

How Intimacy Survives Marriage

Introduction



Part of my job is to watch married people fight about love. Not necessarily love for one another, but so often a twice-removed discussion about what love *used to be*. This can be a gritty hour. Especially when comparing how things *should be* with what currently is. Often, couples face despondent, angry court-like negotiations about innocence, lost hope and marital injustices.

Couples' conflict looks like a 'who-dunnit' in reverse. Except, whoever's telling the story never 'dunnit'. Take heart though. This is common practice for all of us when tested by anger and shame. Under the spell of high emotions, winning is primal. Being 'right' is wired to our emotional survival. In a couple, that means trying to find fault without exposing your own vulnerabilities. As this book explores, vulnerability during conflict is where the wheel turns on intimacy.

Most people keep a secret-ledger of complaints. Commonly known as resentments, these ledgers come in handy for intimate arguments. As a witness, it can be difficult to stay focused on a couple's true intent. This is especially grinding when both partners are attached to their own story of betrayal. No matter what evidence they bring, what is most clear to me is that 'being right' is what they *want*, but finding intimacy is what they *need*.

As much as we want reasons to love someone, it is not an evidence-based affair. We can love without provocation, motive or even special circumstance. So, not surprisingly, sustaining it is more a matter of self-inquiry than cross-examination. They didn't really come in to be 'right' anyway. Most came to find out how to be together. This may require some intimate concessions and, at times, vulnerable confessions.



As you're reading, set an intention:
I'm looking for insight into my relationship.
I want develop better skills with intimacy.
I'm trying to figure out why he/she makes me crazy.
I want to stop the conflict!
I want a vital sexual relationship!

Now pick a question to frame your intention:

Can I set aside your wants for another's needs?
Are his/her feelings more important than your 'solution'?
Can I be 'present' with my partner without losing myself?
Can I let go of *equity* (fairness) and hold fast to *mutuality* (beneficial to both)?

If this exercise is difficult, intimacy may be unfamiliar. And, you wouldn't be alone. Most of us don't want to put that kind of work into relationships. I mean, falling in love is supposed to be fun. A few wild dates, some heady conversation, first sex, crazy sex, or some promises therein. What's so hard about staying together, right? Truth is it's fun to fall in love and damn hard to sustain it. Just like adolescence taught us, we are fighting biology, boredom and our conflicted selves. We grow up trying to reconcile shame and confusion with desire and indestructability.

Still now as adults, we are seduced by our ideals of love. So when disappointed by love, we might lose our courage and composure. One thing for certain about our beloved is they are *mirrors of our maturity*. How we see ourselves is highly influenced by what they think of us. The goal of this book is for you to reconnect with your vulnerable, sensual, invincible self on the way to mutual intimacy.



Intimacy fuels the heart

We all have an attachment pattern and empathy skills for close relationships. They came on board early; primarily in the first ten weeks of life. Faces, sounds, pleasure and pain all wired in as we mirrored the caregivers that floated above our infant perceptions. So, love and trust are as natural as any of the human conditions. And *intimacy* is the muscle we use to connect in trusted loving ways. In short, intimacy is our ability to ‘attend to the needs and desires of another with passion, caring and gratitude’. That last part is what distinguishes it from the vast array of attachments we have for others. Intimacy feels like ‘honor’ that fuels the heart. The goal of intimacy is to be stronger and more vital in love. However it may unfold.



We experience intimacy as the *pleasure* of vulnerable connection. In later chapters I will discuss the role of vulnerability, a specialized form of empathy that allows couples to be mutually intimate. But for now, let's chew on a wrong-minded notion that has made love 'as maddening as all matters between heaven and hell'.

Marital Exchange

In the late 1980's, therapists and researchers co-opted a sociological theory called 'Exchange'. It became a therapeutic solution to arguments about household labor, parenting, and other sources of chronic quarreling that was thought to erode marriage. Much like using an accountant's balance sheet, married couples addressed their complaints of one another gathering the 'evidence' of what was wrong with their relationships. The idea was to see what each brought to the table and how that affected satisfaction in the couple. The notion seemed so simple that it couldn't fail. The therapist helped identify positive and negative traits of each partner. Then, with some measure of gender bias, the couple agreed to parcel out the good and bad jobs of relationship. You do the dishes, and I'll do the garbage. 'I got the money, you do the kids'. 'You be passive aggressive and I'll be the petty tyrant' (that last one was the unfortunate outcome of most exchange agreements). The goal was creating a sense of 'equity'. Partitioning out the labor of life equally. This exercise was thought to yield more satisfaction in marriage. I mean, who could argue such an elegant formula. There's one little problem; someone has to clean the bathroom. Actually, the real problem is 'self-selection' bias. But, you can feel the metaphor more easily with a toilet brush in your hand.



