

Making Love Last

Avenues Toward Restoring Intimacy



Lawrence Hedges

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MAKING LOVE LAST

Creating and Maintaining Intimacy in Long-Term Relationships

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Avenues Toward Restoring Intimacy

When I began my search of couples' books for ideas about how to create and maintain intimacy, I found that most authors focus on how to fix troubled relationships. But couples' therapist Harriet Lerner holds,

What we are truly in need of is not techniques for fixing things, but some solid theory about what relationships are about and why it is so difficult for two people to live intimately connected with one another...and how relationship systems operate under stress...Even the best how-to advice...will at best yield short-lived results unless we struggle to understand the underlying theory or principles [of relationships]. The fact is, there are no techniques to make intimacy happen (Lerner, *The Dance of Intimacy: A Woman's Guide to Courageous Acts of Change in Key Relationships*, 1989 pp.202-203).

I find Lerner's words particularly inspiring and so I have sought in this book to provide some of the solid theory about relationships that she calls for. As a psychoanalyst I am especially interested in theories that help us think about what is going on inside each of us as we co-create relationships rather than simply focusing on such things as communication, compromise, and behavior changes. I have been able to locate four well-known couples' therapists who have formed theories that take into account how our individual subjective worlds of experience interact in relationships—Susan Johnson, Harriet Lerner, Harville Hendrix, and David Schnarch. In a brief overview I cannot possibly do justice to the richness and complexity of their thoughts about relationships or present examples of their stunning work with couples. But I can provide a brief schematic of their leading ideas on the restoration of intimacy that hopefully will inspire you to further study their work.

Four Avenues for Restoring Intimacy

1. The Emotionally Focused Engagement of Susan Johnson

Based on the attachment research begun in England during the 1950's by psychoanalyst John Bowlby, Canadian couples' therapist Susan Johnson understands intimacy in terms of "Emotionally focused engagements."¹ Attachment theory holds that all mammals are born immature and that biological mechanisms exist in both parents and offspring that insure attachment until the babies are mature

enough to survive on their own.² The neurotransmitters oxytocin and vasopressin operate in members of different species to stimulate attachment behaviors necessary to insure survival of the young.

Susan Johnson and Valerie Whiffen in their book, *Attachment Processes in Couple and Family Therapy*, speak of “emotionally focused engagement” as the route to dealing with attachment issues as they arise in intimate relationships. According to the authors most relationship problems are about the security of the bond between the partners and about their experiencing the relationship as a safe haven and a secure base. Isolation, separation, or disconnection from an attachment partner is inherently traumatizing. The need for secure emotional connection with a few key others is considered to be hard-wired by evolution, and there are a finite number of ways of dealing with the loss of such a connection. The patterns of distress in couple relationships are predictable in that they have to do with separation fears—although those fears are experienced differently depending on each person’s relational past. Depression and anxiety expectably accompany relationship distress as security and connection are lost. Restoring intimacy has to do with a couple working towards re-establishing the regulation, processing, and integration of key emotional responses having to do with safe attachment. Pivotal moments where the relationship is defined as unsafe and insecure must be identified. Critical moments in the restoration of a relationship are likely to be shifts and change events that redefine the relationship as mutually secure and satisfying. Change events in the restoration of an intimate relationship involve specific bonding events called “softenings.” In a softening, a vulnerable spouse reaches out to an engaged partner and asks for his or her attachment needs to be met (Johnson & Whiffen, *Attachment Processes in Couples and Families*, 2003 pp. 104-107).

Restoration of an intimate relationship is thought by Johnson to be characterized by:

- Learning to focus on and validate attachment needs and fears and the couple’s promoting an emotional engagement with safety, comfort, and support.
- Privileging emotional communication and a direct addressing of attachment vulnerabilities and fears so as to foster emotional attunement and responsiveness.
- Creating a respectful collaborative alliance, so that the relationship itself may be a safe haven and a secure base.
- Shaping each other’s responsiveness and accessibility. Withdrawn partners reengage and

blaming partners soften so that bonding events can occur that offer an antidote to negative cycles and insecurity.

