

Relationship Dances - Pursuers and Distancers

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Part One: The Pursuer

The following is adapted from Maggie Scarf's book, "Intimate Partners*" (<http://www.maggiescarf.com>).

A chapter from this book was also published by The Atlantic Monthly in November 1986, and is available at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/86nov/scarf.htm>

Qualification: What follows is a not uncommon situation in intimate partner violence, however the discussion here is relevant only to relationships where there is no violence or power imbalance of any kind in the relationship. A proper discussion of this in terms of partner violence belongs in another forum.

A common couples counselling presentation is the situation of the 'emotional', clinging wife and the 'uncaring', distant husband. Although it can be the other way around, I'll talk about it in terms of the wife as the 'over-emotional' partner and the husband as the distant partner, as this appears to be more common.

What is presented below is towards the extreme end of the spectrum, and is truly indicative of a disordered view of reality. However, therapists can be presented with clients at various positions along this spectrum of distorted thinking and feeling. It's not to say that one partner being more emotionally expressive than the other is a bad thing. The key question is whether it is getting in the way of the relationship and dividing the couple, or perhaps limiting each partner's role and way of being in the relationship.

Histrionic personality disorder has been described as "a caricature of femininity" whether it happens to manifest itself in a woman or in a man. The histrionic person is "superficially warm and charming," but on closer inspection can be seen as also "egocentric, self-indulgent, and inconsiderate of others." This self-indulgence and inconsiderateness may not be obvious, as they certainly mouth the opposite.

Careful observation of their behaviours usually shows up the cracks. They tend to say all the 'right' things, but do the opposite. It usually shows as a lack of boundary awareness and not respecting other people's personal space. They tend to gravitate towards or create emotionally charged situations. In short, the histrionic person can actually look as though they're warm, loving, and completely together, but in reality they are unable to set and maintain boundaries to protect themselves, so are also unaware of appropriate boundaries for others.

People with histrionic traits tend to be "dependent, helpless, constantly seeking reassurance," though acting as though they are the opposite, and may be given to indulgence in frequent "flights into romantic fantasy." Described as love addicts, they are in need of a continual supply of affectionate attention.

While histrionic individuals have poor control over their impulses and tend to say and do things that might more have been left unsaid and undone, their partners are often quite opposite — they may be more methodical, autonomous, perfectionists (at least about some things), and may be lacking in spontaneity. They tend to be ever vigilant as they

strive to foresee and deal with all the things that could go wrong. He looks like the ideal, thoughtful ‘protector’ husband.

The story of their marriage very frequently begins with the rescue of an unhappy maiden—from her miserable home life or from a disastrous involvement with a difficult, rejecting (but exciting) lover or boyfriend, or from some other predicament. The wife tends to need the man she marries in some way, and this lends him a sense of great importance. It also feeds into his protector role and being needed makes him feel loved initially. He undertakes to take care of her, as a good parent should. Did I say parent? Yes, parent. Because there will be a parental quality to one partner, and a childlike quality to the other. One is taking care of, and the other is being taken care of.

Initially it all seems to go well. Each feels loved for different reasons, but the roles are not appropriate as long-term ways of relating in an adult relationship. At the start of relationships, the histrionics are outwardly saying “Let me love you”, but as the relationship progresses, what their partner actually experiences is “Please, please love me”.

Eventually the husband, who has suppressed his own needs, begins to feel more and more depleted. While he still wants to placate his needful partner and to meet her never-ending demands, he begins to experience himself as running short of emotional resources and unable to provide her with the constant validation that she so desperately requires.

The symbiotic fusion, in which she was the good, needful child, and he the perfect, boundlessly caretaking parent, gives way when, inevitably, he pulls back in order to protect himself and give himself some attention. She will be very sensitive to any real or imagined signs of withdrawal.

As was said above, the histrionic person is also often impulsive and is very easily a victim to the unscrupulous. If her impulsivity leads to poor involvements or decisions, he may well respond like the authoritarian parent and try to limit or control the situation, including her participation. This the histrionic will also experience as rejection and loss of love. He becomes the critical, rejecting parent in her eyes.

As he pulls back, she is let down and becomes anxious. It triggers her sense of herself as an unlovable, thoroughly ineffective person; she needs a stream of self-esteem-enhancing affirmation, from outside herself, on a fairly regular basis. It’s as though if she doesn’t receive it from others, especially her partner (and maybe her children as well), she actually doesn’t have a sense of who she is. She experiences her partner as having broken his promise to be an unstinting, loving and reliable provider. She feels dismissed, ignored—as she has felt so many times previously in her life. For such a person it is clearly the case that the opposite of love is not hate but indifference.

"Hysterical patients," the psychiatrist Anthony Storr writes in *The Art of Psychotherapy*, "are defeated persons". Due to her own lack of identity, she fears being alone and facing her own terrifying emptiness. Unconsciously she had expected her partner to replace her low self-opinion with his inflated estimate of her beauty, intelligence, and value; to give her the unstinting parental love that she believes she wasn’t accorded before.

When he withdraws, she pursues him with her stream of endless woes, complaints, and accusations. They are in an interactive cycle, in which the more she emotes, the less he listens, and the less he listens, the more persistent and emotive she becomes.

She struggles to take charge of him and of the relationship, to turn it into the marriage that she yearns for — one in which both partners are perennially and completely intimate, and always emotionally expressive (especially around the subject of her own ongoing, difficulties). He struggles just as hard, but in the opposite direction — to control her behavior, and the relationship, so as to ensure the preservation of his personal autonomy.

While his partner has no control, he has nothing but control; each seems, in a way, to have brought to the other a missing segment of his or her personality. Together they have what each of them entered into the relationship needing— he to be able to access his emotionality, and she the ability to set reasonable limits upon it.

The pair ought to live happily ever after ... or so the observer would imagine. They may feel extraordinarily close at first, and their needs may fit together like the interlocking pieces of a puzzle.

However, they can't combine together as one person in order to overcome their respective emotional needs. He needs to be able to access his own emotionality, not to just be in relationship with someone who can access hers. She needs to be able to set reasonable limits on her own emotionality, not be in relationship with someone who will do it for her. What develops is a sense of not only fitting together but of also being *glued* there.

The need for personal space inevitably asserts itself. In an effort to assert their separateness and distinctness, the mates begin to exaggerate those qualities that differentiate them from one another. Each moves in the direction of becoming as much unlike the partner as he or she possibly can—in technical terms, they polarize.

The rift between them yawns ever wider as she becomes more attention-seeking, childish, and theatrical, and he becomes increasingly withdrawn, unavailable, and isolated.

And each believes that peace and harmony could be achieved, if only the other would change.