

shalem *Digest*

SPRING 2011

TOPICS OF INTEREST TO FRIENDS OF SHALEM MENTAL HEALTH NETWORK

Marital Anguish: What Brain Science is Teaching Us

BY IRENE OUDYK-SUK, MSW, RSW

Do you and your partner constantly argue? Have you lost the ability to connect? Has silence and sadness become a shared habit?

Until recently, relationship books or marriage counselors would have taught you and your partner conflict resolution skills or encouraged you to develop a pattern of date nights or common interests. These approaches suggest that fixing relationships is a matter of getting the technique of marriage right.

IT'S ALL ABOUT ATTACHMENT

However a growing body of scientific research into adult love is showing us that the strength of the emotional bond between partners is far more important than having common interests, fair fighting, or the ability to be self-sufficient. We have a wired-in need for safe and secure attachment with a few significant others. The rugged individualism of the Marlboro Man (remember him from the cigarette ad?) and the solitary power of the Virginia Slims Woman (remember her?) are actually bad for our health, longevity, self esteem, and, yes even our earning potential.

BRAIN SCIENCE SUPPORTS IMPORTANCE OF ATTACHMENT

How can this be? Well, fascinating brain research shows that people need to be attached to other people to thrive. For example, a Virginia researcher, Jim Coan,



(Google him on YouTube) put women into an MRI machine where, he said, they would receive small electric shocks. He asked the women to rate the pain themselves and he measured it independently via the MRI. Women who were alone when shocked reported more pain and their brains registered more pain than women whose hands were being held by strangers. But the women who experienced the least amount of pain, by far, were those whose hands were being held by a beloved partner. The words from Genesis fit here: "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him" (2:18).

Here's another piece of attachment research recently reported in the media. Neuroscientists have discovered that emotional rejection and

physical pain are coded identically in the brain. In other words, the pain of rejection is not a metaphor (Google "physical pain and emotional rejection"). People really feel it.

THE CORE ATTACHMENT QUESTIONS

What these two studies and many others like them reveal is that we flourish when we feel emotionally supported and connected. We need to experience affirmative answers to core concerns such as "Do I matter to you?" and "When I need you will you respond?" When we have a secure base and safe haven of love we can better tolerate the stresses of life, including the unavoidable challenges of relationship. ▶

Consider a typical couple. Balancing work deadlines and kids' soccer games make him feel rushed and worried that he can't do it all. He needs reassurance. Reassurance is an attachment need. But he doesn't ask for it. Many of us have been taught that our attachment needs are a sign of weakness. Instead he becomes quiet and, to his wife, seems distant and non-interested. She tries to snap him out of it by snapping at him. It is a moment of disconnection. What happens next makes all the difference in the world for this relationship. If he gets defensive or angry, and further retreats into himself, she may well snap all the more, intuitively sensing that somehow she needs to reconnect. This sets up a withdraw/pursue cycle. However, if one of them can reach out to the other to reconnect so that the other responds, the attachment is repaired and the bond strengthened.

WHEN COUPLES LOSE SIGHT OF ATTACHMENT

It's when couples don't take the time (or don't know how) to repair moments of disconnection that these moments eventually take on a momentum of their own, becoming a negative cycle like the withdraw/pursue one in the example above.

The problem is that losing connection repeatedly endangers our sense of security and safety. Feelings of rejection and panic set in. If you were in an MRI machine having these feelings, the amygdala, the part of the brain that is highly sensitive to threat, would light

up in a nanosecond. Trouble is, a brain with a highly charged amygdala doesn't take the time to think, it just reacts. And it reacts in only one of two ways: leave the danger far behind by running from it, or tame the danger by fighting it into submission-withdraw or pursue.

The MRI image of a brain with the fighting amygdala (often, but certainly not always, the woman's) looks angry or demanding. The brain with the fleeing amygdala (often the man's) looks dismissive or shut down. These two brain states trigger each other. The dismissive or defensive male seems to suggest to his female partner that her feelings don't really matter. The woman who needs to matter fights to tell her partner that yes, this issue does matter. To him she looks dangerous. Since his need for safety is not being honored in that moment he protects himself by minimizing (running from) her concerns. Both partners end up feeling lonely and isolated and unhappy. And it isn't long before this negative pattern is so entrenched in a couple's life that even little concerns can set off the damaging cycle.

