

Aggression in the Long-term Relationship  
and Progressive Emotional Communication

by Jean Hantman

Taken from “Psych News” at  
[http://www.psychnews.us/Aggression\\_in\\_the\\_Longterm\\_Relationship.html](http://www.psychnews.us/Aggression_in_the_Longterm_Relationship.html)

(In press, Clio's Psyche, the Psychohistory Journal, March 2009)

*“(Before 200 years ago) the real traditional marriage was about property, acquiring in-laws, and competing for social status, and in the upper classes, making peace treaties, including military alliances. In the lower classes it was about finding a work partner. Personal attraction took second place in all these social groups and throughout all societies throughout history. In fact, most societies considered love a poor reason to get married and found the idea of a love match very threatening to the political and economic functions of marriage.” (S. Coontz, “Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy, or How Love Conquered Marriage” Viking, 2005)*

*Psychoanalysts understand that what we are working with are two people with good intentions in fierce battle with their unconscious urges to repeat historically destructive patterns. - Jean Hantman*

*In the face of emotional pain people have four choices: symptoms, substances, psychosis or discussions.*

Introduction

We are all familiar with the history of marriage, because throughout human existence and spanning geography, the institution can be split into two eras: before love and after love -- which is a very recent revolution in the course of human social history, about 200 years old, and has added to our world Valentine's Day, elaborate, break-the-bank romantic weddings for the rich and poor, the couple's first dance to "their song", honeymoons, anniversary celebrations etc., and a high rate of divorce.

It is not that marital disharmony did not occur before the era of the love marriage, it just did not matter in terms of how the disharmony played out, because marriage had little to do with emotions and much more to do with finances, property, social status.

Family historian Stephanie Coontz wrote, "Ironically, the fragility of modern marriage stems from the same values that have elevated the marital relationship above all other personal and familial commitments: the concentration of emotion, passion, personal identity, and self-validation in the couple relationship and the attenuation of emotional attachments and obligations beyond the conjugal unit" (2005).

Along with the "fragility" that comes with love comes the need for couples (who were "in love" when they got married and want to stay married even though they are not as sure about the "in love" part after a comparatively short time of 1-5 years) to learn how to strengthen their bond by learning how to talk and stop pretending, to give up the illusion that marriage will cure all of their problems. The "concentration of emotion, passion, personal identity and self-validation in the couple relationship" that Coontz describes is what brings a couple into analysis. Modern analysts cure the "fragility" completely.

The solution to emotional fragility is talking productively. Most of the couples who come into analysis, who were madly in love when they got together and then wonder why they have nothing much to say to each other within two years, are helped through analysis to understand the consequences of concentrating, to use Coontz's word, all of their

“emotion, passion” (and especially) “personal identity and self-validation” into their marriage.

Modern analysts have at least three aims with couples (coming from what couples almost universally present as problems):

1. To reduce the concentration of the intense libidinal energy that couples throw into their marriage because (a) this always leads to disappointment, as any obsession does; and (b) the world is filled with so many interesting things, and we work with couples whose entire mental state is consumed with their marital problems, forgetting the richness the world has to offer in addition to their marriage.
2. To help [partners] understand why and how [things] went wrong, where they got off track with each other.
3. To learn the language of progressive emotional communication, which will lead to a more harmonious and honest, less tense, contentious and boring life together (assuming they want to stay with each other instead of divorcing.)

\*\*\*\*\*

All people have negative as well as positive feelings. This is called “ambivalence” and is believed by many to be the most sophisticated feeling, if tolerated. If a person cannot tolerate ambivalence he or she will suffer from symptoms, neurotic pain, constant confusion and dissatisfaction.

We all feel love, faith, excitement, pleasure, connection, altruism, warmth, joy—and we also all feel hate, fear, anger, boredom, confusion, uncertainty, doubt and self-doubt, jealousy, envy, exasperation.

The closer we are to someone, the more intense our feelings are, both positive and negative. The contortions that people go through who are afraid of their own aggression, and others’ towards them, to conceal

their negative feelings do not work. The process involved in attempting to suppress negative feelings (aggression) leads to half-relationships.

