

The Unraveling: Relationship Disengagement and The Robust Repair Strategies of Intimate REconnections, LLC

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They come singly or in pairs. Eyes teary or vacant, hearts full of sadness or with a curious absence of feeling, the unraveled. Many roads lead here, but only two roads emerge as destinations: flee the relationship or bring it back to life. Most cannot imagine remaining in the lifeless corpse that has replaced their once emotionally and sexually charged intimate relationship. For some, the relationship has lost all but roommate status. For others, a friendship remains but romance and sexual intimacy have been absent a long, long time.

What triggers their appearance at the door of my practice? Sometimes it is an attraction to someone else that suddenly reawakens them from their slumber. Sometimes it is survival from an illness that threatened their very existence and sharpened their resolve to live a more joy-filled life. Often it is triggered by the awareness that their substitutes for true partner intimacy, their children, are becoming appropriately independent and will be leaving soon, creating the possibility of an unbearable void.

Most couples are reasonable enough to understand that the intoxicating cocktail of brain chemicals emitted during the “falling in love” phase of their relationship will not last. But what is involved in sustaining a loving and connected relationship?

Robert Sternberg (1990) created a typology which suggests that there are three elements related to the building blocks of love: passion, intimacy and commitment. Many couples would agree that all three elements are vital to the health of a long-term loving and sexual relationship.

Passion includes the elements of romance, sexual attraction and desire for physical intimacy. It is the “spark” in new relationships that may fade in intensity over time.

Intimacy relates to the emotional connection and feelings of bondedness experienced by couples as their relationship deepens. Elements of intimacy include the ability to be emotionally vulnerable and to communicate on a deep level, the belief that the partners will support one another through difficult times, and the expectation that both partners will always strive for mutual understanding and compassion. This is the element that all too often unravels when career building and care-taking children and elderly parents become priorities, and attention to the emotional, recreational, spiritual and romantic needs of a partner is neglected.

The third element in a love relationship, commitment, is, in the short term, the decision to love someone; in the long term it is the determination to care-take that love, even through the rough ups-and-downs of real life. The element of commitment may sustain a relationship that has temporarily lost passion and intimacy. Conversely, it may be the commitment element that is challenged in many couples’ relationship due to the ongoing loss of intimacy and/or passion.

Nancy and Daniel are a professional couple in their late forties. They see one another as great friends, respect each other’s intellect, and have similar values and parenting styles. They present in my office for help. Their sexual relationship has been lackluster and infrequent since the birth of their second child, a child born with many

physical and emotional challenges. Both remember meeting on the Florida beaches during spring break and experiencing great passion and the ability to act playfully and spontaneously with one another. As passion faded and they replaced mutual emotional intimacy with child rearing, the sexual relationship became more of a “service organization” role for Nancy, who felt that her good husband deserved sex. This pattern eventually diminished her interest in sex even more. As Nancy tried to avoid triggering sexual desire in her husband, she began unconsciously to avoid affectionate or sensual physical contact. Daniel’s response was to pull away emotionally. They were too civilized to fight over the loss of intimacy; rather, they simply accepted it as a natural sequence of events. Today, as they anticipate their youngest child’s departure for college, neither is sure they can remain committed to what each sees as a friendly but disengaged marriage. Nancy and Daniel relate a common theme in many of the couples I see - of having had a strong, vibrant connection, losing it, and hoping for its’ revival.

In my twenty-three years as a therapist, I have seen many changes in both the awareness of sexual issues and the growth of treatment strategies developed for their remediation. In the early years, before trained sex therapists were readily available, couples from around the world left their careers, communities and children to journey to St. Louis, Missouri, and make a commitment to a two week program at the pioneering Masters & Johnson Institute. The program was directed by a cadre of well-trained relationship and sex therapists, of which I was one for a period of five years. While the variety of sexual issues presented by couples entering the program was diverse, many couples were struggling with one or more of the issues illustrated by Sternberg’s typology, such as a lack of emotional closeness and sexual desire, which was both contributing and secondary to their primary sexual dysfunction. By participating in Masters & Johnson’s intensive format of treatment, many of these couples were able to rapidly recover their long-buried feelings and passions for one another.

As human sexuality issues became more mainstream, couples desiring help with reconnection were able to find local alternatives, including seeing a relationship therapist in private practice, joining marital self-help groups, and participating in faith affiliated couples’ experiences, to name a few. There are, however, various reasons why these may not be practical or optimal solutions for some couples. For example, a couple who has difficulty scheduling and keeping weekly appointments may become disheartened by a lack of progress, lose motivation and drop out.

Enter Intimate Reconnections, LLC. For the past 23 years, I have been refining my understanding of the best elements of the various types of relational and sex therapies for helping couples reconnect. My idea for a couples’ retreat maximizes the clear advantages of intensive participation by motivated couples away from life’s daily challenges, the guidance of an experienced therapist trained in both relationship and sexual concerns, and the use of a proven format of focused, short-term strategies. Add to that an idyllic destination specifically selected for its restorative natural properties to promote relaxation, perspective, positive energy, romance and sensuality, and the stage is set for the rebirth of intimacy and sexuality.

I have designed Intimate Reconnections retreats as a four-night mini-vacation in a natural restorative setting for a small number of select couples, with daily educational group sessions and individualized couples’ counseling sessions, as well as plenty of private time for couples to be able to experience themselves as lovers and friends and explore their reconnection. The progress achieved by couples is supported by a follow-up program which will facilitate the successful integration into everyday life of concepts and practices learned and experienced at the retreat. Every facet – educational, experiential, environmental – of the Intimate Reconnections experience has been designed from start to finish to relate directly to the vitality of each couples’ relationship.

There’s no time like today to “jumpstart” your relationship. It will be an amazing adventure for your personal growth and for the growth of your relationship.

For more information, visit our website at www.intimateREconnections.com.