

PlayNotes

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The Last Five Years by Jason Robert Brown



PORTLANDSTAGE
The Theater of Maine

BACKGROUND INFORMATION
INTERVIEWS & COMMENTARY

Community Connection: Interview with a Marriage Counselor

BY DYLAN GURRERA

Jamie and Cathy's romance builds from their fiery passion yet ultimately fractures into isolation, betrayal, loss, and heartbreak. Even though we witness their passion, we experience it in isolation: only seeing Jamie or Cathy in a place of joy. In this relationship, they both choose to work through—or not work through—major issues in their relationship. Do we see similar problems in our everyday relationships? How do people cope, support, or self-advocate in their romantic lives? *PlayNotes* sat down with EJ Hanks, a marriage counselor in North Carolina, to discuss the relationship dynamics in *The Last Five Years*.



EJ HANKS.

Dylan Gurrera (DG): *Thank you for taking the time to talk today, EJ. I wanted to discuss some of the dynamics in Cathy and Jamie's relationship. One of Jamie's first songs, "Moving Too Fast," speaks to how their relationship gets serious sooner than he imagined. While he is excited, he also expresses his concern about it. In your work, is it common for couples to move too fast in the beginning? Do certain issues arise?*

EJ Hanks (EJH): That's a very good question. There is a biological response to being in love. Our brain floods our body with hormones of intensity, typically at its highest at the beginning of a romantic relationship. Dopamine and oxytocin (both of which are known as the "feel good" hormones) are two powerful hormones that exist at relatively significant levels at this stage. One issue is that while oxytocin is naturally high at the beginning of a relationship, it can decrease over time. Problems can occur as these "feel good" hormones lessen and a lot of couples do not have practical skills to improve the friendship in the relationship to help manage conflict in a positive way.

DG: *In "I'm a Part of That," Cathy discusses her decision to support Jamie's success as a writer, which may come at the expense of pursuing her own career goals. Why might a person in a relationship choose to surrender their own personal goals in order to help their partner reach their goals? Do you have any words of advice for how to maintain a balance between pursuing your own goals and supporting a loved one's goals?*

EJH: It is very important to respect one another's personal and life goals and have a desire to assist one another in reaching them. Resentment can occur if one partner neglects or surrenders his or her own personal development to completely focus on another person's goals. This philosophy can be successful if we are simultaneously nurturing our shared goals to some degree. Creating shared meaning (the idea that both individuals understand each other) through goals is one of the most fulfilling aspects of a relationship. This shared meaning can really strengthen a connection, or bond, between two people. Although balancing the needs of both people may seem difficult, balance does not always mean a fifty-fifty balance. It can be a give-and-take depending on the shared meaning of that specific goal.

DG: *In "I Could Never Rescue You," Jamie places his own notion of what Cathy wanted in their relationship: for someone to rescue her and give her purpose. What happens when we put words or intentions into someone else's mouth?*

EJH: It is very difficult to share your thoughts and emotions when someone else answers for you. The words we choose can often mean the difference between increasing intimate opportunities in relationships or creating emotional distance through miscommunication. No one else can completely understand our position.



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DG: *On another note, do you see people getting into relationships because they hope their partner will rescue them in some way? What kind of relationship dynamic does that set up?*

EJH: What you are referring to is commonly called a “victim and rescuer” relationship. While this theme often helps the narrative of a great play, these two mindsets can also increase relational toxicity in real life. Victims look for the person that will make them feel better, and the rescuer always feels needed, even essential to his or her partner. Typically, there are no boundaries present and the couple is destined for therapy. The victim gets tired of being the victim. The rescuer gets tired of not being appreciated for rescuing.

DG: *In your last statement, it feels like that’s where communication would be key—that each partner could communicate their needs as they come up. Throughout this entire musical, we see Jamie and Cathy’s lack of communication and how that might affect their relationship. Why might a person be afraid of communicating in their relationship? Do you have any advice on communicating concerns within a relationship?*

EJH: The ability to have intimate and productive conversations is not one we’re born with. How we grew up and how we handle conflict and communication was modeled to us in some fashion. If it was difficult for us to state our true feelings, or talk about a different perception, then that is typically how we manage these issues in our present relationships. We must learn how to intentionally communicate non-defensively and openly. This is a skill-set that can be developed.

DG: *Lastly, I wanted to talk about coping with a relationship’s ending like Cathy does in “Still Hurting.” In this song, Cathy shares how hard it is to watch Jamie move on in his life, while she is still hurting. Do you have any advice for those currently coping with a break-up? How can we healthfully grieve a loss?*

EJH: This is indeed a traumatic event. It’s okay to grieve and feel sad about what happened. Despite who initiated the breakup, you are still experiencing a loss. Research has shown that social support is vital for your healing. This includes reaching out to people for specific responsibilities and remaining connected to the positive people in your life. Most importantly, you should have someone you trust to talk to about your feelings. As the grieving process progresses you will begin to see your way through.

DG: *Thank you, EJ. Is there anything else that you would like to say to our readers that we have not covered in this interview?*

EJH: I appreciated the opportunity to address your readers by answering a few relationship questions. Many of the skills that I mentioned, including communication, problem solving, and tolerating change, are all skills that can be learned. They are necessary contributors to building healthy relationships.



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