

THE COUPLES THERAPY COMPANION

A Cognitive Behavior Workbook

Russell Grieger, PhD



ROUTLEDGE



THE COUPLES THERAPY COMPANION

Learn to look at marriage and couples counseling through the lens of Rational Emotive Couples Therapy. Dr. Russell Grieger walks the reader through the RECT process and includes numerous exercises that are appropriate for clinicians to use with their clients, for those couples who are in therapy and need a little extra help, and for couples working to improve their relationship on their own.

Along with explaining the process of Rational Emotive Couples Therapy, Dr. Grieger makes the distinction between relationship difficulties, which are small disagreements and dissatisfactions, and relationship disturbances, which occur when a couple becomes emotionally distressed and entrenched in negativity. He walks readers through the couple diagnosis and presents eight powerful strategies for helping resolve both couple difficulties and disturbances to find relationship harmony.

Dr. Grieger addresses such issues as ridding hurt, anger, fear, and insecurity, enhancing closeness and intimacy, win-win conflict resolution, and building couple commitment and connection. Replete with exercises that empower couples to take action and solve their problems, *The Couples Therapy Companion* also helps readers to sustain the positive momentum learned in therapy in everyday life.

Russell Grieger, PhD, is a licensed clinical psychologist with more than 35 years of treating couples, an organizational consultant, and an adjunct professor at the University of Virginia.

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About the Author

Russell Grieger, PhD is a licensed clinical psychologist with more than 35 years of experience treating couples, as well as an organizational consultant and an adjunct professor at the University of Virginia. He has authored six books, 75 articles, and monthly self-help blogs for *Psychology Today*. He is currently writing a self-help book, tentatively titled *The Happiness Handbook*, and a memoir, *The Perfect Season*, about his NCAA championship basketball team.

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Introduction

Your future depends on many things, but mostly on you.

—Frank Tyger

Let me welcome you to *The Couples Therapy Companion*. I wrote this book to be used in three ways:

1. For my colleagues who want to add cognitive behavioral strategies to their clinical arsenal in treating couples.
2. For couples who want to use these strategies in conjunction with their therapy work. I always supply my clients with a copy of *The Couples Therapy Companion*. I emphasize to them that the real work of therapy takes place between sessions in their daily life, not in the measly 45 minutes they spend with me each week. No couple session ends without me assigning them reading and/or exercises from this book.
3. For those couples who want to work on their own to build a loving, lasting relationship. The many case examples and workshops in *The Couples Therapy Companion* will greatly aid in this work.

Let me now introduce myself so that you know with whom you've entrusted yourself. I am a Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy practitioner, trained by Dr. Albert Ellis and his colleagues at *The Institute for Rational Emotive Therapy* (now *The Albert Ellis Institute*) in New York City. My bona fides include being an REBT fellow and senior trainer, a former member of The Institute's International Training and Standards Committee, a coeditor of *The Journal of Rational Emotive and Cognitive Behavior Therapy*, and the director of *The Mid Atlantic Institute for Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy*. In addition to coauthoring two seminal books with Dr. Ellis, *The Handbook of Rational Emotive Therapy: Volumes I and II*, I have published three more REBT-based books, plus some 75 articles and chapters.

By choice I tend to be very busy and wear three professional hats. One is that of organizational consultant, providing problem-solving consultation and focused training programs to companies of all shapes and sizes. A second is that of an adjunct professor at the University of Virginia, where I teach open enrollment seminars throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia.

The third hat I wear is that of a clinical psychologist in private practice. Clinical psychology remains my first love. I have been in practice now for 35 years and have done my best to help untold numbers of individuals rid themselves of such ravaging problems as depression, PTSD, social anxiety, obsessions and compulsions, substance dependency, guilt and self-damning, anger, and eating disorders, among other things. This work has been very rewarding, and I feel grateful that so many people have entrusted their well-being into my hands.

A large part of my clinical practice consists of treating couples who experience relationship distress. Some of these couples are deeply in love, yet find themselves in conflict over some thorny issue. Others have drifted apart and are seeking to rekindle the spark they originally had. Still others have reached the end of the rope, angry and hurt; they perhaps have even turned to other people to get the affirmation and love they do not get from their partner. And yet others have passed the point of no return, and are looking for a way to exit the relationship.

It is my deep commitment to help each and every one of these couples resolve their issues and assist them to move their relationships to where they want them to be. I believe I have succeeded in most cases. At the same time, I feel deep gratitude to these people, for they have given me the opportunity to hone my Rational Emotive Couples Therapy (RECT) skills to a razor-sharp edge. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

And now I pass on to you what I have learned about Rational Emotive Couples Therapy. I know these practices work. I have used them myself in my own relationship and I have used them successfully with hundreds of couples in my practice. Whether you are a practitioner or a couple, they will work for you as well, so long as you bring your commitment and dedication to make them work.

RECT PRINCIPLES

Just as the U.S. Constitution serves to guide Congress in crafting the laws of the land, so too do the principles behind a system of psychological treatment guide the clinician in making sound therapy decisions. Coincidentally, these principles add coherence to the clinical process, allowing both the therapist and the client to understand what is going on and to make elegant decisions to bring about desired changes.

What follows are the five RECT principles that ground all the cognitive behavioral strategies to follow. Whether you are a clinician or a couple, please reflect on and digest each of them, for they will help you make sense of the work in front of you.

Humanism

Rational Emotive Couples Therapy is humanistic in that it places the highest value on the individual's pursuit of happiness. It recognizes that all people, regardless of their situation, possess two basic life goals: (1) to survive; (2) while surviving, to be happy. RECT thus recognizes that the individual pursuing his or her own happiness is natural and ethical, while neglecting or sacrificing one's own happiness is unnatural and unethical.

Accordingly, RECT asserts that relationships are not valuable in and of their own sake, but for the contribution they make to the happiness and well-being of the individuals involved. To say it another way, a relationship has validity to the extent to which it provides long-range happiness, well-being, and satisfaction to the people in it.

RECT therapists, thus, do not take the view that it is their mission to rescue or save a troubled relationship. Rather, they see their purpose as twofold: (1) to help free the couple of strong negative emotions so that they can make a sound decision as to whether it's in their best interest to continue the relationship; (2) if so, to work to enhance the couple's long-range happiness by (a) eliminating and replacing relationship-defeating beliefs and paradigms; (b) changing dysfunctional behavior patterns to ones that lead to long-range satisfaction and pleasure; (c) teaching skills—cognitive, emotive, behavioral—to successfully solve future problems; and (d) building practices to ensure ongoing harmony and happiness.

Such a humanistic perspective, if genuinely embraced, frees you, the clinician, from the pressure of saving the relationship. You are only there to help the couple determine what is in their best interest and to realize it. And you, the client, are freed to determine, without guilt or fear, whether your relationship does or does not serve your best long-range interests. If not, you are free to continue the relationship and work hard to make it prosper, but you can also gracefully exit if relationship happiness is not in the cards.

Relationship Dissatisfaction vs. Relationship Disturbance

I doubt that anyone would disagree when I say that sustaining a happy relationship is difficult. As psychiatrist Lawrence Kubie noted way back in 1956, "Men and women are infinitely ingenious in their ability to find new ways of being unhappy together, so that even with unlimited space it would be impossible to illustrate every variety of marital misery."

It is little wonder that this is so when one considers the number of landmines one has to navigate to make a relationship work. These include:

- The fact that one inevitably mates with a fallible human being, one who will provide the partner with an ongoing string of frustrations, annoyances, and deprivations;
- The inherent disadvantages of being mated, such as some loss of privacy, the sacrifice of variety, novelty, time, and energy, the predictable frustration of expectations and wants, among others (Ellis, 1972);
- The number of practical issues about which two people can differ, for example, money and finances, sex, family planning, childrearing, religion, in-laws, and recreation;
- The personal styles that two people bring to a relationship, along with the likelihood that most couples will find they are at odds with regard to at least one of these—power, control, nurturance, intimacy, trust, fidelity, loyalty, sense of order (Goldberg, 1982);
- The number of personal and interpersonal skills needed for people to effectively relate, which few, if any, individuals possess all of—communication, sexual, negotiation, fair fighting, and parenting, to name but a few.

Given all this, Rational Emotive Couples Therapy recognizes a twofold classification of relationship problems. A **Relationship Dissatisfaction** exists when one or both partners dislike some aspect of the relationship (e.g., an annoying partner behavior, an infringement on one's time and energy) and rationally prefer it did not exist. Usually the dissatisfied partner reacts with some negative emotion that, although it may be intense, is appropriate to the situation. These include frustration, annoyance, disappointment, sadness, regret, and concern, but not such couple-debilitating emotions as anger, hurt, insecurity, guilt, and jealousy.

Relationship dissatisfactions are worthy targets for RECT. But, without the contaminant of the heavy-hitting emotions listed earlier, the couple can respond rationally in a number of ways—they can work together to resolve the dissatisfaction, gracefully lump it, or uncouple with as smooth a transition as possible.

A **Relationship Disturbance** exists when one or both individuals react with intense, inappropriate emotions, such as anger, high anxiety, insecurity, jealousy, hurt, guilt, depression, and the like. Most often, these strong emotions prompt dysfunctional behaviors that can stimulate relationship disturbance in the partner as well.

The irony is that the couple now possess two problems for the price of one. They start with some thorny relationship dissatisfaction that would most likely benefit from some creative problem solving. Then, they develop the strong emotional reactions of hurt, anger, and the like, which comprise the relationship disturbance.

Although a relationship dissatisfaction need not lead to a relationship disturbance, the relationship disturbance has the capacity to do severe damage to the fabric of the couple's relationship in at least three ways:

1. It makes the resolution of the relationship dissatisfaction very difficult, for most people find it a challenge to cooperate in effective problem solving when emotionally contaminated;
2. It prompts the classic downward-spiraling vicious circle, whereby the emotional contamination of the first person prompts such provocative behavior that the second person in turn reacts with emotional contamination, thereby acting inappropriately in kind, further stimulating the first person to more emotional upset and misbehavior, and so on and so forth in a never-ending downward loop;
3. It tends to erode the trust and love between the two people, sometimes to the point of being unsalvageable.

When couples present only relationship dissatisfactions, the RECT therapist helps them define exactly what they are, resolve them decisively and permanently, and develop the skills to fix others in the future. Chapters 7 through 11 of *The Couples Therapy Companion* tackle the prevention and obliteration of relationship dissatisfactions.

When couples present both relationship dissatisfactions and relationship disturbances, it is important to first eliminate the disturbances. Without doing this, the couple will have a hard time, as stated earlier, working together to solve the dissatisfactions. More important, ridding the dissatisfaction without ridding the disturbance may relieve present tension, but will leave the couple vulnerable to the reemergence of the disturbance when further dissatisfactions crop up. Chapters 4 through 6 of *The Couples Therapy Companion* address the relationship disturbances of anger and hurt (Chapter 4), fear and insecurity (Chapter 5), and the intolerance of relationship frustration (Chapter 6).

The ABCs of Relationship Disturbance

The ABCs of Rational Emotive Couples Therapy are discussed at great length in Chapter 1. Here, in brief, it states that the main cause of relationship disturbance (the C) does not result from a relationship dissatisfaction (the A), but from the couple's irrational Beliefs (the B) about the dissatisfaction. According to RECT, then, whenever partners get inordinately upset or behave dysfunctionally in a relationship at C (the disturbance), C is usually preceded by A (the dissatisfaction), but, most significantly, by one or more absolutistic, irrational beliefs at B (the Belief).

$$A \text{ (Dissatisfaction)} + B \text{ (Irrational Beliefs)} = C \text{ (Disturbance)}$$

To quote Albert Ellis (1986), “Disturbed marital and family relationships stem not so much from what happens among family members as from the perceptions that these members have and the views they take of these happenings.”

Although people can create a relationship disturbance by holding any number of irrational beliefs, both research and clinical experience reveal three major absolutistic “shoulds” or “musts” behind almost all disturbances (Ellis, 1986). These are: (1) I *must* have (need) the love and approval of my significant other. It is *awful* if I don’t get it. Without this, I am a *worthless person*. (2) You, my partner, *must* (should) act right and treat me well. It is *horrible* if you don’t and you are a *rotten person* for doing that. (3) This relationship *must* always be easy and pleasurable and I *must* never experience relationship frustration, deprivation, or difficulty. It is *terrible* when it is not this way and this relationship is absolutely *rotten and unbearable*.

When one or both partners hold one or more of these absolute musts, they create the emotional overreactions and dysfunctional behaviors that comprise the relationship disturbance. When an RECT therapist finds a relationship disturbance, he/she will guide the partner(s) to clearly see, surrender, and replace them with more rational ones. Without the anger, hurt, or insecurity thusly stimulated, the RECT therapist then, if the couple so desires, aids them in resolving their dissatisfactions and building relationship harmony and satisfaction.

The Nature of Love

It is unfortunate that so many people subscribe to the romantic myths that abound about love. A few of the more common ones are: “We are meant for each other.” “He’s (she’s) the love of my life.” “Our chemistry binds us together.”

One problem with these beliefs is that there is no evidence to support their validity. Even worse, they very often lead couples to drift in their relationship, thinking love is enough, and that they don’t have to work to sustain their love and happiness, or to grow it. They drift, very often into dissatisfaction, acrimony, and oblivion.

If you look upon love from the perspective of innovative couples therapist Dr. Paul Hauck (1984, 1986), you will see the true nature of love. According to him, “Love is that powerful feeling you have for someone or something which you perceive has, is, or will satisfy your deepest desires and needs.” So, it is not the existence of the person himself or herself that makes you love, it is your judgment of him or her that does it. The implications for relationship happiness this definition spawns are both practical and powerful.

1. Loving someone starts with ourselves. Through our life's experiences, we develop strong values or desires for what we want from a possible mate, although we often aren't consciously aware of them. I, for example, grew up in a warm, nurturing Midwestern family in which both my mom and dad gave copious amounts of love and affection. Naturally, I came to value these qualities in others and felt gratified and comfortable in the presence of people who displayed the same behavior as my parents.
2. All things being equal (e.g., an acceptable level of physical attractiveness, intelligence, compatibility), we become attracted to and fall in love with someone who we believe will deliver to us these deep values and desires. So, when I first met my wife, I sensed her warm and affectionate nature and said to myself, "Boy, she's neat." As I got to know her and experienced more of her loving, affectionate ways, my appreciation or value for her gradually grew to the point that I realized that I loved her.
3. There is no such thing as unconditional love, except perhaps for children and pets. Love will only be sustained if two people continue to satisfy each other's most deeply valued wants and desires. As Hauck said, "It dies if not nourished. Only saints and martyrs continue to love in a climate of chronic neglect."
4. The wise couple will realize that you cannot actually give love. What you can give are the behaviors necessary to satisfy your partner's deepest desires. Again, using myself as an example, as my wife continues to act in her loving, nurturing ways, I most likely will continue to deeply value and love her, as she will me if I reciprocate in kind.
5. You would be wise to think of your role as a partner in the same way you do your job. That is, see yourself as an employee of your mate, complete with a detailed job description that specifics what he/she most wants and desires to be happy in your relationship. If you want to keep your job, you had better do your job every day. If you do, you'll most likely reap the benefits—continued employment, an increased salary, year-end bonuses, and the like.

To put this back into personal terms, if I give my wife what she most wants and needs to be happy in our relationship, she will most likely continue to love me and be motivated to give back to me what I also want and desire in return. The bottom line is action—intelligent, sustained action that keeps love alive between two people.

Hard Work

As an RECT therapist, I admit to a certain degree of confidence. I honestly believe I am good at what I do. At the same time, I am also very humble. For

I know that, no matter how competent I may be, I cannot make the couple change. Only they, through their commitment to sustained hard work, can habituate the changes necessary to create a loving, lasting relationship.

But, alas, many couples refuse to make the effort. Some harbor a victim mentality, reveling in the righteous conviction that their partner is the culprit and they are innocent of any responsibility for the mess. Others find it threatening to admit they have made relationship mistakes and find it hard to examine their own faulty behaviors. Still others hold the kinds of romantic myths about love noted earlier, thinking they should not have to work hard at a good relationship, for love conquers all. Still others drift along out of laziness, too shortsighted to see that the effort they could make in the short run will have long-lasting pay-offs.

I cannot overemphasize the importance of this. I can honestly say that I have never failed to help a couple when they've worked diligently. To the contrary, most of my RECT failures came about because of a reluctance of the couple to put in the necessary time and effort.

The implications, then, are clear. You, the therapist, must repeatedly emphasize the need for sustained, hard work—both in-session and between-session. And you, the couple, would be wise to devote quality time and energy—each and every day—to habituate the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral patterns needed to make your relationship what you want.

THE RECT PROCESS

When a couple comes into my office, I lead them through the three-step process described below. I want to caution you, though, that I often find it necessary to bounce back and forth between these three steps. Think of RECT as basketball, not golf. In golf, the player starts on hole one and works hole after hole right on through hole 18. The sequence never varies. Basketball is different. The team members all know the offensive and defensive plays, but they continually adapt them to the ever-changing circumstances on the court. In RECT, you may be dealing with Step Three one minute, but find it necessary to flip back to Step One the next. Flexibility is the coin of the realm.

Step One: Relationship Diagnosis

Chapter 1 describes the RECT diagnostic process. It starts with identifying a couple's relationship dissatisfaction and relationship disturbance and goes from there. Included is an informal assessment tool that the clinician can administer or the couple can take on their own.

Step Two: Applying Solutions

RECT's second step is to select and implement the strategies that will predictably remediate the couple's relationship problems. These are described later. The first three have to do with remediating relationship disturbances, while the last four are designed to build relationship harmony and satisfaction. These solutions are the center of the therapy process.

Premeditated Acceptance and Forgiveness: The Antidote to Hurt and Anger. Probably the most basic fact of relationship life is that we inevitably mate with an FHB—a Fallible Human Being. Your partner, being fallible, will inevitably have faults, weaknesses, and idiosyncrasies, thereby pretty regularly acting in ways you don't like. And, boy-oh-boy, is it easy to react with hurt and/or anger in return. Chapter 4 teaches the technology to let go of these relationship-defeating disturbances and adopt the kinds of perspectives that make acceptance and forgiveness a cornerstone of the relationship.

Unconditional Self-Acceptance: The Antidote to Fear and Insecurity. To freely give and receive affection, one has to first fully accept oneself. For, when one doesn't, one will inevitably be needy and insecure and engage in any number of relationship-damaging behaviors—clinging, controlling, manipulating, and the like. Chapter 5 teaches the strategies to adopt unconditional self-acceptance. One can then fully focus on generously giving love, while never feeling threatened by or jealous of one's partner, or needing to control him or her.

Relationship Resilience: The Antidote to Low Frustration Tolerance. Relationships by definition present many frustrations. Those couples who prosper work together to overcome them without undue drama or upset. Chapter 6 teaches exactly the paradigms and strategies that are needed to bring resilience to a relationship—to gracefully hang in there—and to continue to use the other six secrets—despite any and all adversity that surfaces.

Relentless and Intelligent Giving. We all long to be significant to and loved by another. Unfortunately, as discussed earlier, many people harbor the belief that love is unconditional, that love is so pure and powerful that it will flourish on its own without tending. The sad fact is that love is not unconditional. If two people do not pay close attention to satisfying each other's deepest desires, their love can wither and die. Chapter 8 provides the strategies to relentlessly and intelligently give to each other exactly what is needed to keep love alive and robust.

Commitment to the Couple. Have you ever heard of anybody building a house without first drawing up blueprints? Of course not. Yet it slays me how many couples spend so much more time planning their wedding than they do their marriage. Chapter 9 leads the reader through a powerful five-step process to create the third partner in your relationship bed—the “we,” the “us,” or the “couple” of your dreams.

Frequent, Passionate Intimacy. Every encounter you have with your partner provides an opportunity to either deepen or undercut your connection. The wise couple will consciously and purposely pay close attention to the twin pillars of deepening their love and respect: one, the quality of their communication; two, the quality of their physical relationship. Chapter 10 delineates the strategies to deepening your bond through deep, shared verbal and physical intimacy.

Win-Win Conflict Resolution. Every couple has differences and disagreements. There are no exceptions. It is absolutely critical for couples to resolve these without either party walking away feeling beaten down or defeated. Why? Because the bad taste left in the mouth of the one defeated can erode affection and contribute to future difficulties. Chapter 11 tackles the strategies to resolve conflicts so that no one loses. When people actually do use them, they not only eliminate some nagging difficulty from their relationship, but they often end up feeling closer, more mutually respectful, and more deeply bonded.

Step Three: Sustaining Momentum

Nothing changes without sustained action. To achieve the results they want, each of the two people who comprise the couple must act over time to do what is necessary to produce the desired results. If they follow through, they have an excellent chance of creating a loving, lasting relationship. If they don't, they won't. It's that simple.

Chapter 12 shares three strategies to sustain committed action. With these strategies, the couple can sustain the drive, dedication, and determination that breeds the kind of action needed to produce the desired results.

GOING FORWARD

As an RECT therapist, I find it useful to prep my couples with three mindsets before launching treatment. I find that these help them to help themselves. Coincidentally, they make my job easier by reducing resistance. I think they will also help both you, my clinical colleague, and you, the couple, get the most you can from *The Couples Therapy Companion*.

Be Committed and Responsible

Unfortunately, there is no guardian angel who has been given the job of making a relationship work. Whether clinician or client, it's up to you. So, take responsibility for energetically engaging the material in this book and continually asking how you can use it to your benefit. You couples be sure to complete the exercises and reflect on and discuss with each other what you read. Above all, follow

through by actively practicing what you learn. I want to emphasize that there are no shortcuts or quick fixes. It will take “elbow grease,” as my mom used to say. But it will be worth it. I promise.

Be Open

It is an unfortunate fact that people often resist a new perspective. They tend to insist that their existing point of view is the truth. What this unfortunately does is keep them stuck where they are. They know what they know, but they are not able or willing to expand the boundaries of their knowledge or insights to something new, different, or perhaps even better.

You would be wise to make a commitment to be open to the new ideas you find on these pages. What this means is that you temporarily suspend the “I already know” attitude that keeps you stuck where you are. Instead adopt the “I don’t know and I know I don’t know” one. This doesn’t mean that you have to slavishly agree with everything I share or automatically follow through on all my recommendations. Rather, you openly entertain that what I offer may indeed be useful to you and openly explore its merits while reserving the right to reject what I share later. By being open, you make available to yourself ideas and strategies you might otherwise not that can help you grow your relationship.

Be Fun Loving

A good many of the personal problems with which people struggle are caused by them taking themselves too seriously. Think about it. Don’t many of the arguments people have arise because they expect their partner to never let them down? Or they think that some objectively minor offense is equivalent to a catastrophe? Or they think that they are indeed so special that unkindness should never be enacted upon them? Deadly serious stuff.

So, lighten up! Take the process of improving your relationship as a wonderful adventure, a glorious opportunity to learn new and exciting things, a real honest-to-goodness possibility to grow together. Be sure to take yourself and your relationship seriously, but not too seriously. Have fun.

ONWARD

We are now ready to launch.

So, dear clinician, my aim is to help you apply the principles and practices of Rational Emotive Couples Therapy to the benefit of your clientele. I am honored that you put your trust in me. I invite you to contact me should you have any questions.

And, dear couple, I offer you my congratulations on the courage and wisdom you display by tackling head-on the quality of your relationship. Can this book be of help to you? Absolutely. Can you use it to bring yourself closer to the loving, lasting relationship you want and deserve? I know you can. Will you follow through and make use of it? That I don't know. It's up to you!

PART I

Diagnosing and Goal Setting

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CHAPTER 1

The Couple Diagnosis

*Ring out the old, ring in the new;
Ring happy bells, across the snow;
The year is going, let it go;
Ring out the faults, ring in the true.*
—Alfred Lord Tennyson

Most couples who walk into my office began their relationship with deep, passionate love. They saw each other as their best friend. They held boundless hope for their future. Then, gradually, disappointments, slights, even unkindnesses mounted. Hurt and resentment grew. Trust faded, passion cooled, love and friendship waned.

Worse yet, most of these unhappy couples hold at best a limited or distorted picture of what went wrong. They may be clear about their individual complaints, yet they are often unaware of their own contributions to the relationship woes. They rarely see the reciprocal interactions that perpetuate their dysfunctional patterns. They have little idea what to do to get their relationship back on track.

Confronting this, my first RECT chore is to understand exactly what are the relationship problems they've created and how they went about doing this. Without a clear picture of the ins and outs of their breakdown—a couple diagnosis, if you will—I am handicapped in what to do to get them back on track. Once I figure this out, my second chore is to educate them about the particulars of their problems and the strategies for remediation. When the couple understands all this, they can then see a way forward, feel hope, and enroll in the therapy process of remediation.

RECT DIAGNOSIS

This may seem basic for the seasoned clinician, but it bears emphasizing that a therapy session is nothing more than a conversation between two or more

people. The difference between a social and a therapy conversation is that, in the case of the latter, one person, the therapist, has a mental template as to how to guide the conversation and to organize the information gathered.

What follows is the template RECT therapists carry in their heads as they conduct the diagnostic conversation. I present the five components in logical order, but I emphasize that the gathering of diagnostic data does not typically follow such a lock-step sequence. Data often comes flying at the therapist at random, so that these categories represent as much an organizing schema as an interview process.

If you are a clinician, you can conduct your couple diagnosis in two ways. One is to supply the couple with “The Couple Diagnostic Workshop” found later in this chapter and then follow up with a clarifying discussion. A second is to conduct the diagnostic interview cold, initiating the discussion with such open-ended questions as: “What problems do you want to fix in your relationship?” “What brought you to the point of seeking help?” “What ails in your relationship?”

If you are a couple, do “The Couple Diagnostic Workshop” with or without the assistance of your therapist. If you do so on your own, be sure to complete Step Five, “Strengths/Weaknesses Questionnaire.” This step guides you directly to the chapters in *The Couple Therapy Companion* designed to remediate your specific couple problems.

Regardless, once you, the clinician, or you, the couple, capture accurate information in each of these categories, you are then only one step removed from fixing the problems. Here they are.

Relationship Dissatisfactions

Most couples begin their therapy by voicing complaints about each other. For example, he displays little affection, or he controls her every move, or he pulls up porno on the Internet after she goes to bed; she frivolously spends money, or she spoils the children, or she drinks too much. These constitute the couple’s relationship dissatisfactions. Whether accompanied by strong, negative emotions or not, the presence of these dissatisfactions can erode love and had best be catalogued for problem solving.

Relationship Disturbance

The RECT therapist stays alert for expressions of destructive emotional overreactions throughout the diagnostic conversation—the hurt and anger, the fear and jealousy and insecurity, the bitterness and depression. These disturbances can soil people’s happiness, prompt dysfunctional behaviors, and make the resolution of relationship dissatisfactions inordinately difficult. If these disturbed

emotions are not volunteered, I always follow up the expression of dissatisfactions with a string of questions designed to uncover them:

- How do you react emotionally when he does that?
- Feeling that way, how do you typically respond?
- When you act like that, how does he react in turn?
- Does your reaction help the situation and the relationship or does it make things worse?

Notice that these questions go beyond simply making explicit the presence of relationship disturbances. They also serve to reveal the negative consequences of acting out these disturbances, in terms of both their effect on the other person, the existing troublesome situation, and the long-term viability of the relationship itself.

Vicious Circle

The RECT therapist is always alert for the presence of a vicious circle in a relationship. A vicious circle occurs when one person presents a dissatisfaction to the partner that stimulates the partner to get upset and act badly in return, which in turn prompts bad behavior from the original person, further stimulating the partner to again act badly, and so on. Typically each partner contends that the resolution calls for the other person to shape up.

Spotting the vicious circle is critical. For, so long as each partner holds the other responsible for the relationship breakdown, victimhood and blame will prevail, leaving little possibility for a breakthrough.

Irrational Beliefs

Uncovering a couple's irrational beliefs holds a special place in RECT diagnosis. Remember that, following RECT's ABC model, the cause of all relationship disturbances (the C) is not the relationship dissatisfactions (the A), but the absolute, perfectionistic demands—the musts and shoulds—couples hold (the B). These drive the hurt, anger, fear, insecurity, and low frustration tolerance that lead to relationship destruction.

$$A \text{ (Dissatisfaction)} + B \text{ (Irrational Beliefs)} = C \text{ (Disturbance)}$$

The RECT therapist thus keeps a keen ear open for these demands, particularly: (1) I *must* be unconditionally loved, approved, and favored by my partner; (2) my partner *must* always act appropriately toward me and treat me well; (3) my relationship *must* always be rewarding and never present hassles or

frustrations. Without eliminating these irrational ways of thinking, there is little hope for couple happiness and harmony:

- If the couple does not stop their irrational thinking, they will continue to suffer the emotional miseries they do, thereby threatening couple survival.
- If the couple does not eliminate their irrational thinking, they will find it difficult to work cooperatively together to resolve their relationship dissatisfactions.
- If the couple does somehow find a way to eliminate their relationship dissatisfactions, despite suffering a relationship disturbance, they may temporarily find interpersonal peace, but they will likely fall back into their disturbances once they encounter new dissatisfactions. Why? Because they still hold their irrational “musts” and “shoulds.”

Additional Information

The RECT therapist also finds it important to get clarity on the following, each of which is relevant for therapeutic planning.

- Individual Emotional Disturbance—Do either of the partners suffer from a severe emotional problem? Such disturbances as depression, a borderline personality disorder, or a substance dependency may require individual therapy for the affected person, either preliminary to or concurrent with the couples therapy.
- Resistances—Are one or both of the couple partners resistant to couples therapy? To taking responsibility for their portion of the relationship problems? What irrational beliefs drive this resistance? If present, it behooves the RECT therapist to figure the best way to address the resistance so as to fully enroll both people in the therapy process.
- Commitment and Love—Do the couple partners love each other? How committed are they to each other and to fixing the relationship? People sometimes seek couples therapy for a number of reasons other than improving their relationship: (1) to prove the partner wrong; (2) to get help in deciding whether to stay mated; (3) to get support in leaving the relationship; (4) to sabotage the therapy as a justification for leaving; (5) to get an ally to get the partner to change.
- Impulse Control—Can the partners exert control over their emotions and impulses in session so that they can participate productively in the couple’s therapy process? What causes the lack of control? Low frustration tolerance? ADHD? Bitterness?

- **Therapy Format**—Is it better to work with the couple conjointly or individually? Conjoint sessions are desirable in most cases, but sometimes it is better to meet with one or both of the partners for one or more individual sessions. Some of the reasons for doing so are: when anger is so palpable that debating and arguing dominates; when one of the partners is so defensive he or she cannot take responsibility for his or her dysfunctional behavior in the presence of the other; when it appears that one or both of the partners harbor a hidden agenda; when one person unduly inhibits the partner from expressing his or her feelings and opinions; when one of the partners is seriously disturbed. When meeting separately with one or both partners, I take care to emphasize two things to the couple beforehand: (1) I hold no agenda, except to eliminate their disturbances and resolve their dissatisfactions so they are free to make sound decisions about their relationship; (2) I will honor the confidentiality of what is said in private as I need each person's total openness and honesty to be of help.

DIAGNOSING TOM AND ERICA

An unusually attractive 37-year-old, Erica burst into tears the instant she sat on my office couch next to her husband, Tom. Dabbing her eyes with a tissue, she stated that her “world had fallen apart” when she discovered that Tom had become intimately involved with another woman. She described herself as unable to eat or sleep, staying in bed a good deal of the time, neglecting her exercise and appearance. While she spoke, Tom sat impassively, his arms folded across his chest, looking past me.

It didn't take a stroke of genius to discern that Erica presented not one but two problems. The one that prompted her to seek professional help was, of course, the relationship dissatisfaction of her husband's affair. I needed to know what the circumstances were behind this if I was ever going to help repair their marriage. The second problem was her relationship disturbances of depression and anxiety. With regard to these, I needed to understand what irrational beliefs she held that, combined with the crisis in her marriage, prompted these reactions. As an RECT therapist, I hypothesized that she believed something to this effect: “I need Tom to love me. If I lose him, I couldn't bear it. Worse, I'm a failure, a worthless nothing.”

After noting both these problems—her marital crisis and her overwhelmingly distraught feelings, I gently probed for and confirmed the existence of the irrational beliefs I hypothesized. As the discussion continued, what struck me about Erica was that she held a conditional sense of self-worth. That is, she

tended to be obsessed with keeping herself attractive and with maintaining a fairly active social life with her girlfriends, all in the service of affirming to herself that she was indeed a worthy, likeable person. I wondered how this might have played into her marital woes.

At this point I turned my attention to Tom, who looked uncomfortable being in my office. I assumed he thought I was going to chastise him for his extramarital affair or attempt to guilt trap him back home. He noticeably relaxed when I emphasized that my job was not to save his marriage, but to help him and Erica make the best possible decision so that they each could lead a happy life. If that meant being together, fine; but, if he no longer loved her and had no motivation to be with her, that was fine as well.

Having navigated through this potential resistance, I ventured to Tom that it seemed that he carried a heavy load of resentment toward Erica, which he acknowledged to be so. Telling him that resentment is a pretty typical reaction when one either gets a steady diet of what one doesn't want or doesn't get what one does want, I wondered what it was that Erica did or didn't do that he found so offensive. With that opening, he enumerated three dissatisfactions with Erica, the ease with which they rolled off his tongue betraying the numerous times he had reviewed them in his mind. As I take copious notes during my first encounter with my clients, I'll share word for word what I wrote.

1. "I grew up in a close-knit family. I wanted a wife who would throw herself into making our family her number one priority. Erica is so into her own personal pursuits that me and the kids are over here and she's over there. I deeply resent that."
2. "The way she treats the children infuriates me. Rather than being loving, there is a lot of harping, criticizing, and yelling."
3. "The house is a mess. There's clutter everywhere, laundry not put away, dirty dishes piled in the sink. I don't want to come home to this chaos each night."

I listened to Tom and pointed out to him both his relationship dissatisfactions and his relationship disturbance of anger. I then asked Tom whether if, in addition to being angry with Erica, he felt lonely, thinking but not saying that his not feeling connected with Erica must have made him easy pickings for another woman. He responded: "I've given up on love. It's not realistic to expect or even miss it."

Tom said he'd have to think about participating in couples counseling. Accepting that, I suggested we make an appointment that they could both keep or, if he chose not to, then Erica could attend on her own.

Once they left my office, I made notes about what I thought was needed for them to repair their marriage.

For Erica

- Develop Unconditional Self-Acceptance (Chapter 5) in order for her to feel personally secure, free to let go of some of her ego-feeding extra-curricular activities, and to become more loving toward her husband and children. Coincidentally, if Tom did decide to terminate the marriage, she could, by accepting herself unconditionally, grieve the loss of the marriage without falling into depression or panic.
- Develop Relationship Resilience (Chapter 6) so as to become more tolerant of the frustration inherent in parenting and domestic chores.
- Become a Relentless and Intelligent Giver (Chapter 8) to Tom of what he most wants and needs from a wife, thereby providing the opportunity to re-spark his love for her.
- Head off future anger (Chapter 4) toward Tom for his affair before it got a foothold, thereby forgiving him for the mistakes he had made.

For Tom

- Learn and use the tools of Premeditated Acceptance and Forgiveness (Chapter 4), thereby letting go of his relationship disturbance of anger at Erica, opening the door to graciously receive her efforts to make amends, and being able to be affectionate toward her.
- Terminate completely and with finality his extramarital relationship and commit wholeheartedly to making his marriage work. This would represent a Commitment to the Couple (Chapter 9).
- Act on the principles of Relentless and Intelligent Giving (Chapter 8), recognizing that what Erica needs to be happily mated may be different from what he needs.

This was my first pass at diagnosing Erica and Tom's couple problems. I uncovered relationship dissatisfactions and relationship disturbances on both their parts, as well as their individual irrational beliefs and a palpable vicious circle. Note particularly that this couple diagnosis led directly to concrete action steps to purposely right their sinking ship rather than a collection of psychopathological labels.

THE COUPLE DIAGNOSIS WORKSHOP

What follows is a five-step couple diagnostic workshop. The clinician can supply this to the couple and then follow up to clarify and expand on the responses. The couple tackling their relationship on their own can work through it to pinpoint the precise things they need to remediate.

Before launching, I want to strongly urge the couple to follow three guidelines.

1. Be honest. Do not withhold your true thoughts and feelings nor minimize your concerns and complaints. This will undercut your ability to make couple progress. But, being honest does not mean being harsh or vengeful. Approach this as an act of service to your partner and to the relationship.
2. Do not be defensive. Each of you has, of course, made relationship mistakes. Not only do I expect it, but I'd be dumbfounded if you both didn't contribute in some way to your couple problems. Be open to your own role in your couple problems. See it as an opportunity to help make things better than ever.
3. Be kind. Remember that your partner, being human, is most likely sensitive to criticism. Who isn't? The last thing you want is to make things worse by being a Grinch. So, while being honest and open, do so with compassion and sensitivity.

