Wired for Love

What’s in it for me? Avoid conflict and sow intimacy by tuning into how the human brain works.

Does it sometimes feel as if your partner just doesn’t understand you? Almost all of us have been there. If you’re in a long-term relationship, disagreements are not unusual. But when you find yourself arguing daily, or when you feel emotionally insecure a lot of the time, then it’s a sign. You need to bring intimacy back into your relationship. There are many barriers to long-term love, sure. But you can overcome them. The key is to grasp how the brain functions: both your, and your partner’s. In these blinks, we’ll look at the biological reasons for conflict between partners, and we’ll offer practical tips on how to translate neurobiological theory into action. These tips will help you and your partner form a strong and lasting connection. In these blinks, you’ll learn

why relationships between lovers are similar to those between mothers and infants; how simple relaxation techniques can help curb warring impulses; and why the human brain is wired for conflict – and how to rewire it for love.

Experiences in early childhood determine how safe you feel in adult relationships.

When you were little – say, four years old – had you ever told your mom a secret? Something really, really important, something only she was supposed to know? Now imagine if your dad brought up this very secret at dinner. How would you feel? In a word – probably – betrayed. Now, fast-forward to adulthood. You graduate, get a job, and you’re now in a committed relationship. One day at a party with friends, your partner blurts out something that’s private – something that only concerns you. Suddenly, you feel like you’re back at your childhood dinner table. You’re reliving the same betrayal. Is your experience psychological? Or physiological? Well, it’s a bit of both. Your early experiences get hardwired into your memory – and, as we’ll see in the following blinks, they affect our sense of security in relationships well into adulthood. The key message here is: Experiences in early childhood determine how safe you feel in adult relationships. There’s a field of psychology that studies how infants form attachments to others. It’s called attachment theory, and it was made popular by John Bowlby in 1969. Here’s what it says: ideally, a baby should have a single caregiver who will put the infant-adult relationship above all else. This is known as a primary attachment relationship. The author calls it the baby bubble. It sets the stage for how we relate to other individuals later in life. If our “baby bubble” feels secure, we will be more confident in forming a similar primary attachment with our romantic partner in adult life. The author calls this a couple bubble. In it, our sense of security is once again dependent upon a single person. But there’s a key difference between these two bubbles. The relationship between an infant and her caregiver is one-sided. But in adult life, two partners form a pact to uphold each other’s sense of safety and security. In a couple bubble, both partners need to feel secure. All the time. But not everyone had a secure, comfortable childhood. As we’ll see in the following blinks, vulnerabilities

developed earlier in life do start to resurface. This can easily put your couple bubble at risk. The good news is that you can rewire those tendencies – but first, you have to get familiar with your insecurities.

Strengthen intimacy in your relationship by understanding your partner’s insecurities.

If you’ve ever been in love, you know the feeling: you’re full of excitement, you cannot stop thinking about your one and only, and it seems like you are destined to be together forever. At the beginning of a relationship, we are usually so besotted that it feels as though the couple bubble will just form itself automatically. But being in love and forming a long-term relationship are two different things. For couples that want to stay together, it’s not so much about falling in love as it is about staying in love. Unfortunately, that is where many struggle: It’s hard to maintain admiration and avoid conflict when the initial infatuation wears out. Rifts begin to open up – and, almost always, it’s because at least one partner feels insecure. Why? One answer is that it’s all to do with attachment theory. Here’s the key message: Strengthen intimacy in your relationship by understanding your partner’s insecurities. Depending on what your childhood was like, you will have developed one of three attachment styles. The author describes people with these styles as anchors, islands, or waves. Anchors grew up in an environment in which their primary caregivers instantly soothed any painful experiences. When anchors reach adulthood, they find it easy to commit to relationships. They are quick to adapt to the needs of the moment. Islands and waves are raised in environments in which primary caregivers sometimes fail to meet their key needs. Islands respond by learning to self-soothe: they withdraw into themselves. Waves, meanwhile, switch between clinging to a partner in fear of abandonment, and distancing from them due to lack of trust. Every type of attachment has its strengths and weaknesses, but when it comes to couple bubbles, it’s anchors who generally feel most comfortable. By contrast, for waves and islands, adult relationships can trigger childhood insecurities. They are, then, wired to avoid forming a couple bubble. Islands do this by shutting out their partners, while waves act with ambivalence about them. To rewire these tendencies, it’s important to do two things. You need to understand your own vulnerabilities and learn where your partner feels insecure. So put some time aside with your loved one and try to determine what relationship style best describes each of you. Are you waves? Islands? Anchors? Ask each other if there are issues from childhood that still affect you. Try to pick specific incidents. This may not be enjoyable, but in the long run it’ll help you become more adept at managing conflict.

