

EMOTIONAL WELLNESS MATTERS

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Enhancing Your Emotionally Committed Relationship

“To become acquainted with oneself is a terrible shock.”
– Carl Jung

Emotionally committed relationships bring excitement and passion into our lives, especially when they are new. Over time, however, we come across roadblocks based in personal issues that can distance us from our partners. When we first enter into a committed relationship, we may think that we have found the answer to life's problems, that we have a partner to share in daily turmoil, that we will never be alone again, that it will be smooth sailing from here on out. If we base relationships on these assumptions, however, we may be sorely disappointed when our partners fail to live up to these expectations. There is a strong probability that if we look to another person to provide fulfillment, we will begin to focus on the failings of that person as the cause of our own disappointment. This pattern is the reason for a great deal of discord in committed relationships. Many people who come in for relationship therapy actually hope that the therapy will change their partner because they are convinced that the partner is the source of the problem.

Over time many relationships enter a stage where the partners feel distanced from each other. The initial passion, sexual freedom, intimacy, and feelings of connectedness with the partner fade. Either person may begin to feel that, although they love their partner, they are no longer “in love.” At the same time, both partners may feel that they have lost themselves in the relationship. They



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have given so much to the relationship in terms of their time, their energies, and their emotions that they have lost what made them feel unique as individuals. They have abandoned old friendships, hobbies, and activities that brought interest and excitement to their own lives in order to devote time and energy to the relationship. When a feeling of distance comes to define the relationship, resentment toward the partner may emerge.

How does a relationship, which may have once shown such promise, end up in a place where the two partners feel distant and may not even like each other very much (even though they feel that love is still there)? The answer lies within. Two people who come together in an emotional commitment carry with them a legacy of their own fears, anxieties and unresolved problems. It is sometimes uncomfortable for us to come to terms with our own baggage. It is, in fact, so troublesome that we are unable to look within ourselves. When that happens, we tend to attribute the problem to our partners, a process called *projection*. Rather than accepting the fact that our partners are just being themselves and probably have the best of intentions, we define the source of our own anxiety as lying within the other person. When we feel uncomfortable about something our partners say or do, we may not realize that our discomfort may derive from a source that we have not examined within ourselves – like our own control issues, our jealousy, our insecurity, or our fear of dependence or independence. Our partners may simply be triggering our own unresolved difficulties. The clue is to search within our own lives to see why we have difficulty with these issues. And this is no small task. To become acquainted with oneself is indeed a terrible shock.

The Course of a Relationship

Relationships mature over time. The initial attraction may be physical, and this may carry the relationship for some time to the point of making an emotional commitment. Then the excitement and promise of sharing our life with another person can lead to a stage of heightened expectations where we ignore or minimize the discomfort that we may feel from time to time in the relationship. But this stage comes to an end and we finally express our frustration. “*Why are you always telling me what to do?*” “*Can’t you give me any time to myself?*” “*Don’t you know who I am?*” “*Why don’t you shower me with love like you used to?*” Notice in these

examples that blame is cast on the other person. The one hurling the blame does not look within (for example, “*I have difficulty because of my own issues when someone tells me what to do.*”). This is a particularly vulnerable stage in the course of an emotionally committed relationship, and can serve as a make or break challenge. It is at this stage that an equilibrium – or, more accurately, a standoff – is reached by the two partners. “*I won’t challenge you and you won’t challenge me, and we’ll just accept the fact that we will be distant from each other.*” In contrast, healthier relationships move into a different and more mature stage – where both partners look within to find the source of their own anxiety, find ways to soothe themselves without trying to change the other person, and learn to accept and love the other person despite their frustrating quirks. When this occurs, and when the distance between the partners has been resolved, the genuine excitement and passion of the relationship can continue to flourish – this time in a mature, accepting, and integrated manner.

Differentiation

David Schnarch, Ph.D., the author of *Passionate Marriage*, suggests that in order to grow within an emotionally committed relationship, we must experience the process of “differentiation.” This means holding onto yourself within a relationship, staying true to what you want out of life while sharing your life with a partner. Differentiation allows us to break free from the negative processes that happen between partners in any relationship. It allows us to take a time out from arguments in order to comfort ourselves. It leads to self-control, which means that we can stop trying to control our partners. The differentiated partner is able to soothe him- or herself rather than pressuring the other person to change in order to make the first one feel better. Paradoxically, when partners differentiate, they actually have the ability to achieve more intimacy, while undifferentiated partners can stay locked in their emotional standoff. And when one partner differentiates, it upsets the old equilibrium that had developed so that the other partner is prompted to make changes as well. In short, a healthy relationship is one in which two people, each of whom has a firm sense of self, come together and celebrate both their differences and their similarities.

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Schnarch identifies several activities that happen when a person differentiates.

