

Hold me tight: The lessons in love

Laura and Lars

'It feels like a revolution in our relationship. I didn't dare to hope that we could be so intimately connected again.

Speaking is Laura, a working young mother of three daughters. 'I appreciated very much that Lars agreed to come with me to this weekend,' she continued, 'because he doesn't like 'psychobabble'. This weekend has meant a lot for us. We are at last really in touch with each other again. For both of us it was confronting to see how we got stuck in those nasty patterns. And it was so special to share our deepest emotions and to be able to understand them. I now see Lars again as the great guy with whom I wanted to grow old together. She takes her man's hand and says in a very sweet way: 'If he would ask me now to marry him I would say 'Yes'.

'Laura, do you want to marry me,' says Lars.

Lessons in love

The proposal of Lars takes place on Sunday, during the last hour of the second day of the 'Hold me tight' weekend. The seven couples who attended 'Hold me tight', discussed with each other and with us, what they learned during the weekend and how they can use the discoveries they made in the future.

One day earlier on Saturday morning at nine, seven nervous couples, coming from different regions in the Netherlands gather together in a conference centre to meet each other and the two marital therapists Berry Aarnoudse and myself, who try hard as well to make a relaxed impression. It is the first time we give this course and the first time we work with a group of couples in this way. They were selected out of the couples that wrote to Margriet after the article in which we explained about 'Hold me tight'. Some of the other candidates had problems who were too severe for this program, for instance because one of the partners was very depressed or because they didn't have feelings anymore for each other. Other couples retreated themselves on second thought and some women couldn't persuade their husbands to come with them. Women notice often in an earlier stage that their relationship is diminishing. Perhaps they expected more of it, while men are inclined to think that it will become better again and that 'it will be always something with women and relationships: always complicated, so don't pay too much attention to it.

Aarnoud, 72, for instance and our eldest participant starts by saying that he just accompanied his wife, but doesn't think much about a course like this. We will see what happens to him.

Hold me tight

Hold me tight is a program that was written by Dr Sue Johnson, the world famous English-Canadian couples therapist and founder of Emotionally Focused Couples therapy (EFT), a method that is based on the attachment theory. We all have an

inborn need to be connected with someone who loves us and with whom we feel safe. The main problem with couples that get problems in their relationship is that they feel that this connection is threatened. They fight about the chaos in their house or about the fact that the other one is always working, but actually it's about the fear of not being important for your loved one anymore and for losing each other at the end. Couples feel too vulnerable to tell this directly to the other one, so they get lost in reproaches or seem indifferent. They develop patterns in which for instance one pursues the other with reproaches, while trying to show him that there is no real connection anymore. The other one gets a feeling through this that he fails and cannot do anything right. So he defends himself for a short time and then becomes silent and withdraws. After this his spouse tries even more vividly and emotionally to reach him. In the program 'Hold me tight', couples who feel how their love is slipping through their fingers learn to understand their pattern, to realize their fears and their longings for connection and to find the courage to tell each other about them and experience again their love for each other. They do so in seven steps, seven conversations. Those conversations are explained in the book 'Hold me tight' which the couples had to read as 'homework' before the course. Most women did, most men didn't. In the course we give an explanation about each conversation. After this people have to practice the conversation with each other. The two therapists, EFT therapist Berry Arnoudse and myself observe the couples, and offer some help when the conversation gets stuck or support partners when emotion takes over. For these conversations with each other the couples go and sit in a quiet corner. The therapists join them sometimes and sometimes are asked by couples to do so and help. Our introductions for every step are followed with the attention of very diligent students, even more when Berry and I give examples of (our) everyday life, or demonstrate in a role-play how conversations between couples can deteriorate. But the 'real work' is done in the exercises with their own partners

In frame

The seven conversations

- 1 Recognition of the pattern
- 2 Discover your pain spots
- 3 Look back on a crisis
- 4 Hold me tight: Ask what you need from your partner
- 5 Forgive hurt from the past
- 6 Strengthen the bond by touching and sex
- 7 Keep your love alive

David and Rose

David and Rose have been married for 11 years. They have twins of 10 years old and a son of 8. David has been seriously ill and it is not sure if he will completely recover. Roos has besides her family a busy job and lives in fear because of David. 'Things are getting worse between us', she wrote in her letter, 'there is much shouting, many lonely moments and much irritation. We, of all people should know, how short and precious life is but we don't live like that. We have lost each other.'

