

A large, stylized number '31' in a bold, orange-red font. The number '3' is on the left and the number '1' is on the right. The word 'Days' is written in a black, elegant script font across the middle of the '3'. The background features a faint, grey, abstract pattern of overlapping squares and rectangles, some with internal patterns like grids or dots, creating a sense of depth and complexity.

# 31 Days

to Build a Better  
**RELATIONSHIP**

*Thank you to my parents  
for teaching me about commitment, respect and enduring love.  
And to the best teacher of all, my partner.  
Thank you for your patience, love and support, which I cherish.  
Our relationship has been the best teacher I've ever known.*

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# *Introduction*

Congratulations!

By purchasing this eBook you are taking the first step to building a better relationship.

I know it's not easy for some people to reach out for support and help. If that seems like you, know that you're taking a proactive approach toward creating the type of relationship you want. I've been privileged to work for over a decade with many singles and couples who have struggled with relationship issues. What I've learned in that time is that no two people or couples are the same. However, there are familiar patterns and cycles that can occur between singles and couples that stop the partners from having the fulfilling relationships for which they long.

Building a better relationship is not easy. It takes attention, work and perseverance. Sometimes you will stumble and sometimes you will fall, but you can always pick yourself up, learn from the experience and continue to improve your relationship.

In this eBook, I describe some of the strategies and concepts that I use when working with singles and couples to help them to break these painful patterns of relating. These tips can help you to form and maintain a relationship that is loving, respectful, enduring and life affirming. To get the best use out of this book, you don't need to read it from beginning to end, as each chapter is a stand-alone tip that you can read and start doing straight away. Just know that there are many more than just 31 tips in this book. You will find at the end of some chapters there are multiple tips and ideas for change. In fact, you could probably take one to a few chapters at a time and just work on applying the tips I suggest for 31 days.

What I recommend is you choose one tip from each chapter to work on for the next 24 hours. Choose the tip that has the most meaning for you. Then after the 24 hours is over, see if you can continue to incorporate this new idea or behavior into your relationship. If you start to feel overwhelmed at any time, just come back to making small and meaningful changes to your relationship and continue to observe and track your results.

## 31 Days to Build a Better RELATIONSHIP

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Many people find using the structure of one relationship tip a day is helpful as it ensures that they start making changes in their relationship and continue to build on these changes. Additionally, knowing that you only need to read one chapter and do one action step per day will feel very achievable to most people.

Why 31 days? Well, it's the repetition of good behaviors over time that then helps you make them long-standing habits. While some readers will need more than 31 days and some will need less to establish positive relationship patterns, just know that if you can commit to working on one action step each day, you're well on the road to building a better relationship. It's also fine if you want to read this book from beginning to end in one sitting to get a broad overview, and then dive back into the chapters you found the most helpful and apply them. There's no right or wrong way to use this book!

Remember that it takes time, patience, compassion and understanding to make relationships work. Most importantly, the tips described in this book take practice, and lots of it! Practice, practice and practice even more until new habits and ways of being start to feel increasingly natural. Don't be hard on yourself if you find that changes are not happening immediately in your relationship. It takes time to establish new habits that stick.

If you're single, don't despair. You can still read this book and take note of the relationship advice and tips so you can apply it to the next relationship you're in. In fact, I think being single is the perfect time to reflect and work on your relationship issues, as you can go into the next relationship with greater awareness and knowledge about what works and what doesn't work. You might find that you reach an impasse where you're struggling to move forward in regards to your relationship issues or in your intimate relationship. This may be because patterns and forces that are beyond your awareness are keeping you stuck. If this is the case, you may need to reach out for professional support to assist you as you move through a difficult period.

I encourage you to seek out the help of a professional relationship counselor or psychotherapist, whether you are a single or in a couple, so that you can begin to create the type of relationship you have always wanted.

I'd love to hear the results you get from working through this eBook. Please send any feedback to [clinton@clintonpower.com.au](mailto:clinton@clintonpower.com.au). I make it a point to personally reply to every email I receive.

I wish you all the best in your endeavors to create loving relationships!

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# Day 1: *Communication 101*

It's impossible to build a better relationship without addressing communication.

Good communication is the basis of any successful relationship. In fact, I often think of communication as the foundation of your relationship house--if your foundation isn't solid (meaning your communication is poor), everything you place above it will be unstable and will suffer. This is equally true for relationships. You may love your partner with all your heart, but if the two of you can't communicate effectively and express your wants and needs, as well as your emotions, that love you have for each other is not going to last the distance.

## **So what's good communication and what's poor communication?**

Good communication can show up in many different ways, but there are some common themes that run through most examples of good communication. These include:

- Active listening, where you take the time to hear what your partner is saying
- Seeking to understand before wanting to be understood
- Reflecting, recapping and checking that what you're hearing is correct
- Suspending your reactions and responses until your partner says that you've understood the message
- Speaking with an attitude of respect and compassion
- Acknowledging differences without needing to eradicate them
- Bringing a state of curiosity to the conversation
- Asking questions to help your partner share more of his or her internal world.

This is just a start, but I hope you're getting an idea of some of the more important features of good communication.

When it comes to poor communication, there are also some common themes that emerge in the lives of couples who struggle with their abilities to express themselves. These include:

- Reacting and responding before the message received has been understood
- Interrupting, butting in, cutting off and attacking your partner when he or she is speaking
- Making assumptions about the meaning and intentions of your partner before checking whether these assumptions are correct
- Treating your partner with disdain, contempt or disgust
- Being defensive when your partner is explaining his or her point of view
- Not allowing differences of opinion and needing to be right at all times
- Steamrolling or stonewalling your partner when she or he is speaking (more about these terms later)
- Lacking curiosity about how your partner thinks and feels and why.

You're probably thinking many of these things are just common sense, but the reality is that we're all guilty of falling into poor communication patterns at one time or another.

### **Day 1 Action Step**

Review the list of poor communication behaviors and write down or tick off which behaviors you have engaged in.

Then look at the list of good communication behaviors and write down or tick off which behaviors you need to improve at.

Now, for the next 24 hours I want you to notice the ways in which you are communicating with your partner. If you observe yourself falling into the trap of poor communication behaviors, I want you to pause. Take that moment to think about what you need to change in order to improve your communication and start to do that. Notice the results that emerge from this shift in your communication. Do this for longer if you are able, but be sure to focus intently on this exercise for at least 24 hours.

**Tip:** Don't tell your partner that you're consciously doing this as it can detract from the impact of observing yourself and that which happens when you make changes to your communication. Just keep this to yourself and enjoy the changes to the quality of your relationship as you change your communication.



## **Day 2: *Is Your Communication Style Passive, Aggressive or Assertive?***

As we start to delve into the ins and outs of communication, it's important that we spend a little time looking at the different communication styles.

Everyone has a unique communication style, but there are three main styles that are what I call "umbrella styles," and all communication falls under one of these umbrellas, no matter how idiosyncratic that style may be.

They are:

1. Passive communication
2. Aggressive communication
3. Assertive communication

Let's examine each of these styles in a little more detail.

### **Passive communication**

Passive communication consists of refusing to take a pro-active position in regards to asking for what is wanted or need. Like the name suggests, passive communication usually involves the communicator being passive in some way—neglecting to overtly share his or her thoughts and feelings, letting others take the lead in the communication and often failing to get his or her wants or needs met.

Passive communicators often have an underlying belief that they "aren't good enough" and that "other people are better," which is reflected by they way they take the "one down" position in their relationships with others.

Passive communicators don't do well in relationships; they often start to feel resentful that because they acquiesce to the desires of their partners and surrender what they themselves want their partners get what it is that *they* want.

Another form of passive communication is passive aggression, which is an indirect way of expressing anger. A common scenario is when a passive communicator starts to feel resentful and angry toward someone. Rather than express the anger directly, the passive communicator will do something to hurt or upset that person in an indirect way. As you can imagine, this is not an effective way to communicate and leads to relationship turmoil.

### **Aggressive communication**

Aggressive communication involves the speaker taking the "one-up" position. Aggressive communicators will often attack, belittle, blame, criticize and generally denigrate their partners to get what they want. They will sometimes use brute force, which can lead to what's commonly known as domestic violence.

But not all aggressive communicators are violent. It's more common that they will use language such as "you," "you're," "always" and "never" when speaking to their partners. For example, you might hear an aggressive communicator say, "You never take the garbage out! You're just so lazy!"

Aggressive communicators often feel deep down that they are vulnerable, weak or deficient in some way, so they use aggressive communication to overcompensate and achieve the "top-dog" position in a situation.

While this may work in the short term—they will often get what they want—their relationships are not based on equality and, over time, the trust, faith and goodwill in these relationships erodes, and the more submissive partners will "check out" of the relationship and leave, emotionally and/or physically.

### **Assertive communication**

Assertive communication is neither passive nor aggressive; it is a balanced communication style that privileges each voice in the conversation equally. An assertive communicator will freely and respectfully disclose feelings, thoughts, wants and needs in a way that can be heard by the other person.

The basis of assertive communication is that all people must be treated equally. You support yourself in having a perspective and a voice, and you also respect that your partner has a perspective and a voice that may be different from yours, but just as valuable nonetheless.

Assertive communicators use “I” language to express their thoughts and feelings. For example, “I would appreciate it if you would return this dish to the kitchen and bring my steak well done.”

Assertive communicators do not avoid conflict or feelings of anger. In fact, they see the expression of anger as being healthy and important and they will share these feelings respectfully. For example, “I am feeling angry that you didn’t let me know what time you would be home.”

The important point to notice here is that the assertive communicator takes ownership of his or her feelings and thoughts and doesn’t blame others for those feelings. This is an important distinction from the aggressive communicator, who will often blame others for his or her feelings.

### **Day 2 Action Step**

Again, I want you to observe your communication with your partner, but don’t stop there. Also observe how you communicate with friends, family and work colleagues. Your communication style will show up across many different relationships.

Look for the features of passive, aggressive and assertive. Take stock of the communication style that you tend to gravitate toward.

If you find assertive communication difficult, I want you to experiment with your partner over the next 24 hours by using assertive communication and noticing what outcomes you both experience. Keep note of the outcomes and the language you used to help achieve such outcomes so you can refer back and check where your strengths and weaknesses are.

## **Day 3: *How to Resolve Conflict and Find Win-Win Situations***

All relationships experience conflict at one time or another. To think that any relationship doesn't is a fallacy.

I believe that conflict can be a positive force in a relationship when that conflict is worked through in such a way that it leads to new outcomes and changes that benefit both partners.

When you experience conflict in your relationship, I encourage you to consider the purpose of the conflict. If you can go beneath the conflict and start to reflect on why it is showing up at that moment, you can start to see that it represents something important in your relationship.

Some of the things that conflict can represent include:

- A need to understand your partner's perspective in a deeper way (even if you disagree).
- A need to look at a recurring problem between you and your partner in a different way.
- A need to try and find different solutions to your common problems.
- A need to respect and appreciate each others' differences.

### **The problem with unresolved conflict**

The problem with conflict that is not productive is that it can be incredible destructive. Conflict that goes nowhere and is not resolved or is ongoing and abusive has lasting repercussions for any relationship.

Unresolved conflict can damage the trust and goodwill in your relationship; when it goes on for long enough, it can even affect your overall health and wellbeing.

So it's essential that you develop some skills that will allow you to start to process and resolve conflict when it arises in your relationship.

### **How to effectively deal with conflict in your relationship**

There are a number of things you can do to avoid setting yourself up for a win-lose dynamic and communication problems in your relationship.

Consider these points when discussing important issues (in sequential order):

1. Raise the issue at an appropriate time that works for both of you.
2. If it's not a good time for one of you, make another time then-and-there to meet again.
3. Only raise one issue at a time and stay on track with that issue not allowing any other issues to be raised.
4. Raise your issue with a soft start-up (see chapter 4).
5. Before you respond, let your partner know what you have heard and check your understanding is correct.
6. Ask open-ended questions to allow your partner to go deeper into their side of the issue e.g. 'what', 'how' and 'when' questions are good, but avoid 'why' questions if possible.
7. Once you have fully understood what your partner is saying, validate his/her perspective by letting them know what makes sense to you.
8. Respond with empathy to his/her perspective to build more connection e.g. "I imagine you feel...[insert feeling]...is that how you feel?"
9. Once your partner has expressed everything about the issue from their perspective, then it's time for you to respond with your perspective using the same structure.

Can you see where the challenges are in this process?