- ▶ **Maintaining a clear sense of who you are within the relationship.** Your partner was probably originally attracted to you because of the strength of your unique qualities. Both of you knew what you valued and believed in. Over time, because we accommodate ourselves to both our own and our partner's more immature qualities and unresolved issues, we lose our sense of uniqueness. We compromise ourselves with the goal of smoothing out conflicts and fail to realize that we are losing our sense of self in the process. We may find that we have lost those qualities that were once so attractive to our partner. Differentiation involves looking within, gaining a firm definition of who we are, and celebrating our uniqueness
- ▶ **Maintaining a sense of perspective.** We need to accept the fact that we all have anxieties and other shortcomings. This is part of the human condition. The mature person, however, understands that these frailties need not determine our behavior. Our limits should neither incapacitate nor drive us. When we honestly accept this fact both in ourselves and in our partners, we can take a more balanced approach in dealing with each other's limitations. The peaks and valleys of crises can be smoothed out. The blaming can come to an end, replaced by acceptance and love for the other person.
- ▶ **Committing to a willingness to engage in self-confrontation.** Looking within is difficult, but it is a necessary step both in our own life development and in helping our relationships to grow to new levels. Self-confrontation means coming to terms with our own fears, anxieties, and insecurities, a process that may be aided by professional psychotherapy. It may mean accepting the criticisms of our partners as valuable feedback about where our insecurities lie. Self-examination can focus on understanding how and why we manipulate others, undermine our own effectiveness, take a selfish approach at times (or, alternatively, give to others and never to ourselves), and work against our own best interests. We need to understand why we avoid ourselves, and then we need to make an honest commitment to enter into a path of honesty and integrity.

- ▶ **Acknowledging our projections and distortions of reality that protect us from ourselves.** We need to understand why we blame others, especially our emotionally committed partners, rather than acknowledging our own participation in interpersonal conflicts. This involves admitting when we are wrong. We should not expect that our partners will do likewise. Taking an honest approach toward our own lives is a tough, but rewarding, journey into personal integrity. When we embark on the trip, our partners, who are no longer feeling blamed and know that the old emotional standoffs have been eliminated, will often decide to begin their own excursions into self-growth.
- ▶ **Learning to tolerate the pain involved in self-exploration.** Dealing with emotional pain is a talent, which can be learned. In childhood many of us learned unhealthy ways of handling discomfort, often because we lacked supportive role modeling from our parents or other adults that would have taught us how to deal with pain in a healthier way. We may have learned to blame our parents when we faced life's difficulties, and then we carry this blaming behavior into our committed relationships in adulthood. Avoiding pain is the reason many adults indulge in substance abuse or other addictive behaviors such as gambling, inordinate spending, or watching too much television. The healthier option is to make the adult commitment to explore the pain and its sources – and to find ways to make self-growth a friend rather than something to avoid. When we learn to cope with our own pain, we no longer need to manipulate our partners into making us feel better. And when this happens, the magic can re-enter our relationships.

Recommended Reading

Schnarch, David. **Passionate Marriage – Keeping Love and Intimacy Alive in Committed Relationships.** New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997, 432 pages, \$16.00. ISBN: 0-8050-5826-5

This well-written book combines principles of relationship therapy and sex therapy into a useful hands-on approach for couples who want to work together to overcome the sexual and emotional barriers that prevent them from finding a satisfying life with each other.

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Learn to Self-Soothe in the Face of Conflict

We blame our partners when we feel discomfort, and this tends to create distance within an emotionally committed relationship. The distance, then, creates a feeling of further discomfort. The clue to dealing with this dilemma is to learn how to soothe your own emotional pain. This can open the way to more passion and closeness in your relationship. Schnarch offers several suggestions for helping people to learn the art of self-soothing.

- ▶ **Don't take your partner's behavior personally.** Even if your partner doesn't make all the changes that you've made, it should not be taken personally. If you and your partner are having a conflict, try some inwardly focused relaxation techniques. Focus on your breathing. Stop talking and try to slow your heart rate. Lower the volume of your speech and work on relaxing your body.
- ▶ **Put the current conflict into perspective.** Think about past instances of the same type of conflict. What resources did you use in the past for dealing with the conflict? Think about how discomfort will surface again in the future – and if you learn now how to deal with it, you will be better off in these future instances.
- ▶ **Control your behavior, even if you can't regulate your emotions.** While we may have difficulty in controlling our emotions, especially in the face of a conflict, we can have control over our behavior. Prevent yourself from saying and doing things that you will regret later. Tell yourself: “I don't have to take action on my feelings.”
- ▶ **Stop the negative thinking.** Our thoughts drive our feelings and behavior. When you find yourself engaged in negative thinking, make the change to more positive thoughts. Accept what is happening and then calm down.
- ▶ **You may have to break contact temporarily with your partner until things cool down.** When you are engaged in a conflict, you may need some time to get in touch with your self again. Look on this as a time-out, not a separation. Tell your partner that you need some time alone to calm down and that you can discuss the issue better later, after both of you have had some space from each other.
- ▶ **Self-soothing does not involve substance abuse, the abuse of food, or emotional regression.** You need time to confront yourself and understand what your part in the conflict may be. This does not mean hiding out, sleeping, binge-eating, or the use of drugs or alcohol, which are all ways to avoid self-confrontation.

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