

COMMENT

Don't try to solve your partner's problems

You may think you're trying to help, but you'll both be better off if you keep your advice to yourself

If your romantic partner is ranting about a problem they have, you'd logically feel compelled to help. Why wouldn't you? You don't want someone you love to be upset, so you try to resolve the issue, to remove the source of their upset by offering advice and suggestions for how to fix it.

But if you do that, you may find your partner gets even more annoyed and frustrated – angry, even. It's not exactly a logical reaction.

If you've experienced this, you're not alone. The key term used so far is 'logical'. But real human relationships have never been purely logical. They're shaped by emotions and emotional connection.

Emotional processing is sort of a mental equivalent to digestion. Much like how food enters our bodies and is gradually broken down into useful components by the digestive system, when an emotional experience

becoming very important to our emotional processing. They become an emotional 'modulator'; someone we depend on to accept and validate us, but also help define and refine our emotions through their responses and interactions with us.

We usually don't know we're doing this with our partners, though. Like most of our emotional development and processing, it happens subconsciously. But that doesn't mean it's any less important.

What it does mean is that we regularly depend on our romantic partners to validate our emotions. Particularly those we've had to suppress, even temporarily, due to experiencing them in situations or groups where expressing them would have negative consequences – the anger at being unfairly blamed for something in a workplace meeting when the higher-ups are present, for example.

This means we're even keener to have our legitimate feelings validated, so we express them, enthusiastically, to our romantic partner.

Then they proceed to ignore our emotions and instead focus on the objective source of them, before making suggestions and offering advice, about a situation that they weren't involved with and have no experience of. What's this, if not a rejection of emotional expression and communication, a denial of much-needed validation?

On top of that, it can also be perceived as a loss of status. Because your partner's effectively saying: "I will offer solutions that I don't believe you will have thought of – ergo, I'm smarter than you."

Loss of status and rejection of emotional connection? Both are guaranteed ways to cause stress and upset in the human brain, both experienced when your romantic partner ignores your emotions and tries to fix your problems.

Let's be clear: no one who genuinely wants to fix their partner's problems is a bad person. It's an understandable and reasonable behaviour. But it's one that causes negative outcomes, due to unawareness of the emotional factors at work.

That's not necessarily a failing. Nobody understands exactly what another person is feeling, and what they want, 100 per cent of the time. Not even long-term partners. Heck, much of the time, we don't really understand what we're feeling ourselves, and what we want, until long after the event.

But it's important to put the effort into improving understanding of these tricky emotional factors, for your partner's wellbeing, and the wellbeing of your relationship.

Ultimately, if you ignore or dismiss your partner's negative emotions for long enough, unintentionally or otherwise, they'll eventually be left with nothing but negative emotions. And then you'll have an emotionally stressful problem to deal with all over again. So, just shut up and listen.

"We regularly depend on our romantic partners to validate our emotions"

occurs within our brains, various neuropsychological systems gradually convert it into something that can be safely added to and integrated into our existing memories, psyche and understanding.

And just like how a disruption to your digestion causes unpleasant physical consequences, prevention of emotional processing is bad for your wellbeing, both mental and physical.

However, we humans are incredibly social creatures, and much of how we develop and learn is based on our interactions with other people and the social feedback they provide.

This has many consequences, one of which is that processing an emotion often means it needs to be communicated, shared, acknowledged and validated by others. But while emotional validation can theoretically come from anyone, we prefer it to come from those closest to us. Evidence shows that a long-term romantic partner often ends up



DR DEAN BURNETT

Dean is a neuroscientist and author. His new book *Why Your Parents Are Hung-Up On Your Phone And What To Do About It*, is out now (Penguin, 2024)

ILLUSTRATION: CHRISTINA KALLI