

## Bears and Turtles!

Many marriage counselors say that 95 – 99% of all problems in marriages are rooted in problems from our childhood. There are hurting little boys and girls inside of all of us that carry pain which can easily be triggered as adults! Because we live in a fallen world and had imperfect parents, we all experienced pain and trauma growing up. Every time our basic love needs of *unconditional love, feeling safe and secure, knowing our purpose in life, and being seen, heard, and understood* were not met, we felt pain in our heart. **If we were not comforted and validated in our pain or did not have enough joy to process the painful event, we got emotionally stuck when the trauma or wound occurred.** Until healed, those hurts stay active in the subconscious and can be triggered by similar situations in our life. Also, spiritual and emotional growth and maturity are put on hold at whatever age we were when the painful events occurred.

When pain in our heart is triggered, two common immature pain-avoidance behaviors often occur:

- 1) **BEARS** will turn to blaming, silent treatment, angry outbursts, rage, or attacks or
- 2) **TURTLES** will hide, withdraw, or suffer in silence.

Besides avoiding the pain, we may also want the other person to feel our pain for us. There have been many times in our marriage where I (Rick) have exploded on Sue verbally with a loud angry voice and facial expressions. To avoid dealing with the issue, I often would then withdraw and go outside to work in the yard or garden. In my heart I wanted her to feel my pain as well as try to calm myself down a little. I could be a bear one moment and a turtle the next! Usually, Sue would take the blame or responsibility for my outburst and be the first one to apologize and ask forgiveness. However, by doing that, I never really had to address my own pain or take responsibility for my actions and what was wrong with our relationship.

**When bears or turtles are active in a relationship**, one person may feel all the hurt and is intimidated by the other person's responses or actions. It's also a lot easier to shift the blame or withdraw from the situations or "hot" topics than deal with the deep pain that is in our own heart. Or we may be avoiding the additional pain that may come from confronting the other person's anger by just suffering in silence. **We try to keep the peace at all costs.** These pain avoidance behaviors only reinforce fear-bonds and prevent us from achieving love bonded relationships that lead to a life-long love affair with our spouse. We never get close enough to have an authentic relationship with our spouse or our heavenly Father!

*It's impossible to have an authentic relationship if we are using defense mechanisms to manipulate or control the situation or the other person.* It's like two porcupines trying to get together without hurting each other! To break free from these harmful pain-avoidance behavior patterns, we must learn how to endure hardships well and stay relational in the midst of confrontations. We are not trying to fix the other person, but we do need to sit with them in their pain first. Pain cannot be "fixed," it can only be healed through Father's love, and we do that with validation and comfort. **Through validation and comfort, we create peace and provide a healthy way to deal with the hurts and pains of our relationship with our spouse.**

When we are hurting, what we really need and want are validation and comfort. I'm the first to admit that validation doesn't come easily to me, and I have not mastered doing it well yet with Sue! The person you are trying to attune with needs to know that you are identifying with their

big emotions and the intensity of their feelings. It should sound something like, “I can tell that you are angry because I forgot our wedding anniversary and that is really bothering you right now.” It’s often good to include a number to let the other person know that you realize how much this hurts. “On a scale of 1 to 10, I’m thinking you are probably at a 9 or 10!” Do not try to belittle their pain or compare it with someone else. **Validation doesn’t mean we are agreeing with how they feel or that we should feel the same way. We are just acknowledging their feelings.**

We can then **take the next step and offer comfort to let the other person know that we are there with them and they are not alone in the situation.** We communicate by our words, tone of voice, safe touches, and calm demeanor. Our face and body language say more than the words we speak and show that we understand and care about how they are feeling. We also comfort with our presence. We might also offer to help or ask if it would be okay to touch or hold them. We can pray or just be silent until they are ready to talk.



To the degree you or your spouse were wounded growing up, there may be a turtle or bear living in your house or you may be one yourself! But don’t despair! The damage does not have to be permanent, and you and your spouse can learn the skills to remain relational even during the big negative emotions that are bound to come up in your marriage.

*For more additional information and resources, check out these websites:*

<https://thrivetoday.org/>

<https://deeperwalkinternational.org/>

## **Dialogue Questions**

1. Think about some times in your relationship where you might have responded more like a bear or turtle to your spouse. Share how that makes you feel. Talk about ways you might do things differently now and, in the future, to stay relational and respond in love. Reaffirm your love for each other and ask forgiveness, if you need to!
2. What are some ways or things I could do to help you know that I am getting in touch with your emotions and validating what you are experiencing when you are dealing with a painful or negative situation?

## ***Fun Night Ideas***

1. Write out 10 - 20 reasons why you are glad to be married to your spouse. Sit together or hold each other with some romantic music in the background and share your lists.
2. Join your spouse unexpectedly in the shower (If they don’t like surprises, knock or ask permission first!)
3. Create a 9-hole golf course in your home from things around the house, garage, or kitchen and use plastic cups for the holes. If you don’t have golf clubs, make putters from whatever materials you have available. After playing a couple rounds, watch a fun movie together.