

Adult Love:

If you use popular music to try to understand the meaning of love you would end up very confused. Romantic love is referred to as being such things as a battlefield, a fever, an infatuation, an addiction, a mystical force, an ocean. A popular conclusion that love is a mystery we cannot understand. While this has poetic appeal for some, it really is out of touch with reality. Love is no longer a mystery.

Decades of psychological research shows that love is in fact understandable, predictable, and changeable. This research has closely examined how we form romantic bonds with others and has given wonderful insights into the origins and nature of romantic love. It is called Attachment Theory and it looks at how we form close bonds, how we become attached to people romantically, and how problems emerge within that romantic attachment. Rather than being mysterious, we find that the emotions and behaviours associated with love are observable and predictable.

What this wonderful research has shown is that the way you fall in love, stay in love, and fall out of love is predicted by the way you formed attachments to your parents when you were an infant. Your behaviour in your marriage is not as logical as you like to think. Rather your behaviour is an emotional response to your needs for what psychologists call "Accessibility & Responsiveness". These two needs are exactly the same needs you had as an infant from your parent(s). You, as a baby, needed your parent to be accessible to you and responsive to you.

So when you get married or involved in a love relationship the simple questions you ask of them are universal ones asked by spouses and infants: (1) Will you be accessible to me? Can I reach you when I need you? Will you be open to me? (2) Can I depend on you? Will you come when I call? Will you hear me when I cry?

In your marriage or intimate relationship these are your simple needs. When they are not forthcoming from your partner in the way you expect your response is also predictable. You respond in one of two ways: You react with either angry criticism or with avoidant withdrawal. Again, just like an infant.

Therefore, your angry criticism of your husband's inaccessibility is your attempt to get him to be more available. This is just like how an infant gets distressed when it feels neglected by a parent). Or when you withdraw into a sulk this is your attempt to manage your distress at being rejected (just the way an infant closes up when feeling hurt).

In fact the similarity between adult and infant responses to unavailable or unresponsive others is uncanny. It is humbling to realise that behind your well-articulated defensive arguments with your husband there is an uncomplicated need that has gone unmet. Your anger is just your attempt to get him to see.

However, the problem with adult relationships is that your husband also has his needs for accessibility and responsiveness and your cry for help is experienced by him as your lack of responsiveness. So your simple needs and protests get entangled with each other and you find it impossible to find the starting point from which you can unravel the knot. However, though you may find it hard to untangle, you can, with a bit of outside help, loosen the knot and sometimes unravel it easily – if you both realise that you conceal your wounded vulnerability and react in protest with anger or withdrawal. However, the angry protest is experienced by the other as more lack of responsiveness. And the merry-go-round continues.

This is a rough outline of the sequence: Your need for accessibility or responsiveness goes unmet in your relationship? Your natural response is to feel vulnerable or wounded. However, you tend to hide these feelings and respond with critical or sulky anger. Your partner then sees your anger but not your

vulnerability. He, of course, then feels his need for accessibility or responsiveness is unmet. He too disguises his vulnerability and fights back with anger. And the cycle continues for ever, over hundreds of different issues, for many years, all ending with the same feelings – of being wounded, then angry, and then misunderstood. Your predictability, if you saw it, would disappoint you.