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Why it's good to be clingy: Thought being too dependent on your love was bad for your relationship? Think again...

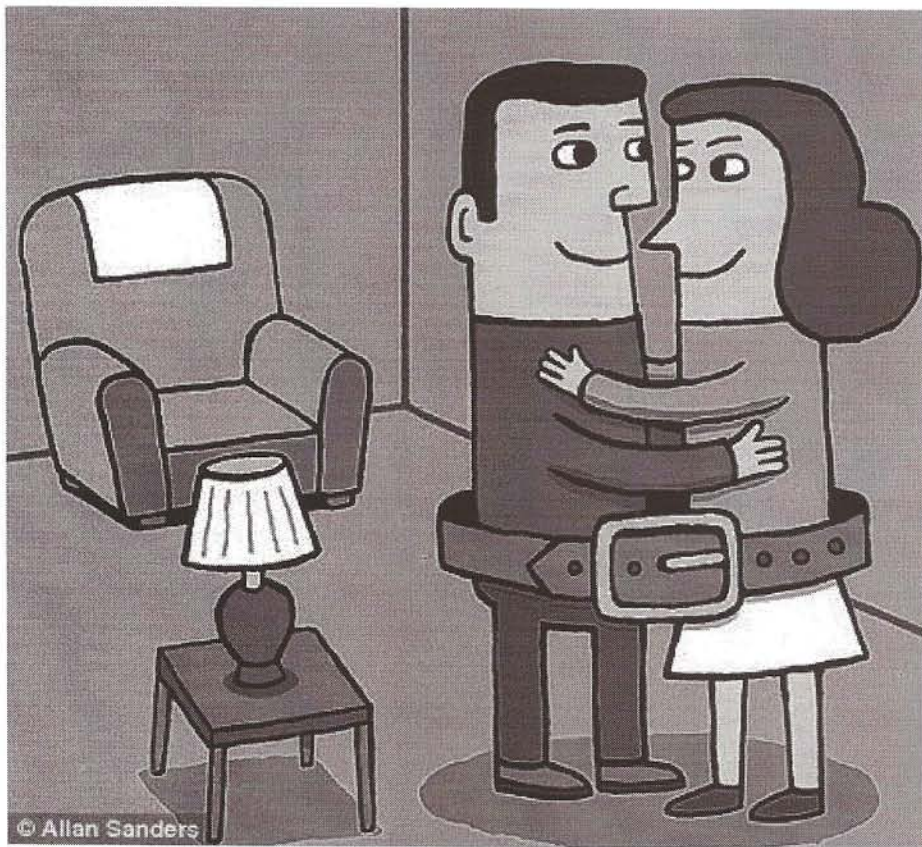
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Simon, my husband of 14 years, and I don't want to split up, yet lately, barely a week goes by without us having an argument. The reason seems to be that we're each wedded to our independence and struggle to ask for support.

During rows I become shrill and demanding, he gets withdrawn and defensive and neither of us will admit we're wrong.

Of course, it's not just Simon and me having these issues. According to one law firm, the number of divorces has increased by 6 per cent since the recession and more than 120,000 couples untied the knot last year.



Get closer: Couples therapist Dr Sue Johnson believes the modern fear of dependency is at fault in many tumultuous relationships

As a result, the Government announced a £30 million 'relationship support' programme, aimed at counselling Britain's increasing number of warring couples.

Simon and I are a great match when we're not fighting. But how can we get out of the endless loop of blame that we have fallen

into?

Couples therapist Dr Sue Johnson believes the modern fear of dependency is at fault in many tumultuous relationships, and that, contrary to our deepest emotional needs, we've been taught to believe we shouldn't rely on our partners.

In her new book *Hold Me Tight* she explains that while a litany of relationship books talk about the importance of having separate friends, hobbies and finances and how crucial it is to retain your 'sense of self' in a relationship, the opposite is true.

'Forget learning how to argue better, analysing your early childhood, making grand romantic gestures or experimenting with new sexual positions,' says Dr Johnson. 'Instead, recognise and admit that you're emotionally attached to, and dependent on, your partner in the same way that a child is on a parent — for nurturing, soothing and protection.'

Sounds simple in theory, but cutting through the armour of self-protection after years of hurt, betrayal and failed relationships is no easy task. Admitting you just want to be loved feels dangerous — because it's inviting rejection — or simply pathetic.

Dr Johnson believes there are seven crucial conversations you should have with your partner in order to achieve true closeness.

'When marriages fail, it isn't increased conflict that's the problem — it's the decrease in affection and emotional responses,' she says.

'Distressed partners are always asking the same basic questions: Are you there for me? Do I matter to you? Will you come when I need you?'

She claims her crucial conversations idea has helped 75 per cent of the couples she has worked with. But could it help Simon and me? Here goes . . .

RECOGNISE 'DEMON DIALOGUES'

According to Sue, warring couples get stuck in three patterns, or 'demon dialogues'.

They are 'Find the bad guy', where we argue endlessly about who's to blame; 'Demand-withdraw', where one party becomes shrill (me) and the other silently withdraws (him); and 'Freeze and flee', where both give up and retreat.

Simon and I sit down with cups of tea and agree we are guilty of at least the first two (and sometimes all three). Johnson provides a handy 'Fill in the blanks' set of statements to shape the conversation, beginning: 'When you . . . I don't feel safely connected to you.'

' . . . go all grumpy and silent,' I say to Simon instantly.

He replies: ' . . . take a high-handed tone, as if I'm your staff.'

