

Where Does Love Go Wrong?

The Three Demon Dialogues That Can Wreck Your Relationship.

By Dr. Sue Johnson, Author of Hold Me Tight

Unhappy couples always tell me that they fight over money, the kids, or sex. They tell me that they cannot communicate and the solution is that their partner has to change. "If Mary would just not get so emotional and listen to my arguments about our finances and the kids, we would get somewhere," Brian tells me. "Well, if Brian would talk more and not just walk away, we wouldn't fight. I think we are just growing apart here," says Mary.

After 25 years of doing couple therapy and couple research studies, I know that both Mary and Tim are just seeing the tip of the iceberg. Submerged below is the massive real issue: both partners feel emotionally disconnected.

They are watching their backs, feeling criticized, shut-out and alone. Underneath all the loud arguments and long silences, partners are asking each other the key questions in the drama of love: "Are you there for me? Do I and my feelings matter to you? Will you respond to me when I need you?" The answers to these questions, questions that are so hard to ask and so hard to hear in the heat of a fight, make the difference between emotional safety and emotional peril and starvation.

We know from all the hundreds of studies on love that have emerged during the past decade that emotional responsiveness is what makes or breaks love relationships. Happy stable couples can quarrel and fight, but they also know how to tune into each other and restore emotional connection after a clash. In our studies we find that seven out of ten couples who receive Emotionally Focused Therapy or EFT can repair their relationship. They do this by finding a way out of emotional disconnection and back into the safe loving contact that builds trust. But why can't we all do this, even without a therapist? What gets in our way? The new science of love tells us.

Our loved one is our shelter in life. When this person is unavailable and unresponsive we are assailed by a tsunami of emotions — sadness, anger, hurt and above all, fear. This fear is wired in. Being able to rely on a loved one, to know that he or she will answer our call is our innate survival code. Research is clear, when we sense that a primary love relationship is threatened, we go into a primal panic.

There are only three ways to deal with our sense of impending loss and isolation. If we are in a happy basically secure union, we accept the need for emotional connection and speak those needs directly in a way that helps their partner respond lovingly. If however we are in a wobbly relationship and are not sure how to voice our need, we either angrily demand and try to push our partner into responding, or we shut down and move away to

protect ourselves. No matter the exact words we use, what we are really saying is, "Notice me. Be with me. I need you." Or, "I won't let you hurt me. I will chill out, try to stay in control."

If these strategies become front and center in a relationship, then we are liable to get stuck in what I call the Demon Dialogues. These dialogues can take over your relationship. They create more and more resentment, caution and distance until we reach a point where we feel the only solution is to give up and bail out.

There are 3 main Demon Dialogues that trap couples in no-solution emotional starvation and insecurity:

Find the Bad Guy

This dead-end pattern of mutual blame keeps a couple miles apart. Fights look like a "who gets to define who" contest. As Pam says, "I am waiting for his put down. I have my gun ready. Maybe I pull the trigger when he isn't even coming for me." Both partners define the other as uncaring or somehow defective. Everybody loses. But this attack-attack pattern is hard to keep up. It is usually the opening measure to the most common and ensnaring dance of all — the Protest Polka.

The Protest Polka

Psychologists knew for years that this demand-withdraw dance leads to divorce, but they weren't able to figure out why is it so widespread and so deadly. We now understand that potent emotions and compelling needs keep this pattern going: the wired in need for emotional connection and the fear of rejection and abandonment. Even if our brains know that we are somehow making things worse by criticizing or shutting our partner out, we cannot just switch off this longing and fear. "The more he refuses to talk to me or dismisses my feelings, the angrier I get and the more I poke him" says Mia.

"Anything to get a response from him." Her partner Jim picks up, "And the more I hear that angry tone in her voice, the more I just hear that I can never please her. I just get hopeless and more silent." It is this spiral that is the enemy, not the other partner, though neither partner recognizes this. Mia is protesting Jim's distance. Jim is frantically trying to avoid her disapproval. They talk this way because they sense an alarming answer to the attachment question, "Are you there for me?" In the Protest Polka, each person, in an attempt to deal with their sense of emotional disconnection unwittingly confirms the other's worst fears and keeps this spiral going. In the end, the demanding protesting partner begins to give up the struggle for connection, grieve the relationship and also move away. This leads into the last dance of all.