Step One: Identifying Couple Dissatisfactions

You and your mate may want to do each step independent of each other and then compare notes. Or you may want to do it together, perhaps taking turns. Regardless, this step gets the couple complaints on the table. Remember: this is not a "bitch" session. It is an opportunity for each of you to reveal what you find frustrating so you can do something constructive to fix it. So, neither complaining nor defensiveness is permitted or allowed.

About You—What are the issues you find troublesome in your relationship? What does your partner do that you don't like or doesn't do that you'd like? List them below. Briefly explain why you find each troublesome and what you would prefer from your partner instead.

My Issues

Why Troublesome

Prefer Instead

About Your Partner—Now focus on your partner. What does he or she find troublesome? Why is this troublesome to him or her? How might you change it so as to remove this dissatisfaction from your partner's life?

His/Her Issues**Why Troublesome****Solutions**

Hopefully you now have a clear picture of what needs to be fixed in order to bring harmony back to your couple life. If you only have relationship dissatisfactions, I encourage you to immediately work together for solutions. But this may be difficult if you are contaminated with relationship disturbances. Push forward and see.

Step Two: Identifying Couple Disturbances

Most couples who seek therapy do so because they suffer from some relationship disturbance or another. They experience hurt, anger, insecurity, neediness, threat, or bitterness. If any of these are present in your relationship, it needs to be acknowledged and gotten rid of for you to go forward with happiness and harmony. But don't despair. If present, they can be eliminated with your effort and cooperation.

About You—How do you typically react emotionally and behaviorally when you encounter your relationship dissatisfactions? Do your reactions make things better or do they perpetuate or escalate the issues? How so? Remember to be open and honest. "Find it, fix it," as my good friend and family physician, Jim, says.

My Issue**My Reaction****Helpful/Harmful**

About Your Partner—You probably are clear about the relationship disturbances in your partner. More important, you also want to be clear about any disturbed reactions you may have to his or her disturbed reactions. Do your reactions to his or her reactions serve to calm or inflame the situation? After all, the last thing you want to do is pour gasoline on a blazing fire.

His/Her Issues

His/Her Reactions

My Reactions

Step Three: Identifying the Vicious Circle

Now that you've diagnosed both your relationship dissatisfactions and relationship disturbances, it's time to see if there exists a troublesome vicious circle. As explained, a vicious circle can take the couple into a never-ending downward spiral. If there, the wise couple will acknowledge it and do whatever it takes to break free. Their relationship depends on it.

In diagnosing your relationship's vicious circle, the best strategy is to first diagram it so you can clearly see it. Then, commit fully to cease what you're doing to perpetuate it.

See It—As best you can, fill in the components of your vicious circle below. Note how your disturbance becomes a dissatisfaction for your partner that in turn becomes a dissatisfaction for you (see Figure 1.1).

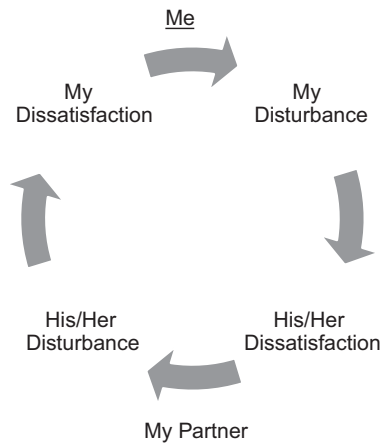


FIGURE 1.1 OUR COUPLE VICIOUS CIRCLE

Take Responsibility—Once you see your vicious circle, you each have two choices as to how to respond. The dysfunctional one is to play the victim role and blame everything on your partner. “He/she is the cause of it all and, if only he will change, then everything will be hunky-dory.” This will get you nothing but more of the same.

The second choice is for you to acknowledge the role you play in the vicious circle and correct it. I can't guarantee it, but, if both of you do your part, it will be next to impossible to not eliminate this vicious circle.

This is where the rubber hits the road. Are you willing to eradicate your part in a vicious circle, even if your partner may not as yet be willing? If so, fill out the following commitment statement.

I, _____, will do what's necessary to eliminate my relationship disturbances of _____ and _____ from my relationship. I will do so independent of whether or not my partner is also willing to do his or her part.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Step Four: Irrational Beliefs

Remember that it is not the difficulties and dissatisfactions you experience that cause your disturbed emotions and actions. Rather, it is your absolute, perfectionistic "musts" and "shoulds" that cause them.

Here is an opportunity to ferret out the musts and shoulds that drive your relationship disturbances. By eliminating these, you will not only feel better toward your partner, but you will act much better as well. But first, you need to find them.

Note below the one or two things your partner does or does not do that get you the most upset. For each, identify your must or should, putting them in complete sentence form.

Your Dissatisfaction

Your Must/Should

1.

2.

Step Five: Strengths/Weaknesses Questionnaire

What follows is an informal questionnaire that can help you pinpoint your relationship strengths and weaknesses. You and your partner can do the relationship

diagnosis independently and then compare notes. A variation would be for you each to rate both yourself and your partner. If you do this, be careful to make this an opportunity to launch your relationship to new heights, not to bludgeon your partner with criticism. Another method would be for you and your partner to do this assessment together, talking about your strengths and weaknesses as you go along.

Under each of the eight categories (which, by the way, parallel Chapters 4–6 and 8–12 of *The Couples Therapy Companion*) are five statements. For each, check whether it always, often, sometimes, rarely, or never describes you. Above all, be totally honest in your ratings. Your weaknesses can absolutely be strengthened, so acknowledging them is the first step in this important process. Look for clusters of “sometimes,” “rarely,” and “never,” as these would represent areas in which you would be wise to focus your couple-improvement efforts.

Premeditated Acceptance and Forgiveness

	<i>Always</i>	<i>Often</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Rarely</i>	<i>Never</i>
• I am capable of not being angry at my partner even when he/she acts badly.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
• I easily and quickly let go of resentment toward my partner.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
• Rather than expecting my partner to be perfect, I understand and accept that he/she is a fallible human being.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
• Remembering that my partner is a fallible human being, I do not take what he/she does personally.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
• When I do get upset with my partner, I can easily let go of these feelings and get back to feeling loving and accepting.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

Unconditional Self-Acceptance

	<i>Always</i>	<i>Often</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Rarely</i>	<i>Never</i>
• I like and accept myself.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
• While I enjoy the love and affirmation I get from my partner, I know I don't need it.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
• I know that my value as a person does not derive from his/her value for me.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
• Accepting myself, I put my needs at a level equal to my partner's needs.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
• I believe my value as a person is unconditional.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

Relationship Resilience

	<i>Always</i>	<i>Often</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Rarely</i>	<i>Never</i>
• I expect there to be hardships, hassles, and frustrations in my relationship life.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
• I take these hardships, hassles, and frustrations emotionally in stride.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
• I bounce back from adversity, quickly getting on with the business of love and life.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
• I am happy even with the hassles in my relationship.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

(Continued)

Relationship Resilience (Continued)

	<i>Always</i>	<i>Often</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Rarely</i>	<i>Never</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">I help and support my partner at times of adversity, rarely expecting him/her to always be strong, and accepting him/her at times of weakness.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

Relentless and Intelligent Giving

	<i>Always</i>	<i>Often</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Rarely</i>	<i>Never</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">I understand exactly what my partner wants and needs to feel loved by and significant to me.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
<ul style="list-style-type: none">I am able to give my partner what he/she needs to feel loved by and significant to me.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
<ul style="list-style-type: none">I willingly give my partner what he/she wants to feel loved by and significant to me.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
<ul style="list-style-type: none">I let my partner know what I want and need to feel loved by and significant to him/her.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
<ul style="list-style-type: none">I get what I want and need from my partner to feel loved and accepted.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

Commitment to the Couple

	<i>Always</i>	<i>Often</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Rarely</i>	<i>Never</i>
• I clearly see that my partner and I are a couple, an entity that exists in addition to he/she and myself as individuals.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
• I bring full commitment to us a couple.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
• I have a clear picture of the ideal couple I want us to be.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
• I am committed to doing my part to grow us into this ideal couple.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
• I regularly and on purpose act in ways that represent the perfect couple I want us to be.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

Frequent, Passionate Intimacy

	<i>Always</i>	<i>Often</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Rarely</i>	<i>Never</i>
• I regularly and freely share my inner thoughts and feelings, as well as the daily events of my life, with my partner.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
• I regularly listen with attention and interest to what my partner shares with me, both his/her inner thoughts and feelings and the daily events of his/her life.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

(Continued)

Frequent, Passionate Intimacy (Continued)

	<i>Always</i>	<i>Often</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Rarely</i>	<i>Never</i>
• I hold our physical intimacy as an important part of our expression of love and bonding.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
• I regularly and freely share physical intimacy with my partner.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
• I believe our physical intimacy is good and satisfying.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

Win-Win Conflict Resolution

	<i>Always</i>	<i>Often</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Rarely</i>	<i>Never</i>
• I want my partner to walk away from a conflict feeling as good about the outcome as I do.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
• I easily balance looking out for my own needs with also looking out for my partner's needs.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
• I am comfortable telling my partner what I want and how I feel when we have a difference or disagreement.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
• I can and do listen to what my partner wants and how he/she feels when we have a difference or disagreement.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

(Continued)

Win-Win Conflict Resolution (Continued)

	<i>Always</i>	<i>Often</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Rarely</i>	<i>Never</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I am determined to take whatever time is necessary to find a solution that works for both of us. 	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

Purposely Sustaining Your Momentum

	<i>Always</i>	<i>Often</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Rarely</i>	<i>Never</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I keep my commitments—both large and small—to my partner. 	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I expect others to keep their commitments to me. 	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When I fail to keep a commitment, I own up and do not make excuses. 	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I associate pleasure with being with my partner and pain with not being with him or her. 	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I am committed to regularly checking with my partner about what we do well and what we do not do well. 	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

GOING FORWARD

Whether you are a clinician or a couple, you have now pinpointed in RECT fashion what is broken that needs fixing. The next step, as made explicit in Chapter 2, “The Couple Goal Setting,” is the strategic plan of action.

Before going there, I want to say a few words directly to you, the couple. I want to compliment you on your commitment to your life and your relationship. You are doing a courageous thing by taking such an honest, hard-nosed look at yourself and your relationship. Mindfully knowing your relationship

strengths and weaknesses provides you with a wonderful opportunity to make the corrections that can help you create the relationship of your dreams.

Before going forward, I want to say that I absolutely know you found both strengths and weaknesses in yourself, your partner, and your relationship. Why? Because neither you nor your partner are perfect, nor is anybody else or their relationship for that matter. Hold your head up high. Be proud of yourself.

CHAPTER 2

The Couple Goal Setting

Great things are not something accidental but must certainly be willed.

—Vincent van Gogh

One cornerstone of good couples therapy is an accurate and useful diagnosis. Another is goal setting. Explicating clear, cogent goals serves both the therapist and the couple in a number of significant ways. It makes clear what needs fixing and why. It illuminates the role both partners have in the relationship breakdown and in the fix. It helps make sense of the action strategies to come. It serves to enroll the couple in the therapy process as active, cooperative change agents. It undercuts discouragement and provides hope.

I think the goal-setting session is so pivotal that I take pains to prepare what I want to say to the couple before I sit down with them. I figure that the clearer I am about what exactly are the causes of their problems and the specific action strategies to overcome them, the more likely they are to align with me in a cooperative therapeutic effort.

GOAL SETTING WITH TOM AND ERICA

I had all of these things in mind when I met with Tom and Erica for their second couple session. After exchanging pleasantries, I asked if they were ready to hear my game plan. They nodded affirmatively and off I went.

Dr. G: Well, then, I want to start by saying I've been practicing now for 30 years and I've successfully helped hundreds of couples. I don't say that to toot my horn, but to reassure you that there is a way forward. So, there's hope for your relationship if you throw yourself into your therapy. Okay?

Erica: Okay.

Dr. G: And, you, Tom?

Tom: I'm here. I'll do what I can.

Dr. G: That's good enough for me. So, to start, let me tell you that I've never worked with a couple who didn't present some relationship dissatisfactions. These are to be expected. No two people can live together and be free of them. For example, Tom, you voiced a number of dissatisfactions with Erica about how she conducts herself in the marriage—her outside interests, the house a mess, her parenting. Yes?

Tom: Yes.

Dr. G: And you, Erica, you may have other complaints, but the biggest one is Tom's taking up with another woman. Right?

Erica: Right, and his emotional aloofness to me for months on end.

Dr. G: Duly noted. So, both of you have significant relationship complaints of one kind or another. To get your marriage back on track, you'll both need to alter these patterns. How can you expect things to get better if you both continue to frustrate each other the way that you do?

Tom: I agree in theory. But how in the world do we do that? There's a mile-wide gulf between us.

Dr. G: And lots of negative feelings, too.

Tom: You bet.

Dr. G: That's right. These relationship dissatisfactions need to be fixed, and it's my job to lead you through the process. But, as you said, Tom, you two also have strong, negative emotional reactions to these complaints. We call these reactions relationship disturbances because they disturb a couple's ability to fix their dissatisfactions and be happy together. It's like you've gone bargain basement shopping—two for the price of one. You've got your dissatisfactions and then, on top of them, you each have gotten yourselves very upset with each other about them. See what I mean?

Erica: But who wouldn't get upset if her husband is cheating on her?

Dr. G: Most people would, Erica. But it's important for you to see that your upset actually contains two parts. One is a rational dislike of what Tom's doing. But, two, you have an overwhelming sense of threat and depression about losing him, as if you can't exist without his loving you. The second is an overreaction. Do you see that?

Erica: I see what you mean.

Dr. G: Good. This first part is appropriate and can motivate you to help fix things. But, the second part, the insecurity and the fear, drives you to spend a lot of time on your extracurricular activities so as to feel good about yourself. It's like you think you need constant reassurance that you're acceptable and likable.

Erica: I guess I've always had self-esteem problems.

Dr. G: Well, we want to fix that so you, as a person, can be happy in your own right. But we also want to fix it so you can be free to be more balanced

in how you spend your time, still honoring your own interests, but also giving more time to your family. Does that make sense?

Erica: It does.

Dr. G: Now, Tom, let's not forget you. You too have your own dissatisfactions and disturbances. We know what your dissatisfactions are, but do you know what your disturbance is?

Tom: My resentment.

I start the goal-setting conversation with a note of assurance. Thinking that they are skeptical about their chances of recapturing their relationship, I want to build in them a degree of confidence in me and offer them a glimmer of hope. I ignored Tom's less than enthusiastic, "I'm here," and praised him for making the effort. From there, I launched into the distinction between relationship dissatisfactions and disturbances, helping them see that they each possess both, and explicating exactly what their major disturbances are—Tom's anger and Erica's low self-esteem. This sets up what will come next, the outlining of their vicious circle and, later, uncovering the irrational beliefs that drive the disturbances.

Notice also two additional features of this interchange. One is that, although I have an outline of what I want to say, I take advantage of the opportunities they afford me to move the goal setting forward. Two, in true RECT fashion, I take an active-directive role in the process, assuming they need my lead to help them first make sense of their couple problems and then ultimately to repair them.

Dr. G: Right on. You've gone from being rationally frustrated with Erica to becoming angry and resentful at her. So, how does that prompt you to react?

Tom: I withdraw.

Dr. G: Yes. You go inside yourself, withdraw your affection, and, in the process, became vulnerable to someone else. And what do you think that does to Erica, given her own relationship disturbance?

Tom: She gets more insecure.

Dr. G: Right, and then she puts more energy and time into also getting her needs met elsewhere, further frustrating you. Now, look at what we're saying here. Erica, your relationship disturbance of insecurity and low self-esteem prompts you to do exactly what's necessary to prompt Tom's anger and withdrawal. And, you, Tom, do exactly what's necessary to stoke Erica's low self-esteem. In effect, you're both creating exactly the opposite of what you want from the other. Do you to see what I'm saying? It's a vicious circle.

Erica: Yes.

Tom: Yes.

Dr. G: Well, now, what do we do? Most couples who come into this office want me to fix their partner. "Fix Tom," she says. "Fix Erica," he says.

But, I've got to tell you, that's backward. Tom, if you fix yourself, getting rid of your anger, and engage Erica again, you'll make it so much easier for her to fix herself and thereby be a better wife to you. And, Erica, the same goes for you. If you fix your ego anxieties and balance your time and energy better, you'll help Tom act more loving as a husband toward you.

Tom: So, step one here is for each of us to fix ourselves?

Dr. G: Correct. And by doing that, you'll likely help motivate your partner to fix herself or himself, thus helping you to further fix yourself, and on and on. Now we have a victorious circle rather than a vicious circle. What do you say? On board?

Erica: I am.

Tom: But how do we do that?

Dr. G: Well, my job is to teach you exactly what to do. And I will. I'll guide you and coach you. I can't guarantee it, but, if you work hard, there's no reason why you can't overcome your relationship disturbances, fix your relationship dissatisfactions, and get back on the loving track.

I move right from the explication of Tom and Erica's relationship dissatisfactions and disturbances into a description of their vicious circle. This alerts them to the deleterious effect of their own reactions on both their partner and ultimately on themselves. It opens the door for both of them to see their role in the couple dysfunction and to see what they each need to do to extricate themselves from their marital misery.

Thankfully, Erica and Tom both signed on. From there, I taught them the ABCs of their relationship disturbances, helped each of them uncover their irrational beliefs, and started the process of eliminating each of their disturbances. At the end of the session, I supplied them with a copy of *The Couples Therapy Companion* and gave them reading assignments in preparation for our next appointment. I assigned both of them Chapter 3, "Eliminating Relationship Disturbance: An Overview." This chapter explains in detail RECT's ABC model and explicates the six core irrational beliefs that cause almost all relationship disturbances. I had Tom follow that up with Chapter 4, "Premeditated Acceptance and Forgiveness: The Antidote to Hurt and Anger," and assigned Erica Chapter 5, "Unconditional Self-Acceptance: The Antidote to Fear and Insecurity."

In future sessions, I would coach each into relinquishing their irrational "musts" and "shoulds," thereby eliminating each of their relationship disturbances. Interjected into this process as soon as possible would be efforts to build harmony and satisfaction into their relationship, particularly using Chapter 7, "Building Relationship Harmony and Happiness: An Overview," and Chapter 8, "Relentless and Intelligent Giving."

THE GOAL SETTING WORKSHOP

There are two purposes to the Goal Setting Workshop. One is to specify exactly what each partner needs to do to repair the couple damage and, beyond that, make the relationship soar. A second is for each partner to make a genuine commitment to do their part to eliminate their disturbed emotions and dysfunctional behaviors. After all, nothing changes without committed action.

Partner One—Goals

You may state your goals on your own or in consultation with your partner. The advantage of consulting with your partner is that it helps you gear your change efforts to be more responsive to exactly what your partner needs in order to be happily mated with you. Either way, be sure to put down only what you fully and genuinely commit to produce. Otherwise, by not following through, you will set your partner up for more frustration and disappointment, not to mention the risk of losing his or her trust and goodwill.

My Goals—These are the goals to which you commit to improve the quality of your relationship. First state the disturbed feelings and dysfunctional behaviors you will eliminate. Don't worry if you as yet do not know how to accomplish these goals. The role of your therapist and/or *The Companion* is to guide you through this process. Then, list the things you will do to be more positive with your partner.

(1) What I Will Eliminate

(2) The Positive Actions I Will Take

Partner Two—Goals

You may do this on your own or in consultation with your partner and/or your therapist. The advantage of consulting with your partner is that it helps you gear your change efforts to be more responsive to exactly what your partner needs in order to be happily mated with you. Either way, be sure to put down only what you fully and genuinely commit to producing. Otherwise, you will set your partner up for more frustration and disappointment, not to mention the risk of losing his or her trust and goodwill.

My Goals—These are the goals to which you commit to improve the quality of your relationship. First state the disturbed feelings and dysfunctional behaviors you will eliminate. Don't worry if you as yet do not know how to accomplish these goals, as the role of your therapist and/or *The Companion* is to guide you through this process. Then, list the positive things you will do to be more positive with your partner.

(1) What I Will Eliminate

(2) The Positive Actions I Will Take

Congratulations. This is a good start to making your relationship healthy and happy. With these goals, you now have a direction. Be careful not to set your expectations for yourself or your partner too high at this time. You most likely will need guidance and/or skill building to accomplish these goals. That's what the rest of *The Couples Therapy Companion* is all about. Read on.

GOING FORWARD

Both couple diagnosis and couple goal setting set the stage for significant couple change. This is exactly what the rest of *The Couples Therapy Companion* addresses—eliminating relationship disturbances in Chapters 3–6 and building couple harmony and satisfaction in Chapters 7–11. Each chapter contains a hands-on workshop that takes the couple from conceptual understanding into constructive action. If you are a clinician, you can lead the couple through the chapter's workshop in-session or assign it to them to do between sessions and then follow it up in your next meeting. If you are a couple, you can turn to the chapters that address your needs.

If there are relationship disturbances, the couple will want to first absorb the content of Chapter 3, "Eliminating Relationship Disturbance: An Overview." It lays out in great detail RECT's ABC model and sets the stage for each partner to make the best use of whichever of the following three relationship disturbance chapters most meet their needs: Chapter 4, "Premeditated Acceptance and Forgiveness: The Antidote to Hurt and Anger"; Chapter 5, "Unconditional Self-Acceptance: The Antidote to Fear and Insecurity"; and Chapter 6, "Relationship Resilience: The Antidote to Low Frustration Tolerance."

For the couple who has successfully gotten rid of their relationship disturbance, or the rare couple who does not present relationship disturbance, they

can proceed directly to Chapter 7, “Building Relationship Harmony and Happiness: An Overview.” From there, they can go to whichever of Chapters 8–11 most meet their needs.

Now a word especially for the couple. Again, congratulations on your wisdom and courage in committing to improving your relationship. I admire and respect you for that. But, please, tackle your relationship with commitment, purpose, and passion. You actually can make a positive difference. Like with every couple who comes into my office, I am with you every step of the way. Good luck!

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PART II

Prescribing Solutions

Eliminating Relationship Disturbance

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Eliminating Relationship Disturbance

An Overview

People are not disturbed by events but by their view of events.

—Epictetus

Three varieties of relationship disturbances drive most couples to my therapy office. Let me review them. You clinicians, see if this isn't your experience as well. You couples, see if you can recognize yourself in one of the categories.

THE RELATIONSHIP DISTURBANCE OF HURT AND ANGER

Take **Rodney and Sonya**. Notice that this couple's problems started with a relationship dissatisfaction and ended with a substantial overlay of hurt and anger. Notice also how Rodney's anger begot anger from Sonya, thereby creating the classic vicious circle, making problem solving impossible.

Immediately upon my asking what problem they wanted to address, Rodney's eyes flared and he blurted out: "Sonya is spending us into the poorhouse. We're in credit card debt up to our ears. This has got to stop!"

"How do you react to this?" I asked Rodney, as I usually do when someone expresses a complaint with such ire. Before he could answer, Sonya sarcastically interjected: "He gives me the Texas Two Step." She went on to say, "He speaks to me like I'm a dog, and then he pouts and withdraws." "And how do you react when he does that?" I asked her. Sonya gave the answer I expected: "I yell back at him, because nobody's going to treat me like that." Adding levels, I then asked her, "What impact does all this have on your spending?" "I spend more," she said, eyes blazing.

How willing do you think Rodney or Sonya were going to be in cooperatively working to resolve their money issues? Rodney felt such righteous indignation that he found it next to impossible to get out of attack mode. And Sonya resented Rodney so much she'd walk on burning coals before she'd correct her spending behavior. Clearly, both of them needed to rid themselves of their

anger before they could possibly work together to fix their respective relationship dissatisfactions. They both needed to practice “Premeditated Acceptance and Forgiveness: The Antidote to Hurt and Anger” (Chapter 4).

THE RELATIONSHIP DISTURBANCE OF FEAR AND INSECURITY

Now let’s turn to **John and Ann**, both of whom suffered from serious personal insecurities. Notice how their respective fears pushed them to act in self- and relationship destructive ways. Notice also how they negatively fed off each other’s insecurity, inadvertently feeling more insecure in response to their partner’s behavior and acting in ways to prompt their partner to feel even more insecure than before. If this isn’t a downward spiraling vicious circle, I don’t know what is.

Ann’s complaint was that John gave her such minimal amounts of affection that she had practically given up on him. When asked why she thought John acted so distant, she immediately said: “Obviously he doesn’t love me.” In response to my inquiring as to what she thought caused John to stop loving her, she said through tear-filled eyes, “Obviously I’m not worth it.” She went on to say that the only way she knew to protect herself was to emotionally shut down.

John, in fact, did love Ann, but he suffered from what is called an Avoidant Personality Disorder. This condition is characterized by a person being loath to open up and take risks in almost all interpersonal situations. Central to this condition is an extreme fear of disapproval and rejection. To put it another way, a person with John’s emotional problems habitually connects his self-worth to other people’s opinions of him. Although deeply desirous of love and approval, they fearfully avoid the risk of rejection and disapproval by holding back emotionally.

So, Ann and John both withdrew their affection from each other out of their own fear and insecurity. The result was increasing dissatisfaction, hurt, and low self-esteem on both their parts. Unless they changed their interaction patterns, they would at best have a marginal relationship. But, to free themselves to act more loving and affectionate with each other, they would first have to internalize “Unconditional Self-Acceptance: The Antidote to Fear and Insecurity” (Chapter 5).

THE RELATIONSHIP DISTURBANCE OF LOW FRUSTRATION TOLERANCE

Cathy is a classic example of a woman with the relationship disturbance of low frustration tolerance. Attractive, intelligent, and vivacious, she succeeded in virtually everything she undertook, the exception being her relationship with men.

She typically began a relationship with a burst of enthusiasm, excited about the adventures before her and eager for what was around the next corner.

Troubles arose, though, when familiarity reared its ugly head, when sex wasn't as exciting as it initially was, when her lover's quirks began to reveal themselves. As these emerged, as they do in all relationships, they loomed so large in her eyes that they virtually dwarfed the positives of the relationship. The more she catastrophized about these frustrations, the more disenchanting she became until she finally broke off the relationship.

Low frustration tolerance is a tendency to overreact to and run away from relationship frustrations. Given the fact that any number of frustrations are inherent to being mated, this condition makes sustaining a loving relationship next to impossible. To succeed in a relationship, one must develop "Relationship Resilience: The Antidote to Low Frustration Tolerance" (Chapter 6). That is, one must learn to gracefully tolerate and even accept the inevitable frustrations of being mated.

Each of these disturbances—hurt and anger; fear and insecurity; low frustration tolerance—can destroy a relationship. They can easily poison trust and goodwill, destroy love, and make it infinitely more difficult for two people to eliminate or minimize their dissatisfactions. So, how do these pernicious relationship disturbances come about? What causes people to behave so dysfunctionally with their partner? What can be done to get rid of these disturbances?

This chapter answers these questions. It explains RECT's ABC model of relationship disturbance. It enumerates the six most common irrational beliefs responsible for virtually all emotional overreactions and dysfunctional behaviors. It lays out RECT's six-step process of eliminating the root source of relationship disturbance.

I find it important to ground all my couple clients with this information. I typically explain the ABC model and illustrate it with examples the couple have supplied me. I follow this by assigning this chapter for the couple to read before our next session. In the follow-up appointment, I review the ABCs and answer any clarifying questions before launching into the couples therapy. I figure that the more the couple and I are on the same page, the more efficient and effective will be the change process.

I recommend that you, the therapist, do the same with your couple clients. And, you, the couple, will want to study this chapter. Underline, make notes, pencil in questions to ask your therapist. Above all, get it.

THE ABCS OF RELATIONSHIP DISTURBANCE

In circumstances similar to those of Rodney and Sonya, John and Ann, and Cathy, most hold the other person responsible for their reactions. You can

imagine Sonya declaring, “Rodney makes me so mad.” Or John saying, “Ann makes me feel too insecure to risk opening up to her.” Or Cathy proclaiming, “That drives me to distraction.”

To the contrary, we have discovered something truly remarkable about human nature in the past 30 years or so, something as profoundly important to human behavior as the law of gravity is to the physical universe. Very simply, we have found that it is not what other people do or don’t do that causes us to react as we do; rather, it is the way we think about what they do that is the culprit. In other words, other people, including your partner, do not upset you, hurt your feelings, or make you mad. You, yourself, upset yourself by the evaluative ways you think about your partner’s behavior.

Think about it. If your partner could actually upset you, he or she would possess magical powers. Your partner would literally be able to get into your gut and directly create your feelings. I don’t think so! What your partner is indeed responsible for is how he or she acts, but you are responsible for how you react.

This has been proven true through thousands of research studies and hundreds of thousands of case examples. As formulated by world-famous clinical psychologist Dr. Albert Ellis, we visualize this through RECT’s ABC model.

Note in Figure 3.1 that “A,” the Activating Event, refers to your partner’s actions, whether positive or negative, and “C,” the Consequence, refers to your emotional and behavioral reaction to what he or she does. What this figure illustrates is that your partner’s actions are always processed through your mind at “B”—your beliefs, your interpretations, your evaluations, your judgments. It is, in other words, the meaning you make of what your partner does, not what he or she actually does, that prompts your reactions.

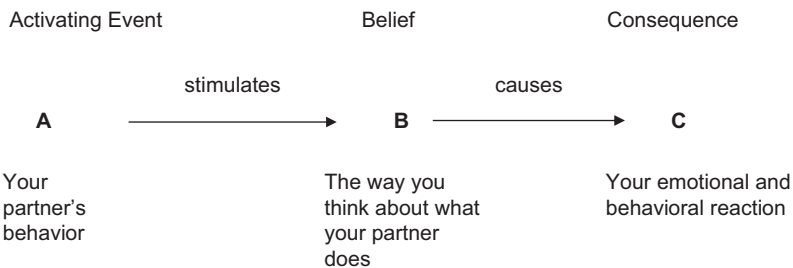


FIGURE 3.1 THE ABCS OF EMOTIONAL CONTAMINATION

Note the difference between the following pairs of statements that could be attributed to Rodney and John, partners from two of the couples described earlier. The first statements incorrectly place the responsibility for the person’s reactions on the partner. In the second statements, they take responsibility for how they reacted by virtue of their own thinking.

Rodney about Sonya:

1. She made me mad by her irresponsible spending.
2. I made myself mad by perfectionistically demanding she not possess this crappy spending habit.

John about Ann:

1. She scares me when she withdraws emotionally from me.
2. I scare myself by thinking how horrible it is for her to be upset with me.

When I counseled these two couples, I first taught them the ABC model and then encouraged them to endorse both the letter and the spirit of the second of the two pairs of statements. My reasons for doing so? For one, it is valid and appropriate, for they each were indeed responsible for how they reacted. For another, by accepting responsibility for creating their own emotional reactions, they could work to relinquish their own relationship disturbance even if their partner did not change. They could, in other words, track down and eradicate the Killer B's (see later) that caused their relationship disturbance. Third, by doing so, they would position themselves, without emotional contamination, to improve upon their relationship dissatisfaction.

The Enemy Within—Our Killer B's

As we have just seen, disturbed relationships stem not so much from what happens between two people, or the existence of a relationship dissatisfaction, but from the irrational beliefs people hold about what happens. When people hold irrational beliefs, they almost always prompt both a strong, negative emotional reaction and some dysfunctional behavior. Now they possess two problems for the price of one: a relationship disturbance on top of a relationship dissatisfaction.

More specifically, relationship disturbance arises when one or both partners engage in one or more of the following six Killer Beliefs.

Personalization. Personalization means that, when your partner acts in some undesirable way, you assume that it is motivated either by a lack of caring for you or by a purposeful desire to hurt you. It does not dawn on you that the behavior may simply be the typical way he or she reacts based on his or her personality.

Let's see how this played out with John and Ann.

- Ann personalized John's behavior by concluding, "Obviously he doesn't love me."

- John assumed that Ann simply didn't love him instead of interpreting Ann's behavior as being motivated by hurt and fear.

Notice that both Ann and John attributed the other's behavior to not caring. This personalization created their own reality about the other's feelings. In fact, both Ann and John behaved as they did because of the way they were psychologically wired, not because one didn't care about the other.

Imagine if both Ann and John, facing the same relationship dissatisfaction, had substituted a non-personalized way of thinking at B. Think how differently each would have responded if they had thought along these lines:

- Ann: "It sure is frustrating to be so deprived of John's affection. But, after all, he does suffer from an emotional disability, not a lack of love for me."
- John: "I hate it when she withdraws from me. But it's because she's scared. It's sure not designed to hurt me."

Perfectionistic Demanding. It is natural for people to want to be treated well by their mate. Then, when treated well, they consequentially feel gratified and pleased. To the contrary, when not, they understandably feel disappointed, displeased, and/or frustrated. With these types of moderate feelings, they retain their ability to express affection, communicate their concerns in a non-hostile way, and stay connected.

But, when people perfectionistically demand that their mate not act badly, they usually make themselves feel angry. If, for example, you demand that your mate act unfailingly loving, you will likely be angry whenever he or she fails to act this way. This reveals an underlying perfectionism about relationships in general and your mate in particular.

This demand for perfection from your partner creates the relationship disturbance of anger. Why? Because real relationships, regardless of how pleasing they most often are, rarely come close to perfection. Communicated with the words "should," "ought," or "must," look at how both Rodney and Sonya made themselves angry by demanding that the other not act badly.

- Rodney: "She shouldn't spend like she does."
- Sonya: "How dare he speak to me like that? He shouldn't do that."

So, it is not the desire for your partner to always act respectful, cherishing, or sensible that causes relationship disturbances. It is the unrealistic, perfectionistic demand that he or she always do so.

Neediness. There exists pretty strong evidence that all humans have an innate desire to be loved. After all, being loved realistically adds to one's fulfillment and happiness. But people often convince themselves that, because they

desire to be loved, they absolutely need to have it. This extreme thinking is often applied to one's mate, as per, "I need him," or "I can't live without her."

This needy way of thinking not only proves empirically invalid, for no adult human being will die without love, but it can cause relationship rifts as well. For, when a person perverts the rational desire to be loved into the irrational belief that it is needed, that person will inevitably put pressure on both himself or herself and his or her partner. He or she will most likely feel insecure, worry that the partner will leave, and/or act possessive and controlling. All these constitute relationship disturbances.

Awfulizing. When we awfulize, we blow the degree of badness of an event out of proportion. By labeling some dissatisfaction as awful, the person believes that it is not just unfortunate or bad to experience it, but so bad that it rivals the worst catastrophe ever. It is not standable. Thus, before one's very eyes, one magically escalates a frustration to the level of an unbearable catastrophe. Quite a formula for strong upset.

Rodney labeling Sonya's poor spending habits as awful, not just annoying, created for him the relationship disturbance of anger. Likewise, Ann's thinking of John's behavior as awful drove her to experience such anguish that it prompted her to withdraw her affection.

Low Frustration Tolerance. This refers to the belief that one can't stand the difficulties or discomforts experienced in a relationship. By demanding that one must not experience relationship adversity or dissatisfaction, one comes to resent and/or fear all kinds of relationship adversity, including deprivations, frustrations, discomforts, difficulties, and hurt. One therefore comes to dread these emotional possibilities, fearfully withdraw into a shell, and dramatically overreact when frustrated. Not a good formula for acting in a satisfying way to one's mate.

Self- or Other Damning. Self-damning is when a person rates one's own or another's value as a person as bad or worthless because of some bad act or trait. Thus, if I do well and succeed in getting you to love me, then I'm a worthwhile person; but if I fail, then I'm worthless. In other words, you think your partner's extrinsic, practical value for you determines your own inner self-value. Therefore, you think you have to succeed with your partner. Self-damning is prevalent among anxious, jealous, insecure partners. Do you recognize our friend, John, in this?

Similarly, thinking of one's partner as a bad, selfish, or rude person constitutes a total damning of him or her. For, if you act well toward me, you are, in my mind, a good person. But, if you do not, then you become the bad thing you do. You are bad, not just what you did. Does this not describe Rodney and Sonya?

The Ally Within—Our Healthy Skepticism

These six Killer B's—personalization, perfectionistic demanding, neediness, awfulizing, low frustration tolerance, and damning—individually or in some

combination are the cause of virtually all relationship disturbances. If you find yourself disturbed, you will want to root them out and eliminate them.

