

Considering Couple Counseling and the Next Step...

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The following information will be helpful if you are considering couple's counseling. I am hoping that this will provide you with a basis to recognize that some of the 'stuck' places that you may be noticing are really a normal stage of growth that most couples go through. The following will help familiarize you with some of these normal developmental sequences. There is also a description of attachment styles which are ways of relating that all of us learn very early and how these early experiences tend to set up our expectations for subsequent relationships. To help summarize the "why" we react in ways that sometimes seem out of our control is a brief explanation about how the neurochemistry and natural protective mechanisms of our brains drive us to act in certain ways when we are in stressful situations.

It is my belief that the more you know about yourself, the better chance you will have to grow into the best person you can be and also be able to participate in your relationships in a healthy and positive way. Unfortunately, it is our blind spots that hold some of the most important information we need to know about ourselves in order to continually grow. Fortunately, it is through our relationships that we have the opportunity to see into that window that may have been obscured in our own introspection. When a loving, accepting and curious partner can ask the right questions, we are provided with an opportunity to know ourselves better and also allow our partners to know us without disguise or pretense. Working together as a couple to heal and grow your relationship can have positive consequences for each of you, both individually and in your relationship with each other.

The following is a basic description of how this model works to give you an idea of the purpose of some of the questions I may ask and to also provide you with information so that you are an informed participant in your therapy.

Relationships are not easy, even though the beginning of a love relationship could not feel better and seems almost effortless--at least the feeling of "being in love." The reciprocal feelings of mutual attraction when two people feel the same way is like a natural high. Helen Fisher of Rutgers University has named three stages of love: lust, attraction and attachment. Her studies have shown that during each of these three stages we predictably are producing specific hormones and neurotransmitters that influence our behaviors. It is the stress hormones, adrenalin and cortisol that cause our sweating and hearts racing during the Lust Stage and then during Attraction, increased dopamine and serotonin levels trigger our brain's 'desire and reward' center that keeps our thinking focused on the object of our desires. When we have reached the Attachment Stage, it is oxytocin 'the cuddle hormone' that provides that sense of closeness and connection. Oxytocin and also another hormone, vasopressin are released by both men and women during orgasm and stimulates the feelings of

commitment and bonding. So while this cocktail of mind altering chemicals is brewing within us, also at play are our own emotions and all of our hopes and dreams for a promising future with the one we love.

Symbiosis and Differentiation

In developmental theory terms, symbiosis is the initial relationship stage and as the last paragraph described, the feelings of love helped along by our chemistry works to secure a strong bond in which we learn to trust and feel safe. During this time we mostly see what we have in common and can't seem to get enough of each other. The benefit of this stage is the building of a strong sense of security in which we learn to trust and count on each other. Ideally once this base is established we can grow into the next stage, differentiation.

Differentiation is the next normal developmental stage and for some individuals it may feel like a pulling away that can cause some insecurity. At about the two year mark, the period of closeness and connection that the two of you shared starts to feel less urgent and each of you may start to recognize yourselves as separate and different. What happens is that you decide that you really don't like watching all those football games--once in a while is ok, but every weekend? The chick flicks that you politely endured--how about a thriller this time? Once you begin to speak up about the differences and want them to be recognized and respected, if there is a measure of insecurity, the self-defining of differentiation can feel like a disruption of the closeness you had previously been experiencing.

Differentiation is something we grow into and it only occurs through the experiencing of the challenges we face in a relationship and it is a necessary growth hurdle in healthy relationships. During this time each individual begins to branch out and do some of their own separate activities, instead of wanting to do everything together as may have been the case in the beginning. Of course all of us have varying degrees of preferences for closeness and distance so every relationship will be different, but the initial sense of connection will begin to noticeably change. Ideally, this does not mean that you are tired or bored with your spouse, but that the relationship has become a secure base in which each partner can meet with friends and desire time for hobbies while knowing that our spouse will respect and encourage our individuality. This is similar to a child during the rapprochement stage. The child realizes that they want to explore and play with other children, yet this can only happen securely with knowing that Mom is still there. As adults with a healthy differentiation, we can be free to pursue our own activities and hobbies separately and not have it perceived as rejection by our partner. Instead our independence is seen as a sign of healthy interdependence in which we can support each other in our differences. A good sign of differentiation is also when we can disagree and maintain our own sense of what we think and feel, but do it in a respectful way so that our spouse still feels validated. Even when your spouse is upset with you, you can still maintain your sense of self and not get caught up in the emotional contagion that occurs so often when people disagree or become defensive. Being

willing to be respectful and curious about the differences can add to the variety and appreciation for what each partner brings to the relationship.

