



INSTITUTE FOR  
PERSONAL  
GROWTH

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***Déjà Vu: Problems that Repeat in  
Relationships***



Michael always seems to get involved with married men. Sarah finds women who drink or drug too much. Roberto is attracted to younger men who inevitably turn out to be too immature to make a commitment. Wanda's last three lovers have been "workaholics" who can't give her as much intimacy as she craves. Why do so many of us always seem to "wind up" with the "wrong" partner? And isn't it curious that these partners are often "wrong" in the same ways? Maybe it's not pure coincidence or sheer bad luck. Maybe we unconsciously choose partners because of, rather than in spite of, their negative characteristics. And maybe it's right that we pick "wrong" ones.

Sounds crazy, but it's a theory proposed a few years ago by a psychologist named Harville Hendrix, and to many people who have read his books (*Getting the Love You Want* and *Keeping the Love You Find*) it hits home on an intense personal level. To many gay, lesbian, and bisexual therapists who use his methods of counseling (Imago Therapy), the ideas make as much sense for same sex as for opposite sex couples. And it's a perspective that not only offers an explanation for the frustrating experience of "déjà vu relationships"; it puts an optimistic spin on the phenomenon and gives useful ways to make the most out of what at first seems like a depressing situation.

Some of what Hendrix says is not new. Most experts - biologists, sociologists, and psychologists alike - who study "pair-bonding" agree that we don't consciously pick our mates, no matter how hard we may try to. We are drawn to prospective partners based on our unconscious mind: the 95% of our mind that controls all kinds of automatic responses from breathing to driving a car while day-dreaming, that regulates emotions and drives and stores memories. But Hendrix believes that specific memories and experiences kept in the unconscious mind determine partner choices - those related to significant caretakers and love-objects in our childhood and adolescence. Hendrix feels we all have a complex "Imago", or image, deep in the limbic system of the "old brain" that is a composite of all the experiences we had with parents, family members, and other people we loved and who cared for us when we were young. When we feel "attracted" to someone, he says, it is because subtle characteristics of that individual match our Imago. Not only does the Imago operate without us being aware of what's in it or how it is directing us, but it has a keen sense of radar far superior to our conscious minds. The Imago can pick up on characteristics of the prospective lover that are not obvious to us consciously.

This is why we "coincidentally" wind up with the same kind of partners we are consciously trying to avoid. "But I didn't know she had a drinking problem when I met her," wailed Sarah, about her partner Kate. "I don't know how she turned out to be like the others - I knew I had been with addicts in the past and this time I really thought it would be different".

According to Imago theory, Sarah unconsciously actually picked up Kate because she had a substance abuse problem. We seem to go through life as adults trying to resolve the conflicts we could never overcome as children. So Imago theory predicts, for example, that if your early caretakers were cold and undemonstrative and as a child you always felt needy and un-nurtured, as an adult you will pick lovers who tend to make you feel the same way. In a sense you are compelled to do this so that you can right the wrongs of your past: your unconscious mind feels that if only you can find someone cold and rejecting like Mom and Dad, but this time get them to be warm and supportive, you will finally be healed from the wounds of your childhood.

Sounds dismal, doesn't it? But the good news is that you can work it to your



advantage and actually repair psychological damage to yourself through your relationships - but more about that later. There is one other component to your Imago, what Hendrix calls "the denied self". All of us, no matter how loving our families, grew up with some parts of us that were repressed or not allowed to develop: we may have been encouraged to be tough and strong and discouraged from being emotional, or allowed to be a competent, achieving child who never played too well, or been the "clown" who couldn't be serious. As adults, we seek these "denied" parts in lovers to make ourselves whole - we look for "opposites". But because we were not allowed these characteristics, we are ambivalent about them. So we both love and hate them in our lovers. Roberto grew up with many parental responsibilities for his younger brothers and sisters, so he had little opportunity to be a carefree child. He is now attracted to younger men (like younger siblings) who are extremely lighthearted. They make Roberto laugh, but they usually can't hold down a regular job.

So our unconscious Imago, then, propels us to seek partners who are like our early love-objects or caretakers, who re-activate childhood conflicts, and who embody characteristics we were not able to express. Let's see how this works in real life. Vanessa's mom was narcissistic, vain, and self-centered; she had little interest or time for her children. Her beloved father was a womanizer and abandoned the family when Vanessa was ten. At that point, Vanessa became a substitute husband and father in the family; she learned to ignore her own needs and emotions because she was busy taking care of herself, her Mom, and her younger siblings. Vanessa is now attracted to physically beautiful women who are much like her mother, who have affairs and ultimately leave her like her father left the family. Moreover, Vanessa finds lovers who are very emotionally expressive, especially about their own needs. So even though her partners represent Vanessa's "denied self", her lovers are also so needy and demanding that Vanessa once again winds up being the "strong silent type" - an emotional caretaker of histrionic women.

Are we fated, then, to cruelly replay the traumas of our childhood forever? Maybe not; the Imago theory offers hope. It starts with awareness: acknowledging that our choices are not "accidents", and exploring our own backgrounds to figure out, based on childhood and relationship history, what our Imago consists of. Next - and this is critical - we must recognize that it takes two to play out our childhood dramas. We are not just picking partners with certain characteristics, we are also reacting to these traits in ways that replicate early patterns. For example, not only did Sarah tend to pick chemically addicted partners, but also, when she found out their problems, she stayed in the relationships, believed her lovers' lies, and bailed them out of the crises they created with their drinking and drugging. Roberto couldn't set limits with his irresponsible younger lovers; when they were out of work he financially supported them. And Vanessa allowed her lovers' needs to dominate her life, deriving satisfaction from her self-sacrificing role and never demanding that she be taken care of, too. This latter piece - recognizing our own reactions - is crucial to changing the game of déjà vu relationships. You may not be able to control who you fall in love with. Think of how many people you know who have said: "I wish I could fall in love with so-and-so. He/she has everything I want in a lover, but there is no 'chemistry'." The "chemistry" is your Imago, and it's a mixture of poison and aphrodisiac. But you can control your own reactions, and if you change your role in a relationship your partner's role has to change. Remember, your partner was attracted to you for complementary reasons, so you both have a potential stake in change. When Roberto hooked up with Eddy, Eddy seemed like all of Roberto's other lovers: young, irresponsible, and charming. Eddy had been the "baby" of his family



who gained his mother's love by being helpless and dependent and letting her run his life. In order for Roberto to heal his childhood wounds he had to be able to be less "responsible", more carefree, stop "parenting" Eddy, and have Eddy love him anyway. But for Eddy to resolve his conflicts he needed to be more mature and adult himself - and still be loved.

So just as Eddy and Roberto's "neuroses" matched, so were they complementary in the paths they needed to take for growth and self-healing. And that is the silver lining in the grey cloud of "déjà vu relationships": they contain the seeds of mutual healing, if you can just discover them. You can stop repeating mistakes time and time again, and instead you and your partner can move into a new level of growth and intimacy.

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