

The Power of Hope

Beyond sexual chemistry, hope is the kindling that gets relationships going and allows us to fall in love. Hope leads us to see our new partners through rose-colored glasses and ignore their imperfections, rough edges, and annoying and sometimes destructive behavior. And part of falling in love involves becoming entranced with who we are or who we think we can be when we are with them. When the hope is strong enough and the rose-colored glasses phase lasts long enough, it creates emotional glue that bonds us to this seemingly magical other. It is this attachment bond that makes us hold onto relationships so tenaciously, even when they are causing more pain than joy.

In *Hold Me Tight*, Sue Johnson explains this in user-friendly terms. We are hard wired for attachment. For infants, having a secure attachment with a caregiver is a matter of life or death. This need for a secure attachment does not go away when we become adults. We all have a basic need for emotional security and safety. We need to know that our significant others will respond to us when we ask for help. We need them to show us that we matter and respond when we share our frustrations, disappointments, sorrows, and joys. And we need them to hold us tight when we need comforting.

As adults, the most profound attachment relationships we have are with our romantic partners. When our emotional security feels threatened, our limbic system (the body's emotional system) goes into panic mode, over riding the cerebral cortex (the body's thinking system). As a result, rational, reasoned thought goes out the window. We don't think -- we react. And that reaction usually spurs dysfunctional interaction patterns. Johnson calls these patterns "demon dialogues" and categorizes them into three interactive patterns which she calls: "Find the Bad Guy," "The Protest Polka" and "Freeze and Flee." "Find the Bad Guy" is a pattern where both partners try to pin the blame on the other. It's a volley of, "you did this." "Well, you did that." This often devolves into "The Protest Polka" -- the classic pursue/withdraw pattern. The more one partner pokes, prods, cajoles or nags to get the other partner to respond, the more the non-responsive partner withdraws, usually until the pursuing partner gives up. Which takes us to the final pattern: "Freeze and Flee." In this pattern, both partners have shut down. Neither reaches out to the other for emotional support. Both partners have retreated into themselves to metaphorically lick their own wounds.

Sue Johnson argues that when couples go into the underlying message is, "I need you and I'm feeling a disconnection. I am afraid our bond is threatened and that you don't really love me." In other words, fights are often unskilled declarations of love and a desire to protect the relationship. The good news is that if you and your partner are playing, "Find the Bad Guy" or "The Protest Polka," both of you have at least some hope that your attachment bond is still intact. If you can remember this when you and your partner are in the midst of slinging mud at each other or spiraling down the pursue/withdraw spiral, you can change the pattern by focusing

on the hope. If you find yourself gearing up for a preemptive strike or withdrawing, take a moment to scan your body. Instead of attacking your partner, focus on your self. Notice where you feel tension, tightness, or discomfort and breathe into those places. Let your breathing slow down. Bring awareness to your emotions. What are you feeling? Likely emotions are fury, anger, frustration, resentment, hurt, sadness, anxiousness, fear, guilt, and/or shame. What is it that you need? Likely needs are acceptance, affection, appreciation, connection, empathy, intimacy, nurturing, the sense that you matter, feeling like your partner has your back, and/or support. If you can stop your part of the pattern and say to your partner, "When you did/ said _____, (keep to the objective facts, leave out the "you did this because....") I felt (pick one or more of these: hurt, sad, angry, afraid, frustrated, worried or some other feeling word) and what I would like is _____ (something concrete like: a hug, to be heard). Also, since a feeling of disconnection is often the spark that instigates the negative patterns, find ways to connect. It can be as easy as reaching out to your partner and asking them to hold you tight.

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