

## It takes two to tango: Emotional connection in couple relationships

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The mysteries of passion, love, and how to best live day to day in a couple relationship is one of the most constant subject of conversations. Literature is dominated by these themes and movies make millions from the subject, highlighting how couple relationships are a major source of emotional passion and joy, as well as the deepest pain. For the past 30 years, as a psychologist specialising in couples and family therapy, I have found that couples are very different in how they manage the demands of day-to-day living. However, when couples are suffering and struggling with various forms of pain, as well as the pathways out of the pain, they are remarkably similar. Consequently, I will say very little about the unique connection which we all create with our partners, be they opposite or same sex, but I will provide you with some suggestions and questions to promote your appreciation of what you have co-created with your partner. I will focus more on increasing your understanding of what may have contributed to your relationship distress and provide some practical ideas for pathways out of the pain, which in the long run provide an opportunity to strengthen your couple relationship.

There is now a growing body of research about how ecstatic joys and the depths of pain in couple relationships fit together;

some poets and writers worked it out long ago, but now they have science to add authority to their ideas. Just as there was a time when we did not know about the link between bacteria and life-threatening infectious diseases and many incorrect and dangerous beliefs filled the knowledge space, psychological research has some sound ideas about how strong mutual attraction, love bonds and dark painful emotions are part of the ecology of strong and long-standing couple relationships. We know much more than ever before how ‘coupleness’ can both grow and be destroyed by hurt feelings that come from disappointment, betrayal, anger, rage, hate and revenge. With some confidence, the research can provide a list of do’s and don’ts in how to grow our couple relationships so that we can enjoy life, and maintain good physical and mental health.

By the end of this chapter, I hope you will have a better understanding of how and why you and your partner are attracted to each other, how your emotional connection works, and why you both overreact, explode and say things that end up hurting each other. I will touch on what we know about how to grow, preserve and prevent deterioration of the deep and rhythmic connection of being in your couple relationship. I encourage you to focus on your particular repair process, and explore how you unintentionally contribute to ruptures in your closest relationships. Our relationship repair processes change over time and you may think about what such change may be. As you read this chapter, you may come up with ideas on how you can improve your ‘emotional-relational’ skills, and contribute to growing passion and love for your partner. I encourage you to think about how to increase the maturity with which you approach couple conflict and reflect on how to do the best you can to manage you and your partner’s vulnerabilities. It is quite normal that we all carry a reservoir of dark emotions and destructive urges, but what makes the difference is how we manage this emotional part of ourselves within our closest relationship.

As a starting point, we all need to persistently lay to rest the most powerful incorrect belief about our relationships, which is that ‘I’m right and s/he is wrong’; research is very clear ‘it takes two to tango’. At the end of the chapter, I list a few of the many useful books on the subject and encourage you to seek well-qualified professional help when your natural relationship building and repair processes get stuck.

### **How do the rhythmic emotional connections in couple relationships work?**

We really like and want to feel alive, happy, loved, calm, excited, liked, wanted, understood, and above all, connected to our nearest and dearest. From our very first breath, we are closeness-seeking beings. We have a basic need for warmth and connection in our closest relationships in order to physically grow, to be mentally and physically healthy, to learn, to speak, to think, to eat, and to manage our emotions and our destructive urges. We also learn how to develop friendships and intimate relationships on foundations we acquired early in life, and the good news is that we can build and modify these foundations throughout life. We have a basic need to ‘look at’ each other and be seen, known, understood, and acknowledged, and with positive and warm relational foundations, we can trust and feel safe in relationships. However, there are many factors beyond our control or the control of our parents that generate trauma and emotional pain that result in us not feeling safe. The good news is that we have an enormous capacity to rebuild and restore our sense of safety in relationships.

As we grow from child to adult, we are magnetically attracted to some people much more than others. This process is driven by our inbuilt urge to be close and relationally successful, and it may also be part of a restorative process. In such relationships, we enjoy the person much more than others. The fun is more intense, the talking, listening and just being with a ‘special’ person has a

heightened quality. Ordinary and simple activities are much more enjoyable with someone with whom we feel a strong mutual attraction. Strong mutual attraction is not just a fleeting emotional state, but it changes the chemistry of our brain. We feel so much more physically and emotionally alive, energised, curious and adventurous, in such relationships. The most emotionally powerful version of mutual attraction is ‘being in love’ and includes intense emotional and sexual attraction. Feeling that we are really loved and wanted both emotionally and physically is particularly important in managing the day-to-day, as well as sustaining us at emotionally difficult times.

