

The Turtle and The Tiger: The Hidden Dance of Relationships

A eBook from the office of Benjamin Seaman, LCSW

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Dear Reader:

My assumption is that you've turned to **The Turtle and the Tiger** because you're in a relationship and looking for ways to make it better. Maybe you're single and hoping for insights about past relationships, or maybe you'd like to learn strategies for getting the most out of your next one. My goal is to successfully illustrate universal relationship dynamics and provide you with new ways to engage with your partner – ways that will yield better results and, ultimately, a safer, more secure connection that brings out the best in both of you.

A New Way For You to Look at Relationships

With nearly all of the couples I have worked with, ranging from Hispanic couples, interracial couples young and old, gay and straight couples, even polyamorous¹ couples, not to mention those who want to be in a relationship, I have found that people nearly always adopt one of two complementary roles with each other, which can be affectionately termed the **Turtle** and the **Tiger**.

¹ the practice, desire, or acceptance of having more than one intimate relationship a time with the knowledge and consent of everyone involved.

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The Turtle in the relationship is the one who reacts to any kind of danger, distress or frustration by going inside his or her “shell.” Retreat is the first defense of the Turtle, and there are many forms this may take. Some Turtles hide out in their jobs, coming home later than necessary; some seem glued to the TV or computer, while others may disappear into compulsive behaviors such as drinking or gambling. Lest this sound negative, the Turtle is also a master at delaying his or her own gratification in order to meet the demands of society, and is rarely a burden to others. Many turtles are breadwinners who create a shell around themselves by never disappointing their bosses or other important relationships. What is difficult for these turtles, however, is believing that people really, *truly* like them, for themselves, so they feel safe only in relationships with people who are quite demonstrative about their affection. Despite the Turtle's need for affection, you can easily identify one because s/he complains of being smothered, suffocated or overwhelmed. The Turtle is also known as the withdrawer, distancer or isolator, but I find that these labels don't acknowledge the positive qualities of the Turtle. The Turtle takes a stand for *independence and individual differences* in a relationship. Turtles are able to do things on their own, and can model this for their Tiger partners, who often see life categorically as a group activity. Turtles are often gifted at standing back and observing when situations call for it.

The Tiger in a relationship is someone who reacts to danger, distress or frustration by “pouncing” on the situation, trying to work it out, often grabbing on very tightly. Because of this “grabbing on” quality, the Tiger is often called the “Octopus.” The Tiger wants to talk more, connect more, even fight more, as long as he or she is maintaining contact. Tigers are very clued

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in to the *connection* in a relationship. They are usually the ones who remember anniversaries, and other important facts and figures about the relationship. In other words, they are the “keepers” of the relationship. Unfortunately, this also means that they are often the judge and jury too, and that they frequently complain that the Turtle is not doing his share, or that the Turtle is not as available as he or she should be. The Tiger wants to connect more, in all ways, including physical intimacy. What is difficult for Tigers, their main challenge, is to be there for *themselves*. If you ask them, they will often admit that they give to others in the hope that someone will give back to them. They will tell you that they derive great pleasure from providing for others, and yet they know that they can overwhelm their partners. Tigers will at times also admit that they have been too hard on others, and that they regret some of the punitive things they have done. The only people who seem to appreciate their efforts — at least initially — are the Turtles. The Tiger is known to be the pursuer, or “fuser” in the relationship. The Tiger takes a stand for *connection and togetherness* in a relationship. This is important because the Turtle, practiced as he is in self-sufficiency, needs the Tiger to vote for the relationship and help him believe in the possibilities of love. Without the Tiger, the Turtle will complain that the world is lonely and we all have to get used to it. Or worse, he or she may grow to accept the world as lonely and settle for less than a nourishing life.

