

When people decide to go their separate ways, is it important to know what went wrong, or just leave sleeping dogs lie, as they say? From my point of view, I think trying to identify reasons for a breakup (in any meaningful relationship) can help us deal with the breakup if it has already occurred or even possibly reverse the seemingly inevitable. However, a recent study in the journal *Psychological Science* has shown that the earliest signs of "relationship decay" may be entirely outside of our conscious awareness [1]. We may either be unaware, unable or even unwilling to report these feelings when they first begin to manifest.

The study also found that if your subconscious reaction to your partner was positive, then you were likely to stay together, whereas if it was negative, you were likely to break up. The interesting finding here is that staying together or breaking up had little to do with conscious reports of how the relationship was going. The subconscious reactions were more powerful in determining whether you stay with someone or leave than reporting that you felt satisfied with the relationship, or even acknowledging being engaged in a hostile conflict.

Why is this so? The scientific fact is that your subconscious brain is fundamentally a more reactive part of your brain. It often makes decisions reflexively. This tells us how important it is to try to uncover what lies in this unknown and unheard part of the brain so that we can make stay or leave decisions more effectively.

Two contrasting case scenarios illustrate how confusing this can be. Jack B. and Lucy N. were married for a very long time. When they both reached 70, they decided to divorce. Consciously, for the longest time, they reported significant relationship satisfaction, but in the course of the therapy it became clear that they each saw their hated mother and father in the other, and this subconscious force was stronger than any conscious wish to stay together, so they divorced. Mary N. and John D. had never consummated their marriage but stayed together nonetheless because unconscious loyalty played a critically important role, going back to events in both of their early lives. They held onto this loyalty rather than facing the fact that they were not sexually compatible. And they also harbored unconscious feelings of anger and fear about aging and death.

How then, can we apply this understanding of subconscious forces to the way we handle our relationships? One suggestion is to try to talk more openly and honestly with your partner. For example, Lucy could have told Jack that she always felt as though her own mother should have left her father who was an abusive alcoholic. She would then have discovered that whenever she did not get what she wanted from Jack, this reminded her of being uncared for by her father. This would show her that, rather than her upset being only about Jack, the overwhelming anger about her father was a strong memory that came surging back whenever Jack annoyed her. They could then talk about ways in which Jack was not her father and Lucy could then have the opportunity to explore her anger toward her father and then let go of it. Letting go of early life negative experiences is critical if one is to have the opportunity for a fresh relationship later on. When we hold onto our earliest disappointments, subconsciously, these memories always make an appearance in our current relationships when something negative occurs.

Letting go is far from easy and just saying you have let go does not resolve the internal conditioning. It may require a period of grieving, whether crying about it or otherwise connecting with the child-like responses within yourself that have never been consciously acknowledged. "Getting over" something also requires us to accept, deep in our soul, that our earlier lives were far from perfect. Easier said than done, which is where therapy can help.

This maturation process does require giving up an innate ego-driven fairy tale "story" of how our lives were or how we would like them to have been. The fact that no one's early life was perfect is not enough comfort. Whatever our own demons were, we need to face them head-on. In the light of day, things are seldom as bad as the way we hold them in our subconscious, with a child's lack of perspective.

Your subconscious mind behaves a lot like that ego-driven, needy, easily wounded and also demanding child. Your willingness to work with your spouse or loved one by setting aside some time to understand this part of yourselves honestly and openly could help you save the relationship -- or end it sweetly and generously, with appreciation for all you had while you were together, wishing each other well as you part company and take different roads to what is always an uncertain future.

Reference

1. Lee, S., R.D. Rogge, and H.T. Reis, Assessing the Seeds of Relationship Decay: Using Implicit Evaluations to Detect the Early Stages of Disillusionment. Psychol Sci.