When things are not going well in our lives and the rhythm of our day-to-day life is stressful, with a high risk of multiple loss of the precious resources in our lives, this is the time when we most need and seek out safe, loving relationships. The research shows that during highly stressful times, couples who have low criticism or judgement of each other will come through such times of loss more united and deeply connected than couples where there is high criticism. Tough times are most effectively faced by couples who provide each other simple support, physical–emotional soothing, attempt to understand about the effect of the stress on the other, and want to be near each other as they problem-solve what needs to be done next. Such couples emerge stronger and more passionately connected than before the losses, as well as having better mental health, including less depression or post-traumatic stress symptoms. But this is not easy to do; it takes reflection and mental effort to do it well. Couples who persist in trying to do it better each time gain the benefits as if they did it really well first time. We all have trigger points and vulnerabilities — some are much more sensitive than others — and in the heat of the moment, all of us have said and done nasty things to the person we love because of these triggers.

Angela and Simon were married 26 years, had three girls and one boy, their youngest, who had a major physical and intellectual disability from birth, and had needed significant interventions to develop his capacity to function. At 19 years old, he was able to attend his graphic design course independently. Both parents were very proud of their son's achievement but their relationship had suffered enormously. The tension between Simon and Angela had increased to the point that their eldest daughter, with the support of her three siblings, spoke to them very firmly. They described what their daughter said, and they agreed that tension between them was affecting everyone in the family. She put to them that they either sort it out or separate.

Simon and Angela had built a small business and devoted themselves to meeting the needs of their children. They took very little time off because there were always tasks to be done that just could not wait. In particular, Simon had spent many years overwhelmed and on edge, while Angela 'kept on keeping on'. They spoke very little to each of the loneliness, disappointment and losses they were both were suffering. Instead, their minds were dominated by inner conversations of how much they were each doing and how hard it was, but the worst part was that each were keeping a tally of all the dishes that were not put in the dishwasher, the socks or cups that were left lying around, and so on. Periodically, external stress would increase and some apparently small difference between them would explode into a sequence of very nasty fights that were repetitive and overwhelming for their family. It took weeks for civil interaction between Angela and Simon to be re-established, and the warm kind interaction with their children softened the tension between them. This went on for years until, within a few months, Angela became very unwell and the business had a rapid growth spurt. Simon put his energy to riding the wave of growth and Angela went into hospital with her children by her side and not her husband. When Angela recovered her strength, the tension between them escalated to the point that their children stepped in.

Look back on your personal record. You may notice that tension and possibly 'fights' occur at times of mutual high stress, or loss, or high level of anticipated loss. In this regard, we are all alike and equally vulnerable. It is a good practice to acknowledge that 'we are going through a hard time and we need to take care of each other ... this is the help I need'. In such times it is good practice to be particularly kind to each other, accept help and support, accept each others shortcomings, do not criticise, be thoughtful and demonstrate warmth and respect of the other. If you can, talking about it is even better, but it is important to carefully listen to the verbal and non-verbal communication. Listen to what the other has to say and you will learn some very important things about your partner's strengths and vulnerabilities. Do not be surprised to find that this kind of nurturing effort is not equally invested during any particular difficult time, but over many such times there does need to be balance and fairness. Inequity at any particular time is normal, because we are not equally affected by hard times. At one time you will be more affected and depleted than the other, and we know from research that the more emotionally depleted we are the less nurturing we can invest in the other. However, when you are both depleted, it is wise to acknowledge it and seek emotional support and assistance for your relationship. This may involve talking to friends or family members or seeking professional help. At such times it is important to become aware that an unhelpful inner conversation may begin to dominate your mind and it may include themes such as 'look what I've done for you ... why don't you pull your weight and care for me ...'. In general, such inner conversations are more indicative of the pain and depleted state, than accurate statements about the relationship.