Freeze and Flee

In this dance both partner feel helpless. No-one is reaching for anyone here. No-one is taking any risks. Everyone has run for cover. In other relationships this might be fine for a while, but with the people we love, this "no response" dance is excruciating. Indeed, the partner's here aren't really dancing at all. They are sitting out. We are not wired to tolerate this kind of isolation. If nothing changes, the relationship is in free fall.

When folks caught in Demon Dialogues come in and ask, "Is there any hope for us?" I tell them, "Sure there is. When we understand what the drama of love is all about, what our needs and fears are, we can help each other step out of these negative dialogues into positive loving conversations that bring us in to each other's arms and safely home.



What You Need to Know About Love

By Dr. Sue Johnson, Author of Hold Me Tight

I am sitting in a restaurant shamelessly eavesdropping on a conversation at the next table. "People who expect all this woo woo stuff — love and closeness in marriage — are out of their minds," declares an elegantly dressed woman to her friend. "If you're lucky in love, you get a reasonable roommate and even that is just the luck of the draw. No-one will ever figure love out." I can't help myself. I lean across the space between us and whisper, "No — that's not true. We really do know about the woo woo stuff. We have cracked the code of love and you don't need luck! We know how to do it!"

The new science of love and loving has been evolving for over a decade. Now, as we begin the 21st century, we finally know what love is about and how it works.

Here's what we've learned:

- The need we have as children to be able to call to a special one and know that this person will respond with reassurance and comfort never goes away. To know that we are loved is the safe haven we all long for. The longing for this is wired into our brains from the cradle to the grave.
- The strongest among us are not those who can take or leave other people, but who can risk and reach out to them. These individuals know how to send clear emotional signals that pull others close. And close connection makes us stronger. Many months after 9/11, survivors who were comfortable turning to loved ones seemed to recover well, while those who turned away or were scared about relying on others still struggled with the ghosts of that day.
- Our brains are wired to see emotional isolation as dangerous and send a panic signal when we cannot get a loved one to respond. If we can't reconnect, we either shut down or get demanding. Both of these strategies can backfire and push our lover away.
- When we have that special closeness to a loved one, while making love or just holding each other, we are flooded with a cuddle hormone, called oxytocin, found only in animals that are monogamous when they mate. Oxytocin gives us a sense of calm joy, while also tamping down our stress hormones.
- Conflicts about the kids, sex or money don't make or break a relationship. What really matters is emotional connection. Underneath the discord, the real issue is that partners are questioning the security of their bond: "Are you there for me?" "Can I count on you to respond to me — to put me first?" When couples

understand the fundamental issue, they can help each other reconnect. Then problems about the kids, sex or money are just differences, not relationship bombs.

Can this emerging knowledge help you come to a better understanding of your love relationship and build a closer, stronger and more trusting connection with your partner? Yes! You can learn to send clear emotional signals to your partner in a series of focused conversations that you can have with your partner. These conversations are the central element of emotionally focused couple therapy or EFT. This therapy doesn't give couples tips to tone down conflict or manuals on how to be nicer to each other. It teaches partners how to express our most basic needs and fears and how to engage in conversations that foster a secure, enduring and loving bond.

The couples are able to:

Step out of what I call the Demon Dialogues where partners get stuck in spirals of negative emotions and wind up shutting down and shutting their partner out, or in becoming so demanding in an effort to counter the lack of connection that they push their partner away. When you understand the emotions that you and your partner feel, you can see these spirals of disconnection as they are happening. Dealing with emotional disconnection in a positive way is a huge part of making your love relationship strong.

Forgive the injuries and hurts that poison love relationships and learn to trust again. If we understand the exquisite logic of love — we can understand how to heal the wounds love inflicts. The key moment in this forgiveness is when injured partners look into the eyes of their partner and see that their pain is shared. They are not alone.

