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Unravelling Complexities: Tidying up our intimate relationships

You meet someone and you're sure you were lovers in a past life. After two weeks with them, you realize why you haven't kept in touch for the last two thousand years.

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I think everyone deserves to have a good enough relationship and a good enough sex life. I guess you could say that this is my passion, helping people to connect to one another, and also to connect to their own deeper selves. This requires an acceptance of all of who we are, and is underpinned by honesty, authenticity and self awareness. NLP has been invaluable in my work as a sex and relationship therapist. If I am honest, when I came across NLP it transformed my own life. So I am delighted to be asked to share 2 exercises that might help people in a practice group. Naturally I am drawn to include something that helps with intimate relationships.

The first exercise is about complex equivalence. This is where two or more experiences are talked about as if they were equivalent. It happens when a set of behaviours equals a label. For example, because Simon brings Sally flowers on Friday (behaviour) then Sally knows he loves her (label). If he doesn't bring Sally flowers on Friday, then to her, it means he no longer loves her! Though of course this is an irrational assumption as there may be many other reasons why Simon didn't bring flowers. For example, he may have been busy and worked late, or the flower shop may have been shut. However, because in Sally's map of the world there is an unconscious connection between these behaviours and the label of being loved, Sally feels wounded.

In my therapy with couples, I see people putting in enormous amounts of effort to express their love for their partner, and yet the partner may not recognise how much they are loved. This is because the love is being expressed in ways that they may not recognise. I remember John and Sheila - John often looked at Sheila with an expression of absolute love in our sessions, but Sheila didn't seem to notice. Exasperated, John asked me 'What more do I have to do to show my love?' I asked him 'How do you show your love currently. What do you do?' He paused a moment and said 'Well I mow the lawn. I hate it, and the only reason I do it is that she likes the garden to look nice'. Her face was a

picture. When I asked what was going on for her, she told me she was amazed, and appalled. She didn't really want him mowing the lawn, they could pay someone to do that! What she wanted was some attention. A hug at the end of the day would be the one thing that would mean more to her than him mowing the lawn for a whole summer. Now it was John's turn to be astonished. And pleased, because hugging her was going to be a whole lot easier than mowing the lawn.

This often happens. Person A is putting masses of effort in to the relationship, but not in the place where it has an impact on their partner. When I see couples doing this, I suggest that they get really clear about where the effort is actually wanted, and then they can each refine what they do. Often they can do less and yet it will have much more impact, because it is what their partner really wants, and so it 'lands'. Our first exercise explores this issue.

The second exercise however, looks at the links between your intimate relationship and your childhood experiences. Negative anchors, set up in childhood, can get triggered and fired by your current partner, and if this is not recognised it can create difficulties leading to misunderstandings and hurt, on both sides. In these cases it can be hard to work out what is causing so much pain, because the distress is out of proportion to the current behaviour. This is one of the major indicators that a childhood issue is getting re-triggered.

2. Outcomes for the session

- To explore what makes you feel loved, and what makes your partner feel loved.
- To check what anchors from childhood relationships may be recreated or triggered in your current relationship,

3. Menu of key tools, models & skills

- map of the world
- complex equivalence
- perceptual positions
- spatial sorting
- anchoring
- rapport

4. Exercises and Activities

In the following exercises where I refer to a partner, this could be a current sexual partner, an ex-partner, or a close but not intimate friendship.

Exercise: BEING LOVED

i) Outcome:

- To develop your self-awareness
- To clarify your complex equivalences around being loved
- To consider your partner's complex equivalences
- To identify areas where you are not getting your own needs met
- In relation to your partner, to consider where you are wasting energy, and could utilise your energy in a more productive way
- To recognise how different our needs are

ii) Time Frame

The whole exercise will take approx 30-40 minutes. Requirements: a sheet of A4 paper and a pen

iii) Numbers:

Initially on your own, and then in groups of 3-4 for a discussion

iv) The Process:

1) Draw a horizontal line across the middle of a piece of paper, and a vertical one, again in the middle. This will give four squares. For clarity, I am going to call you A. I am going to ask you to think about another person who is in your life - this could be a sexual partner, an ex-partner or a close (but not intimate) friend. I am going to call this person B.

2) In the top left hand square, answer this question. 'As A, what do you want B to do, that would let you know that you are loved by them?' Make a list of all the behaviours that you would like someone who loves you to do for you, with you, or to you. This might include things such as touch (hugs, hold hands), words (tell me you love me), actions (mow the lawn for me, bring me a cup of tea in the morning, buy me flowers, dress up when we go out together), or spending quality time together, etc. This is your 'wish list'. Allow about 5 minutes for this.

3) In the top right hand box, write the answer to this question: 'What does B actually do, that B *thinks* will make you feel loved'. Allow about 3-5 minutes for this.

