

EMOTIONAL WELLNESS MATTERS

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Emotional Unavailability

- When Your Partner
Can't Connect

“Fasten your seatbelt.
It's going to be a bumpy ride.”

– Bette Davis

When we commit to a relationship, we usually expect that our partner will reciprocate with roughly the same level of emotional involvement that we put into it. Many of us hope to find a soulmate, a partner who can share and understand our feelings and ways of thinking on an intensely personal level. Others don't expect such an intense level of involvement and feel more comfortable maintaining personal privacy within a more bounded relationship. Conflicts may arise when the two partners differ in their expectations of how close they should become. One partner may feel emotionally stranded, feeling abandoned and craving more closeness, while the other partner may feel smothered or pressured into providing more of his or her emotional self than can possibly be given.

The course of a relationship follows a predictable path. The early weeks, months, or even years of a relationship, in fact, are a time of togetherness – when partners search for and experience the similarities that bring them together. It is common for a couple during this first phase to experience a level of emotional sharing so intense that they want to carry their relationship to a more committed level. The next stage, however, is when boundaries are established, when we focus on our differences and in maintaining our own individuality. Couples who can negotiate their way through both of these stages are moving toward a successful long-term commitment. Both of the initial stages typify a good relationship – the coming together phase, followed by the firming up of our own identities within the relationship. A solid relationship is one in which feelings can be readily expressed and shared while each



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of the partners is able to experience a sense of their own identities.

All too often, however, there is a discrepancy between the two partners in terms of how much of their emotional life they make available to the other. When one partner is able to share emotionally and the other is not, it is usually the emotionally available one who feels more pain. Take the classic example of a couple who have an intense courtship. One partner lavishes the other with flowers, expensive dinners out, and intimate phone calls. Sweetness fills the air and it feels like a dream come true. You have finally met “the one” you had always hoped to meet. But then, almost as quickly as it began, your partner fails to reciprocate when it comes to sharing emotional feelings. Dating comes to a stop, voicemail messages are not answered, and it’s over. There is no fight. There is no discussion about why things are coming to an end.

A successful relationship is one in which feelings can be readily expressed and shared while each of the partners is able to experience a sense of their individual identities.

After you accept that it’s over, you struggle to make sense of the relationship and notice that the focus was always on you, and that’s why it felt so good. In fact, your partner knew a great deal about you, but you knew virtually nothing about him or her. You confused flattery and attention with emotional involvement. You may finally realize that your partner was unable to connect with you or anyone on an emotional level. He or she was an expert at luring people in, but had no ability to sustain an emotionally available relationship over time. It is a painful ride, but you can learn a valuable lesson from it – that relationships entail reciprocal self-disclosure and sharing. The next time, you’ll have the wisdom to know this before being drawn in.

There are many other examples of partners who are emotionally unavailable. Consider a few of them –

- Some people seem to live to do things, the more exciting the better. They are *adventure seekers*. There’s always one more trip to take, one more skydive, one more mountain to climb. These people get their attention from their conquests, and not by making themselves vulnerable within an emotional attachment.

- *Beautiful people*, unfortunately, sometimes grew up with the message that their looks are everything. They may have difficulty engaging in the mutuality of a sharing relationship because they have learned to search for gratification elsewhere. Time may change this, however.
- *Addicts* are attracted to a number of different objects (alcohol, drugs, work, food, television, shopping, gambling, sex...), and may not be able to sustain an emotional relationship – not with you, anyway.
- Some partners are more influenced by their *overinvolved parent* than they are with you. You may be seen as an appendage to the primary relationship – which is with the parent.
- To the *intellectualizer*, emotions are turbulent and unpredictable. Everything has to be analyzed, quantified and categorized. Control is everything. Sharing feelings within a relationship is seen as dangerous folly.
- A relationship with a person suffering from *narcissistic personality disorder* is one-sided, in favor of the narcissist. They have a sense of grandiosity, a sense of entitlement, and a lack of empathy – so that they are more interested in self-love than love based on mutual sharing.
- The *keeper of secrets* probably has some strong boundaries – or walls – in place, and is unable to engage in an emotionally available relationship. If your partner has a private life from which you are excluded, there are probably serious trust issues which undermine the success of a sharing commitment.

Working on Emotional Availability

Emotional availability refers to the ability of a person to share feelings with another person. In order for this to happen, a person needs to be in touch with his or her own emotions and able to define them. This person would have a good working knowledge of his or her own feelings and be able to identify when he or she feels angry, afraid, hurt, sad, happy, or content. Furthermore, the person needs to be able to read these feelings in other people. When these factors are missing, it is impossible for two people to experience an emotionally available relationship. Since people

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connect through their feelings, one who is out of touch with the emotional realm leads a lonely and isolated life, unable to engage in the processes of nurturance and trust that can be found within a healthier relationship. Fortunately, this condition is correctable.

