

Published on *Psychology Today* (<https://www.psychologytoday.com>)

The Lazy Way to Stay in Love

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Created Sep 6 2009 - 1:10pm



Waiting for a concert to begin at our local county fair, my husband and I checked out a reptile exhibit that included an animal trainer with a live alligator resting calmly on his lap. As we stroked the gator, I asked the trainer why it was so tame. "I pet it daily. If I didn't, it would quickly be wild again, and wouldn't allow this," he explained.

I was surprised. Only months earlier I had begun to grasp the power of bonding behaviors (skin-to-skin contact, gentle stroking and so forth) to evoke the desire to bond without our having to do anything more. I didn't realize reptiles ever responded similarly.

Bonding behaviors, or attachment cues, are subconscious signals that can make emotional ties surprisingly effortless, once any initial defensiveness dissolves. Bonding behaviors are also good medicine for easing defensiveness. Here's a dramatic example: Adoptive parents had been struggling for years with a Romanian orphan with reactive attachment disorder. Violent, he put over 1000 holes in his bedroom walls, and as he grew bigger his mother had to hire a body guard. Finally, in his teens, the parents tried daily attachment cues. After three weeks, he finally bonded with his parents and began to form healthy peer relationships as well. Listen to his 'thank you' speech for an award.

Bonding behaviors are effective because they are the way mammal infants attach to their caregivers. To survive, infants need regular contact with Mom's mammaries until they are ready to be weaned. Bonding behaviors work by encouraging the release of neurochemicals (including oxytocin), which lower innate defensiveness, making a bond possible.

In short, these generous behaviors are the way we humans fall in love with our parents and children. Caregiver-infant signals include affectionate touch, grooming, soothing sounds, nurturing, eye contact, and so forth.

In rare pair-bonding mammals like us, bonding cues serve a *secondary* function as well (known as an exaptation). They're part of the reason we stay in love (on average) for long enough for both parents to attach to any kids. Honeymoon neurochemistry also plays a role, but it's somewhat like a booster shot that wears off. In contrast, bonding behaviors can sustain bonds indefinitely.

In lovers, bonding behaviors look a bit different than they do between caregiver and infant, yet the parallels are evident. These potent signals include:

- smiling, with eye contact
- skin-to-skin contact
- providing a service or treat without being asked
- giving unsolicited approval, via smiles or compliments
- gazing into each other's eyes
- listening intently, and restating what you hear
- forgiving or overlooking an error or thoughtless remark, past or present
- preparing your partner something to eat
- synchronized breathing
- kissing with lips and tongues
- cradling, or gently rocking, your partner's head and torso (works well on a couch, or with lots of pillows)
- holding, or spooning, each other in stillness
- wordless sounds of contentment and pleasure
- stroking with intent to comfort
- massaging with intent to comfort, especially feet, shoulders and head
- hugging with intent to comfort
- lying with your ear over your partner's heart and listening to the heart beat
- touching and sucking of nipples/breasts
- gently placing your palm over your lover's genitals with intent to comfort rather than arouse
- making time together at bedtime a priority
- gentle intercourse

There are some curious aspects to bonding behaviors. First, in order to sustain the sparkle in a relationship these behaviors need to occur *daily*, or almost daily—just as the alligator trainer observed. Second, they need not occur for long, or be particularly effortful, but they must be genuinely selfless. Even holding each other in stillness at the end of a long, busy day can be enough to exchange the subconscious signals that your relationship is rewarding. Third, there's evidence that the more you use bonding behaviors, the more sensitive your brain becomes to the neurochemicals that help you feel relaxed and loving. (In contrast, intense stimulation sometimes causes tolerance to build up.)

Fourth, some items on the list above may sound like foreplay, but in one important sense they are not. Foreplay is geared toward building sexual *tension* and climax—which sets off a subtle cycle of neurochemical changes (and

sometimes unwelcome perception shifts) before the brain returns to equilibrium. In contrast, bonding behaviors are geared toward *relaxation*. They work best when they soothe an old part of the primitive brain known as the amygdala.

