

Reliable Membership (The Two Walls)

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This material I developed over several years as I pondered, examined, experienced, and resolved the issue of reliable connection. It came together in its present form in 2001.

Principle:

All humans require reliable, sufficient and not excessive, contact with other humans.

This is an absolute biological, genetic requirement for children under 8 years of age and it is also nice after that age. Older humans can live alone, but in what I call a "degraded condition." This seems to be an idea that you can "take to the bank." It seems that reliable. I believe this is a function of our middle brains, the limbic system, as it appears in mammals as that desire to not be left alone, that desire to be included. I recall in the book, the Horse Whisperer, how young wild horses on the prairie would be given the choice of submission to the lead mare or being driven away from the herd. They would always choose submission or "joining up."

Yet the need to be together can be overridden by the experience of unpleasant connection. Hermits are built by repeated history unpleasantness when they tried to connect.

The Connection Continuum

Childhood is not all one way or the other. I find the best way to express my experience of this basic rule is to speak of a continuum. At one end is absolute unreliability or insufficiency of connection. At the other is absolute excessive connection. People can find their place along this line - some higher, some lower. As we grow, we sometimes move up and down the continuum.

A: Clingers: Some receive Unreliable or Insufficient Contact in childhood.

This causes PANIC!!

When an organism experiences too little or intermittent connection, its old reactive, reptilian brain activates. I call this Panic. As children, these people survive by developing CLINGING skills. These are behaviors of hanging on, standing close, resisting being distanced. And as these children grow, when they can walk, they develop PURSUING skills. These are just ambulatory clinging skills. These behaviors involve following, moving toward, and chasing. A Clinging child doesn't want to be put down, and runs out of the house and after their parents when left with a baby sitter.

These same skills of clinging and pursuing, driven by PANIC, become habits and follow the child into adulthood.

Reactive Behavior

When these adults panic, they move toward others, especially their partner. They ask questions, follow, push toward, talk at, and in general become invasive of their partner's space. As an adult clinging may become very controlling, possessing, captivating, cornering. This is the source of stalking behavior.

Symptom

This is your pattern if you often frequently think of or fear your partner leaving you behind.

Focus

When nervous, you will focus on your partner's evasiveness, withdrawal, silence. You may also have day or night dreams of safe togetherness - of finally living happily forever.

B: Avoiders: Others received Excessive or Unpleasant Contact in childhood.

This causes PANIC!!

When an organism experiences too much or painful contact, the old reactive, reptilian brain activates. Again this is Panic. Children who experience this develop AVOIDING skills. These are behaviors that do not invite contact. Even when hungry these children don't cry. We often call the "good babies," but really they are

happier when left alone. As these children grown, when they can walk, they develop ISOLATING skills. These are just ambulatory avoiding skills. Isolating involves having hiding places, wandering off, climbing trees and not coming down, running away, sitting at the far end of the room, etc.

These same skills of avoiding and isolating, driven by PANIC, become habits and follow the child into adulthood.

Reactive Behavior

When these adults panic, they move away from others, especially their partner. They are quiet, self-contained, elusive, non-talkative, and in general, emotionally cold.

Symptom

This is your pattern if your mind often goes blank when your partner talks, asks, or moves toward you.

Focus

When nervous, you will focus on your partner's invasiveness, attacking, pushing, and you may dream of peace, quiet and space.

Where are you?

Take a moment to find the place on this continuum that fits you. We are all somewhere along this line. Over a lifetime you may change position. Usually in partnership one will be higher on the line and one lower. This seems true for perhaps 80% of the couples I see. Are you the higher one or the lower one? How about your parents? Where did you see them to be?

I make the high Clingers to be +100 and the low Avoiders -100. When I started to look at this problem, I saw myself as +60 and my partner as -35.

I also find that over a period of time people may change their position and even reverse sides. Thus I prefer to speak of Clinging than of Clingers.

The problem

When a Clinging person gets nervous, they tend to move toward their partner in order to reduce their panic. The Avoiding partner sees someone coming and, starting to panic, they move away. The Clinger sees their partner moving away, and moves faster. The Avoider runs faster from the clinging person, who is now chasing them. The two run toward what I call the Leaving Wall, the wall at the edge of the relationship – the Divorce Wall.

Now when a Avoider gets nervous first, they tend to pull back and head for some quiet space. The Clinging partner sees their partner move away and, starting to panic, they start to hold on. The Avoiding partner feels the holding on and, further panicking, withdraws firmly.