REFOCUS ON ATTACHMENT

Attachment studies suggest that the pursue/withdraw cycle is only one of several couples may fall into. But all such cycles are rooted in the fact that emotional safety is a basic survival need for adults. Unfortunately, as the cigarette ads mentioned above suggest, we've been taught to feel ashamed of, and so suppress, our need for emotional connection. That means it's a difficult step for couples to

consider that recurring fights are really not about finances or sex or parenting or growing apart. Such fights are actually about some form of attachment distress. They are a result of emotional distance. Partner's are really asking, "Can I count on you? Will you rely on me?". Understanding that helps couples be curious about how it is that he or she might, often inadvertently, be causing emotional insecurity in the partner.

OUR GOD IS THE GOD OF ATTACHMENT

The Christian faith has long known about the power of attachment. Jesus prayed that we in the church could be made one, just as he and the father are one. Science is helping us understand how adult love relationships, while not the only way for people to get their attachment needs met, is certainly very key. Couples are created, and in Christ are recreated, to be safe havens for each other.

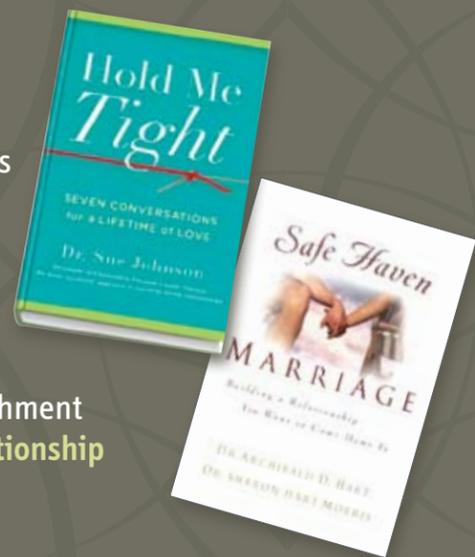


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Recommended Resources

Canadian **Dr. Sue Johnson** has written a very accessible book for couples about the attachment approach to adult love relationships called **"Hold Me Tight: Seven Conversations for a Lifetime of Love."** You can read an excerpt at www.holdmetight.net

Dr. Archibald Hart & Dr. Sharon Hart Morris are Christian authors who have written about marriage from an attachment perspective. Their book is **"Safe Haven Marriage: Building a Relationship You Want to Come Home To."**



{ DIRECTOR'S CORNER }



MARK VANDER VENNEN, MA, M.ED, R.S.W. Executive Director

WHAT'S IN A LOOK?

What's in a look? A look communicates who you are. And visual communication is becoming more and more

important. We live in an increasingly visual culture—it's estimated that 50% of young people are "visual learners" (years ago that figure was 20%), and some say that up to 90% of communication is non-verbal.

So it's important for us at Shalem to pay careful attention to our "look". We want all of our visual presentation to reflect our core Gospel values, such as hope, relationship, restoration, stewardship, wholeness, and attention to the vulnerable. Jesus' accompaniment of all of us is our guiding theme at Shalem.

To that end, with this Digest, we are launching a new "look" for Shalem. It is not a brand new look but a reinterpretation, a strengthening of what we've had. The image of the hand and the bird is contained within a circle, implying wholeness. The logo highlights our two emphases—"accompaniment" and "flourishing" or "taking flight", while at the same time the image reverberates with the presence of God's Spirit infusing it all. The soft blue colour with a green gradient reflects caring, while the darker blue communicates strength and stability. And the interplay of colours between the image and the text creates a harmonious relationship between them.

RESTORING HOPE

As part of the redesigned visual presentation, we have shortened our "by-line" to the phrase "Restoring Hope". Our goal is that biblical hope is the foundation of everything we do. Shalem Board member Michael Maher has begun taking us on a journey into a deeper articulation of Biblical hope and what it means for us at Shalem and the people we are privileged to work with. He has noted that

biblical hope always comes in the context of "lament", of suffering, of a sense of desperation at the seeming abandonment of God. About one-third of the Psalms are Psalms of Lament. But in the depths of lament a mysterious turn often happens, where, with the exhilarating presence of God, mourning is turned to dancing, despair is transformed into life-giving hope. At Shalem we seek to become present at this mysterious turn, to not stand in its way, to accompany people (including ourselves) from lament to wholeness, from despair to taking flight.



