

Hold Me Tight

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Love demands the reassurance of touch. Most fights are really protests over emotional disconnection. Underneath the distress, partners are desperate to know: Are you there for me?

I grew up in my parents' pub in England, where there was always a lot of drama. And all the drama—fights, flirting, tears, tantrums—revolved around love. I also watched my parents destroy their own love for each other. Since that time I've been on a mission to figure out exactly what love is. My mother described it as "a funny five minutes." It's also been called a mysterious mix of sentiment and sex. Or a combination of infatuation and companionship. Well, it's more than that.

My personal insights, gleaned from researching and counseling more than a thousand couples over 35 years, have now merged with a growing body of scientific studies, to the point where I can now say with confidence that we know what love is. It's intuitive and yet not necessarily obvious: It's the continual search for a basic, secure connection with someone else. Through this bond, partners in love become emotionally dependent on each other for nurturing, soothing, and protection.

We have a wired-in need for emotional contact and responsiveness from significant others. It's a survival response, the driving force of the bond of security a baby seeks with its mother. This observation is at the heart of attachment theory. A great deal of evidence indicates that the need for secure attachment never disappears; it evolves into the adult need for a secure emotional bond with a partner. Think of how a mother lovingly gazes at her baby, just as two lovers stare into each other's eyes.

Although our culture has framed dependency as a bad thing, a weakness, it is not. Being attached to someone provides our greatest sense of security and safety. It means depending on a partner to respond when you call, to know that you matter to him or her, that you are cherished, and that he will respond to your emotional needs.

The most basic tenet of attachment theory is that isolation—not just physical isolation but emotional isolation—is traumatizing for human beings. The brain actually codes it as danger. Gloria Steinem once said a woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle. That's nonsense.

The drama of love that I saw played out at the bar each night as a child is all about the human hunger for safe emotional connection, a survival imperative we experience from the cradle to the grave. Once we do feel safely linked with our partner, we can tolerate the hurts they will—inevitably—inflict upon us in the course of daily life.

Broken Connections

We start out intensely connected to and responsive to our partners. But our level of attentiveness tends to drop off over time. We then experience moments of disconnection, times when we don't express our needs clearly. He is upset and really wants to be comforted, but she leaves him alone, thinking that he wants solitude. These moments are actually inescapable in a relationship. If you're going to dance with someone, you're going to step on each other's feet once in a while.

Losing the connection with a loved one, however, jeopardizes our sense of security. We experience a primal feeling of panic. It sets off an alarm in the brain's amygdala, our fear center, where we are highly attuned to threats of all kinds. Once the amygdala sends out an alarm, we don't think—we act.

The threat can come from the outside world or from our own inner cosmos. It's our perception that counts, not the reality. If we feel abandoned at a moment of need, we are set up to enter a state of panic.

It's what we do next, after those moments of disconnection, that has a huge impact on the shape of our relationship. Can you turn around and reconnect? If not, you'll start engaging in fights that follow a clear pattern. I call these "demon dialogues." If they gain momentum, they start to take over and induce a terrible sense of emotional aloneness. Your relationship feels less and less like a safe place, and it starts to unravel. You start to doubt that your partner is there for you, that he values you. Or that she will put you first.

Consider a couple with their firstborn child. Having a baby is a stressful, sleep-depriving experience. But it's also a time when people's attachment fears and needs are particularly strong. The man might think something like, "I know it's wrong, and I know it's pathetic, but I feel like I've lost my wife to my kid." And the woman might say, "When I had the baby I felt so fragile. I was taking care of this little being, and I just needed extra comfort and caring myself, but he was out working all the time." Their intentions are good—she cares for the infant, he works hard to support his new family—but they fail to give each other what they really need.

Or think of a man who is doing just fine in his job while his wife flies high in a new career. She's spending long hours on exciting projects while he is deprived of affection, attention, and sex. Lying in bed alone each night, waiting for her, he feels like a fool for needing her so much—and also angry that she can't see how deeply her absence affects him.