Even for couples like Angela and Simon, who for many years were doing reasonably well in keeping connected, attuned and aware of each other's emotional wellbeing, such negative inner conversations can begin to take over their thinking about the

other. When such tallying began to dominate Angela and Simon's inner conversation, it slowly but profoundly changed the emotional rhythm between them. Each couple has their unique patterns of fairness and injustices, as well as who contributes what and how much. From time to time, it is worth reflecting on the relative contributions to the warmth and connection between you and your partner. It is particularly important to acknowledge what your partner has contributed or how they helped you during your difficult time or at mutually difficult times. There are as many ways to acknowledge each other's contributions as there are couples, but one of the most clear differences in style is between the couples who are comfortable with overt emotional expressiveness and those who are more comfortable with more subtle emotional expression.

Research indicates that, in general, our preferred style of emotional expression is a combination of temperament and a family emotional culture. Some families more readily encourage the expression of emotions; 'say it as it is' is an aspect of the family motto. The advantage of this way of managing emotional states is that it can facilitate an emotionally honest and visible relational rhythm, and as a couple it is more obvious how each other feels, the effect we have on each other and thus there are only a few emotional undercurrents. However, emotions generate very powerful states of arousal and along with 'say it as it is' we need to learn 'good governance' of our emotional expression. We need to develop our knowledge on how to de-escalate, when to stop the expression of intense emotions and how to soothe the pain and repair hurt feelings. Learning how to soothe and repair the hurt we inflict on a loved one can be quite difficult, particularly if there is no reservoir of knowledge about repairing ruptured relationships in the family. It is very confronting to hear that we have hurt, disappointed, saddened, and angered our near and dear. The principles of soothing and repairing a rupture in a relationship are challenging but straightforward:

1. Calmly listen and develop your compassion for the other.
2. Express your regret for the wounds you inflicted.
3. Apologise more than once.
4. Acknowledge your partner's good intentions towards you and describe your own good intentions towards your partner.
5. Make a mental note to monitor yourself and periodically renew your effort not to do it again.

Simon and Angela were very good at 'saying it as it is' and brought up their children to be emotionally honest and expressive. They were a romantic couple who were comfortable with looking in each other's eyes, expressing loving and tender emotions, and having special rituals and traditions of celebrating birthdays and acknowledging important events. The distance between them began almost imperceptibly. It started with the loss of special moments and slowly increased when the overwhelming stress and demands of work and family left them both depleted of the enthusiasm and energy needed to create those 'special' moments that acknowledged and celebrated their emotional connection. Slowly and without their awareness, their inner conversation shifted to keeping tally of the perceived injustices and disappointments, until one day neither had the urge to tenderly touch the other or say anything about love or liking for each other. Thus the emotional rhythm between them had changed.

Paradoxically, when distance between Simon and Angela increased and loneliness set in, their individual need to be warmly noticed, to look in each other's eyes and to speak tenderly to each other, increases enormously. The loss of the tender and loving expressiveness between them left them resentful, and the urge to tally their disappointments grew. When they were both at home the emotional climate radiated out into family interactions and the non-specific tension between them fuelled edgy conversations and readily escalated into nasty explosive fights over nothing. Couples such as Simon and Angela often struggle to understand how they

can end up in such a different emotional rhythm. Some individuals can describe how the warmth in their relationship gradually eroded, but it is very hard to recognise how you have contributed to such erosion when you are hurting and wounded. Research shows that emotional pain floods the human mind and it is very difficult to be self-reflective while in pain. Emotionally honest self-reflection and our capacity to genuinely think about how events unfolded often begins when our emotional pain subsides. It is normal to resort to blaming our partner when we are really hurting but this is also an opportunity to develop our personal maturity and the quality of our relationship. Research has shown that when we can learn to soothe our pain, recognise and acknowledge that 'it takes two to tango' then as a couple we begin to think and talk about our personal contribution to the relational distress.

At the other end of the expressiveness spectrum of family-emotional culture, are families and communities which encourage moderation in the expression of emotion and regard the expression of intense, dark, and sometimes loving romantic emotions, as a sign of weakness and/or immaturity; 'say it with subtlety' is the motto. The advantage of this way of managing emotional states is that it facilitates an emotionally peaceful relational rhythm and minimises conflict. As a couple, there is an unspoken agreement that the individuals devote effort to moderating and soothing their own emotional state and that of their partner. In these relationships, couples are gently spoken, courteous, kind, and compassionate, and try to be attuned to their dear one. The mutual effort is on 'looking after each other' with subtlety and acceptance, without criticism and judgement.

