

Please Try This at Home

Monthly Tips for Increasing the Joy in Your Life

You Are What You Eat, Not What You Crave

It makes sense that it's what we actually choose to put into our mouths, not what we *want* to ingest that ultimately becomes part of our bodies, right? When applied to food, it's kind of a no-brainer that choices matter just as much as cravings. But when I hear folks talk about attraction, that concept stops being so straightforward. Sometimes it sounds like whatever we are attracted to gets to determine who we are and what we do, with no choice about it.

Let me show you what I mean with three real life examples of assumptions about attraction that I hear *a lot*, assumptions that have the power to drive people to major life decisions that are sometimes life giving and sometimes utterly disastrous:

1. Attraction is a mysterious force that can't be controlled. For example, Rodney says, "I want to date stable, kind women who actually appreciate the good things about me. But I always find myself attracted to women who are gorgeous and totally into themselves. If they hang out with me, it's only because they need something from me. I guess I'm just destined to repeat the same bad relationship over and over because I can't make myself be attracted to good people."

2. Unless we pursue what makes us feel most intensely attracted, we will never be happy. Hank says, "There are lots of things I love about my wife. But when I'm with Alex, I feel 'butterflies' that I never feel in marriage. My pulse races and I feel passionate like a teenager again. If I don't pursue Alex, I could be missing my only chance at lasting happiness. But I can't imagine the pain that would cause my wife and kids. I feel like I have to make a choice between their happiness and mine, like there's no way to have both."

3. What we are attracted to automatically defines who we are. Rhonda says, "I've always thought I was straight. I like dating men. But I met this woman, Beth, who makes me feel so good when I'm with her that I just want to spend all my time with her. I'm not sure if I'm sexually attracted to her, but I feel like I'm behaving around her like we're in those first stages of dating. Does that mean I've been wrong all along? That I'm really bi or a lesbian and I won't ever find what I'm looking for unless I embrace that identity?"

Do you hear the absolutes in these examples, wiping out any role of choice or middle ground: "destined to be," "only chance at happiness," "won't ever find...unless"? No wonder the ancient image for attraction is Cupid's arrow, aimed haphazardly at us poor mortals, enchanting us to go against reason, values, self concept, and even other kinds of desire because we are helpless under his cruel spell.

But are these assumptions about attraction actually valid? Certainly there are "Rodneys" out there who report perpetual heartbreak because they can never get their heads and hearts to line up about which relationships to pursue. But what about the other "Rodneys" who end up dating people they admire, though they're not strongly attracted to them, and report high levels of satisfaction about the long-term relationships that follow? Of course there are "Hanks" who find greater satisfaction in a second marriage, but what about the ones who get divorced to marry their "Alexes" and, five years later, find that they are no happier than in their previous marriage? Naturally there are "Rhondas" who find answers to their identity questions by exploring all

varieties of attraction that come their way, but what about those who consider the social, familial, faith, or self concept consequences of exploring bisexual attraction and come to a peace about leaving that avenue unexplored because they don't want those consequences? If we listen to enough stories, we hear about those who increase the vitality of their life by following attraction's lead, while others find deep satisfaction in letting other values, reasons, and commitments "drive the car," putting attraction in the back seat.

So if there aren't absolute truths about what to do with attraction to increase the joy in our lives, what would be a more helpful way to think about it? A way to keep our eyes open to the variety of choices we actually do have when we find ourselves attracted, rather getting duped into thinking we are totally helpless under the power of Cupid's arrow and there's only one way to go?

Attraction as Information, Not Destiny

What if we thought about attraction more like we think about our other urges and hungers: *as information about a certain thing that we need, but not about everything we need*. When we are craving ham, for example, that's our body's way of telling us that we are short on salt, fat, or protein. These are legitimate needs, each required for survival in small amounts. But the fact that we crave ham doesn't mean we have stopped needing fruits, veggies, and grains. We're just not craving them because that need has more recently been met.

Or say we're feeling super lazy or worn out and all we want to do is plop on the couch. At the same time, we may know our kid needs attention, there are no groceries in the fridge, and if we don't get our bills paid today, we'll have to start paying overdue interest. The fact that we need rest doesn't actually wipe out the other pressing needs of the day, just because we really want it. It's just that our brains and bodies are better at strongly communicating some cravings to us than others.

Attraction is the same way. It gives us the strongest information, not about our overall needs, but about the particular needs have not being met recently. Let's say we have a total of 50 relational needs like being listened to, being delighted in, having someone care about our day, sex, intensity/adventure, encouragement, being confronted when we're hurting ourselves, sharing interests, feeling protected, having someone react differently to us than those who wounded us earlier in life so we can heal, etc. If we are single and our friends are meeting 10 out of those 50 needs and two potential partners come along, one who can meet 25 of our 40 remaining needs and another who can meet 30, we're gonna be more attracted to Mr. or Ms. "30."

