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Facing the Dragon Together: Creating Secure Adult Relationships

by Hailey Shoemaker

As a warrior people, the Celts' image of life was quite dark. They described life metaphorically as if you were standing in a dark, narrow passageway with your back against the wall while a dragon comes for you. There is no way out. There is no doubt you are going to lose. Life ends—for everyone—and pain and loss are part of life. Therefore, there is only one thing that gives meaning to life: *how well you fight.*

This image is a reminder that each of us have the chance to confront the “dragon” that we call life and that some of the challenges it brings are inescapable. In our lifetime, we may be forced to face our own personal “dragons,” that may come in the form of depression, anxiety, infertility, addiction, cancer, loss of a loved one, financial struggles, and more.

How well you fight these battles does in fact mean a great deal. But as researcher Sue Johnson points out, the motivation to put up a worthy fight often comes from knowing that someone else is fighting alongside you.¹ If you reach out in the darkness and another hand meets yours, confirming that you're not alone, then the fight is suddenly even more worth fighting.

Everything changes when you're not alone in the darkness, and you choose to face the dragon together.

face and overcome your fears. Despite the gloom, you can find solace and joy when you can trust that someone will have your back when you falter. Everything changes when you're not alone in the darkness, and you choose to face the dragon together.

As social science affirms, we need to know that we can count on someone we love to stand beside us.² Needing a secure attachment is not just for children³ depending on sustenance from a nurturing parent; needing a reliable relationship often motivates human behavior and affects relationships “from cradle to grave.”

Despite the leering dragon, you can find courage and strength in the shadows when you have a companion to help you

You can view a secure, committed relationship in terms of the answers to these crucial questions:⁴ Can you count on your partner to be there for you if you need them? Can they count on you? As couples, we have a sacred opportunity to encourage and strengthen our partner by becoming a place of safety and refuge that they can truly rely on.

ARE You There?

Clinician and researcher Dr. Jonathan Sandberg shows that three essential elements help to strengthen connection and closeness when implemented within a relationship. Dr. Sandberg helps couples remember the three key points of creating a more secure bond with the acronym ARE, meaning *accessibility*, *responsiveness*, and *engagement*.⁵

Accessibility is being available for your partner when they need you, and it requires frequent physical proximity and emotional availability. Common threats to accessibility include activities that physically take us away from our partners, such as work, church, or hobbies, as well as other distractions in the home, like technology, that prevent emotional attentiveness. If inaccessibility is threatening the security of your relationship, be intentional about making changes in your schedule and habits to be more present for your partner.

Responsiveness means your partner can count on you to respond with emotional attentiveness when they reach out with certain needs. It is more than simply acknowledging your partner's words or actions; it is responding in loving and affirming ways. In our modern world of distraction, people more commonly choose not to respond to phone calls, texts, and even face-to-face communication. This lack of response is essentially saying, “I heard you, but I have more important things to care about right now.”

Nonresponsiveness damages trust and connection, especially within a marriage. You can address issues related to responsiveness by deliberately stepping away from the distractions that prevent you from responding to your partner in affectionate ways—especially when those moments matter most to them and they need your time and concern.

Engagement requires a combination of accessibility and responsiveness. It means that when you are needed, you are engaged and present. These moments of engagement form a crucial kind of connection and trust. Though building connection and trust takes time, once built, these times of engagement can create a sense of peace and strength within a marriage that may be unmatched in other more casual, though important, human relationships.

Threats to engagement may not involve intention but may be skill-based, meaning that you are accessible and sincerely responsive to your partner, but you may not be saying or doing the right things to make her or him feel validated or secure. To resolve this issue, focus on learning new and more effective ways to communicate love and support to your partner based on their individual characteristics and needs.

As a partner, are you accessible? Are you responsive? Are you engaged?⁶ If the answer to those questions is no, your partner may respond with alarm and put up defenses to protect themselves. But if the answer to those questions is yes, your partner will likely find it easier to rely on you, regulate their emotions in the face of stress, openly ask for comfort and reassurance, and be flexible and open in their communication. As a securely attached partnership, the positive aspects of your relationship will increase, building higher levels of trust, commitment, and overall satisfaction.⁷

As a personal example, my husband's parents divorced when he was young. Although he would be unlikely to admit that his parents' decision negatively affected him, I have noticed throughout our dating and first year of marriage that having security and reassurance within a relationship is extremely important to him. As his wife, I have an opportunity each day to let him know that no matter what, I am there for him. When he reaches out into the darkness, essentially saying without words, "Do I matter to you? Do you value me? Will you respond to me if I need you?" I want to be able to confirm to him that the answer to each of those questions is a resounding yes.

Surely, it is in these small, yet defining, moments of facing each other's personal dragons together that we form the deep connections that make our fight worth fighting.

Can You Get There?

A liberating truth for those who may be struggling to connect to a partner while facing a dragon in the darkness is that human relational needs are adaptive.⁸ In a beautiful

way, partners can actively construct and reshape their relationship realities by learning to better regulate their emotions and ways of thinking.

If your partner seems distant, sit down and have a vulnerable conversation with him or her about each other's relational needs. Think of the acronym ARE and ask yourself or discuss with them, "Could our relationship



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benefit from more accessibility, responsiveness, or engagement?" "How can I be a better partner?" By focusing on improving these aspects of your relationship, you as a couple can move toward a more trusting, safe, and secure bond.⁹

The Celts had it right: life has its inescapable challenges. Perhaps, however, experiencing pain, loss, and death is not an indication of defeat. Instead, true victory comes as we strive, against all odds, to manage our depressions and anxieties, overcome physical and mental addictions, battle cancer, mend broken relationships, break the cycles of abuse, open our hearts to see and love others deeply, form secure relationships, and lead meaningful lives alongside those we love.

While facing dragons may be inevitable, we don't have to do it alone. Together, we can create secure bonds that will become a place of safety and refuge. Together, we can navigate the hardships and challenges of life. Together, we can find victory in the darkness while finding the our way to a closer, increasingly unbreakable bond.

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Endnotes

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- ⁹ Alder, M. C., Yorgason, J. B., Sandberg, J. G., & Davis, S. (2017). Perceptions of parents' marriage predicting marital satisfaction: The moderating role of attachment behaviors. *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy*, 17(2), 146-164. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15332691.2017.1372834>