As a couple, the challenge is to learn how best to sense what is going on between us because overt expression of emotions is regarded as problematic. It is also quite difficult to know how best to acknowledge that we can be hurt and to courteously express complaints, disappointments, emotional pain, and all the other ways in which we badly affect each other. Often the greatest

challenge can be to learn how to respect the intensity of our own and our partner's range of emotional states, rather than feel guilty or immature and a failure. Feelings such as disappointment, hurt, sadness, anger and other emotions are genuinely powerful neuro-physiological states, and suppressing or disallowing them can rupture the couple relationship, just as much as an excessive and intense expression of emotions. The cycle of erosion of warmth and connection is much the same as for an expressive couple but it occurs covertly and a small event can trigger a very intense and serious singular explosion. After such a singular 'meltdown', and without an emotionally honest conversation acknowledging the rupture in the relationship, such couples can quite quickly revert to appearing as before but the emotional rhythm has changed.

Each couple has its own unique emotional ecology, which is different to every other couple, and we need to respect and to commit ourselves to learning about the 'tango' we dance with our partner. We all need to continually learn about what draws us together, how we can best maintain our mutual attraction, how the ruptures in the relationship occur, and own up to our contribution to the emotional mistakes, as well as our unique ways of repairing the relationship.

As couples, we also live within a wider social-familial-work context, which has enormous impact on how we conduct our relationship. Our relationships need acknowledgement, support and encouragement from our wider family, workplace and the community. The lack of such social-legal-familial recognition and respect of 'being a real couple' is very painful and may cascade into a significant source of stress within the relationship, generating inexplicable conflicts and interfering with the natural development of a substantial emotional couple bond. When your couple relationship is not honoured and supported by parents, or the law or the workplace, it can be very distressing and such pain can interfere with getting to know each other deeply. It is worth discussing with your partner as to whether people in your

workplace, your family and your wider community, honour and respect your partner and your relationship. If there is such distress in either of you, it is very important to develop ways to prevent it from cascading into conflicts in your relationship, and these may include patiently listening to each other, describing and acknowledging how you both experience the disrespect or disapproval, and then working out how to stand together and face it.

### **Mutual attraction, emotional rhythms and putting your best foot forward**

The role of strong mutual attraction is to light the deeper emotional connection, and it has the potential for a co-creation of mutually sustaining relationship. The capacity to feel strongly attracted to, fall in love or be smitten with another is built into our DNA. Over a lifetime, we will be attracted to many different people; it is nature's way of giving us multiple options. However, we can choose how we respond to and build on that initially strong attraction, because without developing these feelings, they will fade when confronted with the demands, stresses and traumas of life. We are neuro-physiologically designed to want more of those special moments, and strong mutual attraction is at the core of a good emotional rhythm. Deepening mutual attraction is much more than finding new mutual interests and activities to do together or having romantic dinners or holidays together, but these can be helpful. Research with longstanding and deeply connected couples has shown that mutual attraction is greatly deepened by how supportively the couple face their hardships and challenges. For example, many women report that the father's devotion and quality of nurturing of a sick or crying child, increased his attractiveness as a man and partner. Similarly, men report their attraction to and respect for their partner deepening as a direct consequence of how much his partner 'believed in me ... and stood by me'. When things are going well, it is hard to 'see' or even be aware of how we are contributing to the emotional

rhythm and its flow, but when life becomes difficult and stressful the depth of the connections and emotional rhythm becomes much clearer. Hence it is important to reflect on how to 'be in it together', 'have faith in each other', and put your best foot forward with your partner over and above all others.

There are very good reasons why in the early stages of relationships we put our best foot forward; we want to foster the mutual attraction and the emotional rhythm, to enjoy more of it, grow it and, to see and feel that 'new person' we can be with in this new relationship. When times are difficult, we all change somewhat and it is important that our partner get to know, understand, and like who we are at such times. The strong mutual attraction that brings couples together and with which we create a unique emotional rhythm, needs to make the transition to be present when times are stressed and challenging. As we get to know and understand our partners the mutual attraction grows, and the relationship feels more substantial. Periodically it is helpful to reflect and tell each other about all the little things we do or do not do in our day-to-day lives that feed the flow of warmth, passion, kindness, support and deep care; it is the small things that count, and it is the small things that repair or rupture the emotional rhythm in relationships. Have a talk about how you and your partner put your 'best foot forward'. How did the emotional rhythm feel in the early days of your relationship? How has the emotional rhythm evolved and what have you learned about each other, and what happens to the emotional rhythm when times are stressful?

