

PASSIONATE MARRIAGE



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David Schnarch's Crucible Therapy

After a few years of marriage, sex becomes routine, right? Most of us resignedly trade the passion of courtship for the predictable humdrum of parenthood, work, and weekends spent trying to catch up on sleep and housework. Proposed solutions to this problem abound. Talk show experts suggest a week at an island resort, or a skimpy outfit from Victoria's Secret, while therapists prescribe sensate focus and communication exercises. But those efforts only have a temporary effect, says psychologist and sex therapist David Schnarch, author of *Passionate Marriage: Sex, Love, and Intimacy in Emotionally Committed Relationships*. If you really want to put passion back in your marriage, Schnarch recommends something altogether different: differentiation.

The road map for becoming an authentic adult is also a blueprint for putting passion back in relationships, says David Schnarch, the New York-born psychologist who has spent decades upending everything we thought we knew about true love, passion, and hot sex. Especially hot sex.

Once considered a heretic, Schnarch is today a distinguished presence in psychology, a pioneer set on redefining intimacy and reinvesting marriage with the passion that usually fades. "It's easy to have hot sex with a stranger," Schnarch insists. "But passionate marriage requires that you become an adult."

And this, Schnarch admits, is a challenge. Becoming an authentic adult means going against the whole drift of the culture. It specifically means, among other things, soothing your own bad feelings without the help of another, pursuing your own goals, and standing on your own two feet. Most people associate such skills with singlehood. But Schnarch finds that marriage can't succeed unless we claim our sense of self in the presence of another. The resulting growth turns right around and fuels the marriage, enabling passionate sex. And it pays wide-ranging dividends in domains from friendship to creativity to work.

To understand just how subversive such thinking is, it helps to know that Schnarch has been articulating his ideas about the emotional and erotic power of independence within relationships just as mainstream psychology has almost unanimously endorsed attachment as the heart of adult relationships. In fact, Schnarch finds that our preoccupation with attachment, with its ideal of feeling and acting as one, keeps partners infantile and overly emotionally dependent—enmeshed, in the language of psychology; fused is the way Schnarch puts it.

Applied to infants, attachment theory has value. The consistent attention of a caregiver allows a helpless baby to develop emotional security, the hallmark of which—in fact, the condition under which it is tested—is his growing ability to explore the world on his own. Extended to marriage, attachment implies that if couples can simulate that early bond, they'll bask in emotional security for life.

Schnarch contends that marital attachment doesn't leave enough space for partners to speak their own mind, think their own thoughts, or attain their ambitions and dreams. Attachment not only reduces adults to infants, it also reduces marriage to a quest for safety, security, and compensation for childhood disappointments. "We've eliminated from marriage those things that fuel our essential drives for autonomy and freedom," says Schnarch. "It becomes a trap that actually prevents us from growing up. Instead of infantilizing us, marriage can—and must—become the cradle of adult development."

The path to this goal is differentiation—the dynamic process through which you can live in close proximity to a partner and still maintain a separate sense of self. "By differentiation, I mean not caving into pressure to conform from a partner who has tremendous emotional significance in your life." The best marital brew is neither dependence nor independence, but a balanced state of interdependence.

Interdependence allows partners who are each capable of handling their own emotional lives to focus on meeting their own and each other's ever evolving goals and agendas in response to shifting circumstances, rather than on keeping one another from falling apart. It is marked by flexibility and focuses on strengths. Dependent partners, by contrast, spend their lives compensating for each other's limitations and needs.

It's not that hard to be independent when you're alone. But pursuing your own goals and standing up for your own beliefs, your personal likes and dislikes, in the midst of a relationship is a far tougher feat. Once achieved in the context of a relationship, differentiation becomes possible outside of it as well. If you can stand your ground with your partner, who means so much to you, you can defend your turf at the office and maintain your principles when pressured. Claiming adulthood is an evolutionary mandate, Schnarch insists; "1.2 million years ago the human cranium evolved to maintain a sense of selfhood. There is lust, there is romantic love, there is attachment. But the strongest desire comes from the self's ability to choose another self." Only the differentiated can truly be known and loved for themselves.

An Eye-Opening Shift

The path to differentiation runs straight through sex. But not just standard Saturday night sex.

Schnarch came of professional age as a sex therapist in the 1970s, at the height of the Masters and Johnson era. For William Masters and Virginia Johnson, intimacy was largely a matter of mechanics. The big sex killer was anxiety—the cause of rapid ejaculation, erectile dysfunction, and general failure to perform.

To rid a couple of anxiety, partners were first to avoid all sexual contact for months. Then they were instructed to focus on the physical sensations of touching each other in turns, giving feedback as to how to make the touching better. Eventually they progressed to intercourse.

