

Hope & Healing for your Relationship

THE KEYS TO EMOTIONAL
CONNECTION

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Introduction

At the Marriage Recovery Center, we are passionate about helping you find hope and healing for your marriage. You have likely contacted us because something in your life is not working, and you have taken a brave step forward by reaching out for help. You are not alone. As director of the Marriage Recovery Center, I have over thirty years of experience working with hurting couples, and have developed a program and set of tools to help couples find healing. We believe that no marriage is beyond hope! My staff and I have counseled thousands of couples and we know these tools work. Having witnessed their effectiveness, I ask you to trust the process.

In the pages that follow, you will read about what it takes to experience real change and healing. You will begin with personal exercises helping you prepare for counseling or for a Marriage Intensive. This workbook will allow you to start the healing process. Should you desire to venture deeper into the healing process, we can address your specific concerns in intensive counseling at The Marriage Recovery Center and find solutions that work for you. We want you to truly experience A Love Life of Your Dreams!



Why Do You Want to Change?

Any change process begins with motivation. Your starting place for change begins with understanding why you want to change. List some of the reasons why you are reading this manual, and why you are participating in a Marriage Intensive or considering one.

1.

2.

3.

What did you notice?

Common motivating factors:

Are you motivated by pain, hoping against hope that you can relate more effectively?

Are you motivated by a desire to have a more enriched relationship?

Most couples coming to the Marriage Recovery Center (MRC) have tried working things out on their own, only to experience failure. Most have tried working with a marriage counselor for 4-8 sessions, only to give up when things did not improve.

At MRC, you will experience Depth Intensive Marriage Counseling, with multiple three-hour sessions, and this makes all the difference in the world.

It is proven that couples who partner with a qualified therapist – and it is critical that your therapist be trained in marriage counseling – can agree on a pathway to change and discover effective solutions.

However, we can only do so much. You must come prepared to own your stuff, discover the path of humility, let go of pride, and allow yourselves to be influenced by us, the trained staff, and yourselves. Throughout our work together, you will be reminded:

“We are in this together, and we can figure this out!”

What Do You Want to Change?

Knowing *why* you want to change is critical, but knowing *what* you want to change is even more important. Consider specifically what you want changed. Try to identify exactly what it is about your relationship **YOU MUST HAVE DIFFERENT.**

GREATER INTIMACY: “INTO ME SEE”

One couple who came to MRC had been so wounded by years of struggle they found it nearly impossible to experience intimacy. Having built up layers of distance and detachment from each other, they didn't trust each other enough to share their most vulnerable feelings. They were profoundly grateful to learn ways to heal old wounds and learn new ways of trusting each other again.

MORE EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Another couple felt inexplicable distance from each other, wanting to learn ways of making healthy contact. They had never practiced the art of effective communication, utilizing such tools as paraphrasing, active listening, perception checking and validation of feelings. They were excited to put together the series of tools explained in this manual, and surprised at the impact those tools had on their marriage.

DECREASED CONFLICT

Nobody likes to fight, and all couples share with us that endless fighting is not only exhausting, but takes a tremendous toll on their marriage. Perhaps you are reading this manual at that point where you believe you cannot live another day with bickering. You know the “emotional hangover” that comes from battling each other, not to mention the energy drain conflict demands.

Any of these are good reasons to want to change.

Change is Possible

While reaching out for help is an incredible first step, **IT IS NOT ENOUGH!** You've undoubtedly done that before, and you know the results you've gotten. We ask you to consider several additional aspects you must bring to the work you want to do on your marriage.

The way of the wise...

To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight, to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity; to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth – Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance.

Proverbs 1:1-33

What is Necessary?

YOU MUST bring GOODWILL toward your mate. If you come harboring so much resentment that you cannot bring constructive intent, we cannot make progress.

Old Pattern: You are so resentful that you cannot stop yourself from blaming your mate. You make accusations out of habit, hardly noticing the hurtful impact it has on them. You justify your actions, since you have been so wounded in the past. In fact, you secretly want your mate to hurt.

New Pattern: You realize that both of you are hurting. You recognize the natural inclination to hurt, but also recognize that healing begins with you. Beneath your layers of pain, you desperately want true connection. You are willing, perhaps out of sheer determination, to treat your mate lovingly and with respect, knowing that by doing so you will plant positive seeds of change.

YOU MUST be prepared to CHANGE. Obviously, if what you were doing before was working, you wouldn't be asking for help. Like the old saying goes: "If you do what you've always done, you'll get what you've always got." And this is NOT working for you. So, you must come with humility and a willingness to allow the facilitator and your mate to speak into your life.

Old Pattern: In the past you have resisted change. While you tried to convince yourself that you were open to change, inwardly you knew this wasn't true. You have hidden behind the belief that it was your mate who needed the majority of change, believing that the problems in your marriage were the fault of your mate.

New Pattern: You are now ready to face the truth of the matter – YOU must change. Things don't change, you do. While you are unclear exactly what will be required of you, with humility you recognize it's not all about your mate. You are finally ready to listen to the complaints your mate has been echoing, learning new ways of interacting.

"If you do what you've always done, you'll get what you've always got."

The Challenge of Change

Once we get beyond the fact that each of us must change, that our lives are simply not working, change doesn't have to be so grueling.

"I couldn't believe it," one man said, "I spent more energy avoiding change when it was far easier to embrace change and get on with it. Once I discovered that we all have issues, I didn't feel so inadequate. When I learned that everyone has problems from the past, wounds that haven't been fully healed and character traits needing change, it all became easier."

