

THE DANCE OF RELATIONSHIP WHAT STEP ARE YOU DOING?

By Marlene and Bob Neufeld

Are you dissatisfied with your relationship? We have found that unhappy couples are usually doing some form of relationship dance. The three most common dances are:

1. Pursue – withdraw
2. Blame – blame
3. Withdraw – withdraw

The dance is most often run by fear. Fear is our built-in alarm system; it is triggered when our survival is threatened. Losing connection with our loved one causes us to feel like our survival is in danger. This is natural and normal. However, the dances we do when we don't feel safe can cause damage to our relationships.

Some of us respond to these threats by energetically going out of ourselves and trying to re-connect. However, when we are being run by fear, our attempts to connect may look and feel unsafe to our partners. In our attempts to draw comfort and reassurance from our partners we may be tentative and unclear. On the other hand, we may be clingy and needy. Or we demand rather than request. Our calls for connection may be tinged with anger, frustration, blame and criticism. Possibly we do not feel safe or deserving of the connection we need. Our bids to re-connect may end in power struggles rather than the embraces we long for. Whatever this looks like, what we are really saying is "Notice me. Be with me. Pay attention to me. I need you."

Some of us respond by energetically going inside of ourselves and trying to minimize our need for connection. We try to reduce our need for closeness and become self-protective and distant. We hear our partners' bids for connection as criticisms and respond defensively. We withdraw and detach in an attempt to soothe ourselves or guard ourselves. We may look like we are stonewalling, refusing to respond or withdrawing from the relationship as a way to avoid conflict. We may think we are trying to be neutral but stonewalling conveys disapproval, icy distance, smugness, separation, and disconnection. Some typical stonewall responses are stony silence, monosyllabic mutterings, changing the subject and removing ourselves physically. Stonewalling is considered, by psychologist, Dr. John Gottman, to be one of the top four indicators that a marriage will fail. Whatever this looks like, what we are really saying is "I don't want you to hurt me. Leave me alone. I am trying to stay in control."

In the classic pursue-withdraw dance, one partner moves toward the other, while the other moves away, detaches and withdraws. The more the partner withdraws, the more the other partner pursues; and vice versa; the more one partner pursues, the more the other partner withdraws.

Some couples do a form of two-step in which one person pursues while the other withdraws, and then the pursuer withdraws and the person who was withdrawn begins to move closer and pursues.

Sometimes both are caught in the pursue pattern, which may deteriorate into a blame-blame dance. While the underlying motivation may be the need for closeness and connection it comes out as fault-finding, or contempt and defensive responses to ward off a perceived attack.

The good news is that if you find yourself in one of these patterns (pursue-withdraw, or blame-blame) then you care about the relationship. However ineffectively you are expressing it, you and your partner are both expressing your distress at your lack of connection with each other.

The withdraw-withdraw dance can be even more scary and difficult to resolve. This may occur when one of the partners has been the pursuer and is now burnt out and withdrawing. When both partners are withdrawing their relationship is heading towards dissolution.

It's not you or your partner who is the problem; it's the dance you are doing. But, it's only you who can change your dance:

1. If you habitually withdraw, can you take a risk and re-engage or re-connect? Can you acknowledge that you have withdrawn and reveal something about yourself?
2. If you habitually pursue, can you bring your attention back towards yourself? When you notice your partner withdrawing, can you get curious about what step you are doing?
3. If you habitually blame, can you move into wonder or curiosity?

In our own relationship, Bob has more often been the pursuer and Marlene the withdrawer. Bob is learning to shift his focus to himself and hold non-judgmental space for Marlene, rather than try to force her to re-engage. Marlene is learning to notice that she is withdrawing and take a risk to stay, revealing what is going on without leaving, physically or energetically. It has been a very exciting journey for both of us.

For more information about these relationship dances see the work of Dr. Sue Johnson, the creator of Emotionally Focused Therapy. Marlene & Bob Neufeld practice body-centered Coaching and Psychotherapy. They are a couple who help couples change the dance they are doing, learn life-changing skills and create closer, more loving relationships with one another. For more information call 613-594-9248 or see www.marleneandbob.com.