

GUEST EDITORIAL

Relationships: Human and Visual

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I have found it useful to describe the partnership of the two eyes (please note that the term *eye* represents the concept of an entire visual pathway not merely an eyeball) to both myself and my patients, as being analogous to two people involved in a relationship. In order for a relationship to work well, the two partners must understand and interact within the context of each other's strengths and weaknesses. However, it is not always easy to know just what these strengths and weaknesses are. Sometimes there is the appearance of a strength or a weakness that is merely a façade. This façade can be consciously utilized to hide certain traits that a person feels uncomfortable sharing with the world (or himself). However, it can also be an unconscious way of behaving that has emerged in an effort to feel more at ease with intra-personal and inter-personal interactions. Relationships work best when each partner knows himself or herself well and when each knows the other well. Chances are better for smooth and lasting integration when more information is available to both parties, and communication between them is consistent with regard to meaning and is consistently available with a minimum of effort.

However, relationships are not always smooth or symmetrical. Each partner is usually more facile at certain tasks than the other. This raises the potential for the

relationship to become lopsided. In some cases, one partner becomes so dominant that the other takes very little responsibility and is, in many ways, just along for the ride. The longer this behavior persists, the more embedded it becomes. Further, as this behavior continues, the dominant partner may develop some level of resentment towards his or her mate. This resentment is two-fold. First, there is the resentment of the party of the first part having to do all the work; second, any attempt by the passive partner, the party of the second part, to assert him/herself is seen as threatening to the party of the first part. This latter person, although resentful of having to do all the work, nevertheless enjoys the feeling of superiority and having something to lord over the party of the second part. These two aspects can obviously work against each other, leading to stagnation and embedded patterns that do not allow for healthy growth for either partner.

Eventually, there must be some kind of resolution. This can be accomplished either by modifying the responses to the way things are (which is a *re-active* attitude), or changing the way things are approached (a more *pro-active* attitude and therefore more likely to lead to meaningful change). Otherwise the relationship, and often the sanity of each individual is in jeopardy. In legal parlance this is known as the sanity clause.

Now, I know what you're probably thinking...you can't fool me, as Chico Marx stated in the movie, "A Night At The Opera," there is no sanity clause. But I won't go into that here – let's move on to the visual aspects of this messy situation.

Amblyopia serves as the most obvious example of how the above situation occurs in the visual process. In unilateral amblyopia there is one eye that provides the expected level of acuity consequent to its ability to fixate accurately on the object of regard. The partner eye has a history of avoiding doing most of the things that the other eye does more effectively—which is often just about everything. This is analogous to the scenario in some human relationships as suggested earlier. And this is the way the visual process is functioning for the untreated amblyope. The preferred eye has considerable experience being in control and doing all the work. Attempts at increasing symmetry may be threatening to this dominant partner. The passive side may be unwilling to attempt action because it knows its attempts are doomed to fail (having poor self-esteem), and because it is afraid to rock the boat.

When there is a committed partnership relation between two eyes and one eye starts showing an unnatural and decidedly unacceptable fondness, say for

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an ear or a nose that is nearby, you can be sure the symmetry of the relationship is in jeopardy. When an eye starts spending too much time looking towards such inappropriate body parts, only trouble can follow. Sure, there are times when both eyes seem obsessed with certain body parts—but these are usually on someone else's body. This however usually reflects some form of teamwork and a commitment to working together toward a common goal. This is far more acceptable and more likely to lead to continued teamwork as a result of the successful forays already experienced.

The issue of the roving eye can be dealt with using monocular occlusion in the office within the context of a thorough visual therapy program. Under controlled conditions, the uncovered partner has the opportunity to carry out a task without the usual dominant input from its mate. This provides feedback that would otherwise be unavailable under normal conditions. While some aspects of the usual behavioral patterns are still active even with one eye covered, there are enough differences because of the occlusion for these usual patterns to be disrupted. This gives the uncovered eye unique opportunities to totally experience dealing with the tasks placed before it.

However, this is where the human—visual relationship analogy tends to break down a bit: while the classical approach considers occlusion therapy to be standard of care for amblyopia, it is considered bad taste to isolate an entire human partner, say in a closet or the trunk of a car—which is analogous to occluding one eye—for even fairly brief periods of time.

Nevertheless, in terms of both human and visual relationships, I propose that it must always be kept in mind that separate inputs provide two avenues and eventual viewpoints from which to gather information. This is valuable on two levels. First, better decisions result when more information is available—getting two sides of a story as it were. (There are always at least two sides to every story.) Second, in any healthy relationship, the combination of the two is greater than the mere sum of the parts. In

the visual version, without prior experience and knowledge that we live in a three-dimensional space-world, each input provides what is essentially two-dimensional imagery. When the two visual inputs are combined properly however, the resulting imagery is three-dimensional in appearance. Therefore, it is worthwhile to aggressively pursue an improved relationship between the two partners, even when it does not result in absolute equality.

I feel it necessary to state that my thoughts on these relationships are not in any way related to my recent divorce. Any similarities between the ideas presented here and aspects of my previous crumbled personal relationship are purely a result of my unruly subconscious. Finally, no plants or animals were damaged during the creation of this editorial.

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