

Why Your Partner Keeps Saying: “You Just Don’t Get It!”

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Has your partner ever said “you just don’t get it!”? “You’ll never understand?” “You’re not hearing me!”? I hear these comments all of the time in my private practice.

But why are so many people struggling to be heard and understood? Why do people in relationship bump up against this same wall over and over again? At least part of the answer lies in attachment theory. **Attachment theory supposes that we are able to become securely and safely attached to those who are sensitive and responsive to our needs.** What exactly does that mean? In part, it means that when we gaze into the eyes of the other, we sense that what we’re saying matters, that we are valued. That we can count on the other to be a safe base, over and over again, not just intermittently.



Let’s look at how this translates to communication. Imagine a couple (Mary and Joe) in a therapy session. Mary is telling Joe how hurt she was that he spent an hour talking to his ex-girlfriend at a recent party they attended. Mary is tearful, trying to convey what it was like to keep glancing across the room, seeing him laughing with his ex, while Mary hung back at the wall frozen, feeling completely like a bystander.

Joe tries to comfort her. But something is going wrong. It’s not working. He tries repeatedly to tell her that it was “*nothing*,” he has no feelings for the ex-girlfriend, they were just catching up about mutual friends, and Mary shouldn’t be so sensitive. Yet, with each explanation, Mary distances further, mentally checking-out of the session.

Joe looks at the therapist for help. “You see?” he says. “No matter what I say, she doesn’t want to let this go!” Mary tells the therapist, “I give up. He’s just never going to get it.”

When they have both had enough of these frustrating experiences, they begin thinking that maybe they shouldn’t be together.

ASSESSMENT OF WHAT IS GOING WRONG:

It’s a common scenario. Joe feels badly that Mary is upset, but also is annoyed. He doesn’t understand why his efforts to help her aren’t working. He tries to comfort Mary by explaining over and over why she’s got it wrong. He’s convinced that if he can explain it the right away, or if Mary can finally hear what he’s saying, she won’t be so upset. So he continues to try to prove that she’s mistaken, hoping that she will finally “see the light.” His intent is good. His heart is in the right place. (Sort of). But it doesn’t

work because Mary doesn't want to hear why she's got it wrong. All she wants is for him to "get her." After all, if he "gets her", she feels more connected to him, more in sync as a partner. It garners trust. It leads to increased feelings of safe and secure attachment.

So, where do they go from here? *For Joe, the coolest thing is that he doesn't have to agree with Mary in order to resolve this issue. He can hold on to his own assessment of what happened. Mary will feel comforted simply by him conveying the following message: "I see the tears, and the fear, and I don't ever want you to have to feel that again. It matters so much to me that you were hurt by this."* This is not agreeing with her...rather, it's letting her feelings matter to him, in a deep, profound, and genuine way.

THERAPIST INTERVENTION:

Here's how the therapist helps Mary and Joe.

Therapist: "Joe, let's slow this down. What I'm hearing Mary say is that she felt really scared and lonely when she saw you with your ex."

Joe: "But it was nothing! I keep telling her that!"

Therapist: "Hang on Joe, because that's not working. Yes, you've told her several times. But each time, I've noticed that she withdraws more and more. Look over at her now, if you will. She seems so alone over there. It doesn't seem to be what she's needing."

(Mary starts to cry. The therapist gets it, and it feels so comforting. Someone is hearing her, finally.)

Joe: "Well, I have no idea what to do at this point."

Therapist: "Let me see if I can help with that. Mary, my sense is that you really want him to hear that you were lost and scared, nothing to grip on to."

Mary: "Yes."

Therapist: "That in that moment, you saw him with this woman he once shared a bed with, and he was laughing and having fun, and you were suddenly an outsider to all of that."

Mary: "Yes, exactly! It was like for that hour, I wasn't his wife, I was just the person who accompanied him to the party. I don't even think he made eye contact with me during that whole time. The two of them were laughing and flirty, and I just wanted to run away."

Joe: "But I told you...."

Therapist: (not letting Joe go into his explanations again) "Joe, she was so scared. So lonely for you. Would have given anything to feel like it was just you and her."

Joe: (becomes silent)

Therapist: “What’s that like Joe? To imagine your wife, scared, wanting you, feeling all alone over in that corner of the room, like she didn’t matter at all in that moment.”

Joe looks at Mary weeping and suddenly feels something. His eyes begin to tear up.

Therapist: “Joe, can you tell Mary what’s happening right now?”

Joe: (tearful) “I’m not sure. I just suddenly feel overwhelmed with sadness. I never want her to feel that way. What she feels does matter to me – so much.”

Therapist: “Right. I see that. Perhaps a feeling that you haven’t been in touch with? That vulnerable part of you that needs her to be okay? That part that really does want to protect her.”

Joe: (puts his head in his hands and cries...then turns to Mary) “I do want you to be okay. And I’ve missed you so much this week. I didn’t know how to get you back. I was actually panicking.”

Mary: (to Therapist) “This feels so different. That’s the first time I feel like he cares. Like he’s heard me. (she sighs) Can I go over and sit next to him? I feel like I want to be closer.”

In one session, Joe and Mary made a significant shift. It takes practice, but in time, they will apply this understanding to other situations. In future sessions, they will bump up against this again, and the therapist will help them reframe their arguments as a mutual desire for attachment. If they practice between sessions, and work to catch themselves, they will argue less, and empathize more. They will have frequent positive emotional transactions, which will help repair the old wounds.

It’s funny isn’t it, how we get so stuck in old patterns, not understanding why our attempts to “fix things” don’t work. Imagine how much easier it will be when you stop feeling the pressure to have to fix it, and instead just tune in and accompany your partner on his/her emotional journey.

Want more information about how you can apply this to your own relationship?

Linda Engelman, MFT, has a private practice with offices in Lafayette and San Ramon, California. She works with individuals, couples, and families, using Emotionally Focused Therapy, based in Attachment Theory, to help her clients deepen and enrich their relationships.

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