A Model for Today

Many of us are still struggling with ideas about how men and women interact in relationships. Books like *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* perpetuate fixed notions of gender roles. While sometimes it may be validating to hear, for instance, that men like to fix things or that women like to discuss things, these constructs don't account for relationships where the

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opposite is true. And they often leave people who don't fit the stereotypes wondering whether there is something wrong with them if they tend toward behaviors typically attributed to the opposite sex. What I have found is that in every relationship both parties struggle with competing impulses. One impulse is to be self-sufficient and the other is to become one with another. In other words, there is usually one person in a relationship who takes a stand for *togetherness*, while the other stakes the claim for *independence*. The “independence” person in the relationship is the “Turtle,” while the “togetherness” person is the “Tiger.” Different models of couple therapy identify these two polarities. The Turtle is the person who, at his or her most defensive, may seem “hard to get”, while the Tiger is the person who when panicked, might seem “possessive” or “clingy.” It is very important to understand that the behavior of playing “hard to get” or “checking out” on the Turtle side, or the “possessive” or “nagging” behavior on the Tiger side is not a fixed trait of one partner or the other. It is a behavior that happens in the *context of a relationship*, and is often in reaction to the other person. This is very significant. I encourage you to resist the temptation to see one of the characters as good or bad. They are simply storybook characters who embody different strategies of love. To give credit where credit is due, these two positions are identified in Imago Relationship Therapy as the “Fuser” and the “Isolator.”

Developed by the renowned marriage counselor and psychologist Harville Hendrix, Imago Therapy helps couples identify research-based relationship patterns.

It's Not About Gender

It's essential to see that while women are often stereotyped as being the more connection-focused partner, with nagging, Tiger-like qualities, there are a thousand country songs testifying to *men's* capacity to fall deeply in love, sometimes at their own peril. And while men are often

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stereotyped as being the independent ones who women must constantly try to get through to, there are examples throughout history, literature and maybe your own experience, of women whose hearts were not easily won, and who remained mysteriously elusive and difficult to label. If you're in a heterosexual relationship, you may have noticed that the person who takes on the “dependence” role in your relationship may go back and forth. Perhaps you started out as the pursuer and later, when your relationship was more established, your spouse became the pursuer, and you began to want some distance.

Throughout the great works of literature, you'll find there are many examples of both men and women doing the pursuing, and of both men and women doing the distancing. In other cultures, there are more models and options for men to be the pursuers, and for women to be the “mystery” partners who must be courted and wooed. Yet even in those cultures there will be female pursuers and males who are “strong silent types.” Among more “alternative” couples, such as those between gay men or lesbians, the model of the Turtle and the Tiger more accurately describe people with parallel gender roles but with complementary connection strategies. Two very feminine-appearing women may have opposite approaches to engagement without one of them having to be the “man” in the relationship. In the same way, two men can adopt pursuer and distancer stances toward each other without one of them having to be the “woman”. In a heterosexual relationship, a woman may employ the more self-sufficient strategy without risking being labeled the “guy,” and the man can employ the more merging stance without having to be the “girl” in the relationship. Also, a man may be the Tiger in terms of finances, monitoring household details, “holding on” to money, at the same time that his wife pursues him vigorously in the bedroom.

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What Does This All Mean?

All of this is just a model. It is based on some solid research in human psychology called “Attachment Theory.” Attachment theory is based on observations of infant-mother relationships in which psychologists notices the “turtle” and “tiger” styles were evident even in toddlers still learning to talk. But it is still just a model, a way of looking at things that can help you understand relationships. This model is something I offer people if it will help. So I hope you will just take the parts of this model that you find helpful. In fact, if you find something in this model that doesn't fit for you, I would love to hear from you so I could expand this model to include your experience.

Some of you may read this model and be saying “That's me!” and you recognize these patterns in yourself and your partner. That's great! There are some strategies you can put into action right away to start changing the way you relate to each other. But others of you may be saying, “Wait a minute, it's not the simple.” You may be aware of other dynamics. You may remember that when you first met it was the other way around: “You were the pursuer and now you're the distancer. Or you may find that even though the Turtle tends to flee when things get stressful, he may pull a “Tiger” move on his way out the door or into his shell, turning around and firing insults before disappearing.

What's helpful about this model is that it offers some broad categories that you can recognize right away, so that you can say: “There I go, being a Turtle (or Tiger) again... Let me back up

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and try something else.” The first step in healing your relationship comes from both you and your partner being willing to stop demonizing each other and acknowledge that you each have different, complementary and essential roles in the relationship. Previously, the Turtle may have self-righteously thought, “She is too clingy.When she learns to calm down, this relationship will work out fine.” At the same time, the Tiger may have indignantly told herself, “When he realizes it’s his job to pay attention to me, we’ll be fine.” Both of these positions point the finger at the other. When you and your partner become able to see that this is actually a dance, quite circular in nature, in which one person pushes a little too hard, while the other reacts by holding back, you can start to see that the solution comes from changing the dance, not fixing one of the partners. To see how to change the dance, read on.

