

The Relationship Dance

By Dvorah Levy

I asked the following question to a group of single men and women in their 50s and early 60s: "What is the hardest part about being single?" The answers given covered the lack of physical intimacy, not having someone to talk to daily who knows your stories well, and not having someone to do things with. The yearning, wanting and desiring to be in a relationship with a significant other are hardwired into our very being; yet, creating a relationship that is emotionally close and connected seems to be so challenging.

Why is that?

Recently I opened an article with the question, "What's the problem with marriage?" And then I answered, "The problem with marriage is that our spouse has the ability to hurt us in ways that no one else can." That makes engaging in an intimate relationship pretty risky. Some of us might be so afraid of getting hurt that we unconsciously sabotage closeness by staying defensive and being protectively distant in our relationship with others.

Here lies the quandary: On the one hand, we are hardwired to desire an intimate relationship with another; on the other hand, our actions and reactions often create distance. The latter is a recipe for huge hurt and disappointment. So how do we create close, satisfying connections?

Couples typically engage in a "dance." This is how the dance begins: I'm in a relationship with someone. I am triggered by something he says or does. I may not even fully understand my reaction; however, if something he did communicated to me that I am not important, respected or cherished, which are known characteristics that create a secure relationship, I am going to feel hurt.

I am then likely to do one of two things: withdraw or attack. If I withdraw or if I attack, my partner is likely to do what? He is likely to do the same. What I want is closeness and connection. What I get is distance. These relationship dance steps create a negative cycle that is very painful. What's the antidote ?

What if instead of withdrawing or attacking, I share what I am feeling? This may be a scary move. Logically, it doesn't seem that expressing one's feelings should be so scary, but below is an example of why it so often is.

Sara and Abe are newly married. Abe brings Sara to a social gathering and spends most of the time chatting away with another IT person, a woman. He gets so completely lost in the conversation that it appears to Sara that he forgets she is there. What Sara feels and what she does about her feelings will determine how their relationship dance is going to play out. If Sara is in touch with her feelings, she might say, "Can I tell you what happened when I saw you talking to so-and-so for so long? My stomach went into a knot, and I started to feel insecure in our relationship. It was like you were interested in her and I wasn't important to you anymore."

What if Abe responds in one of the following ways:

- You're very needy. I'm not sure this can work.
- I think you are imagining things.
- That's the way I am; take me or leave me.

These anticipated responses of blaming and invalidating explain why it is so hard to come forward from our more vulnerable place in order to express emotion. It would be easier to stop talking to Abe for a week or to respond the next time he asks for something with “You’re only interested in me when you want something?!”

So let’s say we have the wherewithal to 1) recognize when we are triggered, 2) understand why, and 3) bring our feelings—with honesty and humility—to our partner. What would then be the best response?

So, if Sara says, “Can I tell you what happened when I saw you talking to so-and-so for so long? My stomach went into a knot and I started to feel insecure in our relationship. It was like you were interested in her and I wasn’t important to you anymore.”

And Abe responds, “Let me see if I understand. When you saw me engaging with so-and-so, you felt jealous. Wow. It’s kind of nice to know that I mean so much to you, and that you were triggered and willing to share it.” This type of response is validating her reality. Next he shares his reality. “So-and-so and I are colleagues from way back. We are just friends. There’s nothing more there.”

Then comes the negotiation that includes them both.

“I didn’t realize how it felt to not be included. I want to be more careful out of sensitivity to you and next time have you be a part of the conversation. Would that feel better?”

That is the most beautiful relationship dance. When the reality of both partners is heard and respected, it leads to closeness and connection in the relationship—it’s a positive cycle. I have rarely seen a case where there were differences between partners and there wasn’t a place in the middle for both to meet and have their needs met.

Keep this in mind: If you stand opposite me and I draw a “6” on the floor, what are you going to see? You are going to see a “9.” We can argue about what is in front of us, or we can accept that depending on where we are standing, we will see things differently, and we can both be right!

Creating, sustaining and nurturing a relationship is hard work. The ability to hold two realities makes the relationship dance one of connection and closeness, something we yearn for no matter what age we are.

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