

SPLITTING

'The first casualty of war is truth.' Hiram Johnson

When you are powerfully triggered (be it something your partner says, their tone of voice, etc), it can activate a splitting action in which you take up a negative position against your partner. This splitting can temporarily blind us to our partner's good qualities, highlighting only their badness.

When splitting, you view your partner as a one-dimensional version of themselves: perfect (idealised) or terrible (demonised). The splitting mechanism works as though they've been unmasked and you now see them for who they really are: a villain, a devil, a tyrant, i.e. Bad! The big-picture view of your partner is scaled down into a small and negative stereotype. (Actually, all forms of discrimination work via this mechanism.)

The challenge is to catch your negative reactions when they begin, so that the splitting isn't allowed to run its course. You can become the master of your reactions, not a servant, by learning more about your initial negative reactions and learning to use circuit-breakers to stop your initial reaction from becoming an over-reaction.

MODIFYING YOUR SPLITTING - UNDOING NEGATIVE STEREOTYPES

Like all psychological defences, splitting issue closes us off to being solution-focused. The antidote begins with recognising that splitting occurs and undoing it's mechanism. Splitting is fuelled by stereotypes and our mind is attracted to stereotypes because the brain has a tendency to seek simplicity.

You have a positive stereotype about your partners: (loving, sexy, funny, etc.) and a negative one (see below). When we are splitting, the negative one is enlisted by the amygdala to support it's one-dimensional view of the other.

Most men are raised with negative stereotypes that demean women. There are many variations on the theme: bitches (cannot be pleased); neurotics (worry too much); and nagging women (always on their case).

Women are also raised on stereotypes of men as: hopeless (lazy at home, poor at parenting); obsessed (with sex-work-sports-collections); and unavailable (absent fathers, absent emotionally) or simply labelled 'not in touch with their feelings'.

We are fed these themes in movies, on TV, and in lunchtime discussions. Add some attachment wounds and you have a highly flammable mix. The less you feed your stereotypes, the better your ability to stop your splitting. The more you feed these negative untruths to your mind, the more you prolong your negative splitting.

All forms of racism and oppression are fuelled by the splitting mechanism because they reduce others down to a single, negative dimension. It is what fuels wars and violence. The better we, as a society, can master the splitting mechanism, the better the world will be for all people.

Remember: Splitting says: fight your partner, The Wiser You says fight the issue, not each other!

There is an old tale attributed to a Cherokee Indian elder who tells his grandson that can guide us to a better way of being:

'Grandson, there is a battle between two wolves inside us all. One is evil. It is anger, jealousy, greed and resentment, inferiority, lies and ego. The other is good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, humility, kindness, empathy and truth.'

The boy thinks about this and asks, 'Grandfather, which one wins?'

The wise Cherokee replies, 'The one that you feed.'

The wolf that you feed during splitting is the negative one.

You can Practise catching your negative self-talk in its tracks. Dispute its one-dimensional view of your partner: Thoughts like 'she's so negative' reduce her down to a one-dimensional aspect when there is so much more to who she is as a person. She is a thinking, feeling, beautiful person, but at this moment your splitting is acting just like propaganda, to run down her worth.

These are not the facts, so you can ignore or dispute them. 'No, she is not a bitch, she is a lovely person. I'm just hurt and angry right now. She's a great person and she loves me.'

REFLECTION TIME:

1. What is the negative self-talk that commonly comes into your mind when the splitting mechanism kicks in for you? Do you have any stereotypes that feed the negative 'wolf'?

.....

2. What kind of stereotype is it? How does it make him/her one-dimensional?

.....

3. Identify how it is a lie about your partner.

.....

4. Return their other dimensions - Who are they really? What are their great qualities?

.....

When we are splitting, we are a poorer version of ourselves. In putting the brakes on your splitting, the better version of you is returning which helps the better part of you speak to the better part of them.

How can you help yourself to speak to the good in them, from the good in you?

.....

Sometimes just telling yourself that you are splitting your partner in a negative one-dimensional figure will be enough to allow you to reconnect to the better version of you.

HEARTBURN

Once we understand the splitting mechanism, we are faced with an uncomfortable truth about ourselves: upon a strong enough trigger I can fall into a negative, one-dimensional view of my partner. This means a negative reaction is waiting for the wrong trigger, at the wrong time. Instead you can get better at seeing your partner and others as 3-dimensional and actively undo your splitting mechanism, well-before a trigger event occurs.

From The Relationship First-Aid Kit, © Timothy O'Leary 2015