Sarah and Tom, both in their late 30s, had been together for 13 years. They had three children, substantive careers, a mortgage, a dog and two cats. They liked each other's families, had a wide social circle and worked very hard. They came to see me for couple and family therapy. The birth of two of their three children had been difficult. Sarah was very unwell and Tom had been very impacted by the pressures of work, keeping up with the mortgage and

looking after Sarah and the babies. They did have help from their parents but it was tentative and somewhat distant. They had both kept quiet as to how hard it was for them and possibly did not even realise it themselves. They both came from families that were very good at gathering resources, working hard and enduring without communicating about the impact. Tom explicitly wanted to protect Sarah from his pressures. Sarah had learnt from her mother not to burden men with her emotions. Their goal for their couples therapy was to 'improve our communication'. Sarah said: 'Tom works long hours and we [Sarah and the three children] hardly see him ... he just does not communicate.' Tom said: 'I just don't understand what she wants of me anymore ... she is always complaining and criticising me.' Sarah was shocked to hear that Tom felt she was criticising him. From her perspective, it was not possible; Tom was wrong. In her mind she respected and treasured Tom, but by the end of the day she really missed him and needed him to be home with her and the children. Tom's relentless work kept him away from home or working at home and she wanted them to be 'a family together'. They proudly described how well they managed picking up and dropping the children at school and childcare, managing their home and the demands of their respective careers. They described this as '... we work together really well' and were confused and very scared by the huge well of unacknowledged sadness, loneliness and disappointment in their relationship that the therapy began to expose. They did not understand why their attempts to 'make things better' and to bring more joy in their life, so quickly faded into emotional insignificance.

### **Your idealised relationship and your real-life relationship**

We are neuro-physiologically designed to seek closeness and love, and we experience disappointment and emotional pain when there is a loss of closeness. Research shows that the loss of closeness is much more powerful than a gain of closeness. Our brains are powerfully impacted by loss, emotional injury and disappointment,

to such an extent that all the wonderful moments appear to just evaporate. We have all experienced that wonderful day when everything has been so close and loving and then one apparently small disappointing event can spoil the emotional harmony. It is what we do next that is very important to the quality of our lives. Research has shown that relationships grow stronger and deeper through the process of rupture and repair. The cycle of strengthening a relationship begins with a rupture in the relationship. Hence those powerful moments of emotional injury can become the beginning of a relationship repair, which over time deepens the connection between two strongly mutually attracted people.

It is very fortunate that we now have sound research to help us understand what Sarah and Tom are experiencing, because the idealised picture of relationships tells us a different story. Tom's idealised picture of relationships is much like Sarah's: 'real love' can overcome all adversity. Our community, friends and our parents are very powerful influences in constructing our picture of how relationships work. Sarah and Tom both described their parents as very happy couples and they had no picture of the ups and downs of their parents' marriages. Their families' mottos were very similar: 'Work hard, protect each other, don't talk about the dark emotions and true love will see you through.' Tom and Sarah have a genuine strong bond; however, they both needed the subtle signs of closeness and warmth to cope with the tough times of illness, birth and rearing of their children. Their genuine and protective desire to 'not burden' the other with their feelings meant that their relationship had become depleted, and had settled into 'endurance mode'.

Privately, Sarah and Tom put great effort into saying nothing, kept up 'a brave face' and did not know about the other's emotional rollercoaster. Finally, late one night when Tom came home after a difficult day at work, Sarah, with much pent-up emotion and in an unusually intense tone in her voice, rapidly fired a barrage of questions at Tom, saying: 'Why did you come home so

late? Am I and the kids not important to you? ... Have you stopped loving me? ... Are we so insignificant to you?' On the receiving end, Tom, unused to intense emotional communication, was overwhelmed and heard only a barrage of criticism. Sarah's questions were so full of complex emotions that he did not know what to say or where to start and said nothing. Tom is particularly good at holding it all in and enduring. His silence only added fuel to Sarah's distress. She read Tom's silence as a rejection. Within minutes, they were both very wounded, feeling lost and painfully alone. They really missed the closeness they had in the times before the children were born. In the dark conversation in their minds, they each conclude 'he-she no longer wants or loves me'.

