
ARE YOU PLAYING THE HUNGER GAME?



To be in an intimate relationship is profoundly courageous. It is the act of letting someone in and, in turn, letting your true self shine through enough to penetrate them. It is analogous to letting go of your self-protective armor and shouting from the rooftop that you need another who—by virtue of their being *another*—you cannot control. Terrifying as that may be, as social animals, we are so intrinsically wired to need this kind of authentic interpersonal connection that we generally find ways to make it happen.

“The Feast” by Robert C. Jackson

After going some time without adequate intimacy, we often make it happen out of a sense of desperation. We may suddenly find ourselves starved enough of companionship and authentic connection that we go out and feast.

Of course, this is most easily done with someone completely new, where the slate (plate?) is clean and the risk of showing ourselves and receiving whatever morsels of goodness they have to give is mitigated by the inherent unimportance of a person we don't yet know. The mind-blowing number of dating apps available on our phones offers a veritable buffet of potential mates with the simple swipe of a finger.



"Ketchup or Mustard" by Robert C. Jackson

Whether by swipe or old-school barhopping, we find a way to meet someone. We put ourselves on the line by being authentic and, if all goes well enough, an interpersonal exchange of nourishment takes place. For a glorious moment, it all feels so good, so warm, euphoric even...like the first bite of your favorite local cuisine after you've been out-of-town for an extended period.

But over time, something begins to shift:

A mounting investment into the uncontrollable and increasingly important other person becomes impossible to ignore...

Fear comes into play...

The mutuality of hunger and fulfillment begins to break down.

Thus begins the Hunger Game (Not the one with Jennifer Lawrence. Sorry).

There are two teams: Team Hunger and Team Full.

Team Hunger represents the individual who maintains their sense of hunger. However, in the case where the risk of intimacy once again becomes too much to bear, that hunger is exacerbated to the point where the person semi-consciously believes that they must be constantly binging on the sustenance provided by the other person in order to survive. In short, to bear the risk of investing in another, those on Team Hunger send the clear signal that their lives and existence are squarely in the hands of their partner; that for the other person to leave them is to put him/her to death by starvation. To be clear, although there is a tactical element to this approach, it is absolutely sincere. Those who find themselves on Team Hunger are often acutely aware of the terror faced by interpersonal deprivation and may feel themselves to be absolutely at the mercy of the other person just to scrap together enough sustenance for survival.

Team Hunger Key Tactic:

Binge to maintain the illusion of the other's infinite resources (and the responsibility of the other to ensure their survival)

Part of the reason that those on Team Hunger may feel so ravenous is that they are not only holding their own hunger, but also that of Team Full. Those on Team Full often react to fears of intimacy by becoming increasingly bored, numb or just plain apathetic in the context of the relationship. The (often unconscious) strategy is to be rid of their own sense of hunger which, fittingly, gets split-off into Team Hunger. This is the quintessential purging defense...the purging of need and desire to shore up a sense that one can be full without need for mortal relational "food." That damned hunger is semi-consciously felt to be the central threat in losing dominion over one's world. To acknowledge hunger for too long means to continue to build a life with someone else who provides life-sustaining nourishment—a someone else who has the agency (or mortality) to leave or otherwise injure us. Again, the relational strategies of those on Team Full are best

understood as sincere attempts at maintaining some semblance of agency in the face of a terrorizing hunger which could open one up to unbearable pain and a perception of compromised autonomy.

Team Full Key Tactic:

Purge to maintain the illusion of one's own infinite resources (and the irrelevance of the other in their survival).

It's probably universally true that, in times of overwhelming stress, we all end up on one of these teams. Recognizing which team we land on and when we start engaging in these old tactics is critical to beginning the hard work of getting back into some kind of middle zone where we can again find traction toward mutual nourishment and the sense of “home” that goes with it.

It is hard work because there is no way of moving out of a rigid team mindset without accepting the potential hurt that goes along with emotional openness and vulnerability. For those on Team Hunger, that means asserting our autonomy and sense of self—our own special flavor—at the risk of being rejected. For Team Full, emotional vulnerability is likely facilitated by a more receptive role...an openness that conveys to our partner that they have something sweet, savory and life-sustaining to give to us. Gaining skills in these areas is a cornerstone of depth-oriented psychotherapy where we more viscerally come to know our sticking points and how we get in the way of our supremely human need to feed and be fed.

To “win” in intimacy is to find a balance between one's hunger (dependency) and fullness (autonomy) and, in doing so, transcend the game altogether. Maintaining this balance is *the* struggle of any intimate relationship, romantic or otherwise. Painfully, it always necessitates acknowledgement that we can be hurt or disappointed by our loved ones. But it is the flow of openness facilitated by our

human vulnerability that makes the empty game give way to a life that is full in the truest sense--a life where we can maintain a deeply felt sense of self and personal vitality while still acknowledging a need for the love and care of those we're with.