Conversation two is about discovering the pain behind the anger and pretended indifference. The conversation of David and Rose starts by telling about the disorder in the household and David's way of shouting at the children that makes Roos furious. David defends himself on those occasions, gets also mad and then both fall silent. 'That's how it is at home', Roos says, 'long days of silence and I must always be the first one to start talking again.'

Then David takes his notebook and designs a little figure that stands near the border of a ravine. 'Roos is standing there all alone,' he says, 'and it is too much for her. So I withdraw to make sure that I am not an extra burden for her. If there is a distance between us she will be at peace with herself.'

I set down with Roos and David because I saw how their conversation stopped and they were sitting silently opposite each other with angry and closed faces. 'How do you feel?' I ask Roos, 'there on the border of the ravine. 'So terribly lonely,' she says with tears dripping from her cheeks. 'So lonely that I think: 'I could as well be really on my own.' David puts his hand carefully on her knee, but she doesn't react.

The next day, during the conversation in which they have to say what they need from each other, she dares to express how frightened she is of losing David. He belittles problems to take away her fear but it is only now that he understands how he is making her even more scared and lonely by doing so. She is scared of losing him and lonely because the person whose understanding she needs the most, seems not to be able to understand and support her. 'I need you, she says, 'I need my husband.'

David's hand that is touching her now feels good and warm, she says.

Wouter and Vivian

Sometimes the painful spots that couples touch on each other have to do with things that happened in the past. Wouter notices a sadness that he recognizes. If this feeling is touched by Vivian, he withdraws behind an imaginative wall. He feels resistant and powerless. Vivian tries to get through to him but is giving up more and more. They don't have a bad relationship, but there is a distance, they both feel, that is bothering them. When Vivian tries to make clear to Wouter that she wants him to be more open, he feels the same as he was feeling with his mother before. When he was 11 years old, he was the only one who knew that she had a lover whom she was meeting during business trips of his father. He never talked about this. With no one, even not with her. His mother was depressed and fearful from time to time. She was

convinced in those moments that she had cancer and her little son had to assure her that she was healthy and that he loved her. What else could he say if not the things she wanted to hear? In loving he became careful from that moment.

His silence evokes in Vivian a memory of the loneliness in the family in which she grew up. She had a mother who claimed her father in such a way that she even couldn't bare his daughter getting any attention from him. There was no one there for Vivian and she feels like knocking on that wall again when Wouter discloses himself from her. She asks him to share his feeling with her and he promises that he will make an effort to find words for his feelings.

Chantal en Nick

Chantal isn't silent, she talks and talks very fast and intensely to her husband Nick. In the fifth conversation couples look back to a crisis. They try to talk about something in the past that is remembered with pain and resentment and is never really understood or forgiven. When Nick came back after a severe operation and asked Chantal if she could help him, Chantal answered: 'Why? You yourself went to work when I was ill.' Nick said nothing; he shut his mouth like he always did, about his feelings at that moment. The more Chantal talked, the less she reached Nick. After I came and sat close to them during their conversation I asked why Chantal talks so much, so fast and so loud. She does so overcome her fear we discover. As a child Chantal has been beaten and locked in. Most children cannot defend themselves against violence. Chantal can. She lived in a posh neighborhood and cried out on top of her voice if she had been hurt. She kept doing so: shouting when she felt pain. That is why Nick keeps automatically his ears shut. When I ask Chantal if she can talk slowly and with a soft voice, I must hold her a few times because again she stampedes and brings on one argument after another. But eventually she says in a soft and trembling voice to Nick: 'When you ask me to help you, I feel as if I let you down again because you had to ask me while I should have known. And when I fail like I so often did already, then I am scared that you will leave me and I will stay all alone.'