The two run toward that Leaving Wall, the Divorce Wall.

These scenarios get played out over and over with no conscious effort, but usually a lot of panic. And they always move toward that Leaving Wall.

A Clinger/Pursuer's View (the clinging partner)

From my point of view, as a Clinger, the Leaving Wall scared me. Whenever my partner said, "I'm out of here; or "I can't take this any longer;" or she was just gone a little longer than I expected, or she was quiet, I would start worrying. My worry always had more or less panic within it. I visualized her divorcing me, leaving me, having an affair, dying, etc. etc. The Leaving Wall scared me. I did all sorts of things to protect myself from "her going over that Leaving Wall." All of my efforts were temporary fixes. And all my efforts seemed to push her away.

An Avoider/Isolator's View (the withdrawing partner)

From my partner's point of view, as an avoider, the Leaving Wall was a safe haven. What scared her was the lack of what I call the Space Wall. The space wall was the one she could get behind to take a break from me. Kahil Gibran said, "Let there be spaces in your togetherness." It was the lack of this wall that frightened my partner. Without that Space Wall, the only safety for her was the Leaving Wall, (which scared me). Avoiders/Isolators often seen contact as a **conflict!**

Solution: The Wall Within

The [Space Wall](#) protects my partner (the avoiding partner), not so much from me, but from her historically valid experiences of too much contact. It also does protect her from me. Simultaneously it protects me (the clinging partner) from that dreaded Leaving Wall. If she has plenty of Space Wall, she does not need to go toward the Leaving Wall. Hooray!!! And so The Space Wall is the "Wall that Al built." It worked.

Advice for the Clinging Partner

Learn to enthusiastically create, and support your partner's need for the [Space Wall](#). This will reduce their need to move toward the Leaving Wall – Divorce Wall. Give them the "benefits of leaving while they are with you."

Learn to be happy when on your own and learn to switch to the on-your-own mode quickly.

Good News

You can live with the Space Wall. You can live alone!

Bad News

Your partner cannot live without it!

Without a strong, readily available Space Wall, they have to use the Leaving Wall.

You have to take primary care of your own neediness. You might as well consider yourself "insatiable". But you can live with it.

Also, I want you to be clear that this topic is the only one in relationship skills where the solution seems one-sided. It seems unfair. [And I think it is.](#) But I'd rather have a solution that is unfair than have no solution at all.

Here the solution: whoever is the Clinger at any time, that is the one who has to do the primary work. This is because the Isolator's defensive posture usually contains paralysis, a blank mind and an inability to do anything.

Sorry about this.

LEARN THE SWITCH

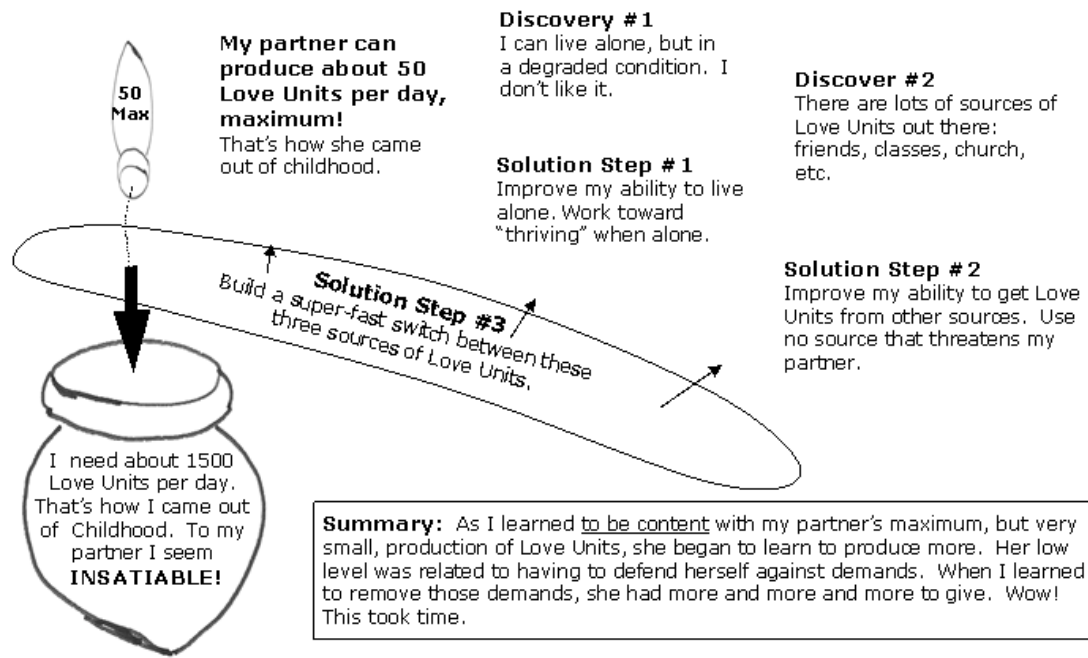
Giving your partner the Space Wall, and you really have to get good at this, ([see my paper on The Testicle Principle](#)) does not take care of your need for connection. You have to take care of that, yourself. This is what I learned, and what follows is how I solved my need for connection when my partner was not available.