ME > you

For psychologically defensible reasons, we view ourselves with higher standards, morals, intelligences, and *roles* than others; even significant others. We do this rather unconsciously. Thus, we end up being less scientific when evaluating ourselves as compared to another. Exchange theory does little to help this 'Zero-Sum' bias. Nor does it seem to do anything except exacerbate conflicts with character assassinations like: 'You are such a liar, you only took out the garbage once...and I had to ask you!' Or, 'Of Course I hurt you. You hurt me first'. And, the all inclusive, 'Your family is way more &*\$%\$# up than mine'. As a solution, exchange conversations fell woefully short. Yet, however petty, social exchange 'exercises' did do one important service. They exposed the secret *ledgers* that are biased in our favor. This is the place where resentments lurk. And, resentment is the best place to start looking when intimacy has gone missing.

The Cost of Intimacy

At times, intimacy has emotional and physical costs. It may even require some healthy conflict to get there. Brushing up against your own uncomfortable truth is never easy. It may cost you some pride, ego, and even a belief or two. You must, under no uncertain terms, let go of something to get where you want to go. At first, we are tempted to throw a bone; something tired and worthless that we don't even want anymore. I've watched couples give up TV shows, porn and junk food and, then negotiate for sex, time, and family vacations. The outcomes of such bartering are perilous. I try to remind them of walking in with wooden nickels and expecting to walk out with gold. If you want to get intimate, you have to get into the business of vulnerability. That means offering what the other person sees as valuable *emotionally*. Like deeply felt apologies, accountability, strong sense of investment in the couple's outcome, even expressed anxiety of losing the mundane parts of relationship. The difficulty for most of us is to attend innocently to our partner's emotions. You've got to throw the semantics of fairness into the fire and trade it for, all things mutual.

Without some measure of give, real intimacy won't take. And, eventually we ensnare love, trust and commitment within the language of regret, contempt and sterile obligations. In short, before we commit to our love, we better learn how to love them through the conflict. The madness of love is that when we fall for our mate, they can do no wrong. However, our beloved eventually meets the person who claims to know us... better than we know ourselves.

Closeness: A source and solution for conflict.

Close Relationships are, all at once, logical, mythical, physical and personal. We climb mountains, slay dragons, forsake others, and even leave our mothers for the ideals of romantic love. Although, most committed relationships have elements of intimacy and vice versa, we can't count on intimacy by proxy. This means that, at some basic level in any relationship we must practice intimate behaviors. The question becomes, for how long? A lifetime? Till the kids are grown? Until college starts in the fall? ...the next morning? We tend to approach our view of relationship commitment as either in or out, long or short, casual or serious. It is a bad reflex for most of us. We get over our head quickly and panic easily. Jealousy is a perfect example of how, in our effort to deal with anxiety of an unknown, we entertain a worst-case scenario. If you came home late without calling...you are disrespectful, you are punishing me, you don't care about me, you are seeing someone else. In an effort to make confusing information more tangible, we reach for volatile feelings. Psychologists call them distortions. *Generalizing, minimizing*, fortune telling and even *catastrophic* banter meant to justify feelings and obligate our lover. This style is far too common in relationship. When we focus on the flaws of our partner, it's like leering too long at a car crash. You're likely to start your own pile-up. So, be careful where you put your attention. Our desire for happiness sometimes creates unrealistic pressure on our partner. Persistent 'quarrelling' about unmet desires is the opposite of intimate and it corrodes a healthy dialogue. It even

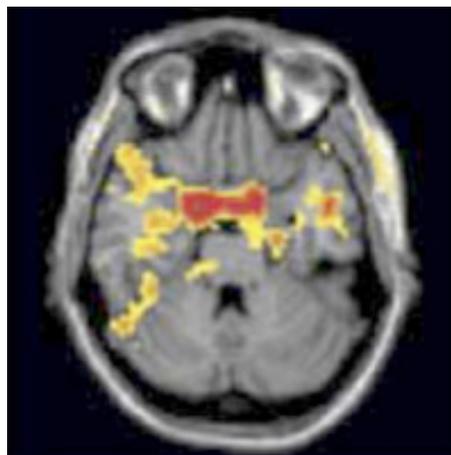
undermines primal needs like health, hunger and eventually, even hope. (See BASE Needs, M. Sanders, 2013)

Communicating...love?

