

Chapter 6

The Relationship Dilemma

Relationships are challenging. No two people experience the world in the same way; each has a differing viewpoint. Individuals in a couple often disagree about even the simplest thing, like who said what and why they said it. There are always irritations and misunderstandings. Maybe if/when you and your partner completed your relationship vision, differences of opinion stood out. That is to be expected: we all have distinctive ways of being in relationship.

The following chapters summarize the major influences on our experience of relationship. The details of these dynamic factors fill many books but I will try to cover only those aspects that directly impact our everyday experience.

The most general issue we experience in all committed relationships is how to balance our need for connection with our need for separateness. This is what I call our *relationship dilemma*, the basic predicament that all couples must work with.

Intimately associated with this dilemma are our own particular *attachment* styles. These are the unconscious attitudes and tendencies we bring to our relationship. When unresolved attachment needs are triggered in a relationship we react automatically and emotionally. *Attachment reactions* are possibly the most troubling and difficult challenges that we have to address and resolve.

Finally, in these chapters, I will explore how our capacity for *projection* becomes a source of contention and unreality. The ability to project our experiences and expectations is natural. However, when it is driven by unresolved attachment needs and unconscious processes, it becomes a major source of confusion and suffering.

The Relationship Dilemma

Even the most loving relationship goes through cycles of closeness punctuated by bouts of emotional distance. These rhythms are normal, like breathing in and out. For many couples, fluctuations in the quality of connection are a source of anxiety

and confusion. It can feel like the relationship is slipping away. Why is it so difficult to sustain closeness all the time? The reason is that human beings are not built like that. We suffer from (or are blessed with) an unavoidable dilemma: the tension between *belonging* and *autonomy*.

We need each other; we have to belong. The inherent urge to bond and connect is fundamental to our nature and wellbeing. Our security and contentment depends on a continuing connection to a special person. That feeling and need is instinctual and pervasive. It was true when we were babies in our mother's arms: we needed her to survive. It was true as children growing up, learning how to become members of society. It is true now we are adults.

The foundation of our sense of self and emotional stability is our bond with our primary caregivers. As we grew up, we looked for a special person to connect deeply with. When we found that person, we invested them with our emotional wellbeing. Our current happiness depends to a greater or lesser extent, on the quality of connection to the one we love.

But connection and belonging are problematic. Something in us struggles against the feeling of being dependent on and restricted by another person. We have a powerful urge towards autonomy and self-direction. The impulse towards independence germinated when we were about two years old (as in the 'terrible twos') and blossomed throughout our adolescence (as in teenage rebellion).

In adulthood, the ability to make unconstrained free choices is fundamental to our sense of an individual self. That is why imprisonment is used as a punishment. We can feel confined and restricted by the duties and expectations inherent in relationship. We fight with our dependence and reliance on others—and often that inner battle is acted out as antagonism and irritation with our partner.

While belonging and autonomy are two sides of the same coin, in Western culture individuality is valued above all else. Childrearing practices stress independence—particularly for males—often at the expense of emotional connection. Our education system assumes individualism, competition and the

striving for success. Each person is supposed to be completely autonomous and not dependent on others.

Naturally, this creates an imbalance towards what is termed *counter-dependence*, an almost phobic reaction to relying on and being attached to others. We have difficulty surrendering into closeness and intimacy with our partner. We cannot allow ourselves to unite completely with our beloved—yet we instinctively need to do so.

To grow into our true self, we have to become comfortable with both belonging and autonomy. Inner freedom develops out of our ability to connect deeply. To be independent, we need a solid sense of self and that true self can only blossom and thrive when sustained by strong bonds to those we love.

The tension between belonging and autonomy is inevitable. It arises from the core of our natures and is one of the spurs to our inner development. However, it does not sit easily and is an issue in all relationships. Every couple has to recognize and accommodate the competing needs for belonging and autonomy for their life together to flourish.

Balance in Relationship

Creating a balance of time together with time apart is crucial to a healthy relationship. We have to connect deeply when we are together and be creative and comfortable when we are apart. Expectations of always being connected, always being loving and affectionate, only cause disappointment. Alternatively, a relationship cannot exist if it is founded on separation, distance and unconstrained freedom. Anyone who has been in a long-distance relationship knows how hard it is to keep it working, how easy it is to fail.

At the beginning of a relationship, the wish for connection overrides separateness and a couple often becomes ‘joined at the hip.’ A couple in love thinks their devotion is extra special, more profound than all others. All they desire is to stay entwined forever. Fortunately, this phase usually shifts and transforms over time. If it does not, the couple are in danger of becoming *enmeshed*.

Enmeshment arises when the drive to belong and the dread of losing the loved one suppresses the need for autonomy and individuation. Enmeshed couples get stuck in mutual

dependence. We recognize this couple because they do everything together, check in with each other constantly, finish each other's sentences, and get agitated when they are separated. Their enmeshment stultifies their growth as individuals. They resist change because it is seen as a threat to their need for togetherness.

In contrast, some couples reach an estranged arrangement that looks more like housemates than marriage. They live disconnected lives with separate finances, activities and interests. Most often this is an accommodation to one spouse who regards his or her freedom as more essential than anything else. The other partner goes along because the only alternative is to split.

When the needs for belonging and autonomy are not in harmony, conflicts arise. In conflicted marriages, whatever they seem to be fighting about, the underlying contest is between different unmet *attachment* needs, needs that remain unfulfilled since childhood. One person is desperate for closeness while the other fears being overwhelmed and pushes their partner away. Commonly, the relationship deteriorates into a power struggle: my needs in contest with your needs. Both feel deprived and aggrieved.

To be stable and to grow, a relationship has to balance the need for belonging with the need for autonomy in both partners. Like a spinning top, a mature marriage sometimes wobbles and wanders—but it stay upright. This balancing act is tricky: it requires awareness and acceptance of each other's differences. We must continually find ways to harmonize our desire for closeness and connection with the urge to have space and separation as individuals.

Marriage requires flexibility and willingness to compromise. There is no final solution to the dissonance between your partner's and your own needs. We will not and should not always get our own way all the time; neither should our partner. Imposing our desires and needs on the other without consent, leads to resentment and resistance. Finding a common rhythm of coming together and moving apart is the sign of a mature connection.

We have to sacrifice to be in relationship: freedom, time, energy, and attention. In exchange, we gain far more: love,

connection, companionship, and personal growth. The secret is to find harmony between belonging and autonomy..

Summary

- Relationships are challenging, as we have to contend with our relationship dilemma, attachment reactions and projections.
- The relationship dilemma is the conflict between our need for belonging versus our need for autonomy.
- Both partners have to balance these needs in order not to become either enmeshed or disconnected.
- For personal growth, we have to sacrifice some of our needs in service to the greater good of the relationship.

Practice

Write notes to yourself in response to the following questions:

- Which do I prefer: being together or being alone? What is the best balance for me?
- Do I feel our relationship is too distant and wish to be closer? Describe how that feels.
- Do I long for more space and breathing room in the relationship? When do I experience that?
- Do I encourage my spouse to spend time alone, doing separate activities?
- Do we make an effort to spend quality time together? Do I make it happen?

Have a conversation with your partner.

- Share insights from the questions above.

Discuss:

- Do we both get enough time for ourselves, either as ‘alone time’ or with separate interests and activities?
- Do we both get enough quality time together—not just in front of the TV or doing tasks?