Conflict occurs when the security-seeking parts of the brain are triggered.

Imagine you’re standing on a railway track and a train is speeding toward you. What’s going through your mind? Chances are, you aren’t trying to guess the train’s destination, or how many passengers are on board. That’s because in that situation,

your brain is wired not to think about anything other than self-preservation. Its only concern is to get you out of the train's way. In the wild, survival has always depended on the ability to avoid threats and stay alive. Our distant ancestors developed brain structures that helped them take immediate action in the face of danger. The author calls these structures primitives. They are great at keeping you alive, but these primitives can also sabotage your chances of forming a peaceful relationship. The key message is this: Conflict occurs when security-seeking parts of the brain are triggered. Out of all these structures, the first in the chain of command are your amygdalae. These almond-shaped parts of your brain work automatically; they continually scan the environment for signs of danger. And when they pick up on one – whether it's a loud noise or an unsettling sight – they trigger the brain's alarm system. This is when the next primitive structure – the hypothalamus – gets into gear. Just like the amygdalae, this part of the brain does not rely on rational analysis. Instead, it offers us three options: fight, flee, or freeze. Either way, your body is now ready for some sort of conflict – and war becomes all but inevitable. What do these primitives look like in the context of a relationship? Let's look at Leia and Franklin. They have been dating for more than a year. Leia is growing increasingly frustrated that Franklin still hasn't expressed a desire to marry her. One evening, they're driving to dinner when a wedding-themed song comes up on the radio. Leia is not even consciously aware of this – but the song captures her amygdalae. She tenses up in her seat, turns down the music and asks, "Can we talk?" "Sure," Franklin replies – but little does he know that his amygdalae have also grabbed onto signs of danger: the silence, Leia's tone, her sudden desire to "talk." His hypothalamus gets activated, and his muscles stiffen up in preparation for a fight. Meanwhile, Leia's primitives are also fired up for a fight – and pretty soon, that's exactly what happens. But it doesn't have to be that way, as we'll learn in the next blinks.

Avoid conflict by learning to identify and manage your partner's negative emotions.

Think of the last time you were in conflict with someone. What physical symptoms did you experience? Maybe your heart raced, your muscles tightened, or your palms got sweaty. These are all signs of your amygdalae firing. For many people, this is exactly what makes fights so stressful: their bodies get overtaken by primitives. The only way to override this wiring and regain control is to use the more evolved parts of the brain. This is the key message: Avoid conflict by learning to identify and manage your partner's negative emotions. While our primitives ready us for war, they can also hinder social interaction. To maintain successful relationships, we have to rely on other parts of our brain. The author calls them ambassadors, because they promote diplomacy. And these ambassadors can be just as powerful; after all, humans haven't only been wired for war, but also for love and cooperation. In 1995, neuroscientist Stephen Porges developed what he termed the polyvagal theory. He showed that the part of our brain that's responsible for socializing had a "dumb" part and a "smart" part. They switch on and off according to the needs of the moment. Put together, they are known as the vagal system. While the dumb part of this system is associated with war-like primitives that constrain social skills, the smart part enhances our capacity for closeness. One way to engage it is to take a deep, slow breath, exhaling as slowly as possible. Another way is to relax as many muscles as you can. There's another diplomat wired into us all – and

that is the right side of the brain. It hosts our imagination, as well as our ability to read and respond to nonverbal cues like vocal tone and eye contact. You can activate it by adjusting your tone of voice during conflicts and acknowledging your partner's cues. For example, instead of barking at your partner that you don't have time to help with something, you could show a desire to assist by saying, "Look, I'd love to step in, but I'm caught up at work, so I can't." If you learn to consciously identify the firing of your primitives, you can make room for the ambassadors to step in. The worst mistake you can make is to ignore what you observe in a partner's facial expression or tone of voice. It is only by paying special attention to those moments of trouble that you can begin to soothe your partner's vulnerabilities – and your own.

Bedtime and morning rituals help you stay connected to your partner.

