



I N S T I T U T E

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Know When To Hold 'Em: When Falling Out of Love Can be Good for Your Relationship - Part 2 of 2

By Wendy Palmer Patterson LCSW, LMFT and Robert W Patterson LMFT, LPC

Last newsletter we shared the idea that being in the long-term committed relationship is like drawing 3 cards in the poker game of five-card draw. In poker, as in life, you often don't know what you've got until the hand is already dealt, the bets are made and you're committed. Years ago we, as couple's therapists and coaches, were noticing that as the commitment level between a couple deepened, the power struggle often intensified.

This phenomenon seemed to help explain why couples 'fall out of love', and lend credibility to the idea that relationships have predictable stages. When we are in the first stage of the long term relationship: Romantic Love, we feel so connected or hopelessly attracted that making commitments seems the natural way, not unlike the strong temptation to raise the bet when you've got a full house.

Romantic Love is a temporary state.

Romantic Love is supposed to end. The experience is emotionally driven with the purpose of bonding two incompatible people. That's right, incompatibility is the natural state of committed couples. We just don't get to appreciate the incompatibility until the Power Struggle stage of relationship, when we are staring at our cards, hoping that what's being dealt next is a lot better than what we're holding. This stage is also supposed to be a temporary state. You know you have entered the Power Struggle when your beloved goes from being the one who lights up your life, to being the one who keeps raising the stakes and making bets that keep you on the edge of your chair. The Power Struggle and your incompatible partner are there to get your attention – focus your energy AND – wake you up.

Turning Power Struggles into Growth Struggles

The very experience of 'being driven crazy' forces change because loving someone who infuriates and confounds us is intolerable. This is a relatively new and unshaped idea, that continuing to love and grow with the one who pushes our crazy buttons is a right and good thing. But thousands of couples around the world are discovering that the difficulties accompanying the Power Struggle phase of relationship can be used to grow,

stretch, wake up and allow more aliveness than ever before. These couples are experiencing the shift to Conscious Relationship and the accompanying stages that include recommitment, doing the work, waking up, and Real Love,

This idea is the essence of what has come to be known as "Imago Match". Imago is Latin for the word "image" and the theory proposes that within each of us is an unconscious map that drives the choices we make when selecting a mate or any significant relationship. The New York Times best selling authors, Drs Harville Hendrix and Helen LaKelly Hunt coined the word Imago in their ground breaking book, Getting the Love You Want: a guide for couples. This book remains a great resource for any couple seeking to understand the nature of their commitment and the steps to creating an extraordinary relationship.

Imago suggests a way to understand and work with the struggles. Following are three Food For Thought Tips and three Action Steps that can help.

Food For Thought Tip #1.

The Good News and Bad News of your childhood shows up in your committed relationship.

The Good News:

Your unconscious mind had or will have a significant role in your choice of a committed partner. When it comes to attraction, we go to our blueprint from the past in hopes of generating good and wonderful feelings of connection and love. Our highest and most creative talents, such as language, poetry and art, are designed to get us into relationship, and committed to each other and the family. It is exactly these unique tensions that can evolve from the Romantic Love attraction to a particularly 'creative' partnering that will allow us to get on to the business we have next to complete, successfully growing and nourishing the relationship.

The Bad News:

We want it all. The repetitive or intense frustrations that we experienced growing up are also asleep in us, waiting to be reborn, this time in connection with our beloved. This is not a cruel trick of nature or as perverse as it might seem. These early frustrations that were unresolved just got buried because that was the best we could do at the time. We put ourselves partially to sleep while growing up in order to fit into our world, the world we saw from our child eyes. But we are not required to live in that drowsy state forever. In adult life we need the differences provided by another person in order to learn to be fully awake. This means that frustration can now become part of a growth strategy to ultimately replace the Power Struggle.

Action Step #1:

Patience and acceptance can go a long way. With very few exceptions, your partner is not trying to hurt you. More often than not, it is the unconscious relationship agenda that has disrupted the connection between you and your partner. This will happen all the

time, so don't throw in your hand because of the loss of this connection. Just know that disruption will occur from time to time and when it does, it's time to go to work.

First, own up to your part of the problem. Start the conversations with how you know you have contributed to the difficulties. This will allow your partner to focus on the issue without feeling so defensive and get a tough conversation off to a stable start. Start your sentences with: "I know I contributed to the problem by"

Food For Thought Tip #2:

What worked in the past, may not be working for you now.

Part of the waking up process is realizing that your habitual responses to frustration with your partner ARE the problem. An example might help here. Bob sometimes has the experience that Wendy gets so busy that she starts unloading various tasks on Bob. Well of course Bob thinks he has his own list to complete, (thank you very much) and if he's not careful he can get captured by the experience of being 'told what to do'. As a youngest child he goes right back to childhood and his older brother and emotionally he is churning the same feelings. Resentment builds and he's got himself all ready to 'show her' and that she can't "push him around", ready to defend his integrity. Wendy will say something innocuous like, "Dear, did you follow up on that request about the next workshop?" By this time Bob has himself so fueled with hostility and defensiveness that he will respond sarcastically with "since when is it my job to be your secretary?" or "you're not the boss of me!" or some other statement that generates that palpable chill we all know. Bob is doing the adult version of what he did growing up to protect himself. Instead, if he changes his childhood defensive behavior and opens a dialog about how he feels and what he needs from Wendy, connection can be restored.

Action Step #2.

If you think you're partner is "not getting it" (not respecting you, not listening etc.), please remember that YOU may be "not getting it". Consider what you are putting into the mix because of your own frustrations. Check in with yourself about your own perceptions of your partner and ask yourself, "Am I getting any benefit or payoff from continuing to see her/him as selfish or distant or depressed?" This helps break the attachment we can have of seeing our partner in a negative light.

Food For Thought Tip #3.

Conflict is natural.

The well used metaphor of "getting upstream" to help manage conflict is apt here. To focus on down-river clean up without upstream prevention, will not solve the problem. Conflict is inevitable whenever creative, ambitious and motivated people are in the mix, so planning for conflict will reduce feelings of personal failure and negative evaluation that can lead to emotional injury. Once we have gone down that road, it is difficult to stay focused on resolution, rather than defending our ideas or actions.

Action Step #3:

Consider having your fights in advance. Most of us know the struggles we will have with our partners already. When you're not in the middle of the fight, we are better able to keep strong emotions from taking over and beginning the repetitive nightmare all over again. Start now, having conversations with your partner that are positive and genuine. Appreciate, in a genuine way, your partner everyday, including the differences. Assume competence in your partner and look for ways to express respect everyday. When you do this, it is like stacking the deck in your favor, and you'll probably need those cards someday when the rupture in the relationship occurs again.

Conclusion:

For most of us, the ruptures between us continue even when we are still waking up, requiring that we treat each other authentically, yet gently, practicing patience and acceptance along the way. The evolution of our relationships from the unconscious stages of Romantic Love and Power Struggle to the conscious relationship stages can make us all better people and strengthen our relationship capacities. The House will always have the odds, but we can play the game knowing how to increase our own odds of walking into the future, as winners.

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Wendy and Bob have been married for over 25 years, have raised two precocious children, and have been humbled, at times confused and exhilarated, in the process of becoming a couple. Their offices are located at P2 Partnerships, Inc., 956 Euclid Avenue, NE, Atlanta, GA 30307. Phone: (404)584-7500.

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