Help for the Turtle

As the Turtle in the relationship, you may struggle quite a bit with guilt and shame. You hear a lot about how you don't do your share, and this tends to activate insecurities you may have about not being “enough.” As a child, you had many experiences in which you learned that it was better to rely on yourself instead of on someone else. So as lonely as that might have felt at times, you also felt it was realistic and safer to do things yourself, not to ask for help, and to be as self-sufficient as possible. As a result, many of your relationships, both positive and negative, are centered on the presentable face you give to people. You have a strong sense of how to place your own needs on the back burner in order to give your boss and friends what they are asking for. What you aren't sure about, however, is how to ask for help yourself. You don't want to burden people. You minimize your needs out of a belief in self-sufficiency as a sign of adulthood. What you could really use, however, is more confidence that people like you for who

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you *really* are. If you were more certain of this you would feel confident telling people “I’m sorry, this is all I can do. I can deliver this by Friday, but not by Tuesday.” You would feel more comfortable picking up the phone when you need help. What you need help with in your relationship style is telling that Tiger you’re involved with “No,” to some of his demands, while at the same time maintaining a sense of connection in a way that does feel comfortable to you. You need to learn to be able to disappoint your Tiger lovingly. Until now, the scenario that typically unfolds is: You say “no,” then feel guilty, and then get angry about feeling guilty.

Turtles Need to Engage... But With Self Interest

My first piece of advice for the Turtle is to say, decide what you CAN do for your partner, and stand by it proudly. You may have to move out of your comfort zone a bit more, but you don't have to do or provide everything your Tiger is asking for. Try to visualize a situation in which you engage with others without using your shell as a place to retreat to. You would have no choice but to defend yourself “in combat” with your partner. What I mean is that you would have a fair way to fight for and defend your needs without hurting the other person. You contribute but you also have a say in the how, why and when of your contribution.

Example: Joe and Sarah met in a 12-step program and have worked hard to create their own healthy, sober lives separate from the entanglements of their alcoholic families of origin. Joe finds the ongoing processing of his relationship with Sarah essential to holding onto his sense of self, while Sarah experiences these conversations as “too intense.” She often avoided deeper conversations with Joe out of fear of having more “relationship talks,” which in turn caused Joe to want to process the relationship even more. My work with Sarah was to show her that she needed to come *toward* Joe and make connection, but

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it could be through physical affection and light conversation — things that were comfortable for her. And she learned to sensitively decline Joe's request to “process” when she didn't feel up to it. Once she became empowered to decide when she was up for certain kinds of discussions, she no longer felt the need to avoid Joe. And consequently, Joe felt less need to talk about the relationship. Action step: Let your Tiger know you love him and are there for him (or her).

Help for the Tiger

As the Tiger in the relationship, you struggle with feelings of abandonment. You often feel that your Turtle is slipping away from you, and you are offended by Turtle behaviors that you experience as rejecting or disrespectful of you or the relationship. The Turtle's ability to go for so long without calling you or getting in touch is also mystifying to you. You know how hard it is to be alone and typically it's been your mission to let the people in your life know that they are loved. Growing up, your sense of connection was plagued with a sense of anxiety. You may have had experiences where you thought you had a connection and then it was ruptured, for instance, in the case of a divorced father who was erratic with visits, or a mother who had difficulty letting you separate from her as you grew up. A number of biological, temperamental and unconscious factors at play in even the most loving and attentive families may translate into some kids growing up anxious about whether important people in their lives are truly trustworthy. Given your experience growing up, you have become a generous, empathic person who would never want your partner or anyone else to feel the way you did growing up. This is a wonderful personal trait. You have an almost moral commitment to do “what's right” in relationships, and you believe that things in this world can be better. While the Turtle has learned that life is tough

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and one must live with what is, the Tigers of this world are outraged that people don't treat each other better. You hold people accountable, even if at times you are a "nag" about it. You've gotten down the role of being there for others, but your personal struggle is how to be there for *yourself*. You often neglect your own pursuits as you attend to making sure that your relationship is working. What would be really beneficial to you, though, is a sense of confidence in your relationship. If you had that you would be able to relax and start giving time to your own projects. And you would be able to make the transition from *pressuring* to *inviting* that is the spiritual journey of the Tiger. Instead of demanding that the Turtle come closer, you would be able to step back, make your offer known, and then allow the Turtle (who is easily frightened underneath his polished shell) to seek you out.