But we don't talk about these conflicts in terms of deeply rooted attachment needs. We talk about the surface emotions, the ire or indifference, and blame the other. "He's so angry; I feel so attacked," or "She's so cold. I don't think she cares at all!" Each person retreats into a corner, making it harder and harder for the two to express their fundamental attachment needs, foreclosing the ability to gain reassurance from each other.

Women are often more sensitive to the first signs of connection breakdown than men, and their response is often to begin what I call the dance of disconnection. Almost ritualistically they will pursue their partners in a futile attempt to get a comforting response. But they do it in a way that almost guarantees their basic need will not be met—they blame their partner for failing in some essential way.

Men, on the other hand, have been taught to suppress emotional responses and needs, which inclines them to withdraw from the conflict. But her rage and his withdrawal both mask what lies below the surface—an underlying vulnerability and need for connection, now compounded by sadness, shame, and, most of all, fear.

Too often, what couples do not see is that most fights are really protests over emotional disconnection. Underneath all the distress, partners are desperate to know: Are you there for me? Do you need me? Do you rely on me?

Repairing Bonds

For years, therapists have viewed these demon dialogues as power struggles. They've attempted to resolve couples' fights by teaching them problem-solving skills. But this is a little like offering Kleenex as the cure for viral pneumonia. It ignores the attachment issues that underlie the pattern. Rather than conflict or control, the issue, from an attachment perspective, is emotional distance.

And what's frustrating to people is not knowing how to bridge that emotional distance. In my office, men sometimes tell me, "I do all kinds of things to show I care. I mow the lawn, bring in a good salary, solve problems, and I don't play around. Why is it that in the end, these things don't seem to matter, and all that counts with my wife is that we talk about emotional stuff and cuddle?" I tell them, "Because that's just the way we are made. We need someone to pay real attention to us, to hold us tight. Have you forgotten that you need that, too?"

When we fight with our partners, we tend to follow the ball as it goes over the net, paying attention to the last barb lobbed at us—and not whether we even want to be in the game at all. It's possible to break out of the demon dialogues, but the first step is to be aware of the game itself, not just the play-by-play. Once you realize you are latched onto your pattern of arguing, you can agree to put the whole game on hold.

Disappointments are always part of relationships. But you can always choose how you handle them. Will you react defensively, out of fear, or in the spirit of understanding? Let's say your partner says, "I don't feel like having sex tonight." You can take a deep breath and think about how much she loves you, and say, "Gee, that's too bad, I was really looking forward to that." Or you can spit out a sarcastic, "Right! Well, we never make love anymore, do we?"

Of course, you may not feel you really have a choice if your panic button has been pushed and your emotions are boiling over. But just being aware that it has been pushed can help calm you down. You can think to yourself, "What is happening here? I'm yelling. But inside, I'm feeling really small." Then you can tell your partner, "I got really scared there—I'm feeling hurt."

If you take that leap of faith and respond with such a bid for reconnection, you have to hope your partner will, too, instead of saying something hurtful like, "Well, you're being asinine and difficult." That's the tricky part about relationships: To change the dance, both people have to change their steps.

Simply accepting your attachment needs instead of feeling ashamed of them is a big and necessary first step, and it applies to single people as well as to those in relationships. A single person might say, "I'm depressed because I'm lonely, and I know I shouldn't be lonely; I know I should be independent." Well, of course you're depressed if you're feeling lonely and then you turn around and beat yourself up for it! When you're ashamed, you tend to hide from others, setting off a vicious cycle that nearly ensures you won't find the social connection you need.

Healing Touches

A man will often say to me, "Even if I do think that she really needs me or is feeling scared, I don't know what to do!" He'll end up making his wife a cup of tea, which is very nice—but it's not what is called for. Had he put his hand on her shoulder and pulled her towards him, however, his bid for connection would have been much more successful.

