



The Relationship Dance

by Pat LaDouceur, Ph.D.

A dance teacher told me once that she could see a couple's entire relationship on the dance floor. When someone's toes got stepped on (and they did – we were all beginners) – she could see how some people blamed their partner, while others apologized and let it go. Some stopped the lessons before they got to be good at it, while others had fun learning and adjusting to how their partners moved.

"Every Relationship is a Dance"

Every relationship is a dance. In the beginning, it can be easy to move to the music with your partner. But over time, things change. Maybe it's a simple misunderstanding, and one of you feels hurt. Perhaps the change comes from something that you've been hoping for -- a child, or a promotion. Or it could come from a major challenge, like an illness or a job loss. Wherever it comes from, something happens, and the music changes. You and your partner step on each others toes. Changes, enjoyable and difficult, are a part of life and of every couple's relationship. But how you handle them makes the difference between a relationship that comes apart...or grows stronger.

Sue Johnson, in her book "Hold Me Tight," says that humans are wired to need emotional connection. Love, she argues, is "the continual search for a basic, secure connection with someone else." Soldiers, she points out, are sent into war with a buddy. Research shows that cancer patients who join a support group have better survival rates. People in happy marriages are more resistant to illness and are more healthy overall than people in distressed relationships.

Fight or Flight in Relationships

Humans seem to be wired for connection, and we react quickly and deeply to the threat of its loss. Loss of connection with someone we love sends an alarm straight to the amygdala, the so-called "fear center" of our brain. Our "fight or flight" response kicks into gear before we are aware of what really happened. Johnson explains that arguments are really protests against this loss, whether it is real or perceived. Whether we get angry (fight) or shut down (flight), she argues, underneath we are really scared.

When things aren't going so well, it helps to take a few minutes to understand what's going on. When you feel angry, are you also sad, lonely, or scared? When you feel like leaving the room, is it the only way you can find to calm things down?

Dance Steps that Build Connection

Here are some steps – some rituals of connection -- that will help you get through those difficult moments:

1. Be honest. Take a moment to sort through your feelings. Let your partner know something about how you feel and what you need.



2. Respond. Recognize that it's often hard to be honest about feelings. When your partner reaches out, take a moment to understand and respond to your partner's mood.
3. Touch. Holding hands, hugging, and kissing build connection. A hand on your partner's arm feels comforting. Sitting on the sofa talking or reading can help you relax together. Take time -- often -- to make physical contact.
4. Build rituals of connection into your daily life. Spend time with each other before you part in the morning, when you come together again in the evening, and before you go to sleep. Find time to share your day with each other, every day. Plan a weekly date, or a quarterly vacation.

Life is full of challenges, changes in the music, which can take a toll on your relationship. But by being responsive to your partner, by learning steps that build connection, you can create a new dance.

As I work with couples in my practice, I still think about what my dance teacher said, years ago, about relationships. Those lessons from the dance floor have helped me understand how relationships work.

Subscribe to the [Building Great Relationships](#) newsletter, and every month you will receive high quality articles, interviews, and ideas on how to build warm, happy relationships. You'll also get occasional notices about workshops and special events.

[Building Great Relationships](#) brings you...

- Articles on increasing romance, managing conflict, sexuality, affairs, parenting, money, and more...
- Occasional interviews with relationship experts
- Creative ways to bring joy, caring, and passion into your relationship

You are welcome to distribute this article as long as you keep my name and contact information on it, and agree not to change it or make money from it.