

# Safe to Soften: How Couples Can Develop Closeness

*By Joe Alexander*

Most couples who seek therapy have problems with understanding, tolerance for differences and empathy for the others' position. Many therapists work on improving communication as the primary task. My experience is that the couple is often communicating quite clearly. The problem is that they don't like what is being said and feel threatened. Often the differences that were initially attractive now grate and chafe at our emotional well being. During this phase, couples often become defensive and "You" messages predominate ("You don't appreciate me." "You don't know what you're talking about." You're so insensitive. You're always complaining.")

This was very true of Robin and Alex, a couple who'd been together 10 years who came to see me because of a growing emotional distance and lack of sex. They were good parents, busily raising two adopted children, but struggled as partners. They wanted to stay together but were clear with each other and me on the first visit that separation and divorce were inevitable if the other didn't change. They had tried couples therapy a couple of years before but although they made some progress in communicating better, they were unable to resolve their differences.

By the time most couples come to see me, it has become unsafe to express themselves openly. I work hard with a couple to get them to talk from an "I feel and I react..." stance. This increases the chance that their partner will use their ears to hear what their partner is saying, instead of their mouth to defend and justify or withdraw into silence. It also starts to move the couple away from blaming and toward taking individual ownership of the part each of them plays in contributing to the problem.

Next, I work with each partner individually in front of their mate on differentiation, the ability to hold on to your feelings and needs and not expect fusion or sameness with your partner. This as you can imagine is often a task that is quite challenging and threatening. After all, so many people believe that if their partner would just change these few things, everything would be much better.

We all remember the joy of the dance of togetherness from the infatuation stage. This stage, which cements a new relationship, usually lasts up to 9 months or longer if couples initially can't spend a lot of time together. Although our minds know this sense of oneness cannot last, our heart and our body remember and we can't reason ourselves out of the feeling that something is wrong. Most of us get together to find someone with whom to fuse or join. We are attracted by a combination of sameness and differences that we believe, sometimes without conscious awareness, will complement us and make us more whole.

Alex was initially attracted to Robin's need for closeness, which was exactly what was lacking in his childhood with his critical, distant mother. Robin was attracted to Alex's independence and self-reliance. It was something she wasn't used to experiencing in a close relationship because Robin's mother had encouraged her to become too bonded or fused with her. Both, however, had mothers who demanded a lot and fathers who were more distant and harder to reach.

Both Robin and Alex valued closeness and warmth and especially acceptance. But due to dysfunction patterns of relating they had learned early in their families, they were pushing each other away. Robin had developed a sense that she was able to do no wrong in a close relationship and had difficulty accepting other viewpoints. Alex learned that he had to rely on himself and protect his vulnerable feelings.

Over time those qualities that a couple found initially attractive about each other often become a source of conflict. In this case, Alex experienced Robin's need for closeness as

suffocating and withdrew. Robin reacted to this withdrawal by criticizing Alex and attributing their problems to Alex's mother and their always distant relationship. Alex felt unheard.

After a number of months of working with the couple, Robin was able to finally "hear" Alex and understand that being judgmental was hurtful and that her assessment of the problem wasn't always right. She was then able to question the belief she learned growing up that she could do no wrong in a relationship.

Alex's work was in sharing vulnerability and giving his wife credit when she made progress. Alex feared letting go of his defenses and silent criticism. He was convinced that Robin would take this sign of closeness as justification that she was right and didn't have to change because it was all Alex's fault.

As Alex and Robin were able to recognize and label the dances/patterns they acted out with each other and each could own their individual parts in the dance true lasting intimacy and change became not only possible but inevitable. This is the paradoxical theory of change that once we become aware of how it is we do what we do change can then come into awareness and become integrated into our behavior. Alex learned to be more verbal and talk about how he felt vs. withdrawing into silent judgment. Robin learned to "hold" herself better and turn elsewhere for emotional support when Alex wasn't available. Both learned to see how they were difficult to live with and apologize for how their behavior was hurtful. This softening allowed the couple more emotional intimacy and made it easier to risk and initiate greater sexual intimacy.

Couples work always involves doing your own individual work as you can see from the above example. The honeymoon transitions into the next phase where both partners need to work on themselves and on their relationship. Fundamental disagreements and differences become problematic to that sense of oneness and fusion most of us crave.

The bad news is the honeymoon really is over. The good news is that couple can arrive at a new, more mature closeness they can build on throughout their relationship. Sometimes it just involves spending more time together. All couples need at least 4 hours of time focused on each other and in contact every week. I ask all couples I see to make time for a date night. Sometimes this is all it takes.

Jim and Greg had been a couple for over 5 years. The sex between them was initially fantastic and dependable. Each was committed to their career and had active family lives as well as friendship circles. After the infatuation stage they stopped making time for each other.

I started seeing them and gave them an analogy that even very dependable cars need regular maintenance. They started to make 4 hours a week of couple time and have a date night. After a couple of sessions they were done with therapy and a 6 month follow up session revealed the new maintenance ritual of 4 hours of uninterrupted time a week had become a habit. I haven't seen them since.

When normal maintenance isn't enough, a couple may need therapy to change each partner's contribution to a pattern of behavior that is pushing them apart. If one person refuses counseling, one member coming into individual therapy can be useful for the couple. This is particularly beneficial when conducted by a therapist with the training and experience to keep the partner as a shadow in the room.

All of us as couples need help from time to time. When we expect our relationship to do just fine while work or the children or our extended family take the majority of our time and attention is unrealistic. As I mentioned earlier this is like expecting our car to keep on running despite not taking the time for normal maintenance. If we don't maintain our car or our relationship, it begins to break down, and often a major overhaul, in this case supportive therapy, is needed to rebuild trust and closeness. Being part of a couple almost always involves up and downs. Getting a therapist's help to take a good hard look at ourselves is often necessary in order to come to a successful resolution.