

What's This Fight Really About?

Jeanie was so upset with her husband. He had always been difficult to feel physically connected to. He had always had a subtle pulling back when she would reach out to touch him, but it had gotten worse in the past few months. She brought him into therapy fearing that they were on the brink of a divorce if not an affair. Jeanie's husband, Frank was a sweet, mild mannered man with some anger issues that had been a problem in a previous marriage and were still somewhat an issue with Jeanie. The bigger problem was that she felt him pulling away from her touch and she was certain this meant he didn't love her any more. After a few sessions, it became clear what the problem really was about. Frank was terrified of losing her to death. He had witnessed his mother's death at the age of four; she died mid-sentence while she was talking on the telephone on her bed in front of him. Then, at 15 he held a girl in his arms as she died from a drug overdose. When he tapped into this in session the fear and pain he felt was palpable. Recently he had lost his father to a lingering cancer that left his father comatose for months. The little boy inside of Frank felt that if he just didn't allow himself close, then death could be avoided. Thus, he found himself pulling further and further away from Jeanie. The pain and shock of his early losses still dictated his emotional and intimate life.

Frank is not any different than the rest of us. We behave in unconscious ways that dictate how we interact with each other, what we feel and what upsets us. We go about our lives as if it were a logical, rational process and the choices and actions we take made some kind of sense. That's where "rationalization" comes in to play. Frank had convinced himself that Jeanie's return to smoking cigarettes had caused him to withdraw from her. But actually, her smoking had started in response to his pulling away. But that's how our brains work to trick us into thinking that what we do makes sense.

Emotions make no obvious, logical sense. Emotions are always laden with the memories of times when we felt similar things at some time in the past and are linked together through a complex network of memories that links them to the earliest memories we have. When Frank connected to his sense of pain about his father's death it took him

directly to the death of his mother, which he had experienced so traumatically, at four. And, the time of his father's death, he went back into the emotional state of the four year old. He was no longer the 30 something man that seemed to be sitting before me, he was emotionally and mentally four.

This is what happens all the time in our conflicts with our partners. We get angry with them for something they did or didn't do and we think it's all about what they did or didn't do. As irrational as it seems, our upset is NEVER about what they did or didn't do! Now, it certainly triggered our upset, but our upset is not really about that.

Let me give you an example. Sara and her husband Tom have been married for about eight years. They have struggled with understanding each other from the beginning. Tom came from a very chaotic neglectful and physically abusive childhood, and Sara from a set of very over controlling parents who never considered her needs or wishes. One afternoon Sara was toasting the meringue topping of a pie in the oven. As she was doing so she was taking care of something in the other room when she forgot about the meringue until she could smell it starting to brown, perhaps too much. Sara then ran into the kitchen yelling her fear of burning it. Tom jumped up and ran to her aide. She tried to pull out the shelf without an oven mitt, Tom handed her one. She of course needed two to pull the pie out of the oven. She yelled, "What am I supposed to do with that? I need two to get it out!" and promptly went over to get another one.

Tom became angry and yelled back at her, "I was only trying to help!"

To which she replied, "How can I possibly get it out with only one hand?"

The fight ensued and both felt justified in their position. Later, Sara was able to say that she could see from the look on his face that he was in a time warp that put him back in the presence of his abusive father who was constantly telling him to do things that he had no idea how to do when he was under five years old. Tearfully, Tom was able to verbalize that reality to her later, as they talked about it on the couch when they had both calmed down.

In both the cases of Sara and Tom and Jeanie and Frank, their conflict and hurt feelings had nothing to do with what it looked like was going on. On the surface, the

logical rational side of things, there is no way to see the pain and upset that was hiding beneath the surface. Without taking the time to truly listen with empathy to what is happening inside the other person, neither Sara nor Jeanie would have had a clue as to what was really going on with their partner.

To get to the place of being able to provide that kind of listening for each other takes work and an ability to step out of our own skin long enough to see things from the others' perspective. That is not always easy, often it's downright scary. But it's always worth it.