

SOME ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

Beginning with a basic understanding of what to expect in intimate relationships and how relationships actually work can dramatically decrease the potential for negativity, cynicism, and a desire to “get back at” and control your partner. The assumptions listed below offer some ways to start thinking about your relationship with your partner to assist you in moving in a more healthy and positive direction.

WE AS HUMAN BEINGS ARE CONTINUALLY SEARCHING FOR WHOLENESS AND FULFILLMENT AND OUR PARTNERS CAN ASSIST US IN ACHIEVING THIS

The goal in living a satisfying and worthwhile life is not to be disrespectful, punishing, explosive, and dysfunctional. It is my belief that people are actually seeking to understand themselves and others and to make a meaningful connection with other people and the world around them. A connection with an intimate partner is one of the most important, if not the most important, connection we will experience in this life. And that connection is also a key to assisting us in developing to our fullest potential. In reality, our partners know us well. In a healthy relationship, they have the ability to offer us significant insight into who we are and who we can become. Relationships certainly can make our lives utterly miserable but they also have the potential to bring us great joy and help us grow and change to become the best person we can possibly be.

WE OFTEN TEND TO UNCONSCIOUSLY SEEK OUT AND FIND PARTNERS:

- ...WHO REPRESENT THE POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF OUR CHILDHOOD CARETAKERS (OFTEN, THE NEGATIVE ASPECTS ARE THE MOST POWERFUL IN OUR CHOICE OF A PARTNER);**
- ...WHO CAN HELP TO PUT US IN TOUCH WITH PARTS OF OURSELVES THAT WERE SQUELCHED AND DISOWNED AS WE GREW UP AND ARE NOW ESSENTIALLY “MISSING” IN WHO WE ARE AND HOW WE LIVE OUR LIVES; AND**
- ...WHO HAVE THE POTENTIAL TO HELP US HEAL THE WOUNDS THAT WE ORIGINALLY EXPERIENCED IN CHILDHOOD AND HAVE CONTINUED TO LIVE OUT IN OUR ADULT LIVES INTO THE PRESENT.**

The family in which you grow up is a lot like a laboratory where you learn what it means to be a person: what to think about yourself, what to think about others, what to expect in your relationships with those around you, including your partner, and how to think about and relate to the larger world. What you see when you watch your parents interact with each other and what you experience when you interact with your father and mother creates long lasting messages about how to relate to the people who are closest to you. You learn how and what kind of affection to express; what feelings are “okay” and how to share them; how to make decisions that affect you and others; how to communicate, disagree with, and

criticize (and receive criticism from) others; how to handle anger and resolve conflict, how to parent children; and the “proper” roles and “place” for males and females in an intimate relationship. This becomes part of your “life script.” If you grew up in a family that was unhealthy and dysfunctional, you may have gotten some very distorted and unhelpful messages about any or all of these sorts of things.

As adults, most people do not put a great deal of thought into what they are looking for in an intimate partner (at least when we are young adults). Hopefully this changes as we get older and “wiser.” Often, during the “infatuation” phase early in the relationship, we tend to fall “head over heels” for the other person, often not thinking very clearly about what is attracting us to that particular person but feeling an intense and often “instant” and overwhelming emotional and physical connection and “rush.”

That connection frequently has to do with what you observed and experienced when you were growing up. If you grew up with an controlling and abusive parent, you may believe that abuse is just a “normal” part of how families are supposed to function. You may tend to become controlling and abusive yourself toward a partner or end up being the victim of a partner who is abusive and controlling with you. If you grew up with a cold and detached parent, you may believe that emotion has no place in a relationship with a partner and then tend to stay distant and “safe.” Or you may strive endlessly to make a connection with a partner, even becoming intrusive, suffocating, and “codependent” in your efforts to do this. If you grow up with a parent who had difficulty functioning in the world as an adult because of issues like irresponsibility, alcohol abuse, or depression, you may end up struggling with these issues yourself or you may become a “rescuer” or “savior” to someone “in need” who seems to be having difficulty with these same sorts of concerns. In any case, what you are exposed to as a child is frequently what you end up expecting and looking for in an adult partner.