A woman said, "I spent years blaming my husband for everything. I prided myself in being the perfect woman, but underneath I was seething. You helped me see that my problems weren't the same as my husband's issues, but they were just as debilitating. I needed to see my need for change, too."

One of our favorite sayings at MRC is:

"We're not okay, and that's okay"

Scripture tells us we all have pride that stops us from choosing the path of humility. Once we get beyond all that posturing, recognizing our failures, we're ready for the change that is needed.

The way of the wise...

Before his downfall a man's heart is proud, but humility comes before honor.

Proverbs 18:12

Expecting Resistance

While you no doubt want to change, and you are desperate to improve your relationship, you have learned many ingenious ways to avoid changing. After reading this list of a few of the ways we avoid change, we encourage you to honestly look at yourself to see if any, or many, fit you. Reflect on how you have come to use these patterns of resisting change.

AVOIDANCE

The art of pretending that things will magically change on their own – also called DENIAL. "I Don't Even Notice I Am Lying (to myself)"

Some of my patterns for resisting change are:

BLAMING

The art of pretending the problem has to do completely with your mate, thereby making it unnecessary for you to look at your part in the destructive dance.

Some of my patterns for blaming are:

Shifting the Focus

Keeping things distorted so you never have to zero in on the issues needing to be changed, and your part in changing them.

Some of my patterns for shifting the focus are:

MINIMIZATION

The art of pretending the elephant in the room isn't really an elephant, and the odor really isn't stinky.

Some of my patterns of minimization are:

SPIRITUALIZING

The art of pretending God will do all the work, passively waiting for the change to "just happen."

Some of my patterns for spiritualizing are:

The Road Ahead

Understanding that change will not come easily, you are ready to begin. However, we must warn you that many take the first and second steps and then abandon their efforts.

YOU MUST MAINTAIN YOUR EFFORTS.

We can assure you of progress, and will walk you through every step that will increase intimacy and effective communication, and lessen conflict, but you must maintain your efforts.

It may seem like it's all uphill, but by maintaining the traction you are sure to experience you will make it up the hill. The strategies in the book are proven successful, but you may never, NEVER, never give up. Promise us at the MRC and, especially your mate, that:

YOU WILL PRACTICE AND MASTER THE STRATEGIES FOUND IN THIS BOOK.

“It may seem like it's all uphill, but by maintaining the traction you are sure to experience you will make it up the hill.”

Taking the Steps

WILL YOU TAKE THE STEPS NECESSARY
FOR CHANGE?

Yes

I'm ready

Name:

Date:

Name:

Date:

No

Not at this time

Name:

Date:

Name:

Date:

Believing Things Can Be Better

Since your relationship may have been troubled for a long time, you may have a lot of doubt to overcome in order to fully invest in a CHANGE PROCESS. "Why should I believe anything can be any different?" you ask.

Great question.

In fact, we're not asking you to let go of all doubts. That would be ridiculous. You must experience change.

In fact, you must experience positive change again and again in order to be a believer. Please let this statement sink in:

YOU MUST EXPERIENCE POSITIVE CHANGE AGAIN AND AGAIN TO FEEL A SENSE OF TRUST THAT THINGS REALLY CAN GET BETTER.

This most often needs to be done under the careful, watchful eye of a professional. If you could do it yourself, you would have done it by now. Right?

What if you could, however, link one positive experience onto another, again and again? What if you could learn to trust your mate again - and again? What if the fighting could stop for a day, then two, then three days? The results can be profound. The bridge between hopelessness to hope is not nearly as long as you might think.



Here is the first concept critical to Having a Love Life of Your Dreams: The Corrective Emotional Experience

How it Works

Suppose you have been in a relationship for years, practicing doing things the wrong way over and over again. Since the past is the best predictor of the future, you expect things to keep going the way they've always gone. That makes sense. If you remain on the same path, leading nowhere, you will end up with disappointing results. WITHOUT INTERVENTION, things will keep going the same way.

But, WITH INTERVENTION, things can change. You have the power to change directions, to choose a path filled with life, hope, and possibilities. But, you MUST CHOOSE a new path.

Choosing a new path, choosing to act differently will lead to new feelings. Every time you use one of the strategies in this manual, it will lead to new, positive experiences – Corrective Emotional Experience.

Trust the Process

Watch and see how much better your relationship can be.

Consider this Example

One couple, in their forties, married for over twenty years, had spent years distrusting each other and practicing doing things the wrong way. Convinced of the need to change, they vowed to do no harm while practicing a few of the tools in this manual. They did what I call “planting seeds and pulling weeds.” Using this example from gardening, any garden can grow lush and vibrant. This couple stopped making accusations against each other and began practicing catching their mate doing things right. Using the power of encouragement, they began to notice positive change.

Attunement

Imagine you can't carry a tune in a bucket. Perhaps it's true, and it won't take much imagination at all. Now, suppose we tell you you've got to master the art of being totally, completely, absolutely tuned into your mate - their every note!

When they say something, you must be so tuned in that you get what they're trying to say. When they speak in circles, you get dizzy following them wherever they go. They shift from one topic to another, and you're there - ahead of them. This is attunement. Mastering the art of attunement will make your relationship sing.

But, you say, you don't understand some of the things they're trying to tell you. Okay, I understand. You say you've been trying to understand them for years, and still haven't mastered it. I understand that, too. We'll figure it out as we work together.

For now, let it be enough that you make the decision to be so tuned in to your mate that you care about anything and everything he/she says. Just the fact that you are willing to listen that intently to them will gain you points in the orchestra of relating. Trust me!

