

The ego battle in relationships

Do not, for one repulse, forego the purpose that you resolved to effect.
William Shakespeare, 'The Tempest'

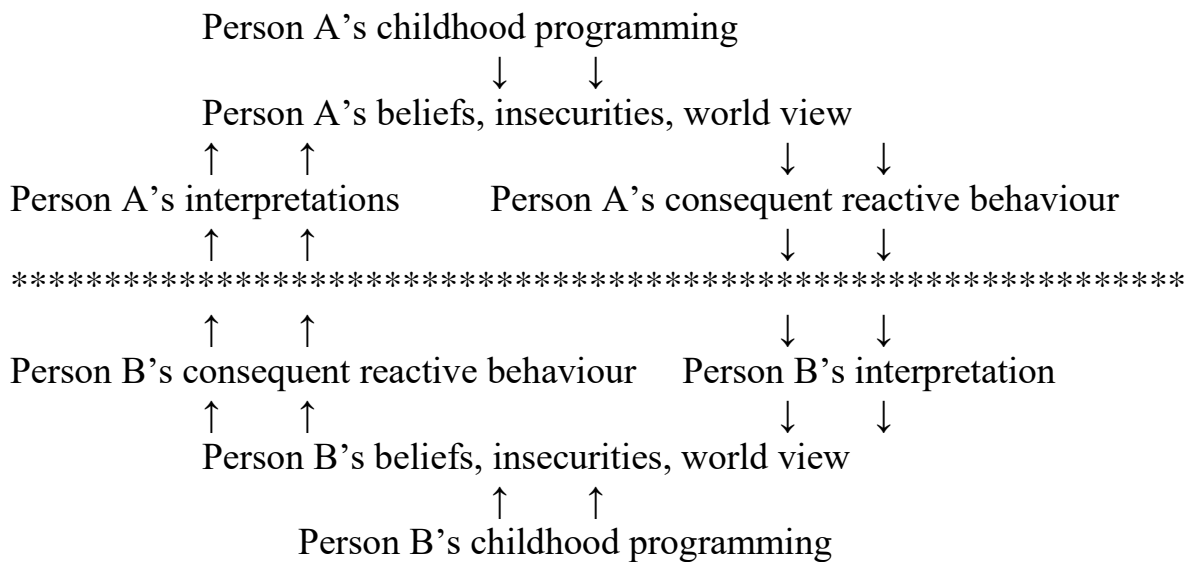
1. All couples get faced with an ego battle at some stage, but are usually both perturbed and confused by it. How could the love we felt now be a battle? How could the pleasure I used to feel with my partner now feel so raw and unpleasant?
2. In order to escape the ego battle where conflict seems to get worse and more painful, you must first understand it. You must realise that you got drawn into that ego battle because you didn't successfully know what YOU must do, not what your PARTNER must do, but what YOU must do in order to maximise the benefits of this relationship for yourself.
3. You are a self requiring expression. You have always been seeking to be the next best version of yourself by making each day better than the previous one. To feel good about life, you must express the essence of who you are.
4. We get together with someone else in order to become more than we were on our own. We wanted more love, enjoyment and fulfilment in our life, and saw this partner we've chosen as a means to getting that.
5. We wanted to be supported in the process of expressing who we are, who we are becoming, as we explore and aim to expand our sense of self. We saw our partner as a means of facilitating that expansion. The love we feel for another is actually an admiration for who they were that we would also like to be or be part of, and also being supported to be our unique self.
6. If we choose to separate from our partner, it is either because that process is failing, or we want to escape the pain that has gripped us as we've tried unsuccessfully to continue our expansion as a person.
7. We therefore now see our partner as a hindrance to, or even as undermining, our becoming who we want to be. We now feel thwarted by the journey they seem to be on which is now not one we want to be part of.
8. What, however, is actually happening, is that one or both partners have been unable to negotiate their journey forward whilst supporting each other to evolve into the person they are seeking to become. As the ego battle heats up, we run out of skills to support both/either self and/or other. We then close down our generosity towards our mate in order to protect our own interests.
9. This is not just about the lack of skills to continue our journey of expansion. We have also come up against our childhood fear that we can't have what we want, that we have to serve others first, or that we have to put ourselves second or last because that is what a nice person does, or what we've always been expected to do.
10. We could of course become very 'not nice' by being angry or belligerent or cynical or demeaning of our partner. But that does little to help, no matter how often we try that because it fails to engage our partner with our needs and desires. We must instead address the fear that we now risk our life being dominated by them.

11. Deep down, our love has turned into a fear for our survival, thus the highly reactive behaviours that ensue. We may act aggressively, or close down and be passively disengaged. Either way, this is mere survival.

12. Of course this doesn't fix the problem. We are now behaving like a child who is either being self-protective, or throwing its toys out of the cot because it can't get its own way - that is attention, freedom, acceptance, love and support to be an autonomous expanding self.

