

Opposites Attract: do they really?

How understanding your relationship style will transform your marriage.

Once upon a time, a hailstorm and a turtle fell in love. "I can't live without you!" thought the hailstorm. "I feel so complete with you!" exclaimed the turtle. The turtle didn't notice the hailstorm's hail, and the hailstorm didn't see the turtle's shell because they were both blissfully happy.

But one day the turtle got angry and withdrew into its shell. This made the hailstorm explode in fury. Another day, the hailstorm first exploded in fury, which pushed the turtle into its shell.

Over time, the hailstorm hailed and the turtle turtled on a regular basis. There were fewer days when the two got along and felt connected, and more days when they found themselves isolated in their roles. This angered and disappointed both. And the space between them became empty and silent. Each thought that the other was at fault and that the other should change.

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Does this story sound familiar? Whether you are entering marriage or have been married for 30 years, this fable usually proves to be eye-opening. It enables couples to view their spouse from an entirely different perspective: that the behavior that drives us so crazy is really their attempt to make themselves safe.

People express their energy in two ways, by expand-

ing outward or by constricting inward. Just as one breathes by inhaling and exhaling, so too one's energy and life force is either moving inward or outward.

We find, in relationships, that couples complement each other. In order for the relationship to be balanced and whole, there is always one who is maximizing energy outward and one who is minimizing inward. (Please note that the purpose of these terms is not to label people or shame them; rather, they are a description of the way our energy is expressed in our relationship.) While women are usually the maximizers/hailstorms and men are the minimizers/turtles, this changes, depending upon the context. For example, a woman might be a maximizer with her husband but a minimizer with her mother. In addition, although each person has his or her own natural response, we typically function in opposition to our partners. That means that, even if both husband and wife are minimizers, in their relationship to each other, one will play the role of the maximizer.

Why is it so significant to understand this concept? As we read in the story, our expression of energy can be very unsafe for our spouse. When a hailstorm feels threatened, she tends to expand her energy outward, magnifying everything into a crisis. On the other hand, a threatened turtle holds in or tones down his energy, defending himself or retreating into his shell. When we were younger, we learned how to respond to stress or discomfort by reacting in one of

these two manners. While this kept us safe as a child, it does not serve us well in a mature, intimate relationship.

The reason why it is no longer helpful is that the very way we get safe is what triggers our partner. The threatened hailstorm, who pushes her energy outward and creates a big drama, forces the turtle to feel unsafe and to retreat deeper into his shell, which then provokes more of a threat and more drama from the hailstorm. The process does not cease, leaving the hailstorm wondering why her husband is so cold and unavailable and the turtle wondering why his wife is so mean and critical.

Once we understand what is happening in this interchange, we can adjust our approach. My wife isn't out to get me; she is actually feeling unsafe, and does not intend to harm me. My husband is not trying to avoid me; he is actually feeling threatened and does not intend to hurt me. This consciousness awakens within us compassion and curiosity to find out what is making our spouse unsafe, instead of our previous feelings of threat and fear. We no longer have to dramatize or run away when we experience this behavior; we can break the cycle by engaging in a safe dialogue. The more safety we bring into our relationship, the less need for us to revert to our old patterns.

As mentioned above, the purpose of this information is not to pigeon-hole or label each other. What I have found

is that it actually normalizes a lot of the conflict that couples are experiencing. It is easy to vilify your spouse and give up hope on the relationship improving, yet when couples discover that some of the interactions they are experiencing are very “normal”, they begin to regain hope for their relationship. As they begin to understand that these defensive adaptations are how most couples react when faced with conflict, they realize that their marriage may not be doomed as previously thought.

When I have helped couples view their conflict through the lens of turtles and hailstorms, it often has a dramatic impact. Couples begin to view their spouse’s behavior in a whole new light. My wife, Rivka, shares with me that during our first Imago workshop that we attended, our facilitator led an exercise that forever impacted her. He divided the room into turtles and hailstorms. As he began to describe what it felt like for the turtles, she was finally able to step into my shoes and understand how I experienced her hail. She realized how my reluctance at times was really me feeling unsafe, not that I was being contrary or stubborn. We both began to become aware of when the other was under stress and instead of escalating the conflict, we were able to be conscious and stop it in its tracks.

While this idea may seem simplistic, it is a profound understanding of human behavior that will forever change the way you view your spouse.

The following checklist is designed to help you learn more about yourself and how you typically get safe. The purpose is to foster a greater awareness so that you can act from a more conscious place. Place a plus (+) or a minus (-) by the behavior that applies to you most often.

TURTLES <i>(Minimizing)</i>	+ or -	HAILSTORMS <i>(Maximizing)</i>	+ or -
When I get upset I tend to...		When I get upset I tend to...	
feel tight inside and do not verbalize my emotions.		express my feelings with a lot of energy.	
adopt an "I'll take care of myself/I don't need anyone" attitude.		turn to others and talk to them about what I am going through.	
not be able to tell my partner why I'm upset.		tell my partner all about my upset.	
express very few if any needs.		need others around when I am upset and am very open with my feelings.	
exclude others from my personal space.		express my needs verbally and try to get my partner to hear and to respond.	
withhold my feelings, thoughts, and behaviors.		feel responsible for making the relationship work and getting my partner to open up and talk.	
figure things out by myself.		be excessively generous.	
feel safer alone or in situations that are not intense.		get others' input about what I should be doing to handle the situation.	
Total		Total	

Now, complete this sentence: “When I get upset, I tend to become like a (Turtle)/(Hailstorm) (depending on which got more plus marks in the above chart) to hide my fear of/that...”

Write what fear you think your habitual response is hiding. (The fear may not be apparent.) For example, you could write: “being unimportant,” “that you don’t love me,” “that you will leave me,” “that you will control me,” “that you will smother me,” “that you will reject me.”

* Turtles and Hailstorm story and chart © by Harville Hendrix, Ph.D. and Helen LaKelly Hunt, Ph.D.