

ATTUNEMENT: THE SECRET INGREDIENT IN PASSIONATE MARRIAGES

Main Entry: attunement

Definition: being or bringing into harmony; a feeling of being "at one" with another being
from Dictionary.com

Babies are born with no verbal ability to express themselves. As parents we learn to read their nonverbal cues and listen discerningly to their various types of cries to determine what they need. It is the parent's ability to attune to their child's nonverbal communication that positively effects baby's ability to regulate his or her affect and is also correlated with higher social competence and a smaller number of behavior problems later on. This type of responsiveness is called attunement- the ability to tune in to another and sense where they are at and what they need.

The power of attunement doesn't only occur between parent and child it is also a major ingredient in healthy, happy and passionate marital relationships. What does attunement look like in marriage? When we look at our partner consciously, with attention, tuning in to what they are experiencing and express that we are aware of their experience, that is attunement. The effects of attunement on our partner are not dissimilar to the effects on infants; it is calming and fosters a deep connection. Attunement is a powerful tool in relationships and something we should be consciously thinking about.

It is easy to lose sight of our partner's inner life and their unique set of needs. We are juggling so many different responsibilities such as parenting and work. Life gets busy, resources are finite and needs physical and emotional seem to increase exponentially over time. It is easy to lose sight of the importance of attunement as an ingredient to a happy, harmonious marriage. Attunement is exercising sensitivity to the needs and wants of our partner and having the desire to make them happy. Some of us recall experiencing this in the early stages of our relationship when we were first learning about each other. If I could make my partner smile it made me feel incredibly accomplished. At a restaurant when my partner noticed my water glass was empty and casually refilled it while conversing or brought me the grapes from a dessert buffet because he knew I was dieting, I felt attuned to.

Most of us are starving to be seen properly. When we are with our partner and they are oblivious to what our day was like, what mood we are in, when they are wrapped up in themselves and criticize us for coming to them with our needs, we experience resentment, alienation and possibly depression. Our busy lives create a vortex that can so easily suck us into thinking only of ourselves. In a climate of survival of the fittest, finite resources, and instinctive needs to grab what I can for myself, it is easy to become self absorbed and lose sight of my partner's needs. A common refrain I hear in my office is "She doesn't appreciate how hard I work and all the pressures I have to meet the financial obligations of this family. She has no idea what it is like out there in the 'real' world." Translation- he is saying that he feels unattuned to- the unsaid cry here is "See me. Appreciate me. Let me know I am getting it right." A common refrain from her is "I don't feel I have a partner. He is not around to help me with the kids. He is of no help when he comes home. I am going insane juggling the demands of the children, work and

my own needs.” It’s the same cry for attunement. How do we get past ourselves and be able to tune into our partner?

Take it as a given-our partner has a very different internal world from ours. Gender differences, upbringing and a myriad of combinations of personality traits, all play a role in guaranteeing that we are going to be very different from our partner. But this is a good thing, miraculous really, because this is how we grow in our capacity to be tolerant, giving and at times balance characteristics in ourselves. We are meant to be different. This also makes attunement a fascinating exercise; there really is so much to learn about our partner.

Attunement is a powerful experience for both partners in a relationship. There is little I can think of that is more satisfying than being understood, validated and accepted by our partner. Relationships have great potential for being healing and nurturing. Attunement is too special an ingredient to be overlooked.

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