



Sculpture created by Alexander Milov for the Burning Man Festival 2015  
Photo by Alec Kondush

## **Tune-Up Your Relationship with Couples Counselling**

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I was amused by a picture of my 5-year-old niece enjoying eating frog legs in Paris this summer. I felt an urge to tell her 'oh, sweetheart, frog legs can be delicious but my wish is that you do not have to kiss too many frogs in this life'.

This fun photo made me think of my own romantic relationships and what I have discovered during these last 12 years while studying counselling and psychotherapy. Please don't get the wrong idea! I'm not talking about characterising men as frogs – I refer to kissing a frog as being in an unhealthy relationship with another human being.

### **Knowing your main love languages and your partner's.**

Gary Chapman came up with this simple and yet powerful concept of love languages namely *words of affirmation, acts of service, receiving gifts, quality time* and *physical touch*. Knowing your primary love languages will allow you understand why you are still unhappy when your partner comes home with a lovely gift but does not spend quality time with you. As a result of knowing your main love languages, you would not harshly judge yourself as 'ungrateful' and will be able to engage with your partner discussing what is missing in your relationship. Getting to

know your partner's main love languages will enable you to reach out to attune to him or her in a meaningful way.

### **The need for safe connection and the changing brain**

I love this quote from Antoine de Saint-Exupery: 'Love does not consist in gazing at each other, but in looking outward together in the same direction'. Here is the thing: looking in the same direction is primordial given that you will need to walk quite a bit of journey together but gazing at each other lovingly is also super important! While early experiences shaped your nervous system, ongoing experiences can reshape it. The brain is continually adapting to our evolving environment and our autonomous nervous system is likewise engaged and can be intentionally influenced. It is therefore important to be in a relationship that relays 'signals of safety' and an automatic invitation for connection.

If you feel that your partner is messing up your head, take a step back and get some perspective.

[University of Exeter's ten critical questions](#). These questions came up after a thorough study interviewing divorce lawyers/mediators and couples who are in long term relationships and those who have separated.

#### ***Out of the 10 questions, I thought that the following were most relevant:***

- Do we want the same things in our relationship and out of life?
- Do we both work at keeping our relationship vibrant?
- Do you feel that we can discuss things freely and raise issues with each other?
- When we face stressful circumstances, would we pull together to get through it?
- Do we each have supportive others around us?

Often too much work to keep the relationship going is an indication of the challenging work that lies ahead. Communication is key and as a transactional analysis psychotherapist, I cannot stress enough how Adult to Adult conversations are an integral part of raising and discussing issues.

As a therapist, I find that the last question is very relevant especially when a couple is going through tough situations.

**Having someone to talk to also allows you have perspective when going through difficult situations.**

Seeing a couple therapist to discuss sensitive issues around the relationship can provide invaluable insight. I encourage couples who are planning to get married to have a few couple therapy sessions. These sessions can save you major heartaches in the years to come.

I would add two open-ended questions to this list from Exeter University.

- How do you find his or her family? The way our primary carers in life interact with us and each other provide the blueprint of our relational patterns. While we can grow individually later through personal development and/or therapy, we cannot completely erase this blueprint. If there are certain aspects of his or her family interactions raise alarm bells, do not ignore them!
- How do you deal with his or her differences? As another human being, your partner brings in the relationship his or her many differences. In this globalised world, cultural differences bring so much richness to a couple but they can also be a major challenge. It is important to explore and discuss the differences before we adopt them. This is important so that the other can respect you as an individual in the relationship.

### **Balancing Attachment and Autonomy**

In all the books I have read about relationships, I quite like David Schnarch's approach as set out in *Intimacy & Desire*. He argues that it is important to develop your Four Points of Balance that support and develop your sense of self in a relationship. They are: Solid Flexible Self (holding on to your 'self' while your partner pressures you to adapt) – this links in with dealing with differences; Quiet Mind – Calm Heart (regulating your own anxiety); Grounded Responding (staying non-reactive *and* engaged); and Meaningful Endurance (tolerating discomfort so that you can grow). He goes on to say that when your Four Points of Balance are weak, you have no freedom, nor do those around you. Differentiation is the *opposite* of emotional fusion as emotional fusion is attachment without autonomy. **Differentiation is togetherness with separateness.** While secure attachment plays a vital role in a relationship, it is also important to pay attention to differentiation.

### **Technology**

We are living in a schizoid era where we tend to live in a parallel world with our friends on social media and this often leads to us not engaging with our loved ones. I would encourage you to put your phones aside and spend quality time with your partner whenever you can do so. This is part of the nurturing of the relationship which needs to take place on a regular basis – think of your relationship as a plant which needs watering and food.

## Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

If one or more of the following 'horsemen' have entered into your relationship and you want to save it, do not let anyone of them claim residency. **Take action and ask for support!** According to Dr. John Gottman, they are *criticism* (an attack on the other at the core of their character), *contempt* (treating the other with disrespect and/or using body language such as eye-rolling), *defensiveness* (an attempt to reverse blame to make it the other partner's fault) and *stonewalling* (when the listener withdraws from the interaction). You can find out more about them on [www.gottman.com/blog/category/column/the-four-horsemen/](http://www.gottman.com/blog/category/column/the-four-horsemen/)

There is much more that I would like to share with my niece when she will be at an age to understand romantic relationships. This however may not be necessary. We often discount the fact that children observe and learn from the family dynamics from an early age. The best lessons are not said but lived out.

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