This is news to both of us. It turns out that my 'high-handed tone' (he may have a point) means he feels worthless, attacked and unloved. His response is to become defensive, silent and sullen.

Meanwhile, I think his sullenness is because he doesn't love me, so I pursue him, shrieking like a harpy, to make him understand what I need. Strangely enough, this doesn't work.



Relationship advice: Flic and Simon learnt a lot from Dr Sue Johnson's tips

FIND THE RAW SPOTS

Raw spots are the sensitive discussion areas for each person. These topics may be easy to discuss for some people, but trigger emotional panic in others. It takes three seconds to agree that ours are money (me) and our children (both of us).

I am terrible with money and have hidden bills so I don't have to open them. We're step-parents to each other's teenage children, and can be wildly over-sensitive about perceived criticisms of our darling offspring.

These subjects regularly result in meltdown. But unless we recognise that these raw spots lead us to react irrationally and instantly, we can't begin to resolve them.

The solution is to identify the actual emotions being triggered, rather than just our visible responses.

BEHAVING BADLY

Unreasonable behaviour was cited as the most common reason for divorce last year

'When we talk about money, I feel as if you don't understand how scary it is for me,' I say. 'And I know I'm being pathetic, so I get even more upset and panicky.'

Simon didn't know this; he thought I was just being a childish idiot.

He admits that if I say anything mildly critical about his children, he feels as if I don't love them.

'That's not true!' I say, dismayed. I thought he was just being over-protective and shutting me out of parenting.

Opening up is hard, but it makes us think about our own responses, and how we could better explain the feelings behind them.

REVISIT A ROCKY MOMENT

Change the focus of your conversations to 'I' or 'We' rather than 'You' (as in 'You always . . .') says Dr Johnson.

Choose a recent dispute and discuss what the emotional subtext really was. As Simon and I have been open about the raw spots, it should be easier to admit to deeper emotions.

We're both nervous about replaying a recent argument over money during which Simon stormed out and I screamed abuse.

'I was terrified, because the money situation was worse than I thought and you didn't seem to think it mattered,' I said.

'No,' says Simon. 'I was scared, too, and trying to stay neutral so we weren't both panicking. But you freaked out and I felt you weren't listening any more.'

'I wasn't,' I say.

It isn't easy to admit to feelings of childish terror — it's much simpler to show anger. I needed him to acknowledge my feelings and hold my hand. But I didn't ask, so how could he know?

HOLD ME TIGHT

This is the key conversation — and it's all about 'creating moments of engagement and connection'. If we don't ask for what we need, the chances of getting these needs met are minuscule.

This conversation is so important, it's in two parts: 'What am I most afraid of?' and 'What do I need most from you?'



Flic and Simon on their wedding day: Couples publicly declare their need for one another in their vows but then never mention it again

What I'm afraid of is having my feelings dismissed, so I shout to be heard. For him, it's not being good enough.

Revealing this is hard, but it's much easier to admit what we need most. I want him to listen to what I'm saying, rather than assume; he wants me to be more loving. Ultimately, we want the same things: a demonstration of love and respect.

LEARN TO FORGIVE

This is a tricky one. Certain incidents in long-term relationships are so traumatic — to at least one partner — that they never get healed, even if we claim to have forgiven them long ago. This conversation is about creating genuine forgiveness.

'Lack of an emotionally supportive response by a loved one, at a moment of threat, can colour a whole relationship,' says Dr Johnson.

She's right. Last summer Simon's business closed, money was tight and our children had problems. During a family dinner, he yelled at me in front of the family and I felt belittled.

Now it's time to tell him how I really feel — without blame.

'I felt stupid and small,' I say. Just talking about it makes me want to cry.

He needs to acknowledge my feelings. He's genuinely upset that he hurt me so much, and his apology sounds genuine in a way that, directly after the original incident, it didn't. (Back then, he felt I was making a fuss over nothing).

It's a big relief to have dealt with that lingering hurt.

BOND THROUGH SEX AND TOUCH

Dr Johnson explains it's lack of emotional connection that causes a lack of physical closeness and affection. 'We are simply not wired to be wary or afraid and ready for sex at the same time,' she says.

If Simon and I have had a row or aren't getting on, I don't want to be touched, yet my husband craves physical closeness.

Dr Johnson's advice is to build up affectionate touch gradually, without any pressure to turn a cuddle into sex.

I make a conscious effort to be more 'touchy-feely' and am pleasantly surprised by the effect this has on his general mood.

He says it's because he 'feels more loved'. I'm always hugging my friends, my son and the cats — but I've overlooked how important daily affection is to him too.

KEEP YOUR LOVE ALIVE

The final conversation is 'a road map for taking your love into the future'. So when we get stuck in demon dialogues or those raw spots come up, we need to remember it's OK to ask for love and support, rather than closing down.

Emotional safety comes first; then we can discuss the burning issues.

'The bond of love is a living thing,' says Dr Johnson. 'If we don't attend to it, then it begins to wither.'

It's early days, but as veterans of all manner of 'fix your relationship' strategies, this was the only method that's worked for both of us and shifted us from our entrenched reactions.

It comes down to admitting we need each other. We all do it publicly on our wedding day — and then it's never mentioned again. It's time to admit that deep-seated need to be loved never goes away, no matter how old we get.

Extracted from Hold Me Tight by Dr Sue Johnson (Piatkus, £12.99). © 2011 Dr Sue Johnson. To order a copy for £10.99 (p&p free), phone 0845 155 0720.