Freud wrote, “He who has eyes to see and ears to hear will be able to convince himself that no mortal can keep a secret. If his lips are silent, he chatters with his fingertips. Betrayal oozes out of him at every pore.” (Freud, S. (1905 [1901]). *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*. S.E. 7: 77-78.) [What we attempt to suppress and keep to ourselves will be transmitted, one way or another. Your partner knows how you feel about him/her and you know how your partner feels about you.]

There are basically three categories of psychic responses that people suffer from, and bring into their long-term relationships, attempting to conceal their aggression [and negative feelings] rather than acknowledge it. These are symptoms, substances and psychosis.

The unharmonious long-term relationship characterized by what Winnicott called “pretense and subterfuge” (Winnicott, D.W. [1986]. “Home is Where We Start From”: p. 16) often leads to all three, as therapists working with couples see and work with.

1. Symptoms caused by living in a relationship in which aggressive feelings are concealed include phobias, psychosomatic illnesses, decrease in sexual desire, and most of all, leaking. When couples pretend to themselves and the world that all they feel for each other is love and devotion, where does the anger, the disillusionment, go? It leaks. The more aggression is denied, the more it leaks and the more damage is done, undermining the bond between the couple over time.

Another way of looking at this is that, for those who fear negative feelings, instead of open, progressive communication, there is unconscious hostile action. In the long-term relationship this can be seen in symptoms such as shutting down, avoiding spending time together, using facial expressions (unconsciously) to communicate true feeling while saying words that express safe, dishonest emotion, spending more time at work, using the children as allies against the other parent.

The most common symptom of the unharmonious marriage, and the one that leads to all other symptoms, is avoidance.

2. Substance abuse is another maladaptive response to the futile effort to suppress aggression. People overeat, they drink, they take antidepressants when depression is not the issue, and a dishonest marriage is.

3. Psychosis (being detached from reality, either the “everyday” forms or the more severe disorders) can be seen in relationships as in, for example, splitting.

“I do all the work to make our marriage better, he doesn't do anything.” And, “If you don't do what I want, you're a bad person.” (I.e., If I don't get my wish that means you must be bad.)

Couples therapists who work with both the husband and the wife can see quite clearly that the "work" one partner says she's doing to “connect more” is often strident and hostile, accusatory, teacherly—anything but loving. Or he consciously thinks he wants more connection but when his wife tries to get close he pushes her away. Also, projection and denial, and other primitive, maladaptive, defenses against connection and relating.

Modern analysts have been working for fifty years with people individually who are in relationships with one another. In this way we know that our patients' self-deception is very clear to the people who know them: usually the opposite of what she presents in therapy is what is really going on.

Unfortunately, people have only one healthy choice to manage aggression [and/or their negative feelings], avoid becoming symptomatic and estranged from their partners and create a harmonious marriage: discussions, about everything—not bickering, not going around in circles, but discussions that modern analysts call progressive emotional communication.

In order to be equipped to have these discussions couples would have to be willing (in addition to accepting that we [all] have an unconscious that fights with our good intentions [i.e., we all experience ongoing internal conflict between the best in us and the worst in us]) to abandon the three most common ways used to deal with unpleasant feelings stimulated by their partners: defensiveness, criticizing and avoidance. *In other words, couples have to learn how to listen and how to respond so that a fight, an inevitable occurrence in long-term relationships, ends with the couple loving each other again instead of hating each other more.* In order to do this, the couple has to help each other stick with an unpleasant discussion until it is resolved. Acting instead of talking (shutting down, leaving the room, giving up and moving on to separate activities) prolongs a discussion unnecessarily, and over time undermines what love there once was between the couple.

### The Language of Emotional Progressive Communication

This kind of talking, loving discussion that goes somewhere in the face of intense conflict, is easy to find in any magazine for women, or in the multitude of self-help books for couples.

What psychoanalysis contributes to the topic that is missing from all of these sources is an acknowledgment of the power of the unconscious, which fiercely fights our well-intentioned, conscious goals. In essence, there are more than two people having a fight. There is a person fighting with his unconscious to have a logical, loving discussion with his partner, and his partner and her unconscious battling her for the right to

have a logical discussion, before and during any discussion between the two people. [There is the best in us trying to have that logical, loving, honest discussion. And there is the worst in us who is determined to take advantage, avoid, destroy, ignore, and otherwise behave irresponsibly and dodge the consequences, etc., *without being aware of what we're doing.*]

Psychoanalysts understand that what we are working with are two people with good intentions in fierce battle with their unconscious urge to repeat historically destructive patterns.