What will it take?

You must listen intently to what he/she is saying, and what they are not saying. What are the themes of what they have been asking for? What is the common note they sing time and again?

WRITE IT OUT HERE:

What are the barriers that keep you from listening to them intently? Are you defensive and reluctant to really hearing them? Do you interrupt, shift the focus, and talk about your needs rather than listen to theirs?

NAME THE BARRIERS TO LISTENING AND ATTUNEMENT:

Those skilled at attunement know that body language of their mate, and can tell immediately if they are off-key. They know if what they have said resonates with their mate. They know if what they have heard and reflected to their mate resonates with their mate.

HOW WELL DO YOU ATTUNE YOURSELF TO THE BODY LANGUAGE OF YOUR MATE?

DEDICATE YOURSELF to being tuned into your mate. Listen for the themes, the musical notes sung time and time again. This skill will serve you well.

The way of the wise...

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.

Ephesians 4:29

It is quite amazing that we have become so out of tune, with ourselves and with each other. Yet, it happens. We become self-centered, self-concerned and self-absorbed, hardly noticing that our mate has become depressed and discouraged. Filled with our own pain, and looking for ways to anesthetize that pain, we don't notice the growing distance.

READ THIS COUPLE'S STORY:

One couple came to MRC having been married for only five years, with two small children, and already the glow of being newlyweds had dimmed. Both had become overly involved in their careers and the activities surrounding small children, and with hardly a warning, one of them had an affair. The emotional pain was devastating. Hoping against hope they could revive their marriage, they came desperate to learn why such a horrific choice could be made and how to heal from it. They came humbled by current circumstances, listening and learning, and today they are attuned to each other again in powerful ways.



The Dance of Intimacy

Relating effectively has been compared to dancing. While I am no DWTS (Dancing With the Stars) finalist, I know a thing or two about keeping a beat. However, tapping my toes to a beat is a world different from being on the dance floor with my wife, Christie, and feeling her every step so I can be somewhat fluid in my movements with her.

Dancing effectively requires focus and concentration, a keen attention to even the smallest movement, all the while listening to the music. I must move to the music, watch my partner, and dance!

Relating is much the same. Effective relaters watch their mate's every movement. They watch for inflections in their mate's voice, how they raise and lower their eyebrows, the gestures of their arms and last but not least, the things they say.

Imagine your relationship being a dance. Imagine being obsessed with your mate and how they move. You care about what they say, how they say it and what they mean by what they say. Now, add yourself and your "dance movements" to the picture. You must also watch what you say. You must notice how what you say impacts them, and how what they say impacts you. This is relational dancing.



It's All About Connection

Here's a typical email:

Dear Dr. Hawkins, My husband and I can't seem to get along. When times are good, they are very good, but when they're bad, they're very bad. When we get along I feel very connected to him, but we get disconnected so easily. We can fight about the smallest or biggest things and the distance lasts for days. We've tried counseling, but the changes never seem to last. Things are better for a little while, and then they go back to the way they were before. I can't live like this. I want to be close to my mate. Can you help me?

This woman voiced the frustration of millions of couples: We just can't seem to get along! That is what I will teach you – how to get along for a lifetime. Getting along is incredibly complex and unbelievably simple. But, the most important thing for you to remember is this:

It's all about the Connection

Isn't that too simple? NO! It really is all about the connection, and the following pages will be dedicated to showing you how this is true. Most important, as you practice the tools involved in connecting and maintaining the connection, you'll see that it's true.

As the above woman noted, couples fight about large things and small things. The issues are rarely really about the sex, the in-laws, the money, the work, or any number of issues. **THE PROBLEM IS THE PROCESS.** In other words, it's **HOW** we relate to each other that is the problem.

I know you may find this truth hard to believe – but the process is the problem. We challenge you to watch closely and see if this is not true. Think about it:

It doesn't matter whether you argue about money, sex, work, or such mundane matters as toothpaste and toilet paper – the fact of the matter is the process is the problem. It is the **WAY** you talk about these issues, and the **WAY** you let them drag you down that we must change.

In the following pages we will walk you through a **METHOD OF INTERACTING** that will transform how you connect, relate, and make contact with your mate and others in your world.

The way of the wise...

Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye. Matthew 7:3-5

Broken Connection

When psychologists analyze what creates broken connections, they notice again and again that the process is the problem. Let's say that another way: we withdraw from relationships when we feel judged, criticized, put down, humiliated, unheard and ridiculed. Without exception, these are the patterns that will push us away from our mate, causing us to either SHUT UP OR BLOW UP. The result: you withdraw, ending up feeling isolated, alone and adrift.

You have developed many patterns of behavior - which you will come to fully understand - that break the connection between you and your mate. You now must learn to notice how and when and, perhaps, even why you break connection with your mate, though to be honest the why is less important than the how and when.

It is critical to learn when this shift occurs. You must become fully aware when you move from feeling connected and attached to feeling disconnected and unloved. Noticing the SHIFT will be a critical and invaluable tool.

Our work at MRC teaches couples who are STUCK in old patterns of relating how to get UNSTUCK. When they come to us, or call me on the phone, I listen intently, noticing the old patterns they use that create BROKEN CONNECTIONS. I hear their heartache, their discouragement and utter fear that they won't be able to change these old patterns. But, I always offer HOPE, knowing that we can always change old, destructive patterns. The ability to catch yourself replaying old patterns, and noticing the disconnection that occurs with those old patterns, is a powerful beginning to change.