4) In the bottom left hand box, write the answer to: 'What do you, A, do for B to let them know that you love them?' Allow about 3-5 minutes for this.

5) Now, step into your B's shoes, and let yourself really take on their way of thinking, feeling, their beliefs and attitudes, and even their physiology. Answer this question as if you were B. 'From your perspective as B, what would you like A to do for you, that would make you feel loved'. Allow about 3-5 minutes for this.

6) Having completed this exercise, spend a few moments thinking through what you have learnt, about your own needs and wants, and your partners.

7) It is very interesting to compare the top left box, with the bottom left box. What you want from B, and what you do for B. Are there any similarities between what you want and what you do?

8) Looking at the top left and the top right boxes: How fully are you getting your needs met. How fully are you meeting your partners?

9) Finally, compare the top right box with the bottom right box, what does B do for you, and what does B actually want.

8) In 3's have a discussion to share learnings and insights. Using 3rd position, (as well as 1st and 2nd), think about what changes or amendments might enhance your relationship. 10-15 minutes.

FURTHER THOUGHTS

1) Something I have observed, is that often we give others what we most want ourselves. Is this true for you (or your partner) in any way? Have a look at your reflections on (7) and (9) to see if this is true for you or your partner.

2) It is interesting to ask your partner to do this exercise, and then compare notes with them to check how well you understand their needs. Did B actually want what you thought they wanted? What do they want but are not currently getting? Is that something that it would be easy to give them/do for them?

3) Sometimes our partner wants something we are not willing to give them. Jane was living with John, who loves football, but Jane didn't enjoy watching sport. It would be hard for Jane to go to every match through the season. In this situation I advise clients to get clear for themselves about their complex equivalence for being loved, to share those with their partner (don't expect them to guess and to mind read, it is wiser and simpler to tell them). Then let your partner choose the behaviours that are relatively easy for them, *and* meaningful for you. This means their efforts will be

in the areas that make a difference to you, and that more of your needs will get met. Likewise, put your efforts where they will have the least cost to you, and the most impact on your partner.

Exercise 2: CLEANING UP RELATIONSHIPS

In the following exercise, when I refer to parents, this could be real parents, adopted parents, step parents, grandparents or caregivers. It is the people who were most influential when you were a child. Usually it would be one or two people, though it could be three or four, for example if your parents divorced and both of them re-married or found new partners.

i) Outcome for exercise

To explore and recognise possible patterns between your parents and partner

To 'clean up' the relationship with your partner by retracting negative anchors

To see your partner 'fresh', and remove 'hypersensitive' hot buttons

ii) Time Frame

Allow 20-40 minutes per person

iii) Numbers

Pairs. Equipment needed: post-its, a pen, tissues and some space.

iv) The Process:

NB This exercise uses spatial sorting to create spaces for reflection and insight. It is based on the work of Al Pessa, the co-founder of Pessa Boyden System Psychomotor. In this exercise the coach guides the client through the process.

INSTRUCTIONS THE COACH GIVES TO THE CLIENT

- 1) Find a place in the room to create a space for you to explore the current situation and the past. We will call this space (i), and it should be a space that is neutral, where you can reflect. Place a post-it with your name on to mark this place. You can be sitting or standing.
- 2) Create a separate space for your partner (ii) (or ex-partner, or friend). Put a post-it there (you can write their name on this) to mark the place. Describe the characteristics of your partner, as seen from your perspective.
- 3) Think about the people who had the most influence in your childhood. Usually this would be mother and father, though it could be a carer, or a step parent. Create a space for each person - so you have spaces for all the important adults who were in your life when you were a child. For simplicity I will assume you have two spaces - one for mother and one for father, and I will refer to these as (iii) and (iv). You can do these in either order, but I will start with Mother.
- 4) Write on a post-it (eg Mum), and place it somewhere in the room (iii). Describe this person and their characteristics. If you summed her up in 5 words, what would those words be?
- 5) From your neutral position i, what similarities, or very strong differences, are there between your mum (iii) and (ii) (your partner)? NB It is best if you use the client's words, e.g 'between your Mum and Tom').
- 6) Look at (iv) (Dad) and describe this person and their characteristics. If you summed him up in 5 words, what would those words be?
- 7) Thinking about your Dad (iv) from a neutral perspective, what similarities are there between your Dad (iv) and your partner (ii).
- 8) What strikes you about the patterns and characteristics of your partner (ii) and how they relate (or do not relate) to your Mum and Dad (iii and iv)? NB sometimes we choose the a person who's characteristics are the exact opposite of our parents, eg if I had a very controlling parent I might have chosen someone who has aspects that are controlling, because it was familiar (even though I might not have liked it as a child); or I might have gone to the other extreme, and chosen someone who

exceptionally permissive or indulgent. It is interesting to become aware of where you have reacted against a parental style.