But most important of all, these couples can then create *Hold Me Tight* conversations. These positive exchanges of loving responsiveness cultivate the close connection we all long for. I recall one couple. "I get so freaked out when I hear that disappointment or frustration in your voice," Tim finally confided to Amy. "I guess I just run. I talk about tasks or concrete issues to get away from the feelings. I don't know how to tell you that I go all hopeless. A voice in my head says that I will never make it with you. At these times, I need to know that you are my lady, even if I am just blundering along and make all these mistakes." When Tim is open like this, he gives Amy what she has always wanted. She tells him, "I don't need a perfect Tim. I just need you to be with me, to share with me like this."

This kind of conversation creates the kind of safe connection that we all need and is the formula, at last we have one, for a lifetime of love.

Ten Tips for a Strong Vibrant Relationship

By Dr Sue Johnson, Author of Hold Me Tight

So love is illogical, random and mysterious, yes? Not any more. We have cracked the code. In the last few years social scientists and therapists who practice emotionally focused therapy (or EFT) have made a breakthrough. Now, at the beginning of the 21st century, we have a map to this passion, this fever that has baffled poets and lovers all through human history.

Here is some of what we know:

1. We are born to need each other. The human brain is wired for close connection with a few irreplaceable others. Accepting your need for this special kind of emotional connection is not a sign of weakness, but maturity and strength. So don't feel ashamed of this need for a safe loving bond.
2. In love relationships emotional hurt is a mixture of anger, sadness but most of all, fear. Fear of being abandoned, and rejected. This hurt registers in the same part of our brain as physical hurt. It is too hard to push these feelings aside or ignore them. The first step to dealing with injuries in love is to pinpoint the feeling and then to send clear messages about this hurt to the one you love. So don't just "ignore hurts" with the idea that they will up and go away.
3. The strongest among us are those who can reach for others. Love is the best survival strategy of all. We all long for a safe haven love relationship. Self-sufficiency is just another word for loneliness. So risk reaching out and fighting for this safe haven. It is the best investment you'll ever make.
4. Relationships can survive partners being very different. Even if you think you are from different planets it's okay. The one thing love can't survive is constant emotional disconnection. Conflict is often less dangerous for your love than distance. So after a fight, put it right. Repair it, heal the rift between you.
5. There is no perfect lover. That is only in the movies. We shut down when we think we have failed as lovers, when we have disappointed. But our lover doesn't want perfect performance. In the end he or she needs our emotional presence. So it's okay to say "I don't know what to do or say." Just stay open and present
6. The fights that matter are never about sex, money or the kids. That is just the ripple on the surface of the sea. They are about someone protesting, often in an indirect way that is hard to understand, the loss of safe emotional connection. The most terrible trap in a love relationship is when one person really wants to say, "Where

are you? Do I matter to you?" but instead becomes critical and demanding and the other person feels hopeless and inadequate and moves away. The lovers then get caught in emotional starvation, stalemate and more and more disconnection. So do try to tell each other when you feel lonely and like you are failing at being the perfect partner, especially if you are having lots of fights about tasks. Look beneath the surface.

7. We only have two ways to deal with the vulnerability of love when we can't connect. Get mad and move in fast to break down the other's walls or try not to care so much, and build a wall to protect yourself. Which one do you do? You probably learned it very young. So do try to listen to your longings and risk reaching to connect. These other two options are traps that drive your lover away from you.
8. A loving relationship is the best recipe for a long and happy life that exists. Holding your lover tight is the ultimate antidote to stress. Cuddle hormones turn off stress hormones! So do take time to hold and canoodle. It's better than taking your vitamins.
9. Lasting passion is entirely possible in love. Infatuation is just the prelude. An attuned loving bond is the symphony. This kind of bond creates what I call synchrony sex. Sex becomes a safe adventure. So don't give up when sex goes into a temporary slump. Talk about it. Making love without candid conversation is like landing a 747 without help from the control tower!
10. The key moments in love are when partners open up and ask for what they need and the other partner responds. This demands courage but this is the moment of magic and transformation. So take a deep breath and listen into your emotions. Let them tell you what you need. Then tell your partner that they are so special to you that you want to take a risk and tell them what you need from them most. Keep it simple and honest.

When you have a blueprint for love you can build it - Love doesn't have to be a mystery anymore.