

August 18, 2004

Unraveling the Mysteries of Relationships: Why Do We Hurt Those We Love Most? Part I

Your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding.

--Kahlil Gibran

How many of you reading this column intentionally act to provoke or anger your spouse or partner? How many of you regularly seek to “pour salt” into your partner’s deepest emotional wounds? I suspect that most, and hopefully all, of us would answer “no, I do not do that.” Yet despite the fact that we rarely intentionally hurt our partner, a strange phenomenon of relationship is that we do so—unconsciously.

Why is it that things that we can tolerate or accept with friends and acquaintances may frustrate us even beyond words when our partner (or a child) does them? For example, we might be indifferent to a friend spending money too freely, being a bit slovenly in housekeeping or personal habits, or even drinking too much from time to time. Yet the same behavior in our partner may really “push our buttons.” And why is it that the behavior that pushes our buttons may not bother others at all?

If some behavior or characteristic of your partner consistently irritates you such that you have a strong emotional “charge” when it occurs, the answer lies in your past. In our practice, as many readers know, we use Imago Relationship Therapy, a model applicable to individuals and couples that gives them tools to use within relationships. Imago theory says we are *unconsciously* attracted to someone with the characteristics of our primary caretakers, including negative as well positive ones. Some characteristics may be obvious, while others are much more subtle. When the romance wears off and we begin to see some of those vaguely familiar traits or behaviors, we may feel uncomfortable, frustrated, angry, or apprehensive. We then resort to coping in the ways we learned in childhood—the primordial choice of fight or flight.

For example, in my family growing up, there was a lot of yelling, screaming, and chaos. I chose the “flight” option and “hid” by going to my room or staying out of the house.

In my first marriage of 25 years, my former spouse got angry and yelled a lot. I was, of course, familiar with that model from the chaos and pain of my childhood. When she got angry my stomach turned to knots, for in my household growing up when folks got angry someone was either hurt physically or abandoned. So I resorted to my familiar mode of hiding in my study or staying at work—my comfortable “flight” pattern. Of course, someone else who had not grown up with my experience of traumatic anger, might not have been threatened at all by her strictly verbal anger.

Unconsciously I was attracted to this woman who had characteristics of my primary caretakers—both the good (some great nurturing like that I had received from my paternal grandmother) and the bad—the angry outbursts.

When Carol and I married, I expected (unconsciously) the same pattern, so there were times when I would—as silly as it seems now--almost pick a fight so that she would get angry and yell at me, as that was the only model I knew. But Carol was not full of rage and angry voices was not the mode of communicating in Carol’s household. It took awhile until I realized that it was really safe to be me and not to hide.

I’ll never forget the night that I was two hours late for dinner—delayed at the library without a phone accessible (this was in the pre-cell phone days). I walked in the door certain that

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I would be met with an angry voice. Her words, “Thank goodness you’re okay. I was worried. Dinner is in the oven,” were a transcendent moment--the moment when I really “got it” that Carol was not going to bring the fury of my childhood to our relationship.

We do have disagreements from time to time, but we rarely raise voices—a model that works for us. We have also learned by using Imago to avoid those terrible conflicts when we might say things we really don’t mean or argue about all but the proverbial kitchen sink.

Emotional pain is a reality of human relationships—at least in the ones that really matter. Spouses, partners, children, and parents will all “push our buttons” and trigger anger, frustration, and even pain at times. This pain can be a stimulus to injure or even destroy relationships, or it can be a source for growing and enriching relationships. In Part II we’ll look at how to use the pain to grow a relationship.

Please write with questions you have or with topic suggestions. The best sources of material for columns are your real life experiences. Email to ken@bccounseling.com.

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