- Focusing on how the self is defined and can be redefined in emotional communication with the partner.
- Shaping of pivotal attachment responses that redefine the relationship and addressing injuries that block relationship repair (Johnson & Whiffen, Attachment Processes in Couples and Families, 2003 p. 110).

Emotionally Focused Therapy developed by Susan Johnson and her colleagues uses John Bowlby's attachment theory to work with couples and families. By encouraging individuals to discover and communicate their attachment needs and fears, Emotionally Focused Therapy seeks to promote softenings in destructive cycles that have developed in the interactions of the relationship. Further, Emotionally Focused Therapy seeks to encourage the development of new and more rewarding patterns of interaction based on the attachment needs and fears of the individuals involved.

Johnson's approach offers a vitalizing perspective on the restoration of lost intimacy from the standpoint of attachment theory. The process of defining one's dependency needs and communicating them in a vulnerable way to one's partner can serve to break the destructive cycles that have developed in the interactions of the relationship. Softenings encourage the development of new and more rewarding patterns of interaction based on the attachment needs and fears of the individuals involved.

2. The Dance of Connection and Disconnection of Harriet Lerner

Foremost couples' therapist Harriet Lerner has given us a series of magnificent books on intimacy—mostly with the word “dance” in the titles. Lerner's expertise has been looking at the way two people in a relationship construct connecting and disconnecting dances around intimacy, deception, anger, and fear. Each person enters the intimacy dance with a set of templates based on past relationships. Each person struggles between learning how her or his partner dances and attempting to teach or coerce the partner into dancing her or his way. The worst dances emerge when partners collude to maintain patterns from the past that limit excitement and life in the present relationship.

Lerner's work highlights the process of the interaction itself and how each person can take

responsibility for his or her connections and disconnections in the dance of intimacy. A central theme in Lerner's work is how our relationship dances tend to polarize around whatever differences we can define. Defining differences is a defense, she says, against our anxiety of not knowing how to be in constant vulnerable negotiation with our partners. She gives examples of how distancers distance more when pursued and how underfunctioners underfunction more around overfunctioners, and vice versa. Lerner believes that differences per se are rarely 'the problem' in relationships; the problem is instead our reactivity to differences. Paying attention to our distressing reactions has the possibility of teaching us a great deal about ourselves.

Restoring intimacy in relationships often requires tuning into and taking responsibility for one's own anger. Lerner is particularly interested in how anger often becomes a mode of relational exchange rather than a means of self-expression and interpersonal communication.

Anger is one of the most painful emotions we experience, and the most difficult to use wisely and well. Yet our anger is an important signal that always deserves our attention and respect. The difficulty is that feeling angry doesn't tell us what is wrong, or what specifically we can do that will make things better rather than worse....If our goal is to break a pattern in an important relationship or to develop a stronger sense of self that we can bring to all our relationships, it is essential that we learn to translate our anger into clear, nonblaming statements about our own self (Lerner, *The Dance of Anger: A Woman's Guide to Changing the Patterns of Intimate Relationships*, 1985 pp. ix and 90).

Anger is a tool for change when it challenges us to become more of an expert on our self and less of an expert on others....Learning to use our anger effectively requires some letting go—letting go of blaming that other person whom we see as causing our problems and failing to provide for our happiness; letting go of the notion that it is our job to change other people or tell them how they should think, feel, behave....In using our anger as a guide to determining our innermost needs, values, and priorities, we should not be distressed if we discover just how unclear we are....Too often, anger propels us to take positions that we have not thought through carefully enough or that we are not really ready to take.... It is an act of courage to acknowledge our own uncertainty and sit with it for a while (Lerner, *The Dance of Anger: A Woman's Guide to Changing the Patterns of Intimate Relationships*, 1985 pp.102 and 107).

Lerner discusses in many ways the anxiety that so often arises when a person is considering some kind of change that threatens the status quo of a relationship. It is important to learn to tolerate the anxiety that comes with doing or saying something differently. Our anxiety alerts us that we are anticipating a counter-move from the other who will insist that we return to the old pattern that is expected or demanded.