Boy, am I needy.

I came to realize that I am needy. I came out of my childhood needing lots and lots of attention. I can look back and hear voices of people complaining about how needy I was. When I finally began to understand this, I decided that I needed about 1500 love units per day. This was not my fault. This excess neediness was my parent's business, but that's all past now. Now it is my problem. So here I am needing lots and lots of love units each day.

My partner, not so much.

My wife came out of her childhood with a very limited ability to produce love units. Her maximum on a good day is 50 love units. Oh, she can work lots and accomplish many many things, but when it comes to love units – not much. This isn't her fault. This limited capacity was her parent's business. But now it is her problem — and my problem, too, because I have been trying to get my needed 1500 love units out of a 50 love unit source for years.



Now What!

So I looked at this situation and looked for my options.

1. My wife had the best love units available. She just didn't have many of them. I wanted every one of her capacity.
2. I can live alone. True, I am kind of degraded when alone, but I can do it. In fact when I travel for business I take care of myself pretty well.
3. There are lots of love units in the world. I get love from cats, dogs, horses, friends, clients, audiences – who there are many sources. Still, among all these sources, my wife has by far the best quality love units – just not many.

My Fix: The Solutions Steps 1-3

And thus here is what I did, and I did it right in front of my partner.

1. I improved my ability to live alone. I looked at my time alone and started to do a better job. I noticed that when I had lived alone, between my marriages, that I often did pretty well. I noticed that when I travelled for business I often did pretty well. I just was not in the habit of doing well when I was near my partner. So I practiced doing better. E.g. When I travelled, I always had a good book available. So, I learned to have a good book available at home also.
2. I improved my ability to get love units from other sources in the world. But, and this is a big but, never did I draw on a source that would threaten my partner. Remember, she had the best LU's in town. I didn't want to ruin my chances of getting them. So, for me, this meant that I could get love units from any person or any group as long as they weren't single females. I built up a network of friends. I joined volunteer organizations. I gave presentations. I kept up with my pets.
3. I developed a super-fast switch. This was a skill to be able to shift from my partner as a source, to my living-along-skills, to my friends, and back quickly. If I was with my friends and my partner had some to share, I would drop my friends and head home. If I was with my partner and she suddenly seemed to want quiet time, I would grab a book and start reading.

The Benefits

I was stunned by the benefits of doing this. I mentioned that I did it in front of my partner. My partner seemed relieved that I was doing it. She actively supported me. She told me about having so often felt a "failure" that she could not meet my needs. She began to relax around me and.....her output of love units began to increase. At this point, quite a few years since I started this plan, she can produce probably 500 love units without difficulty. Wow! And they are those highest quality love units!

Now, they are still not as many as I want, but I found out something else. It was the reliability that made all the difference, not the number of love units. My panic was much more driven by the fear that my sources would be cut off. And now I, with my Superfast Switch, was taking care of the reliability. My supply became just fine. My strategy met my need for reliable and sufficient contact and met my partner's need for not-excessive contact. Cool!

Advice to the Avoiding Partner

Learn to firmly and gently make the Space Wall. Learn to anticipate your own needs for quiet, and signal your partner when those needs are coming up. Learn to take "time outs." Tend to your partner's need for reliability by showing that your Space Wall is not a Leaving Wall. Always refer to your returning when you start to move away.

Good News

You get the quiet space you need.

Bad News

You have to develop Relationship Responsibility. You can't blame your partner for your need for space. You have to come back.

LEARN THE GENTLE ART OF "TIME OUTS"

Also Check out my articles on What to do when he/she won't talk and the Testicle Principle.