Most couples cannot tolerate suspending their responses while listening, reflecting, asking questions, validating and being empathic. This is the part where your need to be right trumps the validity of what your partner is sharing. You then discount and dismiss their perspective because you are so fixated on making sure that your truth is the one that is superior.

### **Why curiosity is the secret sauce for loving relationships**

The biggest tool you can use in the process of resolving conflict effectively is curiosity. And this is no easy task for most couples.

Maintaining curiosity about what your partner is saying when every cell in your body wants to defend yourself is one of the most challenging skills that everyone in a couple needs to develop in order to become effective at resolving conflict. Additionally, not developing that curiosity can lead to relationship ruin.

You see, what curiosity does is it:

- Shows your partner that you care about his or her thoughts and feelings
- Gives you more information about the issue, thereby increasing your understanding
- Helps you to suspend your own reactivity and defensiveness
- Deescalates volatile discussions that are fueled by fast-moving reactivity

### **You're both right . . . and you're both wrong**

The truth in the discussion of any issue is that you're both right and you're both wrong. There are always two different realities that are both true at any given time. Each of you perceives the issue from your own perspectives. Your viewpoint is your own reality and is true for you, and the same applies to your partner.

We could also say that you're both wrong as well. Neither of you could ever appreciate every single part and nuance that your partner is sharing about the issue. None of us has omnipresent powers, so any perspective is limited by that which we can each see, hear and feel with our senses.

I believe bringing a humble attitude to the discussion of your issues can have wonderful benefits for you both. When you can sincerely be humble about how little you actually know you realize that you don't need to be right. And, of course, there's no such thing as right and wrong when you truly appreciate the complexity of human relationships.

### **Day 3 Action Step**

The next time you have some conflict in your relationship, I want you to pause and follow the steps above.

If it helps, write out or print out the sequence of steps so you can refer to them as you're discussing the issue that's causing conflict.

If things get too heated at any time, agree to call a time-out so you can both cool off and then come back at a prearranged time to start the discussion again.

Remember, the goal is not always to resolve the issue; the goal is to make sure that each of you fully understands and appreciates the other's perspective even if you disagree with that perspective.

## Day 4: *The Value of the Soft Start-Up When Discussing Issues*

A change in communication can result in immediate and positive benefits for your relationship.

Dr. John Gottman and Dr. Julie Schwartz Gottman are famous for their world-renowned research on couple dynamics and communication. Their book *The Seven Principles for Making a Marriage Work* has become a bestseller because it focuses on such practical aspects of your relationship that you can start to make changes immediately.

One of their hugely popular couple-communication concepts is the idea of the “soft start-up.”

### **What is the soft start-up?**

The soft start-up involves simply approaching a conversation with your partner in a soft way so that your partner can better receive what you are saying.

Many couples fall into the trap of initiating communication with a harsh start-up such as, “Why didn’t you clean the kitchen?!” [said with a blaming tone].

The Gottmans found in their research that when you start a conversation with tension or harshness, it’s almost certain that you will end the conversation with tension. Perhaps you’ve noticed this yourself? How does one communicate with a soft start-up?

There are several tips that can help you to use the soft start-up to begin a conversation or raise an issue in your relationship.

#### ***1. Choose your timing carefully***

Before you even think about raising an issue or starting a difficult conversation, make sure you’ve got your timing right.

Don't choose a time when one, or both, of you is stressed, rushed or dealing with other matters. Also, avoid noisy and crowded environments—you want to make sure you're both relaxed and able to focus on one another without any interruptions.

### *2. Start with something positive*

Beginning your conversation with a positive statement can make a huge difference in the way that you are received. It also sets the scene for your conversation.

For example, saying, "Darling, I want to let you know that I really appreciate how hard you're working at the moment to save money for our deposit," before you discuss a money issue can help you get off to a strong start.

### *3. Own your feelings and use "I" statements*

Another important aspect of the soft start-up is to own your feelings and use "I" statements.

This has a two-fold effect. One, your partner will be less defensive because you're sharing your own feelings, not commenting or interpreting the feelings of your partner. Secondly, using "I" statements helps you to take ownership of your experience, which makes it less likely that your partner will hear what you're saying as blameful.

For example, "When you left this morning and didn't turn the dishwasher on, I felt annoyed when I came home," is much more palatable than, "You are so lazy and forgetful—why didn't you remember to turn the dishwasher on like I asked you?"

The former is more likely to get you a positive response and the latter is more likely to make your partner defend his or her position and attack back.

### *4. Watch your tone of voice*

Being mindful of your tone of voice can also help with the soft start-up.

As humans, we are wired to be sensitive to threat, and threat can be perceived through the voice and the vocal tone. There can be a fine line between assertive communication and aggressive communication.

Check your tone as you start to speak. Is there an edge to it? Is there harshness? If so, see if you can soften your tone. If it helps, notice any tension in your voice and consciously relax your throat and vocal cords.

### *5. Share a complaint, but don't criticize*

It's normal to have complaints about our partners. In fact, if you make it clear what outcome you desire, it can be very healthy for partners to share complaints with each other.



The problem starts when complaints become criticisms. Any attack on the character of your partner, including global statements about their failings (“you never” or “you always”), can railroad any productive conversation very quickly.

Focus on specific behaviors and make it clear what it is that you dislike, how you feel and how you would like them to change.

### *6. Make requests for change*

Continuing on from the last point—complaints without any requests for change are also unhelpful. If you only share your feelings and complaints, your partner may not understand what it is that you want.

Let your partner know the specific change you desire. For example, “When you leave your clothes on the floor I feel irritated because I have a need for a clean house, so I’m asking you to please put your clothes in the basket.”

You might have noticed that in this example the speaker also expressed his need. An expression of your greater need—such as a need for cleanliness and organization—can also help your partner to understand the source of your irritation. This understanding can then help your partner to be more mindful of your values in the relationship and provide him or her with ways in which to accommodate those values.

## **Day 4 Action Step**

In the next 24 hours, I want you to raise an issue with your partner using the soft start-up.

The issue doesn’t have to be the biggest issue you currently have between you. In fact, I advise that you begin with a smaller issue so you can grasp the feel of using the soft start-up.

Like previous action steps, I want you to observe what it’s like for you to communicate in this way and what outcomes such communication produces. Take note of positive and negative outcomes and adjust your approach accordingly.

## **Day 5: *How to Complain Constructively to Your Partner***

Complaining gets a bad rap, but I think it's a good thing.

If you know how to complain well, you can get good results (meaning, you can get what you want!) and it won't be harmful to your relationship. I always encourage couples to complain to each other rather than criticize.

Now, complaints that don't lead to any changes in behavior can turn into criticisms, which are certainly harmful to your relationship.

Terry Real—author of the bestseller *The New Rules of Marriage: What You Need to Know to Make Love Work*, and a relationship expert who is in high demand with the international media for his commentary on relationships and marriage—has a great 4-step formula addressing the ways in which to constructively complain to your partner.

He breaks down how to effectively complain to your partner into four easy steps.

### **Pre-complaint preparation**

Before you open your mouth, hold the word “love” in your thoughts for a moment. This means that you should think about the intention that you're aiming for. Remember that you're speaking to someone you love. If you can get yourself in the right mindset before you complain, you'll be more likely to get a good outcome.

Then, follow this 4-step formula to complain well:

### *1. This is what I observe*

Describe the actual observation you saw or heard as if you had watched or heard a recording of it. Keep it simple and behavioral. Don't interpret or make assumptions at this stage.

For example, "When you came in the room you slammed the door and I heard you yell."

### *2. This is the meaning it had for me*

Take responsibility for what you saw or heard—after all, it is you who is seeing and hearing and what has happened is filtered through your vision of the world. We all interpret and perceive things differently.

By saying, "The story I make up about this is . . .," you have permission to freely share your interpretation or the story you created about the situation without blaming or accusing your partner.

For example, "When I didn't hear from you the whole day you were with your friends, the story I made up about that was you think they are more important to you than me".

### *3. This is what I felt*

Again, take responsibility for what you feel.

No one makes you feel anything. As difficult as it may be to accept, it is you who chooses to feel every feeling that you feel. Don't tell your partner what he or she is feeling (which is "you" talk), speak about your feelings (not thoughts!). Feeling words include hurt, happy, sad, angry, frustrated, etc.

For example, "When you didn't call me while you were on your business trip I felt sad and lonely".

### *4. Here is something you could say or do that would help me to feel better*

Make sure you tell your partner what you want from him or her that would help you to feel better.

It's through making a clear request that you can then hope to get what you want. If you don't ask for what you want, it is unlikely that you will get it!

### *Bonus step: Let it go*

Once you've communicated your thoughts and feelings, you need to let it go. You've done what you can to make the situation better and now it's time to let it go.

One way to help yourself let go is to stop focusing on the issue and direct your attention to more positive actions in your relationship. This then will help you start to feel better and more productive.

### **Day 5 Action Step**

Sometime in the next 24 hours I want you to notice something that annoys or irritates you about your relationship or about your partner. Then, I want you to use the 4-step formula to complain to your partner.

Remember the soft start-up and use it to introduce your complaint to your partner so as not to shock or surprise him or her.

Be very clear and specific—the more specific you are, the higher the chance that your partner will understand and be able to respond in a positive way.

## **Day 6: *How to Ask for What You Want and Need***

One of the causes of emotional pain in relationships is not getting what you need.

As emotional creatures we all have emotional needs that have to be attended to in order to feel happy and satisfied in our day-to-day lives. It's normal to have needs in relationships and one of the joys of being in relationship with another person is that you can take pleasure in the experience of having those needs met.

Unfortunately, it doesn't always happen in the way that you want.

The other side of the equation is that some people believe in the notion of "perfect, unconditional love," which is totally unrealistic. If you have an expectation of a perfect relationship, you're going to be experiencing pain every time your partner doesn't live up to your expectations.

### **Unmet Needs = Emotional Pain**

It's possible that you've experienced pain when your needs have not been met by your partner. Perhaps you've expressed a need but your partner has responded defensively and angrily. Maybe your partner didn't understand your need or perhaps he or she simply ignored it.

Some partners will retaliate by immediately expressing their own unmet needs instead of responding to the needs their partners have expressed. This is often the beginning of a cycle of anger, blame and criticism, which can then lead to contempt—and we know from the research that when a couple begins to feel contempt, the chances of the relationship surviving lower significantly.

### The Nonviolent Communication Model

Marshall Rosenberg, in his groundbreaking book *Nonviolent Communication (NVC)*, introduced a model for expressing needs through effective communication in your relationship. I find this model particularly useful when working with couples. It uses four steps:

1. Observation
2. Feeling
3. Need
4. Request

#### 1. Observation

This part of the communication process involves describing what you hear or see. Describe what it is that you like or dislike, without judgment, evaluation or blame, e.g., “John, I notice that your clothes are on the floor.”

#### 2. Feeling

This part of the process involves sharing your feelings when you observe this action so that they are known by the other, e.g., I feel hurt, scared, happy or angry.

#### 3. Need

When you state your need, you are expressing what your values are and how they are connected to the observation. Here is how you might link the first three steps:

*“John, I notice that your clothes are on the floor and I feel irritated because I have a need for a clean house.”*

It’s important to note that the need is not about John picking up his clothes. A need is often related to a *value* that you believe is important, and for this reason needs tend to be more broad and general, such as, “I need to feel appreciated,” or, “I need to be professional and on time,” or, “I have a need to be honest and open with those I love.”

#### 4. Request

In this part of the model you make a request for change.

The request is what you want from the other that would enrich your life.

So, the last part of the example might be:

*“John, I would really appreciate it if you would pick up your clothes and put them in the laundry.”*

The great thing about this model is that you can also use it in reverse so that you can deepen your connection and empathy with your partner.

Use the four components to sense what your partner might be observing, feeling and needing and then become aware of what might enrich his or her life with the fourth part, a request. In

my experience this is a wonderful way to deepen your relationship and to voice your feelings, needs and requests in a way that you can truly be heard.

For example, “John, I noticed that you haven’t been cleaning the house and you’ve told me you’re really tired from work. I know that doing well in your business is very important for you, so I’m wondering if you would like me to help you some more around the house?”

### **Day 6 Action Step**

Take some time to identify an unexpressed need that you have and use the NVC 4-part model to express this need to your partner. Observe the results and see if your partner can meet your need.

Remember, your expression of a need does not automatically mean that your partner will meet that need. Your partner can still choose not to meet your need, but the important thing is that you start to get better at expressing your needs in your relationship.

## **Day 7: *The 5 Biggest Losing Strategies That Couples Use***

Relationships don't come with manuals, and the training that most of us get is from those around us as we are growing up.

