

Losing yourself in love can sound like a romantic notion. But it can contribute to a relationship's demise. Lisa Firestone tells us how to stay yourself in a relationship

## Let there be spaces in your togetherness



Some of you might remember the movie *Runaway Bride*, in which a reporter is writing an article on a woman who has made a habit of getting engaged and then abandoning the man at the altar. While interviewing the would-be grooms, the reporter asked them how their former fiancé preferred her eggs. Each suitor had a different answer, “scrambled, poached, sunny-side up,” but they all ended by saying, “just like me.” This small example illustrates quite well a tendency that we all have—to give up aspects of ourselves in our relationships.

In an effort to connect with someone else [in our imaginations], we often forego our own independence and individuality. We attempt to mould ourselves into what we imagine our partner wants us to be. This pattern can have much deeper consequences than the way we take our eggs. It can leave us with the same inclination to not show our ‘real selves’ and to be defended in our close relationships.

While evolution and change are a natural part of life, a relationship thrives when we are able to hold on to the unique person we were when we first met—not in a defiant way, but in a positive sense. So why do we so readily give up our identity, lose track of the person we once were, and ignore the disappearance of that initial spark in our relationship?

### If it's futile why do we do it?

For one thing, when we get close to someone, we tend to replay dynamics from our childhood. We often form what my father, psychologist and author Robert Firestone, calls a “Fantasy Bond” where we lose track of the fact that we are two separate and complete people. Forming a Fantasy Bond can ease insecurities or alleviate anxiety. This bond tends to bury our fears of feeling alone. However,

it also numbs us to our real feelings of love for the other person and dulls the pain and sadness that arises whenever we contemplate their eventual loss.

One destructive dynamic that can play out in a relationship is a tendency to become overly dependent on our partner. A relationship often thrives in its early stages, because both partners are functioning as strong, independent, and self-sufficient people choosing to spend time together, choosing to be kind to each other, and choosing to share activities. As we settle into habit or routine, we forego this sense of adventure and genuine interest for a sense of security and dependence.

### Only ‘we’, no ‘I’

If we lose our identity in the relationship, we often stop feeling like two separate individuals and begin to speak in terms of ‘we’ and ‘us.’ We may start to view our partner as we would our right arm, which diminishes the attraction we once felt.

### Recreate the past

Without even realizing it, we are often at risk of recreating our past. We may start to repeat destructive patterns we saw parents or other



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influential figures engage in. If our parents were critical or verbally abusive toward each other, we may act out in similar ways toward our partner. If our parents or caretakers treated us in a way that was hurtful or damaging, we may seek out a partner who treats us this same way. In our closest relationships, we tend to preserve the identity we formed in our families rather than facing the anxiety of adopting a more positive image of ourselves. We may even try to provoke these negative reactions in our partner. Although these defensive patterns are at best, unpleasant and, at worst, dangerous, we often perpetuate them because they are familiar to us. It can feel very threatening to challenge our old identity or defensive adaptations that have become a way of life and make us feel safe.

### Being a parent to your partner

We may also settle into roles with our partner, where one of us plays the child, and the other plays the parent. In doing so, we keep our parents alive and present in our minds. This can be very destructive when we use the more harmful attitudes of our parents to overshadow our own point of view toward our partner. A man I worked with tended to submit to his wife on every practical decision they faced as a couple. Although she claimed that his indecisiveness drove her crazy, she quickly settled into the role of being the decision-maker in their household. Over time, he demanded her opinion on everything from the car he drove to the shirt he wore to work.

By the time they came to see me as a couple, this parent-child dynamic in their marriage had been playing out for years. He complained about her being dominating, while she complained of him being weak. A look into their past revealed that he had grown up with two controlling parents who disregarded his opinion. She'd grown up with a mother who fell apart at the drop of a hat and a father who could barely keep a job, so she took on the role of caretaker. When the couple met, they were both taking care of

themselves and were drawn to each other for positive traits and similar interests. However, it didn't take long for them to start acting out respective patterns from their childhood that had little, if anything, to do with each other. Armed with this realisation, they were able to make conscious choices to differentiate from their past and treat each other with equality and respect. He was able to become more assertive, and she was able to relinquish control.

Part of the reason these defenses become stronger over time is because, as we get closer to our partner, we are becoming distant from our past and more separate emotionally from our parents. This movement can feel threatening, and we often have a strong desire to reconnect or attach to old, familiar identities. At this point, we may begin listening to the 'critical inner voices' in our heads.