Sarah and Tom were not unusual when they became stuck in their silence. However, they were wise enough to agree to call it 'a lack of communication' and sought out professional help. There is much more going on in their life and their relationship that has made it very difficult to find a way out of their stuckness. They have a history of not enough desire to have an intimate conversation about their inner emotional experience. Conducting an intimate conversation and asking direct questions about feelings such as 'How are you feeling? You look so tired and sad, or are you scared or are you overwhelmed, tell me what's going on? Did I hurt you? I'm so sorry; I did not realise what was going on'; this was all unknown territory for them. They were too focused on protecting and not burdening each other and did not know that sharing your burdens halves the burdens and does not double them. The endurance and protection of each other had ruptured their relationship. They both knew something was 'not right' but they did not know how to repair it. Many people do not realise that closeness and warmth ease the hardships of life, just as much if not more than the practical problem-solving and wise decision-making. Why it works so well is that in closely listening to what the other has experienced, the listener can genuinely respond by saying 'Oh so that is how you felt ... I never realised', or 'Oh that's

why you are so hurt ... I'm so sorry', or 'Oh .. that's what it meant to you .... I never knew'. Such simple statements are a very powerful means of repairing the rupture in relationships, as well as strengthening it.

We are all a bit like Tom, and experience an intensely emotionally charged sequence of questions and statement as criticisms and judgments, and it hurts. However, men and women are significantly different in how we deal with such experiences. Research has found that men read emotional tone, become overwhelmed and miss the message of such interaction. Women may feel hurt but are not so readily overwhelmed and read the tone and content differently. If two women were engaged in a similar interaction as Tom and Sarah, the two women are more likely to continue the conversation regardless of the hurt feelings and emotional intensity. They are more likely to end the interaction by reassuring each other of their good intentions, thus increasing the chance of resolving their misunderstanding. If two men engaged in a similar interaction the tone would be less likely to be intense and more likely to be brief and understated. The gender differences are not hard and fast, nor are these difference set in stone. We know that some men are more emotionally like Sarah and some women are more like Tom. The good news is that many couples learn to reduce the intensity of the feelings, and continue the conversation until they come to an understanding. Some couples will have the conversation in stages, over a period of time, while others can learn to soothe and find a new understanding in one sitting.

After a few sessions of therapy, Tom and Sarah grew in their confidence to talk through their disappointments and emotional wounds, and that painful silence became a thing of the past. They learnt new habits of how to soothe themselves and each other, and to repair the ruptures in their relationship. They were increasingly able to speak about their loving intentions towards each other and could listen, without feeling criticised, to the effect various of their actions had on the other.

## **Knowing and accepting yourself and your partner as vulnerable human beings.**

Sarah and Tom are normal and good people, and like most of us have vulnerabilities, weaknesses, shortcomings and bad habits. All couples have relationship issues and misunderstandings; this is a normal part of life. The terrible suffering in our closest relationships is due to our unhelpful emotional habits or bad habits, which make the issues appear insurmountable, while good habits of interaction and conversation make the issues either feel manageable or resolvable. However, there is a very fine line between an unhelpful habit, a bad habit and a good habit. In most cases, what makes the difference is when, where, how often and why the emotional habits become activated. In general, bad habits increase the emotional distance, create more pain, more silence, more criticism, more contempt and less respect in a relationship. Unhelpful habits generally contribute to a feeling that 'we take three steps forward two steps back', and as you would expect, good habits have the feeling that 'steadily we are getting somewhere and it feels better in this relationship'.

Our good or unhelpful or bad habits are our means of managing and protecting our vulnerabilities. We can all sense that there are better ways and more destructive ways to respond when we are faced with challenging issues in our relationship. But confronted and hurt, we just use the habits we have regardless of the effectiveness or destructiveness of what we have done. Mostly, it is in hindsight that we can recognise that we have not done as well as we would have liked, and the task is to repair the rupture in our relationship. But if we do not take a careful look at our vulnerabilities, emotional habits, and how we react in our relationship, the pattern will keep repeating itself. Bad habits in dealing with relationship issues can exhaust and deplete our most important relationship.

Recognising vulnerabilities is difficult and mostly we are unaware of our own, and do not correctly name our partner's vulnerabilities. Vulnerabilities become most visible when we go into an emotional tailspin or meltdown or lose the plot. In general, human vulnerabilities are linked with experiences of loss, rejections, loneliness, disappointment, guilt, exposure, shame or humiliation and others. Vulnerabilities are always present but below our awareness; we have numerous ways of protecting our vulnerabilities, and there is always an emotionally powerful and touching story about the origin of the vulnerability. Some of the events in these stories are current or recent painful experiences while others are unattended, longstanding wounds from the past.

