

THE MIKI KASHTAN COLUMN

Sharing Impacts for Increasing Intimacy

by Miki Kashtan

Humans are embedded in relationship to such a degree that everything within us is in the process of ongoing, incessant mutual influencing. Even when alone, we each operate within a larger 'we' we are always part of.

In the last couple of years, I have developed a framework for making sense of how to navigate this reality in a way that more and more closely approximates the possibility of making life work for all. The framework is simple: we put on the table all known needs, all known and anticipated impacts, and all available resources, and we allow resources to flow from where they exist to where there is need, within willingness and with as much alignment with the purpose at hand as possible. We do this with as many stakeholders as needed and as possible, as part of making known all the necessary information.

As simple as this framework is, we rarely operate in this way, since patriarchal empires have domesticated all of us and have systematically created obstacles, both internal and external, that interfere with our ability to discern and articulate our needs, impacts on us, and the resources available to us (Kashtan, 2017, 2020). Instead of revealing our needs, we tend to speak in the language of shoulds, concepts and rights. Instead of making impacts on us and others known, we tend to speak in the language

of blame and shame. Instead of giving clear information about our resources and capacity, we tend to speak in the language of fairness, and focus on who deserves what. And we rarely prioritise possible pathways based on purpose, as we usually don't have a clearly articulated purpose, neither for ourselves nor shared with others, and are caught up, instead, in either maximising unspecified benefits for ourselves, or in giving up on our needs altogether.

The result is tragically wasteful. We lack the information and inner capacity to make decisions that care for all concerned. We adopt self-protective measures that separate us from ourselves and each other, and that interfere with our creative, collaborative, expansive capacities to attend to life's endless unfolding.

I see the work of removing the obstacles to the free flow of information from all to all about needs, impacts and resources as an essential component of liberation from patriarchal conditioning, both individually and collectively, so that we can realign with the flow of life.

In this short essay I focus, specifically, on the rigorous and radical practice of sharing impacts in the context of close relationships: family, lover relationships, friendships, small intentional

communities, purpose partnerships, and any other relationship where intimacy matters.

Sharing Impacts vs Blame and Shame

While it sounds simple, being able to sense and then talk about impacts is tricky. We are not in the habit of knowing to separate what is outside of us from what is inside. In particular, we tend to make others the cause of our experience without taking responsibility for the process through which impacts happen; a process that invariably involves interpretations, inferences, and attributions of intent.

Suppose I make a date with a friend to go to a performance or a movie, and the friend is not there at the place where we decided to meet at the time when we decided to meet. The impact on me is not determined by these facts. Instead, the impact emerges from the meaning that I assign to these facts, the personal and collective history that informs my own experiences of the meaning I have assigned, and the relative internal significance that needs of mine carry. If, for example, I know the friend has a sick child and view their absence through that lens, the impact will be very different from the situation where I have a long history with this friend of being late for events, and especially if, in addition, I have challenges in trusting that I matter – to this friend, and more generally.

If, in addition, our meeting is taking place in a part of town where I may feel unsafe because of my gender or my race, I may easily attribute carelessness to my friend, think they should know about the danger to my physical safety, and that will increase the impact. Even with this simple example, major elements of human social life may be present, as well as our own personal histories. And more often than not, life is more complex than this example.

A second element that makes it difficult to talk about impacts is that we have been trained out of vulnerability from early on in life, and sharing impacts effectively invites us to step into vulnerability. Sharing impacts requires us to reveal the entire construct of interpretations we bring to what has affected us, which can easily

be embarrassing, to say the least. It also requires us to share our actual feelings, which most of us lack the habit of doing.

What most of us do instead of sharing impacts is either absorbing the impacts, with or without awareness of the cost, or sharing them unskillfully in the form of blaming, shaming, finger-pointing and judging. As much tenderness and systemic understanding as I bring to understanding why we do this, we face a deep dilemma: when we don't share impacts, or share them unskillfully, we erode trust and intimacy over time; and yet we have almost no training or models for how to do it well. While I don't presume to bridge that gap in one short essay, I am hoping that giving the basic building-blocks would encourage more people to experiment.

The How-to of Sharing Impacts

For impact sharing to actually achieve its magic, three things are necessary, none of which is easy: 1) the information about impact needs to travel from the person experiencing impact to the person whose actions resulted in impact; 2) the person whose action resulted in impact needs to receive it and digest it; and 3) the two people together need to co-hold the entire meaning field, and choose together what to do about it.

Once we come to looking at possible strategies for attending to the impact, there's no rule or clear guideline for how to care for the impact. It's possible that once I hear of the impact on you, I will be open and flexible to find a different strategy to meet my needs that doesn't have that impact on you. It's possible that through understanding what led me to take the action, and perhaps also hearing about whatever capacity limitations I have, you will assign a different meaning to my action that won't have the impact on you.

It's possible that we will come up with an agreement that changes the systemic container that holds us, and the impact won't happen. It's possible that the field within which the impact happened will change from understanding each other, so we don't have to make a change at all, anywhere. And lastly, it's possible that we don't

find any solution, and we mourn the situation together until some future in which we can shift it. It's the togetherness that matters, not who makes a change.

In many contexts where the purpose of sharing impacts is not shared (e.g. in most work-places), a commitment to liberation means that if I want to share impacts, I take full responsibility for making those three things happen, to the point of supporting the person whose actions had impact on me to be able to hear me. No small task. And immense, when we are separated by social location, where this liberation stance is contested.

The same commitment to liberation means that if my actions have had impact on another, I will be the one to take full responsibility for the three elements happening. This requires even a higher skill: to extract information from what can come as a barrage of accusations; to digest it; and to co-hold the whole experience with someone who may be regarding me as the enemy.

Inner Work for Impact Sharing

The following commitments for inner work are adapted from a proposed set of agreements that are currently being explored for a temporary live-in community experiment in the spring of 2021. They are based on previous experiments in temporary communities, learning both from what worked and what didn't work before. I highly recommend that anyone aiming to incorporate this practice into their relationships reflect deeply about how to adapt them to the purpose, values and capacity within their own context. Sharing impacts beyond capacity can definitely backfire.

Self-responsibility. We aim to share impact in full authenticity, while taking full responsibility for any interpretations and/or trauma that are stimulating the impact. We offer it as the gift of information for the whole to self-organise more effectively. If we have persistent judgements and a sense of separation from the person with whom we plan to share impacts, we seek support first to open our heart to that person.

Self-acceptance. We aim to receive impact in full tenderness for ourselves, knowing that we are not responsible for how the impact-sharing person interprets our actions, yet we are responsible for working together to find a pathway that will work for all of us. The more capacity we have to see where we have been impacted by patriarchy, the faster our liberation will be.

Awareness of limits. We work with each other to recognise capacity limits to sharing or receiving impact information. Within the context of a community group, there are more likely to be sources of support for all to metabolise the impacts into useful learning.

Purpose relevance. We calibrate the threshold of impact sharing to the purpose at hand. The larger the purpose, the longer the time-frame; and the stronger the commitment to intimacy, the more impacts will be shared rather than absorbed. We operate from the understanding that absorbing impacts reduces capacity and intimacy, while that may sometimes be necessary for basic functioning, given collective capacity.

References

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About the contributor



Miki Kashtan is a practical visionary pursuing a world that works for all, based on principles and practices rooted in feminist non-violence. Miki is a founding member of the Nonviolent Global Liberation

community (www.NGLcommunity.org), and has taught, consulted, and engaged with projects globally. An Israeli native with significant roots in Mexico and New York City, she is now vagabonding in search of learning about liberation and community. She holds a Ph.D. in sociology from UC Berkeley.