

So What's Really Going on in Relationships?

Part I: The Background Story

What is really happening when we fall in--and out of--love? What's really going on when couples fight? To gain insight into the hidden agenda of a relationship, we need to look at the complex process of human growth and development, and at how we human beings fit into the larger scheme of things.

We are meant to be in relationship. Research on the brain and attachment theory have shown this conclusively. We entered the world in relationship, our survival was dependent on relationship, our deepest joys and wounds happened in relationship.

Our overwhelming impulse at birth is to sustain that feeling of connectedness, to remain attached. If our caretakers are attuned to our wants and needs, ready and able to provide warmth safety and sustenance, our feelings of aliveness and well-being are sustained. Our talents, interests and dreams are supported and affirmed. We develop confidence. We remain whole.

But even in the best of circumstances, our parents are not able to maintain perfect standards, to be available every minute, to always understand exactly what is needed or to meet every demand. Every unmet need causes fear and pain and, in our infantile ignorance, we have no idea how to stop it and restore our feeling of safety. Desperate to survive, we adopt primitive coping mechanisms. Depending on our temperament and the nature of our caretakers' neglect, our feeble defenses may take the form of constant crying to get attention or alternatively, we may withdraw from whatever attentions our caretakers do provide, denying that we even have needs. Though we do what we can, already the world feels unsafe.

Meanwhile, throughout our childhood, we are also being socialized, molded by our caretakers and communities to fit into society. We are told what to do, what to say, how to behave; we see behavior modeled by friends, teachers, TV characters; we are intimate witnesses to the relationship modeled by our parents. Observant and malleable, we learn what to do to gain love and acceptance and in the interest, again, of survival, we repress or disown parts of ourselves that society finds unacceptable or unlovable.

And we bring all of this – our gifts and our baggage – into our adult relationships.

So What's Really Going on in Relationships? Part II: The Relationship Story

A Journey of Three Phases, Two Brains and One Hope

Let's look at what happens in relationships. We'll start by breaking this journey into three phases.

Phase I: Romance... When we fall in love, it's tremendous. We believe we've found it. The world is brighter, our senses more alive. We experience a connectedness that some may call fate. We enter this world "trailing clouds of glory" in the words of the poet Wordsworth. Some experience this as excitement and fanfare – bells ringing in the ears; for others it brings more a sense of quiet calm and security. There's no right or wrong, just different ways to experience romance.

If this weren't enough, nature kicks in to give us a hand. Evolution dictates that we date, mate and procreate. The brain takes this dictate seriously and produces the perfect love cocktail which works like a magical elixir to lower our defenses and put us in an altered state. Romance takes off, with a high that tends to last 3-6 months, then wanes over the following 2-4 years.

Yes, we are on drugs. Their names:

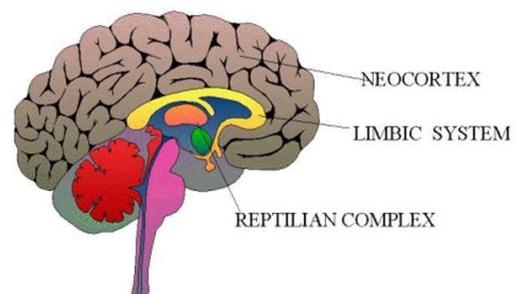
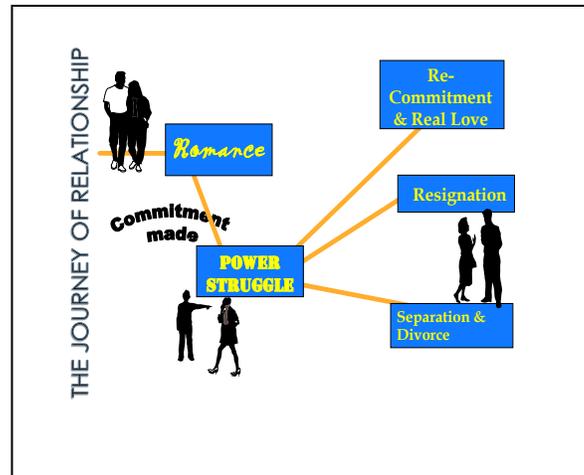
- Testosterone – the hormone of desire, associated with increased libido in both men and women.
- Dopamine & Norepinephrine – which cause feelings of elation, obsession and passion.
- Oxytosin & Vasopressin – the "cuddle chemicals" which produce bonding between partners, and is released after orgasm.