The amygdala's job is to keep our guard *up*, unless it is reassured regularly with these subconscious signals. To be sure, it also relaxes temporarily during and immediately after a passionate encounter. After all, fertilization is our genes' top priority. However, regular, non-goal oriented contact seems to be more effective as a bonding behavior. This suggests that loving foreplay preceding a wonderful orgasm is great...but can send mixed messages. Perhaps these contradictory subconscious signals account for the "attraction-repulsion" phenomenon lovers often notice after their initial honeymoon high wanes.



In any case, nurturing touch not only creates a space of comfort and safety. It can also be surprisingly ecstatic, as a friend shared:

Though it was after 11 PM, we cuddled. For about two hours. Ecstatic cuddling. I had experiences last night that I do not have immediate words for. Rich, deep, full. Subtle. Powerful. Moving. Meaningful. Pointing to greater connection with all life. We were in connection. In the same wave, as she put it, like a flock of birds wheeling in the sky as if with one mind.

Whether or not you experience ecstasy, bonding behaviors are a practical means of restoring and sustaining the harmonious sparkle in a relationship...even with a partner who is snapping like an alligator. Combine them with gentle lovemaking with lots of periods of relaxation (and a minimum of sexual satiety signals via orgasm), and you may find that you can sustain the harmony in your relationship with surprising ease.

Maybe those rare "swans" (couples who effortlessly stay together harmoniously) are largely made, not born. Certainly, I now carefully ponder news stories like this one about a couple married happily for over 80 years. The journalist reported that, "The couple never went to bed without a kiss and cuddle."

Hmmm...cause or effect?

A husband's insights about bonding behaviors:

My wife and I just had guests for three weeks, and kissing, cuddling, complimenting each other, making love, etc, took a back seat. Now, it's like we're partial strangers (again), and it has been something of an eye-opener for me to recognise what is cause and what is effect. If I hadn't been aware of the theoretical importance of bonding behaviours, and their likely result, I would have tended to think, as I have in the past, that our cuddling had dried up because we'd temporarily 'gone off' each other, rather than the other way around. This wouldn't have been particularly worrying. We've been married for ages, and we've had loads of ups and downs. In fact, I used to believe ups and downs were inevitable in marriage; and that the only way round them was to wait for the bottom to occur, and enjoy the passage to the top again. Now, I'm not so sure, since it's become clear to me that 'going off' one another is the result, rather than the cause, of a dearth of cuddling.

Lack of cuddling eventually leads to lack of desire to cuddle, whether through laziness, habit, resentment or indifference. Cuddling (all bonding behaviours included) causes the desire for more cuddles. It is a beneficent biofeedback machine, just as the absence of bonding behaviours seems to be the opposite. Everyone will be familiar with young lovers not seeming able to get near enough to each other. Well, we've experienced the same, repeatedly, as a result of initially scheduling bonding behaviour and watching it snowball.

If serial cuddling doesn't come naturally (i.e., a couple isn't an inseparable pair of young lovers) it seems absolutely critical to schedule bonding behaviours. It's as critical as an exercise regime, should a person have decided they like the outcome of exercise. In this case, assuming a couple likes the idea of feeling as close and as in love as parent and child or star crossed teenagers, time and effort have to be employed.

Actually, it's hardly any effort at all. The effort is in remembering to do it, and in overcoming any underlying resentment that might make that 'remembering' more difficult. Initially, the bonding behaviour need only be one activity a day; and that activity needn't last longer than a minute, though it could, of course, last a lot longer. I think it needs to last at least as long as a minute, as, in our experience, that's enough to start the snowballing effect. Bonding behaviours then become automatic and seem to replicate themselves in abundance. It's not so much that they become a habit, like brushing teeth; they are more like a drink that we develop a liking, and then a recurring thirst, for, not because of the obvious beneficial effect, both short and long term, but because the taste becomes inherently irresistible.

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