

# SOURCE LINES

## HOLD ME TIGHT—PART ONE



Source Line Wellness Letter

### DO YOU KNOW WHAT YOUR RELATIONSHIP 'RAW SPOTS' ARE?

"For all of us, the person we love most in the world, the one who can send us soaring joyfully into space, is also the person who can send us crashing back to earth. All it takes is a slight turning of the head or flip, careless remark. There is no closeness without this sensitivity. If our connection with our mate is safe and strong, we can deal with these moments of sensitivity. Indeed we can use them to bring our partners closer. But when we don't feel safe and connected, these moments are like a spark in a tinder forest. They set fire to the whole relationship." Sue Johnson  
Therapist and Author of Hold Me Tight: Seven Conversations for a Lifetime of Love

Can you remember the last time that your partner sent you "crashing back to earth" with some thoughtless comment, or

facial expression? It could have been an offhand comment you did not appreciate, or a gesture like rolling eyes. Did you take it up with them there and then or later? If you discussed it, did it bring you closer or did it start a quarrel and stay unresolved?

We all have our vulnerabilities or sensitivities. Sue Johnson calls them 'raw spots': places in our emotional skin that is tender to the touch, easily rubbed and deeply painful. These sensitivities are often rooted in wounding relationships of the past, such as parents, siblings or past and present partners.

This raw spot gets touched most often in an intimate relationship. Humans from birth to death seek emotional attachment. An attachment cue is a trigger that plugs you into your partner.

They can be positive or negative bringing up good or bad feelings. If an attachment cue irritates a raw spot, then the brain signals an alarm that something bad may happen. It could be as subtle as a critical tone of voice. When a raw spot gets touched, we lose our composure and get upset.

When upset, we can easily sink into a negative interactional pattern with our partner. Some couples blame the other and try place fault on each other. In other couples one typically pursues and attacks and the other stone walls or withdraws. It is best when couples try to avoid these negative patterns and find ways to sort through the concerns with their partner. This requires going deeper beneath the surface behaviour and feelings to each person's vulnerabilities.

## How to Deal With Raw Spots and Your Relationship

### 1. Recognize when a raw spot is rubbed

There are two signs that a raw spot has been hit by you or your partner. The first is a sudden shift in the emotional tone of the conversation. The second is that the reaction to a perceived offense seems way out of proportion.

### 2. Identify your own raw spots

Try to pinpoint a time in your current relationship when you suddenly got thrown off balance and some small response or no response suddenly changed your sense of safety and comfort with your partner. Ask yourself: What was happening in the relationship? What was the attachment cue that triggered a sense of emotional disconnection? What did your partner say or do that sparked that reaction in you?

### 3. Become aware of your own reactions

When your own raw spot is rubbed, your body may have a reaction, like tightness in your chest, feeling detached, tearful, numbness or anger. Your mind also reacts. What do you say to

yourself when this happens?

Try to fill in the blanks below:

In this incident, the trigger for my raw feelings was \_\_\_\_\_.

On the surface, I probably showed \_\_\_\_\_.

But deep down, I just felt \_\_\_\_\_ (sad, angry, frightened, ashamed).

What I longed for was \_\_\_\_\_.

The main message I got about our bond, about me or my love was \_\_\_\_\_.

Example: "The trigger for me is my husband's tone. It sounds judgemental and dismissive. I showed anger on the surface but deep down I was scared and alone. I longed for reassurance and his support. The main message about our relationship was that I could not count him caring for me."

### 4. Finding the Source of Your Raw Spots

In thinking about your history, did your raw spot arise in your relationship with your parents, your siblings, peers boyfriends/girlfriends when you grew up? Do you think your partner sees your raw spot or just your surface reactive feelings and behaviour? Do

you know your partner's raw spots? Do you know exactly what to do to irritate it? J

### 5. Sharing With Your Partner

By sharing with your partner your sensitivities and vulnerabilities, you avoid falling into the negative patterns that lead to dissatisfaction and emotional distance in your relationship. This is not easy to do. You may worry of being laughed at or rejected or seen as weak when sharing your softest feelings of vulnerability.

Think about how much your attachment and love for your child grows when they share their vulnerabilities with you. So, go on and try sharing your vulnerabilities with your partner. Stop avoiding. You may also be surprised by how it helps to bring you closer to your partner when you take the risk.

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This edition of Source Lines is the first of a four-part series of articles based on the highly regarded work of Sue Johnson, Ph.D.

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