Rightly or wrongly, we learn our coping strategies and how to get what we want from our relationships by absorbing the behavior of those closest to us in our formative years—and more often than not without even being conscious of doing so.

I call this our “relationship blueprint”—our individual beliefs and understandings about how to relate to others. We absorb this blueprint throughout our childhood and adolescence, and it's this blueprint that goes on to be the foundation for the relationships we form in the future.

According to Terry Real, people in intimate relationships use five main losing strategies that push them apart rather than create greater intimacy. Many of those losing strategies are a result of relationship blueprints.

Have a look and ask yourself whether you are using any of these losing strategies in an attempt to improve your relationship. If you are, you may just be wondering why they aren't working and why you stay at loggerheads with your partner.

### **1. Being right**

Being right is a bit of a slippery slope—it often comes down to being right according to whom? Sorting out differences in a relationship is not a matter of who is right or wrong, nor is it about when it is that you're trying to be right. The idea of who is “right” may be dependent on your value system without taking into account the values of your partner.

Nobody wins when the discussion or argument tips over into self-righteous indignation. In fact, you can easily end up hurting the person you love by shaming him or her according to your values and applying this “scientific method” to your relationship.



Remember—you are both right. Each of you can have different experiences of the one event because you are different people with different perspectives. Every relationship has multiple truths. Trying to assert your version of events as the right one only serves to create greater distance between you and your partner.

### **2. Controlling your partner**

People don't like to be controlled and the reality is that it's never a successful strategy and is likely to foster resentment and mistrust.

Whether it's direct or indirect (manipulative) controlling, this form of behavior crosses the emotional boundaries of the relationship and may create more distance between you and your partner as opposed to working to bridge the gap. You are each separate people and each have the right to make choices about what and how you do things. Respective these choices is an important part of any healthy relationship.

Letting go of control is hard for some people as they want to feel they have a say or input in everything their partners do.

But remember this—control is an illusion.

None of us can control anyone and the longer you think you can, the faster you will start to lose your relationship intimacy.

### **3. Unbridled self-expression**

Unbridled self-expression is often couched in one of you saying, "But I'm just being honest!"

Some people in couples think that it's OK to share everything that crosses their minds without reflecting on the impact this sharing will have on their partners.

Honesty is not always your best policy, particularly if it leads to you hurting your partner through your "speaking your truth."

Try authentic sharing that speaks to the heart of what you are feeling so that you communicate accurately with your partner instead of indulging in unbridled self-expression that rarely prompts generosity in others.

### 4. Retaliation

Whether the retaliation is large or small, direct or indirect, some people “offend” from the position of a victim.

Offending from the position of a victim happens if you feel you have been wronged or hurt in some way by your partner and you retaliate from the position of the underdog, believing that your retaliation is completely reasonable.

While you may feel justified in your retaliation, particularly when you feel hurt, the reality is that you rarely get the result you want.

It’s important to understand the distinction between retaliating and simply standing up for yourself. You can stand up for yourself without attacking and if you can learn to develop that skill, you’ll find that you can create greater intimacy between yourself and your partner.

### 5. Withdrawal

Withdrawal can mean a number of things. It may be that you’re giving up, or you may be withdrawing in a passive aggressive manner as a means of retaliation, or perhaps you’re signaling that you don’t wish to invest any further energy in the relationship.

Withdrawal creates resentment and makes it impossible for differences to be resolved. Withdrawal is also painful for you and your partner.

Nobody likes to be shut out. In fact, it’s often a much more damaging way to respond to your partner than it is to stay in contact with your partner and share your anger or hurt.

If you feel the need to withdraw from your partner, let him or her know what you’re doing and make an agreement to stay in contact and reconnect so that you may discuss things further. Doing so will promote trust, safety and good will in your relationship.

### **Day 7 Action Step**

Review the five losing strategies above and consider which ones you have used in the past with your partner and write those strategies down.

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Now, take a moment to think about the specific events and how you could have responded differently. Write down how you aspire to respond next time you're tempted to use one of these losing strategies.

If it helps, fold this piece of paper up and keep it in your wallet or purse so you can refer to it and remind yourself.

## **Day 8: *Online Communication Mistakes to Avoid***

It seems that we're becoming increasingly connected to each other online, and online relationships are starting to become even more important than face-to-face relationships, so it's important that we address how you're communicating with your partner online.

Some new research says that young Generation-X adults are as likely to connect online with friends, family and co-workers as they are to connect in person. The researchers suggest that this is the beginning of a new paradigm wherein online communications will be the dominant way in which we interact and relate to others.

I think this is no surprise to anybody when you see how attached we are to our mobile devices and our need to be connected to others 24/7.

### **Disclosing too much information (aka TMI) that affects your partner**

We've all had the experience of gasping with shock at information that someone we know has shared online. I recently had a Facebook friend who shared intimate photos of his operation. The photos were totally inappropriate for public consumption.

This phenomena is a common one that has been well documented with people also sharing too much information in the workplace, leading to reprimands and lost jobs.

The danger about sharing too much information is that this info can be captured and released into the public domain. Anyone can take a screenshot of his or her computer, smartphone or tablet screen and send it to others—and the cost can be long lasting.

There can also be consequences to your partner and your relationship, so make sure that you check with your partner if you're going to share something that could be seen as risky.

### **Communicating too frequently with your partner**

Some people are so attached to their mobile devices and computers that they feel anxiety when they can't connect with their networks after a short amount of time.

This kind of compulsive need to communicate can show up as a form of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) wherein you're checking Facebook, Twitter and email every few minutes. Being in a conscious state of alertness, anxiety and arousal can have the consequence of increasing your overall stress levels.

I've also seen partners constantly communicating via email, SMS and social media when they're not together. It's possible to communicate too frequently with your partner, so start taking some breaks from each other so you don't develop a dependence on always needing to be in communication with each other.

### **Too much reacting and not enough reflecting**

Due to the instantaneous nature of the Internet, it's far too easy for people to become reactive in their communication online and not take time to consider their actions.

I've seen many instances where people will "shoot from the hip" online only to inflame their relationships or bring their relationships to sudden ends. If the people had taken the time to pause, breathe and reflect, it's likely that their relationships wouldn't have been damaged.

It's always harder to repair a relationship when someone feels injured than it is to approach your partner offline and talk through the issues before anyone gets hurt.

If you have the impulse to respond quickly in a reactive way to your partner via email or SMS, make sure you pause and reflect on the consequences before sending a response.

### **Crossing boundaries**

A common complaint I hear from clients is about someone crossing a boundary through online communication. This might show up when a family member discloses personal details about

another family member without permission. I've heard of families having huge fallouts because a sibling shared some tragic family news to her Facebook friends without seeking the permission of the people involved.

It's also becoming more commonplace that people are sharing major life events like births and deaths online. Before you share information that may not be your business but is the business of your partner, you need to consider if you have the authority or permission to communicate that news.

The question to ask yourself is, "Is this my business or someone else's business?" If it's the latter, you may end up in a difficult situation when others discover that you've shared their personal news.

If you're unsure as to whether you can post something that is related to your partner, run it by him or her first.

### **Sharing photos and locations of your partner without permission**

This one's a little trickier, but it has also emerged as an issue for many people.

A huge amount of the information that is shared online now includes photos and locations. People love to share photos with their friends and don't think twice before doing this. However, this practise has been the cause of many relationship problems.

A man shares a less-than-flattering photo of his wife with his Facebook friends. And don't forget all the privacy concerns that can come from letting people know where and when you are in a particular location.

The possibilities are endless, and it's always best to check first to be sure that your partner is ok with you revealing his or her location or posting a photo that includes him or her.

### **Day 8 Action Step**

Start to observe your online communication with your partner in light of these communication mistakes.

Watch for any areas where you think you might be slipping into unhelpful online communication habits. The danger areas to watch for will be when you have a strong emotional response to something posted online.

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If you can identify any mistakes you're making, become more aware of these potential problems and experiment with changing and improving your online communication.

As with anything, if you have doubts, just take it to an offline conversation with your partner.

## Day 9: *Why You Should Stop Giving Your Partner Advice*

Have you ever noticed that people love to give advice?

Just share with a friend or a family member a problem or a dilemma you're currently going through—you can bet that you'll start receiving some advice.

Don't get me wrong—advice is not bad. In fact, when invited, taken under consideration and weighed up against your internal values and personal integrity, advice can be very helpful. However, unsolicited advice given within your relationship is often unhelpful.

### **Advice can be a response to uncomfortable feelings**

Let me paint a common scenario for you (note, this is not gender specific):

*Your partner comes home from work in a distressed state. She's had an awful day at work and she's been on the receiving end of some manipulation and ugly office politics that have resulted in her being blamed for something she didn't do. As she tells you the story she starts to cry and express feelings of anger and betrayal. She says she feels trapped and doesn't know what to do.*

*As you listen you start to feel increasingly uncomfortable. Someone has hurt your partner and, on her behalf, you start to feel outraged and angry at the injustice. Not only that, your partner is crying and very distressed. What should you do or say?*

What tends to happen most commonly in this scenario is that the listening partner will start to offer advice.

The advice comes from a place of wanting to help and wanting to alleviate the feelings of distress in the other person. But it can also come from a place of feeling uncomfortable about the expression of feelings and the high emotional reactivity in the room.



Sometimes offering advice is more about the discomfort of the listener than it is about wanting to help the other. It's this type of advice that is not helpful.

And another thing—when you're quick to jump in and provide a potential solution to your partner, you miss the potential nuances of what your partner is communicating about his or her emotions. Missing these details about your partner's emotions and the expression of his or her emotional world can lead to you becoming more disconnected.

What's needed at this point is not advice, but *empathy*.

### **Empathy is rocket fuel for your relationship**

One of the areas where most couples can improve is in the expression of empathy towards one other.

Empathy is the experience of putting yourself in the shoes of your partner and imagining what it must be like for him or her *right at that moment*. When you start to imagine what it must be like for your partner, a magical thing starts to happen. Your partner feels *connected* and *closer* to you. Your partner feels heard in the knowledge that you are starting to really “get” him or her.

The wonderful thing about empathy is that once you start to get the hang of it, it's actually easier than solving problems and giving advice. Sitting with a problem or dilemma and truly conveying that you are appreciating the emotions your partner is feeling without doing anything else is a wonderful way of supporting your partner *and* increasing the emotional connection and intimacy within your relationship.

### **Day 9 Action Step**

In the next 24 hours I want you to tune into your partner's emotional expressions.

What is your partner disclosing about his or her feelings and emotional world, both verbally and non-verbally?

Once you've tuned into your partner's emotions, practice imagining what it's like for him or her right now. How is your partner feeling and experiencing what he or she is going through.

Once you start to have a sense of this, then share what you are experiencing or what you imagine your partner is feeling and check out if you're right or not.

Then, notice what happens to your sense of connection with your partner.

## Day 10: 7 Simple Tips to Help You Improve Your Communication

OK, we're coming to the last chapter in our section on communication, so I've distilled down the most important factors that you need to focus on in order to improve your communication in your relationship.

### 1. Seek to understand before trying to be understood

One of the most common negative patterns I see in my work with couples is the cycle of criticism and defensiveness. This often happens when you hear something from your partner that you perceive to be an attack or criticism, which leads to you immediately defending yourself.

The problem with this pattern is it immediately sets both of you up to not be heard. As soon as you start to defend your position, you've lost the opportunity to understand your partner.

*Tip: Even if you feel under attack or think you hear a criticism, first seek to understand your partner's thoughts and feelings that are being raised with you—before you respond.*

### 2. Slow down your communication in order to truly hear your partner

Once this dynamic of criticism and defense is underway, the interaction often moves very quickly and many issues get out of control.

When your communication is speeding up, you can miss a lot of the important information that your partner is expressing. This fast pace also increases the volatility of your discussion, making it harder for you to keep the conversation calm.

*Tip: If you notice that things are moving quickly in your discussion, intentionally put on the brakes and slow down the exchange. You can say to your partner, “Let’s slow this down so I can really understand what you are telling me.” This helps to defuse the reactivity and allow you to continue to communicate in an adult-to-adult way.*

### 3. Be curious about your partner’s perspective

This one is easier said than done when you’re feeling blamed, criticized or attacked. However, one of the best things you can do when you’re feeling like that is to be curious about your partner’s perspective. This can be disarming in a positive way, and it immediately helps to de-escalate the rising tension between the two of you.

By being curious, you can learn new things about your partner, as well as support your conversation in moving towards a resolution.