The opposition invariably goes like this: 'You are wrong,' with volumes of evidence to support this. 'Change back and we will accept you again.' 'If you don't change back, these are the consequences,' which are then

listed....The people who most depend on you to be a certain way may equate change with a potential threat or loss. Your job is not to prevent the countermove from happening, which is impossible. Nor is it to advise the other person not to react that way.... Put simply, the challenge of change requires us to anticipate resistance from within and without—and to manage our own anxiety so that we can be our best selves when the other person, out of anxiety, acts like a big jerk (Lerner, *The Dance of Fear: Rising Above Anxiety, Fear and Shame to be your Best and Bravest Self*, 2004 pp.84-85).

Lerner speaks of the courage it takes to stand steady when the counter-moves roll in. She defines courage as the capacity to think, speak, and act in the face of our own fear and shame. “Real courage requires you to sit with the anxiety that change evokes and stay on course when the countermoves start rolling in....When you are ready, courage may require you to act in ways that elicit the fear or discomfort you believe you can't sit with—and then you learn that you can.” (Lerner, *The Dance of Fear: Rising Above Anxiety, Fear and Shame to be your Best and Bravest Self*, 2004 p. 85).

Lerner's work on partnering focuses on the way people move toward connections and the ways people then move away from connections, thus obeying internalized relational templates learned in childhood. She gives many rich and moving examples of couples caught in some kind of dilemma and how with courage and authentic voice deadened relationships can come back to life again. Lerner's work on the restoration of intimacy hinges on people's willingness to take responsibility for their own participation in the relationship dance. The dance of intimacy—of connection and disconnection—most often fades in the face of fear, shame, and anxiety learned in childhood and triggered by relationship difficulties. What is required to overcome childhood relational patterns in our current relationships, says Lerner, is authenticity, courage, and voice.

3. The Imago in Our Relationships of Harville Hendrix

Harville Hendrix launched Imago Relationship Therapy in his 1988 bestselling book, *Getting the Love You Want*, and has continued with the publication of several follow-up books. His key concept is Imago, the Latin word for image. Hendrix demonstrates in his extensive work with couples how experiences with early intimate caregivers as well as later socialization experiences become internalized and organized unconsciously in our mindbody in the form of what would be the “perfect” partner—an unconscious Imago of what we need to complete ourselves.

Consciously we think we choose a partner based on a sensible checklist of good and bad qualities

that would provide a good fit for us. But unconsciously we are searching for something very different entirely. Under the sway of powerful neurotransmitters when we fall in love, we idealize the good qualities of the beloved and we deny the bad. Only when two have entered into a commitment to be partners does the idealization and denial cease and the unconscious agenda begin to assert itself. What we call the chemistry of love is our unconscious need to select someone emotionally similar to those who failed or traumatized us in our childhood—in short Freud’s compulsion to repeat trauma with the hope of mastery. “But childhood is over; we cannot run back to our parents to get what we missed. So we find the next best thing—a relationship that recapitulates in its vital aspects the complex, idiosyncratic pattern of our wounding and loss” (Hendrix, *Keeping the Love You Find: A Personal Guide*, 1992 p. 214).

The tool that our unconscious uses to perform this feat is the Imago. We need an Imago partner in order to grow and heal, says Hendrix. The issues of self paradoxically require relationship for resolution. The partnership itself is the process by which we attempt to reclaim what is missing in ourselves. Hendrix describes how traumas in early relationships get carried over into our adult partnerships.

We are creatures of nature, with the evolutionary program of our species encoded in our genes. We all begin life in a state of relaxed and joyful bliss, with a feeling of connectedness to everything and everyone. Our overwhelming impulse at birth is to sustain this feeling of connectedness, to remain attached. If our caretakers are attuned to our wants and needs, ready and able to provide warmth, safety, and sustenance, our feelings of aliveness and well-being are sustained. We remain whole. But, of course, that's not the way it works out. Even in the best of circumstances, our parents are not able to maintain the perfect standards of our time in the womb, when everything was provided immediately and automatically in an atmosphere of total safety and continuity. Every unmet need causes fear and pain, and in our infantile ignorance, we have no idea how to stop the pain and restore our feeling of safety. Desperate to survive, we adopt primitive coping mechanisms (Hendrix & Hunt, *Getting the Love You Want Workbook*, 2003 pp. 2-3).