For us to change destructive patterns you will need to master several key concepts

"You must become fully aware when you move from feeling connected and attached to feeling disconnected and unloved. Noticing the shift will be a critical and invaluable tool."



Constructive Intent

Can you honestly say you are approaching your mate with constructive intent? This means you are approaching your mate:

a) with the purpose of improving the relationship

b) for the purpose of reconciliation

c) with no intent to harm

d) with no intent to prove a point, win a battle, or coerce your mate into seeing things the way you do

Embracing an attitude of constructive intent creates an attitude where change occurs. This is an attitude filled with humility and the recognition that it has taken both of you to create your marriage problems, and it will take both of you to fix them. Your positive attitude and willingness to embrace change is a critical antidote to your problems.

The way of the wise...

Love is patient; Love is kind and is not jealous; Love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

1 Corinthians 13: 4-7

Sanctuary vs Courtroom

This may be the most important concept in this book. It is absolutely critical that you inspect your heart to see if you are approaching your mate from the Sanctuary, not the Courtroom.

CONSIDER THIS:

Courtroom Behavior:

- try to win
- push our point of view
- feel defensive
- ignore the discomfort of our mate
- argumentative and combative

Sanctuary Behavior:

- sensitive to others
- seek harmony
- calm
- conciliatory
- seeks connection
- pursues collaborative agreements

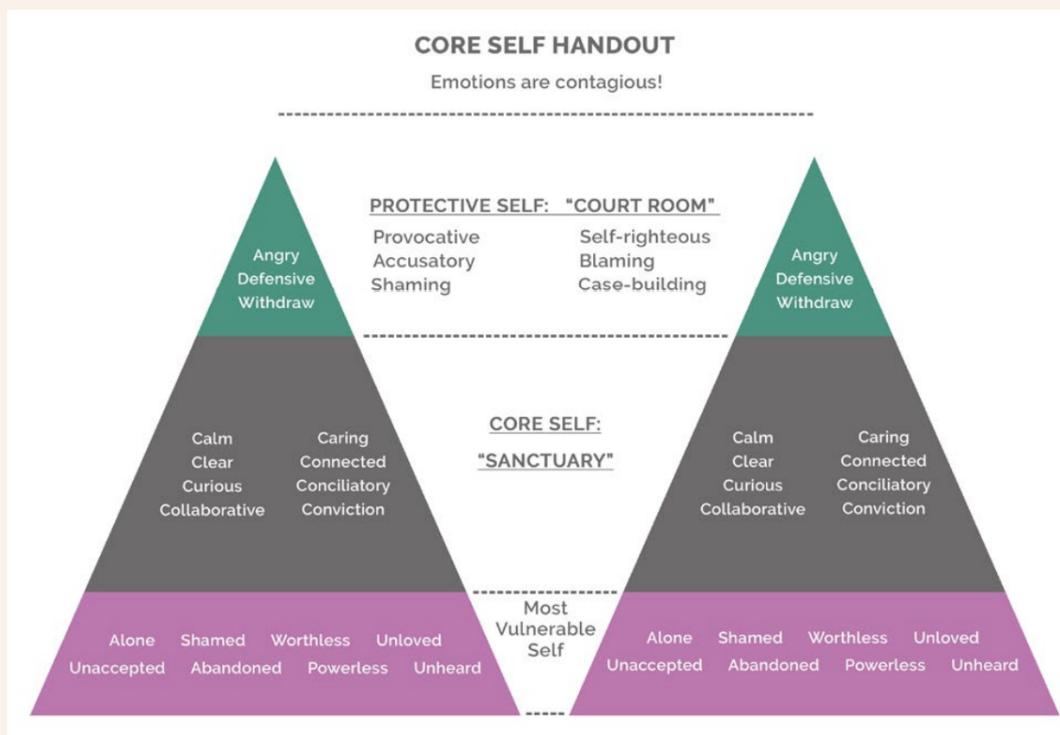
Consider your relationship. Where do you spend the majority of your time when there is conflict, the Courtroom or the Sanctuary? What part do you play in this problem?

Will you agree to talk about issues involving conflict from the Sanctuary and never from the Courtroom? Prepare an action plan, taking responsibility for yourself, asking for a time-out if you move from the Sanctuary to the Courtroom.

Why We Do What We Do

HEALING OUR PAIN

Unfortunately, most of us function from our hidden, hurt parts. Look at the Pyramids diagram below. Imagine the base of the pyramids as being our Most Vulnerable Self. This is where we feel our truest feelings. We feel wounded, sad, hurt. While some of this has to do with childhood, much of it has to do with what is happening right here and now with our mate.



But instead of sharing our wounds – like saying, “I really feel abandoned when you spend as much time as you do with your friends. I’d like to spend more time with you”– we operate from the tips of the pyramid, or our Critical Self, and poke at one another. Instead of speaking from our Most Vulnerable Self, we function from our Primitive Self, saying things like, “Why don’t you spend more time with me? You like your friends more than you like me.” We speak from our Angry Self.

This shaming behavior creates distance. Our mate reacts by withdrawing, adding to our feeling of abandonment, stacking up even more pain within our Selves and within our mate.

Healthy contact comes from our Most Vulnerable Self, where we share our honest feelings, and risk getting close. We risk sharing our hurts, expecting our mate to operate within their Best Self. But, even if they don't - which is very possible - we function from within our Best Self, sharing our true and honest feelings.

