



Love's Little Blind Spots

Why we miss what's going on with those we care about.

By Tim Jarvis

Attention deficit The power of your partner's self-absorption—how he or she can sit so cheerfully through dinner, oblivious to the fact that you're visibly upset, for example—may amaze you, but don't write off the relationship so fast. There are a couple of good excuses to explain such clueless behavior, and they're likely to apply to you as well.



Illustration: Wes Duvall

The first excuse has to do with an innocent brain glitch called attentional blink. Originally described by Canadian scientists in 1992, it occurs in certain circumstances when, for a split second, "we literally become unconscious of what might be happening right in front of us," says Richard Davidson, PhD, professor of psychology and psychiatry at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Researchers can elicit the blink by showing subjects a rapid stream of numbers on a computer screen and asking them to hit a button every time they see a 3. When two 3s appear closely together, Davidson says, almost nobody hits the button twice. "It's as if the mind gets stuck on the occurrence of the first and misses the second."

This is particularly true when we're in a heated or passionate interchange. "With emotional cues, our attention is very sticky," he explains.

"We tend to grasp onto certain things, which is really what causes us to miss the others. Rubbernecking on the freeways is an example of attentional grasping." Davidson's latest research showed, however, that three months of intensive vipassana—or insight—meditation significantly reduced attentional blink. "Vipassana increases awareness of one's surroundings in a nonjudgmental, nonreactive way," Davidson says, but he believes any kind of meditation, even 20 minutes a day, could make spouses better at reading each other's subtleties.

There's another reason people fail to notice their lover's gestures, expressions, or words: "If you're doing well as a couple, basically you have a reservoir of goodwill, so he can be momentarily neglectful or mean-spirited, and it's discounted," says Timothy W. Smith, PhD, a psychology professor at the University of Utah who studies the effects of marital interactions on health. "But couples not doing so well are quick to make a great deal of the lapse." Smith agrees that meditation can help spouses connect with more clarity and awareness.

Davidson recommends starting with a simple meditation of focusing on your breath; when your mind wanders, notice how it's distracted, and come back to your breathing. With regular practice, he says, "I believe a couple would be able to pick up more information about each other's emotional state and do it in a way that is not judgmental. The combination of those two things bodes quite well for improving interpersonal relationships."

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