

How To Deal When Your Partner Is Cold & Has No Empathy

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As humans, it's in our nature to empathize. All the evidence is that we are *not* cut-throat, survival-of-the-fittest evolutionary competitors, we are actually bonding animals who are naturally cooperative and empathic.

In fact, studies by Michael Tomasello and colleagues show that even 14-month-old babies will offer to help an adult who cannot do a task and will comfort someone in distress. But often in romantic relationships we feel that our partner is cold and unfeeling. Let me give you an example from my decades of working with couples in distress.

Amy tells me that her husband John has no empathy. "He's clueless," she says, "and I'm beginning to give up."

But maybe, rather than assuming that John is a Neanderthal, it's better to get curious about what is getting in the way of his natural empathic response.

"What is blocking John's ability to tune into you and be moved by your distress?" I ask.

She raises her brows and looks at me with surprise. (Or is it scorn?) So we set out to see if John is really so cold. Does he have some kind of physical problem, like Asperger syndrome or Attention Deficit Disorder that makes it really difficult for him to focus and grasp her emotions?

Probably not.

More likely the main two blocks to empathy are: (1) There is too much emotional static in the one receiving the message and/or (2) the message is hard to decode. Let me explain.

Once a couple become distressed, both of these blocks to empathy appear. At one moment, Amy begins to cry, saying that she is lonely and has lost the John she loved.

John sits and stares at the floor. So, I ask him if he sees her tears. He looks up, glances at her and says he does. What does he feel?

"Not much," he replies.

I ask him again. “Can you let yourself feel what you see on her face? Your brain has something called mirror neurons that usually set you up to kind of try on the expressions you see on her face and then sense those feelings in your own body. It’s your brains way of predicting other people’s behavior. But something is interfering here. What do you feel in your body as you look at her face?”

He leans forward and stares at me. “Tense” he says, “Kind of waiting.”

“Something bad is coming?” I suggest and he nods.

“She is upset, but what I get is that she is mad at me,” John says. “I am not the person she wants me to be. I don’t know what she wants from me ... I can’t seem to deliver here.”

What John is telling me is that a tidal wave of threat and potential loss bears down on him and he is so busy coping with the roar that he can’t even register his lady’s pain, let alone tune into it and figure out how to comfort her. To say that John is too distracted with his own emotional turmoil to give his wife the empathic response she needs is an understatement.

But once he can talk about this threat and begin to calm himself, he will be able to hear her. The other block to empathy is that the message is unclear and just hard to hear. Amy coats her message about being lonely and needing John in criticism and anger—he doesn’t hear her vulnerability. The irony is that the more he loves her, the more he will focus on the anger of her message and miss her fear and pain.

But as John expresses his fears of letting her down and as she opens up about how much she needs closeness with him, they do find their natural sympathy and understanding for each other.

The good news in all of this is that once we understand the drama of love relationships and the blocks to empathy, we can walk around them and find each other, again and again and again.