Men often say they don't know what to do. Yet men do know how to soothe—they do it with their children, tucking them in at night and whispering gently to them. The difference is, they see their children's vulnerability, and respond to it, but when they look at their wives, they see only someone who is judging them. But she feels vulnerable, too.

Touch is the most basic way of connecting with another human being. Taking your partner's hand when she is nervous or touching his shoulder in the middle of an argument can instantly defuse anxiety and anger.

The world of therapy has been obsessed with maintaining boundaries in recent years. I say our problem is just the opposite—we're all cut off from each other.

If you watch two people in love, they touch each other all the time. If you watch two people finding their way back into a love relationship, after falling into demon dialogues, they touch each other more, too. They literally reach for each other; it's a tangible sign of their desire for connection.

Secure (and Saucy) Sex

A big myth about love is that it's got a "best before" date, that passion is a burning fever that must subside. That's pretty silly. I don't see any scientific or human reason why people can't have happy long-term love relationships.

Among people who do have affairs, they don't do so because their sex lives are boring. I've never had anyone come to my office and tell me that they had an affair because they were bored in bed. They have affairs because they're lonely, because they can't emotionally connect with their partner. Then somebody else smiles at them and makes them feel special and valued—and suddenly, they're in this strange situation where they're committed to one person but find themselves responding to another.

Passion is like everything else: It ebbs and flows. But sex is always going to be boring if it's one-dimensional, cut off from emotional connection. On the other hand, if you're emotionally involved, sex has a hundred dimensions to it, and is as much play as passion.

I call this kind of secure sex "synchrony sex," where emotional openness and responsiveness, tender touch, and erotic exploration all come together. When partners have a secure emotional connection, physical intimacy can retain all of its initial ardor and creativity and then some. Lovers can be tender and playful one moment, fiery and erotic another. Securely attached partners can more openly express their needs and preferences and are more willing to experiment sexually with their lovers.

In a secure relationship, excitement comes not from trying to resurrect the novel moments of infatuated passion but from the risk involved in staying open in the moment-to-moment, here-and-now experience of physical and emotional connection. With this openness comes the sense that lovemaking with your partner is always a new adventure.

Lasting Love

Once you're reconnected with your partner, and both of you are getting your attachment needs filled, you have to keep working at being emotionally responsive to one another. You can do that by helping each other identify the attachment issues that tend to come up in your recurring arguments.

If, for example, you always erupt over your girlfriend's risky mountain climbing trips, talk to her about how your anger is born out of a fear of losing her. Figure out how she can take more precautions. Or, if you often feel abandoned when left with the brunt of childcare duties, plan out how you and your husband can be better parents together, so that you won't call him a deadbeat in a moment of pent-up frustration.

You should also celebrate positive moments together, both big and small. Regularly and deliberately hold, hug, and kiss each other when you wake up, leave the house, return, and go to sleep. Recognize special days, anniversaries, and birthdays in very personal ways. These rituals keep your relationship safe in a distracting and chaotic world.

Stories shape our lives, and the stories we tell about our lives shape us in turn. Create a future love story for you and your partner that outlines what your life together will look like five or ten years down the road. It will prime you to keep your bond strong.

Arms Wide Open

Because attachment is a universal need, the attachment view of love can also help parents understand conflicts with their children. I was recently in a cafe with my teenage son, yelling at him over the roar of the latte machine, while he sulked and huffed. Then suddenly he said, "Mom, we're doing that thing, where I feel like you are criticizing me, and you feel like I don't care what you have to say." We both started laughing and my anger melted away.

Now that we know what love is really about, we know how to sustain it. It's up to us to use that knowledge to nurture it with our partners and families. And then, with the empathy and courage it teaches us, we can search for ways to take it out into the world and make a difference.

Sue Johnson is a clinical psychologist and author of the book Hold Me Tight. Learn more at www.holdmetight.net.