Phase II: The Power Struggle... But at some point things change. What was previously going with the grain now seems to be moving against it. We often think our partner has changed. Although you may not yet agree with this, they haven't. You're just seeing something more deeply under the surface that you haven't seen before. And something that was blind to you during the experience of the romance.

Two Brains & An Iceberg

So let's take a look at what's going on the brain at this point. Our brain is an amazing organ which has evolved over many centuries. In the old brain, one of the core structures – the limbic system – is the emotional center of the fight or flight response. At this level, the brain is always asking itself this fundamental question: *Is it safe, or is it dangerous?*

When it's safe, then we are free to be our best human selves – we can play, create, live, love, mate and just simply enjoy our



life and relationships. During these periods, the newer, uniquely human part of the brain – the cortex - is in control, and this is the part of our brain that seeks out and maintains relationships as we are meant to do.

Limbic Hijack! When it's dangerous, however, we go into "fight or flight response" where we may fight, flee, or freeze. The amygdala (an almond shaped structure in the limbic system) takes over, and short circuits the brain for our protection. It turns on like a light switch, and serves to protect us. If the lion is chasing you, you want to react quickly, not stop and think about it. The problem here is that the limbic system doesn't know the difference between the lion chasing you and your partner being upset with you. This light switch is flipped, and we go into our characteristic reactive behaviors – we get angry and yell or withdraw into a shell – and we become locked into the power struggle.

"Iceberg Dead Ahead!" In these moments, it can seem as if your partner is the enemy. You might think something like, *"if you would just do this one thing (or stop doing this one thing), then we'd be fine."* We want the quick fix, or more accurately, we want our partner to get a quick fix. We can't see beneath the surface layer of the problem to get at the real cause (and the real solution). In this sense, problems in relationships can be likened to icebergs. They look huge, and certainly feel that way when we're experiencing limbic hijack. What we don't realize at first glance is that we're only seeing the surface layer of the problem, just like we only see the surface layer of the iceberg. In fact, 80-90% of an iceberg lies beneath the surface of the water, and yes that same portion of the problem in your relationship lies beneath the surface as well.



When we see a problem, our tendency is simply to want a quick fix. *"If you would just do this one thing, then we'd be fine."* Unfortunately this works about as well as trying to chop off the top of the iceberg. Even if this could be done, the iceberg rises up and the problem resurfaces. Our task is to get beneath the surface and chip away down there; only then can we begin to dissolve the surface problem.

Here's the often misunderstood piece of the puzzle. This is supposed to happen. Romance is supposed to end. Tension is inevitable and necessary in any healthy relationship. **Conflict is growth trying to happen.** Perhaps you've had an experience either individually or in relationship when you go through something very difficult, perhaps extremely painful, and emerge stronger on the other side. Just as the finest gold must go through the fire to refine it, so to must your relationship work through power struggle to reach real love.

Phase III: Your Choice... When you are in the Power Struggle, you have three choices to make about your relationship. You can choose to end it through breaking up or divorce. You can choose to live a life of resignation, accepting less than what you desire or deserve. Or you can choose to embrace this journey and work to create the real love of a committed, conscious relationship. I think you're here because you want the latter, and I'm committed to help you build it. That is the **HOPE** – that you can build the relationship you desire if you choose to look within and do the work that it will take to get there.

Know that this journey is not a one-time process. At times, couples may experience a renaissance of their Romance. Each time a conflict hits, it leads back to the Power Struggle, with that choice of how they want to respond. Each time you have the invitation to view it as an opportunity for growth. Over time, by working to create a secure functioning relationship, you will become better at smoothing out the rough patches and having the relationship you desire.

It Can Be Done!

All this may seem daunting to you, but I want you to know that it can be done. The first step is having the curiosity and openness to start the process. That's all. I will help you from there.

Start now. Contact me at: 310-268-7792 or Michael@DrMichaelD.com