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Second Chances

Love beckons to us, but it may be illusive as to how to embrace it for ourselves. If history is any guide, we are afraid of repeating the negative patterns of our past failed relationships, and this fear inhibits us as we hope to move forward with building a new loving relationship. In order to present ourselves in the most favorable light and to guard against getting hurt, we construct defenses for self-protection, as we worry about being vulnerable, exposed and subject to pain and anguish should the relationship not work out. These defenses initially are adaptive, but in order to forge an honest relationship and to achieve emotional intimacy with one's potential partner, it is necessary to dismantle our protective façade, show our real, unadulterated self to another and begin to trust.

With this process in mind, I reflected on my patients' past and present relationships and noted some very interesting commonalities: Through the process of therapy, several patients discovered important realizations about themselves, ended their unhappy relationships and began making healthy relationship choices. Three patients in disguised form are presented here to illustrate this process. This is an article about new beginnings, happy endings, second chances.

Important to keep in mind: We are products of our unique family histories. Our families represent our earliest and most potent memories of how a relationship functions, how people relate to each other and how each of us played a special part in our family narrative. Our personal histories provide that window into determining which patterns we are playing out in the present and how we might change those patterns in order to make appropriate choices for ourselves. Awareness is key, and with a desire to change, along with a realistic plan, a satisfying relationship is achievable.

Robert

Four years of therapy and countless relationships later, Robert, 36 years old, found the woman he will marry. However, his road to this long-awaited goal was slow and tortuous. I first met Robert for couples therapy with one of his past girlfriends, and it was clear that this relationship, despite being loving, would not last. Both partners held onto unresolved anger from the past and were unable to relinquish control or deal with their residual hurt feelings. Robert was yearning for a woman who would prioritize his needs, be attentive and interested in his life and be a support when he needed bolstering. However, Julie, then age 26, grew up in a dysfunctional home with an emotionally absent

mother without the mitigating positive influences of a father, and Julie's intense need for love left her unable to give in return. She could not reconcile the reality that her inability to trust was one cause of the emotional chasm that separated them. Robert, in return, found it hard to empathize with her pain and react differently to her emotional distance.

Robert's parents, together for 40 years, have a respectful, affectionate marriage. Robert, though, internalized certain important messages from his parents: Mom was volatile, confrontative and a consummate caretaker; Dad was quiet and retiring and avoided any confrontation or serious discussion about issues. Robert learned that his own anger and frustration masked a sadness and loneliness that were hard to access, but in his choice of women, these feelings manifested as a need to take fragile women under his wing and protect them. Sex was passionate, but he soon discovered that these women were unable to stand on their own two feet and be an equal partner. He came to understand that they lacked the depth and maturity he was seeking in a lifetime partner.

The last relationship proved to be the most problematic, but it offered Robert a newfound perspective, which he heeded. Dawn's debilitating addictions were running rampant, and Robert faced the fact that he had to seek a stable, confident woman, despite feeling a close, emotional connection to Dawn. When he projected his life into the future, he realized that he and their future children would be negatively affected by Dawn's emotional immaturity and troubling problems. He wanted her to change, but it became clear that she would not change unless or until she was ready to do so. He envisioned a life of instability, abundant worry and sadness, and difficult as it was, Robert ended the relationship.

Robert reevaluated what he wanted for his life, and the therapeutic process was helpful in encouraging him to mourn the loss of his intense attachment to Dawn and to heal. He had intense moments that alternated between missing her and being cognizant of his good decision to walk away. Despite knowing he made the right decision, he feared not being able to meet someone who would make him feel as alive as he felt with Dawn, and he worried that he would be alone.

Meeting Barbara, 32 years old, at a party, he knew fairly quickly that she was a mature, intelligent, gentle and caring woman. Over the past two years, they have persevered through work separations, career difficulties and deaths in their families. Each made a commitment to stand by the other, and they diligently worked together to overcome communication obstacles and look to the future with shared goals and promise. Robert does on occasion wonder if he won't miss the excitement, drama and intensity of his past relationships, but with his

future goals clearly in mind, he knows Barbara is the woman with whom he will happily share his life.

Carol

A 32-year-old businessperson, Carol is highly educated and accomplished but has suffered through several unfortunate relationships that left her battered and disillusioned. She could visualize her future, which included a husband, house and children, but each of her past relationships shared one common feature: mistreatment by her partner. She tolerated physical or emotional abuse, hoping her partner would change. Her need for connection was strong, and this intensity and chaos felt like love. It was alive and passionate, albeit dangerous and demeaning.

