



TURN TOWARD LOVE

Because our relationships are often marginalized by society, we are in a unique place to reflect on what being in a loving relationship means to us.

I came out to my parents when I was 15. In a matter-of-fact manner, my father informed me that “gay relationships never last.” At that time the only same sex relationships in my life were obviously loving and had endured for over a decade (they still do). Regardless, in that moment, I believed him; intellect told me his conclusion was based in ignorance, but his words have weighed heavy in my heart ever since.

I’m not the first to point out the obvious. We know that as human beings we are generally and naturally oriented toward being connected with one another. But for generations we’ve been told that as queer people we are not capable of meaningful, loving, committed relationships. Many of us swallowed whole a version of this message, often without realizing it. We also know that the sentiment that we’re not capable or worthy of meaningful relationships is rooted in hypocrisy. It is all too often a public figure, on his third or fourth marriage himself, who, in a disgraceful avoidance of personal responsibility, is determined to monger the fear that marriage equality will harm heterosexual marriage.

Another obvious statement: We’re capable of meaningful lifelong relationships, if that’s what we’re seeking. But the reality is that we face unique stressors due to homophobia that make our relationships more challenging, but ultimately significantly rewarding.

As a couples therapist, I work with a model of relationships that is emotionally focused. Sue Johnson, the founder of Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy, reminds us that “closeness, affection and play make us healthier.” Sue also explains that when we feel hurt by our partner it can be easy to start saying things like, “Why didn’t you...” or, “If you were a good partner, you would...” instead of expressing what we need. “I need you to come closer” or, “I feel alone” or, “I am afraid that you will reject me.” Becoming aware of these underlying attachment needs requires a willingness to let our partners into the tender spots of our inner lives.

In a world where reaching for connection with same sex others means risking safety, risking rejection, or risking continued isolation, estab-

lishing a mutual emotional bond can be an overwhelming endeavor. If we’re raised to believe our relationships won’t last, and if this fallacy is even a minor ingredient in the foundation for our relationships, allowing ourselves to be truly vulnerable to another person can feel impossible. I work with many queer folk who are so sincerely seeking love and connection with that special someone, but can’t seem to realize their dream relationship. Understanding that homophobia impacts our relationships is a subtle yet powerful step toward transforming our relationships.

Have you ever talked with your partner about how homophobia influences the way you communicate, show affection or feel your love for one another? What is it like when she refuses to hold hands when you’re in public together? It could be a preference for privacy, but no doubt that preference is in part informed by the awareness of the risk of being easily identified as a same sex couple. Why is he so upset when you decline an invitation to his family gathering? Could it be that showing up as an apparently happy couple is in part his need to prove to his family that two same gender loving individuals can maintain a relationship? Maybe your objection is related to not feeling completely accepted by the family as a queer person?

But let’s look deeper. What makes these situations that much more complex, is that it is so difficult to know if the stress you experience in a relationship is about homophobia and heterosexism or simply about your own relational styles. Often it’s an inextricable combination.

Because our relationships are marginalized, we have this amazing opportunity to sincerely reflect upon what being in a loving relationship means for us. And when we encounter conflict or disappointment in that relationship, we can seek to understand what is happening by moving closer to our partner instead of moving away. We can seek to understand the feelings that lie underneath the words and support one another to deepen the love we share. §

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