How do you do this? The answer is to make use of a very powerful ally, your power of healthy skepticism. Remember that none of your beliefs are necessary true. Your negative beliefs are exactly that—beliefs, not necessarily facts. The world was never flat, although almost everyone believed it to be. If you simply accept your irrational beliefs without question, they remain your reality. You will act them out, despite their absurdity.

Now I want to share a six-step tool I teach to all couples who find themselves mired in a relationship disturbance. Like those whom I have taught to use this tool, I know you too can find it useful. Let me briefly walk you through it in this chapter, and then help you apply it in more depth as you work through your relationship disturbance in the next three application chapters.

Step One: Be Mindful. Eliminating relationship disturbance starts with mindfulness. Being mindful of your anger and hurt, fear and insecurity, and/or low frustration tolerance provides you the opportunity to work to eliminate it.

So, harkening back to the ABCs of relationship disturbance, you want to first identify both your emotional upset at C and the relationship circumstance at A about which you are upset.

Rodney, for example, would note his intense anger at C about the A of Sonya's irresponsible spending. Likewise, Sonya would acknowledge that she holds anger about Rodney's angry behavior toward her. Now they have each targeted the emotional relationship disturbance (the C) they need to eliminate, as well as the dissatisfactions in their relationship (the A) about which they are disturbed.

Step Two: Take Responsibility. Although mindfulness of one's relationship disturbance is a necessary ingredient for couple cure, it is not sufficient. The caveat is that, following the ABC model, you must take responsibility for the creation of your own upset feelings. In other words, no matter how frustrating or bad your partner has behaved, you need to fully accept that you have caused your relationship disturbance with your own Killer B's.

Imagine how empowering it would be for John to declare:

"I sure hate it when Ann gets upset with me. But, as disappointing as it is, I'm causing all this fear and anxiety by the way I habitually think about it. Since I'm creating this upset, I can choose to feel different by changing the way I think about whether or not she loves me."

By taking responsibility for causing his emotional reactions at C, John is now primed to rid himself of his fear and anxiety. He does not need Ann to change in order to get rid of his relationship disturbance. He can do away with his anxieties himself whether she changes or not.

Step Three: Find the Killer B's. There is one—and only one—message in your relationship disturbance. It is that you are thinking and believing something (at B) about the Activating Event (the A) to cause yourself to react emotionally (at C) the way you do. Step Three, then, is to track down exactly what those Killer B's are that prompt you to make yourself so upset.

You ask yourself: Am I taking what he or she does personally? Am I demanding that my partner act perfectly toward me? (In other words, what is my “should”?) Am I foolishly thinking I need this other person to love me? Am I awfulizing about what I don't like? Am I “can't-stand-it-izing” about something? Am I damning myself or my partner for not being perfect? Hunt down these Killer B's so that you get rid of them.

Rodney Killer B's might be:

1. Perfectionistic demanding: “She shouldn't act so irresponsibly by spending money like she does.”
2. Awfulizing: “It's horrible what she does to our budget. I can't stand it.”
3. Demanding: “She's a selfish, self-centered brat.”

Rodney now has identified the killer B's that cause his relationship disturbance of anger. To get past your relationship disturbance, you too need to identify your Killer B's to rid your mind of them.

Step Four: Dispute Your Killer B's. In this step you make use of the power of skepticism. You take each of your Killer B's and resolutely challenge them. You hold them up as hypotheses, not as fact, and you robustly dispute their validity until you can clearly see how incorrect they are. I recommend using the three power questions:

1. Is this belief true or valid? Why?
2. How do I react emotionally and behaviorally with this belief? Does this reaction help or harm me and my relationship?
3. Would I be better off without this belief? How so?

Back to Rodney. Here's how he could challenge the belief: “She shouldn't act so irresponsibly by spending money as she does.”

Power Question 1: Is this belief true or valid? Why?

Answer: “No it's not. Why? Well, first of all, Sonya isn't perfect. She has faults just like everyone else, and this just happens to be one of her faults. Besides, her mom is just like this, so I guess she came by it naturally.”

Power Question 2: How do I react emotionally and behaviorally with this belief? Does this reaction help or harm me?

Answer: “I react like a two-year-old child. I get angry and treat her miserably. This reaction of mine almost always prompts her to respond in kind, and then we don’t talk for days.”

Power Question 3: Would I be better off without this belief?

Answer: “Absolutely. I not only make it impossible to talk with Sonya about my money concerns in a reasonable way that would have a chance of solving the problem, but I’m driving a big wedge between us across the board.”

Step Five: Reframe Your B’s. Once you clearly see how incorrect your Killer B’s are, you take control. You now begin to ingrain new, more realistic beliefs that will help you eliminate your relationship disturbance. What you do is forcefully and repeatedly state a more rational, self-enhancing belief that would predictably lead to better emotional and behavioral results. Rodney might reframe his Killer B’s thusly:

“I sure wish Sonya were better at managing money. But she’s as entitled to her faults as am I. After all, she’s human. Now, without anger, what can I do to help her get past it?”

Once constructed, you rehearse the beliefs many times over a day. I assign to my clients what I call “the six and five.” Six times a day—breakfast, mid-morning, lunch, mid-afternoon, supper, and bedtime—you take five minutes to read and reflect on your new rational belief. I have them do this for the next 100 days so they become indoctrinated in their new, rational way of thinking.

Step Six: Plan Constructive Action. Note how Rodney reframed the Killer B’s that caused him to become angry with Sonya. With repeated practice these new beliefs can become ingrained. And, with his new beliefs in place, he would predictably experience such appropriate emotions as disappointment or frustration, but not anger. And, without anger, he could dispassionately reflect on what, if anything, would best be done to help improve the situation.

GOING FORWARD

Armed with this information, you now have the necessary tools to rid yourself of your relationship disturbance. Chapter 4, “Premeditated Acceptance and Forgiveness,” tackles the relationship disturbance of anger and hurt. Chapter 5, “Unconditional Self-Acceptance,” shows you how to eliminate the relationship disturbance of fear and insecurity. And Chapter 6, “Relationship Resilience,” deals with overcoming the relationship disturbance of low frustration tolerance.

You can work your way through these chapters one by one, or go directly to the relationship disturbance chapter that challenges you the most.

Does this six-step process really work to rid relationship disturbance? Absolutely! I've helped hundreds of couples eliminate their disturbances using these exact steps. Can you yourself do it? I know you can! Will you do it? That I don't know. It's up to you. Go for it—mindfully, purposefully, and passionately!

Premeditated Acceptance and Forgiveness

The Antidote to Hurt and Anger

Let me be a little kinder,
Let me be a little blinder,
To the faults of those around me,
Let me praise a little more.

—Edgar A. Guest

There is an obvious but often ignored relationship reality. One never mates with a saint or an angel. Being a quite fallible, imperfect human being, one's partner will, without question, at times act poorly. He or she will bring quirks, idiosyncrasies, and sometimes even emotional problems into the relationship. He or she will thereby fairly regularly commit (1) sins of commission, by saying and doing things not wanted, and (2) sins of omission, by not saying and doing things that are wanted.

That is the reality of living with another human being. Yours, mine, or anyone's beloved will at times act impatiently, irritably, unreasonably, insensitively, and even rudely. At other times he or she will withdraw affection, forget to do what was promised, and be unavailable. It's inevitable. The question is not whether this will happen, but when. The challenge one faces is how to respond when it does.

During my 30 years of working with couples, I have heard just about every type of relationship complaint imaginable. The wise couples, those who rarely end up in my office, take each other's missteps in stride. They hold realistic expectations, realizing it is impossible for their beloved to always act saintly. They gracefully chalk their partner's misbehaviors up to the inevitable by-product of being mated to an imperfect person. They then either let it slide or they sit down and calmly talk it out.

But, alas, many couples, certainly most of those who seek my help, don't usually respond so wisely. They typically react with the relationship disturbance of hurt and anger. I call these reactions emotional contamination. Why? Because they contaminate a couple's ability to effectively problem solve. Constructive communication becomes difficult if not impossible; cooperative give-and-take

goes out the window; reciprocal emotional contamination in one's partners is stimulated; and, if these feelings linger, love and goodwill become tarnished.

THREE HURT AND ANGRY COUPLES

Let's take a peek at how this typically plays out with three couples. Notice how each started with some relationship complaint and then ended with a substantial overlay of relationship disturbance.

Bill and Nancy nicely illustrate the ravages of hurt and anger. Nancy's grievous sin of omission, according to Bill, was that she was a sexual icicle, desiring sex only once a week. For him, four times a week was more like it.

Unfortunately, rather than sitting down with Nancy and negotiating some win-win compromise, Bill became very angry, as if Nancy's not wanting sex more frequently was a purposeful rejection of him. His resentment grew stronger and stronger the more he thought about it.

Nancy in turn reacted with anger back toward Bill because, as she put it, "He's reduced our marriage to sex, treating me as if I'm a piece of meat." As you can imagine, as their anger went further north, Nancy's libido went further south. And, as one would predict, the less sexually responsive Nancy was, the more upset Bill grew. As this downward spiral continued, their ability to successfully work through their sexual differences became ever more remote.

Tom and Vickie provide yet another example of the destructive consequences of hurt and anger on a relationship. In their first session, Vickie voiced what I came to agree were two rather legitimate complaints about Tom. One was that he drank excessively. In fact, I pretty quickly concluded he had an alcohol problem. A second complaint was his trigger-happy impatience with their two children, sometimes to the point of becoming unreasonably harsh.

As you would guess, Vickie reacted to these two concerns with a great deal of resentment, combining periods of loud outbursts with withdrawals of affection. Of course, Tom was not about to take this lying down. Feeling very disrespected by the way Vickie acted toward him, he became progressively more resentful, turned more to the bottle, and became even less patient with both her and the kids.

Bob and Carolyn are the last example. Over time Carolyn developed a great store of resentment because Bob, in her opinion, spent too much time at work. To add insult to injury, she complained that he volunteered additional time to the local rescue squad, spending each Thursday evening at the station and agreeing to be available by phone on weekends in the event of some emergency.

Much like Bill did with Nancy, Carolyn interpreted Bob's commitment to his career and volunteer work as a statement that she wasn't important to him, thereby setting off her hurt and anger. How did she react? Testily, to say the least. As Bob put it, "She's either in a constant pout, a constant nag, or on a

constant guilt trip.” It was little wonder that, as his resentment toward her grew, he found it less and less appealing to come home. As time went by, he progressively stayed later at work, not to mention jumped at every chance to respond to an emergency call when his pager went off.

The Hurt and Anger Pattern

I could describe hundreds of couples who have fallen into a similar hurt and anger trap. Looking at these three as typical, though, we can extrapolate a common pattern. For you couples, see if you don’t recognize yourself, at least at times.

Notice, first, that at least one partner in each of these couples started with a relationship dissatisfaction. Bill felt dissatisfied with Nancy’s level of sexual interest. Vickie worried about Tom’s drinking. Carolyn disliked Bob’s prioritizing his work over her. These are examples of the dissatisfactions most people periodically experience in relationships.

Notice also that each of these three people, in addition to being frustrated with their mates, took their relationship dissatisfaction to the next level, reacting with hurt and anger. Bill angrily badgered Nancy about sex, Vickie complained incessantly about Tom’s drinking, and Carolyn nagged Bob to death about his work. By their reactions, these people created two problems for the price of one—first their relationship dissatisfaction and then their relationship disturbance of hurt and anger.

Notice, third, the tendency for the second person of the couple to react in similar fashion. Nancy became angry with Bill for badgering her, Tom became resentful about Vickie’s complaining, and Bob hostilely withdrew from Carolyn. Now we have the classic vicious circle whereby person one develops a relationship disturbance over some relationship dissatisfaction, which in turn stimulates a relationship disturbance on the second person’s part, which then prompts the first person to be more relationship disturbed, and on and on in a downward spiral.

Notice, fourth, how difficult it was for each of these couples, mired in hurt and anger, to feel close, express love and tenderness, and sustain their bond. With their relationship disturbances, they found it impossible to cooperatively work through as partners their respective relationship dissatisfactions. This is why it is critically important for couples to first eliminate their relationship disturbance of hurt and anger before working to resolve their relationship dissatisfactions.

Sear This into Your Mind

- No one is mated to a saint or an angel. Every partner in a couple situation is a very fallible human being, a person who will inevitably—yes, inevitably!—act badly at times.

- The wise person will take great pains to not fall into the same hurt and anger traps that the three couples described earlier did. That is, when the partner acts badly, practice acceptance and forgiveness. Then, respond without hurt or anger. Sound difficult? It is, but I will guide you through the six-step process of Premeditated Acceptance and Forgiveness shortly.
- On a broader scale, not only the quality but also the survival of a relationship depends on genuinely accepting one's partner despite his or her faults, quirks, and missteps. This does not mean that you accept everything he or she does, but you determine to accept the person while reserving the right to protest the deeds.
- Working to eliminate hurt and anger takes time and effort. But it can be done. The six steps of Premeditated Acceptance and Forgiveness guide the couple through the process of eliminating hurt and anger. They also provide the steps to ingraining acceptance and forgiveness into the fabric of one's relationship. This is a workshop, not a seminar, so, you couples, please put thought and energy into doing each of the exercises. They will help you rid your relationship of anger and hurt. You clinicians will want to coach your clients through each step of the workshop.

THE PREMEDITATED ACCEPTANCE AND FORGIVENESS WORKSHOP

Please tackle this workshop with three goals in mind. One is to eliminate any hurt and anger you may harbor toward your partner. This is the forgiveness part. A second goal, the acceptance part, is to master the mindsets that will help you avoid becoming hurt and angry when your partner provides you difficulties in the future. The third goal is to learn the six-step Premeditated Acceptance and Forgiveness process so that you can apply it to your relationship for the rest of your life. This will keep your relationship hurt and anger to the barest minimum.

If you haven't already, you might want to familiarize yourself with Chapter 3, "Eliminating Relationship Disturbance: An Overview." This chapter outlines the basic concepts needed to make successful use of this workshop, most importantly the ABC Model of Relationship Disturbance. Please also be open and throw yourself into this as it can truly help you rid your relationship disturbance of hurt and anger, even though you may have been plagued by them for years.

Step One: Mindfulness

Premeditated Acceptance and Forgiveness starts with mindfulness. Being aware of your hurt and anger provides you the opportunity to get rid of it. So, first be

alert to hurt and angry feelings. Then ask yourself: “What did my partner do or not do to make me feel these ways?”

Bill, for example, would note that he feels hurt and angry at Nancy about her relative lack of sexual interest. This awareness does not eliminate his relationship disturbance, but it sure pinpoints it. Bill now has a target to change—his relationship disturbance of hurt and anger about his relationship dissatisfaction of Nancy’s sexual interest level.

Step One Exercise—Mindfulness. It makes sense for you, and hopefully your partner as well, to identify your own hurt and anger patterns. These are the soft spots where you and your partner tend to spiral downward into a relationship-damaging vicious circle. Being mindful of when these happen and how you respond gives you power. With awareness comes the opportunity to choose to respond differently.

As you do this exercise remember that neither you nor your partner are saints or angels. You each on occasion will act badly toward the other. The key at this point is not to eliminate these moments. Rather, you are to see how you yourself react when your partner misbehaves and to note the negative consequences of your reactions. To make wise choices, you must first accurately diagnose your reactivity pattern. So, be brutally honest as you do this.

About You—Focus first on yourself. What are the things your partner does or does not do about which you tend to feel hurt and/or anger? Then, note how you typically react when he or she acts this way—emotionally and behaviorally. Finally, describe the outcome; that is, what results from your reaction. How does your partner typically respond? Does your reaction help or hinder harmony? Does reacting this way help or harm the situation? The relationship? After doing this assessment, make a few preliminary notes about what you could do differently in the future.

What Happens

My Reaction

The Outcome

Some positive changes in how I react might be: _____

About Your Partner—Now focus on your partner. What are some of the things you do about which your partner tends to respond with hurt and anger?

When he or she gets upset, how does he or she react—emotionally and behaviorally? Finally, describe how you tend to react to his or her reactions. Are your counter-reactions helpful or harmful? What is the impact on the relationship of your counter-reactions? After doing all this, make a few preliminary notes about how you could behave differently in the future—with regard to both what you do to stimulate your partner’s reaction and how you respond to your partner’s reactions.

What I Do

His/Her Reactions

My Counter-Reaction

Some positive changes in how I act and react might be: _____

Hopefully you now have a clearer picture of what your partner does about which you respond with hurt and anger. Hopefully you also now see the cost to you and your relationship of reacting the way you do. Being thusly mindful can motivate you to make the changes in how you react that creates your relationship disturbance.

Step Two: Responsibility

Step Two makes use of the ABC model described in Chapter 3. Remember that this is a model of emotional and behavioral responsibility. It communicates that it is not the dissatisfying things your partner does or the satisfying things he or she does not do (the Activating Event at A) that cause your relationship disturbances of hurt and anger (the Consequence at C); rather, it is the way you think (your beliefs, interpretations, evaluations, judgments at B) that causes you to react as you do. In other words, it is the meaning you make of what your partner does, not what he or she actually does, that prompts your reactions. No matter how badly your partner behaves, you need to fully accept that you have upset yourself with your own B’s.

Note the difference between the following pairs of statements that could be attributed to Bill, Vickie, and Carolyn, partners from the three couples described earlier. The first statement incorrectly places the responsibility for the hurt and

anger on what the other did. In the second, the person takes responsibility for how he or she reacted.

Bill about Nancy

1. Nancy hurt my feelings by not wanting more sex.
2. I caused myself to feel hurt by interpreting Nancy's not wanting more sex as a personal rejection.

Vickie about Tom

1. Tom infuriates me with his drinking.
2. I don't like Tom's drinking, but I cause myself to feel anger by expecting him, who after all is an alcoholic, to not act like one.

Carolyn about Bob

1. Bob makes me so angry.
2. Bob is responsible for the choices he makes, but I cause myself to feel so hurt and angry because I insist he have the priorities I want.

When I counseled each of these couples, I first taught them the ABC model of relationship disturbance, and then encouraged them to endorse both the letter and the spirit of the second of the two pairs of statements. My reasons for doing so? For one, it is valid, for they were indeed each responsible for how they reacted to their partner's behavior. For another, by accepting this responsibility, they could then claim the power to relinquish their own anger and hurt, which, as we've seen, often prompts the kinds of reactions that have the potential to further inflame the situation. Third, they could position themselves to track down and eradicate the Killer B's (see Step Three) that caused them to suffer hurt and anger.

Step Two Exercise—Responsibility. This is where the rubber hits the road. Unless your partner somehow magically becomes perfect and never again treats you badly, you are doomed to tons of hurt and anger in your relationship. So, reflect carefully and, if willing, sign the following responsibility pledge.

I, _____, take full responsibility for the anger and hurt I feel toward my partner, _____. When he/she does _____, _____, and _____, I cause myself to feel these ways. I commit to

eliminate my hurt and anger regardless of whether or not my partner alters his/her behavior.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Taking responsibility for your hurt and anger takes courage. Nevertheless, it is a scientific reality that you yourself cause your feelings. So, it is appropriate to take this responsibility. Furthermore, it will pay huge dividends going forward. Take the risk.

Step Three: Identify Your Killer B's

There is one—and only one—message in your hurt and anger. It is that you are thinking and believing something (at B) about the Activating Event (the A) to cause yourself to react emotionally (at C) the way you do. Step Three, then, is to track down exactly what those Killer B's are that prompt you to make yourself so upset with your partner.

To help you ferret out your Killer Beliefs, let's take a closer look at our friends Bill and Nancy. Remember that they came to marital counseling because Bill was quite angry at Nancy for her relative lack of sexual interest, and Nancy in turn was furious at Bill for being unreasonably angry at her. Their Killer B's are typical of most hurt and angry couples. I'll bet you'll recognize yourself in here.

Killer B #1—Personalization. This means that when your partner acts in some undesirable way toward you, you make the assumption that it either reflects a lack of caring for you or that it is purposely meant to hurt you. Let's see how this played out with Bill and Nancy.

- When I asked Bill what it meant to him that Nancy only wanted sex with him once a week, he said, "She doesn't find me attractive or really love me."
- When I asked Nancy what it meant to her that Bill got so angry at her about sex, she said, "He must not think much of me as a person."

Notice that both Bill and Nancy attributed the other's behavior to somehow being against them. According to Bill, Nancy didn't care about him; according to Nancy, Bill didn't respect her. In reality, Nancy responded sexually as she did because of the relatively low intensity of her libido, rather than out of not caring for Bill. And Bill reacted to Nancy as he did not because he disrespected her, but because he felt wounded. It simply wasn't personal on either of their parts.

Imagine if Bill and Nancy, facing the same adversity, had substituted a different non-personalized way of thinking at B. Think how they each would have responded emotionally and behaviorally if they thought along the following lines:

- Bill: "I'm not crazy about the fact that Nancy is sexually wired the way she is. It's frustrating because I find her so sexy. But it's just the way she is. It's not about me."
- Nancy: "Bill sure is acting childishly about all this. I don't like it, but it's not because he doesn't respect me. It's just the way he responds to frustration and hurt."

Killer B #2—Demanding Perfection. Communicated with the words "should," "ought," or "must," both Bill and Nancy also fell into the Demanding Perfection trap. Forgetting that they were each married to an exceptionally imperfect human being who could be expected to fairly regularly let them down, they each demanded that their partner never act in a contrary way.

To illustrate this, listen to the interchange I had with Bill.

Dr. G: Bill, when you think about the A of Nancy not being as sexually interested as you want her to be, what do you tell yourself at B?

Bill: Well, I don't like it.

Dr. G: But, Bill, if you just thought, "I don't like it," you'd only feel frustrated or disappointed, not angry. I'm also hearing a "should." What is it? Finish this sentence: "I don't like it that Nancy isn't more sexually interested, and she. . ."

Bill: She should be!

Dr. G: That's right! You're saying to yourself at B, "My fallible, imperfect human wife, Nancy, should be perfectly the way I want her to be—at least sexually."

Bill: I guess you're right. I am thinking that way.

Dr. G: And that kind of thinking is what gets you mad. For, if there is some law of nature that commands Nancy to be perfectly the way you want her to be sexually, and she is breaking that law, then I guess anger is justified. But, one, she is not perfect to begin with, and, two, there is no such law. Right?

Bill: But I know she's not perfect. Nobody is.

Dr. G: But, Bill, if you indeed operated on the premise that Nancy is a fallible person who will inevitably let you down, would you have reacted with so much hurt and anger

Bill: I guess not.

Listening to this exchange, I could see that Nancy was gratified by Bill's chastised look. Not to let her off the hook, I next said to her:

"Now, Nancy, isn't the same thing true for you? Let's assume for a second that Bill is incorrect in responding as he does. Like Bill, aren't you also secretly demanding that he be perfect, never treating you unfairly?" Sheepishly, she acknowledged I was correct, saying, "I guess you're right on!"

So, both Bill and Nancy, by their demand for perfection from their partner, set themselves up for the relationship disturbance of hurt and anger. The choice a couple makes between these two expectations at B—perfection or imperfection—forms the context in which their relationship life plays out. For if you consciously or unconsciously demand your partner be perfect, you will not only be regularly disappointed and let down, but frequently offended, hurt, and angry as well.

Killer B #3—Damnation. This Killer B drives the final nail into the hurt and anger coffin. It starts with a rational desire for the partner to act differently, as in: "I don't like what you're doing; I wish you'd stop that." But it then quickly evolves into a total damnation of the person, as per: "You shouldn't do this, you blankety-blank."

Let's once more visit Bill and Nancy. Notice how they each damned the other with a negative label or name-call.

Bill: She should be more interested in sex than she is. She is just a cold, frigid person.

Nancy: All he seems to think about is sex. He should just get off it and appreciate me for who I am. What a fool he is.

These three Killer B's devastated Nancy and Bill. Notice, first, the personalization that led to hurt. Then, notice the perfectionistic "shoulding" they each laid on the other. Also notice how they damned each other—Bill calling Nancy a "frigid person" and Nancy calling Bill a "fool." There is no alternative for either of them to feel except for hurt and anger from this way of thinking.

Step Three Exercise—Find Your Killer B's. Earlier you identified things your partner does or does not do (the A) about which you get angry and hurt (the C), as well as your partner's counter-reactions to you. Now it's time to track down your Killer B's.

Note below the top three things your partner does or does not do about which you get hurt or angry. Next, ferret out your Killer B's, specifically looking for your personalization, perfectionistic demanding, and damning thoughts. Write these below in complete sentence form. These are what you will need to change in order to cure your anger/hurt relationship disturbance.

<i>Your A</i>	<i>Your Killer B's</i>
1.	
2.	
3.	

Good job. Your anger and hurt relationship disturbance diagnosis is complete. You have diagnosed what your partner does that makes you feel hurt and angry, and you have identified your Killer B's, which cause these disturbed feelings. Now you can begin to eliminate these Killer B's and replace them with more forgiving and accepting self-messages in the next step.

Step Four: Skeptical Disputation

Step Four makes use of the power of skepticism. In this step, you take each of your Killer B's, hold them up as a hypothesis, not a fact, and robustly dispute their validity until you can clearly see how incorrect they are. As outlined in Chapter 3, I recommend using these three power questions:

1. Is this belief true or valid? Why?
2. How do I react emotionally and behaviorally with this belief? Does this reaction help or harm me?
3. Would I be better off without this belief? How so?

Using Bill as the example, the disputation of his personalization Killer B, "If she doesn't want more sex with me, she must not care about me," would go like this.

Disputation Question 1: Is this belief true or valid? Why?

Answer: "No, it is not! Why? Well, the reality is that Nancy is wired sexually exactly as she is. The frequency with which she desires sex is a reflection of her own libido level. It has nothing to do with loving me. After a few months of excitement, she'd respond exactly the same way to Brad Pitt. Besides, she demonstrates her love of me in a million ways day after day."

Disputation Question 2: How do I react emotionally and behaviorally with this belief? Does this reaction help or harm me?

Answer: "Miserably, like a two-year-old. I get all upset. I obsess about sex, even when I'm not interested in it to begin

with. And I treat her pretty shabbily. All this makes her much less sexually interested, thwarting my goal of being more frequently intimate with her.”

Disputation Question 3: Would I be better off without this belief? How so?

Answer: “Without a doubt. Thinking this way only pulls me down. Furthermore, Nancy doesn’t find my childish behavior sexy, making her less interested in sex than she normally is. The long and short of it is that I lose all the way around—I make myself feel miserable and I further block more sexual adventures with her.”

Now, before providing you the opportunity to dispute your own Killer B’s, I want to underscore two very important points.

1. There is no easy way to change your thinking. To practice Premeditated Acceptance and Forgiveness, you must repeatedly and energetically dispute your Killer B’s in order to eliminate them from your thinking pattern.
2. Your Killer B’s are complete nonsense. They have no validity whatsoever. So I now offer you the core arguments you can use in your disputation. You might want to think of these as a “cheat sheet” as you do Step Four.

Taking It Personally Cheat Sheet

- Your partner does not lie awake at night gleefully thinking of ways to hurt you, deny you, or put you down.
- Your partner acts badly because of the way he or she is psychologically put together, not to get under your skin.
- Even when angry at you, your partner acts spitefully because of the habitual way he or she has learned to handle adversity.
- Even the anger is not personal.

Demanding Perfection Cheat Sheet

- Your partner is not perfect. He or she will regularly act imperfectly, thereby periodically doing things you don’t like or want, as well as not doing things you do like or want.
This is a reality, so expect it.
- No matter how annoying or frustrating it may be, your partner must or should be exactly as he or she is. After all, your partner spent a lifetime

evolving into exactly the person he or she is, no matter how flawed this may be or how much you wish certain of his or her traits, foibles, or weaknesses did not exist.

- While you have every right to dislike what your partner does, and even to assertively (but not angrily) attempt to get him or her to change, it never follows that, because you don't like it, he or she should act as you like. After all, you don't run the universe or own this person.

Damnation Cheat Sheet

- Although your partner will indeed have faults and act badly, he or she is not a totally bad person or any other pejorative, global term (e.g., a frigid person, a fool).
- While you may judge what he or she does, it is never appropriate to judge or damn your partner as a whole person.
- Despite the traits or behaviors you dislike in your partner, he or she has many other traits and behaviors, a good many of which are positive. He or she is not just this one thing you dislike.

Step Four Exercise—Skeptically Dispute Your Killer B's. In Step Three, you identified the Killer B's that cause you to experience your hurt and anger. Now you can begin the process of developing Premeditated Acceptance and Forgiveness. Using the power of skepticism, aggressively dispute and debate each of your Killer B's until you've convinced yourself they are not true. Remember to refer to your "cheat sheets" to help you dispute.

Killer B #1:

Question #1: Is this belief true or valid? Why?

Question #2: How do I react emotionally and behaviorally with this belief? Does this reaction help or hurt me?

Question #3: Would I be better off without this belief? How so?

Killer B #2:

Question #1: Is this belief true or valid? Why?

Question #2: How do I react emotionally and behaviorally with this belief?
Does this reaction help or hurt me?

Question #3: Would I be better off without this belief? How so?

Step Five: Developing Acceptance and Forgiveness Beliefs

Great job. Once you show yourself how absurd your Killer B's are, you are now primed to work to engrain new thought patterns. What you do is forcefully and repeatedly state a more rational, relationship-enhancing Belief that would predictably lead to better emotional and behavioral results than hurt and anger. Bill might reframe his Killer B's thusly:

"I sure wish Nancy were more sexually minded, but her sexual style is simply a reflection of the way she is wired. It's not about me at all. In fact, she should be exactly as she is, particularly because there's no law that commands her to be exactly the way I want. Besides, she is a warm, loving woman in virtually every way imaginable. There is no sense in me being emotionally upset about it on top of being sexually frustrated."

Step Five Exercise—Developing New Beliefs. Take each of your Killer B's and, in accordance with your Skeptical Disputation Exercise, reframe them into beliefs that will allow you to forgive and accept your partner. Note that by doing this you now have the best of both worlds; you can still dislike your partner's undesirable behavior, thereby maintaining your own integrity, while at the same time letting go of your hurt and anger.

Killer B #1: _____

New Acceptance and Forgiveness Belief: _____

Killer B #2: _____

New Acceptance and Forgiveness Belief: _____

Killer B #3: _____

New Acceptance and Forgiveness Belief: _____

Step Six: Forward Action Planning

Note how Bill has changed the beliefs that cause him to become so upset with Nancy. With his new beliefs in place, he may still feel such emotions as frustration or disappointment, but not anger and hurt. And, without this emotional contamination, he could dispassionately reflect on what, if anything, he could do to better his situation.

What are his options? For one, he could just do nothing, gracefully accepting Nancy as she sexually is. Sometimes this is the best alternative. Another option might be to alter his behavior in some strategic way so as to increase the probability that Nancy might be more sexually responsive to him. A third option might be to sit down with her and work out a compromise that would work for both of them.

This last option was in fact what Bill and Nancy did. Once they both eliminated their hurt and anger, I sent them home with the assignment to talk about a compromise about which they could both feel good. To my delight they returned to my office with broad smiles on their faces. “We did it,” Bill announced. “We settled on twice a week.” Nancy added: “Yeah. It’s right down the middle. It’s twice as much as what’s natural for me, and half as much as is natural for Bill.”

The crowning glory was when I asked them if they felt good about this solution. I’ll never forget what Nancy said. I only wish every couple would take such a positive attitude.

“You know, I do all kinds of things for my family out of love that I wouldn’t do naturally—ironing, the dishes, cleaning the bathrooms, and so on. I love this guy, and I want to make him happy. So, with sex, I figure one time a week is for me, then the second time that week I’ll just lend him my vagina.”

All three of us got quite a chuckle out of that remark. But what made it possible for Nancy and Bill to come to such a workable solution was their ability to accept and forgive each other. Only when they could break out of the relationship disturbance into which they had fallen could they creatively solve their sexual problem.

Step Six Exercise—Deciding What to Do. As with Bill and Nancy, you now have three constructive alternatives regarding your relationship dissatisfaction. Without hurt or anger, you can: (1) gracefully accept that your partner is imperfect and basically ignore this dissatisfaction; (2) determine what constructive actions you might take that could probably encourage your partner to make the changes you want; or (3) sit down together and talk it out, using the no-lose method described in Chapter 11.

Below, plan what you intend to do about your relationship dissatisfaction.

Great job on this workshop. You may very well already feel relief from this first effort. However, don't be discouraged if you are still plagued with hurt and anger. Sometimes it takes repeated effort to rewire new beliefs into your head. Keep at it and you will see the results. I promise.

INTENSIFIERS

What follows are three Intensifiers that can magnify any couple's ability to accept and forgive their partner. Notice that all three are cognitive in nature and require mental practice to become habituated.

Notice also that all three are based on what is called the Law of Focus. This says that what we focus on determines to a large extent our mood. Imagine what would happen if one incessantly dwelled only on the negative things in their life. After a while this person would become depressed, pessimistic, perhaps even bitter. To the contrary, if one spent most of one's time focusing on the good in your life, his or her mood would predictably be positive and hopeful.

The Law of Focus applies to relationship life as well as to life in general. To master Premeditated Acceptance and Forgiveness, it will help the couple to integrate it into their daily routine.

Focus on Your Partner's Strengths

Remember that your partner brings both positive and negative qualities to you. Which of these you choose to focus on will determine to a very large extent your feelings toward your partner. If you obsessively focus on your partner's annoying qualities, you'll likely be chronically displeased, unhappy with him or her, and unwilling to forgive further transgressions. To the contrary, if you focus on those positive, endearing qualities your partner possesses, then you'll likely feel more positive and loving.

Make a list of the positive aspects of your partner—the physical attributes you like, the strengths of character and personality you admire, the endearing mannerisms, and the like. Start each day reflecting on these positive features, thereby sculpting your image of him or her in as favorable a light as possible.

Practice Gratitude

Reflect on what your partner does that has contributed positively to the quality of your life. These could be day-to-day things such as a ready smile or a sense of humor. Or they could be more major things like being a wonderful mom, an excellent breadwinner, or an exciting sexual partner. In addition to regularly focusing on these “gifts,” take the time to freely express your gratitude. It will not only gratify your partner, but, by keeping your appreciation front and center, you will find yourself more deeply loving, accepting, and forgiving.

Look on the Bright Side

All relationships have their strengths and weaknesses. You would be wise to not ignore your relationship's weaknesses because they could metastasize and destroy the relationship. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to focus primarily on the weaknesses, for that would only serve to sour you. Instead, be sure to identify and remember all the positive things you experience as a result of being mated to your partner. By doing this your appreciation quotient will rise, and you will be much more likely to gracefully weather the inevitable thunderstorms that maritally visit you.

GOING FORWARD

To sum up, no one is, nor will ever be, mated to a perfect person. One's partner will have faults, and act badly. That's the reality of living with a fallible human being.

All too often couples fall into the hurt and anger vicious circle. That is, one person experiences hurt or anger toward the second person for acting badly, and acts badly in response, which in turn stimulates the second person to feel hurt and anger and act badly, thereby stimulating the first person to be more upset and again act badly, and so on. It is the relationship disturbance of hurt and anger, and the ensuing vicious circle, that destroys most couples, not the faulty behavior per se that started it out.

Acceptance of your partner as a fallible person, along with the commitment and ability to forgive him or her, are necessary skills to make a relationship loving and lasting. To do this, both partners in a couple must take responsibility for their own emotional reactions by eliminating the Killer Beliefs of:

- Taking the partner's gaffes and faults personally,
- Expecting perfection of one's partner, and/or
- Damning the partner as a whole person.

To actualize Premeditated Acceptance and Forgiveness, each of the couple partners must be mindfully aware when they feel hurt and anger, ferret out their Killer B's, skeptically dispute them, and replace them with beliefs that allow them to be accepting and forgiving. Additionally, focusing on the partner's strengths, practicing gratitude, and looking on the bright side will intensify your acceptance of and ability to forgive your partner.

To the couple, I say, Best of luck with all this. I know you can get rid of your hurt and anger. I've seen hundreds of people do so. So can you. Armed with your commitment and the insights and skills contained in this chapter, you can make a wonderfully positive input. Relate mindfully, purposely, and passionately. Go for it.

CHAPTER 5

Unconditional Self-Acceptance

The Antidote to Fear and Insecurity

The privilege of a lifetime is being who you are.

—Joseph Campbell

I think I'm on pretty solid ground when I say that most everyone desires to be happy. Evidence shows that humans, of all ages, of every race, creed, and color, in every corner of the Earth, strive for two goals: one is to survive; the second is to survive happily. Such diverse thinkers as the philosopher Aristotle, the revered spiritual leader the Dalai Lama, and the renowned clinical psychologist Dr. Albert Ellis have declared that being happy is in fact the primary purpose of life.

