

Avoid projection, embrace ownership of your reactions

The way you view yourself, your partner and your relationship makes a big difference as to how you relate and see self and the other. Some basic insights into relationship dynamics explained here will help bring a more balanced perspective to your relationship. Take stock of when you project your inner world onto others, rather than understanding and owning your inner world.

1. No-one is broken, but everyone is damaged. The business of being a child has created conditioned responses that can drive our behaviour as adults robotically. We must get to see any patterns that are habitually robotic and review their usefulness. This is not about being right or wrong. It is about reflecting on whether or not the way in which we behave promotes helpful connections with our partner, or detracts from them. If ever we react unhelpfully, something within us has been triggered. All emotionally charged reactions start from within and have their origins in the past.

2. Am I bringing quality to this relationship, or undermining its quality? Human behaviours, as well as being habitual, are positively intended, even when they are destructive. Even being nasty can have the intention of making us feel better in some way. Sometimes a seemingly good quality such as helping can be unhelpful because it dis-empowers the person being helped. Any behaviours that seem to make things worse, even if positively intentioned, are worth questioning and possibly changing. Common examples of such potentially unhelpful behaviours include trying to have all the answers, trying to fix the struggles of others, shouting in order to get attention, walking out of a difficult situation, saying nothing in order to keep the peace. Check all your behaviours and ask if they add quality to your relationship.

3. Most partners work hard at doing their best, but don't understand what the other wants. You can't do much to support your partner or the relationship if you don't understand what it is your partner really needs or wants. The reason why we seldom understand our partners is because we interpret what they say and do in ways that are often very different to what they intended. Misinterpretation and thus misunderstanding permeates most relationships. Only by understanding your own attachment style and your partner's can this deadlock be broken. Attachment patterns (from childhood) dictate the way we experience others and dictate what we each consider to be functional behaviour.

4. Negative behaviour from your partner is actually not about you! This may surprise you, but the way we behave relates more to our childhood reactive patterns than to our partner's behaviours. The latter simply trigger old patterns that we were in place long before the current relationship began. The only difference now is that we attach a different name to our frustration, hurt and anger than the names we put to them when we were younger. The problem isn't what is in front of us, but what we carry inside of us.

5. We view our problems as coming from without, rather than from within. We believe that our partner is responsible for our misery. Only in cases of abuse, unsafe or undermining behaviours will that be true. Most humans believe that the way they feel is caused by what is 'out there' rather than what's happening 'in here'. Every time we have an emotional reaction

to what happened 'out there', it is because a reactive predisposition towards such 'out there' behaviours has triggered an 'in here' reaction. What we fail to recognise is that 'in here' past history is being retriggered by current 'out there' events. To address this once and for all, we must address our 'in here' emotional reactivity.

6. A consequence of believing that 'out there' is the problem is that 'in here' never gets scrutinised. This causes us to go through life believing we are victims of whatever goes on for or from others. Instead of working on our own reactivity, we try to change others so that their behaviour will suit us better. Once this process is underway, a battle of egos soon results, with each trying to dominate and/or change the other. Often one will give up this battle and withdraw, while another may fight on. This battle never stops until one or both are exhausted or traumatised. The couple are unlikely to realise that their reactivity can only be processed with someone who will listen and be empathic and compassionate rather than combative.

7. The most common reactive pattern couples engage in is the argument. Arguments are based on the notion that there is always a logical or 'right' way forward. Someone must be right or better. But of course what is 'right' for one might not be for another. Furthermore, a person who sees the world through feelings rather than reason can't possibly succeed in a debate. Their feelings may even tell them truths that cannot be articulated. What feels right just 'is'. What feels 'right' can never be justified. Yet arguments proceed as if there is a logical best outcome. How can wanting to eat an apple be better or superior to wanting a banana?

8. You were trained to be reactive, yet it makes no sense. In childhood, you came to believe that what others thought mattered. This occurred largely because as a small person, you came to believe that big people knew better. This was the beginning of our reactivity to 'out there' stimuli. Yet, the big people were actually projecting onto their children comments designed to shape and control the little people. If told 'you're stupid', you believed it because the big people must know. That reactive pattern continues despite, as an adult, knowing that 'you're stupid' isn't a truth at all. It is one of many opinions, any or none of which may be true. Now as an adult, it is time to stop reacting to 'out there' as if it is true.

9. No one person is responsible for your relationship distress. It is the dynamic of one person triggering the other that causes the mayhem. It is the clash of differences. If each person holds on to the belief that it is what's happening 'out there' that's causing the problem, no progress will be made. It is the invisibility of interactive childhood patterning (or later wounding from others) that causes our relationship stress and distress. An old historical interaction is occurring causing the couple to tango together as each did in childhood with some other partner. Yet, neither notices this. It is this conflict ridden dynamic that becomes the ongoing problem, and ways must be found to change it. Understanding and dismantling this dynamic, and patiently, supportively, empathically and compassionately working with our own personality and that of our partner, is the purpose of therapy.

10. Support your reactive partner rather than join their reaction. When our partner is in a reactive state, especially in regards to their partner, it is easy for the partner to take personally this reactive mood. Yet no one can make another feel anything, let alone a reactive emotion. When someone has been triggered by current circumstances, if possible have compassion for their inner child that is currently struggling with a recurring pattern from the past. Certainly don't take it all on as being about you (even if that is what you are told),

otherwise there will be two inner children in the room and no adults around to take care of them!

11. Successful couples choose love and seek understanding. Most of us set out to better ourselves but find ourselves reacting when we had no intention of doing so. A reactive emotional state is a regressed place from which it is impossible to be happy – little wonder that few succeed whilst being reactive no matter who they are with. You will need to learn how to bring inner balance to yourself, tune in to what you really want for your relationship – then reach out and make that happen! Choose to be loving. Choose to try and understand the other. Slow it down, calm it down. It may feel a little scary to do this when you and your partner have been in conflict and are a little nervous of each other – but boldness and determined love will win the day!

12. Tolerance is essential in a relationship. The clients I have most challenges with are those who believe that if their partner changed in this way or that, everything would be fine. Now that's not unreasonable if your partner leaves you feeling unsafe, abused, or is preoccupied with an addiction. Such issues sabotage a relationship and must not continue if the relationship is to have a chance to survive. In general though, everyone in a relationship faces the challenge of accepting aspects of their partner's way of doing things. In my experience, your partner's behaviours will be fine and 'normal' in 80% of cases. Not convenient maybe, maybe even a little grating, but not dysfunctional. We can all change a little bit – but asking your partner to clone and copy your preferred behaviours doesn't make much sense does it? Nor is it possible for them to become just like you.