

Is it Love Or Indigestion?

By

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"I cannot live either without you or with you"

-Ovid

A strange phenomenon happens in the bliss of being swept off your feet. Once couples make a commitment to each other, the romantic love may end and a power struggle subtly begins. As the dance of courtship draws each partner closer, lovers may change their focus solely to the expectation that all their needs will now be met. It's no longer good enough that your partner be affectionate, attentive and fun to be with. Now there is a whole list of expectations (some conscious, but most unconscious) of what (s)he must do in order that you can feel whole, complete and happy. Often clients will tell me that they just don't know what happened to "Mr./Ms. Wonderful" – nothing seems as it was.

We tend to choose partners that have both the positive and negative traits of those who raised us or influenced us early in life. We also are drawn to those who compensate for the positive parts of our personalities that were not expressed in childhood. There is an unconscious belief that our partner will become our ideal surrogate parent, and all we need to do to be happy is form a close, lasting relationship and be worshiped and adored forevermore. When we find out that it is not working, we assume it is because our partner is deliberately ignoring our needs and withholding love.

The power struggle begins as shock and then denial as you try to put a positive spin on the negative traits that bother you. When the denial no longer works you feel betrayed and deceived. The degree of your pain is the amount of disparity between your ideal fantasy of your partner and your partner's true self that you now see. After the anger stage, bargaining sets in. It sounds something like this: "If you will stop drinking, I will be more romantic". Therapy can sometimes prolong the power struggle by negotiating behaviors rather than getting to the core of the problem. The last stage of a power struggle is despair when couples have no hope of finding happiness and love in the relationship and the pain has gone on too long. Here couples may decide to get divorced or to lead parallel lives and find their fulfillment in activities outside the marriage. Very few find a way to resolve the power struggle and create a deeply satisfying relationship.

The key is to be aware of what is happening early on and to identify and communicate what both partners need and want. There is an "old program" of responses to circumstances that each partner brings into the relationship: a look, a word, a gesture that set off a negative reaction because of previous events and circumstances. The old program is an automatic, unconscious cry-or-criticize response that brings more distance between people. You need a "new program" of emotional detachment from the old program, tempered with reason and a nondefensive approach to criticism. In most interactions with your mate, you are actually safer when you lower your defenses than when you attack in return. Your goal is to make your mate an ally, not an enemy.

The more conscious and aware you become the more flexible and discerning your mind will be in helping you achieve your unconscious goals. Realize you have a hidden purpose in things that are important to you. The fight is never about the situation at hand; it is about something deeper that you desire (usually respect, acknowledgement, appreciation). Be more intentional and direct in asking for what you truly want and need. Create an accurate image of your partner and yourself as well – including both positive and negative traits. Value your partner's needs and desires as much as you value your own. The difficulty of creating a warm, loving and lasting relationship is directly related to your commitment to grow and change. We want to believe that relationships are "easy and natural" because it is human nature to want a life without effort. But to be loved, we must first become a lover of life, our partner, our relationship and most importantly, ourselves.

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