

Ambivalence in Relationships

Ambivalence in intimate relationships is the coexistence of opposing emotions and desires towards the other person, which creates uncertainty about being in the relationship. Each partner feels torn between being in and out of the relationship creating confusion, instability, uncertainty and insecure feelings. All relationships experience periods of conflict and doubt but relational ambivalence is lasting, chronic and deeply distressing for both partners. There appears to be no possibility of resolution or change and the partners are stuck in distress.

Opposing emotions are the extreme ends of a spectrum, such as love and hate, pleasure and pain. We all experience them and they are normal and healthy. If we were lucky enough to have good enough emotional support through childhood, or have developed emotional intelligence later in life, we can usually manage opposing emotions. Problems arise when we flip between extremes without the capacity to regulate them. There is no middle ground. Love that rapidly turns to hate, or when commitment suddenly changes to a strong urge to leave, we may be experiencing symptoms of relational ambivalence.

Chronic ambivalence pulls the individuals and their relationship in different directions producing an atmosphere of impending doom. The end of the relationship feels everpresently nigh, whilst periods of happiness come and go. Partners often breakup many times, or threaten to breakup. As time goes on the relationship takes on the characteristics of an emotional roller coaster where they alternate between feeling hopeful and breaking up.

Within this atmosphere, it can be very difficult for both partners to be themselves, and be open with each other. When faced with the possibility that it will end at any moment, anything that either of them says could cause the relationship to end. So partners hide the truth and withhold aspects of themselves, which increases anxiety over the possibility of separation. A vicious circle traps the partners in an endless loop of unhappiness and distress from which they cannot escape. Every promise they make in the good times is smashed in the bad.

Typically, one partner expresses the need for commitment, while the other holds back. The partner who expresses commitment feels hurt and rejected by the other. The feeling that they are not good enough for the other to fully commit to them creates a reaction of trying to please, in the hopes of increasing the other partner's desire to stay. The partner who feels more uncertain often feels guilty that they are not able to give more, and finds it increasingly difficult to voice their

true feelings. They start to dance around each other as they try to anticipate how the other is going to react, and holding back thoughts, feelings, or desires if they think their partner will react badly to them. In this way the relationship becomes more and more dishonest.

Both partners are in a relationship that isn't the way they want it to be, but neither is able to leave. This is the essence of ambivalence. The preoccupation with separation, either wanting more separation, or being afraid of separation from each other, is the foundation of the anxiety that the relationship sits on. This anxiety means that each individual cannot rest in the relationship; it is not a place of sanctuary and support but a place of deprivation. Even though there may be times where both partners can have fun and feel connected it is short lived, as both partners carry an underlying dissatisfaction that doesn't get resolved. A lot of time and energy gets taken up dealing with underlying anxiety and suffering.

Beyond ambivalence

The alternative to living with a chronic pattern of ambivalence is to resolve or learn to live internal conflicts that prevent the partners from taking action, making decisions, expressing how they feel, and being fully present. Accepting and tolerating the fragility and imperfections of life, to go for it despite the possibility it could be gone in the next moment is the goal.

Unresolved issues around connection, intimacy, and separation underpin relational ambivalence, and they are rooted in childhood experiences. Abuse and neglect create deep confusions about the nature of loving attachments, which leave the child with anxiety and fear around relationships that is lifelong.

Remedial action is challenging but essential if progress is to be made. Those who experience chronic ambivalence may have a background of traumatic experience often including abuse and or neglect. It is difficult to face our personal traumas for many reasons, but unless we can grasp what this means for our individual lives we cannot hope to learn new ways of approaching our problems in relationship. The quest is to learn emotional intelligence, which provides the capacity to regulate emotions and hold the centre ground between extremes.

Relational ambivalence is the symptom of personal problems that require personal development, but the relationship itself cannot remedy them. The relationship can support both partners in their quest for understanding the problems they each face, but each partner must take full responsibility for their

own development. This is not an easy journey but it can be the most powerful, rewarding and meaningful path of development and adaptation we ever undertake.

It is an extraordinary fact that ambivalent relationships bring us suffering and pain but they can inspire us to find meaning, identity and purpose beyond the childhood world we were conditioned by. In that sense they are extremely valuable and far from pointless. Relational ambivalence swings us violently between the poles of love and hate from which we cannot escape without learning about ourselves, developing emotional intelligence and growing up beyond the years our guardians could take us.