TOGETHER, CREATE A SAFETY PLAN WHEREBY YOU AGREE NOT TO ATTACK EACH OTHER, ALWAYS AVOIDING BECOMING UNDULY DEFENSIVE (AN ASPECT OF OUR PROTECTIVE SELF). WE AGREE TO SHARE FROM OUR DEEPEST, TRUEST SELF. WE AGREE TO LEARN THE LANGUAGE OF FEELINGS, REQUESTING WHAT YOU WANT AND NEED IN A RESPECTFUL WAY.

The way of the wise...

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Ephesians 4: 32



The Protective Self

When in our Protective Self we are often in our Angry Self, which is reactive, overly emotional and non-rational. Because we have ignored our Most Vulnerable Self, where we feel abandoned, hurt and wounded, we often speak from our Angry Self instead – with horrific results.

It is critical to understand that the Angry, Surface Self CANNOT make real contact with another. With heightened emotion, narrowed perspectives and usually black and white thinking, we CANNOT make real connections with our mate.

REAL CONNECTION occurs when we take the time to get in touch with our Most Vulnerable Self, where we share what we are really feeling, including what we really need.

Think about it. When we speak from our Surface Self, where we feel ANGRY, we push our mate away. Here we yell at our mate, demand change, attempt to control and act immaturely. BUT, in our Most Vulnerable Self, where our feelings reside, sharing our feelings draws our mate to us.

CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING

My mate fails to keep an agreement, making me feel abandoned, neglected and hurt. But, instead of sharing my feelings of abandonment, neglect and hurt, I respond from my Surface Self, angrily saying: *“I don’t know why you didn’t keep your agreement. I can’t trust you and I’ll just have to do things myself.”*

This kind of reaction creates a similar, defensive, Surface Self reaction – and you’re off to the races. One reaction leads to a similar reaction because:

EMOTIONS ARE CONTAGIOUS

So, as challenging as it is, we want to SLOW THINGS DOWN, consider what you are really feeling, sharing what you feel with your mate. But remember; share your feelings – not an accusation.



Notice the Shift

Most people are not aware of when they shift from their Core Self to their Protective Self. We are accustomed to “getting angry” and thinking nothing about it. We feel “fight or flight” syndrome and hardly notice that we are preparing for combat. Yet, this Protective Self mind-set is completely at odds with our Sanctuary/Core Self mind-set that seeks harmony, peace and cooperation.

HOW EFFECTIVE ARE YOU AT:

1) Noticing when you shift into your Protective Self?

2) Noticing when you shift back down into your Core Self?

HOW OFTEN DO YOU CALL FOR A “TIME OUT” SO YOU CAN CALM YOURSELF AND BECOME RE-ATTACHED TO YOUR MATE?

Write about your patterns and what you think needs to change so that you can more effectively attend, attach and attune yourself to your mate.

Resentment

The topic of resentment gets its own section because it is at the tip of the Pyramid, in the Angry, Bitter, Resentful Self, where many people get stuck. Take a moment and decide if you are stuck in Resentment. You will know the answer because if you have not been able to fully grab hold of the V, speaking from your Most Vulnerable Self, then you may be stuck in unforgiveness and resentment. If you have been unable to fully empathize with your mate, you may be stuck in resentment.

What are common reasons why people get stuck in resentment? The most common is – and you might have guessed it – feeling wounded. There, hidden in the deep recesses of the Pyramid, in our Most Vulnerable Self, we feel wounded. Rather than expose this fragile part of our personality, we cover it with our Controlling, Controlled, Angry, Resentful, perhaps even Passive-Aggressive, Self.

Healing can never – NEVER – happen as long as you keep feeding this hungry emotion. Like alligators, this feeling will never go away as long as it is being fed.

As long as you rehearse your resentment, you can never truly connect to your mate.

SO, WHAT IS THE ANSWER? THE ANSWER LIES IN TAKING TWO POWERFUL STEPS OF ACTIONS:

1. Getting close to the wounded, **hurt part of you**. Talking to him or her and asking what they need, befriending and being compassionate with them.
2. Getting close to the wounded, **hurt part of your mate**. Talking to him or her and asking what they need, befriending and being compassionate with them. Begin today to have a deep, intimate conversation with your True Self and the True Self of your mate.

That's when healing can begin.

MORE CONNECTION COLLAPERS

There are many ways we collapse our connection. It is imperative that you understand each of the ways you damage connection. If you can understand how you collapse your connection, you'll go a long way towards creating connections. Here are just a few of the ways you collapse connection.

JUDGMENTS

It is very common to think judgmentally. For example, when one says, "I feel like you are always critical of me," they are not really sharing a feeling, but rather a judgment, and judgments NEVER land well. Perhaps they are even more outspoken with their judgments, and say, "Why don't you put away your wet towel?" Here they are being openly critical and judgmental, attempting to make the other person feel guilty and bad for their decision to leave the wet towel out.

You must break the habit of making judgments. As tempting as it is to criticize and make accusations against your mate, doing so will always be disastrous, leading to a CONNECTION COLLAPSER. You may "win" with getting your point of view across, but lose by creating greater distance in your relationship.



"As tempting as it is to criticize and make accusations against your mate, doing so will always be disastrous, leading to a connection collapse."



Blame

Affixing blame is another troubling habit. We want to find fault, share our critical thoughts, and reduce the situation to someone (usually not us) being wrong and bad. Blame is particularly lethal because it narrows our thought, keeps our part of the problem out of the light, and focuses on the other person.

Some become so adept at affixing blame that they even develop conspiracy theories. They attribute motives to the other person, which is certain to create antagonism and take you straight into the courtroom.