Tigers Need to Hold Their Own Hand

My advice to Tigers: First, identify how you can be there for yourself, have faith that if you tend your own garden, the result will be that the Turtle will notice and seek you out. What Tigers don't realize is that their partners are as eager to connect as the Tiger is. But because the Tiger is willing to "carry" the imperative for connection in the relationship, the Turtle never has to feel any of the discomfort or insecurity that comes with looking for connection. This is the underlying, often maddening to the other partner, dynamic of "playing hard to get."

Example: Sharon and Eileen fought constantly over their lack of sexual intimacy. Sharon had fixed ideas of what the "healthy" amount of sex was in a relationship and read lots of self-help books about intimacy that she used to try to convince Eileen that she needed to "step it up" in the bedroom. Sharon needed help seeing that this tactic was far from enticing, and that her behavior was threatening to Eileen. In couple's sessions, Eileen was

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able to tell Sharon that the pressure she felt was a lot like the pressure Eileen got from her father in his insistence on academic excellence. Sharon was unwittingly causing her partner to relive negative childhood experiences. My work with Eileen was to help her identify attitudes and behaviors around sex that would be *inviting* instead of overwhelming. Turtles, who struggle with self-worth, feel devalued by the Tiger's complaints. What they need, even when they are not doing their share, is a sense of acceptance. Eventually, Eileen was even able to identify the passages from self-help books that Sharon found enticing. Action step for the Tiger: Let your Turtle know you *appreciate* her (or him).

The Turtle's Struggle

The Turtle has a core fear of inadequacy. When they are met with criticism, they are quick to say, "It's not my fault! I can't do all this! Why should *I* have to...?" which the Tiger experiences as rejecting. It is often very hard to see that underlying that defensive reaction is a soft underbelly of wanting – often desperately – to provide for the Tiger. So each missed connection actually rubs quite painfully against the Turtle, provoking feelings of anger and indignation. If the Turtle only felt safe enough he would be able to say, "I feel terrible that you didn't get what you wanted from me." Admitting this is sometimes very difficult. If you identify with the role of the Turtle, see whether you can say it to yourself right now: "I feel terrible that I don't give more to my partner." Don't worry about how this will get solved. Just see if you can locate the truth of it. "The truth is, part of me would really, really like to make my partner happy." If you can get in touch with that feeling, you are already making a considerable shift toward relating more intimately with your partner.

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What if you can't relate to this? What if you really feel that your partner is too demanding? If this is the case, allow yourself for a moment to consider that your partner really is too demanding. You don't have to say it out loud. But give yourself that benefit of the doubt. "My partner really seems to want much more than her share. I shouldn't have to give her all this. She should be able to handle this." Give yourself that.

Now, accepting that you really shouldn't have to give so much – and this is acknowledged and undisputed – can you locate a part of you that nevertheless feels empathy for your partner who wants something so much? Do you remember a time you wanted something so, so much?

A question you will want to answer for yourself is: "What would be so frightening if I were to try to give my partner what she is asking for?" Perhaps you're afraid that you will be used up. Or annihilated, or devoured. Perhaps you feel you will never get anything back. Underneath all your storm and thunder, what is the scariest part of all this? Are you afraid there will be no "you" left after you are done giving what is being asked of you? Or that you simply don't have what it takes? Somewhere below the tough exterior of the Turtle is an existential struggle with self-confidence. My invitation to the Turtle is to be willing to use his or her relationship as a forum in which to explore self-confidence. If you had more self-confidence, what would you do?