My partner, Jane, and I, in our relationship with one another, illustrate some of what is being discussed above. I grew up with an angry and shaming father and an anxious and passive mother. I responded to the anger in my family of origin by becoming passive in my childhood and early adolescent years (to stay safe from my father’s outbursts) and then negative, cynical, and angry myself in my late teens and early twenties (because I was “big enough to take care of myself”). This “angry self” became a primary part of how I functioned for years. One of the parts of me that was “missing” and “underdeveloped” was my ability to slow down and respond in a more positive way to frustrations and stressors. It was easier to simply follow the “program”/script that I learned in my childhood. Other examples of my own “missing” parts included a difficulty in trusting others, including both partners and friends (if you can’t trust your parents and feel safe with them, who can you really trust?), difficulty being truly vulnerable with other people (it just isn’t safe to be vulnerable with and trust people who will ultimately probably hurt you), and difficulty accepting guidance, especially from those in authority like mentors or supervisors (it generally didn’t appear that my father, who was a significant authority figure to me, had my best interests at heart when I was a child).

One of the things that initially attracted me to Jane was her ability to respond in a calm and measured way to issues where I would have tended to quickly become impatient and angry. I knew, at both an unconscious and at a conscious level, that I needed to learn more about how to do this. She had the potential to be a good “teacher” in this area and, when I have let her do this, she has played this role well for me. I also appreciated her strong connection to her women friends, from her elementary school

years to her current state of being retired. She has the ability to trust and be vulnerable with the people in her life whom she values and cares about. This was another area where she could be that “good teacher.”

Jane also had a number of positive aspects of my parents that attracted me to her. She was strong-willed, independent, and self-sufficient, much like my father. She knows how to take care of herself and has always done that. This part of her had a lot of appeal to me. She was also warm and playful, similar to the way my mother could act at times. I liked this part as well. She was close to her parents and siblings, something that, with the exception of my relationship with my brother, I was not. Finally, Jane loved travel and the adventures that came with it, a very different outlook from the idea I had that the outside world was a dangerous place.

She also had some negative aspects. She could be controlling (e.g. about what I was supposed to wear, how I was supposed to act in social situations), which was similar to my father. She was careful and guarded in expressing her emotions, similar to both my parents. With her as a partner, I had the opportunity to re-play some of the same sorts of hurts that I had experienced as a child. But this time, the outcome could be very different if I remained aware of these issues and dealt with them consciously and respectfully and if she was willing to grow with me (because she was going through a similar process from her own side).

WE TEND TO PROJECT THIS “MISSING SELF” ONTO OUR PARTNERS AND THEN CRITICIZE, BLAME, AND SHAME THEM FOR THOSE VERY QUALITIES

The danger, however, is that, once we get beyond the infatuation phase of the relationship, we return to the living of our lives. At that point, we generally enter the “power struggle” phase of a relationship and then often begin to denigrate those very qualities that consciously or unconsciously attracted us to our partners in the first place. If we do not want to do the hard work of addressing the emotional pain from our past and changing the aspects of ourselves that are interfering with our life in the present, we will then distance from and actively work to try to change the very people who have the greatest potential to help us heal our own emotional legacy from childhood.

Once a commitment is made in a relationship, there is a tendency to then back away from the healing potential of a partner because anxiety is triggered in us about actually having to make the changes within ourselves that will make us more complete and healthy human beings. Traits that we once admired and sought out (in a conscious or unconscious way) in our partners become something “bad” and “wrong” in them at a later point. Someone’s calm self-assurance may be transformed later, in our minds, into a cold, withdrawn, and emotionally distant stance. What we see as a cute and endearing tone of voice in a partner can become “childish” and “whiny” at some later time. Boundless energy, a friendly demeanor, and an outgoing and “bubbly” personality may be looked at by us as someone who is constantly flirting and “on the make” and who therefore cannot really be trusted because he or she will be eventually hurt or betray us by getting involved with someone else. A person’s strong work ethic may be converted by us into complaints about their “workaholic tendencies” and our lack of “quality time” with them. A partner who, at first, seemed to really appreciate our strength and wisdom can become, in our minds, a person who is “needy,” dependent, and “a burden.” Someone’s fun-loving, spontaneous, and playful style may be viewed with disdain by us as proof that they are “irresponsible” and “ditzy.” We may view qualities