Consider this sentence: “You always leave your wet towels on the floor because you’re just lazy and you know I will pick them up.” Wow! You’ve tried to read your mate’s mind, determined their motives and made a final accusation.

PASSIVE AGGRESSION

The final Connection Collapser we’ll explore – though there are many more – is passive aggressive actions. Passive aggression is letting someone feel the weight of our anger in a passive way, such as being sarcastic, judgmental, distancing, or even withholding sex. We may pout, make snide comments, or refuse to cooperate.

In the midst of these damaging actions, we will probably deny being angry! “Don’t even bother picking up your towel. You know I will take care of it.”

If these actions DON’T work, what does? What follows is the most effective tool you’ll ever need, and we’ll spend the rest of the book mastering this tool.

The way of the wise...

A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.
Proverbs 15:1

The V

Agree on the Topic

"Can I talk with you about _____?"
(Specific topic)

#1

Use feeling words. Do not use "feel like" or "feel that," as what follows will be a judgment.

"I feel _____"

"I would like to feel _____"

"I feel _____ when _____ happens—make it an observable event"

"When I feel this, I _____, and since doing this creates disconnection,"

"I'm asking you to -_____."

State a specific positive request.

#4

EMPATHIZE:

"I heard you say you feel _____"

GENERAL VALIDATION:

"Anyone would feel _____ if..."

PERSONAL VALIDATION:

This is your chance to come clean, break strongholds, and affirm your insights/awareness.

"It's true that I _____"

"Knowing you, _____"

"I can imagine _____"

RESPOND:

"Do you feel heard?"

INITIATOR: Respond to your partner's request.

RESPONDER: If your partner responds "No", get more information.

#2

EMPATHIZE:

"I heard you say you feel _____"

GENERAL VALIDATION:

"Anyone would feel _____ if..."

PERSONAL VALIDATION:

This is your chance to come clean, break strongholds, and affirm your insights/awareness.

"It's true that I _____"

"Knowing you, _____"

"I can imagine _____"

RESPOND:

"Do you feel heard?"

INITIATOR: Respond to your partner's request.

RESPONDER: If your partner responds "No", get more information.

#3

Use feeling words. Do not use "feel like" or "feel that," as what follows will be a judgment.

"I feel _____"

"I would like to feel _____"

"I feel _____ when _____ happens—make it an observable event"

"When I feel this, I _____, and since doing this creates disconnection,"

"I'm asking you to -_____."

State a specific positive request.

When defensive, slow down or call time out

Negotiate/Brainstorm Solutions

Make Sacred Agreements

If sacred agreement is broken, use the 3 A's of Accountability:

Apologize, Accept Responsibility, make Amends

INITIATOR

RESPONDER

USING THE TOOL

Connection is all about using “The V” communication tool. Once you have mastered this simple tool, you’ll find conflict disappearing, tension decreasing, and – what we are looking for – connection increasing.

Let’s walk through this tool slowly.

AGREEING ON THE TOPIC AND SETTING

We increase the odds of having a successful interaction if we approach it with the right attitude. We first double check our attitude, ensuring we are in the sanctuary, ready to reason with our mate, defenses left at the door, open and willing to hear what is said. **IF YOU CANNOT DO THIS, DON’T AGREE TO HAVE THE TALK.** By agreeing to talk, you have decided you are in a good place to hear what the other person has to say, even if their words may sting a bit.

Placing your defenses aside, you agree to practice the “kernel of truth” technique. In other words, you listen for “what part of what this person is saying is true for me?” While you may not want to hear what they have to say, you **NEED TO HEAR IT.** What they are saying is with constructive intent, shared for the purpose of improving your relationship.

NOT AGREEING TO TALK

If you cannot put on your big boy/girl pants and step into the conversation with constructive intent, say so. Say that you are not ready to have this talk. Say that you are in the courtroom and how you react may have a harmful effect. Ask for a bit more time to get into the right frame of mind.

By agreeing to talk, you agree to listen, or share, with constructive intent. You talk **ONLY** for the purpose of healing the relationship. You have a heart of reconciliation. You want connection! **IF** you have any other motivation, such as to hurt, get even, make a point, push your position, create an agenda, drive your issues – **STOP.**

Timing is Everything

By agreeing to talk, you agree to listen, or share, with constructive intent. You talk only for the purpose of healing the relationship. You have a heart of reconciliation. You want connection!

EPSOM SALT

You have probably soaked in a tub of Epsom Salt sometime over the course of your life. Epsom Salt, made from the mineral magnesium sulfate, is known to draw toxins from your body, and is found to be a sedative for the nervous system. This same concept can be a powerful tool when attempting to create a connection to your mate.

Consider the following example:

Your mate comes home from work to find the house in disarray and you sitting, relaxing on the couch. Understandably angry, he/she flies into a tirade. While your first impulse may be to become defensive and reactively irritated yourself, a better choice might be to use Epsom Salt, so to speak, to listen attentively to their concerns. Pull from them their concerns and assuage their frustrations by offering to help.

Every marriage in trouble is filled with layers of troubles, stacked one upon another, often without resolution. You have an opportunity to listen attentively to your mate to understand what they are asking for. Again, utilizing the tool of Epsom Salt, you are gently curious and probe more deeply into their concerns, drawing them out so that you can help them heal their pain. Seeking understanding, your mate senses your caring and this becomes a new and most potent CONNECTION.

As you talk from your Most Vulnerable Self, practice encouraging your mate to share from their Most Vulnerable Self. Make it safe for your mate to share what they feel; NOT what they think or from their Reactive Self. Ask your mate to tell you more. Request information. "What is really bothering you? What are you feeling?" You will notice a profound impact.