All of us, to one degree or another, are nursing childhood wounds, coping as well as we can with the world and our relationships, using the feeble set of defenses born in the pain of childhood. When we fall in love, we believe we've found the bliss we were born with....We decide that we can't live without our beloved, for now we feel whole, we feel like ourselves. Finally, we feel safe and breathe a sigh of relieved deliverance. It looks as if everything is going to turn out all right, after all.... But inevitably...the veil of illusion falls away, and it seems that our partners are different from what we thought they were... Disillusionment turns to anger, fueled by fear that we won't survive without the love and safety that were within our grasp (Hendrix & Hunt, *Getting the Love You Want Workbook*, 2003 pp. 4-5).

Hendrix describes how the Imago process works in relationships.

This image of 'the person who can make me whole again' is what we call the Imago. Though we consciously seek only the positive traits, the negative traits of our caretakers are more indelibly imprinted in our Imago

picture, because those are the traits that caused the wounds we now seek to heal.... Our unconscious need is to have our feelings of aliveness and wholeness restored by someone who reminds us of our caretakers—In other words, someone with the same deficits of care and attention that hurt us in the first place....Our imperfect caretakers, who have been freeze-dried in our memories of childhood, are reconstituted in our partner....

How can we resolve our childhood issues if our partners wound us in the same ways as our caretakers and we are stuck in childhood patterns that wounded our partners?...Consciousness is the key; it changes everything. When we are unaware of the agenda of love, it is a disaster because our childhood scenarios inevitably repeat themselves with the same devastating consequences....

A conscious marriage is not for the faint-hearted. It requires reclaiming the lost, repressed parts of ourselves, which we were told as children were dangerous to have and which we unconsciously hate ourselves for having.... In a conscious marriage, we change to give our partners what they need, no matter how difficult it is, no matter how much it goes against the grain of our personality and temperament....We stretch to become the person our partner needs us to be to heal. This is not easy, but it works....You are already with your dream partner, but at the moment, he or she is in disguise—and, like you, in pain....A conscious marriage itself is the therapy you need to restore your sense of aliveness (Hendrix & Hunt, *Getting the Love You Want Workbook*, 2003 p. 8).

Says Hendrix, most partners remain unconscious in their marriages. They never develop beyond the Imago power struggle, remaining focused on childhood issues that were never resolved. But, despair can be a turning point for couples and can lead to the work that allows both partners to complete the unfinished business of their childhoods.

Harville Hendrix has capitalized on the Freudian insight that we have a compulsion to repeat the traumas of our childhoods in our emotionally intimate adult relationships. Further, Hendrix has capitalized on a widely held truth of marriage counselors—that we locate not only the hated parts of our parents in our intimate partners, but the split-off, dissociated, unwanted parts of ourselves. His solution is bringing the suppressed parts into the light of consciousness—a feat he believes is only possible in a committed intimate relationship. His reasoning and method are radical: We must commit ourselves to being the best possible partner, to “being there” for the other in ways his/her parents of childhood never could be. Paradoxically, in struggling to be there in full conscious emotional responsiveness with our partner we not only “cure” the childhood wounds of our relating partner, but we “cure” our own childhood wounds in the process.

4. The Differentiating Crucible of David Schnarch

Couples’ therapist David Schnarch has clearly formulated how intimacy produces emotional

growth and how emotional growth leads to more differentiated intimate relationships (Schnarch, *Constructing the Sexual Crucible: An Integration of Sexual and Marital Therapy*, 1991). More than telling us simply that rewarding intimate relationships require work—Schnarch specifies what kind of work is required of us and why. Schnarch explains why none of us—men or women—truly wants the upheaval and pain or the self-confrontation necessarily involved in a committed intimate relationship. He explains why we have to come into seemingly irresolvable conflict with our partners before we become willing to undertake the disruptive process of transforming ourselves.