And guess what? Perhaps the most powerful reason people couple is that they fervently believe that being in a loving, lasting relationship will profoundly enhance their happiness. How many times have we heard lovers exclaim: "She's such a joy." "My life is so much richer with him in it." "She lights up my life."

I have found from decades of working with couples three fundamental postures people can take in an attempt to secure relationship happiness. Think of these as deeply ingrained patterns, formed probably over decades of unintended rehearsal and practice. They drive how we conduct ourselves in our relationship lives and serve us either well or ill.

1. Selfish Love. In this, one focuses first and foremost on getting one's own needs met. The partner's needs are an afterthought. Because of a damaged sense of self-esteem and an excessive neediness, it's as if the person is stating:

"I feel so empty and unworthy that all I can focus on is being affirmed. I need this to feel good about myself."

Notice the insecurity in this statement. What happens when Selfish Love is one's predominant style? At the very least, this person becomes high maintenance. Feeling chronically inadequate, he or she tends to be demanding of attention and affection, threatened by the least disruption of ardor, frequently

pouty and moody, often manipulative and controlling, and prone to angry outbursts. Imagine the burden this places on the partner. Think of how unattractive this makes one over time.

2. Bargaining Love. Bargaining Love is in play when one gives to another, but with the expectation that the partner will reciprocate in kind. Every affectionate gesture, every gift, every concession or compromise is delivered through a scorekeeper's eye. "I'll do my 50 percent but you must do your 50 percent in return." But it's about more than fairness; it's about never being let down, as if one's worth is connected to being treated with equality and respect.

When I think about Bargaining Love, I'm reminded of Carl. When he and his wife, Betty, first sat down in my office, Carl complained that he had no idea why "I have to be in a shrink's office." He went on to describe himself as a generous, giving husband who was attentive, helpful with household chores, and unerring in remembering birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays.

While readily acknowledging Carl's positive contributions, Betty had this to say in response:

"When I step up and respond to him in kind, everything is hunky-dory. But if I'm not Johnny-on-the-spot, he gets cranky and moody, almost like a child. He won't let up until I prove myself again. It's like he totes a calculator, keeping tabs to make sure the score is always equal. When I really think about it, it doesn't feel like he's actually doing these things for me. It's more about obligating me into making him feel important."

Needless to say, if Carl didn't change his ways, he and Betty would predictably slide deeper and deeper into the abyss into which Bargaining Love often pushes couples. Because it is impossible to keep the ledger books perfectly balanced all the time, hurts and resentments inevitably build, blaming and finger-pointing becomes common, and suspicion and distrust seep in. There may be cautious truces, but they are unlikely to hold, and the couple slowly but surely slides into perpetual disharmony.

3. Mature Love. Mature Love represents the highest level of relating. In this style, one holds the partner's happiness and well-being to a level equal to one's own. While of course being deeply committed to personal happiness, this person is equally committed to the partner's happiness as well. To paraphrase Stephen Covey from his brilliant book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, the mature person balances the courage to strive for his or her own happiness with the compassion to strive for the partner's happiness as well.

When I think of Mature Love, I think of my friend Bill. Having previously suffered through a divorce, he became reflective as he approached his upcoming marriage to Sandy. When I asked what he had learned that would help him succeed in this new marriage, he said:

“More than anything else, I owe Sandy my mental health. I must be so comfortable in my own skin that I rarely, if ever, resort to playing petty games. The more comfortable I am with me, the more unselfish I will be, the more I can take good care of her.”

What an insight! When two people relate at this level, how can there not be a deep sense of mutual satisfaction and affection, not to mention an escalating desire to be even more pleasing to each other. After all, what goes around comes around. Obviously, to make your relationship soar, to make it loving and lasting, the goal is to relate at this level.

What does it take for a person to forsake Selfish and Bargaining Love and relate from the posture of Mature Love? The answer is Unconditional Self-Acceptance (USA). Before exploring this concept, first direct your attention to Exercise 1—Assessing Your Relationship Style. You clinicians can assign this exercise to your clients to assess their love posture and, if it’s Selfish or Bargaining Love, use it as a tool to motivate them to work to move to Mature Love. I say the same to you couples. If you find that you relate from Selfish or Bargaining Love, don’t beat yourself up. Just note the negative impact on your partner, your relationship, and ultimately, yourself, then vow to apply everything in this chapter to reach the level of Mature Love.

EXERCISE 1—ASSESSING YOUR RELATIONSHIP STYLE

Take a few minutes to diagnose both your and your partner’s relationship style. Be as honest and accurate as you can. If you find that you or your partner are stuck in Selfish or Bargaining Love, don’t despair. Help is on the way. Remember that acknowledging a problem is the first step to making constructive change.

About You

1. Between Selfish Love, Bargaining Love, and Mature Love, what is your predominant love style?

2. How do you act when you are caught up in your predominant style?

3. What is the impact on your partner and your relationship when you act in accordance with Selfish or Bargaining Love?

About Your Partner

1. Between Selfish Love, Bargaining Love, and Mature Love, what is your partner's predominant love pattern?

2. How does he or she act when caught up in his or her predominant pattern?

3. What is the impact on you and your relationship when he or she acts in accordance with Selfish or Bargaining Love?

The Case of Susan and Jim

Susan and Jim came to my office in crisis. Their marriage was the second one for both, and it turned out that Jim had developed what he called a "close friendship" with a female colleague at work. Denying that there had been any physical intimacy, he claimed he broke off this relationship once he realized he had crossed the line between a friendship and an "emotional affair."

As they told their story, it became clear that Susan's year-long depression played a significant role. As is common for depressed people, Susan had withdrawn into herself, virtually ignoring Jim. It was under these circumstances that he turned to the attention of this other woman at work.

I found it very encouraging that both Jim and Susan made a commitment to repair their marriage. More positive, though, was when they each accepted my

statement that affairs are often the results of mistakes made by both parties. Both agreed to work to correct what they had done to contribute to their current crisis.

For his part, Jim agreed to work to become much less judgmental and committed to be more affectionate and supportive. But Susan amazed me. She readily acknowledged that she had for all practical purposes emotionally abandoned Jim, thereby creating the perfect condition for him to be vulnerable to the attentions of another woman. I praised her for owning her role in all this and encouraged her not to damn herself because, after all, her withdrawal from Jim was an understandable symptom of her depression. She vowed to work with me both on her depression and to act toward Jim in the loving, attentive way she once had.

At the end of their first couple session, I felt hopeful that we had made a nice start in getting their marriage back on track. But two days later Jim called to report that Susan had “fallen apart.” He described her as acutely anxious, obsessively questioning him about the minute details of his extramarital friendship, insistent on comparing herself unfavorably to this other woman, and demanding constant reassurances that he loved her.

Knowing this to be a critical moment, I agreed to meet with them the very day Jim called. Shortly into this session, I had the following interchange with each of them. Note how I worked to uncover the Killer B’s that caused their respective relationship disturbances.

Dr. G: So, Susan, what are you feeling so anxious about?

Susan: That Jim doesn’t really love me and would prefer to be with her.

Dr. G: Well, that’s not what he’s been saying here. In fact, quite the opposite. But, let’s assume the worst for the moment—that it’s true, he really does long to be with her. Now, why would that be so horrible to you?

Susan: I’d lose him.

Dr. G: But is that all you fear? Because if you said to yourself, “Well, I could lose Jim, but I would never lose myself, I’m still a person in my own right with many desirable traits.” If you really believed that, would you be feeling so devastated?

Susan: I guess not. But I’ve never thought that way.

Dr. G: Probably not. So, notice that, in addition to believing that it would be bad to lose Jim, which it would because you love him, you also hold the belief that, if you lose him, you lose yourself as well. You would be nothing. In other words, you equate your value as a person with whether or not Jim values you. So losing him means to you that you lose yourself or your worth. And that’s exactly what drives your anxiety and insecurity. Do you see that?

Susan: But I gave Jim all my love. If I fail with him, doesn’t that mean that I’m a failure?

Dr. G: Absolutely not! At worst you’re only failing with him. You’re equating your whole self—everything about you—with this one failure.

Therefore, because in your mind failing with or losing Jim makes you a totally worthless, undesirable slob who nobody would ever want, you're basing your total worth on Jim.

Susan: But I've been doing that my whole life. Can I really change how I think about myself after all these years? Is it possible?

Dr. G: Yes, it's possible. Maybe not always and only, as that would be perfection, but if you work at it, you can do it pretty doggone well. And, by the way, rating yourself or damning yourself, like you're doing with Jim, is probably what got you depressed to begin with. Because no matter what it was—being inadequate in some aspect of your job, losing your girlish figure, whatever—once you go from damning that to damning yourself, you've pretty much cooked your goose.

I continued along these same lines a while longer to make sure Susan truly understood what I communicated. Then I turned to Jim.

Dr. G: Now, Jim, in a sense you've aided and abetted Susan in her self-damning.

Jim: How so?

R.G.: Well, how about when she got depressed and went missing from you. Weren't you putting her down? What I mean is that, after correctly concluding that you didn't like her withdrawing from you, you followed that with something like, "She shouldn't act like that, she's a weak person." Am I right?

Jim: I guess so. I did think that, in so many words.

Dr. G: Right! And when you thought that way about her, didn't you feel resentment, causing you to withdraw from her?

Jim: Pretty much.

Dr. G: So, Jim, you've got work to do on not judging Susan, while she concurrently works on not judging or unconditionally accepting herself. You need to catch yourself going from, "She's acting badly and I don't like it," to, "Because I don't like it, she shouldn't do it." In other words, her weak moments hardly qualify her as a weak person. You need to show yourself that, while she may be acting weak, she's not totally weak, just weak at times. Then you'll be less resentful, more accepting, and likely treat her better.

Jim: Okay.

Learning from Susan and Jim

Susan illustrates the relationship disturbance of fear and insecurity. For, when a person holds Conditional Self-Esteem, as opposed to Unconditional Self-Acceptance, he or she will inevitably feel threatened and revert to Selfish or Bargaining Love when not reassured. Let me now elaborate on this.

Conditional Self-Esteem (CSE). Conditional Self-Esteem occurs when a person bases his or her worth on the condition of being loved or approved by another. In essence, one equates one's inner value with the value another holds for him or her. Thus, if one succeeds in getting another's love, then one concludes that one is worthwhile; but, if one fails to get or keep another's love, then one thinks of oneself as worthless.

With no iron-clad guarantees, there is always the possibility of not only losing one's lover, but also one's own worth as well. What a devastating prospect. No wonder a person with Conditional Self-Esteem experiences fear and anxiety and resorts to Selfish or Bargaining Love.

Review my conversation with Susan. You'll see that she connected Jim loving her with her worth. Once her naïve belief that Jim would always love her was shattered, she "fell apart." By losing Jim, she firmly believed, she'd also lose herself and her worth.

The Relationship Disturbance of Fear and Insecurity. It is next to impossible to not experience fear and insecurity when you believe you will be stripped of worth if you lose the love of your partner. For you will inevitably fall into three additional traps.

1. You become needy. That is, because you have connected your internal worth to your partner's love, you inevitably conclude that you absolutely need, must have, and can't live without him or her.
2. You operate from Selfish or Bargaining Love. Your relationship becomes about you feeling safe and reassured. This spawns any number of unattractive and off-putting behaviors, including clinginess, dependency, jealousy, suspicion, control, and demanding attention, among others.
3. You present relationship dissatisfactions to your partner that can boomerang into a vicious circle. Unless he or she is a remarkably mature person, your partner will at best find your behavior frustrating and at worst develop the relationship disturbance of hurt and anger toward you. Now there exists the possibility of driving him or her away, which will only serve to stimulate more fear and insecurity in you.

The Unconditional Self-Acceptance (USA) Choice. Unconditional Self-Acceptance means that you neither define nor rate, judge, or esteem yourself at all. You have a self, but there is no way to sum up who you are in a single word. Because you are not definable, there is no way to judge you as a good or a bad person. To say it another way, you give up self and self-esteem as a viable or useful concept. You just are.

Let me illustrate this in Figure 5.1. In this figure, your self is represented by the circle and all your traits, performances, roles, and accomplishments are represented by the dots. Clearly, you are made up of millions of dots—the things

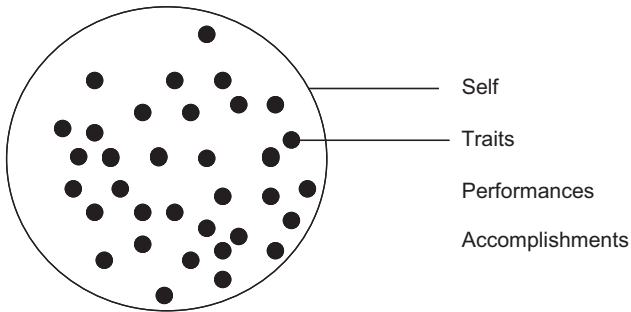


FIGURE 5.1 UNCONDITIONAL SELF-ACCEPTANCE

you have done and the traits you have. While you do your acts and have your traits, you are not your dots—not one or even all of them. To define or judge your self by your dots is an overgeneralization that makes no sense.

Putting this into relationship terms, you may greatly enjoy the attention and affection of your mate, but you don't need to be stroked, accepted, or even loved because who you are is separate from your successes with this person, and from his or her value for you. With your self out of the picture, you then will not be needy and you will have no motivation to succor approval, keep score, or manipulate. You are free to love and give without fear because you know you are you no matter what.

Using Susan as our example, she has two choices. She can continue to base the value of her self on whether or not Jim loves her. This again is the paradigm of Conditional Self-Esteem. But it's absurd to think that this one dot in her circle—her success or failure in retaining Jim's love—is all she is and that everything else about her—from the day she was born to the day she dies—can be rated as worthwhile or worthless depending on this one dot.

Or, she can realize that her self, her whole circle, is unratable or unjudgable. That is, her dots are separate and discrete from each other; doing well in one dot does not mean she has done well in all dots, nor does doing poorly in any one dot mean she has done poorly in all of them. So, while she may find it useful to judge how well she acts with Jim, as her actions will either help or harm her in meeting her goal of keeping his love, she can stubbornly refuse to generalize from her successes or failures with Jim (one dot) to her whole self (her circle). She can totally accept her self simply because she is alive and human, but never think of herself as good or bad depending on what happens with Jim. She can lose Jim, but she can never lose her self or her worth.

Think of the benefit of Unconditional Self-Acceptance. You, your self, never turns into a failure. You are free from the ravages of fear and insecurity. You are now free to love fully. Why? Because, while you may fail in this relationship, this failure represents only one dot in your circle. You are always okay, or acceptable, no matter what.

Sear This into Your Mind

- Being happy is a universal human drive. Most people want to mate because they believe that being in a loving relationship will likely enhance their happiness.
- People can bring one of three styles to seeking happiness in their relationship: (1) Selfish Love, in which they desperately attempt to get their own needs met first and foremost; (2) Bargaining Love, in which they insist that all giving be balanced with an equal amount of receiving; and (3) Mature Love, in which they hold their partner's happiness equal to their own, and then strive to help their partner be just as happy and fulfilled as they themselves want to be.
- To relate at the level of Mature Love, people must unconditionally accept themselves. Although one greatly longs for and relishes love, one does not need the partner's love to feel good about oneself. There is, therefore, no game playing or scorekeeping, just loving.
- One must also free oneself of neediness in order to relate at the level of Mature Love. Neediness is the mirror of Conditional Self-Esteem. For, if one believes one's worth derives from the partner's love, then it follows that one needs his or her love; reciprocally, if one believes it's absolutely necessary to be loved by one's partner, then it is easy to conclude one is unworthy if one fails to get that love. Anxiety and insecurity directly follow from these yoked Killer B's.
- Along with mastering Premeditated Acceptance and Forgiveness (Chapter 4), developing Unconditional Self-Acceptance will not only greatly aid one's general happiness, but it will also add to the quality of one's relationship happiness as well, operating freely at the level of Mature Love.

THE UNCONDITIONAL SELF-ACCEPTANCE WORKSHOP

What follows is the six-step RECT process for replacing Conditional Self-Esteem with Unconditional Self-Acceptance. For this process to yield the desired results, it won't be enough to work through it only once or twice. It will require many repetitions, day after day, until the beliefs that prompt relationship fear and insecurity surrender to ones that lead to security and peace of mind.

If you are a clinician, I urge you to take an active-directive role in coaching your clients through this workshop. Help them to forcefully debate their preexisting ways of thinking about themselves until they clearly see and fully understand they are never to be defined or esteemed.

As a couple, take heart if you suffer from the relationship disturbance of fear and insecurity. Just as you learned the Killer B's that caused it, you can replace them with Unconditional Self-Acceptance. But it will take repeated hard work. If you put in the necessary time and energy, you will feel more safe and secure and thus be free to relate from the position of Mature Love. The end result: you will greatly enhance your chance to build the relationship of your dreams.

I offer one more word of advice. If you haven't, please read Chapter 3 before tackling this workshop. In that chapter I explain RECT's ABC model, which provides the foundation for the process to follow. If you've already read it, it wouldn't hurt to review it. Above all, have confidence that you can relearn how you think about yourself. Thousands upon thousands have made significant, positive improvements in their relationship happiness by doing so. So can you.

Step One: Mindfulness

Any change starts with being aware that there is a problem. Without such an awareness, there is little motivation or ability to change. Summon the courage to face when and where you experience relationship fear and insecurity.

Step One Exercise—Mindfulness. Identify below the situations in which you feel fear and/or insecurity in your relationship. Don't be defensive as you do this, as these emotional reactions only prove you are human. Then note how you tend to act when these feelings get aroused. Finally, describe how your partner reacts when you act in these ways. Does your reaction create harmony or disharmony? Does it help or harm the situation? Does it help your relationship be stronger or weaker? After doing this, make notes on any thoughts or observations you may have.

The Situation

My Reaction

The Outcome

Notes: _____

Step Two: Responsibility

As per the ABC model of relationship disturbance explained in Chapter 3, responsibility means fully accepting that you, yourself, cause your own fear and insecurity. That is, it is not what your partner does at A that causes you to react these ways at C. It is your beliefs, your Killer B's at B.

Without taking emotional responsibility, there is little chance to rid yourself of relationship disturbance. Instead, you'll focus on blaming your partner and hold him or her responsible for making you feel calm and secure. Either way, you will not commit to changing what you do that creates your own fear and insecurity. You will forever be dependent on your partner.

Going back to Susan, notice how hard I worked to help her take emotional responsibility. I would have done this even if Jim was a cad. The reason I would do so is that she would continue to suffer from fear and anxiety even if Jim were to shape up or if she mated with a new partner.

Step Two Exercise—Responsibility. If you can summon the courage to “own” your fears and insecurities, then carefully read, fill in your name, and sign the following responsibility statement.

I, _____, take full responsibility for my relationship fears and insecurities. Despite what my partner does, I cause myself to feel these ways. I commit to eliminating these fears and insecurities regardless of whether or not my partner alters his/her behavior.

Signature

Date

Step Three: Identify Your Killer B's

The purpose of Step Three is to identify the irrational beliefs you hold about yourself that cause you to feel relationship fear and insecurity. By identifying them, you are primed to replace them. What follows are the two Killer B's that cause the relationship disturbance of fear and anxiety.

Killer B #1—Conditional Self-Esteem. As discussed earlier, this is when you base your worth or value on whether or not your partner values you. Remember what Susan asked me: “If I fail with him, doesn't that mean I'm a failure?”

Killer B #2—Neediness. Spoken in the language of “need” and “can't live without,” neediness follows from Conditional Self-Esteem. For if my human

worth truly comes from your loving me, it follows that I need you to love me. Although she didn't directly say it, her Neediness Killer B would predictably sound like the following: "I need Jim to love me and no one else. Without him I'm nothing."

Step Three Exercise—Find Your Killer B's. Whenever you feel fearful or anxious with regard to your partner, you can bet your bottom dollar the two Killer B's articulated earlier are active in your mind. Now it's time to ferret them out. Note below the top three relationship situations (your A's) in which you feel fear and insecurity (your C). Then reflect on the beliefs or self-talks in your head, specifically identifying the Killer B's noted earlier.

<i>Your A</i>	<i>Your Killer B's</i>
1.	
2.	
3.	

Step Four: Skeptical Disputation

Skeptical Disputation means you confront your Killer B's by aggressively showing yourself through logic and data that they are nonsense. A good way to do this is to use the three disputation questions noted in previous chapters.

1. Is this belief true or valid? Why?
2. How do I react emotionally and behaviorally with this belief? Does it help or harm me?
3. Would I be better off without this belief? How so?

Susan used these three questions at least once a day to dispute her Killer B's until she came to fully believe that they were complete nonsense. Here's how this looked.

Disputation Question 1: Is this belief true or valid? Why?

Answer:

"No, of course not. I do not need Jim to love or be with me. First, I won't die without him. My heart won't stop beating. Second, losing Jim doesn't mean I lose my whole life. I still have my children, my family, my friends, my job, and my health. There's a lot more to my life than just him. Third, he's replaceable; if I lose him, I can always love somebody else. Fourth, and most important, my worth as a person

does not depend on Jim loving me. I could lose him, but I never lose myself. I'm ok with or without him."

Disputation Question 2: How do I react emotionally and behaviorally with this belief? Does this reaction help or harm me?

Answer: "I walk around on pins and needles all the time. I'm anxious, worried, and insecure 24/7. Furthermore, I alternate between being clingy and dependent with being suspicious, accusatory, and demanding, none of which Jim finds particularly sexy. All this harms me in two ways: (1) I'm miserable and (2) it turns Jim off."

Disputation Question 3: Would you be better off without this belief? How so?

Answer: "Absolutely. I'd be happier, more independent, and more my own person. Furthermore, I need to give up this way of thinking if I want to have a good relationship whether with Jim or somebody else."

It took about five weeks for this to sink in for Susan. Once it did, she moved on to Step Five. Before we get there, though, let me arm you with a "cheat sheet" that explains why these two Killer B's are nonsense. With these, you'll be well equipped to forcefully answer Disputation Question 1.

With regard to Conditional Self-Esteem (CSE):

- You are an extremely complex, multifaceted person. As such, your self can be neither defined nor evaluated by any one trait, action, or success or failure.
- You are a process. This means that every day you are changing, adding actions, performances, and qualities, losing or eliminating others. To stop you in time, say today, and judge you as all good or bad, now and forever, makes no sense because you will be different tomorrow.
- As is true of all humans, you will perform well at times and poorly at others. Further, you also are a mixture of both good and bad traits. You have succeeded at many things, but on occasion have failed at others, like everybody else. So you are a combination of all of these positives and negatives, not just the good or the bad ones.
- Your partner does not have magical powers. While he or she might value or disvalue you, his or her extrinsic value for you cannot insert value into you or suck value out of you. So, while you may benefit on a practical level from your partner valuing you, his or her value for you does not determine your value.

- If you have to think in terms of human value at all, your value simply comes from the fact that you are alive and human. Thus, you remain a worthwhile person despite any and all conditions in your life until you no longer have life (whenever that is).

With regard to neediness:

- If defined rigorously, need means life and death. Obviously, you won't die without the love or even the presence of your partner.
- Need also means, if you think about it, that you have nothing in life without your mate. But that's not true. You may lose him or her, but you still retain everything else that is good in your life—your friends, family, job, interests, and so on. You can enjoy 100 percent of what's left (say 80 percent of your life), while you miss him or her (the 20 percent).
- Need, when applied to your partner, means that she or he is your one and only. He or she is not replaceable. This is utter rubbish. You most likely loved before this person, and you are perfectly capable of loving again. No matter how much you care about this person, he or she can be replaced.
- Coming full circle, need implies that you are nothing or worthless without your mate. That is, your intrinsic value depends on his or her extrinsic value for you. This is absolute nonsense, as discussed in depth earlier.

Step Four Exercise—Skeptically Dispute Your Killer B's. Referring to the “cheat sheet,” skeptically dispute the Killer B's you identified in Step Three. Repeating this daily for a few weeks will greatly weaken and eventually destroy them.

Killer B #1: _____

Question #1: Is this belief true or valid? Why?

Question #2: How do I react emotionally and behaviorally with this belief? Does it help or harm me?

Question #3: Would I be better off without this belief? How so?

Killer B #2: _____

Question #1: Is this belief true or valid? Why?

Question #2: How do I react emotionally and behaviorally with this belief?
Does it help or harm me?

Question #3: Would I be better off without this belief? How so?

Step Five: Developing Self-Accepting Beliefs

Coordinated with skeptically disputing your Killer B's is the development of new self-accepting ones. Just as it takes frequent disputation to convince yourself that your Killer B's are fallacious, so too will it take repetition for your new self-accepting beliefs to sink in. Susan, for example, rehearsed the following each day:

"I do love and want to be with Jim. But while it would be a blow to lose him, I don't need him. Furthermore, I can never lose my worth. If he left me,

I would still be here with my self intact, and my worth. After licking my wounds for a while, I could look to find someone else to love.”

To help yourself adopt this new way of thinking, you might want to adopt the following strategies. Remember that your relationship-defeating Conditional Self-Esteem belief is strong. You cannot afford to take a day off, rest on weekends, or take a vacation. If you do, the CSE wiring will get stronger while the USA (Unconditional Self-Acceptance) wiring will weaken.

- Dispute your Killer B’s daily, followed by a focused rehearsal of your new self-accepting belief. I recommend reserving 10–15 minutes first thing in the morning, as this can set the tone for the day.
- Conduct a minimum of six three-to-five minute mini-therapy sessions with yourself each day. A logical schedule would be breakfast, mid-morning, lunchtime, mid-afternoon, suppertime, and mid-evening. Use these sessions to read and reflect on your new rational self-accepting belief.
- Picture yourself in real-life situations thinking the new USA belief and feeling safe and secure. Do this several times a day. This imagery exercise has been found to quicken the adoption of the new self-acceptance belief.
- Trust that with repeated practice you will internalize self-acceptance thinking so that you can feel secure within yourself. Appreciate the good work you have done, pat yourself on the back, and feel a sense of power.

Step Five Exercise—Develop Self-Acceptance. Now it’s time to develop your own Unconditional Self-Acceptance belief. Looking over the disputation of your Killer B’s in Step Four, create a new belief that strongly affirms both USA and non-neediness. Then, commit to a plan to deeply ingrain this new belief.

My Unconditional Self-Acceptance Belief: _____

Step Six: Forward Action Planning

With Unconditional Self-Acceptance, you may very well find that your new-found peace of mind is all you need to be happy with your partner. Nevertheless, although personally secure, you may still think it important to resolve some relationship dissatisfactions you may have.

Susan and Jim chose the second route. Susan and Jim worked to become better nurturers of each other (Chapter 8, “Relentless and Intelligent Giving”) and

to be more frequent in their couple intimacy (Chapter 10, “Frequent, Passionate Intimacy”). You too have this option if you care to take it.

Step Six Exercise—Deciding What to Do. Without relationship disturbance, you can if you wish tackle any thorny relationship dissatisfactions you may have. Identify them below and then make notes about what you, together with your partner, might do to alleviate them.

Relationship Difficulty

Action Strategy

INTENSIFIERS

What follows are three strategies to strengthen Unconditional Self-Acceptance. I encourage all my clients to add these to their USA indoctrination regimen and I encourage you clinicians to do so as well. And, you clients, remember that the more you unconditionally accept yourself, the more relaxed and secure you will feel and the more able you will be to relate from the position of Mature Love. Be sure to build these into your self-therapy regimen.

Note Your Positives

Remember that what you focus on largely determines your mood. If you focus on your mistakes and weaknesses, you will predictably feel down. To the contrary, focusing on your successes and strengths will elevate your mood.

To help you to focus on your positives, I recommend you keep a notebook on the nightstand next to your bed. Before going to bed, record at least three correct things you did during the day. Anything will do, so long as they are positive. Do not get hung up on only recording major, earth-shattering achievements. After a week or so, you will see the benefits. It will lift both your mood and your self-confidence.

A caution: do not make the mistake of leaping from these positive things to rating your total self as good. Doing this would only serve to engrain the Conditional Self-Esteem trap you are so avidly trying to weaken.

Take Risks

People who hold Unconditional Self-Acceptance find it relatively easy to risk letting their guard down and getting close to others. They are comfortable expressing and receiving affection, trusting others, and not worrying about being rejected. After all, they realize that, while they may fail with this person, they never become a total failure.

One way to help develop Unconditional Self-Acceptance is to force yourself to take relationship risks. Purposely express love and affection without expectation of return; encourage your mate to pursue his or her own interests, even those that do not include you; celebrate your partner's successes and passions as if they are your own. Not only will your partner be more appreciative of you, but these actions provide you an opportunity to rehearse your rational self-accepting beliefs. They also underscore the fact that the responses and reactions of your partner, while variously gratifying or frustrating, neither define you nor determine your worth.

Turn Breakdowns into Breakthroughs

Most of us fear making mistakes. Why? Because we get it in our heads that we should be perfect. This, of course, is silly because, being intrinsically fallible, we will pretty regularly act in imperfect ways. Even worse, from the Conditional Self-Esteem paradigm, we tend to put ourselves down as totally bad or a failure when we goof. Nonsense, pure and simple.

I want to suggest something radical. What I suggest is that the mistakes you make can be very valuable. I know it sounds crazy, but think about it. Your mistakes are wonderful opportunities to learn and grow, possibly becoming wiser and more skilled. Listen to the philosophy of Tiger Woods, possibly the greatest golfer of all time, but also a fallible person who has erred in his life:

“The greatest thing about tomorrow is that I will be better than I am today. And that’s how I look at my life. I will be better as a golfer, I will be better as a person, I will be better as a father, I will be better as a friend. That’s the beauty of tomorrow. There is no such thing as a setback. The lesson I learn today I will apply tomorrow, and I will be better.” (Diaz, p. 5)

So, with the mindset that any breakdown is an opportunity for a breakthrough, note any mistake you make during the day, particularly in your relationship life, and, without any negative judgments about your self, also note the lesson learned that you can apply tomorrow. The result is you can welcome mistakes and use them to your advantage, all the while reminding yourself that you, your self, is separate from this mistake.

GOING FORWARD

Great job. You have started the process of getting rid of a major barrier to relationship happiness. Without the disturbance of fear and insecurity, you can relax, enjoy yourself and your partner, and do your part to create a loving, lasting relationship.

I want to offer a word of caution before you move on. Remember that you will need to identify, dispute, and replace the Killer B's that cause your fear and insecurity many times before you slay them. In the interest of your personal happiness and the vitality of your relationship, be sure to review the workshop in this chapter daily.

Now read on. If you're working through this book chapter by chapter, the next chapter, on relationship resilience, will help you gracefully tolerate those annoying things that crop up in your relationship. If you've pinpointed a specific weakness in the way you relate in the section on creating happiness and harmony, tackle it with gusto. Above all, relate mindfully, purposely, and passionately.

Relationship Resilience

The Antidote to Low Frustration Tolerance

Being defeated is often a temporary condition. Giving up is what makes it permanent.

—Marilyn vos Savant

Being coupled can be a glorious thing. Think of the exquisite pleasures it can bring. These include a steady supply of love, affirmation, companionship, support, sexuality, and help in managing the practicalities of life. Aren't these among the reasons most people seek to mate?

But, as uplifting as these pleasures can be, there are any number of challenges that can frustrate, annoy, and discourage even the most devoted of lovers. Let me briefly review some of these.

1. There are several unrealistic **marital myths** perpetrated in our culture that, if believed, inevitably lead to frustration. These include: love will solve all my problems; my life will be perpetually blissful; my mate will be my all and my everything; being mated will always be exciting; mat- edness will not take away from other pursuits in my life; a high level of sexual passion and frequency will continue forever; and my mate will unconditionally love and cherish me no matter what.
2. There are several **inherent disadvantages** to being mated. These include a relative lack of privacy, variety, and novelty, as well as the periodic frustra- tions of expectations. Who doesn't at times get frustrated with these?
3. There are **an almost infinite number of practical issues** over which couples can easily differ and disagree. Some of these are money, sex, childrearing practices, in-laws, leisure time, and family planning. What couple totally agrees on everything?
4. Then there are at least five **stylistic factors**, in any or all of which two people may be at least partially incompatible. They are: (1) which person holds power and control; (2) who is responsible for nurturing whom; (3) how much closeness or intimacy should there be; (4) what are the

boundaries for loyalty and fidelity; and (5) how much order and neatness needs to exist.

5. There is also what are called **boundary issues**. These refer to such things as mate characteristics (e.g., education, IQ, looks, chronological age), cultural and social variables (e.g., political persuasion, religion, family of origin), and role shifts as time passes and new circumstances arise. Differences between people on any of these issues can create frustration and conflict.
6. Added to this are the multitudes of **skills that are required** for two people to navigate the maze of their marital journey. Some of these are skills in communication, sexuality, empathy, conflict resolution, problem solving, and parenting, to name but a few. How many people have mastered all these?
7. Finally, add to this list all **the idiosyncrasies, weaknesses, and faults** we humans bring to our relationships. Inevitably, by virtue of our fallibility, we will at times annoy and frustrate our partners.

Think back through your relationship life. Hasn't it been a mixture of both happiness and hardship? Haven't you felt many of the joys being mated provides, along with a healthy dose of the frustrations? Hasn't it been a sublime combination of pleasure and pain? It's been so for me. It's been so for most. I'm sure it's been so for you as well.

RESILIENCE VS. LOW FRUSTRATION TOLERANCE

There is a growing consensus among relationship experts that the trait of resilience is pivotal to marital success. Resilience refers to a person's ability to remain steady amidst, quickly bounce back from, and respond constructively to adverse or frustrating situations. People who possess resilience tend to:

- Retain or quickly recover their emotional equilibrium when frustrated;
- Persist when encountering difficulty;
- Work to overcome obstacles to achieve important goals;
- Accept themselves and others despite their current hassles or hardships;
- Enjoy themselves despite their adversities.

These certainly are positive qualities to bring to a relationship. Given the inherent mixture of satisfaction and challenge that matedness serves up, it is clear that those with resilience have an advantage over their counterparts who are resilience challenged.

Those who lack resilience suffer from what we call the relationship disturbance of **Low Frustration Tolerance (LFT)**. LFT means pretty much what the

words say—a low or limited ability to tolerate being frustrated. In a relationship, people with LFT tend to:

- Overreact emotionally to the frustrations and challenges of matedness;
- Avoid and even run away from difficulty, confrontation, and direct communication when frustrated by their partner or by matedness itself;
- Put little effort into resolving conflicts;
- Denigrate themselves and their partners in the face of conflict;
- Let the adversities they encounter ruin their enjoyment of the greater relationship.

So, when presented with the inevitable relationship dissatisfactions being coupled brings, the person with LFT also suffers from a relationship disturbance. Additionally, one partner's LFT can present quite a challenge to the other partner as well. Let's see how the relationship disturbance of low frustration tolerance plays out in Bob and Karen's relationship.

The Case of Bob and Karen

Bob, a 32-year-old day laborer, had been married less than two years the day I first met him. Telling me that he had an attractive, pleasant wife, Karen, whom he indeed loved, he expressed confusion as to why he felt so unhappy with his marriage. He said he wanted to either figure out how to be happy or to separate.

Bob's history was revealing. Describing himself as fiercely independent, he left home immediately after high school to live on his own. He enjoyed his carefree bachelor days, working long hours, but doing pretty much whatever he wanted in the evenings and on weekends. He bedded many women. He lived by the motto, "love 'em and leave 'em." Being saddled with a "ball and chain," as he termed marriage, had always been anathema to him, and he added that he surprised himself when he fell for Karen. He emphatically stated, "I don't put up with stupid very well," meaning that he was pretty intolerant of people's mistakes.

To get to the heart of what troubled Bob about marital life, let's pick up mid-point in my first conversation with him.

Dr. G: OK. I think I have a pretty good picture of what life was like before you married. What about now? About what are you unhappy with in your marriage?

Bob: I don't really know. She's basically a good wife.

Dr. G: But there must be something. When you're upset, frustrated, resentful, or whatever, it has to be about something.

Bob: Well, I resent having to be there every evening. I feel like there's a leash around my neck.

