



interview with dr harville hendrix

Dr Hendrix was recently in Australia on a public speaking and therapist training tour. He spoke with Gabrielle Gauvre-Kelner (Editor).



Dr Harville Hendrix is an internationally renowned therapist, author and speaker. He co-founded Imago Relationship Therapy with his wife, Dr Helen LaKelly Hunt, and in 1988, in his international bestseller *Getting the Love You Want: A Guide for Couples*, he brought this therapeutic theory to the masses. With over thirty-five years' experience as an educator and therapist, he has worked with numerous

couples to help them create a 'passionate friendship'. Having started his early professional life as a minister, Dr Hendrix now sees 'conscious partnership' as a kind of spiritual pursuit in which the wounded self can be restored: 'We are born in relationship, we are wounded in relationship, and we can be healed in relationship' (2005, p.xix). For more information on Imago Relationship Therapy and Dr Hendrix's work, visit www.harvillehendrix.com

If you had to outline Imago Relationship Therapy in a sentence, how would you describe it?

Well, in one sentence, Imago Therapy is a dialogical process that creates a safe environment between two people; and that safe environment facilitates relaxing their defences, namely regulating their anxiety; and they become more vulnerable to each other, so they can now share from their authentic rather than their defended place; and when they can do that, they experience what we call connection, that is, they are now two people relating rather than being defended against each other or merged with each other; and when they experience connection, they've got what they came for.

In our research that led to this singular therapeutic intervention and the singular diagnosis and the singular treatment modality, we got really clear on what couples wanted, which was to be connected with each other. In order to do that, they have to feel safe, and when they feel safe, they become vulnerable. Through vulnerability they can connect and through connection they feel passionately alive. And then their objections to each other and their frustrations fall away. That's essentially the healing process.

We see that a sense of connection in childhood in the caretaker-child

relationship is what is yearned for by the child, and what motivates the later mate selection process, and what becomes the desired factor in a relationship. All problematic issues seem to circle around ruptured connections: 'We're not close,' 'You don't talk to me anymore,' 'We never hold hands,' 'We don't make love often,' they're all connective terms. So I came to the conclusion some years ago that instead of using a differential diagnosis with couples, they're all simply scared because their connection had been ruptured and they want it back. And when they get it, they're fine.

Ruptured connection is the diagnosis, restored connection is the cure, and dialogue is the process.

I'd read that at one point that you asked your clients to commit to twelve sessions before they started therapy. Is that something you still do or would recommend to other therapists?

It's a kind of technique. I discovered that couples tend to come for three sessions and become ambivalent, and they may not come for the fourth session. If they do come again, they become ambivalent again at about the sixth or seventh session. If they stay beyond that, they'll stay for three more sessions. And after the twelfth session, they'll stay [until the work is done].

I discovered that because the

dialogue process engages them in change processes immediately, their anxiety level goes down at the beginning... The structure keeps them safe so they think, 'Wow, things are happening here!' But when change starts happening, it ruptures the homeostasis of their defences with each other, so they then become ambivalent about the therapy.

So there are about three rounds of that before couples 'settle in'. Until I learned that couples become ambivalent, I kept losing them.

Imago Therapy is a minimum of twelve sessions, and I started off by charging for twelve sessions in advance. Then I learned that if I told the couples that their ambivalence would be activated by the third session and they wouldn't want to come back, then when that happened I had credibility. Ambivalence at that stage means the therapy is working. So after I learned to share that with them I didn't have to charge the twelve sessions in advance anymore. But I didn't know that when I wrote *Getting*.

Ruptured connection is the diagnosis, restored connection is the cure, and dialogue is the process.

Many people read that and think that Imago is a twelve session therapy – but it's a *minimum* of twelve sessions. There are many, many couples who are done in twelve sessions; they're what we'd call pretty healthy couples anyway. They simply needed information and a process when their relationship broke down. They wouldn't go into catastrophic tailspins... they would just get into conflict and they couldn't get out of it. So they learned that if you have a conversation in which both people's ideas are valued and you don't get into judgement, you can actually come up with an option that includes the preferences of both people. All they needed was skills and information.

