

Building a flexible bridge between partners in couples therapy

By Lou Lasprugato

Have you ever been hungry for a hearty, healthy source of protein, but instead, reached for the most accessible processed food item available, like a bag of chips, to quickly satisfy that hunger? This abandoning of sustenance for short-term satisfaction shows up often in the context of intimate relationships, though instead of hunger, it's a yearning that drives us to behave in certain ways.

What is a yearning?

Steven Hayes, originator of acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), formally introduced yearnings as part of the model in his 2019 book, "A Liberated Mind." A yearning can be viewed as a deep enduring longing, or psychological need, that functions as a motivating operation - in other words, it motivates someone to do something, just like securing and consuming food when hungry. We come into relationships with both individual and interpersonal yearnings that can compete for attention.

Individual vs. Interpersonal yearnings

Individual yearnings can include competency (i.e. mastery/effectiveness), autonomy (or self-directed meaning), and coherence (i.e. sense-making). These yearnings can sometimes clash with interpersonal yearnings, such as partnership, shared meaning, and mutual understanding. Take for example a relationship where person A is yearning for a partnership of teamwork and shared responsibilities, though each time person B does something to contribute, it's criticized as not being good enough. Given person B's yearning for competency, and the thwarted efforts at attempting to satisfy that yearning within the relationship, they may devote more time and attention to mastering their craft at work, which subsequently results in less partnership within the relationship, and thus, a discontented person A.

The deepening divide

If partners come from diverse sociocultural backgrounds where self-directed meaning (i.e. carving out your own path) is valued in one culture and shared (or collective) meaning is valued in the other, the former partner may have difficulty with, or even express opposition to, letting go of impassioned personal pursuits in favor of co-creating a meaningful life together. And, when our mind is caught up in trying to make sense of our experience in a way that fits, or coheres, with our learning history, it can be challenging to see past our own "rightness" to respect, or better yet, welcome, a differing perspective from our partner in order to foster mutual understanding (i.e. to be "heard"). These competing needs can create tension and disconnection in relationships, especially when partners aren't effectively communicating their desires.

A secure base

And then there are the more attachment-driven yearnings of security, connection, and validation, which provide much of the energy that fuels relationship-seeking-and-attending behaviors. We human primates deeply want to know, through experience not just words, that our vulnerable bids for connection and support will be met with emotional sensitivity and responsiveness. A secure bond where both partners feel seen and loved for who they are is arguably at the heart of any healthy fulfilling relationship. This bond can usually withstand the everyday challenges and occasional conflicts that show up in nearly all intimate relationships.

Threats to security (The vicious cycle)

Yet, when that secure base is threatened by emotional distancing, stonewalling, contempt, abuse, betrayal or abandonment, our threat response system is activated and our behaviors primitively default to attack, defend, or withdraw. This narrowing of responses tends to evoke more of the same in our partners who understandably also feel compelled to attack, defend, or withdraw in an attempt to stave off threats to self or the relationship. Thus, a vicious cycle of escalating tension and/or disconnection ensues in the form of self-amplifying loops. And, as the actualization of yearnings within the relationship becomes more effortful, draining, or hopeless, partners may turn to shortcuts or immediate fixes from sources outside of the relationship, just like reaching for that bag of chips.

Naming and dismantling the cycle

So, as therapists, our first step is usually to disrupt this self-amplifying loop by (re-)establishing a sense of safety within the couple's relationship. Reconnection is unlikely to occur if both partners are constantly in threat detection mode and not feeling safe enough to be vulnerable with each other. We can start by significantly slowing down the here-and-now interactions occurring during therapy so that couples can observe patterns and their respective roles. Collaboratively, we can begin naming and normalizing the threat response cycle while examining what's maintaining it and how it's working with respect to their yearnings and relationship goals. We can then functionally identify what's being threatened for each of them in the cycle by asking, "What part of you or the relationship are you trying to protect when you do XYZ (attack, defend, or withdraw)?" Such questions can evoke curiosity and compassion, which may soften the dynamic between them.

Channeling the energy of yearnings through values

Once a "safe-enough" context is established, we can turn towards helping couples contact the yearnings underneath the topography of relationship complaints and conflict. As we bring these yearnings out into the open, we can begin the process of channeling their energy into more workable patterns of interaction. One way of facilitating this pivot is to evoke valuing - that is to help partners connect with the qualities of how they deeply want to treat each other. Values can provide direction for the otherwise unwieldy energy of yearnings. (Note: while values and yearnings share certain functions, they are also distinct in that values symbolize qualities we deeply want to engage whereas yearnings are needs we deeply want fulfilled.)

Building a flexible bridge between partners

Extending ACT's psychological flexibility model into the interpersonal realm, there are other critical processes that we can aim to model, evoke, and reinforce in couples therapy.

Cultivation and implementation of certain process-based skills can serve to build a bridge between partners that allows for a secure connection with more flexible responding to stressors. Such skills include:

- bidirectional emotional openness, especially with respect to more vulnerable feelings that tend to pull for empathy;
- defusion from unhelpful judgments, criticisms, and being "right";
- presence and attentive listening;
- being aware of and sensitive to "us-as-context" as opposed to "me-versus-you";
- and committing to values through small actionable steps that rework patterns of interaction.

These interpersonal process-based skills, along with the enactment of relational values, can function to bring more nourishment and sustenance to intimate relationships through the mutual satisfaction of yearnings. Though change may be slow, especially with ingrained patterns, we can better navigate challenges along the way by embodying these same skills ourselves as therapists.