

CAUSES AND CURES OF RELATIONSHIP PROBLEMS

If your car was stuck in sand, would you continue to press on the gas pedal or would you get out and figure out a new line of action? Most people would do the latter. Yet, when it comes to relationships, people often keep their foot on the gas and dig themselves deeper. A man may continue to provoke his spouse to be “rebellious” by attempting to control her. A woman may drive her partner further away by chasing him when he distances. How do these vicious cycles get started? The answer lies in the mystery of romance. High levels of attraction actually produce a chemical change. A person’s system becomes flooded with endorphins, nature’s painkiller, and while on this “high” it is easy to be blinded to signs of trouble. This type of attraction is often created because:

- Your partner has characteristics similar to early caretakers and you unknowingly think he or she will fulfill unmet childhood needs. If you had a controlling parent, you may strive to win freedom from a rigid spouse.
- Your partner has positive qualities you believe you are lacking: Someone who is insecure may be attracted by confidence. A person who is cool and nonchalant can become captivated by another’s warmth.

Often, the seeds of trouble are sown when the relationship becomes “official” and partners make a commitment. Each person begins to focus on being taken care of and is less inclined to accommodate the other’s needs. As a result, full-fledged conflict may emerge or resentments may slowly build over the years. For example, a woman may wake up and realize that her efforts to be docile and compliant are never going to win her the approval she seeks; or a wife’s warmth and attentiveness may suddenly seem like a demand for smothering closeness.¹

FROM DESIRABLE DIFFERENCES TO INCOMPATIBLE POLARITIES

When unresolved resentments build, the differences that were once a source of attraction become sore spots. Instead of complementing each other, differences begin producing conflict. The ways couples can “polarize” their differences are endless:

Differences	Polarities
Creative/Organized	Sloppy/”Neat freak”
Free spirit/Self-disciplined	Irresponsible/Responsible Impulsive/Rigid Emotional/Reserved
Independent/Relationship-oriented	Distancing/Pursuing Detached/Dependent Underinvolved/Overinvolved Uncommitted/Committed
Receiving/Nurturing	Sick/Healthy Helpless/Competent Master/Servant
Leading/Following	Dominant/Yielding Parent/Child

¹ Ideas on infatuation come from *Getting the Love You Want* by Harville Hendrix. (Henry Holt, 1988).

In healthy relationships, differences are interchangeable and a source of learning. Partners can take turns giving and receiving or being spontaneous and setting limits. The relationship achieves a balance of closeness and freedom so that neither suffocation nor detachment results. Unfortunately, when both people in the relationship resist fulfilling their potentials, they become stuck playing certain roles and cease growing. A couple may be satisfied acting out this polarization for years until a crisis occurs. For example, a woman who stubbornly holds onto her role as nurturer (out of a fear of her own “selfishness”) may find this too taxing when she starts working. To make the relationship more open and flexible, one person must change and *allow the other to be upset*. If this is done with firmness and sympathy, even rigid “tyrants” can realize their partners can act independently and remain committed to the relationship.

GENDER DIFFERENCES

Recent research on the brain and nervous system explains how common male-female patterns can become stuck in gender polarities:

- The corpus callosum is 40% larger in women than in men:² This explains why some women readily access emotions and share feelings that are housed in the right side of the brain, whereas men may find it easier to focus on goals and solutions due to reduced “right-brain interference.”
- Men are more rapidly aroused than women during conflict by the part of their nervous system that controls automatic body functions such as heart rate, blood pressure, and digestion. This explains why some men retreat from contact after periods of intensity and desire freedom from emotional encumbrances.

Although male distancing/detachment and female closeness/caretaking patterns can be common, a free-spirited, self-absorbed woman can trigger a man to be dependent and doting. Likewise, a talkative man may prod a woman to be the guardian of space and distance in the relationship. Furthermore, polarities are not stable and can flip-flop wildly over time. When a woman who has fought for closeness for years gives up and decides to exit the relationship, a man who was previously distant may pursue ardently. To discover the polarities in your relationship, create a metaphor:³

Exercise: Relationship Metaphors

1. Choose an image or symbol of how your partner would appear to you in a dream, fairy tale, or cartoon—A playful satyr dancing through the woods.
2. What form would you take in relationship to your partner’s—The moon above.
3. What interaction or dance happens between the two forms—I watch him frolic in my light.
4. What is the worst nightmare that could happen between the two forms—He goes off on his escapades, never noticing that I light his way.
5. What would be the best outcome—He would wait for me and play with the shadows I make.

² The corpus callosum is the mass of fibers connecting the right and left sides of the brain. Information on physical gender differences was taken from *Divorce Busting* by Michele Weiner-David (Simon & Schuster, 1992), pp. 50–51.

³ Exercise from *The Process of Change* by Peggy Papp (Guilford Press, 1983), p. 142.