersPath.net](http://AFathersPath.net)) and performance psychology ([AbovetheFieldofPlay.com](http://AbovetheFieldofPlay.com)). Find out more at [DrJohnPanepinto.com](http://DrJohnPanepinto.com).