The Tiger's Struggle

The Tiger has a core fear of being abandoned, so when they feel alone they may often react out of panic. "Where have you been?! How could you leave me waiting like that?!" The Turtle

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experiences this as harsh and demeaning. It is often very hard to see that underneath the angry voice is a vulnerable soul who, at a neurological level, is terrified. Even harder to see, is how much love that Tiger would give if she had a chance. Each missed connection tears the Tiger apart, provoking feelings of fear, rage and indignation. If only the Tiger felt safe enough, she would be able to say, "I missed you terribly...I got scared something was wrong." Admitting this is so, so difficult sometimes. If you identify with the role of the Tiger, see if you can say to yourself right now, "I feel terrible just thinking of being without my partner." Don't worry about what the solution for your individual situation will be. Just see if you can sit with that feeling of being alone. If you can touch this part of you and still hold onto yourself, you are making an important step toward allowing your partner to get close to you.

What if you can't relate to this? What if you feel your partner really does neglect you? If this is the case, allow yourself for a moment to consider the possibility that your partner really is too neglecting. You don't need to say it out loud right now. But acknowledge this possibility for yourself. "My partner really doesn't give me what I want. I deserve to feel connected to my partner. My partner should be able to make me feel safe." Give yourself that.

Now, given that you really shouldn't have to feel this alone, and that we are acknowledging this and not questioning it, can you locate a part of yourself that nevertheless feels empathy for your partner who, for whatever reason, has to live inside a shell?

A question you will want to answer for yourself is, "What am I afraid would happen if I were to try to give my partner some space?" Perhaps you feel he will never come back to you. Perhaps

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you feel he will hurt you again. Perhaps you feel you don't know how you could go on without him, either outside the relationship, or without the person you want your partner to be.

Somewhere below the tough exterior of the Tiger is an existential struggle with individuality. My invitation to you is to use your relationship as forum in which to explore being your own person.

If you were more your own person, what would you do?

How Can Couple's Therapy Help?

If improving your relationship was just a matter of understanding these basic dynamics, you could probably achieve peace and connection by reading a few well-recommended books on relationships. I believe this happens more than we know. But some couples have been hurt so much by the negative interactions in their relationship that it doesn't feel safe to let down defences – even though many of these defences keep the negative cycle going.

What couple therapy can do is to help partner translate their defences into language the other person can hear. Most tigers, for instance, have no idea that their turtles' guilt-laden disappearance stems from thwarted attempts to please the tiger. And most turtles, for instance, have no idea that their tigers often have very high opinions of them, often seeing them as excellent providers, or as “the one they can run to.”

It's a common occurrence when I interview couples that as I explore with each partner the intentions and the meaning of their behavior, partners are able to see the vulnerabilities that lie beneath the surface of the hurtful things that have been said and done. Sometimes a man is so humiliated by his failed attempts to please his wife, that it is only with a third party that he can admit feeling like less than a man. Sometimes a woman feels so invalidated by her attempts to

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connect with her husband, it is only to a third party that she feels she is making any sense.

Once two people in a committed relationship can start to each other as “safe” again, the real work of the relationship can begin. Both parties have some persecuting and abandoning behaviors that need to be translated into more adaptive ways of connecting. It might seem counterintuitive, but when a person is neglecting a relationship, it is still a communication. Many people can be helped to say, “I don’t feel safe disagreeing with you...that’s why I hide in the garage working on the car. I’d rather just leave some decisions to you.” It might be hard to picture right now, but a person who is used to criticizing his or her partner, often pushing the other person away, is often very lonely and would welcome contact if it was offered.

“But we’re not crazy! Why do we need therapy?”

Many people balk at the idea of “couple therapy” because it implies that someone has to be suffering from a mental or emotional disorder. This is a matter of considerable debate, because I believe couples are best helped by trained clinicians who are equipped to recognize problems such as substance abuse, childhood trauma, and many other clinical issues that may affect a couple. But couple therapy has much more in common with coaching and education when done well. Traditional therapy involves providing clients with a corrective emotional experience that completes a person’s gap in development. In couple therapy, my perspective is that the relationship is the arena of healing, not the therapist. So, while it often takes a person with the sensitivity of a therapist to provide the education necessary to heal a relationship, the real work is for me, as the clinician to educate couples about the nature of their negative cycles, and coach them on how to create a positive, healing, life-affirmative interchange that sustains their relationship in a lasting way.

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I'd like to hear from you!

Was this ebook helpful? What is your reaction? Do you have further questions? This document is a work in progress that I am always interested in improving. Let me know your thoughts. Email me at ben@benjaminseaman.com or visit newyorkcitycouples.com to stay connected.

Cordially,

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