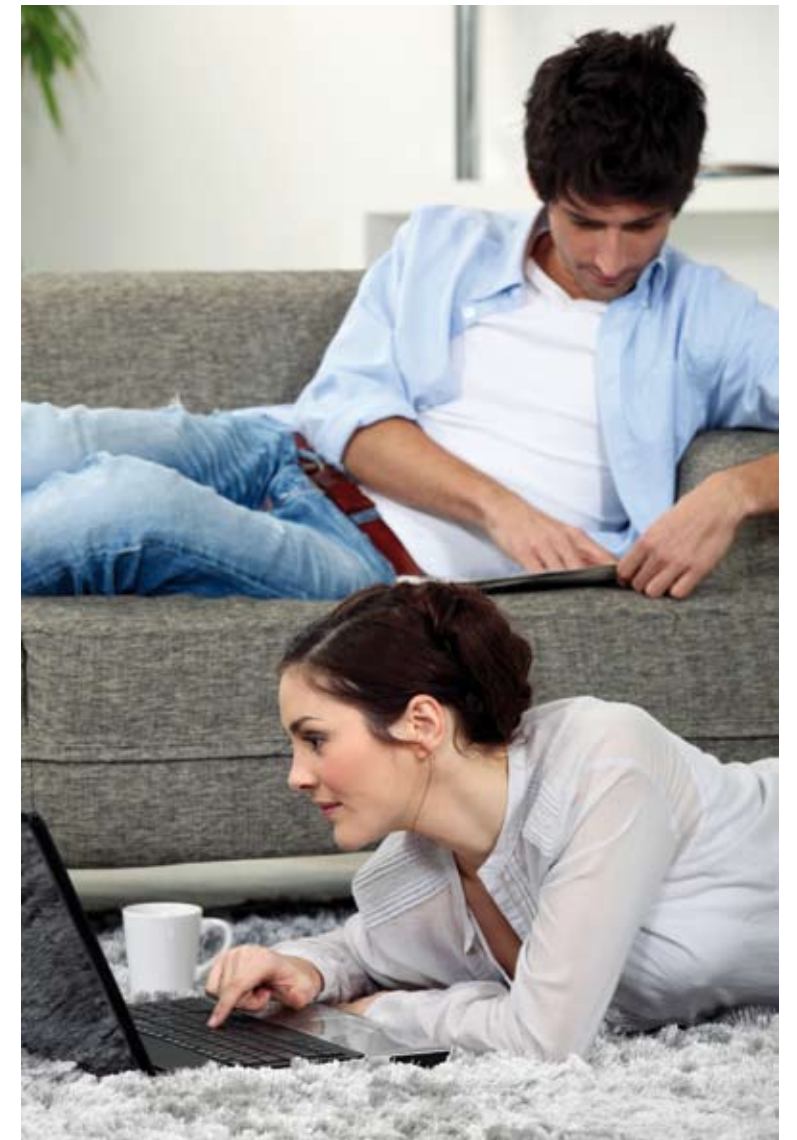
### Untrusting or unsafe

Often times, our partner's loving feelings and actions will challenge the critical thoughts we have toward ourselves, and we may react negatively to our partner. For example, a woman I worked with noticed that every time her husband complimented her, she would have an angry reaction. Once, he told her how much he loved her long hair, and the very next day she went to the hairdresser to cut it short. When exploring her reaction, she realised that her parents had been highly critical of her appearance when she was growing up. Any compliment or positive acknowledgement from her partner went against the deep-seated negative feelings she had about herself, which she felt too uncomfortable or anxious to challenge.

Once we become aware of the unhealthy patterns that lead us to lose ourselves in our relationship, we can find a way to strike a balance between being our own independent person and sharing our lives with someone else. Here are four principles to keep in mind.

**1** Don't give up your interests. Continue to engage in activities that light you up

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and encourage your partner to do the same. Don't place unnecessary restrictions on your partner or yourself. Make sure to maintain and nourish your friendships and not to give up existing relationships just because you are dating someone.

**2** Challenge your critical inner voice. Try to identify the negative coaching you experience and separate it from your real point of view. How do you really feel about yourself? Your relationship? Your partner? What attitudes are expressive of your true point of view and which might be destructive overlays from your past?

**3** Don't reenact your past. Look at traits you didn't like in your parents and make a conscious effort to not reenact these characteristics. Separate from attitudes of your past that you didn't like or do not agree with. In this same way, try to look at the ways you adapted to your early environment that aren't constructive to your current relationship.

**4** Formulate your own values and principles. Decide what kind of person you want to be in your relationship. Take power in your relationship by being the person you want to be, acting on your beliefs and values, no matter what your partner does. This will lead to feelings of equality between you and your partner.

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ships where one partner is playing the parent role most of the time and the other is playing the more childish, dependent role. By striving to become ourselves and to maintain our individuality and true interdependence within our relationships, we can nurture our feelings of love and vitality. While we all possess fears of intimacy, we can confront these fears by challenging ourselves to pursue closeness without succumbing to our defenses. We can choose real love over fantasy and create a relationship that helps us become our truest selves; a relationship that fulfills us and enriches our lives.



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