- Dr. G: Do you ever go out with the boys? And does she give you a hard time if and when you do?
- Bob: Yeah, I do go out, and she doesn't complain. But I know I'd get it if I went out more. It's just the idea that I'm not free to just go when I want.
- Dr. G: Well, we could check out if, in fact, you'd catch hell if you went out more, because you might not. You're making an assumption. But let's assume you're correct—you would catch it. What's your attitude about that? What do you tell yourself about being at least somewhat restrained in your freedom to do what you'd like?
- Bob: That's easy. It sucks.
- Dr. G: So, when you think about the fact that you are not totally free to do whatever you please, what first pops into your head is something like: "That's annoying." Right?
- Bob: Yeah.
- Dr. G: But, Bob, I'm also hearing, in addition to that, something like: "This is horrible. I can't stand it. I shouldn't have or put up with this nonsense." Am I hearing you correctly?
- Bob: Exactly. It's not that I can't stand Karen, although I'm starting to resent her. But I can't stand being captive like this. It's too much.
- Dr. G: Well, it sounds like you've got a pretty classic case of what we call LFT or low frustration tolerance. When you face some of the inevitable frustrations of marital life, you correctly think that you don't like it. I say correctly because nobody likes a frustration or a hassle. That's normal. But then you almost immediately go catastrophic. You tell yourself it's horrible, unstandable, like being tortured to death. This belief, or self-talk, causes you to not only be frustrated but also resentful, pissed, and wanting to run away. So now you've got two problems for the price of one—the dissatisfaction of some lack of freedom, which comes with all relationships, and a disturbance of LFT as well.
- Bob: Are you telling me I should just suck it up and stay home?
- Dr. G: No, of course not. I think it might be wise to talk to Karen about your frustrations and work out some sort of no-lose resolution. But you're making yourself overreact to this situation to the point of thinking about leaving a good wife whom you love. You're tempted to throw the baby out with the bathwater. And, by the way, any committed relationship will bring along some of the same deprivations. Do you want to be single the rest of your life?
- Bob: No.
- Dr. G: Then, to help you decide what to do with Karen, I suggest you first get rid of your relationship disturbance of low frustration tolerance. Without carrying this, what to do will be clear to you. I'm not encouraging you to love your wife or even to stay married to her. What I am

suggesting is that you accept ownership of your LFT, fix it, and then decide what to do. Does this make sense?

Bob: Yes.

Dr. G: Before we do that, though, let's scope out where else you may experience LFT in your marriage.

Bob and I then went on to enumerate other frustrations he had about his married life. Then we had the following exchange.

Dr. G: When you get upset about these things, how do you usually act?

Bob: I don't know. Sullen and withdrawn, I guess.

Dr. G: Meaning you don't interact or communicate with Karen? Sort of ignore her and bury your face in the TV?

Bob: Pretty much.

Dr. G: What about affection? Do you give her much, or do you keep to yourself?

Bob: More to myself.

Dr. G: And what is her reaction to all this?

Bob: She's starting to get mad and complain. She told me last week that she doesn't know if she can take much more loneliness before getting fed up.

Dr. G: Sounds like she's in turn getting pretty upset with your withdrawn behavior. Before long you two are going to have a classic vicious cycle and maybe, if you're not careful, destroy your relationship.

Bob returned for two more sessions, which focused on repairing low frustration tolerance. When he cancelled his third appointment and failed to show up for a fourth, I figured he no longer wanted to repair his LFT and decided to terminate his marriage.

Then, about two months later, I received an urgent phone call from Bob. It turned out that Karen did indeed get fed up and moved back to her parents' house. This shocked Bob to his senses. Realizing that he could actually lose the woman he loved, he now wanted to win her back. I am pleased to report that as I write this he has made great progress and Karen is back home. In a few more weeks she will join Bob and me for RECT couple counseling.

What Bob Teaches Us

Bob's story teaches us at least five important things.

1. The relationship disturbance of low frustration tolerance can wreck even the best of relationships. Although he clearly loved and appreciated Karen, notice that Bob overreacted to his relationship frustrations with resentment, sullenness, and depression. These caused him to withdraw

his attention and affection from Karen. He then behaved in ways that were hardly designed to keep his wife content and happy with him. This brought Bob and Karen's marriage to a dangerous point.

2. Bob also illustrates what causes the LFT relationship disturbance. Harkening back to the ABCs explained in Chapter 3, it was not the frustrations of matedness that caused his resentment and depression, but rather the Killer B's that he held. These included:
 - "This is horrible," meaning not having the total and absolute freedom he once experienced ranked somewhere on the scale of badness right next to the Holocaust, 9/11, or all the collective child abuse in recorded history.
 - "I can't stand it," meaning the frustration of not being totally free was tantamount to a slow, painful death by torture at the hands of a fiendish terrorist.
 - "I shouldn't have to put up with this nonsense," meaning that he thought himself so special that experiencing any deprivation or frustration about being married violated the laws of nature.
 - "This just sucks," meaning that only a perfect relationship that gave him everything he wanted and nothing he didn't want was viable; anything short of total perfection was totally bad and worthless.

With these Killer B's, it was little wonder that Bob became bitter, sullen, and depressed. His Killer B's directly created the relationship disturbance of low frustration tolerance that put his marriage in jeopardy.

3. Notice also that Bob's LFT profoundly impacted Karen. She not only had to experience his resentful, sullen behavior, but she concurrently suffered the denial of anything close to satisfying amounts of attention and affection. As revealed earlier, these relationship dissatisfactions then prompted her own relationship disturbance of hurt and anger, leading her to withdraw her affection and separate from Bob.
4. Before working jointly with Karen to work out a mutually workable balance of individual autonomy and couple sharing, Bob will need to conquer his relationship disturbance of low frustration tolerance. How does he do this? By giving up the Killer B's that make him intolerant of marital frustration and replacing them with ones that will make him resilient in the face of the inevitable adversities he will regularly face while mated.
5. Once Bob and Karen get into couples counseling, they will need to learn to communicate much better (Chapter 10), recommit to their relationship with each other (Chapter 9), and develop habits to provide each other what they each need from the other (Chapter 8). Other needs might arise as their counseling progresses, but these would provide a significant start.

Sear This into Your Mind

- While there are many advantages to being mated, there are any number of disadvantages as well. These disadvantages can and will at times frustrate even the most ardent lovers.
- Frustration comes in many forms, including annoyance, dislike, displeasure, and irritation. When people only feel frustrated, they retain their ability to love and cherish their partner. They can then either accept the frustration as a normal part of couple life, or they can sit down together and address the issues about which they are frustrated. Either way the frustrations need not be relationship breakers.
- It is when people suffer from the relationship disturbance of low frustration tolerance that they overreact to their marital frustrations. Holding LFT Killer B's, they then experience such intense emotions as anger, resentment, dread, and depression. They become intolerant of the frustrations and lash out at and/or withdraw from their partner, often bringing on a disturbed counter-reaction.
- The antidote to LFT is resilience. That is, one needs to ferret out one's LFT Killer B's and replace them with ones that make one hardy in the face of the inevitable frustrations that matedness brings.

What now follows is the Couple Resilience Workshop. As with the other workshops, you clinicians can assign it to your clients and process it with them later in your office. You couples can dig right in, remembering to focus on fixing your own irrational beliefs and dysfunctional ways of interacting.

THE COUPLE RESILIENCE WORKSHOP

I'm sure you are familiar with the Serenity Prayer. It is the philosophic perspective adopted by untold numbers of people to aid in their recovery from some addiction or another. Created by German-American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, it is:

“God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change those I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

This simple prayer captures the soul of relationship resilience as well. For while you certainly want to work with your partner to eliminate as many of those frustrating aspects of your relationship as you can, you also want to gracefully accept those annoying parts you cannot change. Resilience is about serenely tolerating those drawbacks or annoyances inherent in all couple life.

So, if you're one of those people who tend to overreact to the frustrations associated with relationship life, this chapter is definitely for you. If you haven't already done so, please go back and carefully read Chapter 3. It will provide you the RECT information and perspective to overcome your LFT. Even if you have, you might want to again skim this chapter to give you a refresher.

As always, trust that you can make the changes you need in your relationship disturbance. Hundreds of thousands already have, and you can too. All you have to do is put in the time and effort, especially repeating Steps Four, Five, and Six until you've reindoctrinated yourself with the rational, resilient beliefs.

Step One: Mindfulness

Purposeful change starts with being aware of the emotional and behavioral overreactions you have to the difficulties, challenges, and frustrations you experience being coupled. By virtue of this awareness, you can first work to serenely tolerate these annoyances without causing trouble for your partner. Then, while not overreacting, you can, if you wish, also work to improve on them.

Step One Exercise—Mindfulness. Start by pinpointing the frustrating situations about which you tend to be intolerant. Second, note the ways you overreact (e.g., resentment, exasperation, anger, withdrawal). Third, record what impact your overreaction has on your partner. Does he or she overreact in turn? Does it help or hurt couple harmony? Finally, make any notes on your thoughts as you do this exercise.

Situations

My Reaction

The Outcome

Notes: _____

Step Two: Responsibility

Responsibility means for you to honestly acknowledge that you, not the events themselves or your partner, cause your own overreaction to your relationship frustrations. In other words, while you may not be responsible for causing your frustrations, you cause or are responsible for how you react to them.

Why is this so important? It's important because once you take responsibility, you are primed to do what is necessary to change how you react.

Bob is a great example of this. Despite all the intellectual insight he gained from our first few conversations, he continued to blame the circumstances of marital life for his resentment. As a result, he did nothing but continue to complain, in the process driving Karen to distraction. It was only when she actually left him that he woke up and took responsibility for how he acted.

Step Two Exercise—Responsibility. You can only eliminate your low frustration tolerance if you accept responsibility for it. If you're willing, put your signature to the following statement to attest to taking responsibility for your LFT.

I, _____, take full responsibility for my relationship disturbance of low frustration tolerance. Despite the real frustrations I feel about mated life and/or my partner's behavior, I cause myself to overreact the way I do. I commit to eliminate my LFT despite these frustrations.

Signature

Date

Step Three: Identify Your Killer B's

Your next job is to identify the Killer B's that cause you to overreact to your relationship frustrations. These are the beliefs that you need to replace with ones that will help you be more resilient—more accepting, forgiving, and perhaps even serene.

The three Killer B's that prompt almost all low frustration tolerance are as follows:

- **Killer B #1—Catastrophizing.** This is when you take some marital circumstance or partner behavior that you don't like and magnify it into a horror, as in "This is awful, horrible, or terrible."
- **Killer B #2—I Can't Stand-It-itis.** This is when you mistakenly tell yourself you absolutely cannot stand the things you dislike. This is patently absurd, and it merely serves to inflame you about the dislikable event.
- **Killer B #3—Perfectionistic Demanding.** This is when you insist that your relationship, your partner, and even your life in general be perfectly free of frustrations, deprivations, and hardships. The buzzwords are "should" or "shouldn't," as in "I shouldn't have this or any hassle in my life."

Note that Bob strongly endorsed all three Killer B's. Paraphrased by me, he avidly declared when confronting some loss of freedom being married to Karen: "This is horrible." "I can't stand it." "I shouldn't have to put up with this

nonsense.” By thinking this way, he piled resentment and sullenness on top of frustration, leading to thoughts of abandoning his marriage.

Step Three Exercise—Find Your Killer B’s. Note below the top three situations about which you have low frustration tolerance. Then, identify your LFT beliefs about these situations. Putting them into sentence form, particularly look for Catastrophizing, I Can’t Stand-It-itis, and Perfectionistic Demanding.

<i>Your Frustration</i>	<i>Your Killer B’s</i>
1.	
2.	
3.	

Step Four: Skeptical Disputation

As described in Chapter 3, “Eliminating Relationship Disturbance—An Overview,” skeptical disputation is the process of rigorously questioning your Killer B’s in order to show yourself how absurd they are. The three disputation questions particularly good at doing this are:

1. Is this belief true or valid? Why?
2. How do I react emotionally and behaviorally with this belief? Do these reactions help or harm me?
3. Would I be better off without this belief? How so?

Once Bob committed to therapy and took responsibility for his reactions, he disputed his irrational beliefs each day to convince himself of their absurdity. He gave me permission to reprint one of his disputations to “This is horrible,” as follows.

Question 1: Is this belief true or valid? Why?
 Answer: This belief is absolutely absurd. Horrible means something so bad it transcends the worst that has ever happened. If something like 9/11 ranks a 9 on a 1–10 scale, then these frustrations are only a 1. They are only hassles, not horrors. They are easily standable.

Question 2: How do I react emotionally and behaviorally with these beliefs? Do these reactions help or harm me?

Answer: I get down in the dumps and feel sorry for myself. I start feeling resentful toward Karen and treat her like dirt by either withdrawing from her or jumping down her throat. These reactions make her unhappy and cause all sorts of trouble between us.

Question 3: Would I be better off without this belief? How so?
Answer: Without question. Thinking this way does me, Karen, and our marriage no good. It gets in the way of affection, communication, and making things work better.

Both myself and hundreds of other clinicians who use skeptical disputation have found that it works to rid LFT Killer B's. It did for Bob. It can for you as well. Here are a few arguments to help you dispute your Killer B's.

With regard to Catastrophizing:

- Thinking something is awful, horrible, or terrible almost always exaggerates the degree of its badness. While there are some really bad things, such as the death of your child, most bad things you face are relatively minor. On a scale of 1–100, almost all the things you “awfulize” about are less than 10 percent bad. The particular hassles you face likely fall into that range as well.
- When you catastrophize about something, you usually mean that this thing is so bad it totally ruins your life. In fact almost everything else in your life that is good is still there to enjoy, with only this one annoying thing to tolerate.
- Even if this thing you are “awfulizing” about is actually bad enough to rate high on the badness scale, it is still only bad, not horrible. The worst something can be is 100 percent bad. Horrible starts after bad ends. Therefore, horrible begins at 101 percent bad, an impossibility. In other words, there is no such thing as horrible, only some degree of bad.
- When you think of something as awful, horrible, or terrible, you actually tell yourself that it shouldn't exist. That makes no sense because, if it does exist, it should. That is, all the conditions are in place for that bad thing to exist, so it has to, whether you like it or not.

With regard to I Can't Stand-It-itis:

- This is patently absurd. If you think about it, something you can't stand kills you. Anything short of this may hassle or annoy you, but is standable.

- Thinking that you can't stand something only serves to make you overreact. Rather than appropriately feeling displeased or frustrated, you'll feel depressed, angry, or bitter, feelings that hardly lead to relationship-enhancing behaviors.

With regard to Perfectionistic Demanding:

- It is totally unrealistic to expect both matedness itself and your partner to be persistently and thoroughly pleasing. This is perfectionistic. These simply are frustrations inherent to couple life, just as there are bound to be imperfections in your partner.
- Not being perfect does not mean that matedness is totally imperfect. In other words, a relationship is always a mix of good and bad. If the bad outweighs the good, it is probably not the relationship for you. But you will destroy your relationship happiness if you think in all-or-nothing terms; if it's not totally good, then it's totally bad.
- You are not a special case in the universe such that you are entitled to perfect bliss. There is no special law that says that your relationship must be perfect, where every other relationship has its drawbacks. Everybody experiences disappointments and deprivations. Why not you?

Step Four Exercise—Skeptically Dispute Your Killer B's. Taking the Killer B's you identified in Step Three, use the three disputation questions to show yourself how irrational your Killer B's are. Feel free to use the "cheat sheet" provided earlier to help you do this. Remember: you may have to do this every day for weeks on end before you crush your LFT beliefs. But I promise you that it will be worth it in terms of your pleasure and happiness.

Killer B: _____

Question #1: Is this belief true or valid? Why? _____

Question #2: How do I react emotionally and behaviorally with this belief? Do these reactions help or harm me?

Question #3: Would I be better off without this belief? How so?

Step Five: Developing Resilience Beliefs

Now that you've shown yourself how absurd your LFT Killer B's are, your next step is to habituate your new resilience beliefs. You do this by creating your new belief and then forcefully and thoughtfully rehearsing it day after day until it sinks in.

Bob energetically threw himself into this step. Several times each day he reflected on the following.

"The drawbacks I experience to being married are minor. They are hardly horrors or tragedies and are nothing to get upset over. They pale in comparison to the benefits I get from being married to Karen. Besides, she is pretty easy to get along with and is almost always willing to cooperate with me, within reason. I'd be damn lucky to find someone nicer and sweeter than her. Relax and go with the flow."

Pretty soon Bob felt much better about his marriage. To help you with your Step Five process, I recommend the following strategies.

- Do Step Five six times a day for anywhere from three to five minutes—breakfast, mid-morning, lunch, mid-afternoon, supper, and before bedtime.
- Vividly imagine yourself encountering your marital frustration, but following it with the resilience belief. This visualization can add some drama to your rehearsal and really help the LFT habituation process.
- Choose to focus on both the positive benefits of mated life and the positive qualities of your partner.

Step Five Exercise—Develop Resilience. Looking over your Step Four disputations, you are now equipped to create your new resilience belief. First, create it, and then commit to your own habituation schedule.

My Resilience Belief:

My Habituation Schedule:

Step Six: Forward Action Planning

Remember that becoming less disturbed about your relationship frustrations does not mean that you are forbidden from working to eliminate them. If you want, you can do both.

By eliminating his LFT beliefs, Bob felt much better both about his marriage and about Karen. But he still thought it important to talk with her about two things. They were his desire to play in a nighttime softball league and to play golf with his buddies on Saturdays. Karen readily agreed to these two requests, and, with a no-lose perspective (see Chapter 11), she extracted from him in return a weekly Saturday night date.

You too can work with your partner to reduce or eliminate any relationship frustrations you wish. Without the relationship disturbance of low frustration tolerance, you are emotionally free to do so.

Step Six Exercise—Practical Problem Solving. You may be perfectly okay with your relationship frustrations now that you have developed resilience. Nevertheless, without LFT, you can identify below any relationship dissatisfactions you want to change and then make notes about what you might do to reduce or eliminate them.

Relationship Difficulty

Action Strategy

INTENSIFIERS

To help you grow your resilience muscle, I suggest you adopt the following three strategies.

Use the Johnny Carson Scale

A colleague of mine, Dr. Tom Miller, invented a great tool for helping to keep frustrations in perspective. For those of you who remember the great Johnny Carson, host of *The Tonight Show*, you might recall that he had an ongoing gag with his sidekick, Ed McMahan. Johnny would start it with, “Boy was it was hot today,” to which Ed would reply, “How hot was it?” Johnny would then follow this with the punch line, as in, “It was so hot that . . .”

Dr. Miller suggests we use the Johnny Carson Scale to accurately assess the degree of badness of our frustrations. On a scale of 1–100, the question to ask is, “How bad is this frustration?” He suggests that 100 degrees of bad represents arguably the worst thing that could conceivably happen to you, such as the death of your child; 75 degrees of bad might involve being paralyzed from the neck down for life; 50 degrees of bad might be a heart attack followed by quadruple bypass surgery; 25 degrees of bad might be four broken limbs; and 5 degrees might be a slightly sprained ankle.

When you face your inevitable relationship hardships, you would do well to use the badness scale to realistically rate them. I think that if you are honest you will rate a minimum of 99 out of the next 100 frustrations you face in your relationship less than 10 degrees bad. Rarely do frustrations rate higher than this. If you keep your hassles in perspective, you won’t overreact with LFT.

Keep Your Expectations Realistic

Be careful to not hold unrealistic expectations about your partner or with couple life itself. Remember the first message emphasized in Premeditated Acceptance and Forgiveness (Chapter 4): your mate is not a saint or an angel. She or he will periodically step on your precious toes. Similarly, there is no way it will never provide you frustrations.

Give yourself a break and actually expect there to be frustrations. When they arise, as they inevitably will, you won’t be shocked or surprised.

Have a Wonderful Day

One of the more common maxims is to live one day at a time. The truth is we have absolutely no guarantees about tomorrow. We don’t know for sure that we will wake up the next morning. So, while prudently preparing for tomorrow, we would be wise to focus on making the very most we can of today.

Having a wonderful day does not mean that you have to do something special, such as going out for a sumptuous dinner, flying to the Caribbean, or buying a new car. What it means is to be mindful of the opportunities that exist to experience pleasure and satisfaction in your daily routine. Savoring your partner’s smile, the interest he or she provides when you share your day, or the warmth of a goodnight kiss provides cheap and simple pleasures.

GOING FORWARD

Conquering low frustration tolerance does not necessarily end a couple’s therapy. Even without any relationship disturbance, they may not be as satisfied and

happy as they would like. That's what the next five chapters of *The Companion* tackle—building relationship harmony and satisfaction.

I offer the ideas and strategies in Chapters 7 through 11 to both the clinician and the couple. The material in these chapters provides a blueprint for the clinician to teach sound, solid relationship skills. I suggest the couple read and absorb the principles described in Chapter 7 before moving to whichever of the next four chapters. Please remember to follow through with the action workshops because nothing happens without doing whatever it takes.

Building Relationship Harmony and Satisfaction

Building Relationship Harmony and Happiness

An Overview

There is no greater joy nor greater reward than to make a fundamental difference in someone's life.

—Sister Mary Rose McGrady

Recall the distinction between relationship dissatisfaction and relationship disturbance. A couple experiences relationship dissatisfaction when one or both partners do not get enough of what they want or get too much of what they don't want. Partners suffering from a relationship dissatisfaction will experience such appropriate feelings as disappointment, frustration, or concern, but not depression, anger, or anxiety, and they are well positioned to improve on their dissatisfaction if they so desire.

A relationship disturbance occurs when one or both mated people become very upset over some relationship dissatisfaction. With the emotional overlay of hurt and anger, fear and insecurity, and/or low frustration tolerance, they often act in ways that defeat themselves and their relationship.

As communicated in Chapter 3, when couples present both a relationship dissatisfaction and a relationship disturbance, the RECT therapist works first to eliminate the disturbance. The reason is that, without the disturbance, they can choose the best of at least three options going forward. They can: (1) attempt to gracefully lump the dissatisfaction; (2) work to improve on it; or (3) decide to separate with as little fuss as possible.

I vividly remember Gary and Martha, a couple in their mid-sixties who came for counseling after 40 years of marriage. They were so trigger-happy with anger over relatively minor dissatisfactions that they could not sustain a conversation in my office for more than a minute without arguing. I even remarked at one point, "You know, you're wasting so much time, energy, and money arguing in my office that we can't accomplish anything. You'd be better off going home and doing that for free."

After repeated attempts to work conjointly with them, I decided to counsel each of them separately. I energetically applied all the tools described in

Chapter 4 on Premeditated Acceptance and Forgiveness until they each let go of their anger.

Cured of their relationship disturbance, I brought them back together in the counseling room with the goal of helping them improve on their relationship dissatisfactions. Witness the ensuing conversation.

- Dr. G: You each have done a marvelous job ridding yourselves of anger. How does it feel?
- Gary: Great. We haven't felt this connected in years.
- Dr. G: Wonderful. Now, without your anger, we can turn our attention to improving on the things in your relationship that you don't like. Where would you like to start?
- Martha: To tell you the truth, Doc, I think we're ready to stop our appointments.
- Dr. G: Are you sure? Is there something you've kept from me that I should know?
- Martha: No, not really. The thing is, he (pointing to Gary) still does the same things he did before, but now it's no big deal. I'm not mad anymore, so they're really nothing.
- Gary: I agree. I see how stupid we were to get so upset over such trivial things. They were no big deal. It's just good to be friends again.

So Gary and Martha terminated their marriage counseling after successfully ridding themselves of their relationship disturbance. But I must share a strong professional bias. Not only do I strive to help couples live without relationship disturbance, I also want to help them experience couple harmony and happiness as well. So, all things being equal, I encourage most couples to work together to eliminate their relationship disturbance and then to raise their satisfaction quotient.

With the goal of building relationship harmony and happiness, this chapter provides the foundation for the four skill-building chapters that follow. It lays out three relationship power principles that support the skills of Relentless and Intelligent Giving (Chapter 8), Commitment to the Couple (Chapter 9), Frequent, Passionate Intimacy (Chapter 10), and Win-Win Conflict Resolution (Chapter 11).

But this chapter is more than just a theoretical introduction to the skill chapters. For each of the relationship power principles to follow, there is an explanation of the principle, an illustrative case example, and a workshop designed for the couple to translate the principle into concrete action.

I urge you clinicians to process this chapter with your couple clients before going on to the skill chapters to follow. In doing so, be sure to play an active role. What seems simple and straightforward to us is often not the case with the layperson. Furthermore, be alert to any negative feelings that may get aroused

and be prepared to use RECT's ABC model to identify, dispute, and replace the irrational beliefs that spawn them. Remember that emotional contaminants can pop up at any time and cripple people's ability to fully use their skills.

In working with couples through the workshop in this and succeeding chapters, I have found a simple five-part process to be most helpful: (1) make sure the couple understands the concepts; (2) assign the workshop to the couple to complete between sessions or help them through it during the session; (3) direct the couple to apply the strategies in their real-life situations; (4) review and coach the couple on their practice efforts; and (5) repeat the practice and coaching steps until the couple demonstrates mastery. Using instruction, role-playing, and modeling, your coaching will prove invaluable.

I hope you couples appreciate how important each of these relationship power principles is to building your harmony and happiness. Please put quality time and energy into doing the workshops connected to each. The action strategies they produce will benefit you in two major ways: (1) they will raise your couple satisfaction to new levels; (2) they will strengthen the power of the skills you learn in the next four chapters.

So, dear couple, if you tackle this as part of your couples therapy, use your clinician as a sounding board; he or she can help you smooth over the rough spots, dissipate upset feelings, and provide support and encouragement. If you are doing this on your own, throw your heart and soul into these workshops, as I know they can help you.

A full description of the three relationship power principles now follows, along with the workshops to help you translate them into practice.

THE RELATIONSHIP POWER PRINCIPLES

The metaphor that best captures the importance of the relationship power principles is illustrated in Figure 7.1, *The Tree of Extraordinary Relationships*. Just as a tree cannot produce its fruit unless it is solid at its trunk and healthy at its roots, so too will a couple be unable to produce their fruit (relationship harmony and happiness) unless they are solid at their trunk (skillful) and especially healthy at their roots (principle driven).

To produce relationship harmony and happiness, a couple must possess and constructively use the requisite skills to make this happen (Chapters 8 through 11). But there are tons of couples who have mastered the skills, yet still do not produce the satisfaction they want. The reason is that they are weak at their roots, acting on dysfunctional principles that either block or prevent the full effective use of their skills.

I have found three principles that power the effective use of all relationship practices. As illustrated in Figure 7.2, these are: Be a Giver, Not a Getter;

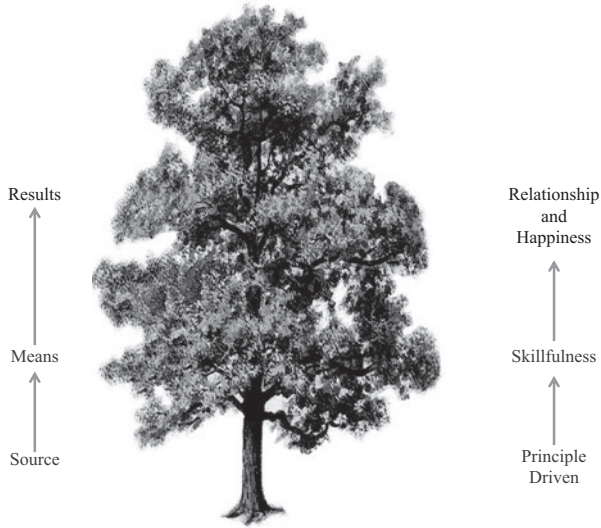


FIGURE 7.1 THE TREE OF EXTRAORDINARY RELATIONSHIPS

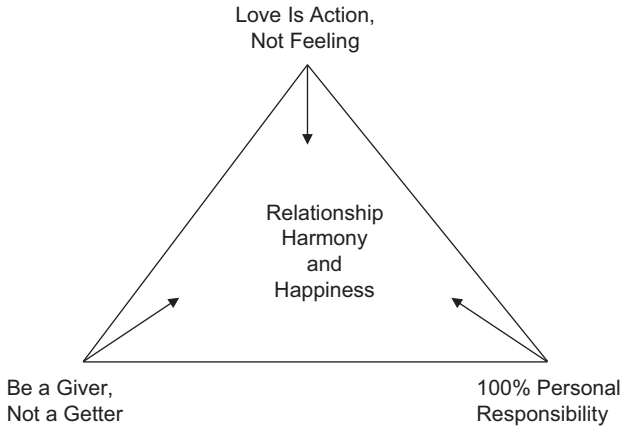


FIGURE 7.2 THE RELATIONSHIP POWER PRINCIPLES

100 Percent Personal Responsibility; and Love Is Action, Not Feeling. After discussing each, I provide the couple, either on their own or under their clinician's guidance, an opportunity to assess the degree to which they act in accordance with these principles. I also give them an opportunity to develop action strategies to improve their principled relationship performance. By acting in accordance with these principles, the couple can add depth and luster to each of the four skill practices that follow.

Principle One: Be a Giver, Not a Getter

There is a universal law of life: those who fail to give—to contribute, aid, assist, supply—are eliminated. What happens when a salesperson fails to sell? How about a college football coach who consistently fields a losing team? Or the stockbroker who doesn't turn a profit for the financial investor? We all know the answer. These people are eliminated. We call it being fired.

Guess what? This also applies to the world of relationships. If a person doesn't give to one's partner, he or she will be in danger of being fired. This person will either be abandoned or, perhaps worse, the partner will stay while withdrawing emotionally. Take a look.

Roberta and Alan. When I first met this couple, they had separated only 11 months into their marriage. "We can't seem to communicate," announced Roberta. Alan added, "Nothing satisfies her. I knock myself out, but she's always mad at me about something."

Sadly, like so many couples, they started their relationship with positive energy only to come to this crisis state. They described their early relationship as filled with tremendous passion, tons of affection, and wells of goodwill.

So what brought them to this point? To be sure, Alan made his mistakes, most notably failing to follow through on promises he made before they married. But it quickly became obvious that their major problem rested squarely on Roberta's shoulders. Despite being on her best behavior before they married, she quickly fell into the pattern of "It's all about getting my needs met" once she said her "I do's."

Let's look at a partial menu of Roberta's violations of the principle of "Be a Giver, Not a Getter." Contrary to her courting behavior, once she married, she demanded that Alan give her almost undivided attention, becoming angry and sullen when she wasn't in the forefront of his consciousness. Prominent examples included her resentment of the attention he gave to Josh, his child from a previous marriage, the time he spent with his parents during the Christmas holidays, and his neglecting to stay by her side at social events. She literally went into rages over these offenses, absolutely refusing to apologize for her behavior, even when it was outrageous. The final straw came when she gave Alan an ultimatum: if he didn't relinquish custody of Josh, she would leave him.

One could speculate at length about the inner demons that drove her. Narcissistic Personality Disorder? Perhaps low self-esteem? Deep-seated anger problems? Regardless, it was obvious that to Roberta her marriage existed only to meet her needs, come hell or high water.

Alan hung in with her a few months longer, attempting to cajole her out of her moods, even pleading with her to come around. When Roberta refused to make changes, blaming Alan not only for his behavior but also for hers, Alan threw her out of his life.

Sear This into Your Mind. This first relationship principle is a reminder to balance an interest in your partner's satisfaction along with an interest in one's own. Remember the following:

- Except perhaps for children and pets, love is never unconditional. A person will cease to be loved if he or she fails to give what the partner wants and needs to be happily mated. Love will wither, and the person will eventually be eliminated.
- The quality of a relationship will be in direct proportion to the amount one gives to one's partner. If a person is a frequent, positive giver, the chances are excellent his or her relationship will be strong and vibrant.
- The more one focuses on giving, the more likely the partner will be motivated to give in return. Out of deep appreciation, the partner will most likely also be a giver, not a getter.

Exercise 1—Assessment and Action Planning. Now it's time for you couples to translate the principle of Be a Giver, Not a Getter into concrete action. First assess yourself and then assess your partner. More important, decide exactly what you can do to increase your amount of giving. When you two have each done this, share with each other what you plan to do, being open to suggestions to improve each of your action plans.

About You—First, with your initials, rate from 1–10 (with 1 lowest and 10 highest) how strong you are in acting according to the principle of "Giving." Then, using your partner's initials, rate where you think he or she would rate you. Finally, note what you could immediately start doing to rate higher with regard to "Giving."

1	-	2	-	3	-	4	-	5
6	-	7	-	8	-	9	-	10

To improve, I will: _____

About Your Partner—Rate from 1–10 (with 1 lowest and 10 highest) how strong your partner is on acting according to the principles of "Giving." Then note what you would like your partner to immediately start doing to rate higher.

1	-	2	-	3	-	4	-	5
6	-	7	-	8	-	9	-	10

To improve, I want him or her to: _____

Principle Two: 100 Percent Personal Responsibility

Jerry and Bridgett. Let's look at another couple who deteriorated to the brink of disaster. Jerry and Bridgett at one time cared deeply for one another, but they had grown so distant that their relationship was almost nonexistent. To make matters worse, neither of them had the vaguest idea what happened or why.

In a nutshell, Bridgett, not feeling loved by Jerry, turned to her two sisters for her emotional support and spent almost all her time and energy at home with her children. Jerry, feeling insignificant to Bridgett, reacted by immersing himself in his work and in his passion for golf. Both felt frustrated and lonely, living more as roommates than spouses.

Notice the vicious circle. The more Bridgett withdrew from Jerry, the more Jerry withdrew from Bridgett. This prompted Bridgett to further withdraw from Jerry, in turn inviting him to withdraw even further from her. And on it went, round and round, each reacting to the other, each feeling victimized by the other, and each feeling justified in their own withdrawal. By the time I met them, this pattern had persisted for almost two years.

It is important to understand that both Jerry and Bridgett had fallen into a victim mentality. That is, they each held their partner responsible for causing their marital problems. So long as they each felt so victimized, neither of them was willing to take the initiative to break the vicious circle in which they had become mired. So I started the change process by asking them three questions.

- Question #1: When did your problems begin?
Answer: Neither of them could remember.
- Question #2: Who first started your problems?
Answer: Neither of them could remember.
- Question #3: Who is responsible for fixing the problem?
Answer: They each said the other.

My initial goal was to convince both Jerry and Bridgett to take 100 percent responsibility for overcoming their problems and making their relationship once again thrive. Meeting separately, I asked each of them to rate on a scale

from 1–10 how loved they felt by their partner. Both said a “2.” To raise their consciousness to the roles they each played in their marital problems, I then asked them to rate, again on scale from 1–10, how loved they thought their partner felt. Interestingly, they each again responded with a “2.”

Having established a benchmark, I then gave both Jerry and Bridgett what I call “the speech.” It amounted to an attempt to get them each to individually take the initiative to reverse their maritally defeating patterns. Read what I said to Bridgett.

“Bridgett, I know how hurt and angry you are. But I want you to know that Jerry deeply loves you. He craves to feel significant to and loved by you. His pulling away and turning to his work is a desperate attempt to feel good about himself and to feel significant somewhere in his life.

I know you feel very abandoned and hurt too, thinking Jerry holds all the cards. But, if you will only realize how deeply Jerry wants you to love him, you can save the day. How? By feeding him the significance and love he so much wants from you. If he begins to once again believe that you love him, he will then knock himself out to make you feel significant and loved in return.

So, Bridgett, what I’m strongly urging you to do is to make a commitment—a 100 percent, no-holds-barred commitment—to make Jerry feel so special and loved that he’ll appreciate you till his dying day. You’ll own his heart. Now, I’ll be here to coach you along the way, but it has to start with your commitment. What do you say? Will you sign on?”

In my experience, significant, positive change will happen even when only one of the two people in a relationship follows this advice. Why? Because when one person takes 100 percent responsibility to display love, the other most often follows suit. Thankfully, both Jerry and Bridgett stepped up to the plate. And they succeeded beyond my wildest hopes. The more loving Bridgett acted, the more gratified Jerry felt. Then, with his newfound appreciation for Bridgett, he acted more loving toward her than he had in years. This then motivated Bridgett to act even more lovingly to Jerry. The end result was a victorious circle, whereby the good deeds of the one served to stimulate the good deeds of the other.

100 Percent/100 Percent Responsibility. The truth is that in every couple there are two halves—partner one and partner two. Of these two halves, each partner is 100 percent responsible for how he or she acts, regardless of the behavior of the other. To say it another way, each of the partners is completely responsible for his or her half.

So, in a relationship one has two choices. First, a person can take the 50 percent/50 percent stance. That is, he or she can take the reactive posture that says “I’ll contribute my 50 percent, but only if you do your part.” Like with Jerry and

Bridgett, this represents “nanny-nanny boo-boo” thinking, as per: “Because you didn’t show me love, I won’t show you the love you want; if you change, then I will.”

Second, a person can take the proactive stance. It sounds like this: “I am 100 percent responsible for how I act, the choices I make, and the results I want to produce in my relationship. My relationship depends 100 percent on me, and I will do whatever is necessary to make it work, despite the lapses of my partner.” This is a 100 percent, no-holds-barred commitment. It really only takes one, but imagine the power if both partners adopt this principle. This is the commitment both Jerry and Bridgett adopted in the course of their couples counseling.

