

EMOTIONAL WELLNESS MATTERS

VOLUME X, NUMBER 3

It Takes Two – A Way to Understand Relationship Conflicts

Relationships are seldom as simple as we would like. They bring out our needs, anxieties, and conflicts with people from our past – parents, friends and former partners.

Our relationships with our partners are colored by our own personal legacies. We often react to our partners as if they were someone else – and most of the time this causes conflict in the relationship. After all, when we entered into a primary relationship we expected love, nurturance, and validation just for being who we are. A relationship, we usually imagine, should provide a safe zone where our partners cherish us for expressing our own unique qualities. This is a simple expectation. Why, then, does it seem so hard to achieve?

How we perceive our partners is influenced by how we learned to deal with other people in the past. This process can go back into early childhood, even to infancy. Indeed, our earliest primary attachment to a caretaker – a mother, a father, or another adult – can have an effect on how we deal with other people for the rest of our lives. For example, if our earliest experiences taught us to trust in the world, then we are likely, barring any other event that leads to distrust, to take a trusting attitude toward people throughout our lives. Conversely, if a child is never shown love during the earliest stages of life, it may be a challenge during adulthood to learn how to experience love. Early experiences from childhood can have a powerful effect later on. (This is a strong argument for treating children well.)



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Children experience both good and bad in the world. Plenty of good experiences, like love and trust, feel comfortable, and produce a positive self-image in children – a positive way of defining themselves. The bad experiences, though, create feelings of conflict and frustration. These negative experiences also go into the self-definition that the child is developing. But they don't feel compatible with the more positive feelings, so, according to one theory, the child *projects* them onto somebody else. (*Projection* means finding in someone else the qualities that you don't want to accept within yourself – like blaming your partner for being controlling when you are the one who has the tendency to want to control.)

PROJECTIONS

It is not only early childhood experiences that cause us to project our unacceptable feelings onto someone else. Friends can have the same effect, as can partners from our previous relationships. This is a process that happens throughout our lives. How many times have we heard someone say, “Treat me for who I am – I am not your former partner”?

The major point to keep in mind is that we project *our own* problematic feelings onto another person. If, for example, we have an issue with the feeling of jealousy, we will project our own jealousy onto someone else, and perceive them as being the jealous one! This is because we can't tolerate seeing ourselves as having a problem with jealousy – and it's easier to attribute it to someone else. In other words, we feel unable to correct the problem in ourselves, so we focus on this issue in the other person. The way out of this, of course, is to become aware of this projection and understand how it affects us.

When couples experience conflict in their relationship, projections are often at the root of the problem. If we are living with our own conflicts and are unable to make any headway in understanding them, it's as if we look for the problem in the other person. In fact, at a certain level, we may actually seek out partners who have the qualities that we find problematic within ourselves. If we have difficulty in asserting ourselves, for example, and we get frustrated and angry with other people for running over us, we may seek out partners who do just that – people who dominate us. Just as often, though, our partners may not see themselves as domineering, but because we need to work out our own problems with the issues of domi-

nance and submission, we will search for these qualities in the other person. We take any cue we can from our partner and magnify it. Then we're able to project our own problem onto the other person, saying it is their fault. By blaming the other person, we protect ourselves from having to come to terms with our own issues. We can safely continue our submissive pattern and blame the other person for having the problem.

The healthier option, when projections are causing relationship conflicts, is to increase our awareness of our own internal conflicts and how we project these conflicts onto our partners. We can look for examples of our projections in other life situations until we see a pattern. When we have awareness of the problem, we can understand the many ways it influences our behavior – and this can give us some control over the problem. We can then try out new ways of dealing with people. For example, when a person experiences frustration time and again from feeling dominated by others, learning some assertiveness techniques can alleviate the problem.

It is important to understand...

...that projections are not at the root of every problem that couples experience. Sometimes the other person does indeed have a real problem that can lead to an abusive situation. In this case, it is not advisable to try to understand it as a projection, but to see it for what it truly is and to take appropriate measures to change the situation.

THE OTHER PARTNER COLLUDES

An interesting phenomenon happens when a partner is the *recipient* of a projection – the one being projected upon. Because this person is trying to smooth out the conflicts, he or she may *identify* with the projection. So, the couple now begins to define their problem in this

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way. The person receiving the projection starts to say, “Yes, I have a problem with being too dominant, and I need to work on it.” In fact, this person may start to behave in a way that confirms the projection. It may never have occurred to this person that dominance was a personal issue in the past, but because it is brought up frequently through the first partner’s projections, the second person may create a self-definition that conforms to the projection. The recipient of the projection can either take in the projection – believing that it is true and behaving accordingly – or, in the more mature case, can modify it, insisting that the projection is not a true representation. In this case, the recipient can actually help the partner come to terms with his or her own issues and restore some health to the relationship.