What are the next steps?

LOOK AT THE V

When you have agreed that you will speak to each other, with an open heart and open mind, ready to receive what your mate has to say to you, then and only then, proceed.

First, the Speaker shares vital information:

- What you **FEEL**. Again, this cannot be a judgment, but an emotion. Consider how you feel about an issue. Do you feel angry, sad, frustrated, hurt, bitter? Think about how you feel.
- Now share what you **NEED**. This is a bit tricky. Don't share what you want from your mate. That comes next. For now, share what you need.
- Finally, you state a specific, **POSITIVE REQUEST**.

Let me illustrate:

My wife comes home an hour later than she said she would be home. She walks in the door, and I'm ready for an argument. However, I manage my emotions – a critical tool – and ask if I can talk to her. "Christie," I say, "Can I talk to you about being late tonight?" "Sure," she says. Let's assume she's at the top of her game and is willing to talk about being late.

"I'm feeling frustrated," I say CALMLY, "that you are an hour later than you said you would be here. I was worried about you. I need to know you are safe and that you respect my feelings of concern. I ask that you call if you are going to be late."

Okay. So far so good. Now, the Listener – Christie – is on the right side of The V, and will practice listening, learning, understanding, empathizing, validating, and being influenced by my request.

Here's how she responds:

"I hear why you are upset with me. I was late and didn't take the time to call you. I could have called and that would have been the more sensitive things to do. I'm sorry and I'll be careful to call in the future."

How do I feel about her response? Fantastic! I sense that she cares about my feelings, sees the validity of my concerns and takes ownership of her actions. Again, we have Connection.

Now I'm going to SLOWWW things down. Why? Because if we're not on the top of our game, it is terribly, terribly hard to do ALL those things. So let's take them one at a time. It is imperative that the Listener move very slowly through each step.



LISTEN

Every Speaker deserves our undivided attention, especially when the stakes are high. The Listener must tune into the Speaker, listening for clues as to what the Speaker is trying to communicate.

LEARN

The Listener must learn from the Speaker. What is the Speaker trying to say? What am I to learn from what they are saying? Is there a theme to what they are saying, perhaps something that has been said before?

UNDERSTAND

It has been said that we must seek first to understand, then to be understood. Acknowledge that you get what the Speaker is trying to say. Paraphrase back to them that you “get” their message. You hear the “echo” in what they’re saying today, connecting with what they’ve tried to tell you before.

EMPATHIZE

Show that you care about their message. Reflect the emotion you heard the Speaker talk about. Practice attunement – catching the heart of the Speaker’s message.

VALIDATE

Let the Speaker know there is truth in what they are saying. Perhaps it is not completely true, but find some aspect of truth in their message. Remember, there is always some element of truth in what your mate is saying, and there is some message for you to hear. When you are validating, you might say, “It is true that I contributed to your hurt feelings by being late.” Or, “I spoke sharply to you and that didn’t make you feel safe. I’m sorry.”

WHAT IF THINGS GO SIDEWAYS?

What if Christie becomes DEFENSIVE when I share my feelings with her? What if she immediately launches into a bunch of reasons why she was late, and instead of empathizing with my feelings, she attacks me for even questioning her?

What if she had said this: “I can’t believe you’re making a big deal out of me being late,” she says angrily. “It’s not like a pattern. What’s the big deal anyway?”

Since emotions are contagious – another incredibly important truth – I’m likely to react in kind – and we’re off to the races.

She accuses me of being overly sensitive; I accuse her of not being sensitive at all to my feelings. She becomes even angrier, and I respond equally angry. And this is how fights start – and sometimes end.

Defensiveness

Defensiveness is perhaps the largest killer of effective communication. Feeling vulnerable, no one wants to be challenged. No one wants to be criticized. And so we become defensive, stopping communication, and perhaps worse – escalating the conflict.

You'll note when anyone becomes defensive, and they can no longer effectively listen to their mate, they MUST call a time out.

Defensiveness, remember, is telling another that you can no longer really listen to them. It is effectively saying, "I don't like what I'm hearing, so I'm going to tune you out. I'm going to plan my response. I'm going to refute what you're saying. I'm going to escalate this conversation."

Any of these responses is DESTRUCTIVE.

And so you MUST call for a Time Out. You must exhibit enough self-control to say the words, "Time Out."

"I'm sorry," you say, "but I can no longer give you my undivided attention. I'm feeling defensive and so must take a breather. Give me a few minutes to collect myself."

Since this will have been agreed upon ahead of time, your mate will allow this without making a bigger deal out of it. He/she knows that this will help both of you.

Finally, the one who calls the Time Out calls the time back in, and ONLY when they can attend fully to their mate.

Will you agree to use Time Outs?

(The one who calls the Time Out will call time back in, within a reasonable amount of time. This should be sometime within the next 24 hours.)

Both of you must recognize when you leave the Sanctuary and enter the Courtroom. Becoming argumentative, adversarial and angry are a few of the primary signs of defensiveness.

Will you stay out of the COURTROOM?

Empathy

Empathy is perhaps the most powerful, as well as the most misunderstood concept, when it comes to really connecting with our mate. Empathy requires that we step outside of ourselves – outside the way we perceive things; outside the way we think things ought to be; outside the way we even want them to be; outside the way we insist they be – to the way they are for our mate. We take time to walk in their shoes. We slowly consider what it is like to live with someone LIKE US!