like stability and predictability, at first, as positive and responsible but may later believe that these same attributes are, in fact, “boring” and “stuffy” in the partner we have chosen. Finally, a woman who is initially seen and respected as strong, independent, assertive, self-sufficient, and “sure of herself” may be labeled as controlling or as a “bitch” and a “ball-buster” as the relationship continues (or, who can turn into someone whom we perceive to be distant, detached, and “unemotional”). It is as if we change the focus from ourselves, our issues, and our potential for personal growth into pushing the other person to change who they are so that we do not have to confront the issues within ourselves that we actually need to alter in order to live up to our fullest potential.

With Jane, I became frustrated and impatient that she did not get as “angry” as I felt she should about some of the situations in her life. I also became irritated that she was not more assertive and direct in her interactions with people around her, arguing that she was allowing others to “walk on her” at times. I started to minimize what I needed to learn from her about being more patient and accepting and instead focused on what she needed to change “to be a better person” and to become more acceptable to me. In reality, she has been an ongoing model of how to address my own anger and frustration in life. Her desire to be independent and self-sufficient also triggered anxiety in me and brought out my own desire to control her (e.g. not wanting her to do as much traveling, with or without me, which I initially criticized and resisted). She has taught me well about the need for me to let go of the idea that I can or should be able to control her or anyone else. Her extensive network of wonderful friends initially became competitors for my time with her, which created hurt feelings and jealousy at times; in the end, it actually pushed me to do more to connect with the men in my life who were important to me and allowed me to become more tolerant of the different sorts of friends that I currently have. When we criticize and shame partners for the very things we ourselves need to change, it is unlikely that they will, in the end, be able to teach us what we need to learn to change those wounded and unhealthy parts of who we are. We need to realize what we can learn from our partners and then work actively at letting them teach us those life lessons.

NOTHING IN A RELATIONSHIP “JUST HAPPENS:” THERE IS ALWAYS MEANING AND PURPOSE IN HOW WE BEHAVE WITH ONE ANOTHER

“*It just happened*” is the naive explanation a therapist often hears when a couple comes in to counseling to talk about an affair that has just occurred. I have also frequently heard this explanation when someone comes in to report an explosive, and sometimes even violent, incident with a partner. That explanation is a disturbing way to make sense of what happens in our lives because it means we actually have no idea why things happen around us and it implies that our thoughts, our feelings, our behaviors, and even our lives are simply “out of control.” But, in reality, this just isn’t the case.

In fact, we do what we do because there is purpose behind our actions. We would not act in the way that we do if there was not meaning attached to what we are doing. Our behavior has the potential to give us significant insight into who we are and how we view our partner and the rest of the world. And part of the challenge in being in an intimate relationship is to look inside yourself to discover exactly why you do the things you do and what you are trying to communicate through your words and actions.

Without this effort and insight, your relationship and your life will continue to exist in a confusing and incomprehensible “fog.”

WITHOUT ONGOING AWARENESS AND CONSCIOUS EFFORT, WE TEND TO REPEAT THE VERY SAME RELATIONSHIP AND PARENTING MISTAKES THAT WE SAW IN OUR FAMILIES OF ORIGIN

Sadly, if we live out the “life script” that was written for us by someone else (often the important people in our childhood like our parents), it is as if we are “sleepwalking” through our daily life in the present. We think and act in the ways that we were taught without much awareness of the alternatives to what we are doing. If we saw our parents treat each other in hurtful or disrespectful ways or we experienced this in our own individual relationships with them, we may assume that this is the way close relationships are supposed to be. If we were “disciplined” by our parents in harsh and shaming ways, we may assume that this is the way that we are supposed to parent our own children. If we act in these ways, we pass along to our partner and our children the same unhealthy messages that we received when we were younger and the intergenerational cycle of dysfunction and shame continues unabated.

