

The dance of intimacy:

The outcome of conflict in most intimate relationships is predictable. Despite our wish to see ourselves as behaving in rational ways we invariably respond in predictable ways to different situations. I often say to couples that if they could observe themselves having verbal disagreements on videotape they would be shocked by their predictability.

I often use the metaphor of a dance to describe this to couples. Couples fight in the same ways all the time. There is usually a predictable sequence of steps to this dance. For example in may be a classic pursuer-distancer routine. The pursuer-distancer routine usually has five steps:

Step 1 involves the woman pursuing the man for affection or contact. Step 2 involves the man withdrawing from the woman's pursuit. Step 3 involves the woman increasing her pursuit with more intensity. Step 4 involves the man stopping his withdrawal but shutting down. Step 5 involves the woman stopping her pursuit and giving up. The end result is that both partners are left feeling distant and frustrated and invariably feeling like they keep ending up in the same emotional cul-de-sac.

That "here we go again" feeling is familiar to most couples after they go through their conflict-management routine. It is common for couples to feel that "no-matter what we do it always ends up the same". As an intimate partner you will be familiar with that deflated feeling at the end of a disagreement. You end up asking yourself "what's the point?" or concluding that "there is just no getting through to him". It all sounds familiar?

The Compliant-Defiance routine is another common "dance" sequence I see with couples. I call it this because it involves an apparent compliance by the man that ultimately defies his wife. It goes something like this. In Step 1 the wife points out some incompetence in her husband and demands that he change his ways ("Clean the countertop after you make a sandwich"). In Step 2 the husband responds with a half-hearted agreement to change. ("All right, all right, I'll clean it up in future). The wife remains unconvinced but because of his agreement has to let it go. In Step 3 the husband conveniently forgets about the agreement and repeats the behavior. In Step 4 the wife escalates her criticism of her husband ("What the hell is wrong with you?") to which the husband plays victim and points out his wife's hysterical over-reaction. In Step 5 the wife withdraws in complete frustration and the husband withdraws feeling somewhat self-righteous.

The dance sequence will start up again soon over some other issue. The wife in these exchanges starts out feeling right and ends up feeling defeated. The husband starts out feeling wrong but ends up partly victorious.

Men are very good at this kind of conflict-management because it involves a kind of passive resistance. Men become experts at saying "Yes" but meaning "No". They become good at agreeing with their wives just to make the hassle to stop. In his mind he is saying, "If I just agree to this then she will stop and leave me alone. I'll figure out how to get out of it later."

The point I want to emphasize is how predictable these patterns become and how both partners know exactly where their particular dance is going to end up. Yet despite this inevitability both people seem at a loss as to how to stop this runaway train.

The thing is people are passionately convinced that we are right and see no reason to change their behaviour. The problem is that both partners believe the same thing. So they keep on righteously driving up these dead-end streets.

It is extraordinary how we are all the same. Though we can see that our approach to someone is not working our solution is to *do more of the same only more intensely*. It is as if all we have is a hammer so we see every problem like it is a nail. I will frequently ask spouses, parents, children this simple question: "If what you are doing does not work, why do you keep doing it?" Most respond with the child-like answer "Because it should work!"

Very often the problem is caused not by the other but by our stubborn repeating of the same attempted solution over and over again. "If I persist in pointing out his flaws eventually he will change" she says to herself. So the dance repeats itself to the same inevitable end. Day after day. Year after year.

Today, do something different. Surprise yourself. And him.