

JANAE MUNDAY, LCSW

How to Create a Loving Healthy Relationship!

"...love is a skill, not just an enthusiasm"

*" We seem to know far too much about how love starts,
and recklessly little about how it may continue"*

*By Alain de Botton**

These two quotes by Alain de Botton beautifully remind us that creating loving healthy relationships does not come easily. How do we begin to learn the skills required to build a long lasting love? In this paper, I hope to give you some new ways of thinking about love and how to build a nurturing relationship by understanding yourself and your mate on a new level.

First, we need to look at what the scientists are saying about our brains! Because our biology does play a role in how we love and how we fight. The scientists are finding that our brains are prewired to go too readily into battle rather than into love. Our brains think they are protecting us by interpreting the actions of others, even our mates, as potentially hostile and therefore preparing us for a fight! When we are primed in this fight position, everything our mate does is seen through this distorted lens. We automatically go into defense or fight, flight or freeze mode. No wonder 50% of marriages end up in divorce!

How much better it could be if we were able to see our mate's actions as merely their differing expressions of who they are, not necessarily hostile. We can even make up stories about our partners that are false, such as, " he doesn't clean up his messes - that means he doesn't care about me and what's important to me!" What if it meant something else? For example- is he depressed? Does he have ADD? Or is he feeling undervalued for the things that he does do? Or he doesn't value a clean house like you do. In another situation, we could think, " she is always nagging me that? must mean she doesn't really love and appreciate me ." What If it meant she was exhausted? That she's frustrated with not being heard? Or she's holding on to an old script that this is the best way to get my mate's attention? None of the above necessarily mean that your partner does not love you. But instead it may mean that you and your partner need some new tools to communicate to one another in order to build the healthy relationship you want!

This is when we have to shift our brains from a state of going to war to one of building loving relationships. It sounds crazy but often in order to build these healthy, loving relationships we are going to have to fight our own biology! Sounds Hard? Well, actually we already have some practice. There have probably been times for all of us that we have felt angry towards others yet have controlled ourselves. The best example is with our kids! When our child acts bratty, selfish or unkind we do not shame them, call them names, yell at them, stonewall or humiliate them (at least I hope not!). In fact we often try to understand why they are behaving this way. If we need to make an intervention we endeavor to be firm but respectful. Astoundingly, many times, we are much more patient with our kids then we are with our mates!

JANAE MUNDAY, LCSW

“The child teaches the adult something else about love: that genuine love should involve a constant attempt to interpret with maximal generosity what might be going on, at any time, beneath the surface of difficult and unappealing behavior” Alain de Botton*

The great news is if we can practice patience with our children then we certainly can begin to practice it with our mates. It's just much harder with our partners. Try this, the next time you find yourself getting angry at your partner and about to say something unkind, dismissive or stonewalling, Take a Time Out! Take 20 minutes to get yourself calm and ask yourself, 'if my kid just did this how would I react? Would I show him/her more grace? Or would I use a more cherishing tone? Could I see his/her behavior "with maximal generosity"?'

Differentiation

So, what are some other ways to begin this process of moving our brains from the defensive go-to-battle posture to love? How do we turn the ship around? We can start with learning the concept of Differentiation. Couple's expert Ellyn Bader**, states

“Differentiation is individual partners being able to actively define their thoughts, their feelings, their wants and desires to each other and to be able to handle and allow the partner to do the same. “

Let's start with how love begins. When we first fall in love or begin a new relationship we often believe we have found someone who is just like us or our soul-mate. Blissful symbiosis while an important part of falling in love and creating that bond does not last forever. Eventually we begin to realize that the person is not exactly like us but is in fact VERY DIFFERENT in many areas. This is very normal. This phase can happen after the wedding, about 6 months to 2 years into the relationship, varying from couple to couple. As we begin to notice these differences we can become disillusioned. We want them to act the way we imagined our fantasized mate would act. We can become angry and resentful. Angrily insisting they think exactly as we do about a particular subject and continuing to fight with them until they see it our way!. Or we can go into silent mode, not saying a word, submerging our disappointed and angry feelings to avoid conflict. Until one day we've bottled up too much frustration, either blowing our top or moving farther away from our partner creating a distant-colder relationship. A healthy way to manage this struggling time is to begin to keep in mind that our partners may not be wrong but merely different.

Where Differentiation comes in handy. That is to be able to say, “Hey, my partner is not necessarily bad or stupid but just *Different* from me in how he/she thinks about things. How can I better understand him/her? “ Differentiation also means being able to respectfully express your own thoughts, desires or wishes to your partner even when you know they may be very different from his/hers. Once individuals can express their differences clearly and with kindness then they can begin to negotiate a mutually satisfying resolution. Many couples get stuck in this phase of their relationship-unable to differentiate from one another the relationship can crash on the rocks.

JANAE MUNDAY, LCSW

Here's an example from my own marriage of failed differentiation: My husband and I were setting out to clean the garage, I thought I had a brilliantly efficient way to clean it and set out doing so. I soon became aggravated at my husband that he was doing it an entirely different way which, of course, I was sure was wrong! I said a few snarky comments to which he threw a few back at me. All I could see was that my way was right and his was not. He did not appreciate my brilliance and disagreed with me! Finally, after several heated exchanges I stormed out. The good news was I was able to calm down (after about 20 minutes) and think like a differentiated respectful of others adult. I concluded that there is probably no right or wrong way to clean a garage. My husband and I were then able to calmly share our differing ideas of garage cleaning resulting in a much more harmonious afternoon and a clean garage! If only we had discussed our different views and desired outcomes before we started cleaning then a fight could have been avoided. Now we can joke about our different methods as we apply them to other things as well.