Attachment Styles

Attachment theory is another informative method used to figure out why there are so many differences in how people come at relationships. You will be able to find many resources describing this information. The attachment styles are labeled differently depending on what resource you use, so I have included all the labels that I have found to make your researching less confusing.

Secure Attachment

Ideal or 'good enough' nurturing from our earliest caretakers provides a secure attachment. The attention we get from our early relationship experiences does not have to be perfect. "Good enough" parenting provides a basis of safety in which an infant can feel secure to trust that their caretaker will be there for them. When a baby's crying or other cues for attention are reliably attended to, the infant learns that they can count on their parents.

As adults, we all have different ways of letting our partners know that we need their attention. If we have experienced a secure attachment in the past and we developed a sense of trust, then we can feel an assurance that later relationships will provide the same. With a securely attached style, it is usually easy to become emotionally close with others. Emotional interdependence has some flex and boundaries are clear and defined and there is an easy balance between intimacy and independence in relationships.

Anxious/Preoccupied Attachment

This insecure type of attachment style is a result of experiences with children who have learned that their parents are only intermittently available and the child's responses to this unreliability is insecurity and anxiety. Separation anxiety and clinging behaviors are seen in children who are uncertain about whether their parents will come when they need them. This scenario can occur without any intention to do harm. When unfortunate circumstances like a parent's depression, physical illness or a family member with special needs takes up most of the time and energy, it sets up a deficit because there is not enough to go around. Also events like separation, divorce, military deployment or a long hospitalization can compromise capacities to bond in a secure way.

If you experienced this uncertainty about whether you could count on those closest to you, you may question your own 'lovability' and blame yourself for why the relationship is not going well. This becomes most noticeable when you are under stress and also you can demonstrate different forms of attachment in different situations. If you had a secure base with your father, but an insecure attachment with your mother than you might feel secure most of the time, but when an argument or disappointment occurs you may switch to feelings of insecurity.

Dismissive/Avoidant Attachment

This is another type of insecure attachment which also develops when a parent is not reliable and the child learns they can't count on the parent to be there for them. These children learn that they are better off relying on themselves. "I'll do it myself" or "I don't need you" becomes the basis for their coping and for soothing themselves, rather than trying to get their needs met from a parent who for the most part has not been available. Again this may not be intentional, but can be observed in families where another sibling has special needs or one or both of the parents are depressed, addicted or physically disabled and the functioning parent is overwhelmed by all the attention needed to care for the problem situation, so there is not enough time or attention for the rest of the family.

If you grow up not being able to trust that there are others whom you can count on, you eventually learn to only rely on yourself. This form of ultra-independence does not necessarily mean that the person with this style does not want a relationship, even though that is the impression that they give. The person with this style of self-sufficiency tends to deal with difficulties in the relationship by distancing which can make their partner feel unneeded and unwanted.

Disorganized/Fearful/Avoidant Attachment

When the family environment is disorganized as in cases with abuse, addiction, neglect and when caregivers are not available, then there is no opportunity for a secure attachment to develop. Children who during their early years have had trauma, such as sexual abuse and abandonment often develop this type of attachment. These forms of attachment initially are about survival. If a caretaker cannot be counted on, a child adaptively learns alternate ways to get by. What shows up in later relationships is uncertainty about trust and being able to depend on another. The wanting is there, but since they themselves felt unwanted they question whether they are really lovable and because of this insecurity they have a hard time expressing and showing their feelings of love for their partner.

No matter which attachment style you may recognize in yourself, please note that this is meant to be information that helps you know more about yourself. Development of these styles had a purpose and that was to best cope with the situation that you grew up in. Discovering the reason you react in a certain ways allows you the awareness to decide now how you want to handle your present situation. The healing can occur in your relationship once you and your partner know how to respond to each other in a way that allows a sense of security for each of you.

If you want to know more about your attachment style, you can go to the following site to do an online assessment which will chart your attachment styles in several relationships.

<http://www.yourpersonality.net/relstructures/>

Neurochemistry and Brain Based Reactions

Another facet about how we relate that you might find helpful is our 'knee-jerk' responses or how we react spontaneously or impulsively when confronted with a difficult situation. This usually occurs during stress and, for most of us reflecting back on certain situations, we can remember that we went from the trigger that set us off, to the full blown reaction in a matter of mini-seconds, but are at a loss about how we could have stopped it. This reaction is something that we may have regrettably repeated many times, yet do not have an intervention that could have slowed us down enough to allow us to think before we shout, cuss, throw things and generally make fools of ourselves, yet in the moment feel totally justified for acting the way we do.