Then there are people who were wounded in the first or second year of life who can't yet proceed with information and skills. They actually have to be in a context where they have a new experience with the therapist and their partner, then they can begin to integrate and the chaos begins to move towards more coherence. After a while their anxiety levels and rigid defences are regulated by that. It may take eighteen months to two years before they can take this process home.

We think of Imago as a portable therapy. We want you out of here as fast as possible because you want to be in your life, not in my office. So you have to integrate what we do in the office into your life outside.

You've said that people in love are masters of projection. So do you think it's possible for us to ever really see the other? Or, even in relationship, are we kind of only engaging with ourselves?

I think we do see the other. It certainly doesn't start there. It starts with a projection onto the other, of both the idealised and the unacknowledged, disowned, de-idealised aspects of yourself, so that romantic love appears to be pretty much an illusion, in terms of knowing who it is that you're relating to. And then the power struggle happens, in which you try to extract yourself from your partner's definition of you. That

produces a tremendous amount of anxiety in both people.

But otherness doesn't show up until you engage in a process – this is where I think dialogue becomes such a powerful intervention. When you dialogue with a person, which means that you have to listen and not judge what you're hearing, you don't have to agree with it, but you do have to accept it and realise the fact that this is another reality.

The rule of the dialogical process is that eventually you start to experience anxiety: 'Do you really think that?' 'I didn't know you think that.' And you eventually 'get it' – yep, they do think that.

And the anxiety, we've found, slowly dissipates when you begin to see that your partner is actually *not you*. That is the process of differentiation of self from other, and the process by which the healing actually occurs. Otherwise you engage in not only a projective process but a *coercive* process, to make your partner live inside your projections, which creates an illusory relationship.

But one of the big pieces of the work is that you have to 'get it' – that your partner's not you. And here's how you do that. What we've learned is that the most rapid way to move to otherness is to eliminate negativity, because negativity, as I've observed it, is an unconscious mechanism to maintain the illusion. Negativity coerces you into being in my projection, and when you're not, I have to tell you how badly you're doing. So if you're strongly rebellious, you'll fight me back, and if you're not, you'll collapse back into the way I want you to do it.

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But if you take the courageous position of surrendering judgement and accepting at face value the self-presentation of your partner, you'll go through enormous anxiety that will ultimately give way to interest. So what

we do to stimulate that is ask couples to replace judgement with curiosity. Instead of saying: "Where did you get that idea?!" you can just sort of say, "Wow, tell me about that idea – where did it come from?" You're curious.

And when you have curiosity, your partner doesn't feel attacked anymore, so they become more self-disclosing, and through that self-disclosure, through the other, people discover themselves. But there's a part of self-disclosure that people feel incapable of while they feel anxious and defended, so the dialogue process is one of differentiation for me, and self-discovery for you. Equally, when I'm in the self-disclosing position, I find out about me, and that I'm not you...

Self-discovery appears not to be the path that we thought it was for several years: the idea that I can see you because I know who I am. It turns out that if I get clear about who you are, that I can then see me better; that it's an 'outer-inner thing' instead of an 'inner-outer thing'.

It's like love. Most people say, 'Don't you have to love yourself before you love others?' I haven't seen anybody do that. I have seen people say, 'OK, I'll make your life important to me' and when they start doing that in an unconditional way, they begin to experience changes in themselves... If I just tell myself I'm a good person take care of myself and feed myself well and love myself and all that, somehow that never gets to otherness. You get really clear about a range of *you*, but there's a part of you that you don't discover except in *engagement*.

I think that's where we've shifted, generally, in the psychotherapy field. The individual paradigm of the isolated self that has its roots in Freud was around until the seventies, when the self psychology people and the relational, psychoanalytical people began to talk about the relationship as the context within which the self is formed. Instead of the self creating relationships, relationship is creating the self...