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Look for an ongoing articulation of these themes throughout the coming year, along with the production of new brochures, promotional material, and a revamped website built from the ground up. We are blessed to have been able to engage Riordon Design, a Christian design group based in Oakville, Ontario, to support our visual redesign work.

EXCITING TIMES

These are exciting times at Shalem. Our Board and Staff are engaged in a new Strategic Plan visioning process (our current three-year plan expires at the end of 2011). Our long-term future, including ministry services and the key elements of a sustainable business plan for Shalem, are now coming into clear focus. For more on that theme, please do plan to come to our next Annual Meeting on June 6 (see the announcement to the right of this article). Through all of this, we need your partnership. As members, supporters and partners, you are the supporting hand underneath us helping us to take flight. It is not an exaggeration to say that we experience your presence in our work every day.

Thank you for all that you do for Shalem—your prayers, your financial support, your promotion, your volunteering. But thank you especially for all that you do in support of people who struggle with emotional distress or mental illness, in the name of Jesus, who brings peace.

Yours in Christ,

YOU ARE INVITED TO JOIN US FOR OUR

Annual General Meeting

Shalem's Executive Director, Mark Vander Vennen, will be sharing his reflections on:

"The Long-Term Promise of Shalem"

What does Shalem's future look like? What will be its ministry services and how will they be supported for the long haul? Who will its partners be? Come and enjoy this invitation to gaze, with God's blessing, into Shalem's promising future.

Monday, June 6th, 2011

7:30 pm–9 pm

At CrossPoint

Christian Reformed Church

444 Steeles Avenue West, Brampton, ON

Light Refreshments will be served. Please contact our office for a copy of our Annual Report or for details on becoming a member. They will also be posted on our website.

Shalem is committed to best practices in mental health and is a member of Family Service Ontario. All services are offered in strictest confidence.

Shalem Digest is a publication of Shalem Mental Health Network, a non-profit, charitable organization. RN 130566011 RR00011

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Setting Up a Successful Catch

JENNIFER BOWEN, Clinical Director

When we play catch with our children, we lob the ball gently to them, underhand, setting them up to catch it easily. We set them up for success.

When playing with others, we can sometimes shift to competitive or even aggressive games of catch when we make it difficult or impossible for our opponent to catch the ball.

Throwing a ball can be a helpful metaphor when thinking about how you are initiating conversation with your partner. Do you set yourselves up for success, and gently lob the ball or comment to them, or do you zing the statement at them, making it hard to respond to?

In relationship, it can sometimes feel like you are communicating with an opponent rather than someone on your own team. That can influence how you initiate your communication. Thinking of your partner as an opponent is an effective way of bringing about a fight. Try to think of your partner as someone on your team, someone you want to be close to.

Much of the time, we long for good connection. We wish we could sit together at the dinner table and exchange kind glances and good laughs. We are discouraged and hurt when we



find ourselves suddenly in adversarial discussion, where someone wins and someone loses.

A successful throw and catch involve seeing your partner as a member of your team, taking stock of where they are at, and if they are ready for the ball. Couple counselling can be a helpful way of finding strategies to talk about what really matters, and getting back on the same team as your partner. When it comes to communication, some of us need to learn how to soften our throw.

At Shalem, we are keenly interested in the strong role of attachment in the lives of the children, couples and families we work with. In recent years, we have connected closely with the work of Sue Johnson, described in Irene's Oudyk-Suk's article.

We have also built a dynamic, ongoing partnership with Dan Hughes, a US-based psychologist who has developed treatment for improving broken attachment between children and their parents or caregivers. We are excited to offer counselling services that specifically attend to issues of attachment at our two counselling centers, both in Hamilton and Durham.

World Vision
Canadian Programs

A Continuing Partnership for Shalem:

Shalem is delighted to announce a new four year funding partnership with World Vision Canada entitled "WrapAround Relational Ministries."

As one of World Vision's Partners to End Child Poverty, Shalem will develop church-based WrapAround training and work over the next four years. This will include an exciting partnership between Shalem and Neighbourlink Chatham-Kent. It further complements our grant from the Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health to evaluate our WrapAround work.

WrapAround is a best practice, community-based way of supporting people who have persistent, overlapping needs, such as mental illness, poverty, family breakdown, medical needs and more.

This is Shalem's second WrapAround funding partnership with World Vision. We are grateful to World Vision for their support and look forward to continuing our energizing, fruitful partnership.