Sear This into Your Mind. Following the principle of 100 Percent Personal Responsibility, remember . . .

- Each partner will inevitably fail the other on occasion. This is a reality.
- If a person holds a reactive mindset, he or she will very likely become resentful and retaliate in some way by shutting down and/or lashing out when the partner doesn’t live up to expectations. This betrays a 50 percent/50 percent victim mentality and will most likely prompt this person to start a downward-spiraling, relationship-destroying vicious circle.
- The more two people operate on the principle of “100 Percent Personal Responsibility,” that is, taking 100 percent responsibility to do what is necessary to make the relationship work, the better are their chances to create a loving, lasting relationship.

Exercise 2—Assessment and Action Planning. Now couples, back to work. Remember: the quality of your relationship depends on the degree to which you take responsibility for the success of your relationship.

About You—First, with your initials, rate from 1–10 (with 1 lowest and 10 highest) how strong you think and act in accordance with the principle of 100 Percent Personal Responsibility. Then, using your partner’s initials, rate where you think he or she would put you. Finally, note exactly what you could immediately begin to do to rate higher with regard to this principle.

1	-	2	-	3	-	4	-	5
6	-	7	-	8	-	9	-	10

To improve, I will: _____

About Your Partner—Rate from 1–10 (with 1 lowest and 10 highest) how strong you perceive your partner to be with regard to thinking and acting according to the principles of “100 Percent Personal Responsibility.” Then note what you would like your partner to immediately start doing to rate higher.

1	-	2	-	3	-	4	-	5
6	-	7	-	8	-	9	-	10

To improve, I want him or her to: _____

Principle Three: Love Is Action, Not Feeling

Kevin and Lori. This couple started their marriage with tremendous love. They described themselves in their early years as lavishing tons of affection on each other, making time to talk about the events of their days, being frequent and passionate in the bedroom, and verbalizing many “I love you’s.”

Sounds pretty good, doesn’t it? Sadly, as with so many couples, they gradually stopped acting in these loving ways. Much like parents who don’t notice their child’s daily growth, neither Kevin nor Lori perceived how dramatically they had changed toward each other over the years until it was almost too late.

Let’s first take a look at Lori. For starters, she gave birth to three healthy, energetic youngsters who, as you parents know, can drain even the most vibrant of moms. In addition, because of financial strains, she had to restart the medical transcription business she gave up when she became pregnant with their first child. As fate would have it, demand for her service grew, requiring more hours each day than envisioned. Add to this her daily household chores and you can see she was on the go virtually from the moment she woke till the moment she put her head on the pillow at night.

To be sure, Lori was a talented, responsible woman. But, because of the load she carried, she stayed exhausted, having little time or energy left for Kevin. She still deeply loved her man, but, unintentionally, she virtually stopped showing him that she loved him in the ways he had come to cherish.

What about Kevin? He bought a new business that struggled from day one. Out of necessity, he began his day at 6:00 AM, typically worked through the lunch hour, and didn’t get home until late in the evening, at about the time Lori put the kids to bed. After wolfing down a hurried meal, he immediately got busy preparing for his next workday, falling into bed exhausted around midnight.

Being so depleted, he had little time or energy left for Lori—little conversation, few displays of affection, and virtually no desire for intimacy. He still loved her, but how was she to know?

The key point here is that, while Kevin and Lori both loved each other, neither of them experienced being loved by the other. They were a train wreck waiting to happen, the only question being who would derail first. After a couple of years of this, Kevin started a relationship with a woman who worked for him at his office, and he and Lori ended up in my office.

Act, Act, Act. The story of Kevin and Lori is all too typical. So here's the point. Loving somebody is not about attitude, passion, or even a feeling of love. Love is about action—action that shows one's partner, over and over, day after day, how adored he or she is. Only love in action—doing things that express and communicate love for and appreciation of the partner—can produce happiness and satisfaction in that person.

When I talk about the Love Is Action principle in my relationship seminars, I often enlist a couple from the audience to participate in a demonstration. My instruction to them is simple: Look intently at each other, but do not move a muscle, make a facial expression, or say anything.

I then ask the audience a series of questions. From one to ten, how much do they love each other? Are they happy with each other? Are they passionate about each other? Do they feel loved and cherished by each other? The correct answer is that there is no way to tell because no data is provided. That's the way it is for one's partner if one fails to translate feelings of love into action. The partner won't know how cherished he or she is unless it can be actually seen or heard in action. He or she won't benefit from the partner's inside feelings without an outward expression. Feelings are useless if not put into action. One can only experience love through action.

Sear This into Your Mind. The principle “Love Is Action, Not Feeling” is absolutely bedrock to making a relationship work. Each of the two people in a couple absolutely must . . .

- Act in ways that show the partner how deeply significant he or she is!
- Act in ways that demonstrate how deeply one loves one's partner!
- Act in ways that communicate how lucky one is to have the partner in his or her life!

If one will do this, not once or twice, but relentlessly, day after day, this person will own the partner's heart. And, glory be, he or she will almost for sure be motivated to act in kind.

Exercise 3—Assessment and Action Planning. Now, couples, let's turn again to action planning. Remember: The quality of your relationship depends on the degree to which you translate your love and passion into action.

About You—First, with your initials, rate from 1–10 (with 1 lowest and 10 highest) how strong you are in behaving consistent with the principle of “Love Is Action, Not Feeling.” Then, using your partner's initials, rate where you think

he or she would put you. Finally, note exactly what you will immediately begin to do to rate higher with regard to this principle.

1	-	2	-	3	-	4	-	5
6	-	7	-	8	-	9	-	10

To improve, I will: _____

About Your Partner—Rate from 1–10 (with 1 lowest and 10 highest) how strong you perceive your partner to be on acting according to the principle of “Love Is Action, Not Feeling.” Then note what you would like your partner to immediately start doing to rate higher.

1	-	2	-	3	-	4	-	5
6	-	7	-	8	-	9	-	10

To improve, I want him or her to: _____

GOING FORWARD

To create and sustain a relationship filled with harmony and happiness, it is not enough for a couple to simply be free of relationship disturbance. They owe it to themselves, their children, and even the significant people in their lives to live a relationship that is filled with harmony, happiness, and satisfaction.

So, for a couple to build the relationship of their dreams, delivering the skills contained in the next four chapters, they want to be sure to operate from the three relationship power principles outlined in this chapter. These principles, if truly representative of a couple’s code of conduct, will color how each of them thinks, feels, and acts across a wide variety of situations. They can shape and give direction as to how the couple shows up in their relationship.

You clinicians, please encourage your couple clients to integrate their action plans into their daily interactions with their mate. And you couples, please follow through with the principle-based actions you’ve identified. I promise you that there will be a significant, positive difference.

Relentless and Intelligent Giving

Let no one ever come to you without leaving better and happier.

—*Mother Teresa*

No relationship can prosper without it. No relationship can become legendary without it! What is it? To give you a hint, let me share a joke with you.

“A husband and wife seek out a counselor after 45 years of marriage. The counselor asks them what the problem is. The wife goes into a tirade, listing every problem they have ever had in all the 45 years they’ve been married. She goes on and on.

Finally, the counselor gets up, embraces the woman, and kisses her passionately. The woman sits stupefied.

The counselor turns to the husband and says, “That is what your wife needs, at least three times a week. Can you do that?”

The husband thinks for a moment and replies, “Well, I can get her here Mondays and Wednesdays, but on Fridays I play golf.”

As this joke suggests, the answer to the question I posed is relentless and intelligent giving—acting in ways that make your partner feel significant to and loved by you.

- How so relentlessly? By giving love and affection to your partner each day—day after day, week after week, month after month.
- How so intelligently? By giving love and affection in exactly the ways your partner most appreciates.

The husband in this joke was neither relentless nor intelligent. He failed to give his wife the attention, affection, and passion she so desperately wanted. Predictably, she became increasingly annoyed, in turn making his life miserable.

If things don't change, their lives will undoubtedly continue in this vein, wasting any possibility for harmony and happiness. What a tragedy.

So, relentless and intelligent giving is a first strategy to creating a relationship that prospers. If partners are mindful of what each deeply want from the other and, most importantly, purposefully act to deliver it, their relationship will soar. To the contrary, if the partners don't, their relationship will wither and die.

THE CASE OF PETER AND KATHY

Let's visit two people who failed relentless and intelligent giving. When I first met Peter and Kathy, these attractive, successful people stated that their marital problems stemmed from a lack of communication skills. They specifically requested that I teach them how to talk better so they could resolve their chronic haggling over sex and money.

As I observed them, I indeed noted that they communicated in rather inept ways. In talking further with them, though, I found that poor communication was only the surface issue. Below the surface, both Peter and Kathy felt quite unloved and rather insignificant to each other.

Listen in to an interchange I had with Peter during the early part of this first session.

Dr. G: Peter, I hear your frustrations with Kathy about sex and money. But, I get the distinct feeling that there is something more on your mind, perhaps something missing for you in your marriage about which you're frustrated. Am I right?

Peter: (After a long pause and a deep sigh) Doc, I don't feel special to her, like I'm just a piece of furniture.

Dr. G: Well, how so?

Peter: I used to feel number one in her life, that she really adored me. Now I feel I'm just about last on her list—behind her work, the kids, her exercise, her friends, just about everything.

Dr. G: What did she used to do that made you feel so special, something, maybe, that she stopped doing?

Peter: Lots of things. When I came home, she'd greet me at the door, ask about my day, and tell me about hers. She'd spend time with me in the evenings. She'd ride along with me in the cart while I played golf. Lots of things like that.

Dr. G: And this made you feel special?

Peter: Absolutely.

Dr. G: And now how do you feel?

Peter: I just feel so alone.

Dr. G: How does this affect your motivation to show love to Kathy?

Peter: It pretty much kills it.

While talking to Peter, I could see Kathy squirming. Not wanting this to become an indictment of her, I turned to Kathy.

Dr. G: I bet my bottom dollar, Kathy, you feel pretty much the same as Peter.

Kathy: You bet! Peter is very self-focused. By his own admission, he's not really cut out for marriage.

Dr. G: Can you explain what you mean?

Kathy: He doesn't really show much affection toward me or interest in what's important to me. Unless it's focused on him, there's just nothing.

Dr. G: So it's very important for Peter to demonstrate to you that he cares about you and, at the very least, show some interest in what is going on in your life?

Kathy: Very much so.

Dr. G: Did he show you affection and interest when you were first together?

Kathy: More so than now.

Dr. G: How did he do that?

Kathy: He gave me hugs. He asked about things in my life. He listened when I shared.

Dr. G: How did it make you feel?

Kathy: Very special. It's what I always wanted from a man.

Dr. G: And how do you now react when you don't get these affirmations?

Kathy: I climb further into my own life. Why wouldn't I? That's where I get all my strokes.

From these exchanges, I felt confident that I had gotten to the core of Peter and Kathy's marital woes. Very simply, after starting their marriage giving to each other exactly what the other needed to feel significant and loved, they little by little stopped doing that. The sad result was that they eventually became less bonded, thereby becoming increasingly unmotivated to give to each other what they each wanted and needed. Then, without the intimate connection they once had, differences over issues like sex and money became bones of contention.

To their credit, both Peter and Kathy stepped up to the plate. We'll see a little later exactly what they did to straighten out their marriage. Suffice it to say at this point they each took responsibility for their role in their marital breakdown and committed to making each other once again feel like number one. I'll never forget their last session when Peter shook my hand and said: "Thank you, Doc, we've got our marriage back."

THE CASE OF VICKIE AND KEVIN

To nail the point, let's look at another couple who were so incompatible that they would probably have been wise to not have married. Witness what Vickie said to open their first marriage counseling appointment:

"We are on the verge of splitting up. We've had problems since day one. We're not, and never have been, on the same page."

To be sure, Vickie and Kevin described themselves as two people with radically different personalities, interests, and needs from a relationship. Vickie owned a vintage clothing store. A vivacious, extraverted people person, she liked nothing better than chatting with friends and customers about the intimacies of their lives, showering them with smiles, hugs, and affection. To her, the joy of a marriage was to connect with her husband on a deep emotional level. She most wanted the mutual sharing of their life experiences and the giving and receiving of tons of affection.

In stark contrast, Kevin described himself as an introvert, one who had become "more studious over the years." He was quiet, reflective, and reserved, yet unfailingly polite and courteous. He loved to read, devouring three newspapers a day and burrowing through books on history, politics, and philosophy. A workaholic devoted to his financial advising career, Kevin not surprisingly stated that what he most wanted from a wife was someone who supported his career and with whom he could discuss both current events and his latest intellectual interests.

How could two people who are so different intimately connect? How could two people who want such different things from a marriage live together in harmony? How could two people who are so polar opposite be satisfying mates to each other? With such stark temperamental and stylistic differences, it was a miracle that they weren't at each other's throats.

Can this marriage be saved? Frankly, it will be difficult. These two very decent people have a major decision before them. Do they drift along, both deprived of what they want in a marriage, feeling increasingly frustrated, unfulfilled, and lonely? Do they make a Herculean effort to make each other happy? Or, do they admit that they made a mistake in marrying and gracefully go their separate ways?

As I write this chapter, Vickie and Kevin are considering giving their marriage one more try. Can they succeed? I honestly don't know. What I do know is that the only chance they have to be happy together is for both to work relentlessly and intelligently to give each other what they each most want and need in a marriage. Kevin will have to shower Vickie with affection and companionship. Vickie will have to devote herself to engaging Kevin intellectually.

LEARNING FROM THESE COUPLES

The marriages of Peter and Emily and Vickie and Kevin are quite instructive. They help explain why people fall in love and why love either grows or withers as time goes by. So sear the following five points into your mind. Don't forget them. Use them, either as a clinician or as a couple. They will make or break a relationship.

- Everyone wants to feel significant to and loved by another person. It is not something learned; it's built into our DNA. Note that every one of these four people—Peter, Emily, Vickie, and Kevin—deeply desired to feel loved by and special to their partners. Isn't the thwarting of this expectation what frustrated each of these married people?
- But there's a complication. While everyone wants to feel significant to and loved by another, not everyone feels significant and loved in the same way. Some feel loved through physical actions, others through verbal expressions, still others through quality time. Think how different Kevin was from Peter, Emily, and Vickie. In contrast to these three, Kevin experienced being loved through intellectual engagement. Peter, Emily, and Kevin were more touchy-feely, wanting sweet words and tender caresses. Yet they all wanted to feel cherished by their partners. So it's not enough to simply show love and affection to our partners. It must be shown in the exact ways that matter most to them.
- As elegantly stated by my colleague Dr. Paul Hauck, a person doesn't fall in love because of chemistry or because of such magical myths as "We belong together," "We're soulmates," or "We're made for each other." Rather, we fall in love because our partner makes us feel significant and loved in ways that matter most to us. You see, we carry within us deep desires for certain qualities in a mate that we believe to be absolutely necessary for our happiness. When we perceive someone to possess these qualities, we naturally value this person. At a certain level of intensity, we call this value "love." By the way, our partner fell in love with us because we likewise provided to him or her the right kinds of love and affection.
- If we meet Mr. or Ms. Right, we will only sustain our love for each other if we both continue to give each other exactly what we each want and need to feel loved and significant. If we two fail at this, our love for each other will eventually dissipate and die. This is not romantic, but absolutely true.
- Here's the bottom line. If we are wise, we will take the time to figure out exactly what we need from our partner in order to feel loved and significant. This represents, in effect, our relationship job description. Then, if smart, we two will mindfully, purposefully, and consistently act to do our

job. By relentlessly and intelligently making our partner feel loved and significant in exactly the ways that matter most to him or her, we will give ourselves the best chance to keep our mutual love and happiness bright and shiny.

Armed with these insights, we are now primed to tackle the Relentless and Intelligent Giving Workshop. It is modeled on Dr. Paul Hauck's simple three-step process of first understanding each other's wants and needs, then freeing oneself to deliver the goods, and finally acting to deliver.

Simple, right? Wrong. Couples often have a difficult time at each step of the way. Self-awareness may be clouded. Strong emotions may contaminate ability. Difficulties in follow-through may pop up.

As a clinician, I find it important to play an active role when I assist couples with their Relentless and Intelligent Giving Workshop. I think, dear clinician, you too will find this so. You most likely will need to call on your complete bag of clinical tools as couples often fumble and stumble along the way.

And, dear client, whether you work your way through this workshop on your own or under the guidance of your couple therapist, please appreciate how important this process is to your relationship harmony and happiness. Listen to your partner. Be open to his or her needs. Above all, follow through with passion.

THE RELENTLESS AND INTELLIGENT GIVING WORKSHOP

Using Peter and Kathy as a model, I want you, the couple, to now do the three-step process that can weave relentless and intelligent giving into the fabric of your relationship. You will notice that both Kathy and Peter actively participated in this process. Hopefully you and your partner will as well. It will require you to devote quality time to self-reflection, open communication, and committed follow-through. But the time and energy you spend will be well worth it because it can absolutely divorce-proof your relationship.

A word of caution! Don't despair if your partner declines to participate. By you taking it on your own shoulders to relentlessly and intelligently give to your partner, there is a good chance your partner will eventually enroll in the process. After all, a happy spouse, one who feels significant to and loved by you, will predictably be motivated to also give back to you.

Step One: Understanding

The first step to relentless and intelligent giving is to become mindful of exactly what each of you need from the other to feel significant and loved. This means

that both of you must first know what you yourself value and then clearly communicate it to the other.

This only makes sense. You wouldn't hire a contractor to build your house without having in hand an exact blueprint. Nor would you hire someone to work in your business without providing them a detailed job description. Yet we often leave perhaps our most important life's enterprise, our primary relationship, to chance, thinking that the two of us will intuitively know what we need from each other to be happy.

Let's revisit Peter and Kathy. After assessing their relationship problems, I explained to them the concept of relentless and intelligent giving, showed them exactly how they had failed to act accordingly, and gave them the following assignment to complete before their next appointment.

"Now, you are to each go home and reflect on yourself, not your spouse. You are to think deeply about what it is that you must have—absolutely must have—to feel loved by and significant to your partner and thereby happily mated. Be as concrete and specific as you can. After all, you can't expect your partner to read your mind. You must know your desires so clearly that you can communicate them to your partner so that he or she has no problem whatsoever understanding."

Happily, Kathy and Peter returned for their second session having done their homework. Witness the following interchange.

- Dr. G: Kathy, let's start with you. Looking inward, what do you need from Peter in order to feel that you are significant to and loved by him?
- Kathy: Easy. Three things, really. I guess I'm old fashioned, but I need, one, lots of hugs and kisses, two, a whole bunch of "I love you's," and, three, lots of attention.
- Dr. G: What do you mean by "attention"?
- Kathy: Sitting down and talking to me, sometimes by directly asking about things in my life and by being willing to listen to me talk about what goes on in my life.
- Dr. G: Let's say Peter did all that. What would this do for you?
- Kathy: I'd feel like I mattered to him. I'd feel that he cared enough to do the things that make me feel loved and cherished. I'd open up my heart to him.

At this point I turned to Peter and I had him repeat what he had heard that Kathy needed from him. Once I felt that he understood his marital job description, I led him through the same process I did with Kathy. When finished, I made sure Kathy completely understood what Peter needed from her as well.

Notice that now both Peter and Kathy were armed with the information they needed to be an extraordinary partner to the other. What to do with this knowledge comes in Steps Two and Three. Before going there, though, it's time for you to complete your own Step One.

Step One Exercise—Understanding You. First focus on yourself. What is it that you want and need from your partner in order to feel significant and loved? Following the thinking of Gary Chapman in his excellent book, *The Five Love Languages*, you might want to think along the lines of these five categories: (1) words of love, appreciation, and affirmation; (2) quality time; (3) receiving gifts; (4) acts of help and service; (5) physical affection. Pick your top two and define them behaviorally so your partner will know exactly what she or he needs to do.

<i>My Top 2</i>	<i>Behavioral Expressions</i>
1. _____ _____ _____	_____
2. _____ _____ _____	_____

Once you are clear about what you want and need from your partner, you will need to communicate it so that she or he clearly understands. What might you say to your partner to help him or her understand your wants and needs? Remember that your job is to communicate about you, not about your partner. This communication, in other words, is designed to raise awareness of you in your partner's mind, not to critique his or her prior performance.

About Your Partner. Now focus on your partner. What is it that your partner wants and needs from you in order to feel loved and significant? You will need this information so that you can purposely do the job for which you were hired. You need to listen without judgment so you can fully absorb what he or she has to say. If your partner is not participating, go directly to him or her and ask. Regardless, make sure to translate his or her top two wants into observable behavioral strategies on your part.

<i>His/Her Top 2</i>	<i>Behavioral Expressions</i>
1. _____ _____ _____	_____
2. _____ _____ _____	_____

Step Two: Ability

Without this deep understanding, you two will be flying by the seat of your pants. The success of your relationship will be a wish and a prayer. All you can do is hope for the best.

But I offer a word of caution. While awareness is necessary, it is not sufficient. You must also be able to relentlessly and intelligently act to give exactly what your partner needs from you in order for him or her to feel loved and cherished. So, the questions you are now to answer are:

1. Am I able to relentlessly and intelligently give to my partner what he/she wants and needs from me?
2. Is my partner able to relentlessly and intelligently give to me what I want and need from him or her?

If the answer to both of these questions is “yes,” then go right to Step Three. But if the answer to either of these questions is “no,” then some work needs to be done right here at Step Two. Remember: the quality of your relationship depends on both of you being able to deliver the goods.

Back to Peter and Kathy. Even with their newly acquired awareness, both of them were limited in their ability to deliver the goods to the other. Peter held a great deal of resentment toward Kathy for not making him number one in her life. Being so contaminated, he found it next to impossible to break through his passive-aggressive pattern of ignoring her in favor of sports on TV and playing with their young son. Kathy herself carried a great deal of hurt, such that she found it difficult to let down her guard. Out of this defensive habit, she continued to turn to her work, friends, and hobbies to gain a sense of significance and being valued.

For Peter and Kathy to be able to relentlessly and intelligently make each other feel significant and loved, they had to eliminate their respective relationship disturbances of hurt and anger. This was done by helping them practice

Premeditated Acceptance and Forgiveness (Chapter 4). Using RECT's ABC model, I helped them both take responsibility for their feelings, identify the irrational beliefs they each held to bring on their hurt and anger (for Peter, damning "shoulds"; for Kathy, personalization), and replace these beliefs with more accepting and forgiving ones.

Step Two Exercise—Ability. Now it's time for you and your partner to identify what blocks you from giving to your partner exactly what he or she needs from you. Be clear that it is not enough to know what your blocks are; you must also act to overcome them. Your relationship absolutely depends on this.

About You—What are the things that block your ability to relentlessly and intelligently give to your partners? Check from the list below the ones that apply to you. Also identify what triggers these, that is, the things your partner does or does not do that prompt these. Most important, what could you do—on purpose—to interrupt and eliminate these patterns? Don't ignore the fact that it may be helpful to consult with a competent RECT therapist if strong feelings block you.

<i>My Blocking Patterns</i>	<i>Triggers</i>
Emotional Upsets	_____

Tired and Stressed	_____

Distractions	_____

Laziness/ Taking For	_____
Granted	_____

Narcissism	_____

Other

What I will do to interrupt these patterns so as to relentlessly and intelligently give to my partner: _____

About Your Partner. Now focus on your partner. What are some of the things that block your partner from being a relentless and intelligent giver to you? More important, what do you do that triggers him or her into this pattern? Most important, what will you do to eliminate these triggers? Take this exercise from the power principle of 100 Percent Personal Responsibility discussed in Chapter 7.

Partner's Blocking Patterns

Triggers I Provide

Emotional Upsets

Tired and Stressed

Distractions

**Laziness/Taking For
Granted**

Narcissism

Other

What I will commit to do to interrupt what I do to make it difficult for my partner to truly give me what I want and need to feel loved and significant: _____

Step Three: Action

It is important to realize that all the understanding and ability in the world is useless without action. The truth is that the only thing that produces a desired result is doing what is necessary to produce that result. Nothing will happen without taking the correct action.

Let's say you wanted your house painted. Understanding that your house needs painting won't get it done. Developing a plan to paint it won't get it painted. Hoping and praying for it to be painted will not do the job. Becoming a master painter will not do the trick. As simple as it sounds, the only way to get your house painted is to paint it.

The same is true with regard to the success of your relationship. To create the relationship of your dream, you must act—relentlessly and intelligently. So, once you understand what you need to do and see to it that you are able to do it, you must do it. The \$64,000 questions, the ones that will make or break your relationship, are:

1. Will I commit to relentlessly and intelligently act in the exact ways to make my partner feel deeply important to and absolutely loved by me?
2. Will I act—day after day, week after week, month after month—to give my partner exactly what she or he wants and needs from me to feel significant and loved?

There it is. When all is said and done, that is the bottom line: relentless and intelligent action.

I am happy to report that Peter and Kathy did just that. They each took responsibility for diligently demonstrating their care for each other. It wasn't long before what initially required a deliberate, conscious effort became automatic. The more Peter gave to Kathy, the more significant and loved she felt. This prompted her to return the favor to Peter. And, the more Kathy gave to Peter, the more significant and loved he felt, prompting him to be even more giving to her. Backed by their understanding and ability, their relentless and intelligent actions turned a vicious circle into a victorious one.

Step Three Exercise—Action. Remember the power principle that Love Is Action, Not Feeling. You must relentlessly deliver to your partner the spot-on actions that communicate how significant to and loved by you she or he is. Nothing will make a difference without doing this.

About You—Referring to what you have learned about your partner in Step One, create your Relentless and Intelligent Giving Action Plan. Exactly what will you do to make your partner feel supremely significant to and loved by you? Where and when will you do it? How often? Do not leave this to chance. Instead, plan it, and do it on purpose!

What

Where & When

How Often

About Your Partner—Remember that you cannot change your partner. You can only change your own behavior toward your partner. However, taking the actions you listed earlier can help to influence him or her to do likewise toward you. Similarly, rewarding your partner when she or he makes you feel significant and loved will predictably encourage him or her to do more of the same. So, when your partner acts lovingly toward you, what positive, appreciative things will you do in response?

What He/She Does

My Rewarding Response

Great job on this workshop. You now have a solid plan to make your relationship loving and lasting. Remember, though, that you must follow through, not just today and tomorrow while this is fresh in your mind, but mindfully and purposely into the future. You will find it easier to do as you develop the habit. And you will see the positive results.

INTENSIFIERS

To help you increase your relentless and intelligent giving, I now share three strategies that can intensify any couple's relationship happiness. I urge you couples to add these ingredients to your relationship routine. Although relatively easy to do, research tells us that couples who adopt these practices feel much more connected to and happier with each other.

Hellos and Good-bye

Before separating in the morning, be sure to take the time to say "good-bye" with a brief hug and/or a kiss. Similarly, when rejoining at the end of the day, take a few moments to affectionately greet each other.

Touch Base

Once or twice during the day reach out to say "hello" to your partner. An affectionate e-mail, a quick phone call, or a brief face-to-face visit goes a long way in communicating how important your mate is to you.

A Weekly Date

Make it a ritual to go on a date together at least once a week. This could include doing something outside the home, such as taking in dinner and a movie, getting an ice cream cone, or taking a leisurely walk. Or it could be something within the confines of your dwelling, such as watching a movie while sharing a tub of popcorn. Regardless, you both should view this date as sacred, meaning that it is a priority during your week, a time for the two of you to truly connect with each other.

GOING FORWARD

If two people follow both the letter and the law of Relentless and Intelligent Giving, they will absolutely see the results. That is, by purposely making each other feel loved and important each and every day, they will experience more satisfaction and happiness than they ever have before. So, please remember the following three points.

- Except perhaps for children and animals, love is never unconditional. We come to love somebody when we perceive that this other person will give us exactly what we need to feel loved and significant. Furthermore,

we will only sustain our love for somebody if they continue to give us what we deeply long for in order to feel loved and significant.

- While everybody deeply values feeling significant and loved, what makes a person feel significant and loved varies from person to person. It is therefore important to not only relentlessly communicate to our partner how significant he or she is to us, but also to do so intelligently, that is, in ways that matter most to him or her.
- To purposely keep love alive, we need to follow the three-step Relentless and Intelligent Giving process.
 1. Understanding—Through open and honest communication, we need to become acutely aware of what we each need in order to feel significant and loved. By the way, it wouldn't hurt to periodically revisit this.
 2. Ability—We must overcome whatever blocks we have that prevent us from relentlessly delivering the message to our partner that he or she is highly significant to and deeply loved by us. Our understanding is useless without our ability to deliver.
 3. Action—Although awareness and ability are necessary, they are not sufficient. We must act, act, act. No relationship result can take place without the requisite action. Remember: Love Is Action, Not Feeling.

Now that you've digested the critical core of relentless and intelligent giving, as well as the action plan you developed in your workshop, it is time to get to work. Make a difference. Relate to your partner with mindfulness, with purpose, and with passion. You can create the relationship of your dreams.

CHAPTER 9

Commitment to the Couple

Undoubtedly, we become what we envisage.

—Charles M. Bristol

A few years ago I had the good fortune to present a series of leadership seminars to the management team of a resort hotel in the Virgin Islands. Traveling to this tropical location was quite a sacrifice, but somebody had to do it.

As you may know, one of the services many of these upscale Caribbean resorts offer is a wedding package. They take responsibility for arranging and delivering every aspect of a couple's wedding—the cake, the music, the champagne, the flowers, the photographer, the honeymoon lodging, and even the clergy to conduct the ceremony. All the couple has to do is show up and say “I do.” Picture for a moment standing barefoot at sunset on a pristine, white, sandy beach fringed with palm trees exchanging your wedding vows.

I remember lunching with this hotel's director of wedding services. During our conversation, I asked her what was the most notable impression she had after assisting hundreds of couples to tie the knot. Her response struck me as infinitely true: “Most couples spend more time planning their wedding than they do their marriage.”

What an observation! People will indeed spend months, not to mention thousands of dollars, drawing up blueprints for their big day. But few give much thought to their future lives together. How unwise.

THE CASE OF LINDA AND JOHN

To bring this to life, let me share the case of Linda and John. When asked what brought them to couples counseling, they related that “We rarely fight or argue, but we have little connection to each other.” They described a relationship that was respectful and polite, but one with rare displays of affection, little

conversation except about schedules, finances, and their child, and virtually no physical intimacy.

Perhaps a little background would help illuminate this couple's problems. Some 15 months previously, they had moved, along with their 10-year-old son, to Charlottesville, Virginia to live in the rolling central Virginia countryside nestled below the Blue Ridge Mountains. They felt the time was ripe for this move because of a very favorable housing market and very low interest rates.

The rub was that both Linda and John retained their jobs in Richmond, Virginia, some 80 miles east of their new home. They made their schedules work by staggering their week. John left for Richmond at 5:00 AM on Monday and returned to Charlottesville about 7:00 PM on Wednesday, whereupon he would work the rest of the week from his home office while also taking care of domestic chores and their son. Linda would batten down the home hatches on Monday and Tuesday before leaving for her Richmond job Wednesday mornings after putting their child on the school bus, only to return home at 7:00 PM Friday evening. They devoted the weekend to catching up on household chores and ferrying their active youngster to his various social and athletic activities. Needless to say, this schedule left them both exhausted.

As if this backbreaking schedule wasn't enough to put a strain on their marriage in and of itself, let's take a look at the heart of this couple's marital woes by eavesdropping on their first counseling session.

Linda: We have no time to ever see each other.

Dr. G: What about weekends?

Linda: We're so busy on weekends, with running around, cleaning the house, and all.

Dr. G: But, look, how you spend your time is your choice. After all, time is choice.

John: (He again went through the litany of responsibilities and challenges they faced over the weekend.)

Dr. G: But, guys, you're choosing to spend your time as you do. You're choosing, in a very real way, to not spend time together. Let me ask you a couple of questions. Do you ever block off as little as a half hour together?

John: No.

Dr. G: Do you ever take a break from chores to take a walk together?

John: No.

Dr. G: How about the movies?

John: No.

Dr. G: Do either of you ever think about arranging these types of things?

Linda/John: (Silence)

Having backed them into a corner, I described a demonstration I once observed at a Stephen Covey seminar. The presenter took a large, translucent plastic jar from beneath a cloth-draped table, along with a pail of fist-sized, irregularly shaped rocks. He invited a volunteer from the audience to fit all the rocks inside the container, which was accomplished with some difficulty after about 10 minutes of labored effort.

So far so good. The presenter then asked the audience if any more could fit in. After the audience uniformly said, “no,” he then produced another pail filled with gravel, which he preceded to sprinkle into the jar, alternating sprinkling and shaking the jar until all the gravel filtered in. He next repeated this procedure with sand and then with water before revealing the point of the demonstration.

So, what was the point? It was, first, that the only way he could fit all these ingredients into the jar was by putting the bigger items in first; if he put the water, sand, and gravel in first, there would be no way he could fit even half the rocks into the jar. Second, and more to the point, he told us that the big rocks represent our most important priorities. He went on to explain that it is a shame that so many people do not allow time for their priorities by filling up their time with lesser, even unimportant activities. They mindlessly squeeze out what’s more important in life.

Now, back to the conversation with Linda and John.

Dr. G: Sounds like your marriage has become a little rock for each of you.

Linda/John: (They sat in stunned silence.)

Dr. G: Let’s see if we can figure out why you’re making this choice. People typically put this relationship down the priority list for one or both of two reasons. One is that they’re so angry at or hurt by each other that they build up walls.

Linda No, we never fight.

John: And I can say honestly that I’m not mad at her.

Linda: Me neither.

Dr. G: Okay, let’s look at reason number two. They’ve lost their connection to each other and/or their relationship—probably a little bit each week over a long time—so that the “we” no longer exists. There is no “couple.”

John: That’s it. Everything exists, except our relationship (with Linda nodding).

Dr. G: So, John, instead of your relationship, what are your commitments?

John: To work, bills, the lawn.

Dr. G: Linda?

Linda: To work, my son, keeping up with the house.

Learning from Linda and John

There is a lot to learn from this couple. First, as illustrated in Figure 9.1, there are three parts to this and to any relationship. One is the husband (John), a second is the wife (Linda), and a third is the couple or the “we.” While you can see the husband and wife, you cannot see the couple. It’s an abstraction. But it exists and had better be concretized so it too can be nurtured and grown.

No wonder Linda and John felt so unfilled in their marriage. Each of them had invested heavily in their work, their child, and their domestic responsibilities. But they had invested virtually nothing in their relationship. They had a marriage on paper, but not one in reality. No “couple” existed that bound them together.

To prosper in this relationship, Linda and John would need to give birth to and nurture their relationship in a flesh and blood sense, not just on paper. After that, they would need to commit to doing what was necessary to make it soar.

The rest of this chapter is devoted to the methodology to accomplish this. Before going there, I want you to sear the following two concepts deeply into your mind.

1. Relationships that are legendary are ones that have—and continue to affirm, over and over—a deep, total, no-holds-barred commitment to three separate, but intimately related ingredients.

- There is an abiding commitment to Couple. Couple is a concept introduced by my friends and colleagues Drs. Peter Sheras and Phyllis Koch-Sheras. As they state, Couple can’t be seen or felt, but there is an acute, mindful awareness in each individual that a “we” or an “us” exists. This is an entity in and of itself that both husband and wife are devoted to mindfully honoring, nurturing, and growing.
- There is a deep commitment to the partner. If one cannot or will not make a deep, passionate commitment to one’s partner, forsaking all others, and devoting oneself to giving him or her love and affection, it is unreasonable to expect relationship fulfillment and satisfaction, nor can there be much confidence in your relationship future.
- There is a commitment to the ideal couple future, along with a commitment to a strategic plan to make that ideal future a present reality. In other words, legendary couples don’t leave their relationship to chance. They do not drift. They do not simply react to life’s unfolding circumstances. To the contrary, they purposely conceptualize, plan, and act to make the vision of their ideal relationship a reality.

2. These three commitments provide the glue that binds two people together. They are the essence of being a team. They provide deep trust and a sense of belonging and sharing. They allow mutual giving without self-sacrifice. They are the foundation for relationship satisfaction, partnership, and happiness.

