

## Relationship Advice: The Dance of Intimacy

The decision to reject love and intimacy (and to withhold love) can stem from a conscious decision or for unconscious reasons (e.g., you feel unworthy of love). In a previous post I discussed how impaired self-esteem can lead you to reject overtures of love due to deep-seated beliefs that you are undeserving. When this occurs, you place a ceiling on the positives you are able to take in. In this case, the partner who feels unworthy brings these long-standing issues to his/her marriage or relationship, and those issues have a powerful influence on the course of the relationship.

As one of my readers astutely pointed out, another reason for one partner's rejection of love and intimacy might stem from the dynamics of the relationship itself. Let's look at this aspect of blocked intimacy more closely.

### The relationship dance

The relationship as a dance is an appropriate metaphor to help us better understand the dynamics of intimacy. (Don't worry, you can have two left feet like me and still grasp the implications of this metaphor.) During a literal dance each partner reacts—very often you react to your partner's moves and s/he reacts to yours. So in your relationship you and your partner are continuously acting and reacting to each other. Imagine you and your partner having this brief exchange:

**You:** I didn't like it when you made fun of me in front of everyone. You know I'm embarrassed about being clumsy.

**Partner:** I was just kidding. And I didn't make the joke until I realized you were okay (and that you didn't fall on the cat that was at the bottom of the stairs).

**You:** But that wasn't funny, it felt hurtful.

**Partner:** (visibly and audibly annoyed now) Geez, I said I was sorry. What more do you want from me? (Exits the room, slams the door on the way out...)

In this interpersonal dance how do you think you would react to your partner's apology? Would you just hear the words "I'm sorry," or would you react to his/her tone of voice? In this case you might reject the apology because his/her emotional message sends a very different and conflicting message. So you might remain closed off and your feelings of hurt unresolved.

If, on the other hand, the apology felt genuine to you, you might forgive her/him and your relationship dance will get back into step.

### Relationship missteps

Your relationship dance does not have to be perfect or even near perfect (to expect perfection is just a set-up for major disappointment). What's important is to identify the times your relationship becomes unsynchronized. So identifying when and why your relationship falls out of step and then doing something about this out-of-step dance is what will keep your relationship healthy.

But don't forget that your relationship (as in all relationships) will experience periods when you and your partner are attuned to each other, as well as periods when you're not attuned to each other. An essential ingredient of a healthy relationship is how the periods when you're not in step with each other are handled (not if they occur, because they will). In the brief example above, your partner said something that was hurtful (and your connection with him/her was weakened) and you attempted to get the relationship back on track (to reconnect with your partner by sharing your feelings and having her/him understand what bothered you) . But your partner's defensive reaction prevented the relationship from getting back on track.

There are many reasons why you and your partner might temporarily fail to remain attuned to each other's needs. These reasons may take the form of misunderstanding, arguments, falling into a relationship rut, taking each other for granted, to name a few. Don't let this variety overwhelm you because all periods of emotional missed connections can be resolved when handled with:

- 1. Respect (disagree while maintaining respect toward one another)**
- 2. Openness (control your defensive reaction)**
- 3. Empathy (make efforts to understand your partner's perspective)**
- 4. Ownership (take responsibility for your part of the dance)**

When this occurs, trust and intimacy are strengthened. Knowing that you and your partner can inadvertently stumble into times when you're out of synch and emerge from them is a powerful way to deepen intimacy. You learn that you can be yourself, have a bad day, and even slip up once in a while and take the workday stress out on your partner. Because ultimately, you learned that you and your partner will emerge time and time again from your relationship missteps and find the connection and emotional attunement that make you feel loved and deeply bonded to each other.

### **When you consciously reject love**

When you and/or your partner react to natural, inevitable relationship missteps with disrespect, defensiveness, minimization or denial, then your relationship has entered a danger zone.

In our above example, let's imagine that your partner typically gets angry and defensive whenever you appropriately assert yourself. In this case you might come to realize that whenever you attempt to get your needs met and feel safe enough to bring all of yourself into the relationship, your partner shuts you down, rejecting your attempts to keep the relationship on track. A divide between you grows.

But every so often, your partner makes an attempt to be loving and intimate with you. In this case, you may reject his/her offers. In short, your role in the relationship dance is now one of self-protection. Rather than accept his/her offers of love (which would require you to lower your defenses and open your heart, thereby leaving you vulnerable to his/her erratic behavior), you reject your partner's offerings—not out of some inability to accept love, but as a means of self-preservation. Sometimes your rejections might be subtle (e.g., refusing to accept a kind offer), at other times more dramatic (e.g., refusing to have sex with your partner).

**Take away questions:**

What do you and your partner do to repair relationship missteps?

Do you (and your partner) exhibit all four behaviors (respect, openness, empathy, and ownership) required to repair the relationship when the dance involves stepped-on feet?

If not, which behavior is missing? What do you need to do to act in ways that will help repair the inevitable times when your relationship dance becomes unsynchronized?