*Tip: You can still disagree with your partner’s perspective and remain curious and interested in how his or her view differs from yours. Practice bringing in this state of curiosity the next time you’re feeling a heated discussion coming on, and see what happens.*

### 4. Recognize your emotional triggers

Knowing what your emotional triggers are allows you to be aware when there’s a possibility that they will be activated.

We all bring “baggage” into our relationships—from our childhoods, previous relationships, school experiences, and, of course, our families of origin. There’s no such thing as a person who is “baggage free”; however, you can use your awareness of your “hot spots” to know when they are likely to be triggered.

*Tip: Practice observing yourself even when you feel triggered by your partner. See if you can name the trigger by saying “I’m feeling [insert feeling] now, and I think it’s also touching something in my past that’s not related to you.” By naming the trigger, it helps your partner understand that there’s more at play in the moment than just the conversation. This understanding can help both of you to be less reactive in the moment.*

### 5. Practice using empathy to foster a closer connection

Empathy is the fuel of good relationships. Being empathic is about imagining yourself walking in the shoes of your partner and feeling and seeing the world as he or she does.

Responding empathically to your partner also facilitates a deeper bond, creating a strong sense of safety and trust between the two of you and helping in the giving and receiving of love.

The challenge is that being empathetic is the last thing you feel like doing when you're feeling under attack. It does require you to be able to "step outside yourself" and begin to appreciate a reality that is different to your own.

Practicing empathy does not mean that you have to completely surrender your own reality or give up what you want. It just means that you must suspend your own perspective, even momentarily, so that you can appreciate in at least the smallest of ways how your partner sees things.

*Tip: Start small—even if it means imagining only 1% to 5% of what your partner feels—and then build on that. Your partner will feel the shift and will be able to let down his or her guard a little, opening up the possibility of a better connection.*

### 6. Listen for the hidden unmet need or emotion

When your partner is in distress and voicing a complaint or you're feeling criticized or blamed, there's always some unmet need, want, desire or unexpressed emotion underlying this cry. The challenge for you is to go beneath the overt complaint and see if you can tap into the hidden emotion.

By uncovering this emotion and tentatively asking if your partner is experiencing that covert emotion, you can bypass the surface anger, irritation or resentment and cut to the core emotion that needs to be validated.

This is no easy task, as it requires you to figuratively step up and out of the current conflict as well as to look and listen for that which is not being expressed. You must suspend your own reactivity and defensiveness to be able to connect with the deeper needs of your partner.

*Tip: When you find yourself in a conflict with your partner, pause for a moment and see if you can feel what else in the conversation your partner is not expressing. To help you with this, remind yourself that your partner is in distress but is unable to share the whole picture of the distress with you. Listen carefully for this and use your curiosity to find out what else is not being overtly shared.*

### 7. Anticipate issues before they become issues

One of the most common major communication problems is that many relationship issues often could have been dealt with much earlier in the relationship, but weren't.

When you avoid speaking about small issues, you lay the groundwork for these unresolved issues to fester and expand over time. They can then explode farther down the road and feel much bigger than they were to begin with.

You may avoid the small issues because you don't want to "rock the boat" when you think things are going relatively well. You may also believe that nothing good comes of raising complaints or issues. The reality is that couples who seek to avoid conflict almost always end up bogged down in more conflict than that which they were trying to avoid in the first place.

*Tip: Get into the habit of naming and flagging issues with each other with assertive communication, even when those issues are small. One of the ways to do this is to have regular check-ins where you meet on a regular basis to discuss current issues and check how your relationship is going. Over time, this structure can help you to feel more confident about your ability to effectively deal with conflict and disagreements.*

### Day 10 Action Step

Choose one (or more) of the tips above and implement them in your relationship in the next 24 hours. Observe the results; if the outcome is successful, repeat this action each time an issue arises.

## ***Day 11: What are Your Blocks to Intimacy?***

When you read or hear the word intimacy, what does it raise for you?

Many people associate intimacy with sex. It's true that intimacy can include sexual intimacy, but it's also so much more than that.

Intimacy is also about truly knowing yourself and allowing yourself to be known by another. It's about opening up your internal emotional and cognitive world to your partner and trusting wholeheartedly that you are safe and secure in doing so.

When you slowly break down the word "intimacy," it becomes into-me-I-see, which is a nice reminder that intimacy is also about knowing yourself.

### **Intimacy is not easy for some**

Unfortunately, not all of us find intimacy easy or comfortable.

The way that you feel about or experience intimacy is based on your early childhood experiences of love, affection and security. If you grew up in a family where some or all of those aspects were missing or inconsistent, it's possible that you don't know the experience of intimacy, or you may be frightened or actively avoid intimacy with others.

For example, I've worked with many people over the last decade who were not frequently touched or held by their mothers or fathers during their childhood years. While it just felt like the norm to them as children, they discovered, as they moved into intimate relationships, that they felt challenged or confronted by their partners' requests for emotional closeness. For some, it wasn't until they were in relationships that they even knew they had issues with intimacy.

### Do you avoid intimacy?

Intimacy issues can show up in a range of ways, but some of the most common indicators include:

- Avoiding hugging, holding, touching or caressing another person
- Feeling uncomfortable when others move into your personal space with the intention of being affectionate
- Finding it difficult to verbalize expressions of love or affection for another
- Actively avoiding situations where thoughts and feelings may have to be shared with others
- Focusing on the other person instead of disclosing aspects of yourself in social situations
- Using sex to feel close to another, but running when that person wants something more
- Not knowing how to respond when someone overtly expresses love or affection for you

Are you getting a sense of what we're talking about here?

### So what can cause intimacy issues?

There are many reasons why someone might have issues with intimacy, but some of the more common ones include:

- Growing up in an emotionally distant family where expressions of love were rare
- Having one or both parents who were uncomfortable with touch and neglected to touch you
- Growing up in an unspoken family culture of "we don't talk about feelings"
- Experiencing some sort of abuse, whether that be emotional, physical or sexual—or all three—in your development
- Being betrayed and deeply hurt by a trusted person

It's possible that you experienced only a degree of one of the situations listed above; also, you don't need to have been neglected to have intimacy issues. But if you can relate to an aspect of one or more of those situations, it's only natural that it has influenced your development in some way.

The important thing to remember here is that this is not about blaming your parents or your family for something you missed out on, it's about identifying where you might experience blocks surrounding intimacy and then working on your these areas.

The good news is that intimacy can be learned and improved in any relationship; fundamentally, we are all mammals and we are wired to connect to others.

### **Day 11 Action Step**

Choose from the following intimacy exercises and do one with your partner in the next 24 hours:

1. Lay on the bed with your partner so that you are both facing each other at eye level. Talk to each other about how you're doing as a couple and maintain good eye contact and touch as you talk.
2. Hold your partner in a standing hug for a minimum of five minutes. Notice what it's like to hold each other without letting go.
3. While you are sitting upright on a sofa, have your partner lay across you from your right so that you can cradle him or her head in your left arm. Look continuously into your partner's eyes without looking away. Hold this for at least ten minutes and then swap roles. Notice which role you are more comfortable with.



## Day 12: *Tell Me How You Were Loved and I'll Tell You How You Make Love*

The title of this day actually comes from a quote from one of my favorite sex therapists and authors, Esther Perel. Her passionate and deep interest in what people can do to sustain desire in long-term relationships lead to her book—which I highly recommend—*Mating in Captivity*.

What I love about her statement is the simple truth of it. We *make* love the way we *were* loved. Take a moment and reflect on this. Does this feel true for you? I would be surprised if it didn't.

When it comes to sex and the sexual life, many couples report dissatisfaction, ranging from mild disappointment—"I wish we had more sex," or, "I wish our sex was more exciting,"—to the expression of a non-existent sex life—"We rarely have sex and we feel like housemates."

I'm going to go into some of the deeper issues surrounding sexual issues later in this book; for now, let's just start with how you are making love.

### **Your lovemaking is an expression of *you***

Take a moment and reflect on the question: How were you loved?

What comes up for you? And what is the emotional feeling surrounding your response to that question? Do you feel sad, disappointed, content, happy, joyful or angry?

Now think about how you make love to your partner. What's important for you when you're having sex? Are you focusing on your partner's pleasure, your mutual pleasure or your own pleasure? And *how* are you having sex? Is it slow and sensuous, is it fast and hurried, or is it somewhere in between?

Perhaps you haven't considered this before, but the way you approach sex is an embodiment of *you*. By that, I mean the way you have sex with your partner is an expression of your history, your values, your desires, your fantasies and your wishes.

Many of these things are unconscious, but they still play out in your sexual expression.

Some couples run into problems when one or both partners have had problematic histories surrounding sex and/or intimacy; this, then, comes into conflict with their partners during sex.

I often think sex can be such a potential mine field for couples, as so much goes unsaid when things go wrong.

On the other side of the coin, many people don't tell their partners about their sexual desires and fantasies, or what turns them on and off, so their partners are completely oblivious to the sexual landscapes they are working with.

### **Talk about sex with your partner**

To build a great relationship, it's essential that you learn the skill of talking about sex with your partner.

I say that this is a skill you need to learn because no one teaches us how to talk about sex, and I think that this is partially why so many people run into sexual problems in their relationships.

The good thing is that the more you talk about sex with your partner, the more enjoyable the discussion becomes and the easier it becomes to talk about sexual issues. Plus, you start to get your sexual needs met because your partner understands you more.

### **Day 12 Action Step**

As you raise your awareness about the way that you make love, think about where you could improve or experiment with doing something different.

In the spirit of experimentation, see what it's like to change the way you make love to your partner. If possible, do this in the next 24 hours so that you have some fresh data. Take note of how your partner responds to you making love in a different way.

## **Day 13: *The Meaning of Sexual Issues in Your Relationship***

I think of one's sex life as being the "melting pot" of all the issues in one's relationship.

If an issue is unresolved or ongoing and not being attended to in your relationship, that issue often starts to show up in a number of ways, including:

- Lack of sexual desire toward one's partner
- Active avoidance of situations where sex might happen
- Differing libido levels
- Inability for one or both partners to reach orgasm
- Other sexual issues such as premature ejaculation, erectile dysfunction or painful intercourse

This is just a sample, but hopefully you get the idea of some of the most common sexual issues.

### **Sexual issues show up outside of the bedroom**

This might sound strange to you, but most sexual issues start even before you get into the bedroom.

Start to consider that everything you do outside of the bedroom is foreplay. Once you make that mindset shift, you will begin to see how the lead up to sex can start hours or days before sex is even on the agenda.

For example, if you come home from work and expect that your partner should have cooked you dinner and you don't help to clean up after dinner but instead lie on the couch and watch TV, does it really surprise you that your partner isn't in the mood for sex when you climb into bed a few hours later?

Bringing a state of mindfulness to your actions in your relationship can set the stage for a satisfying sex life. But you need to consider that the way in which you're behaving now toward your partner is going to affect him or her later. Generosity and mindfulness outside of the bedroom begets generosity and mindfulness in bed.

### **Are you speaking a different language when it comes to sex?**

Another common sexual problem I see with couples is that they speak different languages when it comes to sex.

Have you ever been to foreign country and spoken to someone who has little or no grasp of your native language? It's pretty frustrating trying to convey what you want to say, right? Well it's the same when it comes to communicating sexually. If you're speaking French and your partner's speaking German, you're not going to get very far.

Sometimes this can show up in the initiation of sex. One partner likes to be romanced, seduced and flirted with . . . and the other partner likes to be pounced on and then go hell for leather.

You can see that there's a mismatch here between the sexual styles of each partner; it's likely that this couple won't fair well if the partners each initiate sex the way they like to have it, and not the way their partners prefer.

This is where an awareness of your partner's turn-ons and turn-offs comes in handy. When you know what arouses your partner, it's much easier to then get your own sexual needs met. Start by considering what your partner wants before you seek to get your sexual needs met.

### **Day 13 Action Step**

I want you to start to consider if you're experiencing any sexual issues in your relationship and why that might be and what it might mean?

Write down a list of the main issues you are experiencing in your relationship.

Now write a list of when and how sex is not working well for you both.

Is there any connection between the two? It may not be immediately apparent and this exercise will likely require that you observe over the coming days the dance that goes on between the two of you and what does or doesn't lead to sex.

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If you identify any connections, bring a state of mindfulness to these issues and see what happens as you start to change your approach or attitude toward your partner and the issue.

## ***Day 14: How to Talk About Sex so Your Sexual Needs Get Met***

Let's face it—many of us are not comfortable talking about sex with our partners. This has a lot to do with one's personal history in regard to sex and the family culture one grew up in.