Schnarch thought it an adolescent approach, preoccupied with technique and anathema to the deeper emotional connection that heightens responsiveness in adults. As an assistant professor at Louisiana State University in New Orleans, Schnarch was listening to his own patients. Among them were a husband with erectile dysfunction and a wife resistant to the idea of sex therapy at all. "Don't tell me to do that hokey stuff," said the wife, referring to the then-standard touching exercises. Indeed, great sex is not about technique but about feeling close.

From his clients, Schnarch found that married couples often wished they felt in the bedroom what they felt just making eye contact with strangers walking down the street. Call it sizzle.

Now that is truly intimate looking someone in the eye while making love, really seeing them. One couple Schnarch saw, Theresa and Philip, had been married 30 years. They still had sex once a week, but reaching orgasm was difficult. Theresa was plagued by insecurities: She worried about her appearance and she anticipated rejection no matter what she did. On the verge of retiring from his job, Philip wondered whether a new partner would do better at turning him on.

"There was more involved here than lack of passion and feeling inadequate," Schnarch soon realized. After 30 years, Theresa and Philip no longer even kissed during sex. Further, Theresa complained that Philip continually failed to touch her the way she wanted—despite her many explicit instructions on just what to do and how. On the surface, they were lazy during sex. Underneath, Schnarch realized, they were isolated by a fear of getting close.

Schnarch ultimately advised them not to pursue touching in any specific way but to actually feel each other, to follow an emotional connection into sex, not the other way around. Instead of just relaxing to reduce anxiety, they had to tolerate the discomfort of wanting to be wanted—and the potential for rejection that implied.

And they were to have sex with their eyes open, an experience likely to jolt the most closed-off couples to change. "To feel comfortable looking each other in the eye," says Schnarch, "you have to confront conflicts you've swept under the carpet. You aren't likely to let your partner look deep inside you until you've done that yourself."

Eyes-open sex drills right to the heart of differentiation and drives the process of growing up. Closed-eye partners can get close enough to copulate, but not so close that they have to confront the differences between them or delve into who they are. The discomfort of eyes-open sex, on the other hand, heightens connectivity. Physical sensation and emotional connection become integrated rather than remaining separate dimensions that can interfere with each other. At the same time, the sense of individual selves is enhanced.

Self-Confrontation & Differentiation

Schnarch's approach to sex therapy departs from the norm, both in its focus on differentiation and its often-challenging tone. When Bill, for example, confessed that he felt he was disappointing his wife, Joan, when he consistently lost his erection during intercourse, Schnarch told him, "I didn't know you could let someone down with your penis. I've never seen a hard-on strong enough to support someone. If you want to make love, why not do it with the parts capable of loving - your brain and your heart - and let the rest of your anatomy follow? When you lose your erection, do you ever find your tongue or fingers go limp, too?"

Intimacy and authentic sex, Schnarch says, begin not with communication but with self-confrontation, which requires the courage to look deeply into ourselves and take responsibility for what we find there. For Bill, this meant facing his sexual selfishness. "Why do you stop pleasing Joan when you lose your hard-on if you're worried about disappointing her?" Schnarch wanted to know. Bill didn't have an immediate answer. But as he and Joan struggled with the question over the next few weeks, sex, which had been their battleground, became the place where they put their marriage back together. Bill began to enjoy pleasing Joan, in bed and out, while Joan began to own her personal and sexual power. Most important, they ended up respecting themselves for having the courage to break their sexual gridlock.

How could working on a sexual problem lead to empowerment and increased self-respect? Schnarch contends that sex is a mirror in which the key issue of differentiation - the tension between separateness and togetherness - is played out and where the balance can be changed. Many partners, for example, drift off into their own inner worlds during sex, darkening the room and closing their eyes to concentrate on their own feelings and sensations while separating themselves from their partners. And who can blame them?

Too much closeness can be scary. But without connection, sex becomes mechanized. Schnarch coaches couples to make love with the lights on and their eyes open, experiencing their connection to each other and their separate erotic worlds simultaneously. While uncomfortable at first, this exercise takes many couples to new heights of sexual pleasure, what Schnarch calls "wall-socket sex" because the experience is absolutely electric. Whoever guessed that differentiation could be sexy?

The Path to Interdependence

Eyes-open sex helped bring couples closer, but because it is also confrontational, it seemed at direct odds with the entire field of marriage therapy, which prescribed compromise and calm as the way to work things through. Then Schnarch discovered the work of Murray Bowen, a pioneering psychiatrist at Georgetown University who was in the process of revamping family therapy. He, too, saw the limitations of attachment theory in relationships.