The strong metaphor that Schnarch chooses for describing the possibilities of what can happen in an intimate relationship is a crucible. Schnarch uses crucible in both senses of the word—a container in which new alloys can be forged out of more basic metals, and an extreme situation that tests one's strength and courage to such a degree that one becomes transformed by the experience.

Differentiation is a key concept for Schnarch. He explains that we are born into merged physical and psychological bonds with our caregivers. Within those early intimate bonds of psychological oneness we seek emotional acceptance and validation for our developing selves—the kind of “other-validation” we later seek from the socially-constructed human milieu. In time, and with appropriate encouragement, we begin to differentiate our own private selves from limiting entanglements with others in a process of “self-validation” that serves to establish our sense of separateness. In this way a lifelong process of differentiating ourselves from emotionally influential others becomes initiated.

All subsequent emotional transformations follow this growth cycle of an intimate merger for the purpose of benefiting from contact with others, followed by the painful process of asserting emotional separateness—of differentiating from the seemingly safe harbor of psychological oneness. Schnarch's relationship crucible approach is about using the connections among intimacy, sexuality, and differentiation to facilitate the growth necessary to free yourself from emotional gridlock and experience profound sex and intimacy. The same basic principles hold for sexual as well as non-sexual committed intimate relationships.

Differentiation involves taking a stand that defines you and, at first at least, may evoke ominous responses from your partner. You are likely to hear accusations such as 'You're making a mistake' or 'You'll destroy our relationship' more than once before the benefits kick in. As differentiation increases, this push-pull process stops feeling adversarial and starts feeling more like you are 'worthy opponents'—friendly training partners. It leads

to being true lovers and best friends. Constructing your relationship crucible involves extracting your unresolved personal issues embedded in your gridlocked situation and confronting them as an act of integrity. You do this unilaterally, without counting on your partner to do likewise, and without getting lost in what he is or isn't doing. Intensely satisfying committed relationships trigger fears of engulfment, rejection, deprivation, and being controlled through one's own desire. Irrational fears of pride, hubris, and the 'evil eye' surface in many forms—including the fears of losing the level of love, or safety, or good sex that one has been able to achieve. Becomes the Motto: "Best be satisfied with what one has rather than push the envelope for real satisfaction!" (Schnarch, *Passionate Marriage: Keeping Love and Intimacy Alive in Committed Relationships*, 1997).

Schnarch's position is that we are born emotionally fused into intimate relationship with others. With time and good encouragement we begin to differentiate—to express our own needs and desires that are at odds with the surrounding relational milieu. That is, other-validated intimacy gives way to self-validated intimacy. For Schnarch, personal growth always occurs within the context of emotionally committed intimate relationships. We fall in love with our relationship partner—fall into psychological merger in search of other-validated intimacy. The price partners pay for validating each other in the relationship is the price of loosing oneself, one's capacity for self-validated intimacy. As differences inevitably show up and disillusionment sets in, however, one can decide on a leap of faith and validate oneself rather than the other. Protests inevitably follow as the other experiences the self-validation move as an abandonment. The perceived abandonment and protest trigger a need in the other for self-soothing and a counter self-validating move. At each step of the way each partner needs courage to make leaps of faith as well as a capacity for self-soothing and self-centering during the process of attaining greater self-validation.

Schnarch's metaphor of a crucible as a well-bounded vessel for high firing different metals into strong alloys provides an apt analogy for monogamous commitment as the container in which individual personal growth and strength can occur. According to Schnarch, the paradox involved in intensifying intimacy is that in order to reach our full energetic potential (sexually and otherwise) we must be able to focus on what's going on inside the other person while simultaneously experiencing ourselves as separate from it—and then to see where mutual attention to meanings within the relationship takes us.

Johnson, Lerner, Hendrix, and Schnarch all open up fascinating avenues we can pursue in restoring greater intimacy to our relationships. While none of them offer techniques per se, all of them point thoughtful and useful directions.

Notes

- 1 Johnson, S. (2002). *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy*. New York: Brunner-Routledge. Also Johnson, S. and Whiffen, V. (2003). *Attachment Processes in Couple and Family Therapy*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- 2 Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and Loss: Vol. I, Attachment*. New York: Basic Books.