

EMOTIONAL WELLNESS MATTERS

VOLUME XI, NUMBER 2



*“This above all –
to thine own self be true.”*

– Polonius in *Hamlet*
(William Shakespeare)

Although some people prefer to remain single throughout their lives, most people strive to connect with and live in partnership with one special person. There are many obvious advantages to finding a relationship partner – physical, economic, social – but there is another significant advantage in that working through the ups and downs of a relationship allows us to come to terms with many of our own personal issues. In fact, these personal issues may make or break a relationship, depending on whether we choose to work on them. If you are single now, you can use this time to learn more about yourself and what makes relationships work.

We might discover that we have the same pattern of difficulty in every one of our relationships, as if we keep making the same mistakes over and over again.

There is evidence that the families we come from (our *families of origin*) have a profound influence on how we will behave in the relationships we create for ourselves in adulthood. How many times have you heard the phrase, “You are acting just like your father (mother).” Or, “I can’t believe that I am saying the same things my mother (father) said.” Sometimes we find ourselves



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acting toward a current relationship partner in the same way we acted toward a previous partner, as if there were a repetitive pattern in play. And if we look closely enough, we might discover that we have the same pattern of difficulty in every one of our relationships, as if we keep making the same mistakes over and over again.

According to one school of thought (see the book recommendations on page three), we all had imperfect parents or caregivers as we grew up, and the experiences we had as children left a lasting impression on us. We all went through stages of development in childhood. Sometimes our parents were there for us as we progressed through a developmental stage – and sometimes they were not (and this could be due to many reasons, like a parent having his or her own personal difficulties at the time, or the birth of another child). If we have difficulty at one particular stage of development, then we have a gap in our personalities that could follow us into adulthood unless we recognize and attend to the problem.

Feeling Whole and Complete

In fact, the theory goes further and says that we all have a desire to be whole and complete – and this means completing our unfinished business from childhood. Therefore, in adulthood we search out potential relationship partners who will allow us to work on this unfinished business. In fact, this is the type of person we will be attracted to when we grow up.

This theory says that we are attracted to a person who carries both the *positive* and *negative* qualities of our imperfect parent or caregiver. We carry an image around with us of who our perfect partner will be – and we search for a person who embodies these qualities. When we find a person with these traits, we feel as if we have found the person we have been searching for our entire lives. At last we feel whole and complete. It feels as if the gap from our childhood is now filled. And we tell people that we are in love. When we find this person we feel fully alive – we have a profound sense of well-being. We have found happiness at last.

Over time, however, the negative qualities found in our parents begin to emerge in our relationships with our partners. According to the theory, this is expected and predictable. In fact, a mature love commitment will not occur until we have worked through these more negative issues. For example, if we had a chaotic parent, we might find happiness at last in a partner who gives

us a feeling of security. This is the partner's positive trait. But then the negative parts creep into the relationship. He or she will not always be there on time, or tell the truth, or in other ways provide us with the security we need. Nobody is perfect, and sometimes our partners will indeed engage in behavior that dredges up our old fear of chaos. In fact, because we need to work on our issues with chaos, we may even perceive the presence of chaos where it doesn't really exist. We accuse our once-beloved partners of threatening our feeling of security. As our childhood fears return, we might blame our partners for not understanding us after all or for deliberately trying to undermine the relationship. At this point, power struggles begin – the person you were in love with not so long ago can now seem like your worst enemy.

Breaking Up Is Not Always the Answer

Many people who have been through a series of relationships report that they seem to have the same problems time after time. The same types of relationship problems emerge regardless of who their beloved is. This fact suggests that the problem resides in the person, not in the choice of partner. The clue is to look within in order to see why the problem recurs and why we become attached to the same kind of person.

Many people would rather break up than work through an old childhood issue. They get to the stage of the power struggle in their relationship, and they are not able to work past it. Old childhood fears are dredged up at this stage and it feels safer to bury these fears or run away from them rather than face them. Unfortunately, when people break up with their partner, they deprive themselves of the opportunity to deal with the issues they need to face in order to have a successful relationship. (Note, however, that there are times when breaking up is advisable, and this involves situations where physical, sexual or emotional abuse is present in the relationship so that one or both of the partners is in danger.)

The Healthy Relationship

Rather than *searching* for the right partner, it might be more helpful to think of *being* the right partner. This means bringing our old issues from childhood to awareness. We need to understand the impact of the events in our childhood on our choice

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of a partner in adulthood. We should examine why we keep making the same mistakes again and again in our relationships. Once we have completed this life task, we are then free to enter into a conscious, mature relationship.

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What does a mature relationship look like?

- Both partners acknowledge that their childhood wounds are likely to emerge in the relationship. They make an attempt to understand how these wounds developed and how they influence the relationship.
- Each partner owns up to his or her own faults and talks about them freely with the other. Each partner identifies what he or she needs in the relationship, within reason – and the other provides those things unconditionally.
- Each partner is seen as a whole, complete person striving to live an individual life as fully as possible. The two partners have equality in the relationship with open dialogue between them.
- The partners understand that when they feel uncomfortable, they need to engage in constructive communication. They don't engage in acting out behavior such as withdrawing from their partner or looking outside of the relationship to get their needs for intimacy met.
- Both partners agree to avoid blaming or criticizing each other – and they engage in constructive communication instead.
- Anger is recognized as an expression of pain, and the partners agree to accept each other's anger and other emotions. However, they also agree not to dump their anger on each other. They recognize that anger must be contained and expressed constructively.
- The partners in a healthy relationship develop their own strengths rather than relying on the other to provide them. Both partners strive toward wholeness – in themselves and in each other.

Rather than *leaving* a relationship in order to find yourself, it may be possible to find yourself *through* a relationship. A mature relationship is based on commitment, awareness, and mutual respect. It is healing and it leads to genuine wholeness for each of the partners. We recognize what our partner needs, and we provide these things gently, lovingly, and without conditions.

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The ability to provide unconditional love for our partner is one of our highest life goals. It takes great strength to be able to surmount our own needs and to give unconditionally to a person who has made a commitment to us. Even though our partner's behavior may cause us anxiety, pain, or anger, we show our maturity by understanding and containing our own reactions in order to make the other person feel better. There can be no greater expression of love.

A Suggestion

Delving into our early childhood issues is a difficult process, and it is best accomplished with the help of a professional therapist. The rewards, however, can be immeasurable. If you are stuck in a series of relationships with the same destructive patterns emerging time and time again, it might be best to put a moratorium on getting into a *committed* relationship until you have had time to examine these early personal issues. Once you have been through the therapy process, which is safe and confidential, your chances of finding a more mature and successful relationship are greatly enhanced.

Recommended Reading

Hendrix, Harville. *Getting the Love You Want: A Guide for Couples*. Owl Books, 2001, ISBN: 0805068953, 320 pages, \$14.00.

Hendrix, Harville. *Keeping the Love You Find: A Personal Guide*. Pocket Books, 1992, ISBN: 0671734202, 325 pages, \$14.00.

T H E B A C K P A G E

How Does It Feel To Be In Love?

Harville Hendrix, the author of the theory described above, has examined the phenomenon of being in love. This refers to the stage of feeling whole and complete once we have found someone who matches the image we carry around with us of the person we have been searching for – that is, someone who has the positive and negative qualities of an imperfect parent from our childhood. The experience of being in love happens when two people first meet, when the holes in our lives are filled with each other's positive qualities. It is followed eventually by a power struggle when the partner's negative qualities begin to emerge. According to Hendrix, "romantic love is supposed to end." Once the power struggle is resolved, a more mature, committed love can begin.

The first quality of being in love is **recognition**. This is the strange feeling of familiarity with someone we have just met. "I feel as if I've known you my whole life." The person we are attracted to has qualities that tap into our needs from childhood – and, in a sense, we have held this image in our minds since childhood. When we find a person with these qualities, we do feel as if we have known this person forever.

Next is **timelessness**. "Even though we just met, I can't remember when I didn't know you." Lovers can spend hours with each other, embracing and drawing on the feeling of being alive with that person, so that time seems to vanish. The cocoon of love becomes everything.

Third is **reunification**. Lovers find the parts of themselves that are missing through the other person. "I no longer feel alone. When I'm with you I feel complete and connected to things. I feel at one with the world." In truth, they have found through each other what was missing in themselves.

Last is a feeling of **necessity**. We come to feel that we need the other person. "I can't imagine what it would be like without you. I don't think I could live without you." You feel safe with your partner, and, for perhaps the first time, you feel that your life needs have at long last been met.

Predictably, however, the initial feeling of being in love is followed by a much longer journey – an adventure that leads to true maturity and integrity. It's worth the trip.



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