

Stonebriar Psychiatric Services News & Views

Connection and Disconnection in Relationships

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By Wendy Copeland, M.A., LPC



Experiencing Connection and Disconnection in Relationships

Maintaining connection through conflict. How do we do it? Conflict can be immensely painful, so it is no wonder that we frequently disconnect emotionally from one another to avoid the pain. In fact, most of us are masters of disconnecting. When we experience pain from a loved one, we will most likely shame, blame, hide, dismiss attack, criticize, act out, or withdraw. But what if there was another way to react in a relationship? A way to resolve conflict instead of disconnecting? A way to heal and reconnect even in the midst of pain? Now that would be something to write about!

“You Can't Relate to a Defense”

We discussed in the last article how we can be wounded in childhood (even by well-meaning parents) and how that wounding can prompt defenses to protect ourselves from pain. We also discussed how these defenses help us to survive and function. However, as adults seeking intimate relationship and fulfillment, these defenses can be highly toxic. While defending ourselves may deflect or avoid pain, it also breaks connection. As a wise therapist once said, “You can't relate to a defense.” That's right! You cannot relate to a defense. When faced with a defense, our first impulse is to respond with a defense.

So let's dig a little deeper into this concept of defending against pain. When we defend against pain in a relationship, what type of pain are we referring to? In childhood, pain can be experienced through over-involved or under-involved primary caregivers or even siblings. If a child experiences under-involvement, then they might feel disconnected, abandoned, unloved, unacceptable, inferior, or worse...despised. For the child who experiences over-connection, they might feel overly connected or fused, smothered, dominated, controlled, “enmeshed,” and lacking autonomy or freedom.

From birth, we learn to connect to our caregivers. In fact, it is necessary for survival. In order to eat and receive care for our basic needs, we must connect. Without connection, we cannot survive! Yet we also learn that connection can bring pain. Caregivers are imperfect. They may not arrive on time or may be insensitive to our needs. They may be rejecting, unavailable, or even excessively available. Double jeopardy! You need to connect, but connection can bring pain!

While connection can bring pain, disconnection can also bring pain. In fact, with children disconnection has its own dangers. If survival requires connection, then wouldn't disconnection be a disastrous thing? How do we survive without our caregivers? So defenses can protect us from painful connection, but they can also function as a means to manage disconnection. Children experiencing pain from disconnection may cry, whine, plead, cling, or become attention-seeking.

These defenses from childhood can surface in adult relationships. Defenses against disconnection in adult relationships vary from simple to sophisticated, including complaining, criticizing, blaming, guilt, manipulating, and controlling. We evolve and adapt more sophisticated maneuvers, but the basic strategy remains intact. We try to draw the disconnected partner back to us because the lack of connection hurts.

Why Some Relationships Work and Others Don't

Dr. John Gottman of the University of Washington, one of the premier researchers in marital relationships, has asserted that he can predict with 95% accuracy which couples will eventually divorce. Gottman and his research team identified four factors that could reliably predict divorce. He called these the *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* for marital relationships.

The *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* includes:

- 1) **Criticism** - telling a spouse his or her faults
- 2) **Defensiveness** – reacting to certain subjects by denying responsibility or refusing to discuss an issue the spouse regards as important
- 3) **Contempt** – making sarcastic or painful remarks about the partner
- 4) **Withdrawal** – also called “stonewalling;” this would include showing no reaction, having a blank look, or ceasing to care

Gottman noted that the potentially most “corrosive” of the Four Horsemen is **contempt**, which he said should be banned from marriages. This makes particular sense in that contempt most definitely opposes connection or even the hope of connection.

On a brighter note, Gottman also found a positive predictor of marriage. That is, he identified a factor that predicted long-term success in marriage. The predictor? The ability to give and receive influence from your partner. Simply stated, you have a reciprocal relationship with your partner and are able to influence your partner, as well as allowing your partner to influence you.

Gottman’s research also emphasized that marital success is dependent on the relationship environment. He described a “magic ratio” of 5:1 in a couple’s interactions. That is, a relationship requires at least 5 positive interactions to counteract every 1 negative interaction. Gottman demonstrated that this ratio could predict with 94% accuracy whether newlywed couples would ultimately divorce or remain married.

So we have just begun to scratch the surface about how to thrive in relationships. We know four things to avoid and one “magic ratio” for relationship. Conflict is inevitable, and we predictably will sabotage connection and but then also struggle to reconnect. Conflict and marriage go together like peanut butter and jelly. Yet when conflict surfaces, there is always the potential for growth and connection. This happens when there is a relationship environment of positive regard, understanding, and intentionality. Oh yes, and if we can risk dropping our defenses, then we give breathing room for safety and life-giving connection. In future newsletters, we will talk more about how to do this thing called connection!



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