Noah and Isabella are in their mid-thirties. They have two kids, and they are pretty busy with both work and family commitments. When they first got married, they used to go out quite a lot. But now things have changed. Isabella prefers to go to bed around 9 p.m., as soon as the children fall asleep. Noah has always been a night owl, and feels abandoned when Isabella goes to sleep early. Meanwhile, when Isabella wakes up at midnight, she finds it hard to fall asleep again if Noah is still up and not in bed with her. Lately, the couple have been fighting a lot. They blame the children, work, finances. But what if the source of their problems were different? What if it were all about the fact that they simply don't go to bed together, and don't wake up at the same time? Here's the key message: Bedtime and morning rituals help you stay connected to your partner. The couple bubble risks disintegrating if you don't spend a lot of quality time together – particularly in the hours before bedtime, and immediately after waking up. The author found this to be true among his own patients. But it's not just anecdotal: there's plenty of scholarly research that backs this up. In 1991, psychologist Jeffry Larson and his team studied 150 couples and found that people who don't go to bed together and do not wake up together have more arguments than those who do. They also spend less quality time with their partners. And some evidence even suggests that sharing the bedroom with your partner can be healthier than sleeping on your own. This may sound counterintuitive, but in 2010 psychologist Wendy Troxel showed that people's perception of their sleep quality improved when they slept together. Troxel theorized that the need to feel secure at night outweighs any sleep disturbances. So try this experiment with your partner. Agree that, for a week, you'll start every day together, and you'll also wind down together. Try to plan something you can do as a couple. Even if it's just watching TV or listening to a podcast, don't let yourselves become isolated. Look at your partner during emotional or funny moments, hold hands, talk to each other. At the end of the week compare your experiences. What worked for each of you, and why? Have you created any rituals that will now become part of your routine? After all, a commitment to closeness is what the couple bubble is all about.

Commit to being available for your partner 24/7, and make sure the agreement is mutual.

When you’re a bit low, what do you do to feel better? Throughout human history, people have sought ways to relieve suffering. From philosophy and religion to alcohol and spas, it seems like we’ve tried everything under the sun. But what if the one source of fulfillment each of us needs is another human at our beck and call? The author certainly thinks this is the key. It’s important to note, though, that this is not the same as codependency, in which partners live for each other to the detriment of their own well-being. In a healthy couple bubble, you don’t put your partner’s well-being above your own. No – instead you both commit to being there for one another 24/7. The key message is this: Commit to being available for your partner 24/7, and make sure the agreement is mutual. As we’ve seen, a big part of maintaining the couple bubble is managing emotions and vulnerabilities – your own, but also your partner’s. And it means being available for your partner any time and any place that person needs you. Of course, you shouldn’t expect your partner to fly back home from a business trip on the other side of the world just to scratch your back. But both members of any committed couple should feel secure that either of them will be receptive any time, and anywhere, one might need the other – be it to ask for advice, complain about a loud neighbor, or share a joke. The author recommends this technique: Make a formal commitment to be available for each other no matter what – and make sure that it’s mutual. You could both sign up to this; for example: “I will make myself available without expectation, but my partner should also be there for me whenever I need support.” At the end of the day, two minds are better than one. You can think of your partner’s brain as a kind of “auxiliary brain” that helps you find solutions to your problems and expand on your creativity. In 1957, psychologist Donald Winnicott called this “mind-sharing space.” To create it, you need to stay alert to all of your partner’s cues, ready to respond and communicate. You can even develop nonverbal cues to gesture that you require each other’s attention. For example, taking both your partner’s hands in yours can be the signal to put everything on hold so you can focus on each other’s needs in the moment. Don’t forget that the couple bubble protects you both, so make sure you’re both working to maintain it every day.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks: Your sense of security is rooted in your childhood, and it continues to determine your attachment style as you grow up. To maintain long-term intimacy with your partner, you must be able to mutually soothe each other’s deep-seated insecurities and manage each other’s negative emotions, especially when you’re experiencing conflict. Most importantly, you must both demonstrate a willingness always to be there for one another, no matter what. Actionable advice: Try to make your partner smile. As a fun experiment, try to guess what will bring a smile to your partner’s face. Then go and see if you guessed right. For example, you might give your partner a back rub without being asked. This will generate more closeness – and, as a bonus, you’ll also learn more about your partner and your relationship.