These 're-actions'--repeated actions occurring over and over again do have a neurochemical basis. The neurons and chemicals in our brains are activated by our thoughts and feelings and the more we practice a certain behavior the more likely we are to repeat it. "Neurons that fire together wire together" literary means that for every repeat of an action our neurons are that much more reinforced to repeat that action. This is the knee-jerk response we do when words fly out of our mouths or we storm off slamming a door behind us before we even realize what we are doing. We all have well practiced scenarios that play out seemingly beyond our control.

Different parts of our brains are also activated depending on our situation. We have a wonderfully developed pre-frontal cortex (PFC) that allows us to think and process and figure out all sorts of things. This allows for our higher level functioning that sets us apart from other sentient beings and provides us with a conscience and capabilities of empathy and altruism. Although we do have something in common with all other vertebrates and without it we would never have survived and that is our 'primitive' or 'reptilian' brain known as the limbic system. It sits underneath our PFC and its function allows a quick response to danger. In fact it works so quickly that it bypasses our PFC. When we put our fingers on a hot stove, that quick reaction saves us from a severe burn, but in the same way when we feel insulted or attacked that same reflex occurs quickly, bypassing our thinking brain with results that we may later regret. The limbic area is where the fight-flight-freeze response originates. Between our limbic system and the amygdala which are two almond shaped lobes that coordinate messages for a quick and usually emotional response, we are prepared to act quickly and efficiently to protect ourselves. Unfortunately because the PFC is mostly bypassed when our nervous system reads something as a threat, our reactions may not be what we would have done if we had had a chance to think first.

Learning to slow down this reflex takes practice--lots of practice. Think of your brain as a muscle, like all the muscles in your body, if you want them to look and function in a particular way you have to put time and focus into that goal. You need to spend hours exercising and concentrated effort to get the results you want for your body. In the same way, if you want to change your brain it will take effort, consistency and patience to have your brain slow its knee-jerk way of heading off in a direction without you having much control. Think of ruminating thoughts that spin like an endless reel and come uninvited,

keeping you awake at night trying to figure out a problem, instead of getting the good night sleep you need or when you are upset, saying the worst possible thing and later regretting your choice of words.

There is a solution for this and it is fairly simple, yet very hard to do or at least keep doing. The solution is the practice of mindfulness and you can do it in any form that works for you. Some people instead of a breathing meditation prefer practicing yoga, walking, swimming or jogging. All that is involved is a concentrated attention to a specific repetitive activity. It does not matter which method you decide to use to train your brain, it just takes consistent practice. What happens is the singular focus allows our brain's neurons and neurotransmitters to slow down and that process clears our mind of thoughts. We all know what kinds of problems can develop when we think too much. Restless nights without much sleep is one, but also the crowding of thoughts doesn't allow a clear space to come up with something new, so slowing down and stopping our constant rumination allows that essential pause which creates the space to choose what we are going to do or say rather than an impulsive reaction.

If you are just starting to brain train, you will be frustrated at first because it is not as easy as it sounds, but if you keep practicing on a consistent basis you will notice a difference and not just clearing your thoughts so that you can fall asleep, but you will be able to slow your reaction time down so that you will be able to choose your words and actions and respond to a situation in a new way. Think about the sequence of an argument that you and your spouse get into. Now think about being able to stand back and observe, taking in all the nuances--maybe seeing the hurt behind the anger, understanding the disappointment and then instead of reacting defensively and getting caught up in the emotional contagion, you are able to calmly and compassionately respond. You might think of a response that conveys: "I really want to understand." "Help me figure out what is going on with you." "Let's take a time out and talk later when we have cooled off, so we don't say hurtful things to each other." Do you see what a difference that kind of response could make? When you work to genuinely understand, in most cases, the defensiveness comes down and you can be dealing with the real issues instead of the anger (limbic) that is only reactionary and self-protective.

I hope that this information provides you and your partner with some insight into how participating in couple counseling can open up a whole new way of relating to each other. When there is knowledge about why we act the way we do it provides an opportunity to understand and begin to repair some of the pain and resentment that has accumulated over the years. It is not until we know how to make the changes and can practice a new way of being that the more positive results can occur and result in the difference you have been hoping for in your relationship.

Experience is the best teacher; it just takes the longest. Author unknown.

