

Where Does Love Go Wrong?, or The Three Demon Dialogues That Can Wreck Your Relationship

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Unhappy couples always tell me that they fight over money, the kids, or sex. They tell me that they cannot communicate and the solution is that their partner has to change. “If Mary would just not get so emotional and listen to my arguments about our finances and the kids, we would get somewhere,” Brian tells me. “Well, if Brian would talk more and not just walk away, we wouldn’t fight. I think we are just growing apart here,” says Mary.

After 25 years of doing couple therapy and couple research studies, I know that both Mary and Tim are just seeing the tip of the iceberg. Submerged below is the massive real issue: both partners feel emotionally disconnected.

They are watching their backs, feeling criticized, shut-out and alone. Underneath all the loud arguments and long silences, partners are asking each other the key questions in the drama of love: “Are you there for me? Do I and my feelings matter to you? Will you respond to me when I need you?” The answers to these questions, questions that are so hard to ask and so hard to hear in the heat of a fight, make the difference between emotional safety and emotional peril and starvation.

We know from all the hundreds of studies on love that have emerged during the past decade that emotional responsiveness is what makes or breaks love relationships. Happy stable couples can quarrel and fight, but they also know how to tune into each other and restore emotional connection after a clash. In our studies we find that seven out of ten couples who receive Emotionally Focused Therapy or EFT can repair their relationship. They do this by finding a way out of emotional disconnection and back into the safe loving contact that builds trust. But why can’t we all do this, even without a therapist? What gets in our way? The new science of love tells us.

Our loved one is our shelter in life. When this person is unavailable and unresponsive we are assailed by a tsunami of emotions — sadness, anger, hurt and above all, fear. This fear is wired in. Being able to rely on a loved one, to know that he or she will answer our call is our innate survival code. Research is clear, when we sense that a primary love relationship is threatened, we go into a primal panic.

There are only three ways to deal with our sense of impending loss and isolation. If we are in a happy basically secure union, we accept the need for emotional connection and speak those needs directly in a way that helps their partner respond lovingly. If however we are in a wobbly relationship and are not sure how to voice our need, we either angrily demand and try to push our partner into responding, or we shut down and move away to protect ourselves. No matter the exact words we use, what we are really saying is, “Notice me. Be with me. I need you.” Or, “I won’t let you hurt me. I will chill out, try to stay in control.”

If these strategies become front and center in a relationship, then we are liable to get stuck in what I call the Demon Dialogues. These dialogues can take over your relationship. They create more and more resentment, caution and distance until we reach a point where we feel the only solution is to give up and bail out.

There are 3 main Demon Dialogues that trap couples in no-solution emotional starvation and insecurity:

Find the Bad Guy.

This dead-end pattern of mutual blame keeps a couple miles apart. Fights look like a “who gets to define who” contest. As Pam says, “I am waiting for his put down. I have my gun ready. Maybe I pull the trigger when he isn’t even coming for me.” Both partners define the other as uncaring or somehow defective. Everybody loses. But this attack-attack pattern is hard to keep up. It is usually the opening measure to the most common and ensnaring dance of all — the Protest Polka.

The Protest Polka.

Psychologists knew for years that this demand-withdraw dance leads to divorce, but they weren’t able to figure out why is it so widespread and so deadly. We now understand that potent emotions and compelling needs keep this pattern going: the wired in need for emotional connection and the fear of rejection and abandonment. Even if our brains know that we are somehow making things worse by criticizing or shutting our partner out, we cannot just switch off this longing and fear. “The more he refuses to talk to me or dismisses my feelings, the angrier I get and the more I poke him” says Mia. “Anything to get a response from him.” Her partner Jim picks up, “And the more I hear that angry tone in her voice, the more I just hear that I can never please her. I just get hopeless and more silent.” It is this spiral that is the enemy, not the other partner, though neither partner recognizes this. Mia is protesting Jim’s distance. Jim is frantically trying to avoid her disapproval. They talk this way because they sense an alarming answer to the attachment question, “Are you there for me?” In the Protest Polka, each person, in an attempt to deal with their sense of emotional disconnection unwittingly confirms the other’s worst fears and keeps this spiral going. In the end, the demanding protesting partner begins to give up the struggle for connection, grieve the relationship and also move away. This leads into the last dance of all.

Freeze and Flee.

In this dance both partner feel helpless. No-one is reaching for anyone here. No-one is taking any risks. Everyone has run for cover. In other relationships this might be fine for a while, but with the people we love, this “no response” dance is excruciating. Indeed, the partner’s here aren’t really dancing at all. They are sitting out. We are not wired to tolerate this kind of isolation. If nothing changes, the relationship is in free fall.

When folks caught in Demon Dialogues come in and ask, “Is there any hope for us?” I tell them, “Sure there is. When we understand what the drama of love is all about, what our needs and fears are, we can help each other step out of these negative dialogues into positive loving conversations that bring us in to each other’s arms and safely home.