Repressed and suppressed hate, and unhealthy styles of communicating anger that have been going on for years in a long-term relationship, which is always learned in childhood, is not going to be amenable to a quick fix. There will be, before the couple fights productively, a fight from the unconscious.

The key word is “emotional”. When a couple decides to start communicating about their negative feelings in a more productive way they need to know exactly how they are feeling at each point in the discussion. They also need to say it out loud. Words replace symptoms so if someone is furious, without saying “furious,” the discussion probably will not go anywhere.

In the beginning, nervousness, doubt and uncertainty are the feelings that keep a couple from getting through a discussion to resolution. That is why those feelings need to be said out loud before even starting. If someone is nervous or fears the loss of his partner if he broaches a difficult topic, he should start the discussion by saying, “I’m nervous about bringing this up. I’m afraid you might leave me if I talk about this.”

The point of modern analysis is to help people put all of their feelings into words, not actions. Patients often ask us for the “right words” to say in conflict situations. Of course we know the “right words” but we also know that, until they have been in analysis for a long time, it is likely that three hours after the session their unconscious will have gotten them to forget all of the words. They go blank. People will

call and say, “What were those words I’m supposed to say to my husband?” (This is one of the ways that modern analysts help patients at the beginning of an analysis know what the unconscious is, and how powerful it is—by giving advice knowing it will be forgotten. The knowledge of the unconscious comes to the patient without being instructed as if an analytic session were a classroom.)

The analyst is happy to repeat the right words, but the patient needs to understand why she forgot them. They made so much sense at her session. She thought the words were so brilliant, so logical, but three hours later she has amnesia.

And that is why to get a couple to the point of being able to have these kinds of progressive emotional discussions that are so cavalierly written about in self-help books, they have to first understand that the unconscious will do anything to thwart good, conscious intentions.

In the first phase of couples analysis the couple will not be able to have the discussion at all. In the second phase of analysis the couple will alter or modify the words so that the [positive] effect is weakened and will have no power to change maladaptive patterns of communicating. For example, “I’m nervous to say this to you because I think you might leave me” is changed when the patient leaves the analyst’s office to, “I was wondering what would happen if we had an honest discussion.”

Usually the way in which the unconscious alters the direct communication suggested by the therapist makes things worse, not better. Instead of saying, “I’m afraid,” the patient’s unconscious induces her to say something to incite her partner to be even angrier, leaving her more afraid.

In the third phase the couple is ready to have a progressive, emotional discussion. They have learned to identify the ways in which their unconscious will try to disrupt connecting and resolving.

### The Foundation of Progressive Communication

In order for a couple to begin having civilized, progressive discussions they have to learn first to tolerate and accept [the differences that exist between the two of them], from the trivial (e.g., differences in decorating style) to the serious (e.g., how to raise the children). This might seem like a natural skill that we all learn growing up, but unfortunately, many of us are not raised to tolerate difference. More people than not are greatly disappointed to find that the partner they chose is not their clone and that in fact, we have no clone in the world, although we all wish we did.

[Ellyn Bader says this about tolerating the ways in which marriage partners are different from one another:

Sadly, unfolding differentiation frightens many partners because it signals that "we are different". I believe this can trigger primitive anxiety - fear of being left or cast out. In their attempts to calm this anxiety, partners often try to inhibit growth in one another.]

Much of the analysis of couples involves helping people not only tolerate and accept their differences, in style, taste, opinion etc., but enjoying the differences.

For this to happen couples also have to resolve their need to control, to shape the other into a replica of themselves.

### The Discussions

Stick to an original point. Help your partner avoid more than one important request or opinion at any serious discussion. Circular discussions that go nowhere often happen because the one who starts a tense discussion is distracted from her original request or opinion by her partner taking the discussion way off course, so cleverly that the original point is forgotten.

Help each other keep the discussion going until the fight is resolved:

“Where are you going? We’re not finished discussing this.”

“I have nothing else to say.”

“Then we need to stay together and figure out what to say that’s new because you’re going into your study and I’m going into mine, and we’ve become less of a couple every time you do this.”