Some families have quite an open approach to discussions about sex; if you grew up in a family like that, you likely are quite comfortable when it comes to the subject of sex. In other families, the subject of sex is “off limits.” If you grew up in a family like that, you may have even unconsciously picked up the unspoken rule that it's not OK to be free and open when it comes to the act of sex itself.

Your approach to sex can be influenced by many things, including:

- Experiencing a sexual humiliation while growing up or in school
- Coming from a very religious upbringing where openness about sex was frowned upon
- Having parents who were uncomfortable about sex and their own sexualities
- Being confused about your own sexual orientation and having to keep it hidden from others
- Being publicly or privately shamed by a parent or teacher for being sexual or masturbating

As you see, there are a range of influences that may have shaped the way you think, feel and talk about sex.

It's important to know that you can learn to feel more comfortable about sex and you can improve at expressing your sexual needs to your partner.

### Tips for talking about sex

#### *1. Create the right mood*

To start a conversation about what you want during sex, you don't need to be in the bedroom. In fact, it can be better to have this talk outside of the bedroom so you feel more grounded and less vulnerable.

That said, make sure you pick your timing so that your partner is receptive and you won't be interrupted. I think the best time to start such a conversation is when you are feeling relaxed and awake, you're in a quiet setting and you're both present with each other without distractions (like television or mobile devices).

#### *2. Support yourself in being open and vulnerable*

If you're not entirely comfortable talking about sex, it's likely you're going to feel a little (or a lot) vulnerable.

Just know that it's to be expected and you can support yourself at this point. Use some soothing self-talk to calm yourself down and reassure yourself that this is a positive thing to do for your relationship.

#### *3. Feel the fear and do it anyway*

When it comes down to it, you just have to take the plunge. It may feel risky, but I want you to consider that it's also exciting. You're sharing your sexual world with your partner and building the emotional and sexual intimacy between the two of you.

#### *4. Be curious about your partner's sexual world*

The other important element here is that you need to also be curious about your partner's sexual needs. What turns your lover on, what are his or her fantasies and what can you do (or stop doing) that he or she would find erotic?

Being curious is a wonderful way to open up a conversation and to support each other in revealing more.

### **Day 14 Action Step**

Follow the four tips above and start to have a conversation with your partner about your sexual needs. Make sure you also inquire about your partner's sexual needs.

Be aware that this conversation may (or may not) lead to sex. Either way, notice the quality of your erotic connection.

## ***Day 15: How to Sustain Your Erotic Life in a Long-Term Relationship***

It's easy to have a great sex life at the start of your relationship.

You've met someone you're attracted to and with whom you likely share some strong chemistry. Along with that, your body produces bonding chemicals and marinates your brain in these strong hormones to produce the "in love" feelings. All of these factors mingle to give you an exciting and heart-pounding sex life that doesn't feel like an effort to make happen.

Fast forward many months or years—it's likely that some of the excitement has dwindled.

Familiarity and predictability are passion killers. This is a natural evolution of your love relationship that you need to go through; however, this doesn't mean it's the death of your sex life.

### **The challenge is to develop a deeper erotic connection**

Many couples believe that because their sex lives have become boring or have significantly reduced in frequency, it will never change and this is their lot.

It doesn't have to be like this. It's possible to develop a deeper erotic connection with each other that goes beyond the adrenaline-fueled passion that you may have experienced at the beginning.

Some of the characteristics of a mature erotic connection include:

- The ability to communicate freely and clearly with your partner about your emotional and sexual wants, desires and needs
- The ability to be emotionally vulnerable with your partner and feel safe and secure in your connection



- The ability to manage your own anxiety and emotions, even in the face of your partner's distress
- The ability to soothe yourself and your partner when you experience conflict or distress

The skills I'm describing above are the skills of *differentiation*.

### **What differentiation is and why it matters**

Differentiation is the process of maintaining your sense of self and your identity while being intimately connected with another person.

Easy to say, much harder to do.

David Schnarch, author of *A Passionate Marriage*, believes that developing the skill of differentiation with your partner is of foundational importance if you want to sustain your erotic life in your long-term relationship.

I often think of differentiation as a delicate balancing act wherein you're managing and observing your own responses and reactions while being acutely aware of your partner's reactions and responses. The challenge is to not be overwhelmed or flooded by your partner's emotions, yet still remain available to attend to them and respond to their emotional needs.

In everyday life this can seem quite easy, but the real test is when one or both of you are in a crisis and emotions are running high. This is when differentiation comes into play.

Some couples tend to move towards symbiosis in their relationships, which is a fusing or merging of your identities—you probably know a couple like this. Other couples tend to move towards separateness and withdrawal in their relationships. Neither of these positions involves differentiated stances, but more a response to anxiety in the relationships.

### **Tips for sustaining your erotic life**

Here are a few ideas to consider that will help to support you in your erotic life with your partner:

- Take turns sharing your deepest sexual fantasies with each other.
- Practice sensual and erotic touching (but without orgasm), but with one person receiving and one person giving.

- Take turns holding each other like a baby and looking into each other's eyes without talking for a few minutes.
- Flirt with each other throughout the day to build sexual tension and heighten your arousal levels.

This is only a small list, but feel free to let your imagination run with other ideas.

### **Day 15 Action Step**

Observe how you manage your anxiety and feelings in relation to your partner over the next 24 hours. Do you tend to merge your feelings or do you withdraw into yourself? Notice the dance you engage in.

Choose one of the tips from the list above and experiment with your partner. Notice how connected or disconnected you feel from your partner.

## Day 16: *How to Close the Door on Your Relationship Exits*

One of the patterns that couples sometimes engage in is called “relationship exits.” This term was coined by Harville Hendrix, founder of Imago Therapy and author of [\*Getting the Love You Want\*](#).

Any behavior that results in you reducing your involvement in the relationship can be considered to be a relationship exit.

If you find yourself acting out your feelings instead of communicating about them, know that your acting out can sometimes show up as a way to withdraw from your partner. In these moments, the goal is to let your partner know what is happening for you in a way that is respectful and promotes connection rather than disconnection.

It can be valuable to identify the exits that you use in your relationship to avoid connection, communication and intimacy. Once you identify these exits, you can then increase the energy and intimacy in your relationship by communicating your thoughts and feelings, rather than avoiding your partner by engaging in activities or behaviors that are more pleasurable for you to do.

### **Which relationship exits do you use?**

Can you relate to any of those common relationships exits?

- Working long hours and weekends
- Staying on the computer and Internet for extended periods of time
- Watching TV or listening to music
- Constantly checking your smartphone email and social media
- Cleaning the house or car
- Hanging out with friends or drinking at the bar with buddies

- Overeating
- Shopping for fun
- Spending too much time on your iPhone/smartphone
- Sleeping more than is needed
- Playing sports
- Immersing yourself in pornography
- Constantly playing computer games
- Focusing extensively on the children

As you read that list, you may recognize that you do some or all of those activities. Just because you engage in an activity doesn't mean you're using it as a relationship exit. Of course, not all exits are a problem and many are functional and necessary parts of life. Ask yourself the question: Do I use these behaviors to avoid my partner and the relationship? Look for the underlying motivation for your behavior, as that will indicate what's really going on with you.

Often relationship exits come about because one or both partners struggle with the skill of differentiation. This is the ability to "hold onto yourself" in the face of conflict, disagreement or feelings of fear and anxiety. It's an essential skill that needs to be developed in couples so that one can manage one's own emotions, even when one's partner cannot manage his or her own emotions.

A relationship exit is often a way of avoiding differentiation. It is a short-term solution for a longer-term problem. As long as a couple avoids differentiation and the working through of issues, the relationship cannot grow and move forward.

### **Day 16 Action Step**

1. Each of you create a list of all the exits that you use to avoid your relationship and then consider which ones you're willing to modify and which ones you will find difficult.
2. Share your list with your partner and discuss how these relationship exits affect each other.
3. Negotiate with each other about which behaviors you are willing to modify.
4. Check in with each other after two weeks to give feedback as to how the other has progressed in regards to closing relationship exits.

Keep each other accountable and give feedback when you notice your partner, or yourself, engaging in relationship exits.

## **Day 17: *Why Date Night Really Works***

One of the issues faced by people in modern relationships is that they struggle to find quality time to spend with their partners.

It seems that we have to manage lives that are incredibly busy and that we are working longer hours than ever before. If you have a family, all your work and relationship stresses are compounded because you have to attend to the needs of your children as well as your own.

Modern relationships in Western culture are under incredible stress, and when your relationship feels stress, it can lead to a breakdown in communication and a fracturing of your connection and intimacy.

The challenge for relationships today is to find quality time to spend with your partner so that you can reconnect, regroup and rediscover your love and affection for each other.

### **Date night really does work**

We've all heard of the cliché, "date night." Many people have used this strategy to create some time during which they can reconnect with their partners in their busy lives.

It's easy to pass this off as a simple technique that doesn't have much to offer; but the truth is, date night actually works.

The benefits of date night include:

- Quality time with your partner that doesn't involve any of the familiar stresses or problems of everyday life
- Dedicated time to reconnect and listen to each other and share what's going on in your worlds
- An opportunity to speak about your dreams, aspirations and wishes for the future

- Time to talk about your relationship and how you're doing as a couple
- Enjoyment in getting dressed up, looking good and feeling sexy with your partner
- Mutual pleasure in enjoying food, wine or art together

There may be many other benefits that you have also experienced from spending quality time with your partner.

Also, date night can also be date day. Don't limit yourself to only going out at night—think about quality time you can spend together during the day.

### **Leave your problems at home**

The important thing is to make sure that date night is problem-free time with your partner. Don't use date night to talk about any current issues or problems in your relationship, work or family.

The intention of date night needs to be one of enjoyment and pleasure—have a fun time together away from your problems. This is even more imperative if you're having issues in your life or relationship at the moment.

In this way, date night becomes a sacred space where you look forward to trouble-free connecting and enjoyment with your partner.

### **Date night doesn't have to be expensive**

If you're on a budget and you're worried about buying expensive dinners with your partner, it's important to remember that date night can be done on a budget. The cost of the restaurant or activity is not what matters, what matters is that you share quality time together.

Here are some budget suggestions for your date:

- Take a trip to the zoo together and pack a picnic lunch.
- Have a picnic lunch or dinner in a beautiful park or on a lovely beach.
- Explore a new part of the city or town you live in that you haven't been to before.
- Take a hike together on a new trail in the woods and pack snacks for the journey.
- Take a drive to a local beach or lake where you can lie on a blanket together and talk and cuddle.
- Explore the cheap eats in your local area and take in a movie on the discount night.

Are you getting some ideas here?

As an aside, I don't recommend that you only go to a movie together. Make sure if you do go to see a movie that you have quiet time together before or after to connect over a drink or dessert.

### **Day 17 Action Step**

Plan a date night with your partner that you can do within the next week.

Put together the time, date and activity and invite your partner to join you. It's important that you take the initiative to make it happen, so don't just casually ask your partner if he or she wants to do something with you. Actually present your partner with a concrete idea or even a couple of options that might be appreciated, and let your partner choose.

Your partner will love the initiative that you put into date night.

## ***Day 18: What Turns You On and What Turns You Off?***

An important part of your intimate and erotic life with your partner is being aware of what turns you on and what turns you off.

An ingredient of good sex is the ability to raise your arousal levels and the arousal levels of your partner. Your arousal level needs to be raised above your own unique threshold for orgasm to occur. For each person, this threshold is different, however, you probably have some sense of what it's like when your arousal level increases to a point where you're heading towards an orgasm.

For orgasm to occur, you also need to surrender to some degree. Surrender to your partner (if you're having sex together) and surrender to your own feelings of pleasure. This requires you to "go inside" yourself to some degree.

It's not uncommon for people who have strong controls issues—a need to stay in control and remain in control at all times—to have problems with climaxing and spilling over their orgasm threshold.

Hopefully you can see that sex is an intimate dance between you and your partner that requires you to be present to yourself, present to your partner and willing to submit to your feelings and surrender control.

Sounds scary? If so, you're not alone in your fears.

### **What's the difference between sex and love?**

A common issue I see with couples who have sexual problems is they often have differing "blueprints" of love and sex.



One partner may think of sex as romantic, seductive, passionate and tender—while the other partner thinks of sex as body parts, genitals, and pounding, adrenaline-fueled and sweaty activity.

Do you see the disconnect here?

When sex and love mean different things to you, problems can happen when you're expressing love and sex because you both have differing desires and needs. This is often the seed that later grows into sexual problems such as loss of libido, impotence and painful intercourse.