Seems easy until you try it under spell of high emotions. This appears to be especially true for men. In college I worked as a bartender/bouncer. Watching couples argue in the pressure-cooker of institutionalized partying prepared me for a formal degree in conflict resolution. In heated moments, I noticed how gender could ride two very different neurological paths. Judgments and jealousies topped the list for both men and women. Even when the fight and feelings were shared, the communication differences were shocking. 'She' could yell articulately and 'he' would often stare disbelievingly. Let me take you through it. The initial conflict would be a misstep, poorly chosen words, maybe a furtive glance in the wrong direction. Snarky would turn mean and the couple would find their way to annoyance and cold-shouldering. Eventually, things circle back to a face-to-face throw down. Usually, at this point I noticed that females escalated with particular clarity. While men tended to dumb- down into dismissive grunts, smirks and profanity. The women leaned in and men avoided. It was as if gender had decided the winner of the verbal cage match.

Now, this is not to say that being in public did not lace some of the gender differences. However, there was no disputing that the feminine could talk circles around an angry masculine. This is NOT just a college bar phenomenon. In the Ache tribes of Central and South America, when a female feels threatened by a man, the women rush in, surround the offending male, and verbally shame his aggression. Needless to say, domestic violence among the Ache is almost nonexistent.

Sexy Brains



Later, in graduate school, neurological and brain scan studies would clarify some of this for me. It seems high stakes emotional arousal invokes orator-like communication skills in women while reducing men to a verbal shambles. There is a special kind of shame that lurks in male anger (loss of control over self or other). Shame is notorious for shutting down higher communication centers of the brain. Emotionally, men fall into shame but then are quick to anger as a way to rescue themselves. *Imagine shame as male purgatory and rage as the ladder out.* Over the course of a heated argument, shame can become toxic and men get explosive (Bradshaw, 2005). In women, there is a justice orientation toward emotional 'wrong-doing' that can retain details of events under high emotional stakes. This tends to make women better at recounting traumatic events, even in states of hysteria. Men, on the other hand, flood to the basics. Neurologically speaking, a conflict lights his brain 'limbic' and her blood boils articulate.

The Hero?

For men, the difference between hero and coward is merely behavior under pressure. During a traumatic event, he might run heroically into a burning building. If caught *in the building*, the same 'he' might run over an elderly person trying to get to an exit.

Thus, when a couple meets in a verbal battle, the male is self-identifying (hero, coward, sinner, martyr). Meanwhile, her brain is labeling (lover, liar, partner, betrayer). For him, *character* is his primary concern and internal conflict. On her end, being duped is driving her short-term appraisals. Arguments tend toward his defensiveness about her accusations. In a way, he is less concerned about 'what he's done' and more concerned about her appraisal of his character. So, even if he was unfaithful, he might not accept the label.. 'cheater'. This can get strange, because women tend to be more concerned about his feelings for a rival female than his sexual behavior. It's researched and argued that the feminine has evolved to accept sexually unfaithful masculine, but will not tolerate emotional infidelity.

The jealousy circuitry for men is much simpler and hinges on her sexual exclusivity. He minimizes her emotional connection with others (close male friends, family members that don't approve of him). He can even tolerate if not encourage her same-sex exploration. Yet, when it comes to her allowing another man sexual access, his primal responses are on deck. Evolutionary psychologists call this duality 'cuckoldry defense'. Psychoanalysts identify it as a Madonna-Whore complex. Feminists refer to it as the duplicity of patriarchy and control over female sexuality. In any case, this conflict gets messy and may result in sexual dispersions by *him* that are not easily forgotten by *her*.

Conflict with a loved one puts men into float mode. Not yet fight and not quite flight, float can be embarrassing for men who prize being right over her feelings. This can become just one of the many *fault-lines* in future relationship conflict. For men, feeling like an *idiot* is far worse than being called an *asshole* because the former is weakness and the latter, though unflattering, is still masculine. In fact, some men make a career of it (See catathymic responses, Dutton, 2006). These men become chronically abusive and

pre-emptively strike hard into conflict. Also, this pattern can evolve into a combative habit of being passive aggressive and belittling as a way to maintain power.

Once again, the practice of masculine aggression in close relationships can lead to chronic conflict. Through extensive research and experience with abusive men I can say without question that heredity and male biology play a strong role in violent behavior, but societal permission has proven statistically dominant in predicting intimate violence. *Far and away, men who abuse in their conflict, do it simply because they can.*

Lover's Banter



Conflict is a hungry animal; a dog with a vague memory of domestication. Pure of heart, righteous in motive and, when starved, empty of compassion. In committed relationship, we negotiate for love by fighting over money, sex and children; the latter a playground for the sins of the former. I have watched couples jaw-wag in and out of these three territories only to find that neither one feels understood. Most of the time couples settle for dystopian or rigid conclusions.

‘He/she just doesn’t respect me’

‘I will never give/get affection again’

‘We will always be friends but never lovers’

You see it all the time, with no emotional brakes, conflict consumes the nicer promises of commitment. Not the high-minded stuff we said at the altar, or in the courthouse, or even in front of the tribe. The promise of commitment must be steeped in tolerance. We can only disguise ourselves as missionaries of truth for so long. Conflict has a way of unveiling the dogma in our causes. The best place to start is to watch both people tell their stories, then mark the rare moment when the monologues stop and reality is shared. These 'relational truths' are a coup; a moment of resolve that is by no means the end of the revolution, but rather a ...*beginning of something that could lead to something* ...relationally better.