9) Having asked questions to check what the client has noticed, at this stage the coach can respectfully, and tentatively, (with great rapport) add in their own observations, if they think there is something(s) that the client has not yet noticed.

PART 2: IF YOU WANT TO CONTINUE

10) Sometimes couples develop 'hot buttons'. These are areas of excessive sensitivity. For example, if in your childhood you had a father who shouted and was very angry, it often follows that if your partner raises his voice just a small amount, you may experience him as shouting, even when the volume is only at 5 out of 10. What behaviours does your partner exhibit that push your hot buttons? How might these hot buttons relate to what happened in your key family relationships as a child, and/or were characteristics that your parents had?

11) If you have found one or more hot buttons that relate to childhood, put a tiny piece of tissue paper out to represent the 'negative trait' that you see in your partner. Place that paper representing the negative trait (ideally name it as you do it, for example. 'this represents his aggression') on to the post-it that represents your current partner.

12) There may (or may not) be other areas of excessive sensitivity, which are actually attributable to your parents rather than your current partner. This is not to say that your current partner does not do this behaviour at all, but it is about the fact that you may have developed a high sensitivity to this behaviour, due to the primary wound from your childhood. Make a small piece of paper to represent each trait..and put each one on to your partner.

13) Take time to take this in. There may be one, or several pieces of tissue on your partner, representing behaviours and patterns that were present in your childhood. Take a moment to really recognise and assimilate this information.

14) Now it is time to move those traits back to where they originated. The purpose of this is to take the 'load' off the current experience with your partner, so that when you experience the negative behaviour, you simply experience the 'here and now,' and don't also experience the reverberating 'there and then' of your childhood. There are 2 ways to do this. Either you do this yourself, or you ask your coach to do this for you. Decide which fits you best.

13) The moving is done by literally moving the pieces of tissue representing the negative trait, off the place representing your partner, and putting them back into the correct place (onto the place representing the parent with whom you originally experienced the behaviour). With great reverence and ceremony, the small piece of tissue representing the 'negative trait' is plucked off your the place representing partner (either by you or by your coach), and slowly, and deliberately placed back on to the original parent. E.g. the negative trait of aggression would be plucked off your partner and slowly, reverently placed back onto Dad (iv). Words may accompany this, such as 'This does not belong to Tom (your partner). It was your father that was aggressive (or weak, critical etc).

14) Check what the client notices in their body after this step has been taken.

14) Repeat this if there are other pieces of tissue representing negative traits, one by one, checking with the client what they notice after each one, until they are all back on the parents (or the place where they originated).

15) Check how the client feels now, and also what happens in their body as they look at their partner (who no longer has the 'negative traits' sitting on him/her).

v) Additional Notes:

- This can create a profound shift, so calibrate the appropriate speed for the client of moving the 'negative traits' back. Some clients need few moments between each one to assimilate, others like to get them all moved quite quickly.

- Sometimes I do this exercise with objects rather than post-its. I don't let the client use their own objects (eg their handbag) or mine (as both are 'loaded' with extra significance), but they can pick neutral objects that are in the room. This adds another dimension of size and colour. For example they might pick a red velvet cushion for their father, and an empty plastic cup for their mother. You can ask them what it means to them that they have picked a large cushion for their father, and a small plastic cup for their mother. This might add another level of information.

5. We carry all our experiences with us. As Al Pessso says "Present consciousness is woven of the tapestry of memory." Inevitably our intimate relationships trigger old anchors and unresolved issues. But the brain is extraordinary, and this exercise can change our perceptions of our partner very quickly, making it easier to relate to them in more straightforward ways that are not contaminated with the past.

6. Juliet Grayson:

Corporate Website www.interactiontraining.co.uk

Therapy Website www.therapyandcounselling.co.uk www.sexuallyinappropriatebehaviour.org

About the author

When Juliet Grayson first studied NLP in 1991 it was life changing for her, and she became a passionate advocate. She dedicated the next ten years to getting NLP 'into the muscle' and completed several Practitioner and 6 Master Practitioner courses. She now spends half her time working as a sex and relationship therapist, and the rest of her time travelling - running ongoing personal development groups across the UK, teaching other therapists about working with couples, and running corporate workshops on communication. She recently co-founded StopSO, the Specialist Treatment Organisation for the Prevention of Sexual Offending, which offers anyone in the UK who feels at risk of sexual offending or re-offending, the opportunity to have therapy with someone trained and willing to work with them.

www.therapyandcounselling.co.uk/diary.htm www.interactiontraining.co.uk www.stopso.org.uk