

Acceptance From Your Spouse Can Heal Your Past: The Science Behind Marriage's Restorative Power

By Joshua Pease

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Here's a simple exercise for you to try:

Allow yourself to sit quietly for a moment, eyes gently closed. When you're ready, imagine yourself walking down the street on the sidewalk someplace familiar to you. You're fine, humming along, and then across the street walking toward you, but on the other side of the street, you see someone you know and you wave hello – and they don't wave back. Stay quiet for a moment. Simply notice what happens inside as you perceive and react to not being seen nor responded to by them.



There is an automatic, unconscious, “separation distress response” when someone we are connected with turns away, or in this case someone we want to connect with doesn't respond. There's a uhh!! in our body, coming from the brainstem that triggers a moving toward or a pulling away. Or often an even larger cascade of feelings and stories that try to make sense of what just happened. **If any part of the story goes in the direction of “It must be me; I must be bad,” we've tapped into an old embedded shame circuit of feeling unlovable, unworthy, undeserving.** As a therapist, or even as a vulnerable human being, I encounter these deeply tormenting feelings of “unlovableness” all the time. It's almost endemic in our Western culture.

The more I understand the neuroscience of attachment trauma, especially from reading Bonnie Badenoch's [Being A Brain-Wise Therapist](#) or Louis Cozolino's [The Neuroscience of Human Relationships: Attachment and the Developing Social Brain](#), the more I respect the power of our earliest relational experiences to live on in implicit memories that can de-rail our trust in ourselves from time to time, even when we've experienced genuine love and acceptance in our lives later.

When the earliest experiences of reaching out for connection (even in infancy) are met with non-response, indifference, disregard, dismissal, or with anger or critical blaming-shaming, that experience of reaching out gets paired with a feeling of hurt or rejection or confusion. We withdraw back in to ourselves for protection. We begin life primed to reach out and connect — and we learn to fear wanting or needing connection. The visceral experience of that hurt or rejection is encoded in neural cells around our heart.



We literally feel the sensations of heartache or a broken heart.

If our experience of reaching out and being met with nothing or with pain, and then our retreating for protection is repeated often enough, the amygdala, which is both our fear center and our emotional meaning center, begins to encode a memory, a warning, around our yearning paired with an anticipation of hurt

and rejection. That neural pairing becomes an unconscious implicit memory even before we have the self-consciousness to create a story about being unlovable. That pairing can become a self-reinforcing recursive loop. Our brain becomes so used to firing in this repeated pairing it generates a kind of neural cement.

Then, as a child continues to grow and explore the world and wants to connect elsewhere in new relationships, new experiences, if the same parents who responded to the child's early yearning for connection respond similarly to the child's yearning for exploration, with disregard, neglect, or overt criticism and shaming, the child's self-concept of its desires and of its self begins to go negative. "There must be something wrong or bad with me for wanting this." And the child again withdraws into a protective shell, only now isolated in fear of relationship because of fear of rejection and fear of feeling shamed – unacceptable, unlovable. The same process of encoding experiences as memories of the future now encodes the shame experience in the neural circuitry; with enough repetitions, more neural cement.

We can feel this neural cement viscerally as a limbic collapse – eyes down, head down, chest collapsed. If no other relationships come along to do the attending to and attuning to our inner experience with interest and curiosity, not judgment and not blame, but interest and curiosity and empathy and acceptance, these circuits stay split off, operating unconsciously. The encoded neural circuitry not only isolates the child as a person; it isolates itself within the brain, not integrated with later experiences of acceptance and love. We grow up and learn to relate as we do, but these buried circuits can still be triggered in relationships when our yearning for connection meets a wall, leaving us vulnerable to perceived or real slights and rejections.

These unconscious internal working models then influence all future perceptions. They filter those perceptions. They even distort our perceptions. And how this impacts adult relationships now is fear of rejection and fear of shame can lead us to avoid or block intimacy – even unconsciously. And if shame blocks us or cut us off from receiving interest and mirroring of our goodness and empathy and acceptance of our intrinsic worth from others, there's no change and no healing. We can no longer go there or admit that there's any there there to go to.

Tara Brach, clinical psychologist and the founder of Insight Meditation Society in Washington, D.C., describes the Buddhist path to healing shame beautifully in her best-selling *Radical Acceptance: Living Your Life with the Heart of a Buddha*. Acceptance

and love are what heal what she calls the “trance of unworthiness.” And they are the only things that heal feeling unlovable. Our culture strongly encourages us to develop self-esteem through accomplishment and achievement. And while mastery and competence actually do re-condition our early conditioning in important and helpful ways, it is acceptance and love that re-wires the circuits of shame. And mindfulness of love and acceptance, taking in the acceptance and love of others, is what re-programs our circuitry.

Modern neuroscience can now explain this movement, this healing process. A person must have, or generate, many, many experiences of feeling accepted and loved. This could happen in therapy or healthy intimate relationship or with an attuned friend or beloved benefactor, or a devoted pet. That feeling accepted and loved must be experienced viscerally in a felt sense in the body. Then when a



sensation or feeling or memory of hurt or shame comes up, that old painful experience is now paired with the already positive experience of feeling seen and known and cared about and loved by an accepting other. The new experience is strong enough to pair with the old memory, or fire new neuronal connections in the brain. Each time the new experience of acceptance and love holds the old toxic memory of unlovability or shame with love and awareness, acceptance and compassion, synaptic connections are modified and the old implicit memory pattern begins to change. If the new experience of love and acceptance is large enough and steady enough, with enough repetitions of pairing, neural firing and modification of synapses, over enough time, the felt sense of love and acceptance becomes the super-highway of response and the old shame becomes the back country road we don't have to go down anymore.

We know that the felt sense of being loved triggers oxytocin in the brain. Oxytocin is the bonding hormone that sends signals to the pre-frontal cortex which is the part of the brain that regulates all of our emotions and all of our body sensations to send its own neurochemicals down to the amygdala, the fear center and calm down the fear response. A neurochemical, “there, there, it's OK, it's OK, you're OK.” Self-acceptance also calms us down and helps us see things clearly, undistorted by fear or shame. I heard at a neuroscientists' retreat at Spirit Rock recently that self-reported levels of self-acceptance correlate with oxytocin levels in the brain. These positive experiences of love and self-love, acceptance and self-acceptance, establish a new positive recursive cycle in the brain.

We begin to foster and create the circuits in the brain that steady a sense of feeling lovable, loved and loving.

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