### **Good sex is all in your mind**

Whether you know it or not, you play an important part in your own arousal levels. While it's easy to think your partner didn't do this or that, or that he or she did something that turns you off, we also need to look at how you turn yourself off and on.

I think there's a lot of truth in the saying "good sex is all in your mind," because your brain really is your biggest sexual organ.

Begin to discover how you turn yourself on; what do you do, say or think that arouses you. And reflect on how you turn yourself off. What do you do, say, think or feel that decreases your arousal?

### **Day 18 Action Step**

You have two pieces of homework to complete for this day:

**1. Do this exercise with your partner.**

On a piece of paper, create two columns.

At the top of one column write the word LOVE and at the top of the other column write the word SEX.

Now brainstorm and write down all the words you associate with each of these words under each column.

Once you've finished, compare your words with your partner's words. Note any crossover and acknowledge the differences.

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Keep in mind that each of you has expressed the meanings associated with each of these words and that the differences will reveal where you need to work.

### **2. This exercise can be done alone.**

On a piece of paper, write down the following sentences in two separate columns:

How I turn myself on is . . .

How I turn myself off is . . .

Now brainstorm and finish each of those sentences with all the responses that come to mind. Go until you don't have any more responses left.

You now have a map of what you do or don't do that contributes to your own arousal levels.

## **Day 19: *What's Your Intimacy Dance?***

We all have differing levels of comfort when it comes to closeness and distance.

I think that in a relationship there is a spectrum on which we all fall. At one end there's togetherness and intimacy and at the other end there's distance and separateness.

Any position on this spectrum is a valid position to hold in your relationship. But problems occur when a couple gets stuck in a position.

For example, if you're in a relationship where you can't bear for your partner to be away from you, this can lead to what's called a "symbiotic" relationship wherein each of you starts to lose your individual identities.

This is a normal part of all relationships when you fall in love and are in the "honeymoon stage"; however, at some point it's also a part of a couple's development that you start to assert your individual identity with your partner and move towards more separateness.

At the other end of the spectrum it can also be problematic when you withdraw from your partner and you start to live quite separate and individual lives. You might feel alone and disconnected, and you may feel unsafe or insecure in your relationship.

### **Flexibility is healthy**

People who are able to move freely on this spectrum from togetherness to separateness and back to togetherness tend to do much better in relationships. This is because human beings all have needs for closeness and distance at different times.

If you feel anxious when you're away from your partner or you dread when you will be separate, you may want to look at why that might be.

Similarly, if you continually desire alone time and actively avoid spending time with your partner, examine what that's about and why you move towards that position.

### **Every couple has their own intimacy dance**

As you start to consider some of these questions, you may be aware of your own movement and that of your partner's.

Every couple has their own intimacy dance that's unique to them. Here are a few examples:

- Your partner loves alone time but you feel anxious when he or she is not with you.
- You love alone time but your partner always wants to interrupt it and spend time with you.
- You both have separate friends and interests and you sometimes feel you're just housemates living separate lives.
- You do everything together and don't like to be apart for extended periods.
- You both enjoy time together and time apart and it's not an issue for you to have separate interests and friends.

Are you seeing your relationship in one of those examples?

### **Day 19 Action Step**

Reflect on your own relationship style and consider where you feel most comfortable on the togetherness-separateness spectrum.

Then consider your partner and consider where on the spectrum he or she is most comfortable.

Now consider the two of you together in your relationship and the way in which your two styles interact?

Where do you need to do more work so that you're able to be more flexible in your ability to move towards and away from your partner?

## Day 20: *Are You Just Too Tired for Sex?*

A growing problem for many long-term relationships is that one or both partners are too tired for sex. This is brought about by many things, including physical and emotional stress from work, less relationship and family time, and our insatiable desire to be connected with each other via technology.

I'm often amazed when a couples report that their sex life is in the doldrums, yet they both sit in bed together typing on computers, smartphones and iPads. Technology in the bedroom (including televisions) can be a massive passion killer.

It's important that you associate your bed and bedroom with only two things—sex and sleeping. If you can ban technology from the bedroom, you're off to a good start.

If you *must* have a tablet or Kindle in the bedroom because that's how you read to go to sleep, that can work, as long as you're not checking emails, surfing the Internet or on social media. And, by the way, this is also really good sleep hygiene and will help you to establish healthy sleeping patterns.

While it's quite common to have some reduced frequency in sex after the first few years of being in a relationship, sex always plays an important role in any relationship.

Sex is important on a number of levels because:

- It's a natural mood enhancer and antidepressant
- It helps you to feel safe and secure in your bond with your partner
- It relieves physical stress and tension
- It allows you to let go, open up and intimately trust another human being
- It helps you to reestablish your relationship bond every time you have sex
- It reminds you that you're important to one another
- It improves your self-esteem, confidence and overall well-being

### **How do you make time for sex when you're tired?**

It's important to understand when you're at your best for initiating sex. Many couples are tired in the evening, so that may not be the best time to initiate. If you're morning people, see if you can alter your morning routines to make time to be able to have sex before you leave for work. This can be a great mood enhancer and get you off to a great start for the day.

If you're a morning person and your partner is an evening person, this will take some negotiation and compromise. Finding a time where you're both the closest to your optimum (even if you're on the edge of being tired) is a good solution for this dilemma.

Even when you're tired, it can be really valuable to just carve out "connection time" when you go to bed and even agree to have non-sexual time. This is a time when you can lay together on your bed facing each other with your heads on your pillows, holding each other and talking about what's going on in your life, while stroking and hugging. This very important connection time is often a precursor to having more sex because it improves your bond and increases your sense of safety and care in the relationship.

There's no rulebook regarding the amount and frequency of sex that couples should have. It's all about talking and working out together what your needs are and finding a frequency that works for you both. Some couples are fine with once a week, others once a month, and others need it much more frequently.

### **How you can rejuvenate your sex life with your partner**

Great sex comes from elevating your arousal levels to a point where your blood is pumping and you're ready to go.

Sameness in a relationship can be a passion killer. Trying to bring in more excitement by changing up your schedule, having a spontaneous date night or flirting with your partner throughout the day via email or SMS can help bring up your arousal levels.

John Gottman says, "Every positive thing you do in your relationship is foreplay," If you can develop this mindset, it will help you increasingly prepare the ground for the possibility of sex.

It's important to speak up when you're feeling sexually and/or emotionally disconnected from one another so you can find ways to reconnect and re-establish your secure bond. When you're experiencing different desire levels, you can consider the following:

- Try to go to bed at the same time and rise at the same time, so you're on the same schedule.
- If you can't go to bed together, have the partner that goes to bed later come in and "tuck" the other partner in—this is sacred connection time.
- Leave smartphones, computers and iPads out of the bedroom.
- Kick the television out of the bedroom.
- Schedule non-sexual touching, holding and caressing time together.
- Help your partner achieve orgasm on his or her own.
- Make time to be alone and touch, hold and caress, without the pressure of having sex (though sex often does come from this).
- Do positive things for your partner without being asked; for example, do all the washing, cook a nice meal or generally take away tasks so there is more time for the two of you to have sex.

Many people don't feel like having sex, but once they start and their arousal levels increase, they feel the desire—so it's important not to always say no just because you don't feel like it. The research suggests that many people can enjoy very satisfying sex even when they don't have the desire but they start anyway.

### **Day 20 Action Step**

Look at the list of activities above that you can do to reconnect sexually with your partner.

Choose one thing to do differently in the next 24 hours. Notice the results.

Rinse and repeat as needed.

## **Day 21: *The Benefits of Valuing Your Differences***

I'm sure you've heard the phrase, "opposites attract." It's a part of common folklore that people who are opposites are attracted to each other.

Well, there's actually a psychological basis to support this saying.

It's true that we are often attracted to people who are different from us. They don't necessarily have to be opposite in every way, but it's a common phenomena that people are drawn to other people who display behaviors and characteristics that they don't have themselves.

The reason is that we all have parts of ourselves that we "own" . . . and there are parts of ourselves that we "disown."

For example, you may feel very comfortable developing strong, intimate friendships and relationships that are loving and nurturing; but at the first sign of upset or conflict, you get anxious and want to run. You then criticize the person who is bringing conflict into your life. If you recognize yourself in this description, it's likely that you own the loving nurturing part of yourself, but you disown the strong, assertive and forthright part of yourself.

It's not uncommon for someone who tends to be passive, quiet and introverted to be attracted to someone who is active, verbose and extroverted. This is because we are drawn to parts of ourselves that we see in other people—parts that we don't recognize to be within ourselves. Make sense?

Of course the challenge for any of us individuals is to "re-own" the parts of ourselves that we are not connected to so we don't need to seek them out in others.



### **Why differences are problematic in long-term relationships**

While you may feel a lot of admiration and attraction to some of the qualities in your partner that you have difficulty bringing out within yourself, what commonly happens is that the very qualities you were initially attracted to can turn into points of difference that begin to cause you annoyance.

It's not uncommon at this point that you try to alter your partner. Your frustration with his or her behavior increases, which leads to you criticizing or blaming your partner for the very characteristics you once found appealing.

I think the increase in annoyance and irritation toward your partner is related to the fact that you're not connected with those qualities within yourself. For example, if you were attracted to your partner because of his or her outgoing personality and ability to talk to anyone about anything, and further into your relationship you find yourself getting annoyed when your partner does this, it's time to look at yourself.

Do you need to speak up more? Can you get in touch with the more outgoing aspects of yourself? What would it be like if you started to express yourself more to others?

Are you seeing the link here?

### **Don't try to change your partner**

Many couples try to eradicate the differences between them, but this is the wrong solution to the problem.

The solution is not to eliminate your differences, but more to learn *how to manage* your differences. When you make this change of perspective, you can then start to appreciate, once again, the differences between you.

The important thing to recognize is that the only person you can change is *you*. So start with what you can individually change and then see how you respond to your partner.

### **Day 21 Action Step**

Write down a list of all the qualities that originally attracted you to your partner.

Consider if any of the qualities you were attracted to are qualities that are not as strong in you. Look at that list and see if any of those qualities annoy, frustrate or irritate you now.

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As you define the characteristics in your partner that can trigger a negative response in you, look at how these qualities relate to you and where your growing edges are.

You now have a list of areas where you can personally improve and grow. Use this new awareness to help you to start to interact differently with your partner in the future.

## Day 22: *Create Your Love Map*

Dr. John Gottman's research regarding couples has shown that emotionally intelligent people in long-term relationships intimately know and understand the worlds of their partners.

This seems like common sense, but it's surprising how many people in couples actually don't know important details about their partners. You might feel you have the basics of your partner's life, but have you really attempted to know your partner on a deeper level?

It's important to have a detailed "love map" of your partner's inner world, as this can sustain you through good times and through tough times.

It's through truly knowing your partner—his or her history, current life circumstances, and aspirations for the future—that you build a strong foundation for your relationship and strengthen your intimacy and closeness. You're also contributing to your "emotional bank account" that you can draw on when the going gets tough.

Consider whether you know some of these details about your partner:

- The name of your partner's best friend in school
- The name of your partner's first pet
- What your partner hoped to be when he or she was young
- What your partner is currently stressed about in his or her life
- Your partner's favorite way to unwind from the day
- Your partner's dream holiday destination
- Your partner's biggest unrealized sexual fantasy
- Your partner's favorite place to dine

How are you doing with this?

If you're feeling quietly confident about some of these details, it's possible that you've already created a strong love map with your partner, but today's action step will really test your knowledge.

Couples who don't have strong love maps often report that they feel distant and disconnected from their partners, which leads to living parallel lives. Conversely, couples who have strong love maps are able to weather relationship conflicts and crises with much more success because they've created a stronger and more resilient relationship with each other.

### **Day 22 Action Step**

You can really have some fun with your partner on this day's action step.

With your partner, see if you know the answers to these questions— suggested by the [Gottman Institute](#) – as a starting point in building your love maps.

Keep track of how well you do and where your weakest areas are—and then build on your knowledge over time.

Love Map questions:

- Name my two closest friends.
- What was I wearing when we first met?
- Name one of my hobbies.
- What stresses am I facing right now?
- Describe in detail what I did today, or yesterday.
- What is my fondest unrealized dream?
- What is one of my greatest fears or disaster scenarios?
- What is my favorite way to spend an evening?
- What is one of my favorite ways to be soothed?
- What is my favorite getaway place?
- What are some of the important events coming up in my life? How do I feel about them?
- What are some of my favorite ways to work out?
- Name one of my major rivals or “enemies.”
- What would I consider my ideal job?
- What medical problems do I worry about?
- What was my most embarrassing moment?
- Name one of my favorite novels or movies.
- What is my favorite restaurant?