If you are a moody person, consider what it is like to live with someone like you – moods and all. If you have a temper, what is it like to live with someone who has a temper? If you withdraw into silence, what do you suppose it is like to be on the receiving end of that silence? Take some time to walk in your mate's shoes. It will turn on some lights for you.

Now, share that empathy. One of the most powerful and healing truths is this: Accurate empathy heals. When you really “get” your mate, when you understand what they are experiencing, and can share it effectively, you create a bond like none other. They sense your attempt to connect to them. They feel valued, cared for and honored that you would reach out in this way.

Empathy changes the empathizer. Yes, that's right. Accurate empathy not only draws you to your mate, but it changes your heart. The intent to understand your mate draws you to them, and is one of the highest forms of love.

The way of the wise...

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

Romans 12:15

Validation

Validation is another incredibly powerful link to your mate, and it is also very misunderstood.

What do we mean by validation? Consider what your mate is experiencing and share with them how you have contributed to their painful feelings.

Let me offer an illustration.

In a moment of frustration and anger I say something sarcastic to my wife. "You don't care at all about my feelings." Simple words said in a moment of frustration. But the words were meant to hurt, and they do! Here is how I might empathize and validate my wife's feelings.

"Christie, when I said you didn't care about my feelings, I attempted to hurt you, and I did. I tried to demean you, and I know that those words were hurtful. They were intended to poke at your character, and I understand you withdrawing from me because of my hurtful words. I'm sorry for saying them."

Notice how I take ownership of my words, as well as owning my hurtful intentions. I also validate her need to push away from me because of them. I affirm that she has the right to feel the way she does, and I contributed to her feeling bruised by me.

Notice also where I made my apology – after I have empathized with her feelings and validated them. To apologize one moment sooner is to diminish the power of the apology. To apologize sooner is to hurry the process. Some have called this cheap grace – a desire on our part to hurry and get things back to normal.

TRYING IT OUT

I'd like you to practice the art of Validation. Consider a recent event in your relationship where you've hurt your mate's feelings.

What was your part in the conflict?

What was the impact of your behavior?

Practice saying to them, "It is true that..."

Do not move forward until you have completely owned your side of the conflict.

Take it slow. Listen carefully to see if your mate feels your connection with them. Ask if they feel listened to. Have you "sat with" whatever emotions arose? Remember also that in addition to taking time, this takes courage. You must be fully present to your mate and whatever feelings they have, pleasant and unpleasant.

Empathy and Validation form an incredibly powerful healing connection. Consider how you might use them to draw closer to your mate.

BEING INFLUENCED BY YOUR MATE

Do you really care about your mate? Do you have their best interests in mind? I certainly hope so. Though you have been through tough times, perhaps even to the point of wondering about your relationship, you must dig deep within yourself to find that place where you can sincerely say, "I care about you."

If you can find this place of caring, you can allow your mate to influence you. You can believe that in the midst of their criticism, they really care about you. Trusting that they care about you, you lower your defenses and let them impact you. You listen to everything they say, attending carefully to 'the kernel of truth' in what they are saying to you.

Take a moment and consider what he/she is saying to you. What is the message he/she wants you to hear? What is the central point they want to make to you that, if you listened attentively to it, would make a powerful statement?

What do they want you to know?

Remember, accurate empathy heals. That means, if you listen to your mate, and let them know you really care about what they are trying to tell you, you can win their heart and their affections.

So, look your mate in the eyes and tell them: "I want to know what you are trying to tell me. I am listening and I care."

Remember, accurate empathy heals. That means, if you listen to your mate, and let them know you really care about what they are trying to tell you, you can win their heart and their affections.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Each part of this sequence is critical. Like learning a new language, learning to communicate effectively, especially when there is voltage in the topic, is challenging. But, you can do it. Let's run through the most powerful communicating sentence you can know.

If you want to heal the broken connection with you mate, you will:

- Listen to their concerns
- Convey that you understand their concerns
- Empathize with their feelings
- Validate their right to feel the way they do AND your part in contributing to
 - those feelings
- Apologize sincerely
- Convey your dedication to changing

Christie handled things very effectively with me as I shared my frustration about her being late. She made the following statement:

"I hear that you are frustrated about me being late. I hear your concern about my safety, and your need to be respected. I understand what you're saying. I know I could have called and let you know I'd be late, and I didn't do that. I'm sorry and won't let it happen again."

Can you see the power in this exchange? I feel heard, attended to, empathized with, and validated, with a commitment that the situation won't occur again. This is healing, effective, emotionally corrective communication!

"We are in this together and We can figure this out!"

Every crisis is an opportunity. Don't worry about the fact that there is tension in your relationship. IF you have a plan, IF you are motivated to improve your relationship, every situation is an opportunity for growth. Your relationship can be more powerful, more intimate than ever.

No one else in the universe has your story. You and your mate have your own unique history. You have a connection forged by hundreds of experiences – some bad, many good. Making a relationship work occurs when we learn from the bad experiences and apply them to changing the future. You can do that. Success is also built upon believing you can do it. Trusting that together, by mastering these tools, you will achieve a powerful and intimate connection with your mate. So, sit down with your mate and let them know that no matter how tough the road gets at times, you're in this with them forever – and though challenging, you WILL be able to figure it out.



Dr. David Hawkins is the founder of the Marriage Recovery Center located near Seattle, Washington. He and his team are passionate about helping couples find hope and healing for their relationships. Whether your relationship is in crisis, or you long for a deeper connection with your partner, the Marriage Recovery Center will help you gain the tools you both need to experience a healthy and fulfilling relationship.

Learn more at www.marriagerecoverycenter.com