An important piece of good news about our vulnerabilities and emotionally strong couple relationship is that when a relationship is working well, we feel safe that our partner accepts and loves us with our vulnerabilities and shortcomings, but most of all will contribute to easing the wounds that are the source of the vulnerability. The most direct way to recognise vulnerabilities in ourselves and in our partner is to think about our most recent emotional tailspin. Ask yourself: 'Why was my reaction so intense and which of my vulnerabilities did that comment or experience touch in me?'

After the emotional tailspin between Sarah and Tom, and once Sarah had time to settle and think about what had happened between herself and Tom, she felt increasingly more and more ill at ease and somewhat distressed. To her credit, while feeling the way she was, she began to reflect on the questions and statements which she had fired at Tom and on Tom's silence. She knew that she had gone too far in what she said. She also wondered about the few words Tom uttered and his ongoing pained silence. She knew him well enough to recognise that Tom was in deep pain and had retreated down his protective burrow. She had touched some of her own and Tom's vulnerabilities. Sarah noticed that this time it took a week or so for him to be able to initiate a conversation.

Sarah had calmed down and was regretful and reflective within a few hours. In contrast, settling his emotions was a much more lengthy process for Tom. Over the course of the week, Sarah would quietly look at Tom, while in her mind there was a very complex series of echoes and reflections: 'He's just like his father; a quiet good man with not a bad bone in his body, but he is so vulnerable.' She could see it but she did not know or understand what she was seeing. What also popped into her mind was: 'Why did I do it? Why did I say those terrible things? I hurt him so much! Why was I so hurt on that night? He came home at his usual time and he told me he has lots of complications at work.'

As her emotions settled, Sarah became increasingly aware that her emotionally intense questions were driven by a dark well of loneliness and that she deeply missed Tom, his presence and his wonderful assistance with the children. She remembered events in the recent past that clearly demonstrated that Tom was a good and loyal man, and recalled some of the many wonderful times they had together. She remembered times when they were so attuned that they did not need to talk but just felt what the other was thinking. Now some years later, not only had their sex life decreased in frequency but it was squeezed into the small cracks between the demands of their family and work lives. In the past, their sex life was at the heart of their deepest connection, a place where time stood still and they brought each other great joy. Sarah was coming up with ideas about a way forward.

Tom's mind was also active in an attempt to facilitate his recovery from the emotional crisis, but his line of thinking was quite different. Tom's mind remained flooded by severe emotional pain and in the brief moments between the demands of his work, his mind collected evidence of Sarah's lack of appreciation of all he has done for her and the family, her lack of understanding of his work demands and who he is, but most of all his mind had been telling him that she no longer wants or loves him. His inner dialogue travelled into emotionally charged moments from the

distant past, which had remained unfinished and unrepaired. His precise mind gathered the smallest pieces of evidence to support his conclusion that she no longer loved him. By the end of the week he had emotionally settled to some degree by thinking about, and facing the worst possibility. He had not spent any time reflecting on his own vulnerabilities; instead he played them out. Unfortunately, he was so wounded that he had gone into 'self-protection' mode and was generating a large catalogue of Sarah's bad habits and shortcomings, and losing sight of the person for whom he still held a strong attraction and personal respect.

Research has helped us understand the difference between Sarah and Tom just as it did for Angela and Simon, and the themes are similar. The male and female brains and nervous systems are differently focused and the feedback between emotions and thoughts has some subtle but important differences. The male brain and nervous system is neuro-physiologically designed for problem-solving and protecting, and under stressful conditions men can do extraordinary things to protect their loved ones. However, Simon and Tom responded similarly when faced with intense, unexpected accusatory statements and questions from their partner, whom they regarded themselves as protecting. The evidence is growing that men's nervous system has a high need of attunement, and it becomes profoundly overwhelmed when there is a loss of attunement in their closest relationships, such as their mother, father or partner. However, men also do not show their vulnerability, and they can continue going to work while at the same time, as Tom's mind illustrated, problem-solving by generating a list of Sarah's shortcomings and constructing the worst possible scenario.

