

THERAPY MATTERS: The Psychology of Love  
By Sue Mayo and Helen Muscolo

To love and be loved is an almost universal desire. Why then do so many couples fail in their attempts to maintain this in their lives? It is a multi-faceted and complex set of issues that make or break a relationship. If it was easy, the divorce rate would not be hovering near 50 percent.

Everyone has heard the phrase “opposites attract”. On the surface, this would seem to be a strange concept. Seemingly, it is more logical to think that similarities would go further toward cementing a partnership as opposed to differences. However, many are attracted to another person because they view their loved one’s differences as strengths that they themselves do not possess. For example, the highly organized, efficient person may be drawn to someone who is somewhat scattered and lazy. This allows for the efficient one to “run” the relationship and be in control. The less efficient partner can acquiesce and feel taken care of. When egos do not collide, this is quite a workable situation. The trouble begins when a power struggle ensues. Frequently in this kind of dynamic, resentments can start to build and this can initially be quite unconscious. What was once attractive becomes just the opposite. The efficient person over time grows weary of being the one who has to keep everything together while the scattered person may start to feel stifled and smothered. What began as a good dynamic can become toxic and the relationship may erode to the point that the differences are not reconcilable.

Imago Relationship Theory goes further in addressing why couples choose each other by believing that people have an innate, unconscious desire to choose partners who complete them...because it is in these areas, precisely, that the person needs to grow. Thus, in our example above, it is easy to see how the scattered and lazy partner initially enjoys the fact that their spouse is so organized, while the efficient partner rather likes being in charge of things. But taking things one step further, as Imago Theory does, we could also see that the disorganized partner would benefit by learning how to create more “order” in their lives. And it just might be true that the organized and efficient partner needs to grow by learning how to “let go” some of the time. A central concept of this theory is the idea that “that which we criticize in our partners is either also present in ourselves or is the very area in which we ourselves need to grow”. Of course, people have to be willing to look at themselves and put in the required “work” in order to grow.

Another interesting concept is that we are often attracted to partners who represent something we have not worked out from our family-of-origin. We look to find a person who has the same qualities as our mother or father in an effort to find the love we need. Again, this is usually not a conscious decision. It’s a matter of “the devil you know is better than the devil you don’t know”. A woman may be drawn to a man who is critical and cold, just as her father was, in an attempt to create a different outcome in her love relationship. If a different outcome happens, it becomes a corrective emotional experience and opens the door to the healing of old wounds. Far too often, however, the relationship just replicates what was previously experienced in the family-of-origin, and dissatisfaction ultimately prevails.

Birth order can also be a factor in whether a relationship will be successful. Though not always the case, first-born children are accustomed to being the “trail blazer” and can be quite opinionated and head strong. Conversely, the baby of the family is often spoiled and may tend to be a bit self-centered. Two “first-borns” can create a clash of the titans as neither person wants to relinquish their position. The last-born dynamic may create tension as both want to be taken care of and are unwilling to look much beyond their own needs.

Finally, love can be blind, and sometimes deaf and dumb. Falling in love is a powerful drug and ordinarily reasonable, pragmatic people often overlook obvious faults in their partner. Red flags are dismissed or ignored. Only after the infatuation wears off do they begin to realize that their spouse has traits, habits or addictions that they can not live with. At this point the partner may try to “change” the other person into the person they want them to be. This tactic rarely succeeds.

There are a multitude of theories to explain the psychology of love and why we choose the partners we choose. Fully understanding the attractions can help people create the love they want. In this way, the unconscious can become conscious and the relationship can be viewed with eyes wide open. In recognition of the Valentine’s Day that has just passed and all those yet to come, we wish you and your loved one all the best in the wonderful and sometimes crazy world of love.

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