## **Day 23: *Create Joint Projects for Long-Term Relationship Success***

I mentioned earlier the importance of being able to move with flexibility on the relationship spectrum from togetherness to separateness. This is a core trait of successful couples who are able to navigate their relationships in the long term.

Sadly, one of the most common scenarios I hear about as a couples' therapist is when a couple have drifted apart and have lost their intimate connection and closeness. These couples frequently report that they feel like housemates who share a living space but don't have much else in common.

When I inquire deeper as to what's going on, I often notice that they don't have any projects or activities that they enjoy together. One partner likes to watch football, but football bores the other. One partner loves romantic comedies, but the other loves action flicks. One partner loves gardening, but the other would rather play computer games.

Are you getting the picture here?

### **What projects can you create today?**

You don't need to have common interests and hobbies to make a longer-term relationship work, but you do need to have some joint projects that you can work on together.

It's through working together on a joint project that you can really contribute to the foundation of your relationship while having fun and enjoying each other.

Some examples of joint projects could include:

- Researching properties on the weekend together
- Deciding on a location and planning an itinerary for your next holiday

- Supporting your children at their weekend sporting events together
- Doing charity work or donating time to those less fortunate
- Learning a new sport or skill together, such as hiking or windsurfing
- Exploring new areas of your city together for culture, food and entertainment
- Planning your cultural calendar for the next year by booking tickets and subscriptions in advance

This list could go on forever, but the important thing is that you're doing something together that has some or all of these ingredients:

- Emotionally rewarding
- Inspiring your creativity
- Physically active
- Fun and playful
- Challenging to your skills and knowledge
- Expanding your creativity
- Developing your knowledge of culture and the arts

### **Day 23 Action Step**

Sit down with your partner and discuss what joint projects you might be interested in creating and starting over the next few weeks. This works well if you brainstorm to begin with—throw out all and any ideas, and then narrow them down to those that interest both of you.

Remember, you don't have to be 100% interested in a project—and I recommend that you stretch yourself a little. Meaning, if you are a little interested, but not convinced that it will be fun, take a little risk and try it out together. Some activities are incredibly enjoyable, even though your initial reaction to the idea may have been negative.

If you poo poo every idea without giving some a chance, you're less likely to reap the rewards that come from sharing a new project or activity together.

Bottom line is—take a risk, as you may be pleasantly surprised with the outcome.

## **Day 24: *The 5 Worst Relationship Pitfalls When Communicating via SMS***

Advances in technology in the last decade, and particularly SMS, have made communication via technology faster and easier than ever. SMS allows mobile-phone users to send short text messages of under 160 characters to each other.

There are obvious advantages to this style of communication, including convenience, low cost and speed. There are also numerous pitfalls that I am frequently hearing about from couples. Here are some of the five worst pitfalls of communicating via SMS. I hope this information will help you to avoid relationship ruin.

### **1. Sending emotionally loaded content.**

Sending emotionally loaded messages can be a big pitfall for SMS communications. I'm not talking about messages of love, care, appreciation or gratitude. I am speaking about feelings such as anger, disappointment, sadness, frustration and other such challenging feelings.

When you send a message that has strong emotional content, your partner may or may not correctly interpret the intensity or level of emotion in your message, leaving your message wide open to misinterpretation.

Ask yourself why you are sending an SMS to convey your strong emotions. Are you avoiding the tension that comes from having a difficult conversation? When you avoid these types of conversations, you aren't developing your ability to hold on to yourself in the face of tension, conflict or intense feelings. This ability to hold on to oneself is an essential relationship skill that we all need to develop in our growth as individuals.

### 2. Interpreting between the characters.

We are wired to interpret our surroundings and all the messages with which we come into contact. At 160 characters, an SMS has very limited information. Your brain will filter through the message and then project or interpret the emotional tone of the message in an attempt to make sense of it. This frequently becomes a point of miscommunication or relationship breakdown because the message is translated into a different tone than the tone that was intended.

*David sends a message to Alice early on in their relationship saying he's enjoying spending time with her but wants to "go slow." Alice's interpretation of his message is that he's not interested in developing the relationship. Her trust issues and fears of being hurt come to the surface and she withdraws from David without telling him that she's doing so. David's left confused and unsure of what's happening and feels hopeless about their future. His original meaning of "go slow" was an indication of how much he cares about her. This lost-in-translation experience has a significant impact on each of them and their ability to form a strong bond in the early stage of their relationship.*

When you're unsure of the meaning of a message, err on the side of caution. Call your partner or meet in person and checkout the intention of the message. This simple action prevents relationship ruptures and facilitates clear communication.

### 3. Venting via SMS

Some people find it tempting to vent or dump their feelings in SMS form when they feel outraged, upset or angry. It can feel like a quick release of pent-up emotion and a short-term solution to a bigger problem.

The danger here is that any form of mobile communication is not 100% secure. Once your message has been sent there may be no recourse and there certainly may be repercussions.

*Josh and Karen have a habit of venting their feelings via SMS. The problem is that their fights tend to escalate as they make assumptions and false interpretations of the meaning of their partner's communication. When they finally meet in person, they are furious with each other, but much of their fury has been misplaced, leading to relationship ruptures that take lots of work to repair.*

When you have the urge to vent, talk to your partner to work through the issue rather than use the quick fix of an SMS dump.



### 4. Threatening to end your relationship via SMS

If you're inclined to end your relationship via an SMS message, consider why that is. What are you avoiding by not meeting face-to-face or speaking on the phone? Often the issue is anxiety and the desire to avoid anxiety. The person who ends a relationship via SMS wants to avoid the feelings that will be aroused by such a conversation.

*Richard has been seeing Alex for three months and their relationship has deepened during that time. Alex receives an SMS from Richard saying he doesn't want to continue the relationship. Alex is devastated; but more than that, struggles to understand what has happened and why Richard wants out. With no conversation to end the relationship, Alex is left confused, angry and outraged. The way the relationship ends affects his self-esteem and is a blow to his confidence.*

If you're considering ending a relationship, find it within yourself to end it with respect and dignity. Remember, all of your relationships will end until you find the one that continues. In other words, you'll probably be left too—so communicate with your partner in a way that you would want to receive such news.

You'll also learn how to manage your own anxiety and communicate with honesty in difficult situations. This is a skill we all need in order to create successful relationships.

### 5. Sexting

MMS (Multimedia Message Service) is an upgraded version of SMS that allows users to send messages that may include voice, pictures or video to other compatible users. An outcome of this new technology has been an increase in "sexting," which is the sending of sexually explicit messages, pictures or videos between mobile users.

If you choose to send sexually explicit messages to your partner, that message immediately goes beyond your control. You have no say in where it goes, who sees it and where it is or will be posted.

*Janice sends a nude picture of herself to her partner, Jeff, at one point in their relationship. It is a playful joke between them and Jeff promises he will keep it private. The relationship ends after a year and Janice has forgotten about the photo. She is horrified when a work colleague shows her that the photo has been posted on a pornography site. She spends an enormous amount of time and money having the photo removed from a server based in another country.*

If you want to increase the excitement in your relationship, do it person to person and avoid any communications that are not 100% secure.

### **Day 24 Action Step**

Review how you use SMS in your relationship. Can you relate to any of the pitfalls I've mentioned above?

If so, challenge yourself to start to change your SMS behavior with your partner. Experiment with bringing important issues up when you are face to face.

While you may feel more anxiety, you will actually develop a greater maturity in your relationship and deepen your connection with each other.

## **Day 25: *What Classical Music and Successful Relationships Have in Common***

I was a classical musician for 20 years before I became a full-time relationship counselor. I was a trumpet player and performed opera and symphonic music with Australian and international orchestras and I traveled the world on musical tours.

It was an exciting career, full of great performances, intense stress and anxiety, huge highs and sometimes big lows—but mostly it was enormously rewarding to make music with fine musicians every day of the week.

While I no longer perform, I've come to understand that there are a lot of parallels between being a musician and being someone who is working to create a successful relationship. Here's what I think classical music and creating a successful relationship have in common.

### **Both involve listening.**

The foundation of being a great musician is listening. When I was playing in the symphony orchestra, I had to listen with every cell in my body. I was listening for other sections of the music, listening for the quality and volume of the sound, and then listening to my own sound and constantly adjusting and modifying in order to create an overall beautiful quality of sound.

In relationships, listening can be vastly underrated and almost always underutilized. Most people just listen in a half-baked way as they formulate what to say while the other person is speaking. This is the I'm-waiting-to-speak approach as opposed to an approach that involves listening, reflecting and absorbing what the other person is saying.

When you work on improving your listening in your relationship you will immediately begin to reap the rewards. Your partner will feel heard, validated and acknowledged. What's more, your partner will likely be even more interested in your perspective once he or she feels heard.

The question to ask yourself is: Are you truly listening or are you just waiting to speak?

### **Both involve getting in tune.**

An essential part of being a musician—and even more so for a classical musician—is the skill of playing in tune.

A large part of my profession involved improving my intonation so that I could play in tune and match the pitch of the other musicians playing with me. It involved developing a finely nuanced ability to listen to my sound and then match it to the sounds of others.

Now, this is a nice metaphor for your relationship. An essential skill that all people need to develop in a relationship is the ability to connect and “tune in” to our partners. Another word for this is *attunement*. If you aren’t sure what attunement is, observe a mother spending some quiet time with her newborn child. This attunement between mother and child is a necessity for the good health and growth of the baby. It also applies to relationships that flourish.

The more you tune in to your own wants and needs, as well as those of your partner, the more you stay on track for creating an extraordinary relationship.

### **Both require teamwork**

Playing in a symphony orchestra taught me about teamwork. I had to always be in sync with my colleagues—not only in the brass section where I played, but also right across the orchestra. If I had an solo entry, I had to connect and work in tandem with the other instruments I was playing with. This often required verbal and nonverbal communication about how best to do this, and it wasn’t always easy.

In a successful relationship, you need to work as a team. The more you can communicate about your wants, needs and desires, the greater the chance of having them met. Remember, your partner is not a mind reader. So many people I see expect that their partners should know what’s important to them. What’s more, when you’re working as a team, you can more flexibly give and take in the relationship.

### **Both need to start with the end in mind**

Another essential element of being a classical musician was being able to start with the end in mind. This involved creating a vision for the performance; a positive aural formulation of what the performance would sound like. I learned the hard way when I negatively focused on all the things that could possibly go wrong in a performance—they usually did.

The same applies to creating a successful relationship. You need to create a relationship vision together. This is a picture of the type of relationship you aspire to and want to create together. It includes your values, dreams, hopes and aspirations for the future. It's like having a map of the future.

We all know that when we have a map it's more likely that we'll get to our destination. And in the words of my "Divorce Busting" colleague, Michele Weiner-Davis, "When you aim at nothing, you hit it 100% of the time."

### **Both require hard work**

Now I can assure you I didn't become a professional musician overnight. I spent years and years practicing on my own for hours a day. The old adage, "You're only as good as your last performance," was especially true, and always a motivator for practicing consistently over long periods of time.

But, of course, the rewards were great. There was nothing as euphoric as completing a successful performance and experiencing the gratitude of a concert hall applauding for all our hard work.

If there's one myth I wish I could dispel, it would be the myth that "A successful relationship should be easy." Successful relationships are not easy. They take time, hard work, commitment and your investment of emotional energy. However, like those reaped by a hard-working classical musician, the rewards are great. For people who put in the hard work, they can appreciate all the wonderful benefits of being in a relationship where each partner is equally invested in themselves and the relationship.

### **Day 25 Action Step**

This day's action step has a few parts to it:

1. Practice tuning into your partner. Pay attention to his or her feelings, thoughts and body language. What are these things telling you?

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2. Spend time together and communicate about what's important to you—your wants, needs and desires—so that your partner doesn't have to guess. This then frees you both up to support each other in times of stress.
3. Think about the type of relationship you want to create together. Each of you should make a list of positive statements about the relationship you each aspire to have. Then compare your lists and decide which statements you agree on. This becomes your relationship vision!

## ***Day 26: 9 Ways Couples Can Avoid Social Media Suicide***

I'm always fascinated to see how social media, particularly Facebook, is impacting and influencing relationships. In my relationship counseling practice, not a week goes by without someone raising an issue related to Facebook and how the use of this technology gets people into sticky situations.