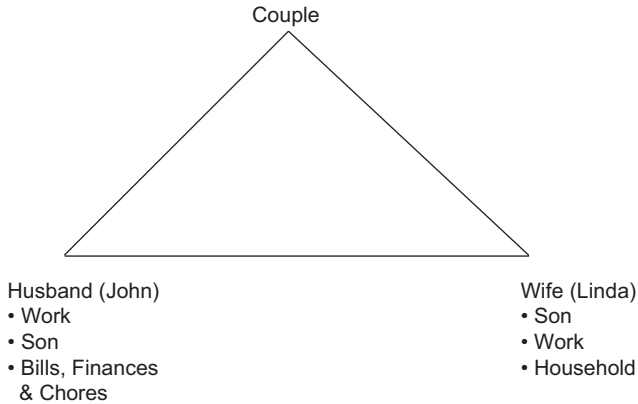


FIGURE 9.1 THE THREE PARTS TO A RELATIONSHIP

THE COMMITMENT TO THE COUPLE WORKSHOP

Now let's get to the five-step Commitment to the Couple Workshop. If you couples throw yourself into this workshop, you can bring such a degree of commitment to your relationship, your partner, and your future as a couple that you will have a wonderful chance of creating a legendary relationship of your own. And the wisdom and guidance of a couples therapist will always add to the richness of the final product.

Step One: Creating Couple

Like Linda and John, you are not a couple simply because you are mated. All couples relate to each other, but not all couples are truly related. You need to go from merely relating to "Being a Couple."

Creating a Couple is a two-part process. The first part is to simply draw the distinction between me, my partner, and we or Couple in your minds. By defining "Couple" as something distinct and tangible in and of itself, you can focus on your relationship as something to be grown in its own right. This is simple enough.

The second part of the process is for you and your partner to formally declare that indeed you are a Couple. A declaration is a powerful tool. It is an act of creation whereby something becomes so, a reality, by virtue of simply saying it is so. Examples of declarations include Congress voting to be at war, a jury finding a defendant guilty, or a minister pronouncing two people married. War exists, the defendant is guilty, and the individuals are married simply by the power of someone with the authority to do so saying so. A war, a verdict, and a marriage now exist out of these declarations.

Now, neither you nor I have the authority to declare war, legally determine a person's guilt or innocence, or pronounce people married. If we tried, people would think we were insane. But, guess what? We have the authority, along with our partner, to create a Couple. Once you declare it to exist, you've created it. Then, you two can systematically act to make it perfect as you define it.

Step One Exercise—Creating a Couple. Just as the Declaration of Independence in 1776 created a new, independent country, you now create your "Couple." As silly as this may sound, take this first exercise seriously, as it forms the foundation of you moving to the Couple of your dreams.

Make an appointment, sit and look each other in the eye, and declare that you are a Couple. You may use any words you want to, so long as you are conscious of giving birth to or creating an entity that is neither of you individually, but is both of you, together, as a third, separate entity. It could sound as simple as the one below:

"We, _____, and _____, lovingly and passionately hereby declare that we are a Couple."

Now do it. If you want to make it formal, write it, sign it, date it, and have it witnessed. Regardless, once done, celebrate. Pop open the champagne. Whoop and holler. Reward yourself with cake and ice cream. Whatever works for you is fine because you are now mated in a way you've never been before.

Step Two: Create Your Couple Vision

Great job on Step One. You are now a Couple, not just two people with a marriage certificate in your desk. This takes us to the second step, creating your vision of the ideal Couple you want to become.

Much like a blueprint for a house, a vision becomes the overarching image of what your relationship would look like if it were perfect, as you define it. In other words, it is the blueprint for the perfect relationship you want to create and live for the rest of your lives.

The power of a Couple vision can also serve to inspire you to action. Think of Martin Luther King Jr.'s magnificent "I Have a Dream" speech at the Lincoln Memorial in 1963. It inspired tremendous passion in him as well as hundreds of thousands of other people to move his vision of racial equality closer to reality.

So, now, you are to create your own dream or vision of what your relationship would be if it were perfect, as you define it. It need not be as poetic or as lengthy as Dr. King's. In fact, the briefer and more to the point the better. Above all, make it personally relevant to the two of you. Capture the spirit of what it would be like to be the perfect Couple. Some examples of real Couple visions include these:

- We deeply value and appreciate each other!
- We are a never-ending source of love and support!
- We are relentlessly passionate!
- We are a winning team!
- We are endlessly playful with each other!

Step Two Exercise—Creating Couple Vision. Here are some questions you might consider to help you create your Couple vision. When we are at our best, what describes us? Looking at other couples whom we admire, what makes them special? If a miracle happened right now and we were transformed into a perfect Couple, what would our relationship look like?

So first brainstorm key ideas and words that would capture how you might want to be. Then, second, write your vision statement.

1. Soaring ideas and adjectives that we want to describe us:
2. Our Couple vision:

Step Three: Create Action Strategies

Congratulations! You have now created both yourselves as a Couple and your vision of the ideal Couple you want to be. But, as uplifting as your vision might be, it is not enough. You have to go to the third step, which is to create concrete strategies to get you from where you now are to the vision of where you want to be.

The task here is to determine up to five actions that, if you two followed through on them consistently and excellently, would help make your vision a reality. Examples might include: be physically intimate twice a week; communicate love to each other daily; follow through on doing our respective chores; share what goes on in our daily lives; look for ways to help each other out; acknowledge and compliment each other; go out on a weekly date. These types of action strategies provide the specifics of what you would do if you in fact were magically transformed into the Couple of your dreams. All you have to then do is act out these strategies and your vision becomes a reality.

Step Three Exercise—Creating Action Strategies. Together determine what action strategies you two will engage in to make your Couple vision a reality. What are five of the most important things you two could do such that, if you both did them regularly and excellently, would make you “be” your vision? Be as specific as you can so there is no doubt as to what you are to do. Remember: By doing this step, you are creating the relationship of your dreams. Write these strategies below.

1. _____
2. _____

3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Step Four: Follow Through

Couples who are smart are ones who act to make their Couple vision a reality. They make a no-holds-barred commitment to act out their Step Three action plan. They each take 100 percent responsibility to do what they have decided will work to make their Couple look and feel exactly like they envisioned. There is, in other words, relentless, purposeful follow-through.

Step Four Exercise—Create a Commitment to Follow Through. Key strategies to strengthen follow-through are discussed in Chapter 12. You might want to overview these at this time to put real meat into your commitments. What you are to do here is to make a formal, sacred commitment to regularly and excellently act out your Step Three action strategies. To do so, each of you sign the following pledge.

Partner One

I, _____, hereby give my sacred word that I will regularly and excellently act in the ways we articulated to make our relationship look and feel like our Couple vision.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Partner Two

I, _____, hereby give my sacred word that I will regularly and excellently act in the ways we articulated to make our relationship look and feel like our Couple vision.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Step Five: Follow-Up

A problem for many couples is that they get so caught up in their daily responsibilities that they lose sight of tending to their relationship. They find themselves reacting to the multitude of immediate demands on their time. They end up too stressed or tired to pay attention to each other. They may try for a time to

fit their relationship into the limited time left after all the other chores are done, but they often get discouraged and give up. Couple gets lost.

The key is not to prioritize your schedule, but to schedule your priorities. In concrete terms, this means you would be wise to set aside a specific time each week (e.g., Sunday at 4:00 p.m.) at a private, quiet location to take stock of how you two are doing. This meeting could include reviewing your Couple vision and action strategies and making any necessary adjustments. You could also use this meeting to schedule quality time together for the next week so your Couple vision doesn't get lost in the shuffle. Whatever the agenda, this meeting keeps "Couple" on the front burner.

Step Five Exercise—Create Follow-Up Plan. The last step in your Commitment to the Couple Workshop is to plan the date, time, and place of your follow-up meetings. Please take this step seriously. You don't want something as important as your relationship to be trumped by the circumstances of your life. Make this meeting happen on purpose.

Date

Time

Place

INTENSIFIERS

Many, many congratulations, Couple. Doing the Commitment to the Couple Workshop is a significant part of creating—and sustaining—the relationship of your dreams. If you want to further deepen your relationship, you might also want to integrate the following intensifiers into the fabric of your lives together.

Develop Rituals that Bond You

Shared rituals bind people. Think of the Jewish family who shares their Seder dinner each year; or the stadium crowd that sings the national anthem before the sporting event; or the family that gathers for Thanksgiving dinner each year.

I recommend that you consciously strive to integrate rituals into your Couple life. Examples may be such nondramatic things as taking a walk together each evening, going out on a date each week, or sharing a cup of coffee each morning before heading off to work. Grander examples may be taking that annual vacation trip to some exotic location, hosting a holiday dinner for your extended family, or taking pains to honor each other's birthdays.

You don't want to leave this to chance. Do it on purpose. You might want to put this intensifier on the agenda of one of your weekly Couple follow-up meetings.

Connect to a Higher Purpose

Any commitment is strengthened when it is connected to some higher purpose. To connect to the higher purpose of your Couple, you might want to explore the following questions:

- Who, besides ourselves, will benefit from the success of our relationship?
- What will be the benefits to our children of creating a loving, lasting relationship?
- What about our grandchildren? Our extended family? Our community?
- If my partner were to die before me, how would I feel about my contribution to the quality of his or her life and to the quality of our relationship? Proud, pleased, and happy? Regretful, guilty, and sad?

Annual Renewal

The beginning of each year represents an opportunity for renewal. It is when we can look back over the prior year and plan for the new one. Think of your relationship as something organic that can continue to grow and evolve.

For this last intensifier, I strongly recommend you hold an annual strategic planning meeting. At this meeting you redo the Commitment to the Couple Workshop. You recreate your Couple (Step 1) and critically review your performance on each of the four steps in this workshop. This not only keeps this creation process alive, but it also serves for the two of you to make any adjustments you might find desirable as you head into the new year.

GOING FORWARD

As you go forward, you want to remember and act on the three relationship power principles laid out in Chapter 7. The degree to which you act on them can make or break your relationship. Many, many people mistakenly think that love is enough to make their relationships prosper, which, of course, it isn't.

Remember also that legendary relationships are ones that regularly affirm three deep and abiding commitments: (1) to Couple; (2) to your partner; and (3) to creating your ideal Couple future. These commitments can glue a couple together for a lifetime.

A powerful, purposeful five-step process can be used to create—and sustain—the relationship of your dreams. This includes: (1) creating Couple; (2) creating Couple vision; (3) creating action strategies; (4) creating a commitment to follow-through; and (5) following up. In addition, three productive intensifiers will profoundly deepen your couple connection, including (1) developing rituals that bond you, (2) connecting your Couple to a higher purpose, and (3) conducting annual renewal and strategic planning.

Before leaving this chapter, I strongly urge you to act on what you have created in this chapter. The possibility for deep bonding is there for you. All you have to do is act. Best of luck. Go for it. Relate mindfully, with purpose, and with passion.

CHAPTER 10

Frequent, Passionate Intimacy

Life begets life, energy creates energy. It is by spending oneself that one gets rich.
—Sarah Bernhardt

I'll never forget the sight I saw one crisp fall afternoon. In walked Ellen, followed meekly by her husband, Tom. What made this sight so remarkable was the way Ellen dressed. She matched her mid-thigh-length black skirt with a blouse cut so low it revealed half her chest. She looked to be dressed more for a porn movie than a couples therapy session.

Her outfit proved prophetic. When I asked what relationship problems they wanted to address, Ellen blurted out: "I'm an affair waiting to happen." She went on to explain that the two forms of intimacy she most wanted in her marriage, verbal and sexual, were almost nonexistent. She said she saw no reason to stay faithful, much less married, if she continued to be deprived of both of these intimate forms of couple connecting.

Ellen did not beat around the bush. She stated up front her needs and put Tom on notice that he had better put out if he were to retain the loyalty of his wife.

Most important for our purposes, Ellen and Tom are very instructive in illuminating how important intimacy is to making a relationship loving and lasting. Two people who frequently and passionately connect, both verbally and sexually, most often stay emotionally close and deeply satisfied. When these two forms of intimacy are absent, there is almost always a significant disconnect.

In this chapter, I will address ways to enhance the quality of a couple's verbal and physical intimacy. By mastering these skills, the couple can not only divorce-proof their marriage, but also raise their connection to an unbelievably high level.

COMMUNICATION INTIMACY

Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida is world renowned for its customer service. It demands that each employee live by a simple, but poignant motto:

“Everything speaks.” What this pithy slogan conveys is that everything done in the presence of a customer sends either a positive or negative message. How one dresses, the expression on one’s face, the tone of one’s voice, one’s posture, and the words one uses all express one of two things—either “I am delighted you are here,” or “I’d rather be doing anything else than having to deal with you.”

“Everything speaks” is not limited to customer service. It also represents a profound truth about intimate relationships. Everything that is done in the presence of one’s partner sends a message.

What message does it send if a husband consistently comes home at 2:00 AM? What is the wife “saying” if she indifferently greets her husband when he returns from a three-day business trip? What is being communicated to the wife if her husband keeps his head buried in the newspaper while she tries to share something important?

Again, any time one is in the presence of another person, one cannot not communicate. Because loving, supporting, sharing, giving, hugging, and everything else are all forms of communication, then we can say that a relationship is, at the core, its communication. In some significant way, in fact, a relationship is its communication; conversely, communication makes up a relationship. Loving, supporting, sharing, giving, hugging, and everything else are, at the core, all communication.

The bottom line is that the quality of a couple’s communication defines the quality of their relationship. Through patterns of verbal and nonverbal communication, partners will either create an upward-spiraling victorious circle or a downward-spiraling vicious circle. Once two people appreciate this, they can purposely make it their business to flood each other with positive and powerful communication intimacy.

Revisiting Ellen and Tom

Listen to a part of the conversation I had with Ellen and Tom during their first counseling session.

Ellen: I can get on the phone and talk with my girlfriends for hours. With Tom the best I get is “Uh-huh,” “No kidding,” or my favorite, “Get to the point.”

Dr. G: So what do your girlfriends do that is so satisfying and rewarding to you?

Ellen: First of all, they take the time to talk with me. There is no hurry up. They listen and they share. Sometimes I wish I were gay.

Dr. G: Is this what you want from Tom?

Ellen: Absolutely. But it’s more than just talking to me. It’s the messages he gives that he’s really not here with me. He’s off somewhere by himself. His body is there, but I don’t feel him there.

Dr. G: What does he do?

Ellen: A million things—all day, each day. He comes home and grunts “hello” to me. Then he turns to the paper and the TV news. Then it’s a silent supper and off he goes to his office to work.

Dr. G: How do you feel about this?

Ellen: Beyond frustrated. I’m lonely. I’m starved for connection. The message I get over and over is: “There’s furniture and there’s you, all the same to me.”

Ellen dramatically described the importance of communication intimacy more poignantly than I ever could. Note how everything Tom did communicated to her, accurately or not, that she had little value for him. So, not only was she deprived of someone with whom to chat and connect, but she also received a multitude of disaffirming messages. No wonder she was “an affair waiting to happen.”

Sear This into Your Mind

- In the presence of our partner, we cannot not communicate. We always send both verbal and nonverbal messages, whether we realize it or not. So fundamental to everything you do in your relationship is communication.
- Everything communicates or speaks on two levels: (1) the content or topic of the conversation; (2) the respect and affection, or the lack thereof, that two people have for each other. Just as a person cannot not communicate, one cannot not communicate on each of these two levels whenever in the presence of another. Everything done either communicates love and respect or the opposite.
- The quality of couple communication defines the quality of the relationship. If two people want a loving, lasting relationship, they had better be mindful of the messages they send and regularly use quality communication skills.

A Potpourri of Communication Tips for the Couple

I present next a handful of sound communication tips. Both you clinicians and you couples will find them simple and straightforward. But they each require purposeful, sustained effort. Although I communicate these directly to the couple, I emphasize to you clinicians that clients often find themselves unable or unwilling to practice them. If so, this may very well indicate either underlying resentment and fear that requires your professional assistance in eradicating.

- **Be Mindful.** As already emphasized, whenever you and your partner are in each other’s presence, you always communicate the quality of your respect for, affection for, and interest in each other. You want to be careful

to not drift, thereby neglecting to communicate affirmation to your significant other. So be mindful of two things: one is those moments of truth in which you have the opportunity to communicate your love and respect; a second is to pay attention to what you do indeed communicate. Do you show interest or disinterest? Do you show patience or impatience? Do you show you are attracted or repelled? Everything you do (or not do) speaks volumes. So be mindful.

- **Adopt the 5–1 Rule.** You want to mostly communicate affirmations to your partner. At times, of course, it will be necessary to criticize things he or she does. To avoid all negative feedback would be to betray yourself. But, for every negative message you deliver, you want to be sure to purposely communicate at least five positive ones.
- **Banter.** Take time to “shoot the breeze.” Share with your partner the latest joke you’ve heard, things that happened during your day, or some juicy bit of information you’ve run across. This keeps you connected to each other by making the two of you a regular part of each other’s lives.
- **Share Your Feelings and Perspectives.** Real intimacy results when you let down your guard and share your feelings and perspectives on your world. Opening up with what goes on inside you is the ultimate compliment to your partner because it communicates trust and respect.
- **Good-byes and Hellos.** Make it a point to say good-bye to each other when you part, as well as to greet each other when you reunite. A little hug or kiss wouldn’t hurt. Again, this shows caring and respect.
- **Reserve Time.** In this busy world we inhabit, it is easy to get bogged down with life’s practical demands, often forgetting to devote time to each other. Don’t fall into this trap. Make a point to chat a few minutes each day. One couple I’ve worked with spent a few minutes together each evening after work in the sitting area of their bedroom. They instructed their kids to leave them alone while they sat and talked over a cocktail. After about a half hour, they emerged and got on with family chores.

Imagine the emotional satisfaction Ellen would have derived from Tom if he delivered to her a steady dose of these communication intimacies. Who wouldn’t? But there’s more to follow—the heavy lifting.

Probably the most important communication skills are the two discussed below. If you couples master these, you can almost guarantee that your relationship will soar. But be forewarned; they are difficult to master, so be sure to turn to your couples therapist if and when you get stuck.

Purposeful Listening. Imagine a situation in which you could not get sufficient air to breathe, say by choking on a piece of meat or being swept under water by a riptide. Nothing else would matter to you except catching your breath.

Being heard and understood is the psychological equivalent of air. It nourishes the heart. It makes us feel important to and loved by another. All told, being listened to is the deepest longing of the human spirit.

But there is listening and there is purposeful listening. Many times people feign listening. They let their partner rattle on while attending elsewhere. Or, while their partner is expressing something, they busy themselves formulating their rebuttal.

Purposeful listening means, first of all, being fully present and attentive to your partner's experience. It means being fully dedicated to knowing and understanding your partner's thoughts and feelings without exercising judgment of any sort. To paraphrase Stephen Covey, it means listening to your partner's ideas with your mind, while listening to his or her feelings with your heart.

In practice, purposeful listening is a feedback loop whereby you fully absorb your partner's message and then honor him or her by acknowledging that you've really heard. It comes in five levels, from least to most powerful.

1. Listening, absorbing, and then delivering an appropriate exclamation, such as "Wow," "Oh, my," or "Unbelievable."
2. Listening, absorbing, and then repeating back verbatim what your partner just said.
3. Listening, absorbing, and then paraphrasing in your own words the ideas your partner just communicated.
4. Listening, absorbing, and reflecting in your own words your partner's feelings.
5. Listening, absorbing, and both paraphrasing your partner's ideas and reflecting his or her feelings.

Purposeful listening takes practice. As you practice, remember three rules of thumb. First, you must intend to absorb what your partner thinks and feels without judgment. Second, you must inhibit your tendency to hear things through your own mental filters, as these will prohibit you from really tuning into your partner's message. Third, you must express to your partner your acknowledgment and/or understanding of his or her experience before you take your turn to speak. Just imagine the power to enrich your partner's spirit, build his or her trust, and bind your connection by regularly doing this.

Straight Arrow Speaking. One of the unfortunate things people often do to damage their relationships is to withhold speaking their whole and complete truth to their partners. I'm not suggesting that you prattle on about everything that comes into your mind or that you compulsively say things that would needlessly do damage to your partner. What I'm referring to here is keeping to yourself important things that need to be said. When we withhold the truth about our feelings, values, or opinions, we not only cheat ourselves, but we cheat our partners as well.

Many of us do this. Sometimes it's because we're holding on to some resentment. Other times it's because of fear—fear of disapproval, fear of hurting the other's feelings, fear of retribution, or fear of conflict. It behooves us, of course, to get over these resentments and fears so that we can speak our truth.

What are the negative consequences of not speaking straight arrow? For one, we often build resentment, eventually blowing up because of the accumulation of frustration and hurt. Two, we easily let the withheld feelings and opinions color new encounters, so that our perceptions and reactions about these interactions are contaminated by those preexisting ones. Third, we can become emotionally inhibited because we haven't addressed and resolved issues. Fourth, we invite our partner to respond with resentment in kind, thus creating the dreaded vicious circle.

Here are some tips to help you speak straight arrow to your partner.

1. Rid yourself of your resentment and/or fear. These feelings will not only hold you back from communicating openly and honestly, but they will also contaminate your ability to speak effectively when you do. You might want to review Chapters 3 through 6 to refresh yourself on how to rid yourself of these contaminating emotions.
2. Take the right attitude. By this I mean to speak straight arrow from a place of compassion for your partner. That is, speak with the intention of being of service to your partner and/or to your relationship. Do not succumb to the temptation to settle old scores or seek vengeance.
3. Figure out your goal in holding the straight arrow conversation. What do you want to happen? What do you want for the other person? What's your goal for the relationship? Becoming mindful of these things helps you stay focused and increases your chances of a successful outcome.
4. Figure out what needs to be said and how to say it. This step has three parts: (1) determine what you need to say; (2) anticipate how your partner will react; and (3) carefully formulate how to express your truth to help your partner non-defensively hear you.
5. Determine where and when will be the most fruitful time to hold this conversation. Then do it, being willing to do purposeful listening on your part as well.

THE COUPLE COMMUNICATION WORKSHOP

Here are three exercises that can help any couple improve the quality of their couple communication. Couples, please do these exercises thoughtfully, and then follow through mindfully and purposely. Therapist, your expertise may be especially useful in Exercises 2 and 3.

Exercise 1—Becoming Mindful. Remember that you can never not communicate. So be mindful of the moments when you are in the presence of your partner. At these times, you are going to communicate either love and respect or indifference and disrespect. Being mindful of these moments of truth gives you the opportunity to make intelligent choices as to which of these messages you wish to communicate to your partner.

Review a typical day starting from when you first awake to when you fall asleep at night. List those “moments of truth” when you typically cross paths with your partner. Then, star the ones in which you want to take special care to communicate positive messages to your partner and specifically what you will do to communicate these positive messages.

Moments of Truth

Communication Commitment

Exercise 2—Eliminate Negative Speaking. Delivering negative messages has the potential to do severe damage to your relationship. You want to become acutely mindful of when and how you deliver these messages. Reflect on your communication style. Ask for feedback from your partner regarding your habits of mindless negative communication. Armed with this information, you can purposely work to habituate the opposite.

My Negative Speaking

Alternative

Exercise 3—Skill Building. From the list of communication skills listed below, check the ones you think you would be wise to improve on. Then think about actions to take to actually do them, including soliciting the expertise of a competent couples therapist.

<i>Skills</i>	<i>Strategy</i>
_____ The 5-1 rule	
_____ Banter	

- _____ Share Feelings/Perspectives
 - _____ Good-byes and Hellos
 - _____ Reserve Time
 - _____ Purposeful Listening
 - _____ Speak Your Truth
-

PHYSICAL INTIMACY

Think about it. Virtually everything a couple does together, they also do with other people, except for one thing—their sex life. Their sex life is a unique thing just between the two of them. It is special. It separates their relationship from any other relationship they may individually or collectively have.

In some real way, the quality of a couple's sex life defines the quality of their relationship. At one and the same time, it is a vehicle to express their deep love and a very valuable tool to keep their connection alive and vibrant.

Once More with Ellen and Tom

Let's pick up the conversation with Ellen a little later in her and Tom's first couples session.

Ellen: On top of all the other stuff, I hardly ever get laid.

Dr. G: Well, is that frustrating for you just because you are deprived of good ol' sex or do you see it as another deprivation of an intimate connection with your husband?

Ellen: Actually both. I am a highly sexual person. I like sex. But it's deeper than that. Physical frustration is bad enough, but the emotional frustration is even worse.

Dr. G: How so?

Ellen: How am I supposed to interpret his lack of interest? That he doesn't love me or find me attractive? I not only feel sexually frustrated, but I'm beginning to doubt that he even cares about me at all.

Dr. G: Anything else?

Ellen: Yeah. I'm beginning to doubt myself. I'm losing my self-confidence.

It is clear from Ellen's comments that a couple's sex life has layers. In addition to the actual sexual experience, there is much communicated to each other on a deeper level. Sex can communicate love and attraction or indifference and aversion. The couple's physical intimacy has the potential to add greatly to their connection to each other, but it also has the potential to do severe damage.

Sear This into Your Mind

There are all kinds of sexual styles. Some couples prefer frequent sex, while others are satisfied with relatively little. Some couples are highly adventurous, experimenting with all sorts of playful, provocative things, while others are more conservative. Some couples schedule their physical intimacy, while others prefer spontaneity. Although no style is right or wrong, I do want to strongly assert three points, all of which I encourage both the clinician and the couple to sear into their minds.

- Physical intimacy can serve to deeply bind two people together. It has the capacity to enhance love and make a relationship stronger. It can connect a couple together in ways that nothing else can.
- Good sex in the bedroom depends so much on the quality of a couple's relationship outside the bedroom. In other words, good sex generally begins with a good relationship. The opposite is also true; problems in a relationship often translate into problems in the bedroom. So all the other strategies in this book can enhance a couple's sexual relationship.
- Because a couple's sex life has such a powerful potential for making their relationship loving and lasting, it is important for them to pay close attention to it. They would be wise to purposely plan their sex life—talk about it; prepare for it; explore it; look forward to it; expand it without barriers, so long as they both agree. Above all, I urge them to not leave it to chance.

A Tip Especially for Him

Please be aware that sexuality is a whole lot different for women than for men. While most women enjoy sex, sex for women is critically tied to the quality of their relationships. That is, the more a woman feels safe, secure, and connected to her partner, the more sexually interested and adventuresome she tends to be.

Too many men ignore their wives or are critical of them during the day, but then expect them to be sexually responsive at night. For women, foreplay begins outside the bedroom—through the regular interactions that are a part of their ongoing relationships. The best advice I can offer the guys is to be a sweetheart!

A Tip Especially for Her

Please be aware that a man is most likely a highly charged sexual being. Worse, his ego may very well be connected to his ability to perform sexually. This is not only so with regard to achieving an erection, but also in succeeding to stimulate your interest and arousal. So, unlike the woman, what goes on in the bedroom greatly affects what goes on with him outside the bedroom.

Now I know that at times the woman may be tired. Or sometimes she just doesn't feel like it. Or she may feel crunched with an endless list of chores. It's certainly easy to find reasons to not have sex. But ladies would be wise to understand that the more they act sexy and sexual, the more appreciative and affectionate their man will likely be toward them outside the bedroom. The advice I give them is to be a tigress!

A Potpourri of Tips for Both Him and Her

If, dear reader, I have convinced you of the value of physical intimacy to relationship happiness, then it follows that two people will want to pay special attention to their sex life. In this spirit, here, in no particular order, is a potpourri of ideas to help couples keep their sex life alive and exciting.

- **Sex on Purpose.** Don't fall victim to the myth that sex has to be spontaneous, that it should only happen when two people get the urge at the same time. Especially if they've been mated for years and have busy lives, it is unlikely that the two of them will spontaneously respond like they did when younger.

Instead, a couple would be wise to purposely manage their sex life. Talk about it, schedule it, prepare for it, look forward to it, and do it. Have a regular sex date each week. Whatever you do, you don't want to leave it to chance. You want to purposely keep physically connected.

- **Be Generous.** It is unlikely that two people will always be interested at the same time. While of course reserving the right to decline sex, each partner will want to understand that willingly participating in physical intimacy, even when not passionate, is a loving act. They will want to be willing to generously give.

One couple I worked with had a phrase they used to express sexual generosity. When one of them was interested but the other was not, the uninterested one would say, "I'm there for you." This communicated to the interested party that he or she was loved, and that the uninterested party would be glad to be lovingly intimate as an expression of that love. They not only had a vibrant sex life but, more important, felt deeply connected to each other.

- **Be Adventurous.** Think of sex as adult play. Explore ways to add spice to your love life. Some couples talk about and agree on "wild and crazy" adventures, while others take turns surprising each other. When two people are loving and trusting, the sky's the limit.

Here are a few ideas couples might want to consider that can bring adventure into their bedroom. Once they make sure that they both agree, so there is no sense of pressure or coercion, they will want to approach these with an attitude of playfulness.

- Try different sexual positions.
- Wear sexy outfits.
- Do roleplaying games stimulated by your sexual fantasies.
- Enhance sex play with sex toys, lotions, and/or feathers.
- Play “wild sexual dare” games.
- Experiment with sexual massage.
- Experiment with light bondage.
- Undress before your partner in provocative ways.

There are tons of ideas on how to spice up a couple’s sex life in tasteful books available on the Internet or in local bookstores. Or, two people could each independently generate five novel things they might like to add to their sexual repertoire. Regardless, the wise couple takes pains to be adventurous.

- **Accentuate the Love Nest.** While there hopefully is much more to a couple’s life than physical intimacy, their bedroom is perhaps the most important room in their house. Accentuating this love nest with proper lighting, music, sexy sheets, candles, massage oils, aromatic scents, and even mirrors does wonders.
- **Erotic Banter.** In general, sex is best when two people feel loved and attractive. A steady diet of “I love you,” “You look great,” and “Hi, Sexy” goes a long way to creating the right mood. Beyond that, sexy talk can be quite arousing for many people. So, to the degree that two people feel comfortable talking “dirty” to each other before, during, and after being intimate, that’s the degree to which they can connect.
- **Take Time.** Remember that sex is much more than intercourse. Guys especially need to hear that. Smart couples take plenty of time to touch, caress, and fondle. They tease each other. They don’t forget oral sex. They discontinue intercourse at times to play some more before resuming. And, by the way, after they’ve finished, they take time to lovingly hold each other before going back to the TV or to sleep.
- **Attitude Is Everything.** Tons of research has shown that the most important sex organ is above the neck, not below the belt. The mind is the central pleasure center, being primarily responsible for the experience of sexual pleasure. The brain signals the genitals how to respond, determining whether he becomes erect and whether she becomes lubricated.

It obviously follows that negative thoughts will kill sexuality. Thoughts like the ones below will turn anyone off, put one’s mind elsewhere, and/or make a person nervous:

- “This used to feel so much better.”
- “I’m so fat and unattractive.”
- “I wonder if I’ll be able to orgasm.”

- “I really don’t have time for this.”

The key to having good, satisfying sex is to hold the right mindset. It is important to focus on the positive and the provocative. Be aware of negative thoughts so one can challenge and replace them with more positive, sexually enhancing ones (see Chapter 3). This allows a person to focus on the moment and just enjoy himself or herself.

- **Be Faithful.** I have made the point that physical intimacy is a special opportunity for two people to connect. It binds two people together. Being faithful is the right thing to do because it fulfills a sacred promise, one made to another. But it’s also smart. To break one’s word and be unfaithful can do such damage to trust that it may not be repairable.

THE PHYSICAL INTIMACY WORKSHOP

This workshop will help you couples mindfully increase the quality of both your sex life and your relationship in general. I suggest that you and your partner separately do the first two exercises. When finished, discuss what you have written. Then, in Exercise 3, decide together what changes you both would like to make to your love life.

Exercise 1—Eliminating Negative Beliefs. Negative thinking will not only destroy your sexual enjoyment, but your couple connection as well. Therefore, identify below any negative thoughts you have that detract from your desire for and enjoyment of sex with your partner. These can be about you and your body, your partner and his or her body, your life in general, or about sex itself. Then, substitute replacement beliefs you can energetically and frequently rehearse in order to enhance your ability to focus on your own and your partner’s pleasure.

Negative Beliefs

Replacement Beliefs

Exercise 2—Sexual Inventory. Getting the results you want has to do with closing the gap between where you are and where you want to be. Taking a sexual inventory can reveal this gap and start you on the way to making your couple sex life more passionate and loving. Spend quality time answering the following questions. You might also want to refer to the tips presented earlier to

help stimulate your thinking. Remember that honesty is your friend. Let it fly. Do not censure yourself.

- What do you like about your sex life? What turns you on? What is now working that you want to continue?
- What is missing in your sex life that you would like to add? What do you two do only occasionally that you'd like to do more frequently?
- What needs some work? What do you want to change? What may need a major overhaul?
- Other thoughts?

Exercise 3—Game Planning. With the foregoing information in hand, sit together as a couple and agree to what you two will do to spice up your sex life. Remember how important this is to your couple happiness. Follow through and have a ball.

INTENSIFIERS

I trust that in both the Communication Intimacy and the Physical Intimacy Workshops couples developed a powerful set of strategies to help their relationship be more loving and lasting. Here I offer three general strategies to further intensify a couple's ability to engage each other with frequent, passionate intimacy.

Frequently Express Admiration and Appreciation

A lack of validating messages, frequent criticism, displays of annoyance, and negative body language have all been shown in the literature to be highly predictive of divorce. To the contrary, frequent expressions of genuine admiration and appreciation make a person feel loved and cherished. These bind people together.

To enhance a couple's ability to be frequent and passionate in their intimacy, each partner would be wise to purposely express affection, admiration, and appreciation to the other at least once a day. They want to make this a habit. Not only will the partner feel more loved and cherished, but he or she will likely reciprocate in kind.

Write a Testimonial

It's easy to get caught up in the minutia of life. By being so busy, people often fail to take the time to pause, savor, and appreciate the more important things. It's like being on a fast-moving treadmill, focusing on keeping up lest we fall on

our faces. Of course, neglecting to devote time and energy to one's significant other can easily be interpreted as a lack of interest or love.

At least once a year, I recommend that each person take the time to write a testimonial to summarize the positive impact the partner has on his or her life. Communicate how grateful you are for your partner. Let him or her know how he or she has enriched your life. Take the time to do this thoughtfully. Make it about one page in length. Have it framed or laminated. Read it slowly and with conviction to the partner before giving him or her a copy to keep. Let the partner respond if he or she wishes. Conclude by reminiscing about the past year, especially with regard to how being together has positively impacted the quality of your life.

Keep Alive Unconditional Self-Acceptance

People who unconditionally accept themselves have the best chance of creating a loving, lasting relationship. Both research and just plain common sense tell us that people with Unconditional Self-Acceptance are more caring, comfortable being close, and sensitive to their partner's moods. They also have less anxiety over their relationship, are less likely to take offense, and are less frequently defensive. All in all, they are free to be frequently and passionately intimate.

The lesson to be learned here is that a person would be wise to continually work to operate from a position of Unconditional Self-Acceptance. Not only will this give greater peace of mind, but one will also be a more satisfying mate to one's partner. Rather than repeat myself here, I refer the reader back to Chapter 5 for a refresher in how to achieve this wonderful state.

GOING FORWARD

When two people behave verbally and sexually intimately, they most likely stay close and satisfied. With regard to communication intimacy, they remember that communicating with their partner not only serves to share information, but also to say, "I care about and respect you." So they talk frequently with each other.

Additionally, a couple's physical intimacy is something special just between the two of them. This special feature of their relationship provides a wonderful avenue to bind them together and to express their deepest levels of trust and caring. They take special care to not neglect their sex life. They pay mindful attention to it—plan for it, enrich it with both affection and adventure, look forward to it, and fully express their caring for each other through it.

It is my deepest wish that you, dear reader, heed the messages of this chapter. What I have shared has helped untold numbers of couples experience the relationship of their dreams. I know this applies to you as well. Go for it.

Win-Win Conflict Resolution

I get better results in my relationships by cooperating interdependently than by competing independently.

—Stephen R. Covey

It is not unusual for a couple to have disagreements. What would indeed be unusual would be for two people to have such identical values, perspectives, and opinions that they never disagreed.

If we start from the proposition that partners will at times have disagreements, it follows that how they resolve their disagreements will be critical to the health of their relationship. You see, every disagreement will have a resolution of one kind or another. A couple will want to make sure that the resolution does not leave lingering hurt or resentment in one or both of them. That is how trust erodes, love dwindles, and connection fades.

Think of disagreements as having four possible outcomes.

1. One is for the outcome to be good for the first of two people, but not for the second. We call this win-lose. The first person gets his or her way, but the partner is thwarted. The danger from win-lose is that, while person one may feel good about how things turned out, person two might not. The defeated person may feel hurt, slighted, or resentful. And this second person could very well carry these poisonous feelings into other aspects of the relationship or to the next disagreement, possibly leading to disastrous results.
2. A second resolution is for the outcome to benefit partner two but not partner one. This is lose-win in that the second person prevails while the first loses. This mirrors the first outcome, except for the fact that the first person may very well end up feeling upset instead of the partner and carry this upset into future interactions.
3. A third possibility is for the outcome to be bad for both people. Both lose. This often happens when two people get so stubborn that neither

person is willing to give in. Both can end up with bad feelings that further contaminate their relationship.