But say we've been married for awhile to that person who meets 30 of our needs, but our 20 remaining needs haven't been met for quite some time. If someone else comes along who meets 15 out of those 20 remaining needs, we're gonna be attracted to them and feel the "butterflies," even if that person is only capable of meeting a total of 15 out of our 50 needs. Why? Because "butterflies," like intense food cravings, are caused by *anticipation of having unmet needs met, not by steady need meeting over time*. It's for this reason that attraction is much better at telling us about needs that are not being met at a particular moment than exactly which person we should be with long term for optimal health and wellbeing.

If we treat attraction as information about unmet needs, rather than as identification of *the* person who will best meet all our needs long term, that sets us free to make choices based on our whole range of needs, rather than automatically running after what we are missing, only to

leave other needs unmet that were previously taken care of. This is how that can look in practice:

1. Rodney asks himself what his attraction to beautiful, narcissistic women tells him about his unmet needs. He realizes he has bought our culture's message that winning an unobtainable woman is the way to be respected as a man by other men. Having always felt "less than" other guys, he realizes what he really needs is to feel respected and that a self-centered woman is never going to be able to give that to him, no matter how gorgeous she is. He begins to explore other ways of increasing his respect for himself and building stronger friendships with men who can value things about him. Then he starts asking out girls he actually enjoys being with, telling himself it's okay that he doesn't feel a "spark" right away.
2. Hank lists the things that attract him to Alex: she notices his work and compliments him on it, she takes care of herself physically, she's spontaneous and free with her time, and she's great at showing excitement about his ideas. Realizing that his wife used to be good at some of these things years ago, but not recently, he wonders whether it's really Alex that he wants, or just to have someone meet these particular needs. Before jumping into an affair or filing for divorce, he decides to see if it would help to talk to his wife about his need for these things and to spend some more time with some of his other friends who are also encouraging and spontaneous.
3. Rhonda realizes that what most intensely draws her to Beth is the way that Beth seems to understand her feelings even when Rhonda is too shy or scared to say them out loud. Rhonda's twin sister was the only other person who had been able to get her that well and she's felt so lonely since her sister was killed in an accident ten years ago. Unclear about whether it's sexual attraction or just her intense longing to be understood that is causing her desire for Beth, Rhonda decides that it's okay to stay close friends with Beth for awhile and just see how her feelings for her go. She can return to the question of which gender(s) she is attracted to after having her long, deep need to feel understood satisfied for awhile. Her desire to be with Beth right now does not have to be the only defining factor of her sexual identity.

Do you see how in each of these examples, the folks who were attracted pulled back from the *people* they felt the attraction was about long enough to identify what *needs* the attraction was alerting them to? Because they were each ambivalent about romantically pursuing the people they were attracted to, they decided to first look at other ways to get those identified needs met, kind of like filling the body's craving for fat, protein, and salt with creamy chicken soup rather than ham. If it turns out that the other ways of need-meeting fail, they would be free to do deeper exploration of their needs and try other need-meeting strategies or, armed with more complete information about their overall needs and the person who inspired the attraction, pursue the person. The important thing is that, even when strongly attracted, they all still have a choice about how to get their needs met, taking into consideration other commitments and values in their lives and the other important needs and desires associated with those.

Getting Your Needs Met within Your Values and Commitments

If you have been struggling with an attraction in your life that seems to go against your other commitments, values, and needs, rather than quickly going after it or puritanically resigning yourself to misery because you are choosing to ignore the attraction, try the following:

1. List everything about the person that you find attractive.
2. List which of your relational needs you feel would be met by each of those things.
3. List which *other* people and activities in your life could meet some or all of these needs, without compromising your commitments, values, or other needs.
4. Plan to rearrange your schedule to give a higher priority to spending time with the other people and activities that address the unmet needs your attraction helped identify. (YES, this is hard. It's just easier than dealing with the fallout of a horrible relationship pursued on impulse or a life of acetic misery. That's all.)
5. When more of your unmet needs have been getting met on a regular basis for a few months, check back in with your attraction. Is it still as intense? Are there ways that it has changed? Are there other unmet needs that it is giving you information about that you missed at first?
6. Paying attention to any new needs that your attraction identifies for you, make whatever additional schedule and priority changes that you can to get even more of these needs met by other people and activities.
7. After several more months of greater need-meeting activities, reassess your attraction, deciding from a less deprived, more solid place whether your attraction is really about the person, or simply what that person represented to you about the life changes you needed to make.

If you or someone you know would like help deciding what to do with a tricky attraction, feel free to call me at 303-931-4284 for a free 20-minute consultation or email info@jenniferdiebel.com.

Thanks for reading!

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