Classic attachment theorists contend that those with emotional problems received too little love and support from their families. Bowen argued that it didn't necessarily follow that more love and attention would make them whole—in fact, they had become over dependent on love. They needed to break the dependency while maintaining the closeness—in short, by differentiating from their families of origin and their adult partners, to keep individuality intact. The goal was not to retreat into the security of infancy but to move forward, completing the process of growing up.

Indeed, Schnarch now saw, in one clinical session after another, the most troubled couples were often far too enmeshed in the very relationships they complained were not close enough. And they typically felt obligated to seek approval from a partner instead of feeling confident about their own thoughts and actions, the imprimatur of the adult.

One couple had formed their early relationship based on reciprocal emotional disclosures about childhood traumas, old flames, and other life events, talking for hours on end. But years into the marriage, the husband shrank from what he considered constant emotional soul-searching. "I don't like being opened up like a fire hydrant," he declared. The more the husband withdrew, the needier the wife became, until divorce loomed. Demanding his empathy and getting none at all, the wife felt rejected and unloved. With her self-worth dependent on the view through her husband's eyes, her confidence withered, and her sense of self-worth tanked.

Schnarch couldn't help but note the irony: The couple's style of relating had rendered the wife a child, so fused to her partner she could not stand alone. Yet empathy was being hailed by other professionals as a marriage-saver.

To him, demanding empathy just encouraged partners to seek approval, or validation, from one another, what he dubs "other-validated intimacy." The problem: After disclosing their innermost feelings only to find rejection, partners begin to select what to reveal more carefully. "When we start shading what we say to keep our relationship calm, we destroy intimacy and desire and diminish our sense of security and self-worth," Schnarch observes.

Forget empathy. Schnarch sees a better approach in self-validated intimacy. "You say what you have to say, and your partner either gives a supportive response or says, 'That is the stupidest thing I ever heard.'" Either way, you pat yourself on the back, respect your own thoughts and feelings, and maintain your sense of self-worth. Instead of asking someone for a stamp of approval, you do what any grown-up does—approve of yourself. The irony is that when you say what you think without fear of rejection, your partner loves and respects you more, because he knows who you really are.

And when you become your own person within a relationship, you leave room for someone else to do the same. Instead of depending on a partner to help you manage your own feelings and maintain your equilibrium, you are free to choose to be with your partner. "You can offer your partner a hand instead of just your needs," says Schnarch. The ideal dynamic for marriage is what Schnarch calls "interdependence," somewhat like the cells of an organism. Each cell functions individually, but they thrive best by relating to other cells in the context of the whole.

Marriage, the System

The more Schnarch observed marriage, the more he realized it was a system unto itself. And that system has unique, built-in hurdles to happiness. Their purpose is to provide the pressure for people to grow up.

Dating is one thing. As Schnarch describes it, "We date and you see only what I want you to see. I tell you some pseudo deep, dark secret and we feel close and we have sex." But with marriage, "You may start out talking about all that deep and important stuff, but eventually it gets used up. Then we make deals: I want to spend time with the boys. You want time with your friends. We agree. But now we have used up all the things we agree about, and we are left only with the things we disagree about." Couples become gridlocked. It provokes anxiety. But to Schnarch, therein lies the best chance most people ever get for growing up, a trial-by-fire crucible.

Sue and Brandon were budding fiction writers who met at a writers' workshop. Over the two years they dated, they passionately critiqued each other's stories while meeting other writer friends to brood over childhood traumas and art.

Sex and independent films completed the scene. Marriage was far less romantic. Working at a dental journal that he felt sapped his soul, Brandon railed at Sue when she gained 10 pounds and routinely trashed her writing. When he spent hours playing video games, Sue called him a "pedestrian loser jerk." When one of their sons was diagnosed with ADD, Brandon screamed at Sue, "You don't know how to discipline them." "You're cruel and truly damaging," she quietly replied.

Schnarch compares marital gridlock to an intricate Chinese puzzle, with each partner's movement blocked by the other's position. At a standstill in their relationship, Brandon and Sue began impeding each other's dreams. One wanted a city apartment, the other a house in the suburbs. One wanted children to follow strict routines, the other wanted freewheeling fun. They would not adapt to each other, nor would they confront their own roles in the standoff.

Gridlock in marriage is guaranteed. After all the late-night confessionals and wild sex, after all those walks in the park and vacations with friends, after the children have gone to bed and the bills have been paid, only gridlock remains. And there's just one road out of gridlock if you want to keep your marriage intact. You can't communicate your way out of it. You can't empathize your way out of it. You have to learn to soothe your own discomfort, regulate your own emotions, and pursue your own goals. To stop being a drain on your partner and to handle problems on your own. That way, says Schnarch, we "open enough space" to get closer and provide room for passionate love to return.

