

Healing Through Relationships

by John Howard, MAC, CSH

Relationships are one of the most powerful healing forces in the world. They have the ability to positively rewire our brains and serve as a means for deep spiritual growth. It was once thought that we could prepare for a relationship by being alone and “working on ourselves.” However, recent research refutes this idea. In their book, *Love and War in Intimate Relationships*, Marion Solomon and Stan Tatkin say our deepest issues tend to surface in close partnership and, in particular, as intimacy deepens.

The good news is that relationships can heal issues more effectively than by working on them alone due to the way the brain learns new material and the fact that much of our issues stem from early relationships with caregivers, according to Susan M. Johnson, author of *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy: Creating Connection*. Spiritually, relationships help us let go of rigidity and teach us how to live for something greater than ourselves.

Many of our lifelong issues result from early relationships that shaped the way our brains function. Daniel Siegel, author of *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are*, says primary attachment in adulthood opens these wounds, but also has the power to heal them. This healing effect occurs when our issues are activated and there is enough love and support to process them. Establishing a sense of safety and security in relationships is critical to optimizing the potential for change.

It is mostly lower-level parts of the brain that are responsible for the direct perception of safety versus danger, so knowing how to speak directly to these parts can mean the difference between a nice day with our partner and an argument. Solomon and Tatkin note that rather than attending to explanations from the brain’s more intellectual centers, our nervous system determines safety through cues such as physical proximity, touch, tone of voice and how quickly a partner responds. Learning how to speak “nervous system” enables partners to de-escalate arguments far more quickly and return to loving interaction.

Every person is unique, and partners should become experts in each other’s tendencies. While we do not get an owner’s manual with our partners, most people are fairly predictable in terms of what works and what does not.

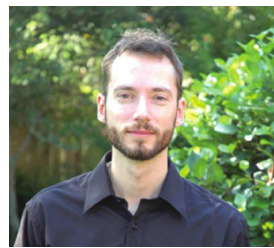
The process of relating is more important than the content. Openly exploring how we talk with our partners gives us the ability to increase the safety quotient of our interactions. For example, if we feel frustrated in a conversation with our partner, it is important to voice that as soon as possible and turn our attention to easing the frustration. Couples need not resolve all arguments and differences, but they do need to learn how to manage them gracefully. Couples researcher Dr. John Gottman found that 69 percent of the issues couples argue about have no solution anyway. Having a playful and curious demeanor helps a couple dance with differences in ways that respect native tendencies and avoid rigidity.

If partners can understand each other’s automatic reactions and not take things so personally, they are well on their way to a better relationship. Such automatic reactions are partly encoded by our attachment system—a kind of memory about early rela-

tionships that plays out in adulthood. According to Siegle, attachment styles are “tracks” the brain uses to organize close bonding. Understanding each partner’s style can make a couple experts in managing perpetual problems, such as when one person tries to be close and the other distances. Avoidant people often distance themselves when a partner presses for closeness, but may move closer when they feel understood. People who seek intimacy but are often frustrated by it may benefit from regular assurances that their partner is consistently there for them. Working with a knowledgeable professional to understand automatic reactions and develop key skills can be valuable to learning how to support a relationship in its healing capacity.

The spirituality of relationships is another way that partnership can be deeply healing. A relationship is a spiritual path. Successful partnering requires skills and abilities taught by the world’s great schools of spiritual development such as listening, paying attention and responding sensitively. The ability to feel love and empathy are also tested by relationship and apply to our spiritual lives. Relationships present an opportunity each moment to deepen humility, patience and surrender to something greater than ourselves.

Relationships can be very healing, particularly when partners make use of how the brain grows and embrace the opportunity for deep spiritual growth. Learning our partner’s nervous system makes a relationship more playful as one realizes that behaviors may not be as intentional as previously thought. The fruit of relationship can make life better than living alone, but only if its healing power is accessed. Many say that the apex of relationship is a sense of safety and security wherein we feel connected, loved and understood. While it can take dedication, and occasionally support, to navigate the waters of relationship, the reward has powerful implications for spiritual growth, mental health, and living a long and fulfilling life.



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