Limerent Madness: A rosy-colored lie.

For love, we'll proclaim anything, but hesitate on the hard things. That is to say, we will vow to walk to the ends of the earth, but struggle to admit when we get a little lost. So this book will take a close look at love, this well-meaning coward, and understand the interplay of passion, trust, loyalty and other ingredients that lead to sustained closeness. The goal is to rediscover our primal attraction as relational art. In some order, the text will explore love's heady beginnings, volatile patterns, and intimate conclusions.

When we fall in love we quickly become enchanted by the chemistry and the 'feeling' of being in love. In essence, we love how love makes us feel. Evolutionary Psychologist Helen Fischer (See TED Talks 2013 for Dr. Fisher's recent summary of the chemistry of love), coined the phrase Limerence to describe the high velocity attraction that occurs when chemistry, physical type, and psychological similarities pile on top of our intentions. This star aligning epiphany sinks deep hooks into our physiology and can turn any sober thinking individual into eye popping drunk full of wild intention and wilder propositions. Limerent feelings can also 'kneecap' our self-esteem and wake jealousy into mythic proportions.

Loving another that madly reminds us of two things 1) we love ourselves enough to covet the feeling 2) we don't stand a chance if it goes wrong. This beautiful trick of evolution throws caution to the wind, assumes libraries of trust and makes an unconscious water-tight case for having babies. The catch is that much of what we value in another comes from the virtuous character we imagine in our beloved through rose-colored eyelids.

Typically, we don't fall in love with our mate's character, we discover it along the way. Therefore, many couple's endure the revolving rhetoric of, "you are not who I thought you were". This is the slow motion shock of 'trust as a lie and love as the messenger'. In short, when our true love fails us, love *itself* becomes a lie.

Wherever love is sexy, there's an inverse histamine complex.

They say the rule of attraction is similarities. And while we could admit that these similarities got us in the same room at the same time, more than likely the chemistry of attraction blurs our differences and colors us, in a word, agreeable. Infatuation, the desire to be liked, hell... even the desire to not be rejected can make us agreeable to someone

else's likes. Imagine for a moment that couples fall in love on perceived similarities but mate on actual differences. This seems to be true from genetics to disposition all the way to personality, attitudes and even major beliefs. When we look at high levels in attraction, we can't avoid differences. Genetically, those who are different actually smell better to us. This makes sense on face value. The further someone is genetically from your family, the safer it is to reproduce healthy offspring. This is not a religious artifact, arbitrary rule or recent ordinance for rural communities. It's the trial and error of 2.5 million years of evolution. If that doesn't move you then it's also a biological fact. In addition, we seem very interested in the character or qualities of another that shock us or create excitement. Remember, the chemistry of falling in love makes us feel a bit invincible. That's why unique views and beliefs of the "love object" can be fascinating and thought provoking instead of stupid and irritating. Even religious beliefs held by another, especially if forbidden, can seem too delicious to resist. It's not even that the good girls like bad boys, they just like the ones that mix the unknown with just the right amount of danger. The truth is that attraction is based on differences and is fueled by novelty. Love isn't content or staid. It's an addictive and sexy beast. That's why bonding on similarities feels like *serendipity* and climbing over mountains for one another feels like *destiny*.

Intimacy can survive marriage through the lens of our conflicts. As will be discussed in later sections, self-reflection, conflict regulation, vulnerable connection and deep intimacy is the landscape of our close relationships. Yet, the moment we commit, is the moment of attaching to a lifetime of *meaningful* conflict. A respected therapist and friend once implied that true marriage vows should include..."Do you take (so and so) to love honor and disappoint you above all others?" Now, say it without the sarcasm. "I choose you to disappoint me above anyone else". Powerful, isn't it? It's like saying, 'if we were destined to fall in love then we were destined to disagree... and I'll try to show-up open, mutual and vulnerable for all of it.

Caveat:

Having worked in the field of domestic violence for over 20 years, I don't pretend to undervalue safety, kindness and healthy connection in relationship. Abuse and conflict are not synonymous in this text. You may find that some of the conflict described in these pages has the potential to be abusive. Power and control based conclusions are tempting when basing discussions on both evolutionary and gender based arguments. There is no permission for violence in these pages. Only, at worst, the wretched struggle for mutual respect and understanding in the most vulnerable places of marriage: The disillusioned, gender-laced, dog-faced dances over the fires of sex and conflict. This book is dedicated to those who search for accountability, forgiveness and intimacy through it all.