Gridlock creates anxiety, anger, feelings of rejection, and emotional pressure, Schnarch observes. When the negative feelings become unbearable, the relationship must either change or break apart. Those who stay together must look within themselves for insight, confronting their role in maintaining the conflict. "The only solution is for one person to differentiate, moving forward and making room for the partner to grow as well."

Stung and crippled by Brandon's critiques of her writing, Sue finally stopped showing it to him. Instead, she sent it to national magazines. They were far more accepting, and Sue met with some success whether Brandon approved or not. Brandon converted his desire to structure his children's lives into participation in sports, an outlet they enjoyed and in which Sue was largely uninvolved. When Sue worked on a book that was almost derailed because her editor was fired, she solved the problem by finding another publisher without mentioning the crisis to Brandon. He developed a set of friends with whom he played tennis weekly. The couple thought they were just taking a break from each other, but the distance allowed them to reconnect, to be flexible in meeting each other's needs, and to have something to talk about beyond kids and bills.

Sure, differentiation is a complex feat, but Schnarch is creating an operational road map. Starting with a list of component skills first developed by Bowen— including withstanding peer pressure, collaborating with others, controlling one's own anxiety, persevering in the face of difficulty, and changing direction when further struggle is futile or foolhardy—he has field-tested them on more than 4,000 people. The elements of maturity, he has found, cluster into four distinct if interrelated groups he calls the Four Points of Balance.

One involves operating according to deeply held personal values and goals even when pressured to abandon them. A second revolves around handling one's own inner emotional life and dealing with anxiety and emotional bruises without needing to turn to a partner for help. A third focuses on not overreacting to—but still facing—difficult people and situations. The fourth involves forbearance and perseverance in the face of failure and disappointment to accomplish one's goals. The four groups emphasize resilience, because they also involve the ability to adapt and change direction when need be without losing track of one's overall goals, agendas, or sense of self.

Ending Mind Games

No matter how differentiated, how self-sufficient, how resilient you become, a relationship can still veer off track. Differentiation is necessary to salvage a marriage, but it isn't quite enough because, Schnarch has found, people play mind games with each other that keep the relationship going but destroy intimacy. It is essential to confront one's partner and oneself over the games and drop the pretence that neither one knows what's going on. Schnarch saw the collusion operating most clearly in one client couple.

A fundamentalist minister sought treatment for his relationship with his wife. The minister insisted the woman walk two steps behind him. "I don't understand it," the minister complained one day. "My food is always burnt and on Sundays, after she irons my shirt, it's always scorched. Why did I marry such a bad cook?" "Perhaps she's not really a bad cook," Schnarch told his client. "If she has to walk behind you, she may like to be looking at the shirt she burned."

"Couples are always complaining that they don't communicate," Schnarch says, "but that's not true." Often, they grasp the dynamic quite well. "We take it as an article of faith that bad behaviour in troubled relationships stems primarily from good intentions gone wrong." Schnarch calls this "the big lie." People usually know the harm they're doing and do it intentionally.

Not only are most people aware of the mind games they perpetrate, they're aware that their partner is aware that they're aware, a dynamic Schnarch calls "mind-mapping," after the brain's ability to make a mental map of how another mind works.

A man sees an overweight woman on the street and comments disparagingly on her girth to his wife, then insists he couldn't know his wife, at virtually the same weight, would feel wounded. The next day the woman goes on at length about the success of her old friend the investment banker despite the fact that her husband has just lost his job. At some level, they both know she is returning the pain. The insidious nature of such exchanges could be one of the best-kept secrets in marriage. Partners are perpetually in collusion, clearing a path of mutual sadism.

Whether partners can come to the anxiety-provoking—and disappointing—realization that their partner has been mapping their mind, not just noting but relishing their pain, depends on their level of differentiation. Those overwhelmed by that recognition are likely to retreat right back into collusion. The road back for couples is clear: It's essential to stop playing mind games and confess their hurtful intent.

In one young couple, the woman complained that the husband was so uninterested in sex that every time she broached the subject, he retreated to the basement, evading conflict.

Yet when the partners were asked to gaze into each other's eyes, it was the woman who panicked. She had chosen a mate whom she knew could not engage emotionally. Her own father had been cruel, and her family never looked one another in the eye. The wife attacked her husband as emotionally disconnected to protect herself.

The couple did engage emotionally—through squabbling—but at a deep level he knew she was no more capable of intimacy than he was. By confronting each other, the couple was able to end the collusion and set on a path to improve the marriage.

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