Both have tears in their eyes when Nick says: 'I don't leave you, I love you, but if you don't want to look after me when I am ill and when you just talk and talk I get a feeling that I'm not important to you at all. That you and you alone are important and everything you want and feel and that I just have to listen'.

Let's talk about sex

Touching each other and making love to each other strengthens in a special way the bond you have with your partner. At the same time you notice that especially in this very vulnerable place people can feel often hurt and rejected. The sixth conversation almost at the end of the second day is about sex and again about patterns. While women often (but not always) are trying to connect by talking, men more often (but not always) want to create connection through lovemaking. And again you can see how some couples eventually withdraw on their own island when they are not able to reach and hold each other. 'If you don't find me attractive then I don't care about it

either. ' And then they not only lose the passion but also the tender caressing. To touch each other has become a risk 'because he (or she) always wants more' or 'Because he (she) doesn't like sex with me at all and will reject me.'

Sophie and Tom

Sophie and Tom got eventually a son, through IVF after a long period of trying to get pregnant. They experienced the treatment and the repeated failure of it as very difficult. Sophie did have a feeling of not being herself because of the hormones she received and it is very difficult during a treatment like this to make love in a spontaneous way. Then at the end there was this very lively little boy with whom they were so happy and who asked all their attention. On top of that Sophie became ill. Because of this illness her energy was limited and she needed much support from Tom. He tried to offer her help but often he didn't feel how to do this in a right way. The irritations during the day caused a distance in bed. It became a place where they just slept. Tom is not the kind of guy who forces Sophie to do anything she doesn't want. He is kind and quiet. During this weekend he first realized why Sophie's criticism affected him so much. He has been bullied at school and has learned there to become invisible to avoid trouble.

Tom and Sophie are taken by a strange kind of shyness to each other as it concerns sexual intimacy. They long for it, but it feels strange. The solution they find (with a little help) is start all over again. First be sweet and loving to each other, give some compliments or a little present, then follows a kiss and a caress, then play and seduce and eventually give in. More or less how they did it before but, while still knowing what they know now.

Willem en Renske

We saw other couples holding hands, hugging or secretly kissing before it was the subject of this sixth conversation. Willem and Renske for instance did so. Willem is a successful businessman who has to travel a lot for his company. Renske and he met each other after an earlier marriage and lost each other after a certain time. She feels that there is no place for her anymore in his busy life. Recently she experienced a big loss and now she tries to build up her life again. Willem tries to help her with 'sensible advices', through which she feels even more worthless. During the weekend he really listened to her and the pattern of 'attack and counterattack' which was their former way of interacting, has been softened. Renske's face changes. The tense expression disappears; she becomes more sweet and beautiful. And without any doubt, this is the reason that Willem takes her in his arms and holds her tight. Willem who is never without words, is this time very clear while being speechless.

Aarnoud and Maud

And yes we have Aarnoud. He was forced to accompany his wife Maud. The last day he sustains a somewhat closer view on his deeper feelings. He tells us how difficult it is for him that Maud sometimes is so depressed. Maud explains that in her opinion,

she inherited this tendency towards depression from her father. When she feels depressed she discloses, starts working on her pc, leaves the house, starts walking or gardening. Aarnoud cannot reach her in those moments. He tries to get through to her by talking with her and by proving that she has no reason to be sad. When this doesn't help, he feels powerless and gets mad. It is not so surprising that Maud never has understood that this is his way to connect to her again. What she needs, she says, is on one side the feeling that she has a right to feel like she does, also when she is sad and that he can let her be then for a moment. On the other side she wants to feel that he is there for her when she needs him. I have the impression that there is some contradiction in this, but Aarnoud understands exactly what she means and he thinks that he is the man who can offer her just that.

And then we say goodbye. The couples, but also Berry and myself tell how we felt during this weekend. I am surprised and touched that these people, who were so different in age and background, were opening up like this towards their partners. When we leave, there is nothing left of the tension of the Saturday morning. We are no longer strangers for each other.