The person doing the projecting may define the whole of the other partner as having the problem, and the recipient of the projection may do the same – to define the problem not just as a *part* of the self, but the *whole self*. When this happens, the couple may forget about the positive parts of each of the partners and concentrate instead on only the problematic areas. The mistake here is this: *when we work on our relationship conflicts, we need to draw on the positive parts of the relationship rather than focusing entirely on the problems.*

When a couple first gets together, they focus on their similarities – those parts of themselves that are compatible. This is when the intimacy and trust of the relationship are formed. It isn’t until the relationship has matured that the negative projections begin to take shape. This helps to explain why some couples who were so perfect for each other in the beginning start to have conflicts as time goes by. When the negative projections begin, the partner doing the projecting tends to withdraw from the intimacy of the relationship and to focus more on seeking some independence from the relationship. And the second partner may then withdraw as well. This is when the couple may start to experience relationship difficulties.

IT TAKES TWO

The process of projection in a relationship is not always one-sided. Things can get complicated when both partners are mutually engaged in this process, which is a common occurrence. It becomes difficult for the partners to see where the problem lies. Take a look at the following example.

AN EXAMPLE – CHRIS AND PAT

Chris grew up in a household where the parents were emotionally withholding. Affection was seldom expressed toward Chris and the other siblings, although material needs were always provided. Chris always searched for nurturance, love and support, the things that were never provided in the household – and harbored some anger that the kids were never given these things. Of course, this anger was never expressed, for fear that it would lead toward even more emotional deprivation.

Pat, on the other hand, had two very controlling parents. It was hard to experience independence during childhood, adolescence and early adulthood, and this led to hidden resentment that could never be expressed.

When Pat and Chris first got together, they both felt liberated, as if all of their dreams and hopes for a relationship could be met in the other person. Chris saw in Pat a person who appreciated freedom and was genuine, affectionate, and willing to give love and emotional support. Similarly, Pat saw in Chris someone who valued love, trust, and respect for personal integrity. Their first year or two together were the happy times.

Over time, however, Chris’s resentment, harbored since childhood and never resolved, became attached to Pat. Rather than seeing all the positive qualities in Pat that formed the basis of the initial attraction, Chris focused negatively on Pat’s need for independence and not being at home enough. Pat is accused of always being out with friends and finding the job more important than the relationship.

Pat, on the other hand, sees Chris’s demands to be at home more often as control, the same thing that caused such resentment during Pat’s childhood. Rather than focus on Chris’s more positive qualities of love and trust, Pat accuses Chris of acting like a parent who would not allow independence.

The couple is at an impasse. Chris accuses Pat of emotional withdrawal. Pat blames Chris for being controlling. They aren’t able to see their way out of their dilemma until they start to work with a therapist who is able to clarify the patterns. And for this couple – with some exploration, courage, and insight, there is hope.



ASSESS YOUR RELATIONSHIP

Understanding the sources of conflict in your relationship is one step towards resolving the differences between you. When we can get the problems out in the open and talk about them objectively, we can often find the solutions. Use the list below as a starting point for shedding some light on your relationship conflicts, which may now be hidden but which, with some thought, can become known and talked about constructively.

- Look for themes in your relationship conflicts, problems that keep reappearing time and time again. Focus on identifying the underlying theme in most of your arguments. Arguments usually focus on the surface aspects of the underlying conflict. Your goal here is to define the underlying conflict.
- Have these themes appeared in your relationships with other people – both friends and perhaps other partners in the past?
- Can you identify your part in contributing to these themes? Every relationship takes two people and both contribute to the difficulties. What is your part? (This may be a hard question to answer since we tend to see the problems as lying within our partner rather than within ourselves.)

- What are the positive qualities in your partner that you may have forgotten about as time has gone by? Can you begin to define your partner in those terms again?
- What are the negative qualities in your partner that cause conflicts between you? Does your partner agree that these qualities are true? Has your partner changed over time, gradually starting to agree that the negative qualities may be true? Or, conversely, does your partner insist that these negative qualities are not true?
- Do you focus mostly on these negative qualities when you think about your partner?
- Is there anything from your past – from childhood on through adulthood – which reminds you of the conflicts between you and your partner? (This may be a clue regarding your unresolved conflicts that are the source of projections.)
- Does your partner project unresolved conflicts onto you? (These are probably easier to see than your projections onto your partner.)



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