

Getting Along

Loving the other without losing yourself

CHRISTOPHER GERMER

OVER THE YEARS I've come to a conclusion: *Human beings are basically incompatible.*

Think about it. We live in different bodies, we've had different childhoods, and at any given moment our thoughts and feelings are

likely to differ from anybody else's, even those of our nearest and dearest. Given the disparities in our genetic makeup, conditioning, and life circumstances, it's a miracle we get along at all.

Yet we yearn to feel connected to others. At the deepest level, connectedness is our natural state—what Thich Nhat Hanh calls “interbeing.” We are inextricably related, yet somehow our day-to-day experience tells us otherwise. We suffer bumps and bruises in relationships. This poses an existential dilemma: “How can I have an authentic voice and still feel close to my friends and loved ones? How can I satisfy my personal needs within the constraints of my family and my culture?”

In my experience as a couples therapist, I've found that most of the suffering in relationships comes from disconnections. A disconnection is a break in the feeling of mutuality; as the psychologist Janet Surrey describes it, “we” becomes “I” and “you.” Some disconnections are obvious, such as the sense of betrayal we feel upon discovering a partner's infidelity. Others may



Love Love's Unlovable, Gary Hume, 1994, gloss paint on panel, 85 x 144 inches

be harder to identify. A subtle disconnection may occur, for example, if a conversation is interrupted by one person answering a cell phone, or a new haircut goes unnoticed, or when one partner falls asleep in bed first, leaving the other alone in the darkness. It's almost certain that there's been a disconnection when two people find themselves talking endlessly about “the relationship” and how it's going.

The Buddha prescribed equanimity in the face of suffering. In relationships, this means accepting the inevitability of painful disconnections and using them as an opportunity to work through difficult emotions. We instinctively avoid unpleasantness, often without our awareness. When we touch something unlovely in ourselves—fear, anger, jealousy, shame, disgust—we tend to withdraw emotionally and

direct our attention elsewhere. But denying how we feel, or projecting our fears and faults onto others, only drives a wedge between us and the people we yearn to be close to.

Mindfulness practice—a profound method for engaging life's unpleasant moments—is a powerful tool for removing obstacles and rediscovering happiness in relationships. Mindfulness involves both awareness and acceptance of present experience. Some psychologists, among them Tara Brach and Marsha Linehan, talk about *radical acceptance*—radical meaning “root”—to emphasize our deep, innate capacity to embrace both negative and positive emotions. Acceptance in this context does not mean tolerating or condoning abusive behavior. Rather, acceptance often means fully acknowledging just how much pain we may be feeling at a given moment, which inevitably

leads to greater empowerment and creative change.

One of the trickiest challenges for a psychotherapist, and for a mindfulness-oriented therapist in particular, is to impress on clients the need to turn toward their emotional discomfort and address it directly instead of looking for ways to avoid it. If we move into pain mindfully and compassionately, the pain will shift naturally. Consider what happened to one couple I worked with in couple therapy.

Suzanne and Michael were living in “cold hell.” Cold-hell couples are partners who are deeply resentful and suspicious of each other and communicate in chilly, carefully modulated tones. Some couples can go on like this for years, frozen on the brink of divorce.

After five months of unsuccessful therapy, meeting every other week, Suzanne decided it was time to file for divorce. It seemed obvious to her that

Michael would never change—that he would not work less than sixty-five hours a week or take care of himself (he was fifty pounds overweight and smoked). Even more distressing to Suzanne was the fact that Michael was making no effort to enjoy their marriage; they seldom went out and had not taken a vacation in two and a half years. Suzanne felt lonely and rejected. Michael felt unappreciated for working so hard to take care of his family.

Suzanne’s move toward divorce was the turning point—it gave them “the gift of desperation.” For the first time, Michael seemed willing to explore just how painful his life had become. During one session, when they were discussing a heavy snowstorm in the Denver area, Michael mentioned that his sixty-four-year-old father had just missed his first day of work in twenty years. I asked Michael what that meant to him. His eyes welling up with tears,

Michael said he wished his father had enjoyed his life more. I wondered aloud if Michael had ever wished the same thing for himself. “I’m scared,” he replied. “I’m scared of what would happen if I stopped working all the time. I’m even scared to stop *worrying* about the business—scared that I might be overlooking something important that would make my whole business crumble before my eyes.”

With that, a light went on for Suzanne. “Is that why you ignore me and the kids, and even ignore your own body?” she asked him. Michael just nodded, his tears flowing freely now. “Oh my God,” Suzanne said, “I thought it was me—that I wasn’t good enough, that I’m just too much trouble for you. We’re *both* anxious—just in different ways. You’re scared about your business and I’m scared about our marriage.” The painful feeling of disconnection that separated

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Michael and Suzanne for years had begun to dissolve.

From the beginning of our sessions, Michael had been aware of his workaholicism. He even realized that he was ignoring his family just as he had been ignored by his own father. But Michael felt helpless to reverse the intergenerational transmission of suffering. That began to change when he felt the pain of the impending divorce. Michael accepted how unhappy his life had become, and he experienced a spark of compassion, first for his father and then for himself.

Suzanne often complained that Michael paid insufficient attention to their two kids. But behind her complaints was a wish—not unfamiliar to mothers of young children—that Michael would pay attention to *her* first when he came home from work, and later play with the kids. Suzanne was ashamed of this desire: she thought it

was selfish and indicated that she was a bad mother. But when she could see it as a natural expression of her wish to connect with her husband, she was able to make her request openly and confidently. Michael readily responded.

A little self-acceptance and self-compassion allowed both Suzanne and Michael to transform their negative emotions. In relationships, behind strong feelings like shame and anger is often a big “I MISS YOU!” It simply feels unnatural and painful not to share a common ground of being with our loved ones.

We all have personal sensitivities—“hot buttons”—that are evoked in close relationships. Mindfulness practice helps us to identify them and disengage from our habitual reactions, so that we can reconnect with our partners. We can mindfully address recurring problems with a simple four-step technique: (1) Feel the emotional pain of disconnec-

tion, (2) Accept that the pain is a natural and healthy sign of disconnection, and the need to make a change, (3) Compassionately explore the personal issues or beliefs being evoked within yourself, (4) Trust that a skillful response will arise at the right moment.

Mindfulness can transform all our personal relationships—but only if we are willing to feel the inevitable pain that relationships entail. When we turn away from our distress, we inevitably abandon our loved ones as well as ourselves. But when we mindfully and compassionately incline toward whatever is arising within us, we can be truly present and alive for ourselves and others. ▼

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