We learn about emotions starting in childhood, and we continually refine our relationship with our emotions throughout our lives. We learn subtler versions of our basic childhood emotions during adulthood. We learn how to define them, how to categorize them, and how to express them appropriately throughout our development.

An Exercise: If you (or your partner) feel that you need some work in developing your familiarity with your emotions, you might try the following –

Throughout the day, keep a record of anytime you feel a certain emotion. Keep your list of emotions simple (e.g., “glad,” “sad,” “mad” or “bad – afraid or guilty”). Anytime you feel one of these emotions, identify the time of day, the emotion you’re feeling, and the circumstances surrounding the emotion (i.e., what was going on when you felt the emotion). Later, with your partner, a trusted friend, or your therapist, go through your list and share what you’ve written down. First identify what was going on when you felt a certain emotion. Try to understand why the event led to this emotion. Next, describe how the emotion feels within your body. Finally, after you have completed your list, talk about how it feels to share your emotional feelings with another person.

In addition to becoming familiar with your emotions, there are three other elements that are related to developing the capacity to be emotionally available –

Good Self-Esteem – The messages we have heard from other people throughout our lives – but especially during childhood when we are most vulnerable to the impact of these messages – have a profound influence on how we see ourselves. If people tell us that we have negative qualities, we eventually internalize this message and begin to see ourselves in a negative light. On the other hand, if we are treated with high regard from others as we grow up, we can develop positive self-esteem. People with good self-esteem value themselves, are confident in expressing themselves, and can engage in healthy reciprocal relationships with other people. Positive self-esteem allows a person to treat other people with high regard and to value the accomplishments and achievements of other people without feeling threatened. People with positive self-esteem like themselves, and, in turn, can like other people as well. They can make themselves emotionally available to another person.

Healthy Boundaries – Good boundaries show that you respect the individuality, personal space and privacy of other people – as well as your own. This ability, again, is developed most strongly in childhood, but is refined throughout our lives. People with poor boundaries intrude into the lives of others so that other people don’t feel safe around them. They gossip, reveal secrets, meddle into the private affairs of others, and, in general, fail to show respect for the dignity of other people – as well as themselves. People who grew up in households with poor boundaries have never been able to develop a sense of their own individuality or a sense of separation from their family members, so in adulthood they have difficulty honoring another person’s space. A person with porous boundaries may be emotionally unavailable because, in a sense, they are too available – so available, in fact, that they lack a clear sense of who they are. In order to be emotionally available to another person, you need a good sense of your own self that you protect. When you have good boundaries, you are able to protect the healthiest parts of both yourself and your partner.

The Ability to Trust – One of the core attributes we develop from the families we grow up in is a sense of safety. When we feel safe, we are able to trust in the world. But when we feel abandoned, rejected, or controlled, trust can become an issue for us in later relationships. And when our ability to trust is damaged, we may feel safer by walling ourselves off from our partner – and thus become emotionally unavailable. Trust is a deep issue that requires exploration and understanding, as well as some courage when we are finally ready to attempt to trust other people. The development of trust can be facilitated by working with a professional therapist in a setting that feels safe, and it may be a necessary step in making yourself emotionally available to your partner. When a person makes a commitment to us in a relationship, we owe that person respect – and that means making ourselves emotionally available to those who love us.

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RECOMMENDED READING

Collins, Bryn C. *Emotional Unavailability*. Contemporary Books, paperback, 292 pages, \$14.95. ISBN: 0-8092-2914-5.

THE BACK PAGE

HOW EMOTIONALLY AVAILABLE ARE YOU?

Circle “T” or “F” to describe how you respond to the following situations. The more “True” answers you circle, the likelier you may have difficulty with emotional availability.

- T F 1. I seldom cry.
- T F 2. If I feel like crying, I try everything I can to stop myself.
- T F 3. I seldom saw my family express emotions when I was growing up.
- T F 4. Emotions are embarrassing.
- T F 5. There are many things from my childhood I don’t like talking about.
- T F 6. I think people who express their emotions are weak or silly.
- T F 7. People who get emotional at work risk ruining things for all of us.
- T F 8. People do much better when they use logic, not emotions. Emotions are a waste of time.
- T F 9. If my friends want to talk about their relationships, I change the subject.
- T F 10. When I hear people talk about how they feel, I’m not sure what they mean.

(This quiz is adapted from *Emotional Unavailability* by Bryn C. Collins.)

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