13. As kids, we didn't get all the support, attention, acceptance, love, caring and invitation to be a creative expressive soul because we were surrounded by others who were unable to model this to us. We never realised we grew up in an incubation chamber that didn't have all if the necessary goodies for life contained within it. No one ever told us that this meant we grew up with deficiencies, that our parents also had deficiencies, and that when our current relationship has deficiencies, we are again coming up against those old deficiencies that we can neither see nor address

14. Here is the cycle caused by our upbringing that we are not only caught in but cannot see. We began this interaction in childhood, and if blind to it repeat it with those who are close to us as adults just as we did as children. No one ever told us that we perceive the world around us through the window of out-dated programming.



15. However what is not so apparent is that we've come up against ourselves. We don't know how to support self and other at the same time. We don't know how to listen to them and also ensure they listen to us. We don't know how to articulate our desired journey or ask them to articulate theirs. We don't know how everyone's needs, wants and desires can be met. In part, this is because most of the time we're not really clear about what our own needs, wants and desires are because growing up we may not have learned very well what they were

16. Thus we have a blind spot about what is going on within us, thinking that the problem is outside of us - other people, outer circumstances.

17. Whenever life gets to be difficult, distressing, scary or unsafe, then life is telling us that our old paradigm (from childhood) is not working. We need something new. We need to expand into a new version of self. We may feel this as dissatisfaction, loneliness, hurt, resentment, frustration - all of which are telling us 'get out of here' or 'reinvent yourself', or 'do something differently'.

18. This however is not so easy to do. You can't just walk out on a marriage, walk out on kids, forget about working anymore or stop paying the mortgage. It seems of course that the discomfort I'm

feeling 'in here' is because of circumstances 'out there'. We then develop negative emotions towards our partner (because of our interpretations of their behaviours as in in the diagram above) who we perceive to be 'the problem', whereupon our feelings for them begin a slow (or maybe quick) inexorable slide into the trash can.

19. Most people don't tell themselves 'I'm a problem' or even 'I've got a problem'. Instead they point the finger elsewhere.

20. However, this is absolutely the time to ask yourself "What am I really wanting in life?" This should quickly be followed by the question "What have I done constructively to ensure I would get what I wanted? Did I express my feelings, needs, goals, dreams to my partner, and engage in a discussion and create a plan in regards to this? Does my partner know exactly what I want from my life or even our relationship?" "Have we both sat down and discussed what we want and how to get it - in all parameters of our life, not just making sure the money covers the essentials or that the kids are OK?"

21. The ego battle gets under way when these essentials have not been addressed, so that both parties find themselves unhappy, unfulfilled, unexcited, uncreative, unimaginative. Something is crying out to be changed, but instead stuck patterns persist.

22. If you don't know very clearly what you want from your life right now, and don't know how to express this to a significant other person, then you are beyond rescue. Only you can do this, and it must be done skilfully so that when your partner hears what you have to say, s/he can put his/her own issues/concerns to one side while listening to you. Both must then plan how to support each other's needs, wants and desires.

23. This requires skills of patience and tolerance of difference, and of course the ability to genuinely listen to a partner who may be reinventing themselves as inevitably happens over time. The ability to put one's own preferences and ideals to one side and listen to someone who may be on a different page is not easy, especially when they are very close to you, and change in them will affect you.

24. It is no small thing to be in touch with yourself sufficiently to be able to articulate your needs and desires when these arise. Furthermore, they are a moving target; you never get this life task done. You and your partner need to be able to change who you are and where you're going and to be able to articulate this patiently and regularly whilst juggling kids, work, expenses and whatever else demands your attention and energy.

25. It is not whether or not couples disagree that defines a relationship; it is how they negotiate the troubled waters of difference. These differences and the resulting conflict are inevitable. What matters is that you don't treat conflict as a problem. Those who get anxious about conflict as if it's a contagion have the greatest challenges. Those who welcome difference and the honest sharing of perspectives as bringing colour to their relationship do much better.

26. Little wonder that so many couples don't manage all of this! The dance of balancing support, care and love for self with support, care and love for your partner is summarised in the following diagram.

Support sense of self

→

Support other's sense of self

Who am I? – strengths/challenges

Who are you? – strengths/challenges

Who do I want to be? – values/needs

Who do you want to be? – values/needs

What do I feel, think, need, want?

What do you feel, think, need, want?

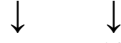
↓

↓

Differences = Conflict
(not necessarily problematic)



Creates anxiety
(How can this be managed?)



Requires *self management* (not self-protection)
(opportunity to self-regulate)



Requires *exploration* (not fighting or appeasing)
(of each person's sense of self)



Requires *negotiation* (not stalemate)
(and possibly agree to disagree harmoniously)