This could take all night, but it is better than years going by with grudges and resentment building silently rather than addressed directly, that day.

Remember that one discussion does not end negative feelings for the rest of your lives. People are so hopeful that if they are angry and have a good discussion they will only have to do it once. Again that is a wish. At the end of a productive discussion, even those words can be said out loud.

“Wouldn’t it be great if this discussion ended all of our negative feelings forever?”

“I wish.”

Point out as soon as the other becomes defensive, manipulative, threatening or critical. This involves becoming better observers of these maneuvers to avoiding resolution.

To demonstrate that the mental (or “cognitive”) intellect and the emotional intellect have very little to do with each other before about ten years of analysis, one needs only to listen to how patients who are, for example, university professors, or physicians, or lawyers, and all of the other highly-educated people who have read thousands of books, evade a relationship discussion by screwing up their faces, rolling up their eyes, contorting their mouth into expressions of scorn—and not saying one word.

Defensiveness sounds like this:

“Listen, I have to tell you that you were hostile to me last night in front of our friends.” (That’s a healthy way to start a discussion.)

“I was not!”

The helpful partner says, “Okay listen, that’s defensive so do you want to hear what I want to say or not?”

In this way one helps the other get back on track by researching their partner’s willingness to listen and be open to hearing another point of view.

Be curious rather than critical about the disagreement, and open to the possibility that you might be wrong. The language of scientific method is often useful, for instance, “I have a theory but I might be wrong.”

Or, “I’ll tell you what I’m thinking and then you can tell me if I’m wrong or not.”

Avoid pop psychology jargon like “I hear you.” Or, “Thank you for validating my feelings.” Pop psychology language is often used as a defense against being real and the other person knows it and is turned off by the inauthenticity of self-help book language.

Obviously, don’t use critical language like “You’re being immature”, “You’re a princess” (and worse, usually beginning with “You are such a \_\_\_”). If one or the other says anything critical rather than constructive, the partner has to immediately halt the discussion.

“Um, how is calling me immature going to help us love each other more at the end of this discussion?”

For a couple who is experienced in progressive emotional communication, there are times when words that sound like a slap in the face can help the partner return from a paranoid state into a more amenable state. If one or the other is so overtaken by paranoia that

pointing it out directly will throw her into more intense paranoia, the considered, calm use of a verbal “slap in the face” can restore the partner’s sense of humor and get the discussion back on track. For instance, a patient (say her mother’s name was Ellen) who has been working to become conscious of not repeating her own mother’s controlling behavior is grateful when her husband says, “Hello Ellen” during a fight.

Know when some of the intensity of the fight has to do with a memory and not with the present situation. It sounds like this: “The way you’re saying that is stimulating memories of my father, who was cruel,” and the partner responds, “I might be using the same words, but my intention is loving.” The couple needs to be able to honestly identify their underlying motives in everything they say to each other [which can be profoundly challenging and which can require terrific courage].

### How the Discussion Ends

Progressive emotional communication leads a couple to a promise and a goal.

“Okay, from now on when we’re out in public you have to let me know immediately if I’m saying anything hurtful, and I promise to stop.”

The prognosis is not as good if a discussion ends with one or the other or either saying, “I’ll try”, or “I’ll work on that.”

Modern analysts have found that people who say “I’ll try,” means they won’t try and usually say that simply to end an unpleasant discussion without resolving the issue. The prognosis is excellent if the couple understands the difference between an idea and a decision (or promise).

So if one is not sure that the partner has moved to a greater level of understanding, along with a promise to behave more lovingly, he or she should say, “Is that an idea or a decision?”

Both have heard each other out. Both assume good faith, that whatever negative feelings were underlying are out in the open. All feelings stirred up by the conflict are talked about, including the worry that being direct might lead to the end of the relationship. People who feel they will not survive, literally, if a relationship ends, or that anger kills, will not be able to have a progressive discussion.

If a couple feels that the end of their relationship would be deadly, and act on this fear by avoiding conflictual discussions, they need to learn that that is a feeling, not a fact. Anger does not end relationships nearly as much as silence does.

Silence is the killer of relationships, not angry discussions.

And angry discussions in which both people assume [, act, and speak on] good faith bring a couple closer, not farther apart.