

WIRED *for* LOVE

HOW UNDERSTANDING
YOUR PARTNER'S BRAIN AND
ATTACHMENT STYLE CAN HELP
YOU DEFUSE CONFLICT AND
BUILD A SECURE RELATIONSHIP

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by Harville Hendrix

Couplehood has been, from the dawn of human history, the primary social structure of our species, giving rise to larger structures of family, community, society, culture, and civilization. But interest in helping couples improve the quality of their relationships is a very recent phenomenon. What help couples got in the past came from their families or social institutions, primarily religious ones. But given that what happens in the home determines what happens in society, and given the perennial presence of conflict and violence between partners and among groups and cultures, we can conclude that that help was not very helpful. If we operate from the logical premise that healthy couples are essential to a healthy society, and vice versa, then “helping couples” should be elevated from a romantic sentiment—and a professional career—to a primary social value. The best thing a society can do for itself is to promote and support healthy couples, and the best thing partners can do for themselves, for their children, and for society is to have a healthy relationship! This book points in that direction, describing and giving concrete guidance toward a view of intimate partnership that can help couples shift their focus from personally centered needs to the needs of their relationship and, by extension, to the transformation of society.

This radical position—that by transforming couplehood we transform every social structure—has been in the making only in the last twenty-five years or so. I want to briefly trace the emergence of couplehood—and of the evolving notions of “help” for couples—so that couples who read this splendid book can have a sense of their place in the history of this primary relationship. I want to also put *Wired for Love* in context.

We have little information about how prehistoric couples chose each other and how they related to each other, but the informed imagination of cultural anthropologist Helen Fisher offers us some clues that prior to 11,000 years ago, couples formed a "pair bond" for the purposes of procreation and physical survival. She believes this bond was based on an implicit ethic of "sharing" that served mutual interests and needs. Their roles were specific. Women gathered wood for the fires, cared for the children, and gathered fruit, berries, nuts, and roots, which they shared with the men. Men hunted wild game, which they shared with the women and children, whom they also protected from other men and wild animals. While these pair relationships were clearly sexual, they were not very durable and it is probable that they were not very intimate. Estimates are that they lasted about three years on average, or until the children were mobile. Both sexes repeatedly sought and consummated other relationships. Women gave birth to many children from different fathers and men sired many children with whom they most likely spent little time and whom they seldom recognized as their progeny. Most children were reared by single mothers and transient fathers.

That all changed about 11,000 years ago when, according to the same body of research, the hunters and gatherers learned how to grow food and corral and breed animals. No longer having to search for food, they settled down into small compounds and villages, and the concept of "property" that had to be protected arose. This concept may have applied at first only to animals and crops, but since children and women also needed protection, the concept eventually extended to include them. Small social groups evolved into villages, cities, and even empires, adding new layers of importance to social relations. The concept of property ownership gave birth to economics, and who children belonged to and whom they married became critically important components of both social and economic structures. So the second version of couplehood, the "arranged marriage," was born. It had nothing to do with romantic attraction, personal needs, or mature love and everything to do with social status, economic security, and political expedience. So parents collaborated with other parents, usually without much regard for the preferences of their sons and daughters, to select spouses for their children who would improve or maintain the social and economic status of the family as a whole. Little if any attention was paid to the quality of the couple's relationship. The couple were expected to honor family values and approved

social etiquette irrespective of their feelings for each other, and if one of them transgressed—through abandonment or infidelity or other dishonorable conduct—the transgressor was advised, admonished, and/or punished by family and community leaders—father, brothers, elders, religious officials. The tools of analysis, understanding, and empathy had not yet been invented.

The next incarnation of marriage began in the eighteenth century with the rise in Europe of democratic political institutions, which argued that everyone was entitled to personal freedom—and, by extension, the freedom to marry the person of their choice. The door to marriage was, increasingly, romantic love rather than parental dictates, and this shift gave rise to the personal or psychological marriage designed to meet personal and psychological rather than social and economic needs. However, until Sigmund Freud's discovery of the unconscious and founding of psychotherapy at the end of the nineteenth century, it was little guessed that our unconscious minds are deeply involved in our personal choices and that our past interpersonal experiences have a powerful impact on our present adult relationships. The discovery that this was so led to the awareness that our choice of a partner, if it is romantic, is influenced by our unconscious minds more than our rational preferences. The partner we unconsciously choose is dauntingly similar—warts and all, and especially the warts—to the caretakers who reared us. Thus the needs we want met in our adult intimate relationship—those that were not met in childhood—are presented to persons who are woefully similar to the persons who did not meet those needs when we were children. The dissatisfaction arising from this cruel incompatibility eventually contributed to a rise in the divorce rate. While divorce was essentially forbidden in the arranged marriage and profoundly discouraged in the romantic marriage until recently, the rising divorce rate, especially after the post-World War II population explosion in the 1950s, gave birth to marriage counseling and marital therapy as professions. Help for couples was expanded from traditional (religious, familial) sources to an emerging mental health profession whose members had varying degrees of training and competence.