The female nervous system is built for attunement, emotionally reaching out, listening and managing emotions. However, when women become highly emotionally depleted, the pain emerging from the loss of the relationship can be surprisingly huge. However, regardless of how enormous the emotional pain may appear at any

particular point in time, women's nervous systems appear to settle more quickly than do men's nervous systems. There are a number of other significant and interesting differences that may help you to understand the ecology of your relationship.

In therapy, after Tom described his inner conversation and the lengthy catalogue of shortcomings, including his own, I reminded them both that 'It takes two to tango' and that the issues in their life are not a problem so much as our bad habits in how we deal with them. We spoke about what they each regret about how they had handled themselves and their partner's vulnerabilities. They were both very thoughtful about what they would have liked to have done differently and thus the repair process had begun. I also explained that as they each contribute to repairing the ruptures in their relationship, they need to be patient and not expect immediate improvement because they are still vulnerable and it is one step at a time.

Tom, like all of us, is terrified of being 'dumped' because of his shortcomings. It is very painful to be rejected and unwanted, so we protect ourselves by preparing our mind to face the worst possible circumstance. Some couples live for many years with one foot in and one foot out of their relationship, leaving it structurally weakened; this is a good example of a really bad habit. Fortunately, Tom was brave enough to clearly declare that he really wants Sarah, and had ideas how to improve the warmth between them. He and Sarah discovered that they were on the same page; they want their relationship to be much better than it was before. Having hopes and dreams for your relationship is a very good habit as long as you keep talking about it and take your dreams seriously.

Sarah and Tom worked out that they had neglected to develop the rich emotional rhythm with which they had started their mutual bond. The time had come to do something new and somewhat unfamiliar; they needed to have the conversations, which they had not known how to have. They had just 'lived

through' and 'kept going alone' through a number of enormously difficult times. The absence of these conversations had kept their relationship caught in 'missing and mourning the loss of the time before babies'. Emotionally real and intimate conversations about stresses and hardships have the effect of restructuring relationships, so that the bond and intimacy can be a major resource and support for the couple. All couples need their relationship to be the source of replenishment and a haven from all the trials and tribulations of their lives. Tom and Sarah, and Simon and Angela decided that they had chosen their respective partners wisely. It is a very good sign that both couples respected their partner, regardless of their shortcomings. As Sarah and Tom 'put their best foot forward' and developed the habit of having intimate and candid conversations, their love for each other re-emerged and their mutual attraction grew stronger. They restructured and adjusted their relationship to the pace and demands of their family and professional life.

### **Constructive relational patterns**

There are many more different kinds of constructive relationship patterns than there are bad habits. Some good relationships have lots of fighting and tears, while others are quiet and avoid conflict. All good relationships have periods of distress, disappointment, dissatisfaction, anger, silence, tears, fighting and loneliness. Good relationships even have periods of separations. But in all good relationships the partners have a very broad range of ways in which they express their respect for each other and their determination to deal with their differences and their conflicts. The most constructive patterns in couple relationships involve agreement to listen to each other's descriptions of various experiences and to think about and learn from these, regardless of whether they agree or not. It is important to co-create an emotional rhythm that aims to do less blaming; that has less defensiveness and criticism, and

more openness, transparency and clarity of intention, and more willingness to repair the ruptures in the relationship. In good relationships the partners agree to avoid criticising their partner personally; mocking, insulting and being sarcastic are grounds for a lengthy apology. Such couples make it abundantly clear that they want and like their partner, and have a high ratio of happy, productive and pleasurable times together. Research has found a ratio of five good times to one bad time, to be optimum. A good couple is able to recognise when one or the other is feeling overwhelmed, stressed or distressed, and can find ways of supporting and soothing each other. They can air complaints and then talk about the complaints in a calm and helpful way, with neither feeling criticised. They can freely express appreciation and acknowledge each other's contribution and efforts for their mutual or individual benefit. Overall they are optimistic and wish to do better in the future, thus affirming the relationship as something to be honoured and treasured.

### Further reading

- L Brizendine, *The male brain*, Random House, New York, 2010.  
 L Brizendine, *The female brain*, Random House, New York, 2006.  
 J Gottman, *Why marriages succeed or fail*. Simon and Schuster, New York, 1994.  
 A Fruzzetti, *The high conflict couple*, New Harbinger, Oakland, 2006.