WE ALL HAVE THE ABILITY TO BE MINDFUL AND CONSCIOUS DECISION-MAKERS

Many people essentially seem to be living their lives on “automatic pilot.” They think very little about the negative and positive traits that attracted them to their partners in the first place nor about what they bring to the relationship from their own life history. Thus, not being aware of what creates problems and having few of the skills necessary to address these problems, they struggle on with limited insight and unhealthy behavior, creating more and more unhappiness and dissatisfaction (in themselves and in their partners). An important task in becoming involved in a healthy relationship has to do with being aware of the emotional legacy from the past and then actively taking steps to identify and directly address what each partner brings into the relationship. This awareness has the potential to lead to a “conscious” (rather than an “unconscious”) relationship where you work actively with one another to create the most intimate and healthy relationship that is possible for you.

People also frequently go through their day-to-day life without much conscious thought about their present circumstances. This can happen all too easily with our partners, especially when we are confronted by the many demands in living: working our jobs, raising our children, worrying about finances and the economy, and fretting about friends and family. There are many external “pulls” that can take us away from “being in the moment” in our everyday lives with our partners. This can lead to a myriad of problems, including “taking partners for granted” and not putting much energy and effort into keeping our relationship with a partner “alive” and fulfilling for both of you. Slowing down and becoming more aware and conscious of who you are and how you are thinking and behaving is critical to developing and maintaining a healthy relationship. We all have the ability to do that if we are willing to expend the energy and effort to make it happen.

CONFLICT AND DISAGREEMENT ARE A “GIVEN” IN AN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP AND CANNOT BE AVOIDED

Conflict can be a scary proposition. It often feels like, because of our differences and disagreements, we could, at any point, be rejected and abandoned by the people closest to us, since they are not seeing things the same way we do (and this is especially true if they are making threats to leave). But, in reality, intimacy cannot exist without conflict. It is simply a part of being truly emotionally connected to another person. To expect that conflict will not occur is essentially believing that you and your partner have exactly the same way of looking at life. This is not very realistic given the notion that you each grew up in different families and have probably had some very different life experiences which have shaped how you view yourselves and the rest of the world. In addition, for heterosexual couples, simply because of your gender, you probably have received some very different cultural messages and have some very different ways of looking at life. In the end, there is no way to completely avoid conflict. In fact, if differences did not exist in a relationship, your life together could, in fact, become pretty boring. The reality of intimacy is that you need to accept that there will be conflict and then figure out how to handle it effectively when it does arise. Explosive anger and punishing and disrespectful behavior are never helpful in doing this.

PUNISHING AND EXPLOSIVE ANGER AND CONTROLLING AND ABUSIVE BEHAVIOR ARE ALWAYS DESTRUCTIVE TO TRUST, SAFETY, AND INTIMACY IN OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS

There is certainly no way to completely avoid anger since that emotion is a part of being human and a part of interacting with other people. But when anger becomes distorted and destructive, it always undermines trust, safety, and intimacy and replaces these qualities with fear, emotional distance, and estrangement. Punishing, controlling, and abusive attitudes and behaviors have no place in a relationship with a partner. These are never helpful “building blocks” for a healthy and positive relationship. Research by John Gottman indicates that couples who feel best about their relationship with a partner report that the intensity of their anger is moderated in the interactions and conflicts that they have. “Letting it all hang out” is a poor strategy if emotional closeness and intimacy are the goals in your relationship with a partner.

A POSITIVE ATTITUDE AND A SENSE OF HUMOR ARE ABSOLUTELY CRITICAL ELEMENTS TO DEVELOP AND MAINTAIN WITH A PARTNER

Relationships can be difficult and the world around us has the potential to dramatically increase how hard our life together becomes at times. In the face of problems in our personal lives and in the world-at-large, it is all too easy to become negative and cynical and to feel victimized and overwhelmed. If we lapse into this way of looking at life, it takes an enormous toll on our own personal mental health and on the health of our relationships with those around us, especially a partner. It is essential to learn to “look on the bright side” when it comes to living with a partner and to focus on positive aspects of

ourselves, our partners, and our lives. Part of this is appreciating who we are and what we have, working to develop that “attitude of gratitude.” And part of this is being able to chuckle and laugh about what happens in our relationships and our lives together, realizing that we don’t have to take ourselves and what happens around us “very seriously” at all times. Partners can easily become the scapegoats for our life’s emotional pain. In reality, they don’t deserve this sort of treatment and they can actually become a healing force for us if we allow this to happen with them.