Appreciating the richness that differing perspectives can bring to our lives broadens us and teaches us to embrace these differences rather than try to squelch them.

Differentiation is a concept that can take a while to fully learn. I work with all of my couples teaching them how to be more differentiated in their relationships. Expressing our authentic selves and accepting our differences, at first, can feel uncomfortable or even anxiety provoking.

But . . . ***Once we get there we can achieve a deeper level of intimacy with one another. Learning to see our partners as flawed adults with their own internal struggles and sharing our own vulnerabilities with them deepens the love and grace in our relationship. . . .***

--- Janae Munday, LCSW---

YOUR EXERCISE TREAT - The Daily Double!! Lastly, I want to share with you a great exercise developed by Dr. Pete Pearson of the Couples Institute. This exercise can help you shift your focus from the negative to the positive. It assists the brain in getting out of the "ready to fight" mode. It also is a great exercise to help build differentiation because it asks us to do something completely independent of our mates. It is NOT about reacting to our mates but instead about us initiating a positive action that we know would be meaningful to them. Have Fun With It!

("The Daily Double" is provided on the following pages)

*The quotes are from Alain de Botton's book, "The Course of Love" copyright 2016.

**Dr's Ellyn Bader and Pete Pearson are founders of The Couples Institute. They are leading experts in the field of couples therapy. They have brought the concept of *Differentiation* in couples to the fore of couples work throughout the world.

Tracking Success by Doing "The Daily Double"

Here's something you can do for your relationship today. It's called ***The Daily Double***. You earn two points today by doing two positive things on the positive list below, while avoiding doing any of the negative behaviors from the list at the end.

Let's up the ante and go for the ***Thirty Day Challenge***. Do ***The Daily Double*** for 30 days straight. If you slip up and do one of the negative behaviors in the box at the end of this article, start over again at Day 1 until you have 30 consecutive ***Daily Doubles***. Be sure to track your accomplishments every day.

Why do this practice? Your brain **cannot** be appreciative and simultaneously be angry, fearful or resentful. It's like trying to breathe in and out at the same time- you can't do it.

The more you practice being appreciative and take positive action, the more you crowd out fear and resentment.

So, put this list where you can review it daily. Keep a fresh reminder and do your part to create a better connection.

This simple (but not easy) exercise will definitely make a positive impact on your connection with each other. This is the marriage equivalent of an out of shape person getting into shape. **It won't happen without effort!**

Even better, you are the one in control of whether or not you do ***The Daily Double*** for thirty days. You can't blame your partner if you don't do it. Actually you can blame your partner, but it's you opting out.

Twenty-Four Ways to be Positive

I listened to difficult comments and kept my cool.

I was able to recap what I was hearing in a conversation.

I expressed compassion in a difficult situation.

When I felt I needed to solve a problem, I first asked my partner if they wanted advice.

I used some appropriate humor, which my partner appreciated.

I asked several questions before butting in with my reactions.

I took several relaxing breaths instead of negatively commenting on an annoying habit.

I expressed appreciation at least twice today.

I took this further and expressed why I was appreciative of what my partner did.

I took a time out to stop a downward spiraling argument.

I apologized for my part in a bad situation or conversation.

I went out of my way to do something nice for my partner.

I had kind and loving thoughts about my partner today.

When I had negative thoughts about my partner, I shifted to thinking of what I appreciated.

I emailed my partner at least one appreciation today.

I texted my partner at least one appreciation today.

I said both "please" and "thank you" today.

I made better eye contact today.

I kept my voice tone positive during a difficult discussion.

I told my partner how I would like them to respond to me before talking about a difficult topic. For example, "I just want you to listen with concern. No advice needed, just support."

I looked for something positive in my partner today then expressed it.

I asked a series of questions about my partner's perspectives and reality. I genuinely was curious.

I took the initiative doing something I know my partner would value.

I expressed empathy for my partner's feelings or experience.

Important note to self: I thought about how I aspired to be before having a difficult discussion. For example, be curious about my partner's perspective, be patient, be calm, be assertive, be concise, be considerate, be understanding, etc.

Focusing on how you aspire to be is an exceptionally good way to have better discussions immediately.

If you do something positive today that's not on the list, write it down and count it --- and congratulate yourself. You're tracking your success!

Today I practiced being:

Affectionate

Kind

Generous

Supportive

Caring

Curious and asking good questions vs telling or preaching

Understanding vs pushing my perspective

Thoughtful and considerate

Grateful for things I usually take for granted

Today I avoided these negative behaviors

Sarcasm

Cold shoulders

Saying "never"

Interrupting

Name calling

Blaming/accusing

Guilt and shaming

Being resentfully compliant

Raising my voice inappropriately

Being vague about what I wanted

Criticizing what my partner wanted

Changing the topic during a difficult discussion

Asking blaming questions like, "Why do you always-?"

Psychoanalyzing my partner during a difficult discussion