The early models of marriage counseling were based upon the assumption that a couple consisted of two independent, autonomous persons who could use their learning capacity and cognitive skills to resolve their differences by regulating conflict about their differences. This assumption shifted help from advice, instruction, and admonition—the method of parents and

religious professionals before the development of professional counseling and psychotherapy—to conflict resolution, negotiation, and problem solving. This was helpful to some couples whose issues were not so difficult, but for others the conflict resolution process was a failure. These more difficult couples were advised to engage in depth psychotherapy to work through their long-standing personal problems independent of their relationship, and to separate from each other with the assumption that when they came back together, free of their personal neuroses, they could meet each others' needs, current and past, and create a satisfying and wonderful relationship.

This model did not work very well. Most partners who were successful in their private psychotherapy tended to divorce rather than reconcile. The divorce rate reached about 50 percent, and there it has held steady for the past sixty years. The statistics on the success of marriage therapy has held steady at around 30 percent—not a shining success for this fledgling profession.

In recent years we have discovered that the major problem with this model is its focus on the “individual” as the foundational unit of society and on the satisfaction of personal needs as the goal of marriage. Given that democracy gave political reality to the concept of the individual and Freud illuminated the architecture of the interior of the self, this perspective makes sense. It led Freud to locate the human problem inside the individual and to create psychotherapy as a cure for the ills of the self. Since marital counseling and couples therapy are the handmaidens of psychotherapy, it makes sense that marital therapy would focus on healing the individuals as a precondition for a satisfying relationship. It also makes sense that therapists would assume that the problem was unmet needs “inside” the individuals and that relationships existed to satisfy those needs. This all give birth to this narrative of marriage: If your relationship is not satisfying your needs, you are married to the wrong person. You have a right to the satisfaction of your needs in a relationship, and if that does not happen, you should change partners and try again to get the same needs met with a different person. To put it in more crass terms, your marriage is about “you” and your needs and if it does not provide you with satisfaction, its dissolution is justifiable no matter the consequences for others, even the children.

This narrative has birthed the phenomena of multiple marriages, one-parent families, shattered children, the “starter” marriage, and cohabitation

as a substitute for marriage, as well as a trend toward tying the knot at later and later ages. Since, as was stated above, a society reflects the quality of couples' relationships, this focus on the self has also mirrored and fed a society of abuse and violence ranging from endemic negativity to domestic abuse, addictions of all kinds, crime, poverty, and war. These huge social issues cannot be changed until a different narrative about how to be in an intimate relationship emerges.

I believe a new narrative that shifts the focus from the self and personal need satisfaction to the relationship began to emerge in the last quarter of the twentieth century. In the seventies, a new view of the self as intrinsically relational and interdependent began to challenge the reigning view of the self as autonomous, independent, and self-sufficient. This paradigm shift was fomented by developmental psychologists who began to describe the newborn child as "social" at birth rather than becoming social at a later developmental stage. Humans beings, they began to say, are inherently relational and relationally dependent. At the same time, other students of the child-parent relationship began to say that there is no such thing as an "individual," there is only a mother-child relationship, thus making relationship foundational rather than the individual. The isolated and autonomous self was exposed as a myth. The origin of the human problem was relocated from the interior of the self to the failure of relationship "between" caretakers and their infant children. These failed relationships, the new researchers said, are the source of suffering in the interior soul, and its relief requires participation in a relationship that is the antithesis of the early parent-child drama. Since these students of the human situation tended to be therapists, they assumed the optimal corrective relationship was with a therapist.

In the past twenty years, these insights have become the theme of a new marital narrative and the fourth incarnation of marriage, which I refer to as the "conscious partnership." In this new narrative, commitment is to the needs of the relationship rather than to the needs of the self. It goes something like this: Your marriage is not about you. Your marriage is about itself; it is a third reality to which and for which you are responsible, and only by honoring that responsibility will you get your childhood and current needs met. When you make your relationship primary and your needs secondary, you produce the paradoxical effect of getting your needs met in ways they can never be met if you make them primary. What happens is not so much the

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healing of childhood wounds, which may in fact not be healable, but the creation of a relationship in which two persons are reliably and sustainably present to each other empathically. This new emotional environment develops new neural pathways flowered with loving presence that replace the old toxic pathways that are filled with the debris of the sufferings of childhood. Couplehood becomes the container for the joy of being, which is a connected relationship. And, since the quality of couplehood determines the tenor of the social fabric, the extension of that joy from the local to the global could heal most human suffering.

In my view, *Wired for Love* by Stan Tatkin is more than an addition to the vast literature directed to couples. It is more than a brilliant integration of recent brain research with the insights of attachment theory. It is an instance of an emergent literature expressing a new paradigm of couplehood. This is no small achievement: this book will help couples flourish in their relationships and it will aid the professionals who want to help couples be more effective. Since the author has provided a thorough guide for those on the journey to lasting love, it requires no summary here. It speaks for itself, and I encourage you to begin reading now. Your view of how to be in an intimate relationship and of the potential of marriage for personal and social healing will change forever!