



The Science of Love Part I: Calming the Hurricane

by Pat LaDouceur, Ph.D.

"I love Rich," Diana told me during our first session. "But I don't know if we can stay together. The arguments we have are too painful. The wounds are too old and deep."

"And I love Diana," Rich echoed. "And respect her. But we see the world completely differently. That's just how it is. Maybe we can learn to communicate a little better, but I don't see how the fundamentals are going to change."

I knew that it wasn't differences that were pulling Rich and Diana apart. It was the "cycle" they were in, the way they interacted with each other. They were caught in it, and didn't know how to change it. But that cycle was so frustrating and painful that Diana and Rich were on the verge of giving up. I had to let them know, right away, that change was possible. And I wanted to let them know that it was possible to rediscover the magic that had once brought them together.

"With two people, there are always differences," I told them. "Some of the strongest, most loving relationships are between people who are very different. It's knowing how much you matter to each other, in spite of those differences, that lets you connect. It's that connection, that bond, that you're struggling to find again."

Love and the Brain

Scientists are beginning to understand how love works. New studies help us make sense of relationships like Rich and Diana's. These studies show us a map through the unknown paths and rocky terrain of relationships. And just like in the real wilderness, the best path isn't always a straight line. There are twists and turns, obstacles, and places where you can get hurt.

As we travel through the wilderness of relationships, we search for two contradictory things. On the one hand, we need a close, secure relationship with someone we can count on. We want a partner who is on our side, who matters to us, and lets us know we matter.

On the other hand, we need safety. There is a tiny part of our brain, the "amygdala," that is always on the lookout for danger. It stops us from touching a poisonous snake, pulls our bare foot back from a sharp piece of glass, pumps our heart faster and stronger to escape a wild boar. We barely perceive the danger, but in an instant we are ready to fight or flee.

This part of our brain can't tell the difference between physical danger and emotional danger. When scientists look at MRI scans of our brain, the area that "lights up" when we see a lion is the same area that lights up when our partner yells...or walks out the door. Whenever we feel attacked or afraid or abandoned, the amygdala reacts, and in an instant we are once again ready to fight or run for our lives.

Clients described here are a composite of actual clients; names and identifying details have been changed to maintain privacy and confidentiality. Research cited here is for Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy. See www.ICEEFT.com



When that happens in a relationship, communication skills go out the window. Instead we do whatever we can to try and protect ourselves. We criticize, make demands, argue, or threaten. We storm out of the room, log onto the computer, or look off into the distance in what seems to be stony silence. These reactions and counter-reactions can pull us away from each other until we barely remember why we married this person in the first place. We feel lost.

One Couple’s Journey

When Diana wanted to feel close to Rich, she ask him to spend more time with her, to talk more often. Rich heard this as a message that he wasn’t quite measuring up, and it came at a time when he was under a lot of stress. He felt criticized, and reacted working longer hours. He hoped that this would help calm things down. But Diana noticed his withdrawal. She tried harder to feel close to him...but it came out as complaint. When Rich felt pushed to far, he got angry. They argued. When they made up, both felt closer – for a few days. Then the cycle started again.

It’s not easy for most couples to see their cycle, and to learn to step out of it. I suggested that we start by giving this pattern of theirs a name. They called it “The Hurricane.” After all, their arguments seemed to tear through their home and leave both of them feeling devastated. Naming it was the first step in seeing the pattern (instead of each other) their common enemy. As they started to fight against “The Hurricane,” they began to work as a team.

It’s not easy for most couples to see what’s driving their cycle. Each time we met, I helped them slow it down so they could understand what their arguments were really about. Underneath the Diana’s yearning for closeness and Rich’s need for calm were other feelings. Deep down Diana was afraid that Rich – the man she cared about more than anyone else in the world – was going to leave her. What Rich felt as criticism was really Diana’s desperate attempt to bring them closer.

And Rick, deep down, was afraid that he couldn’t measure up to what Diana wanted. He was afraid that he couldn’t give Diana – the most important person in the world to him – what she really needed. As I helped them see their own deeper needs -- and each others’ -- their arguments slowed and finally stopped. It took 18 sessions for them to understand their dance in a way that was crystal clear to both of them. It took 18 sessions for them to find their way back to each other.

By taming the Hurricane together, Rich and Diana were on their way to creating a warm, loving relationship that would weather life’s challenges. When they felt securely connected, they could start to see their differences as something to celebrate.

Read more about how Diana and Rich changed their relationship in Part II: Building Connection.

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Pat LaDouceur is a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist who helps people build warm, satisfying relationships. Her office is in Albany, CA. She can be reached by

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