Her family was her template for tolerating this violent behavior: Her powerful father yelled and hit without provocation, and Carol and her mother learned to fight back with equal force and conviction. Somehow meeting her father face to face and standing up to the “enemy” informed her future relationships. This challenge energized her and served as a defense against dealing with her feelings of sadness or loss, and set the stage for her being unable to trust. Unfortunately, Carol found kind, even-tempered men boring, and she sought out partners who could match the emotional intensity she recalled from her past. This dynamic stimulated her and made her feel powerful and in control, and perhaps entitled. Sad to say, these explosive men treated her with contempt and disdain, and her desire for love and affection was thwarted.

A friend introduced her to James, also in business, and it was clear from the start that this relationship had potential. Carol arrived for sessions relaxed and amazed that her time with James seemed calm and balanced and was not a struggle. She described how easily they could communicate, debate the fine points of business without getting out of control and forge a respectful relationship. Love developed over a few years, and they were recently married.

James had to overcome his own resistance to coupling with a strong woman, as his mother’s power, which overwhelmed him during his childhood, made him wary at the start of his relationship with Carol. He came to see that Carol’s strength and occasional anger outbursts would not diminish him but would ensure that someone will support him and be an asset at his side. His kindness and tenderness over time gave Carol the opportunity to relax and accept love and help. Nevertheless, it was not easy and is still a subject of constant reassessment, for her not to meet each slight or rebuff with anger. However, she is making progress by catching herself earlier and putting new behaviors in place. Carol and James provided a missing piece to each other from their past, and they

are each trying to rework their family's deficits and hurt feelings and plan a future together as a strong, intact unit.

David

David, age 40, is on the cusp of a new relationship adventure. He is in the process of dismantling his eight-year marriage, one that produced a daughter, now four years old. One of David's challenges is to determine what went wrong in his marriage and what was his role in contributing to the unraveling of their relationship. It is important for him to take stock of his marriage, in order to make different choices as he considers new dating opportunities.

David is fearful of making a mistake, and he is not used to thinking about his own needs. His family yielded important information about the difficulties David faced throughout his life and his growing awareness of danger signs as he begins to date. His parents got divorced when he was a teenager, and the dissolution of their marriage caused David much heartache. He was manipulated as a pawn between his parents--used by his mother as her confidante and mistreated by his father, a strong and powerful man in the community. David learned that his survival was predicated on denying his own needs and feelings, and he became very adept at doing so. Staying out of the spotlight, he could function undetected and, therefore, not be persecuted by his warring parents. He had a strong urge to be liked, and that meant putting his own needs last, in deference to others. He learned in therapy, however, that these coping strategies had left him open to feeling alone and isolated and perhaps vulnerable to inappropriate partner choices.

Our work in therapy has in part focused on bolstering his right to his own needs and happiness and exploring why self-care had been difficult to imagine, consider or actualize. This focus on self is new for him, and he often catches himself so as not to fall back into self-doubt and self-sabotaging behaviors. As one can imagine, this is not an easy path for David, and he struggles to retain control and not let someone else's agenda supersede his own. He is suspicious when a woman does something nice for him, and he worries that if he shows his pleasure in this kind act, he will be taken advantage of.

David has a strong need to be honest and forthright with his daughter and to teach her to express her needs, wants and feelings. He encourages her, as his past was so painful, and he does whatever he can to ensure his daughter's strong emotional health. He wants to show her that a stable, calm and loving relationship can happen, and he wants to be a good role model for her as she moves forward in her life. He is working diligently on building his own foundation for the future and in doing so, will be in a good position to date, enjoy meeting and knowing

different women and ultimately choose a woman with whom to build a future together. I continue to be heartened by his willingness and resilience to try again, and I believe he will succeed.

Conclusion

It's Never Too Late. One's past need not define one's future. The beauty of awareness and reflective time is to allow for a new beginning based on the learning from the past. Robert and Carol made peace with their difficult family and past relationship issues, so that they can now move forward with loving, appropriate partners. David is much earlier in his journey but is on the path to incorporating a newfound, albeit shaky, belief in self and other. No matter how difficult it may be to believe this, age should not be a barrier to rediscovering love. It can happen for anyone at any age, with proper attention to self-needs, an honest re-evaluation of the past and a desire/plan to change.