

## Relationship Trouble and Biophysical Reactions - "I can't stand the way he eats an apple".

Many people come to counselling and psychotherapy to try to resolve difficulties with relationship. Sometimes this might be caused by a particular crisis or its aftermath. There are others who spend years living with their partners in a steady state of frustration or dull boredom, or with a constant anxiety-provoking dynamic of pushing away and pulling back. In general they live with the niggling awareness that they are being hurt with the wrong person and that they are not getting their needs met.

Commitment is all very well, but there is a feeling that the other partner could provide relief from the frustration, but chooses not to. So a culture of blame develops, and as defensive walls go up communication shuts down. There is a sense of confidence being undermined and the uncertain thought "is it me? Is there some way I can change my perspective which will change all this?"

How do you know when to trust your own perceptions in a relationship when time and familiarity have done their work of adaptation? You have the sense that you have sacrificed your individuality, your own identity. Instead there's the feeling that your partnership has somehow sucked you in to losing yourself in favour of the needs of the other. What became of the joyful adventure originally envisaged together, to be replaced by a sense of revulsion caused by something as mundane as watching your partner eat an apple? The clue, and the key to freedom, lies in the physical origins of your reaction.

Once these two people were drawn to each other with a sense of reciprocal certainty that they had each found 'the one'. What happens is that with time the euphoria, endorphins and idealising wears off. What remains is a complex physical and biological imprint of automatic response and reaction which each individual carries with them from early life. That biophysical imprint will be activated so fast that it is beyond conscious awareness. But the individual will feel triggered and have feelings often associated with anger or numbness, aversion, or need.

What does this look like? I have already mentioned the apple. Take for another example a wife, driving the car, reaching for her husband's hand in a moment of warmth towards him. He responds with an instant feeling of claustrophobia and withdraws his hand. He doesn't know why he feels aversion from the touch, but can't stop himself. He feels bad about it and wonders why he instinctively wants to move away from her when she reaches for him that way. He wonders if he'd be better on his own. She feels rejected and hurt. She begins to think critical thoughts about him. An argument begins.

Early in life we learn to attune with our caregivers and thereby learn how to regulate ourselves to feel safe and well, through the sensations in our body. As time goes on we begin to integrate these sensations with our mind, emotions and our relationships. We are profoundly shaped by our interactions with others at this early stage. We then, often unconsciously, carry the imprint of those early experiences forward with us into adulthood. This pays out in subtle and often not so subtle ways as we recreate and re-experience past wounds and engage in strategies of we're not even aware.

The couple in the car described could be of any gender, any culture. They acted out something instinctive that belongs to a pattern that has its origins remote from the present moment. Perhaps the man experienced his mother as over-protective and learned to protect himself by withdrawing from her approach. Perhaps the wife experienced her father as unavailable and longed for his affirmation. She has married a man who also keeps her uncertain of his affirmation and hence feeling unsafe, and he has married a woman who makes him feel avoidant when she physically expresses affection for him.

On the positive side, of course these instinctive patterns might be connected with warmth, love and connection. However in longer term relationship, through misunderstanding of this complex biophysical 'language' of each individual in a partnership, hurt often perpetuates a toxic cycle. This kills communication and turns it to hostility, attack, criticism and defence.

These hurts and reactions are learned so early in life that they become automatic. But they don't have to stay that way; counselling and psychotherapy can open the door to new insight, healing and change. It is possible to create positive state shifts in self and partner. This in turn creates a moment of warmth and mutuality so that both feel the benefit and doors to communication are opened. With practise and repetition the old biophysical patterns can be overcome.

Counselling directory article version

"I can't stand the way he eats an apple!" Many people come to counselling and psychotherapy to try to resolve difficulties with relationship. Sometimes this might be caused by a particular crisis or its aftermath. There are others, like the person quoted above, who spend years living with their partners in a steady state of frustration or dull boredom, or with a constant anxiety-provoking pattern of pushing away and pulling back. In general they live with the nagging awareness that they are being hurt by the relationship, that they are with the wrong partner, and that they are not getting their needs met.

Commitment might be all that is keeping you together, and there is a feeling that the other partner could provide relief from the frustration, but chooses not to. So a culture of blame develops. As defensive walls go up communication shuts down. There is a sense of confidence being undermined, battle stations set, and behind it all the uncertain thought "is it me? Is there some way I can change my perspective which will change all this?"

How do you know when to trust your own perceptions in a relationship when time and familiarity have done their work of adaptation? Perhaps you have the sense that you have sacrificed your individuality, your own identity. Instead there's the feeling that your partnership has somehow sucked you in to losing yourself in favour of the needs of the other. What became of the joyful adventure originally envisaged together, to be replaced by a sense of revulsion caused by something as mundane as watching your partner eat an apple? The clue lies in the physical origin of your reaction.

Once upon a time the partners in any relationship were drawn to each other with a sense of reciprocal certainty that they had each found 'the one'. Then with time the euphoria, endorphins and idealising wears off. What remains is a complex physical and biological imprint of automatic

response and reaction. Each person carries this imprint with them from early life. That biophysical imprint will be activated so fast that it is beyond conscious awareness. The person will feel triggered and have feelings often associated with anger or numbness, aversion or need. Thankfully, they can also be feelings associated with warmth, expansion and love.

What does the negative biophysical reaction in a relationship look like when it happens? I have already mentioned the apple. Take for another example a wife, driving the car, reaching for her husband's hand in a moment of affection for him. He reacts with an instant feeling of claustrophobia and withdraws his hand. He doesn't know why he feels aversion from the touch, but can't stop himself. He feels bad about it and wonders if he'd be better on his own. She feels rejected and hurt. She begins to think critical thoughts about him. An argument begins.

The couple could be of any gender combination, any culture. They are acting out something instinctive that belongs to a pattern that has its roots far from the present moment. Perhaps the man experienced his mother as over-protective and learned to withdraw from her approach. Perhaps the wife experienced her father as unavailable and longed for his affirmation. She has married a man who also keeps her uncertain of his affirmation and hence feeling unsafe and needy, and he has married a woman who makes him feel avoidant with each affectionate touch. Perhaps instinctively each recognised the potential for healing in the other, but they have got lost. Through misunderstanding of the complex biophysical 'language' of each individual in a partnership, hurt often perpetuates a toxic cycle.

Early in life we learn to attune to our caregivers and thereby learn how to regulate ourselves to feel safe and well, and our experience is through the sensations in our body. As time goes on we begin to integrate these sensations with our mind and rational understanding, our emotions and our relationships. We are profoundly shaped by our interactions with others at this stage. We then, often unconsciously, carry the imprint of those early experiences forward with us into adulthood. This plays out as we recreate and re-experience past wounds and engage in strategies of which we're not even aware.

These hurts and reactions may be automatic, but they don't have to stay that way. Counselling and psychotherapy can open a door to new insight and change. The positive aspects of the biophysical cycle can be brought into awareness. Understanding, warmth and affirmation which can create positive state shifts in self and partner which in turn create moments of mutuality. Communication flows again and something different can happen. Old biophysical patterns can be overcome and relationship can be experienced anew.