4. The fourth outcome is when both people work hard to find a resolution that works for both of them. There are no losers—win-win. By working cooperatively, they see to it that neither of them leaves the disagreement feeling defeated. They strive to find an outcome that is good for both of them.

It is obvious that the fourth resolution is by far the most desirable. As opposed to the first three, there are no losers, no chance for ill will, no danger of a downward-spiraling vicious circle. In this chapter, I will lead the reader through the four-part win-win method for resolving all disagreements. But first I want to share a case example.

THE CASE OF RUSS AND PATTI

At the risk of looking narcissistic, I would like to use my wife Patti and myself as an example of a couple who has learned to successfully apply win-win conflict resolution to disagreements. We are fortunate in that we have few conflicts of any consequence. Yet on occasion we have had disagreements with which we have had to contend. I want to share one of these.

When we first got together almost 30 years ago, I owned my own residence. It perfectly fit my needs. It was a condominium, which meant I had absolutely no yard work, no snow shoveling, and no outside maintenance. Further, it was only blocks from a golf course, something very important to me then as my golf interest bordered on an addiction. Most important to me, its modern architecture perfectly suited my taste.

As much as this residence suited me, it most certainly was not Patti's cup of tea. She spent her formative years in the Caribbean and lived for many years in a log cabin on a sprawling farm outside Charlottesville. She reveled in her rustic privacy. She could leave her front door open all day for her dogs to go in and out, experience the sights and sounds of nature at any time day or night, and feel safe in her seclusion. She loved it.

When we married, it only made sense for her to move into my condominium as I owned and she rented. Although she willingly did so, she never felt content there. She understandably did not like our neighbors living on the other side of our walls, the need to put our dogs on leashes to walk them, and the lack of privacy.

While Patti lobbied to move to a new home that better suited her, I resisted. Discussions went back and forth. Tied to each getting our own way, we both strived to convince the other of the validity of our own positions. We each operated from a win-lose position.

I distinctly remember the day of our breakthrough and I give Patti full credit. With a twinkle in her eyes, she approached me and asked: "Don't you do couples counseling?" Acknowledging that I indeed did, she suggested that I share with her what I do with couples when they find themselves at such loggerheads. She wondered if we could use the same tools.

The long and the short of it was that, after I described the win-win conflict resolution process, we used it. What happened was that by listening carefully to what amounted to a win for each of us and by working together to find a solution in which both of us could win, we achieved a perfect solution neither of us envisioned.

By putting my arguments aside and truly listening to what Patti wanted, I discovered that she liked the design and décor of our condominium, but she didn't like "apartment living." She wanted bucolic privacy. When she listened to me, she found that I could easily live in a single-dwelling home relatively isolated from other people. I just didn't want to live in a rustic dwelling. So we agreed for Patti to house search with these agreed-upon, win-win guidelines: the house we would purchase would be of modern design, but be in a wooded, spacious lot that afforded some degree of privacy and had access to nature.

Armed with these guidelines, Patti began house hunting. I am happy to report that after about a year of diligent searching, she found the exact house that fit both our needs. It rests on three and a half wooded acres with no other dwelling visible when leaves are on the trees. There is a stream that runs through our property, trails to walk through the woods, and deer and other wildlife in abundant supply. Most important to me, the house has the modern features I like, most notably floor-to-ceiling windows in the living room. This was truly a win-win solution to our conflict.

What You Can Learn from Us

It was not by accident that Patti and I worked out this conflict. We both committed to finding a win-win solution in which neither of us would lose. And we used the win-win process to solve two other major issues with similar success. With all three of these issues, we not only found a suitable resolution, but we deepened our bond in the process. If we can do it, anyone can.

Now let me describe the four-step process that I teach to most couples who face seemingly intractable and often contentious conflicts. It is fairly simple and straightforward, yet not always easy to pull off. This is so because it requires a different mindset than most bring to disagreements. In doing so, I want to acknowledge the work of Stephen Covey, who developed a major portion of what is to follow in his wonderful book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. I give him full credit.

Step One—Eliminate Relationship Disturbance. It is very difficult for any two people to work cooperatively when one or both harbor a relationship disturbance. How willing can one be to patiently listen to the partner when one feels angry? How motivated can a person be to work cooperatively with their partner to find a win-win when carrying hurt?

Clearly, a first ingredient to win-win conflict resolution is to get rid of hurt and anger, fear and insecurity, and/or low frustration tolerance. All of these will drive winning or losing postures, not win-win. Chapters 3 through 6 have shown you how to get rid of these contaminants, so anyone mired in relationship disturbance will want to go back and use these if needed.

Step Two—Adopt a Win-Win Posture. Adopting a win-win posture means that a person commits to finding a resolution to a disagreement that works for both people. He or she decides to never agree to a solution where he or she wins but the partner loses. This person also makes sure to not agree to a solution where the partner wins and he or she loses. This person commits to finding a solution in which both parties win and neither loses.

Step Three—Purposeful Listening. To find a win-win solution, two people must purposely listen to each other. Each of them presumably already knows what is a win for themselves. They also need to know what is a win for their partner. Buttressed with this information, they are now poised to find a win-win solution to their disagreement.

As described in Chapter 10, purposeful listening requires two people to listen to each other without judgment or censorship. The way I describe it to my couples is for them to make themselves invisible. There is no agreeing or disagreeing, only understanding. That is, listen to exactly what the partner wants without the intrusion of one's own judgments. Once the two of them are equipped with the information this nonjudgmental listening provides, they are now equipped to find a win-win resolution to their disagreement.

Step Four—Synergistic Brainstorming. Without emotional contamination, with the win-win mindset, and fully understanding what is a win for both, a couple is now primed to successfully find a workable solution to their disagreement. What they do in Step Four is simply let ideas fly, brainstorming solutions until they find one that satisfies both of them.

Sear This into Your Mind

To pull together all of what has been said so far, sear the following five points into your mind.

- All couples have disagreements. It is impossible to avoid them. It is how they handle them that will make or break their relationship.

- It is not the presence of the difference or disagreement that causes problems for couples. As we have previously seen, it is (1) when people over-react emotionally to their disagreement and (2) when people resolve their disagreements in a way that causes a loss for one or both of the partners. These resolutions can leave a bad taste in one or both parties' mouths, which in turn tends to negatively color future interactions.
- There are four ways to resolve conflicts. The first three have the potential to lead to further trouble down the line. These include: (1) win-lose; (2) lose-win; (3) lose-lose; (4) win-win.
- Two people will want to strive for a win-win solution whenever they have a disagreement or conflict of any consequence. To do this, they will want to follow the four-step win-win conflict resolution process: (1) eliminate emotional contamination; (2) adopt a win-win posture; (3) purposely listen to each other; (4) brainstorm together until they find a win-win solution.
- Be sure to keep the win-win posture alive as a relationship principle. That is, never force a win for yourself and a loss for one's partner. Also, never sacrifice by giving up a win for yourself for a win for the partner. Both of these have the potential for hurt and anger, which will end up a loss for both people down the line.

THE WIN-WIN CONFLICT RESOLUTION WORKSHOP

Now is the opportunity, dear couple, to apply the four-step win-win conflict resolution process to your relationship. Remember that all the ideas and tools in this chapter will be useless without action. So please work your way through these four steps. Remember that the more you put into this workshop, the more you will get out of it.

Preliminary Step: Identifying Problems

I once consulted with a medium-sized business whose revenues had steadily declined over the previous years. My charge was to help them figure out what accounted for their slow demise and what could be done to turn it around.

When I met with this company's fifteen-person management team, I started by splitting them into three five-person groups with the assignment for each group to identify what they thought were the top five problems that held the company back from success. Once we reassembled, I listed on a flip chart the seven problems they collectively identified. Then, going down the problems one by one, I asked the group how long each of these had existed. Surprisingly, they in unison said to each: "Forever."

Next came the clincher. I asked them a simple but provocative question: “What’s wrong with this picture?” They sat there, no one answering, until I said to them in as dramatic a tone as I could muster:

“First, these problems hold your business back from success. Second, they’ve existed for a long, long time. Third, you’ve known about them all along. Fourth, you’re the leaders of this company. Fifth, you’ve done nothing to fix them.”

Their stunned looks told me I hit the mark. What they came to realize was that they had shirked their responsibility as company leaders to be on the forefront of problem identification and problem solving. In other words, as leaders, they failed in their responsibility to (1) regularly identify their business problems and (2) decisively and permanently act to solve them.

That is exactly what I coached them to do the rest of the day. Together, with my guidance, they worked to find workable solutions to each of their seven major problems. To cap off the day, I helped them to devise strategies to build problem identification and solving into their yearly routine (e.g., quarterly management meetings and an annual retreat devoted solely to problem solving).

I find this problem identification and resolution process extremely valuable for couples as well. Like with this business, couples often ignore, avoid, or refuse to address the problems they face. Perhaps they are afraid to admit they have problems. Maybe there is a fear of conflict. Possibly there is concern that the problems will split them apart. Nevertheless, by not squarely facing their problems, couples often block themselves from experiencing the quality relationship they want.

I want to strongly recommend the following. You and your partner set aside a regular, private time (say, once a month) to identify the problems you currently face as a couple. Rather than being afraid of them, take the attitude that identifying them gives you the opportunity to rid them from your relationship once and for all. In this spirit, throw yourself into the exercise below.

Preliminary Step Exercise—Problem Identification. List below the problems or conflicts you have in your relationship that interfere with your harmony and happiness. These can be either minor or significant, be immediately pressing or long-standing, or concern only one or both of you. Regardless, for each problem, note the negative impact of it on your relationship. You can then use the four-step process to follow to resolve them one at a time.

Problem

Impact on Relationship

Step One: Eliminate Relationship Disturbances

Before trying to resolve your couple conflict, you would be wise to first get rid of any relationship disturbances you may have about them. Fortunately, Patti and I had no anger, hurt, or fear about our housing conflict, so we could zip right past this step.

Other couples are often not so lucky. Many people harbor feelings of anger, resentment, and/or hurt about the conflicts. These make it very difficult to genuinely work together toward a win-win solution. When two people harbor these feelings, they typically spend more time debating and arguing than listening and cooperating. They tend to be hell-bent for leather to win their point rather than working together in the search for a mutual win.

Others bring anxiety and insecurity to their conflict resolution endeavor. Because of fears of disapproval or rejection, perhaps growing out of low self-esteem, they often sacrifice what they want in favor of what their partner wants. They take an “I’ll lose so you can win” posture. The trouble with this, as discussed earlier, is that the sacrificer can easily become resentful about the unfairness or unevenness of the resolution.

Still others bring low frustration tolerance to their conflicts. Being intolerant of the discomfort, they avoid the conflict at all costs. To them, any resolution is better than facing the conflict, so they easily give in to maintain their tranquility. Out of fear or discomfort, they adopt the lose position, but they set themselves up for more frustration down the line.

If you find yourself or your partner trapped in one of these patterns, you will have a difficult time with the next three conflict resolution steps. I strongly urge you to return to Chapters 4, 5, and/or 6. Go to the one that most fits your feelings. Work these emotional contaminants through and then pick up here when you’ve finished. To help you choose properly, do the following exercise.

Step One Exercise—Eliminate Relationship Disturbance. List the disagreements or conflicts you currently have in your relationship, along with any adverse emotional reactions you and your partner may have. Look especially for hurt, anger, resentment, fear, and insecurity. Then detail your plan to eliminate these win-win conflict resolution-defeating emotions.

Disagreements

Emotional Reactions

Mine

My Partner’s

- 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
-

Plan To Eliminate Your Relationship Disturbances: _____

Step Two: Adopt the Win-Win Principle

The win-win principle is a mindset, not a technique or tool. Win-win means to dedicate yourselves to finding solutions to disagreements in such a way that there is mutual satisfaction.

Instead of asking, “How do I get my way?” you take the stance: “How can we both get what we want?” The ultimate is to make the following commitment: “I will not settle for an outcome in which I lose, but I also will not settle for an outcome that ends with my partner losing. I will work to find a solution that works for both of us, no matter how long it takes.”

Remember that this is exactly what Patti and I did when we were stymied with our housing conflict. We committed to both of us being happy with regard to where we lived. Can you also make this win-win commitment? I urge you to. If you are willing, please complete the following exercise.

Step Two Exercise—Commitment to Win-Win. In order to find a win-win solution to your conflict, you need to commit to the win-win principle. If you are willing, please sign the following win-win commitment below. Note that you could broaden your scope and commit to this principle as a way to conduct your relationship in general, not just with regard to the specific disagreement or conflict in question.

I, _____, hereby commit to resolving this current conflict and all future relationship disagreements from the win-win principle. I will only agree to a solution that is a win for both me and for my partner. I will settle for nothing less.

Signature

Date

Step Three: Purposeful Listening

Step three is where you both purposely listen to each other so that you have a deep understanding of each other's win. Knowing what your partner wants, along with knowing what you want, arms you with the information you need to avidly search for a win-win solution.

I discovered something remarkable when I gave up advocating my own position and listened to Patti. I found that she actually liked my condominium. What she didn't like was the location. As unbelievable as this sounds, by not listening to her, I had assumed she wanted to live in a rustic house stocked only with early American furniture.

Step Three Exercise—Purposeful Listening. Your task here is to sit together and purposely listen to what is a win for each of you. Remember to be totally nonjudgmental. Your goal is to just get it. Do not advocate, argue, or lobby. You each want to walk away from this step with an in-depth understanding of what your partner wants. Once finished, record what you have learned is a win for both of you.

My win: _____

My partner's win: _____

Step Four: Synergistic Brainstorming

Synergy does not mean compromise. Compromise is when you each give up something of value in order to meet somewhere in the middle. You equally share the pain. To the contrary, synergy is when you keep your minds open to what could be a win for both of you. You bounce ideas off each other. You hang in there until you produce something that neither of you could have produced alone. You keep generating ideas until you find one that is a win-win.

Patti and I had it easy with our disagreement. Once we fully heard and understood each other's win, finding the win-win solution was a snap. You may find this to be so for you as well. If not, don't fret. You will find one, so long as you do not get upset, keep alive the win-win principle, and keep at it.

Step Four Exercise—Brainstorming. As you brainstorm ideas for your win-win solution, remember to keep alive the win-win principle. Keep throwing out ideas until you find a solution you both feel good about, listening purposely to the other person and openly expressing how you feel about and perceive the proposals.

Your Win

Your Partner's Win

Win-Win Solution

INTENSIFIERS

In addition to Patti's and my successes, I've helped scores of couples successfully navigate through this win-win process. You can too. I promise. To deepen your win-win conflict resolution abilities, you might also want to hone the following three intensifiers.

Schedule Problem-Solving Meetings

I encourage you to schedule regular couple meetings whose agenda it is to identify and resolve disagreements. I've known some couples to meet an hour a week, others each month. These meetings provide not only an excellent opportunity to resolve the more important issues in your relationship life, but they also serve to prevent differences or disagreements from festering over long periods of time whereby hurt and resentment can build.

When you hold your couple meetings, follow three ground rules. One, do not turn these into a complaint session; they are for problem identification and problem solving. Two, restate to each other your commitment to the win-win principle. Three, listen, listen, listen. In other words, be more committed to hearing and understanding your partner than in selling your point of view.

Think Breakthrough

Many people approach relationship problems as catastrophes. That is, they view their couple disagreements as horrors, things to be avoided at all costs. Moreover, they often get caught in the trap of deeming themselves, the other person, or the relationship itself worthless. It goes without saying that this breakdown mindset does not lend itself to constructive problem solving.

In breakthrough thinking, you look on your relationship problems as opportunities to work together to achieve new levels of closeness and intimacy. The questions a breakthrough thinker asks are: What are the possibilities for a new, long range, win-win solution to this problem? What can I or we learn that will help us be more intimate and close together? What opportunity exists in this disagreement to show love and respect to my partner?

Couples who adopt the breakthrough mentality may still not like to experience relationship problems, but they don't fear or avoid them. To the contrary, they welcome them as opportunities for win-win breakthroughs. You can approach your inevitable differences and disagreements this way too.

Listen, Listen, Listen

As emphasized in Chapter 10, "Frequent, Passionate Intimacy," listening is a profoundly important couple skill. And as pointed out in this chapter, it is an essential part of win-win conflict resolution. Beyond problem solving, remember that listening serves to communicate caring and respect for your partner. So you can hardly listen too much. Practice it daily and see the results in your partner's relationship satisfaction.

GOING FORWARD

Win-win conflict resolution is a cognitive behavioral skill that can serve your relationship well. Starting from the premise that you will indeed have disagreements and even conflicts, you cannot only resolve these issues but also draw closer together as a couple. Try it, you'll like it.

If you have worked your way through all four of the strategies to build relationship harmony and happiness—Relentless and Intelligent Giving; Commitment to the Couple; Frequent, Passionate Intimacy; Win-Win Conflict Resolution—hearty congratulations. If so, be sure to go on to Chapter 12. It provides you with powerful strategies to purposely sustain the couple gains you've made. Don't ignore that chapter.

Congratulations, too, if you've jumped straight to the skills of Win-Win Conflict Resolution. You can, if you want, move to the other strategies to further deepen the quality of your relationship. I also urge you to not put this book away until you've mastered Chapter 12.

Remember that everything in *The Couples Therapy Companion* is designed to show you how to create and sustain the relationship of your dreams. Take note, though, that no matter how brilliant these ideas and strategies may be, in the last analysis it's up to you. So, use them mindfully, with purpose, and with passion.

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PART III

Following Through to Success

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Purposely Sustaining Momentum

The great end in life is not knowledge but action.

—Thomas Henry Huxley

Think about it. With regard to our most important life's endeavors, wouldn't we be wise to devote years of consistent, focused energy and effort?

Take raising our children. If responsible, we parents take advantage of the daily opportunities to help them grow healthy bodies, solid personalities, and strong characters. We don't neglect them until they become seniors in high school and then try to cram wisdom into them in one year. We do it from the cradle onward.

Isn't this also true for our careers? We spend years in school preparing for our life's work, and we then make consistent efforts to move up the ladder of success. How about building our nest egg so that we can live comfortably in retirement? To accomplish this, we must put money away month after month for many, many years. What about our health? The wisest of us consistently adopt sensible eating habits, exercise regularly, and keep our body refreshed throughout our lifetime in order to stay vital and active.

For each of these, we must start early and work hard for years to produce the results we want. Much like a garden, we can't just throw seeds into the ground and expect flowers to blossom in a few days. We must plant the seeds, water and fertilize the ground, and till the soil over time until we can finally savor the bounty of our yield.

What disappoints me more than anything else in my clinical practice is when couples do not follow through in using the insights, concepts, and strategies they worked hard to acquire during therapy once their treatment ends. Despite my admonishment that they need to keep alive what they learned, some couples (thankfully not all) discontinue their efforts and quickly slide back into their old, dysfunctional ways. These are the couples who later return to my office with a, "We're baaaack."

Let me describe a demonstration I often do in my public seminars. Holding a pencil in the palm of my hand, I instruct a volunteer from the audience to “try to take the pencil from my hand.”

Invariably this person snatches the pencil, as if I will pull it away at the last moment as a trick. After laughter subsides from the onlookers, I ask, “Did he follow my instruction?” Most say, “Yes.” But a few get the point and say, “No, you said, ‘try,’ not ‘take it.’” I then turn again to the volunteer and repeat the instruction as before: “Try to take the pencil from my hand.” This time the person gets it and goes through all kinds of gyrations to demonstrate trying without taking it.

I then say to the audience: “See. Nothing happens with trying. There is no change. No results.” My final instruction to the volunteer is to once again “take the pencil from my hand.” This time the person actually takes it. To conclude, I make the following two points.

1. The only thing that matters in life is producing desired, valued results. This applies to everything—the raising of our children, our careers, our retirement, our physical health, our friendships, and our significant love relationships. Producing results in all these areas is what makes life work.

2. The only thing that produces these results is doing, that is, consistently, relentlessly, over time doing what is necessary to produce the wanted results. Trying won’t work. Hoping won’t work. Even praying won’t work. You have to act to produce these results. Only acting will do the job.

I designed this chapter, “Purposely Sustaining Momentum,” to help couples do what they need to do to sustain the quality relationship they worked so hard to create. To help them do this endlessly into the future, I describe three powerful strategies. You clinicians will want to go over these with your couple clients before turning them loose. You couples who are working on your own would be wise to heed what I share. You deserve to be happy and fulfilled as a couple. You deserve the relationship of your dreams. So please use these strategies.

THREE POWERFUL FOLLOW-THROUGH STRATEGIES

Leverage Pleasure and Pain

Most Psych 101 courses introduce students to the pleasure-pain principle. This principle states that humans naturally tend to gravitate toward pleasure and run away from pain. Some observers even contend that avoiding pain is more of a motivator than gaining pleasure.

Examples of the pleasure-pain principle in action abound all around. It is perhaps most obvious in our work life. Would you continue to go to work each day without either finding pleasure in your work or getting your paycheck at the end of the week? I know I wouldn’t. I doubt if you would either.

Education professionals regularly praise children for achievement and decorum while punishing them for poor performance or behavior. Pleasuring employees with bonuses, accolades, and special prizes for outstanding performance is a staple of corporate America. Commercial airlines reward their customers with bonus points for future free trips. All these strategies make use of the pleasure-pain principle; they are used in an attempt to encourage people to behave in a desired way.

The bottom line is that, whenever we associate something with pleasure, we tend to act to get more of it. Similarly, when we associate something with pain, we tend to act to avoid it. It is a natural, universal human drive.

But here's the rub. Too often we humans run afoul of this principle. Much of the time we are not even aware of how pleasure and pain drive us. Worse, we often mindlessly let pleasure and pain run us to our detriment rather than purposely using pleasure and pain to our advantage. Purposely using the pleasure-pain principle can be a powerful tool to motivate us to act to achieve great goals in any area of our lives we want, including in our relationships.

The Case of John. Let me illustrate how I used pleasure and pain to help a client overcome his cocaine addiction. When I first met John, he had already failed to break his habit through two 30-day inpatient hospitalizations and through the services of three different outpatient psychotherapists.

Knowing that all these competent mental health professionals had failed, I reasoned that I would have to figure out the missing ingredient necessary to finally get him off cocaine. After gathering as much information as I thought I needed, I assigned him the following take-home exercise (illustrated in Figure 12.1). I first instructed him to list both the benefits and the costs he experienced in doing cocaine. I also told him to list all the benefits and the costs to not doing cocaine. Without telling him the purpose of this exercise, I emphasized that his recovery depended on the quality of what he produced.

John returned having completed his assignment and I was more than a little impressed. With the help of his parents, he produced quite a number of profound costs and benefits to both doing and not doing cocaine. He clearly took this exercise seriously. After I copiously praised him for his efforts, we had the following telling conversation.

Doing Cocaine	
Benefits (Pleasures)	Costs (Pains)
Not Doing Cocaine	
Benefits (Pleasures)	Costs (Pains)

FIGURE 12.1 JOHN'S PLEASURE-PAIN ANALYSIS

- Dr. G: John, when you think about doing cocaine, what do you think about? Is your association with the benefits or pleasures or with the costs or pains?
- John: That's easy. The benefits.
- Dr. G: Such as?
- John: The feeling, mostly. It makes me feel better than anything else I've ever experienced in my life.
- Dr. G: Anything else?
- John: Women love me. They know I have cocaine, and they'll flirt with me cause they want some.
- Dr. G: So you feel more popular, and maybe even feel better about yourself. These are indeed benefits. But, let me ask you another question. When you think about not doing cocaine, do you associate that with the benefits and pleasures or with the costs and pain?
- John: The costs.
- Dr. G: Like what?
- John: I feel horrible. I won't have that thrill. I'll have to face life all by myself.
- Dr. G: So look, John. Do you see how you're working against yourself? Your pleasure-pain association dooms you to keep doing cocaine. You associate massive pleasure with doing cocaine and massive pain with not doing cocaine. Your mind connects cocaine with pleasure and abstinence from cocaine with pain. So every fiber of your being is therefore motivated to continue to use cocaine. Do you see what I'm saying?
- John: Yes.
- Dr. G: No wonder you've failed in your previous therapy efforts. The pleasure-pain principle overrules any insights or strategies provided you by your therapists.
- John: I've never thought of it that way. So my motivation is in the wrong direction.
- Dr. G: Precisely. And it's powerful. You unwittingly let pleasure and pain run you, rather than you purposely using pleasure and pain to your advantage. You need to reverse your associations. You need to purposely habituate yourself to associate massive pain to using cocaine and massive pleasure to not using it. Then and only then can you use therapy to kick the habit.
- John: But I don't know how to do it.
- Dr. G: That's what I'm here for. I'll show you how. Are you ready to get to work on this?
- John: Yes.

And that is precisely what John did. He wrote the pleasures of not doing cocaine on one side and the pains of doing cocaine on the other side of a laminated three by five card. He then meditated on his new pleasure-pain associations six times a day—at breakfast, mid-morning, lunch, mid-afternoon, supper, and mid-evening. Additionally, he carried this card with him 24/7 to refer to

whenever he felt tempted to use cocaine. By leveraging pleasure and pain to his advantage, he became sufficiently motivated to then use his psychotherapy to wean himself away from his cocaine use. As I write this chapter, I'm happy to say that John has been cocaine free now for five years.

Learning from John. I share John's story to illustrate how anyone can purposely leverage pleasure and pain to their benefit. Like most of us, John had mindlessly developed a surefire formula to perpetuate his cocaine habit. Once he purposely leveraged pleasure and pain to his benefit, mindfully associating pain to doing cocaine and pleasure to not, he found the motivation to do the hard work needed to break his addiction.

When we face the many challenges and frustrations that matedness presents, it can be easy for any of us to fall into the same pleasure-pain trap as John. That is, it is easy to mindlessly associate pain to being mated and pleasure to being free. This pleasure-pain association will demotivate anyone from doing the hard work necessary to purposely create and sustain a dream relationship.

As modeled by John, it would behoove anyone to use the pleasure-pain principle to the betterment of their relationship. Imagine creating a profoundly powerful list of all the pleasures available from having a dream relationship, plus a list of all the pain for failing to make this so. Wouldn't this highly motivate a person to use the skills and strategies described throughout this book?

Exercise 1—Leveraging Pleasure and Pain. Now, dear couple, list as many of the profound pleasures you and your partner would have in a relationship filled with harmony and happiness. Likewise, list all the pains that you would experience if you failed to create and sustain this type of relationship. Even better, work together as a couple to create these lists. Then list up to five strategies you will commit to consistently and excellently use that would likely sustain the gains you have made from your couples therapy and/or from this book. Finally, decide what your plan will be to regularly reflect on these pleasures and pain to sustain your motivation.

1. The profound pleasures of acting to create and sustain the relationship of my/our dreams: _____

The profound pains of failing to act to create and sustain the relationship of my/our dreams: _____

2. The strategies I/we commit to act on to sustain the quality of our relationship:
 - (1) _____
 - (2) _____
 - (3) _____
 - (4) _____
 - (5) _____

3. My/our plan to regularly reflect on my/our relationship pleasures and pain:

Regular Couple Check-Ups

We all know the wisdom of getting an annual physical examination. By checking our heart rhythm, cholesterol, and various blood factors, we can proactively act to fix any problems before they become a crisis. Add to this periodic colonoscopies, breast exams, and prostate screenings and we further enhance our chances of living long, vibrant lives.

In the spirit of keeping a watchful eye on the health of the body, I urge couples to also regularly pay close attention to the health of their relationships. By doing this, they provide themselves an opportunity to nip problems in the bud, as well as keep alive exactly what they need to do to relentlessly keep harmony and happiness at a peak level.

A good time to do this is at the beginning of each month. Why each month? It's because each month provides enough distance to spot the patterns of dysfunctional relationship interactions, while not letting too much time accrue so that these patterns became habituated. As a couple gets better at conducting their monthly check-ups, they can drop back to doing them quarterly if wished, although I recommend not letting any more time than this elapse between meetings.

Whether the couple stays at home or meets at some secluded location, remember that this is a time to honestly take stock and strategically plan how they will keep their relationship on track. It is a time to revitalize their identification as a couple, to renew their efforts with an updated action plan, and to refresh their rational beliefs and functional skills. So they are to lock the doors, turn off the phones, pull down the shades, and stay focused.

Exercise 2—Planning Check-Ups. So, couple, find a time and a place where you won't be disturbed. Together plan the when, where, and what of your relationship check-up. Think of this meeting as sacred. It is an opportunity to not only tinker with the nuts and bolts of how you two interact, but also to secure the quality of your relationship. Together commit to the following:

- **When:** When will you hold your relationship check-ups? Be precise as to the dates and times.
- **Where:** In what location will you conduct your relationship check-ups? Be precise as to how you will make them private.
- **What:** What will be your agenda? You can set the agenda to suit your couple circumstances. However, I have found the following structure productive for the couples with whom I have worked.

- (1) What are we doing well that we need to keep doing?
- (2) What are we doing just okay that we need to do better?
- (3) What are we not doing that we need to start doing?
- (4) What are we doing incorrectly that we need to stop doing and replace with something more productive?

Before moving on, I want to offer a word of caution. These check-ups should be done in the spirit of love and camaraderie. Couples need to be very careful not to turn them into a gotcha session, as this will defeat the whole purpose of the check-up. They are to be partners, be loving, and be constructive. Their relationship will be the better for it.

Operate With Integrity

Perhaps the most powerful thing a couple can do to sustain their relationship momentum is to act with integrity. Without integrity, nothing works—not the best of intentions, dreams, goals, or hopes. Integrity doesn't guarantee the extraordinary results two people might want, but, without integrity, there is little possibility for sustaining the relationship of their dreams.

Integrity has to do with character. It is a matter of not only knowing what is the right thing to do, but also doing what is right as an expression of who one is in the world. It is a matter of not only giving, but honoring one's word. It is walking the talk. It is mindfully doing what one says he or she will do. It is keeping made promises and commitments no matter how hard it may be.

Abraham Lincoln, the 16th and perhaps greatest president of the United States, presents a wonderful illustration of what integrity is all about. There is an amazing story about Lincoln that is particularly illuminating. It seems that, while engaged to marry Mary Todd, he fell in love with a beautiful 18-year-old, Matilda Edwards. Caught in the dilemma of loving a woman to whom he was not betrothed, but feeling an obligation to keep his word to his fiancée, he fell into what we today call a clinical depression. Most important for our purposes, he cast this dilemma in the most lofty of terms. Witness what he said in a letter to his friend Joshua Speed.

“Before I resolve to do the one thing or another, I must regain my confidence in my own ability to keep my resolves when they are made. In that ability, you know, I once prided myself as the only, or at least the chief gem of my character; that gem I lost. . . . I have not yet regained it; and until I do, I cannot trust myself in any matter of great importance.”

Notice that Lincoln raised his personal dilemma from a practical matter (“What should I do?”) or a personal matter (“What will happen to me should

I make a wrong decision?”) to a matter of integrity (“What does this say about my ability to honor my word?”). This “gem” of his character, his depth of integrity, would prove one of his central virtues as he acted to save the Union during the Civil War.

Conditional vs. Unconditional Commitment. Most of us unfortunately approach our promises or commitments with a conditional mentality. That is, at the time we make a commitment, we probably mean it. We do not lie or manipulate. But we hold a giant escape hatch in our mind that gives us wiggle room when it becomes difficult to follow through. If we listened to our self-talk, it would sound something like the following:

“Yes, I do promise that I will go to dinner and a movie with my wife every Saturday night. But, if something comes up that makes it difficult or undesirable to do so, that circumstance justifies not following through. All I have to do then is to explain why I can’t do it and everything will be okay.”

Notice that such a commitment is not made with integrity. It is at best a “maybe” or a “hope.” The person is saying that he will do what he promised only if it is convenient to do so. This person may have said he’d do something, but his commitment has no integrity behind it. He may or may not follow through, depending on what arises in the meantime. These types of promises not only endanger trust between two people, but they cripple a person’s ability to sustain the purposeful couple action that is required to create and sustain a happy, harmonious relationship.

What is the alternative? It is to approach our promises and commitments with integrity. It means holding an unconditional mentality with regard to keeping our word. We never have to make a promise to our partner, but when we do, we do so with an unconditional commitment to fulfill it, despite any and all circumstances. Like Abraham Lincoln, we hold our promises as sacred. We realize that our integrity is at stake. We refuse to use adverse circumstances as a reason to not keep our word. We just do it, even though it may be cumbersome.

See how this unconditional mentality can push us to follow through on what we say we will do? People who operate from such a place of integrity increase tremendously the likelihood they will produce the results they want. When they say they will do something, they know their integrity is at stake, and they just do it. With regard to their relationship, they almost always sustain the action needed to make their relationship loving and lasting.

I now invite you, the couple, to complete the last exercise in *The Couples Therapy Companion*. It perhaps is the most important of all because, without integrity, you will be unlikely to sustain your ability to act on all the ideas and skills you have already learned.

Exercise 3—Committing to Commitment. This exercise has three parts. Please give serious thought to each. The quality of your relationship absolutely depends on your responses.

1. Do I **understand** the distinction between conditional and unconditional promising and committing? If not, what are your confusions or questions? You may want to take the time to reread this section, contact Dr. Grieger directly, or consult with others in order to understand.
2. Will I commit to unconditionally keeping all my promises? If so, sign the first of the two commitment statements below. If you are unwilling to pledge to the first, then pledge to the second. To not sign the first means you have by default chosen the second, so you might as well own up to it.

(1) I, _____, fully commit to keeping all my promises and commitments, both to my partner and to myself. I will hereafter act in this relationship fully committed to my commitment, despite adverse circumstances.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

(2) I, _____, fully commit to keeping all my promises and commitments, both to my partner and to myself, but only if it is convenient to do so. I will hereafter act in this relationship committed to my commitments only if the circumstances are not too difficult.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

3. What specific promises will I make with regard to my partner and my relationship in order to sustain our couple harmony and happiness? Write five specific ones that will make a powerful, positive impact with regard to sustaining the relationship of your dreams.

GOING FORWARD

Please remember the “take the pencil from my hand” demonstration. Through this demonstration, I tried to make the point that results will only happen from a person doing what is necessary, whatever that is, to produce the results. Accordingly, it is absolutely necessary for a couple to do what is necessary—not just today, this month, or this year, but endlessly into the future—to live a

relationship filled with harmony and happiness. They must devote themselves to the sustained action that will make this a reality.

To sustain action, I offered three strategies in this chapter—leveraging pleasure and pain, holding regular couple check-ups, and operating with integrity. Each of these can help any couple to purposely sustain their harmony and happiness endlessly into the future. I believe we clinicians have a responsibility to equip our couples with them. I think the prudent couple would be wise to mindfully—on purpose—integrate them into their relationship enhancement practices.

Epilogue

The world is round and the place which may seem like the end may also be the beginning.

—Ivy Baker Priest

As I stated in the introduction, I wrote *The Couples Therapy Companion* to be used in three ways: (1) for clinicians to integrate cognitive behavioral strategies into their treatment of couples; (2) for couples to use in coordination with the work they do with their own couple therapist; (3) for couples who want to work on their own to make their relationships healthy and happy. To cover these bases, I have tried to communicate the RECT process and strategies I use to treat couples in as straightforward, nontechnical language as I could.

So, dear clinical colleague, I hope that you have found what I have presented in this book useful in your practice. I know I do with couple after couple, in session after session.

And I am absolutely certain, dear couple, that, by mindfully and purposely putting into practice what you have learned in this book, you have moved much closer to the happy, harmonious relationship you want. Now it's time to celebrate. You've done a wonderful job. Pop open the champagne. Ring the bells. Light the fireworks.

But, in going forward, please heed the quote by Ivy Baker Priest cited above. To sustain your gains, you will need to continue to do what you now know to do. Otherwise you will be in danger of backsliding. There should be no end to working on your relationship. Every day is a new beginning, a new opportunity to create anew your loving, harmonious relationship.

In conclusion, I would be remiss if I did not say to both of you, you clinicians and you couples alike, that it's been an absolute honor to have served you. Although I do not know you personally, I truly feel a deep connection to you. I invite you to contact me if you should ever have any questions, want to share any thoughts or feedback, or should ever wish to consult with me. I not

only conduct couples therapy in my office, but I also coach clinicians and couples by phone, and conduct relationship enrichment seminars. You can contact me by e-mail (grieger@cstone.net) should you ever desire to do so. I would be delighted to hear from you.

Please relate with love and passion.

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