LOVE CAN BE DEFINED AS WHAT YOU SAY AND DO WITH YOUR PARTNER; IN ORDER TO TRULY EXPERIENCE LOVE, YOU NEED TO DEMONSTRATE LOVE (THROUGH YOUR THOUGHTS, WORDS, AND ACTIONS) ON AN ONGOING AND CONSISTENT BASIS IN YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH A PARTNER

It is not enough to simply say “*I love you*” to a partner and then treat her or him in any way you wish. Real love is not just a “concept” that hangs in the air around you and your partner. It is, in fact, how you choose to think about and act around that other person in an ongoing way. The reality is that **“love is an action verb.”** Real love involves working hard on a daily basis to think about and treat that other person in a caring, nurturing, respectful, and loving manner. Disrespectful and punishing anger is never a demonstration of love in an intimate relationship. It is, in fact, a demonstration of power and control which is always destructive to love and intimacy.

ONE PERSON CAN DESTROY A RELATIONSHIP; IT TAKES TWO PEOPLE TO MAKE A RELATIONSHIP TRULY “ALIVE” AND HEALTHY

It is relatively easy to destroy a relationship. The process can involve not taking care of yourself by becoming over-involved in an activity that changes your focus away from your intimate relationship. This could involve working too much, drinking too much, gambling too much, playing too many video games, focusing too much on your cell phone, tablet, and the internet, or even watching too much TV. Or it can involve violating the trust and safety in a relationship by having an affair or becoming controlling, intimidating, and abusive with a partner.

As much as we might like to believe that love between adult partners is unconditional, in fact, it is not. We all have conditions that we place on our partners. That is just a part of the reality of being in any relationship. Some conditions are rigid, unrealistic, and perfectionistic. An example of this might be expecting that a partner to live up to all the traditional societal expectations of what men and women are supposed to be when that is not who they really are. But some, like expecting partners to be honest, trustworthy, responsible, respectful, and caring adults in their interactions with us, help to ensure that our own lives do not spiral down into a morass of depression, anxiety, and resentment about our “lot” in life.

Both people need to have these realistic expectations of one another and then work hard to actually live these expectations with one another to create and maintain a truly healthy and vibrant relationship.

RELATIONSHIPS TAKE A SIGNIFICANT INVESTMENT OF TIME, ENERGY, EMOTION AND, AT TIMES, SOME VERY HARD WORK

Some people, both male and female, think that relationships don't take much effort to be successful and happy. This notion involves the idea that, if we meet our "soul-mate" or our "prince charming," we will live in eternal and loving bliss from that point on without having to do much of anything. Nothing can be further from the truth. We can be lulled into complacency by the "infatuation" phase early in the relationship where everything seems easy and effortless and we are completely focused on one another, but that phase never lasts as we go back to living our individual lives in the context of the relationship. We can also be lulled into complacency by the Hollywood movies that communicate the romantic and unrealistic notion that "love just happens." But, in reality, creating and maintaining a satisfying, loving, and authentic relationship in real life is a full-time job and needs to be attended to in the same way that we would attend to any of the other truly important aspect of our lives.

WORKING TOGETHER, WE CAN, IN FACT, CHANGE OUR RELATIONSHIP INTO A FULFILLING AND SATISFYING ONE FOR BOTH OURSELVES AND OUR PARTNERS

The potential for individual and relationship growth and satisfaction is unlimited when both partners do what is necessary to create, maintain, and improve their relationship. Partners can become friends, confidant(e)s, "playmates," supporters, and lovers if you and they actively work to make this happen. In the end, life is too short to do anything but this. When all is said and done and you are lying on your deathbed, will you be thinking about the houses, the cars, and the boats you have owned, the money you have made, and the career aspirations you have attained? Or will you be thinking about the people who touched your life and were most important to you, including your partner, family, and friends? For most of us, the real meaning in life has to do with the emotional connections with those who are closest to us. Work hard to do your part to make your relationship with your partner something you can savor and feel good about rather than something that only brings up feelings of sadness, hurt, resentment, remorse, regrets, and misery. You and your partner have the ability to create a vibrant and healthy relationship if you are willing to make the necessary investment of time, energy, and emotion in yourselves and each other. It is well worth the effort!