

The Relationship Dance

By Dvorah Levy, LCSW

The yearning, wanting and desiring to be in a relationship with a significant other is hardwired into our very being; yet, creating a relationship that is emotionally close and connected can be challenging for couples. Why is that?

Couples coming into therapy often report that their spouse has the ability to hurt them in ways that no one else can. That makes engaging in an intimate relationship pretty risky. Some of us are so afraid of getting hurt that we unconsciously sabotage closeness by staying defensive and being protectively distant in relation to our spouse.

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 may be creating distance. The latter is a recipe for huge hurt and disappointment. So how do we create close, satisfying connection?

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 spouse 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 painful. But there is an antidote.

What if instead of withdrawing or attacking, I share what I am feeling? This can 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.

Rachel and Yaakov are newly married. Yaakov brings Rachel to a social gathering and spends most of the time chatting away with someone he knows from work. He gets so completely lost in the conversation that it appears to Rachel that he forgets she is there. What Rachel feels and what she does about her feelings will determine how their relationship dance is going to play out. If Rachel is in touch with her feelings, she might say, “Can I tell you what happened when you were talking to your friend for so long? I felt abandoned. It was like you forgot I existed and I wasn’t important to you.”

What if Yaakov 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 and express emotion. It would be easier for Rachel to stop talking to Yaakov for a week (withdraw step) or to respond the next time he asks for something with “You’re only interested in me when you want something?!” (attack step).

Here is a different dance: 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 our spouse's best response?

If Rachel were to say, "Can I tell you what happened when I saw you talking to your friend for so long? I felt abandoned. It was like you forgot I existed and I wasn't important to you."

And Yaakov responded, "Let me see if I understand. I was engrossed in the conversation with my friend and you experienced this as abandoning. I hear that." This type of response validates her reality. Next he shares his reality. "You are really important to me and I'm not very accustomed to socializing as a couple."

Then comes the negotiation that includes both their needs.

"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 there 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, express one's needs from an open, perhaps more vulnerable place and be responded to sensitively, makes the relationship dance one of connection and closeness.

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"Apparently I have done something to upset you."

McFARREN