

Masters and Disasters

Do you turn toward or away?



RELATIONSHIPS
With Joanne Wilson

IT WOULD be true to say the meaning of "turning on" your partner is fairly clear. Some of the why, what, how, where and when was covered last week. As it turns out, "turning toward" your partner is a considerably important priority for connection. If you make a conscious effort to consistently turn towards your partner then it's likely you get to enjoy both.

In any relationship we seek emotional connection from our partners. These take the form of distinct "bids", as outlined by scholar Dr John Gottman. These bids are related to safety derived from attention, conversation, approval, sympathy, and play etc. Consider: Can you help me find my other sock? Did you see Usher on Carpool Karaoke? What did you get up to today? and the quintessential Does my bum look big in this? They present various attempts at making a connection in the form of interest, reassurance and emotional support.

How you respond to this bid can be summarised by one of three "turns".

1. Turn against your partner: When you respond to one of these attempts at connection with hostility. You snap at them and tell them you're busy or concentrating. You may even tell them to nick off with "Shhhh, Daenerys Targaryen is on the telly!"

2. Turn away from your partner: You ignore or dismiss them. You pretend you haven't heard, or maybe even give a little shrug to drive your apathy home. This is also a common tactic easily deployed after conflict.

3. Turn toward your partner: Here it is! You actively engage with your partner's bid for attention. You look at them, respond and ask questions to show interest and empathy. "Yes, your cheesecake is just as good as Sally's!" or "Wow, that must have been so embarrassing. What did you do then?"



Connect emotionally and stay together. PHOTO: CONTRIBUTED

All interactions between couples have a mixture of these responses depending on life stressors such as health, work and sleep. Turning away, or even against your partner every now and then isn't going to destroy a relationship. Couples who consistently turn toward each other, however, fare a lot better.

Gottman's research involved analysing married couples over the space of six years. Those still happily together at the six-year mark turned toward each other 87% of the time. That's really high, and still allows you some room for the occasional "Uh huh. Very nice." These couples were called the Masters.

By contrast, the couples who had fallen apart – bluntly labelled Disasters – only managed to turn towards and connect three times out of 10. Ouch.

How can we strive to turn toward our partners more often to

give them as much engagement and attention as we're capable of?

1. Look for the positives: Masters view their environment and their partners more appreciatively. They create an air of respect and gratitude for one another, making it easier to engage with their bids for attention.

2. Disagree respectfully: Disaster couples look at their lives and partners negatively. They get hung up on any failing, no matter how inconsequential. Couples who find themselves tearing at each other disrespectfully are on an express elevator to separation. If you need to express it, consider your delivery.

3. Understand why you argue: Many arguments stem from a sense of disconnection. It is not about the dishwasher or toilet seat. It is about whether the other person has your back. Underneath we can fear abandonment. Fear turns to anger and we lash out at the person we're terrified of living without. When you understand how insidious this fear of disconnection truly is, it's easier to put the effort into those "bids" for connection.

4. Enjoy individuality: You and your partner are not clones. For all your similarities, you have different tastes and interests. Let your partner know how much something means to you. They don't need to necessarily partake in everything with you, but know that it is meaningful.

5. Be kind: If your partner is down in the dumps and you're tired and laid out on the couch, it can be the greatest gift in the world to get up and hold them tight. It's these small gestures, these small expressions of kindness and compassion, that exemplify turning towards your partner when they need it. Understanding the magnitude of acknowledging "bids" builds a stronger relationship that inevitably turns everything else on as well.

Did this prompt a question or concern? I welcome your thoughts.

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