Then it turns into an oscillation and a reciprocity [of the relationship and the self co-creating one another]. But it starts with a relationship...

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For the past two or three years I've been reading a lot on brain research, and the brain people seem to agree with that... that an integrated brain is the function of an integrated context, and that that is the neurophysiological basis for a sense of psychological wellbeing. And no matter what you do to try to shape-up your psychological life, if you don't have brain integration [and relationships] in the balance, you're not going to feel good; you're going to feel anxious.

So it's really helped to know how specific you can be about that integration: 'So that was a feeling you had. Can you think about it?' So you move from limbic to cortical. And if a person's up here [in the cortical] all the time, then you ask, 'Well, how do you feel as you say that?' So the whole idea that feelings are primordial and primary and that you have to deal with feelings all the time is just wrong. It's the integration of feeling and thought and behaviour in some sense of conversation that makes for a healthily balanced person...

And I think we're also getting over what the systems theory people did when they discovered that the pathology of adolescents was the function of families. They went in to work solely with families and lost the self. We lost the self in the system. Self is the system, but it's also a location interacting with a system...

What I'm trying to do in my writing

is to highlight that it is neither the self nor the system; it's the oscillation between the two. That's the constant; the oscillation. Self changes, the system changes, but the oscillation is constant. Maybe that's what the self is – the oscillation.

That's fascinating. So that oscillation between the self and the system, between self and other, and also between thought and feeling...

And between particle and wave...

...considering that movement as where the self resides...

Well, is there a particle? No. Is there a wave? No. There's a wave-particle relationship, and interaction, and what's constant is the oscillation. So that begins to provide you with a process that's not chaotic – if everything is moving, then that movement becomes the structure. The oscillation between experience and words, thinking and feeling, self and other, self and system. That's the constant. [Dr Hendrix evokes the symbol for infinity with his finger]. And when that oscillation is ruptured then you have two separate circles; and that's neurosis or psychosis. But if you can restore the oscillation [and restore the movement between self and system] then you go back to a state of balance.

I'm wondering about social norms here as well, whether aspects of social norms might also impact on relationships and potentially even on the imagos we construct. I'm thinking of the work that your wife also does regarding feminism and women's rights, and whether perhaps something like patriarchy is potentially an invisible other in relationships. What are your thoughts?

I think that the content of the polarities in relationships changes, but that the oscillation doesn't. At the intersection between self and other, or self and culture, if new information enters that intersection, then your

relationship of self to culture changes, and the relationship of culture to self also changes. That's ultimately the evolutionary process. But if you don't add in the new information, then you have a static society or a static relationship.

That's why we say to couples that novelty is your best way to sustain the excitement. That doesn't mean you have to go to Africa, for instance, just that you need to try walking around a different way today; go on the other side of the street.

So just bring something new in.

You have to have new input. The couples who do that, they're never bored. Couples need a routine and they need novelty. If they don't have routine, they have chaos. But if they only have routine, they have boredom and the relationship dies from lack of energy. To me it seems like there's something actually cosmic in that – it's not like just a recommendation – it seems like that's just the way the world works. That it's the nature of being itself.

And in terms of same-sex relationships, I wonder if you think there's any particular considerations in that realm as well, or whether those relationships follow the same sort of ideas.

...What we've learned, from gays and lesbians themselves, is that there are some differences. One of our master Imago Therapy trainers is a lesbian, and she's pretty clear, after twenty years of working with this, that the major difference is that the female qualities which are mirrored in lesbian relationships make it difficult for lesbians to differentiate, so they stay sort of stuck together. And the masculine qualities – this doesn't mean these qualities are necessarily gendered, by the way – but the masculine qualities usually make it difficult for the guys [in same-sex relationships] to connect.

