The search for security

The work of the couple therapist includes helping clients to explore and express their expectations of love, writes **Kathy Rees**

John Bowlby revealed the human drive to make attachments is innate and not learned, and Mary Ainsworth went on to devise the Strange Situation Classification, which provided evidence of the nature of these attachments. The classification of four main attachment styles – secure, insecure-ambivalent, insecure-avoidant and disorganised/disoriented – emerged. Later research incorporated the theory that a child's own innate temperament affects their attachment type as much as the relationship with their caregiver, and it became clear that those with an insecure attachment trait have an increased risk of struggling with social and emotional development and interpersonal relationships.

Our search for emotional security continues into adulthood when the focus switches from our parental caregivers to romantic partners. But, depending on our individual psyche and family history, as Esther Perel states, 'We each come out of childhood with a greater need for either separateness or togetherness,'[1] and managing our adult couple relationships is a constant challenge.

The basis of these relationships has altered as society has changed. Marriage, for example, no longer tends to be arranged with a focus on faith, family, class or financial security. The choice of a partner is now emotional and based on love, with a concomitant greater risk of disappointment, as the meaning and expectation is less clearly understood. The work of the couple therapist includes helping clients explore and express their conscious and unconscious expectations of love and attachment.

The ways in which the structures of family and society have altered are an additional consideration. Families are often splintered and live at a distance from one another. A couple may be disconnected from their roots and the more traditional practical support may be less readily available. Missing the involvement of extended family and community, the couple can become isolated and overly dependent on each other. The partnership can become the primary 'container'[2] and the principal source of reassurance, emotional sustenance and intimacy. This can place pressure on a fragile couple organisation. Crises and transitional events can cause it to crack, and a once secure attachment can suddenly feel unsafe.

A close adult attachment can have a reparative effect and go towards healing childhood hurts. However, anxious insecurity can resurface and be evident in defensive patterns of relating. Couples can come into counselling fearing their relationship is broken, when the promise of the relationship safe haven feels undermined. They are wary, reluctant to trust, and suspicion has replaced goodwill. Each partner's response to the feeling of disconnection will be individually shaped by past experience, but that isn't the whole picture. An interpretation of the couple interplay when vulnerability is triggered is also necessary.

Often the nature of an anxious response will spark a flood of counter reaction in the other and the couple can slide into angry protest. The loved partner becomes the one who hurts, and the therapist is witness to the anguish of outrage and counterattack. The couple are overwhelmed by the seeming impossibility of preventing another angry escalation. The pattern is repeated and they get stuck in an endless cycle of destructive interaction they can't break.

The therapist works to help the couple unravel the negative interplay and understand the dynamics of their particular 'couple fit'. Each partner is helped to deconstruct emotional reactions and determine the meanings they are attributing to events. Slowing down the sequence of a difficult interaction can reveal the triggers that provoked vulnerability, fear and anxiety. For example:

When you are late I feel abandoned [memories of childhood neglect]. I feel panic, alone, and at a loss. In order to retrieve control I get angry and clamour for your attention by shouting. My anger feels intrusive and threatening to you and you visibly shrink [memories of parental aggression]. You close down and withdraw. You feel even less available and my fury increases. We are lost to each other at this moment.

The power of couple therapy is that partners are present and involved in the exploration and revelation of particular sensitivities. Sue Johnson's account of emotionally focused therapy[3] describes how explaining feelings, interpreting meanings, being heard and acknowledged, allows empathy and compassion to return to the relationship. Hostility can dissipate when a partner sees beyond anger to hurt and pain.

Emotionally focused therapy involves both partners in an investigation of the couple's relationship 'dance'. It allows comprehension about the behaviours that are experienced as an attack, and perceived as constituting a threat to the relationship. Couple counselling creates the space for recognising that the destructive couple 'demon dialogues'[3] are, at root, defensive survival responses. The relationship is, in fact, of such value that furious protest can stem from a perception of a relationship disconnect and is not a gratuitous personal demolition of the other. It can be affecting to listen, understand the state of mind of the other, and witness the dread and panic. It can be transformative to feel heard and understood, to share recognition, express regret and commit to change. There can be significant 'turning towards' moments, when both partners manifest concern and move to reconnect.

For those traumatised by past relationship wounds, trust can be challenging. However, soothing gestures of reassurance and reconnection, and obvious accommodation of differences, make for a relaxation of tension. Changes are noticeable as individual needs are acknowledged. Feeling able to depend on a partner's love, care and concern allows a more resilient couple relationship to emerge.

About the author

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