

In a previous post, I talked a little about [distance and anxiety in a relationship](#). Building on that I think a useful way of helping a relationship develop is thinking about it in terms of optimal relationship distance. Essentially optimal relationship distance is the space where we feel solid and grounded but also feel very connected to our partners. Connection in this context means not losing yourself in the relationship yet maintaining high degrees of interpersonal intimacy - it can also vary greatly from couple to couple.

Finding a deep connection while not losing oneself may sound easy but like many things it takes a great deal of work. To understand the difficulty, I often use a metaphor of finding the right physical balance. In this metaphor think of one partner as physically constantly leaning forward. Then picture the other partner as always leaning back. Neither is standing tall and straight, rather each in their own way has forged a relationship based on instability.

The person leaning forward needs another person to lean into. The person leaning back needs another person to hold onto in order to stop them from falling over. When we draw a sense of stability from others in such a fashion we have to control them to maintain that stability. We can never relax into the relationship. Similarly, we can never relax into being ourselves and that is where problems really arise.

The relationship begins to become about identities based on pursuit and distancing. One person chasing the other for more intimacy, unconsciously knowing full well that the chase will just make the other person distance. Its a form of pressure, hence the leaning in metaphor. The other person distancing mechanism irritates the other person and around and around the pattern goes in a circle. It is a form of stringing along, thus suiting the leaning back metaphor. In practical terms it is a self-destructive mechanism which is engaged in by both people.

One of the things which tends to occur over time is that this pattern becomes increasingly irritating for both people. Anxiety becomes so intensified that it seems unbearable for both people. It's the increase in anxiety - the pressure cooker situation of the relationship and the constant bickering and frustration which often sees the end to relationships.

Usually when people come and see me this pattern is well underway, and the anxiety is intense. One of the very first things I get a couple to do is to learn to relax. Couples often will assume that other things are more important, e.g. good communication, insight, romance etc. These are important and are often addressed as therapy progresses but when a couple is really at that intense, at each other's throats, circular fighting stage, the first thing they need to learn it to relax.

It should be surprising to learn that most people do not really know how to relax deeply... Let's repeat that, most people, do not know how to relax deeply-at least that is my experience when working with people. What relaxation typically means for people is falling back on an acceptable and tolerable level of tension.

Being fully relaxed means being relaxed to your bones. Our ears should be relaxed, our toes, the inside of our mouths. Our minds should be relatively quiet. Quiet does not mean blanking out, in this case it means to find the presence of peace. Find that place of peace.

How you may ask? A good way to begin is to learn progressive muscle relaxation and combine that with deep breathing. Do not let the simplicity of progressive muscle relaxation fool you. It is a great initial exercise to learn because a) its relatively simply to remember and b) it teaches each muscle to relax.

With this technique, we clench and tighten each muscle group and then release them in turn. For example, make a clenched fist. Squeeze it tight. Then let it go fully. Repeat that three times. With each squeeze take a deep deep in breath. With each release let the breath out fully. Breathe from the stomach not the chest. Repeat that sequence with the arm, then chest, then head, stomach, back, legs feet etc. Cover every aspect of your body.

At first keep it general, but after a few weeks try including things like relaxing your ear, the inside of your mouth, your forehead etc.

How does this help in a relationship? Whenever we operate from a place of quite calm, many constructive things can occur. Here are just a couple of things which may happen:

1. We feel more secure within ourselves. When we do there is less need to attempt to control the other person. Nearly all control stems from insecurity.
2. We feel internally more stable. This stability allows us to keep our boundaries intact and stops them from becoming enmeshed. Notice in your relationships how it is almost impossible not to have good boundaries when you are calm, peaceful and internally quite.
3. We feel safe. When we feel safe, we begin to open up to the other person in new and exciting ways. Trust and in turn intimacy begins to blossom.
4. Sex takes off! One of the most surprising things people find is how good sex can be when they are fully relaxed.

I do not want to make out that relaxing is going to solve all relationship difficulties. That would be far from the case. It does however provide an essential platform from which a

solid, loving, mature relationship can flourish. There are many techniques I use with people to help them learn to relax. Its dependent upon the needs of the clients and what suits best on a case per case basis. There is one technique I do use regularly however, so let me share that if I may.

One of the better techniques I encourage people to engage in is to hug until relaxed. It's a technique I heard about many years ago, and has made its way into David Schnarch excellent book *The Passionate Marriage*. I often use this technique in couples counseling with great results.

The technique is one of hugging and breathing with your partner until fully relaxed. Again do not let the simplicity of the exercise fool you. I have seen many couples break down into tears as emotional and psychological release occurred. But don't let that scare you, that's actually a good thing!

The technique while it's essentially a hugging and breathing technique, it's also one of getting more in touch with your partner, while also maintaining your own boundaries.

At first do not worry about the correctness of hugging. Just hug even if the hugging feels uncomfortable for both. Instead just note how you hug, do you lean in, lean away? What is your breathing rate? What part of the body feels tense? What feels loose and relaxed? What feelings emerge? What physical sensations occur?

Initially, just become increasingly aware of what is transpiring on a moment to moment basis no matter how uncomfortable or comfortable. Then talk to your partner about what was experienced. Allow room for both people to share.

Once you begin to get a little more comfortable with hugging try the following:

Prepare yourself by taking a good ten minutes to slow down, relax, and slow your heart rate. Try and get as close as you can to that peaceful quite we spoke of earlier.

Then stand facing your partner a few feet away.

Stand in a balanced position over your own two feet.

Take a deep breath and as you do close your eyes and release and relax.

Repeat this as many times as necessary. No rush here.

Open your eyes.

When you and your partner are ready move forward while maintaining the balanced position. Have one foot between your partner's feet.

Be close enough so that you can easily put your arms around your partner without feeling off balance. Do not pull or push your partner off-balance. If that occurs start over.

Get as physically comfortable with your partner as you can. Shift around while maintain contact if need be.

Let yourself relax into the hug and remember to breathe deeply!

Note your resistances when hugging but do not give in to them. Instead deep breathe and just try and relax and let the resistance go.

That's the exercise. It is natural for lots of feelings to arise. Use these as a ground for further communication and discussion. Talking about the experience with your partner.

Things can turn around rather quickly, but often it takes a few months of practice of using this several times a week, for the most benefit to occur. Couples find this an amazing exercise and often surprised by the many changes it brings.

Hugging 'till Relaxed is fully described in the excellent relationship book called *Passionate Marriage: Keeping Love and Intimacy Alive in Committed Relationships* . A link to the book is provided below: