

The Love Breakthrough

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"Somebody please get me out of here!" Grace had to check to be sure that she hadn't actually blurted the words out loud. She'd come to this wedding reception as a favor to her husband, Adam, whose friend from high school was getting married. Adam was sitting at the main table, laughing and having a great time while Grace was stuck listening to a plump, middle-aged woman chatter about her poodle. Grace thought to herself, "This is the last place on earth I want to be right now." She looked repeatedly in Adam's direction. Finally catching his eye, she motioned for him to come over. But Adam shook his head and mouthed "I can't!" "Bullshit" thought Grace. She'd already seen other members of the wedding party leave the table to talk to their families. "This is so typical" she thought. "He drags me here, then abandons me."

After what seemed like an eternity, the dancing began. Grace's irritation yielded to a sense of anticipation as Adam smiled and began walking toward her. But he never made it across the room. He was intercepted by three friends who insisted that he go outside with them to smoke cigars. Adam held up one finger, signaling that he'd be there in a minute. Before Grace could register a protest, Adam disappeared out the door. Grace sat and stewed, planning what she would say to him when he returned. Ten minutes passed, then twenty. After a half hour, she simply walked out of the reception, got in her car and went home. Adam eventually returned and searched for Grace. Gradually, it dawned on him that she had left. He called her cell phone, but she didn't pick up. He shook his head, muttered "What a baby!" and then returned to the party. At four o'clock in the morning, Adam slipped into the bedroom, grateful that Grace was sound asleep.

Adam's eyes popped open at 9am to the sound of the coffee grinder. "Uh oh." he thought to himself. "Its time to face the music." He got up and snuck up behind Grace and gave her a hug. Grace endured it silently until Adam gave up and released her. Playing dumb, Adam asked, "Why did you leave last night? I was looking for you." Grace rolled her eyes, and replied, "Yeah, you were looking really hard, weren't you?" Grace's sarcasm let Adam know that he was in the doghouse – a place he knew all too well.

Adam was still reeling from the abrupt change he'd seen in Grace since they'd gotten married three years before. Grace's independence was one of the things that Adam had found most attractive about her, but as soon as they said, "I do," she morphed into a demanding, controlling nag who constantly required his attention – or so it seemed to him. Adam let out an exasperated sigh, and backed away, thinking, "Here we go again." Grace and Adam didn't speak for the remainder of the day or the following morning. In fact, when they came in for their therapy session three days later, they still hadn't spoken.

Most people believe that certain ways of behaving in relationships are correct and others are incorrect. This is true to some degree. We would probably all agree that

physically assaulting one's partner is wrong. But marriage researchers have found that the vast majority of things couples argue about involve areas in which there is no evidence that one partner's standards are better or "healthier" than the other's. Take selfishness—most of us think it's bad for relationships. The problem is that there are so many potentially legitimate yardsticks for measuring selfishness and we tend to use our own, not our partners'. Grace believed that Adam's behavior at the reception was selfish – he was thinking only of himself. But Adam believed that Grace was the one who acted badly. He wouldn't dream of restricting her desire to be with her friends.

In my office, I explained to Grace that if she wanted to believe that Adam's actions were wrong, she had every right to. But in doing so, she'd be putting herself in the company of those who are destined to fail in their relationships. The choice was hers. I wouldn't try to stop her. But I could and did tell her that evidence from seven studies spearheaded by John Gottman at the University of Washington suggests that if Adam and Grace continued with their critical attitudes toward each other, the chances of their marriage surviving over the long haul are less than 20%.

I also explained that Adam's responses weren't any more effective than Grace's. He had made it clear that he thought Grace was over-reacting and that her expectations were out of line, but Adam needed to know that beliefs like this are highly predictive of divorce. Partners who succeed in their relationships recognize that conflicts are not usually about "right" or "wrong," they're about legitimately different expectations. I told Adam it was important that he recognize Grace's needs at the reception were just as legitimate as his.

I could see them struggling with this information. To Grace, dropping the idea that Adam was wrong would be like letting him off the hook. If he wasn't the bad guy, did she really have a right to be upset? It's natural to feel agitated when your expectations are ignored, I explained, and she had every right to insist that Adam take her feelings into account. But Adam would be more able to do this if she could give up the idea that he did something wrong and instead explain to him how she felt. Once Grace realized her critical attitude was working against her, she saw the value in not blaming Adam. Instead she confessed that she felt unimportant to him and she was afraid that he cared more about his friends than her. This was a bold move on Grace's part, leaving her vulnerable. She braced herself for his response. But Adam's eyes softened immediately, and he offered an unsolicited apology, assuring her that he would try to be more sensitive to her feelings.

I wasn't surprised. I've spent 20 years as a marriage counselor, witnessing the profound rewards partners like Grace and Adam reap once they've adjusted their attitudes toward each other. The way our brains are wired, the most effective way to solicit understanding and cooperation is not by attempting to prove oneself right at the other's expense. It's by exposing vulnerability. This is a difficult adjustment for anyone to make when feeling threatened, but in relationships where an emotional bond exists, evidence suggests that the brains of those involved are set up to respond to vulnerability with empathy.

A week later, Adam and Grace sat sullenly on my couch. The day before, Grace had decided to surprise Adam by showing up at his office to take him out to lunch. Adam wasn't as pleased as Grace anticipated, because he'd already planned a working

lunch with a colleague who was helping him with a project. Reluctantly, he broke his plans and went out with Grace, but she was incensed by his attitude.

What happened here? The couple had experienced first-hand the enormous benefits of abandoning critical judgments of each other, yet less than seven days later, they were locked into the same defensive attitudes that had created the impasse at the reception. The lesson they'd learned the previous week was forgotten, just when they needed to remember it most.

Grace and Adam aren't unique. I've spent years patting myself on the back after helping couples experience heartfelt changes during therapy sessions, only to watch them show up the next week as miserable as ever.

Why do people forget what they pick up so easily? Recent neuroscience studies suggest that new insights often don't last because they aren't integrated into the brain states that become active when the insights are most necessary. Finding a new way of thinking when we are calm doesn't necessarily transfer to moments when we're upset. When we feel threatened, our brains automatically kick into special operating modes that are designed for self-protection – not relationship bliss. Early indications of our special self-protective modes emerged from studies involving electrical stimulation of the brain date back to the 1950's. By implanting electrodes deep within specific regions of patients' brains, then applying electrical pulses, researchers were stunned to see the moods, desires and concerns of patients change dramatically. For example, upon stimulation, a patient in a study conducted by Robert Heath of Tulane University School of Medicine flew into a rage and felt suddenly offended, and threatened to kill the physician who was closest to him at the time. Patients in such studies are often surprised and confused by their own actions. When stimulation ceased, one patient remarked, "Why does it make me do this? I couldn't help it. I didn't have any control. I wanted to slap your face." Even though they know ahead of time that the electrical stimulation might trigger anger, when the self-protective states in their brains are activated, they trust the feeling that they've actually been offended.

Neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux at the Center for Neural Science at New York University, has identified the neural mechanisms that explain how this happens. Using a variety of methods for locating how information travels throughout the brain, LeDoux discovered that emotion has a privileged position of influence. His studies suggest that our brains are set up so that self-protective emotions can hijack the conscious mind for periods of time, driving us to think and act in ways that we may later regret. Although Grace left the previous therapy session armed with new knowledge about how to bring out the best in Adam, when he balked at going to lunch with her, Grace was seized by an impulse to criticize him. Grace couldn't apply the new way of thinking she'd learned the previous week because she was in an operating mode that was programmed for self-protection – not mutual understanding. When she questioned Adam's priorities, his walls went up immediately.

Fortunately, our brains are not only equipped for self-protection; we're also wired for love. Jaak Panksepp and his colleagues at Bowling Green State University have found the neural pathways for four specialized brain states that produce feelings that draw us closer to those we love: One state produces a feeling of vulnerability and a longing for emotional contact, a second produces feelings of tenderness and the urge to care for others, a third produces the urges for spontaneous and playful social contact, and a

fourth activates sexual desire. While it's possible to engage in caring actions without the activation of these mood states, such actions often feel fake, lacking the heartfelt quality that gives them meaning. Caring acts are simply that: acts.

When relationships are going well, the intimacy states are naturally active – and the feelings they produce are contagious. When one person is feeling sad, tender, playful or lustful, it's easy for the other to feel something similar. For example, Panksepp has found that distress cries of young animals automatically activate the caretaking circuits of nearby adult animals. UCLA researcher Marco Iacoboni believes that this may be because of "mirror neurons" recently discovered in various many areas of the brain. Mirror neurons allow us to feel what another person is experiencing. This is why we cry at the movies when we sense the emotions of the characters, even though we don't know them. Mirror neurons help our brains recreate the feelings inside of ourselves, allowing us to be powerfully affected by others. In our first session, when I helped Grace move from her critical stance to a more vulnerable place, I had bet on Adam's mirror neurons, and I wasn't disappointed. When she disclosed that she was feeling unimportant, Adam's brain automatically responded with tenderness.

With guidance, clients like Grace and Adam can develop the ability to shift from critical and defensive postures to more unguarded internal states. Nearly all neuroscience researchers agree on one thing: The mechanism through which the brain acquires new habits is repetition. One of the most enduring concepts in the field of neuroscience is Hebb's Law, which states that when brain processes occur together over and over again, the connections between the neurons involved are strengthened, so that these processes are more likely to occur in conjunction in the future. I knew that if Grace and Adam could think differently while they were angered, and if they could do this enough times, the new thought processes would begin spontaneously each time they became annoyed with each other, and they'd stand a chance of eliminating their knee-jerk reactions. Rehearsing new thoughts alone would not do the trick. They'd each have to practice new ways of thinking under game conditions -- that is, when they were actually furious.

The problem was that when Grace and Adam fought, they seemed completely unable to avoid their usual interactions unless I was there to help them. Near the end of our second session, Adam remarked, "I wish we could take you home with us!" I replied, "Maybe you can!" I made Adam and Grace each an audiotope that they promised to listen to each time they found themselves ready to smack the other upside the head. This isn't unusual; the way our brains work means most of us require outside input when we're enraged. Pre-recorded audiotapes are a great way to get an unbiased perspective exactly when we need it.

Grace's first used her audiotope just three days later. Without consulting her, Adam made arrangements to watch Monday Night Football at a friend's house. When Adam called Grace to tell her, she was miffed but shrugged it off. As the evening wore on, though, she was flooded by thoughts like, "He was single so long that he doesn't know how to be in a relationship!" and "This man is an emotional moron!"

She decided that maybe it would be a good idea to listen to the tape I'd made for her: "Grace, if you're listening to this, you're probably feeling like Adam has been inattentive or selfish in some way. It probably feels like he's ignoring your wishes. I'm

making this tape because I want him to be as concerned about your needs as he is his own, and I won't be satisfied until he is." My words helped Grace relax somewhat, although she still felt angry. "Grace, remember in our last session how I was talking to you about the fact that 96% of the time, the likelihood that a person's partner will care about how she or he feels depends on the attitude that she or he has in the beginning moments of the conversation? Your attitude can have a powerful effect on Adam, even if he has a bad attitude to begin with. Right now, you probably feel that Adam's actions or thinking are wrong, or out of line in some way. If you enter the conversation with this attitude, you can kiss the chances of getting Adam to care about how you feel goodbye."

This statement infuriated Grace and she turned the tape off. But after a few minutes, she decided to go back to it. "Grace, is it possible that if the roles were reversed, Adam wouldn't be as mad at you?" She had to admit, Adam wouldn't be bothered if she made plans without consulting him.

At eleven o'clock, Adam's car rolled into the garage. Grace took a deep breath and waited for him to come inside. As he walked through the door, he looked apprehensive. Grace began, "Adam, I don't like it when you make plans without talking to me first." Adam protested, "But we didn't have any plans!" Grace felt a surge of irritation but caught herself, and relaxed. "Look, Adam, I'm not saying it was wrong for you to do that. I know that you probably wouldn't have been irritated with me if I made plans without consulting you. I just think we're different on this type of thing." In a strange way, Grace felt powerful as she uttered these words. For a moment, Adam seemed confused. This was not the Grace he knew. After a moment of silence, his demeanor shifted, and he said softly, "I could easily have called before I committed to the game. I just didn't think about it. I'm sorry. I really don't mind checking with you at all."

In our next session, Grace relayed these events to me with a well-deserved sense of pride. She was beginning to understand how much the fate of her relationship was in her own hands. As the weeks passed, Grace was still frustrated each time Adam seemed inattentive to her desires, but she used the tape every time, and her attitude began changing more easily. Three weeks later, she reported that she actually began hearing my words in her head without using the tape.

This signaled that her brain was being rewired for more flexibility, and she was no longer driven by the dictates of her automatic judgmental thoughts. Meanwhile, on Adam's tape, I encouraged him to avoid his tendency to discredit Grace's expectations just because they were different than his, and to look for the legitimate needs that drove her reactions.

The disarming of Adam and Grace's self-protective states was only the first part of their therapy, but it opened the way for each of them to become honest with each other about their needs and fears. Once the critical judgments ceased, Adam was able to disclose his terror of the kind of suffocating dependency he'd experienced as a child from his emotionally needy mother. Sensing his discomfort, Grace was able to assure Adam that she would respect his need for autonomy. Ironically, this made Adam want more connectedness with Grace. In turn, Grace was able to describe the feelings of insignificance she'd experienced growing up as the youngest child in a large family. This helped Adam understand her panic when he seemed inattentive. He was relieved

to find that Grace didn't want him to take care of her; she simply needed him to check in more.

Their relationship improved because they learned perhaps the most important lesson that the brain sciences have given us: Our moods and attitudes play a more powerful role in influencing our partners than the persuasiveness of our arguments. Grace found that she could get the understanding and caring she needed from Adam not by trying to prove him wrong but rather by shifting to an unguarded place and honestly expressing her needs and fears. Adam discovered that when he tried convincing Grace that her criticisms were unwarranted, the self-protective mechanisms in her brain rejected his influence. But when he listened to the feelings that drove Grace's reaction, her internal wall came down.

Grace and Adam aren't unique. People often struggle mightily to influence each other's behavior, only to fail because they don't understand that their own critical attitudes and moods are triggering their partner's natural defenses. Couples must retrain lifelong neuroemotional habits, in much the same way athletic or musical ability is honed through intense training and practice. Lasting change requires new impulses—ones that are formed only by making the same internal shifts over and over. If there's one thing that's clear to me from my new understanding of the brain, it's that we will never succeed in out-muscling emotional states with the power of rationality. My experience tells me that when partners are approached with compassion rather than cool logic or blazing argument, internal states will usually shift in ways that create the possibility for real intimacy. Our brains, after all, are wired for love.