Other than that, there's not much

difference. In a lesbian relationship, there's still one person who merges more than the other; and in gay relationships, there's still one who is more distant than the other; so that the parallel of there being a distancer and a connector is in *both* relationships. [This same master trainer also suggests that therapists should] just know that you may have to pry the women apart and push the men together. And I've found that to be true...

On a different note, a kind of 'shadow side' of working with couples is working with people who are not currently in a relationship, but who might want to be. I wonder how you might recommend working with that situation?

Go to group therapy.

I think a committed marriage is the most powerful structure for personal healing and growth. That comes out of years and years of watching it. There's something about what the unconscious does with the wedding ceremony; it just seems to be that it unleashes previously unknown expectations and feelings of entitlement, which is what blows up.

Cohabiting couples may have lived together for five years and think they're fine. They decide to get married and everything blows up – why is that? When I start interviewing them, I find that the day they got married, they started feeling more entitled, more irritated, giving more demands, becoming more critical... The little child inside says 'Oh, boy, now I'm going to get what I want – I'm entitled to it and you owe it to me, and if you don't give it, I'm going to beat you up!'

So, what do you do with singles? It's a tragic kind of statement. And the only answer I know is, you have to get married if you really want to be fully healed and whole, because your wounding occurred in a dyadic situation in your childhood, and the unconscious

Like a wild animal goes to its cave, the unconscious says 'you need to be healed in a context that's similar to the one in which you were wounded.'

...your wounding occurred in a dyadic situation in your childhood, and the unconscious apparently 'goes home' to repair itself.

So what do you do when you don't have a relationship? When I had a practice that addressed singles, I put them in therapy groups of seven, and those groups would become surrogate families. Everything that didn't get worked through in your family is going to come up in this group...you'll become conscious of stuff, and you'll be able to mitigate some of your anxiety, relax some of your defences. Mainly you'll know what happens when you get close; that certain anxieties are triggered around you getting your needs met. That you simultaneously want it, but you also have a prohibition against it. So when you get close to that, you'll back away from it, and when you back away from it, you'll want it again.

So you can learn about all of that. Then you still need to go on and get into a committed partnership. Maybe pick someone in this group that now you've worked with. I used to have seven groups and eventually have a party with forty-nine people and say 'these are the best choices in Dallas.'

What happens [after such group therapy] is that you know romantic love will come to an end, and that the power struggle is going to be the second stage of the relationship. You can either turn that into a nightmare, or you can say, 'Oh! We're on the wild horse. We better use the skills we know so we can

your anxiety consciously.

But if you don't know this is going to happen and you get married, then it's like you hit this wild horse and you don't even have a saddle. Now, with group therapy, you at least have a saddle, so some healing can occur. But what always happens is that even in those groups, where people worked together for a couple of years on all sorts of deep feelings and memories and all kinds of re-parenting stuff, they'd go on to meet somebody and get married and it would all go to hell. *But*, at least they knew it was going to happen. Knowing it regulates it.

Then they could come in as a couple to couples therapy or go to the couples therapy group, where everything was now tumbling out of the unconscious because the marriage had in some sense given permission for all of that to happen. And they would come knowing what they were going to do, and what the therapist was going to do. So in three months, six months, they were fine.

So that's what I've done with singles. It's just the case that there are some contexts in which you can't be healed *fully*. But you can get a lot done in a surrogate family if you allow yourself to be vulnerable in that group and talk about what you want and need and hate and so forth. So these groups become a healthier family than the one people grew up in...

There's a real power in the context to facilitate healing...the context or the relationship that we know co-creates the self... ❖

*'Imago' is Latin for 'image'. According to Imago Relationship Therapy, each of us subconsciously constructs an internalised imago of all the most positive and negative traits of our childhood caregivers. This composite image then forms a kind of template for the type of person we are romantically drawn to, and who we can potentially find healing with in relationship (Hendrix 2005, pp.36-39).

Reference
Hendrix H 2005, *Getting the Love You Want: A Guide for Couples*, Pocket Books, London.