Some of the problematic behaviors that I've observed in regards to Facebook include:

- Dropping a new relationship via a Facebook message
- Ending a long-term relationship by changing a Facebook status from "in a relationship" to "single"
- Spying on an Internet date or partner by tracking his or her activity and conversations with others
- Using a mutual acquaintance to cyber-stalk a partner's ex by logging into that friend's account
- Breaking into the account of a wife to post inappropriate photos of her
- Publishing unflattering photos of a partner without consent
- Disclosing personal information about a partner in a status update without consent
- Intentionally humiliating or embarrassing a partner by divulging inappropriate details of his or her life
- Using the "check in" feature to disclose that a partner is in a location where he or she shouldn't be

While Facebook is a powerful platform that brings people together, reduces isolation and helps us feel more connected, many couples have found that it can also be the cause of numerous conflicts, arguments and falling outs. It may be called social media, but many Facebook couples are committing social suicide.

Here are my tips for couples to consider when they use Facebook in their relationships:

### **1. Ask your partner for permission before publishing photos on Facebook**

We all know that most people put their best face forward when it comes to posting photos online. It's only human nature that we like to be seen in a good light by others. When you post a photo of your partner that is potentially embarrassing or humiliating—even in fun—you're damaging the safety and security of your bond.

It's common sense to ask for your partner's permission before publishing any photos of him or her. It's not only respectful, but also shows that you care about your partner's feelings.

### **2. Disclose to your partner if you're commenting about him or her on Facebook (preferably beforehand)**

This also comes under the umbrella of using good common sense. If you're writing about your partner, commenting on your partner, or mentioning him or her in some way on Facebook, it's a good strategy to flag this in advance and check if it's OK with your partner.

Most arguments and conflict that occur in a relationship are often minimized when you discuss potential issues before they become major issues.

Keep an eye out for issues and then flag them before they grow into major conflicts by practicing good couple communication.

### **3. Form an agreement to decide which aspects of your lives you wish to reveal on Facebook**

Some couples are ahead of the curve and are talking at the dating stage about how they want to use Facebook in their lives. While this might seem a little weird to some, it's actually a pretty smart strategy.

Letting your partner or love interest know what you want or need in your relationship around the use of Facebook can avert problems before they even begin. If you both have a clear sense of what's OK and what's not OK for each other on Facebook, you're going to be able to proceed with social media with much less likelihood of upsetting your partner.

It's never too soon to have a conversation about how you want to navigate the waters of social media as a couple.



### **4. Always ask your partner and others before you check them into a location**

*Sally is at a lunch with Anthony when he starts to check them into the cafe where they're sitting. "Don't check me in!" she says with gusto, "I'm supposed to be in the office today!"*

These are the kind of dilemmas that seem to arise with couples who check one another into locations on Facebook. Not everyone wants their whereabouts disclosed to their friends, particularly if you have a mix of friends and work colleagues who follow you on Facebook.

Again, your safest strategy here is to clear it with your partner first before you take his or her privacy into your own hands.

### **5. Give your partner publishing rights when it comes to deciding whether any photos are posted or removed**

*Tom is in the process of coming out of the closet and his partner, Andre, has been out for a number of years. Andre is very active on Facebook and loves sharing photos of the two of them on holidays and with friends in many social situations. This is a huge conflict for Tom because he still hasn't come out to his family and only a few close friends know that he's gay.*

*When Andre tags Tom in photos with him, Tom flies off the handle because he feels his privacy is being invaded and Andre is forcing him to come out faster than he is ready. Andre doesn't understand why Tom can't accept that they're a couple and takes his reaction as a rejection of him and the relationship.*

It's important to respect your partner's wishes when it comes to tagging photos on Facebook. If your partner is uncomfortable in any way, remove the tag and the photo and be curious—not furious—about his or her perspective.

### **6. Be transparent about any insecurities you have about other people in your partner's life**

If you're already insecure in your relationship, Facebook can potentially heighten your jealousy. Never before has so much information about our lives and the lives of the people we know been so accessible.

Rather than spying and stalking your partner online, talk to him or her about your insecurities and your need to improve the safety and trust in the relationship.

The more you can deal with these issues face to face, the greater the chance you have of strengthening your love and creating a successful relationship.

### **7. Decide together if you wish to give each other access to each other's Facebook accounts**

Some couples deal with some of the potential Facebook problems that arise in relationships by giving each other access to their Facebook accounts.

If you're into 100% transparency, this may work for you. However, if you choose this option, be prepared to know that your partner may be observing all your interactions, messages, photos and friends.

If there are any skeletons in your closet—or ex-partners in your history who you're friends with—put all your cards on the table at the beginning to reduce the potential for conflict when your partner may get a surprise looking through your history.

### **8. Avoid taking conflict and disagreements online to Facebook**

You may have seen a Facebook friend dump on another friend or partner in a very public way. It's nasty and makes everyone who sees it feel uncomfortable.

When you're upset in the heat of the moment, it's not unusual to want to react impulsively. There's a biological reason for this. The amygdala in the primitive part of your brain feels under threat and starts pumping hormones like adrenaline and cortisol throughout your brain and body. These are the hormones related to your fight-or-flight response.

Many people do go to Facebook in the heat of an argument or conflict and publicly slander their partners. This gives them a quick release of emotion; but it's a quick fix that often makes the problem worse in the long run and can lead to relationship ruin.

If you notice you're having a fight-or-flight response with your partner, stay away from social media. Take some time to cool down and collect yourself, and when you're in a better state of mind, take the issue back to your partner face to face to talk through the disagreement.

## **9. Respect your partner and place the safety and security of your relationship above all else**

In his book *Wired for Love*, Stan Tatkin talks about the importance of forming a “couple bubble,” in which you protect the safety and security of the bond of your relationship. You honor and respect your partner’s wishes and immediately attend to any issues that could damage the connection between you.

This is an important concept to remember when it comes to Facebook and issues that arise between you when using social media.

### **Day 26 Action Step**

Start a discussion with your partner about what’s OK and what’s not OK for each of you regarding Facebook.

Use the tips above to guide you in your discussion, and make an agreement that you both understand and will honor when it comes to the ways that you will use Facebook as a couple.

## **Day 27: *The Disturbing Effects of Technology on Your Relationship***

Technology has made our lives easier, helped us be more effective in our work, and allowed us to connect with friends, family and colleagues across the world. However, often with rapid change, there comes a cost. And, far too often, relationships are suffering because of the effects of technology and the way in which it dominates our world.

Whatever your position on technology, the simple facts are that we can't avoid it. Technology is embedded into every part of our day, from the moment we wake up until when we go to sleep. Unless you live in a cave, or somewhere very remote with no contact with others, we actually need technology to go about our day-to-day lives.

### **Technology promotes connection *and* disconnection**

Don't get me wrong—I love technology. In fact, a large part of my work and personal life involves using technology. From organizing my work life online, to communicating with friends and family on social networks, I can't imagine life without it. However, all the advances in technology are designed to help us communicate faster, cheaper and clearer, yet many people are more lonely and isolated than ever before.

Some people can use technology to create pseudo connections. By this, I mean a person can create the illusion or perception that he is very connected, engaged and vibrant, when the reality is that he is anything but. This tends to happen when a person does all his engaging online, yet doesn't meet with people in the offline world.

Some people are more interested in connecting with their Internet friends than they are with their actual partners. How many times have you walked past a restaurant or cafe and seen two partners staring into their smartphones instead of talking with each other? Have you caught yourself doing this?

The key here is to find a balance of connection online *and* connection offline. I think technology is great to facilitate connection, but then take that connection into the real world where something of substance can be developed.

### **Connection with technology can be shallow**

Technology can help you to initiate relationships and connect with people whom you may not have been able to previously. This is a wonderful aspect of technology. I have met colleagues from all over the world, and even become wonderful friends with some of them—all facilitated by technology.

On the flip side, technology can promote superficial and shallow relationships. While you may have 650 Facebook friends, how many of them could you truly lean on in a time of crisis? While you may have many surface-level relationships within the world of technology, you might be missing a couple of key people in your life who can really make a difference to you and your well-being.

It was only a few decades ago that the only way you could connect with a friend was by picking up a phone or walking around to her house for a cup of tea and a chat. I think the mental health of people in those past decades was better, mostly because people connected in a real way; they connected in the flesh and were present with each other. They learned how to ask for help, reach out for support and give a helping hand to their fellow neighbors.

### **Technology can mean instant gratification and lasting dissatisfaction**

Technology has certainly promoted our culture of desire, immediate need and instant gratification. However, what we may be losing is the ability to “chew things over.” What I mean is the development of the ability to reflect on yourself and others and then take your time to make a decision.

I see this play out in couples who fight over email, SMS or social media.

It’s all too easy to express your anger at your partner without thinking about the consequences by shooting from the hip in an instant message. Conflict can quickly spiral out of control, leaving you feeling ambushed by a tirade of feelings that are expressed with little thought to the impact on each other. This entire process is often supported by the instant communication and always-ready-and-available position that technology allows.

What's helpful to remember here is that even though your technology can help you to communicate at light speed, you, as a human being, might need more time to work out what you want and how you want it. Slow yourself down—take time out to reflect and support yourself in making sound decisions that will impact you greatly in the future.

### **The culture of “busy me” leads to a disconnected “we”**

We live in a time of unparalleled busyness. Technology allows us to be instantly connected and tuned in at all times to others. With the emergence of smartphones, we are almost never away from our work email, friends' updates, text messages and notifications of the location of family.

All this busyness has an impact on the “I” and the “we” of our relationships. You may be working harder than you ever have. You're more connected to work, friends and family than you thought was possible. But the real question is, how connected are you to yourself and to your partner?

When was the last time you had a meal together with no distractions? A night you didn't play on your iPhone or read your iPad in bed? Or a day without technology at all, for that matter? No phones, SMS, iPad, emails, DVDs, TV or computers? If that sounds like a strange idea, you're not alone. Being connected to technology at all hours of the day has become the modern-day disease.

### **Day 27 Action Step**

Reflect on what part technology plays in your relationship.

Does it help to sustain and support your connection, or is it leading to frequent disconnection?

Consider how you use technology and whether you can modify your use so that it supports your relationship rather than hinders it.

Experiment with this new approach to technology over the next 24 hours and beyond and observe what happens.

## **Day 28: *Does Your Relationship Need a Digital Detox?***

On a recent holiday to Canada, I visited the beautiful Whistler in British Columbia and decided to take the “peak-to-peak” Gondola, which is the world’s longest free-span Gondola.

It was a spectacular ride with incredible scenery; but what I found shocking was a couple on the Gondola who both had their heads buried in their smartphones for the entire trip. I didn’t see them look up once! Here we were surrounded by some of the most spectacular scenery in the world and this couple was missing it.

Sadly, this seems to be becoming the norm. Just walk past a cafe or restaurant and you’ll see couples, friends and family members with their heads in their smartphones, not conversing.

A [recent video](#) that went viral beautifully showed how this is sadly affecting the quality of our friendships and relationships.

### **The downside of always being connected**

There’s no doubt that technology has changed the way we relate today. Our smartphones have become an extension of our bodies. For some people, leaving home without their phones can feel like they’ve left a limb at home.

As much as technology and the Internet have changed our lives for the better, there can be a cost in your relationship when you’re always connected online.

Some of these include:

- Not being present with each other when sharing important moments
- Not having as much spontaneous fun in the moment
- Focusing on capturing everything on your phone which takes away from your actual memory of the event

- Experiencing the quality of your relationship suffering from not “being” with each other
- Feeling isolated and disconnected from your partner
- Finding that Facebook and social-media conversations are becoming more important than speaking with your partner

You can probably think of many more, but you get the gist.

### **What is a digital detox?**

I recently came across the phrase “digital detox” and I think that it’s a great thing for people to do on a regular basis.

A digital detox is similar to any detox wherein you take a break from something and cleanse. The most common detox is an alcohol or drug detox involving abstaining from alcohol or drugs in order to cleanse the body and return to a state of health.

A digital detox involves having a period of time when you don’t access the Internet, use technology or go online. This can be a predetermined time, such as a day, a night, a weekend or longer.

On a smaller scale, some people now all put their smartphones on the table when they meet friends at a bar or pub—the rule being that the first person to check his phone has to pick up the tab. A nice incentive for not being connected.

The idea is that you and your partner (although you can do it on your own if you want—that still works well) will have a complete break from being online.

The easiest way to do this is to turn off your smartphone and put it in a drawer where you can’t access it for a prescribed period of time.

I think having a digital detox for a day on the weekend—or even for the whole weekend—can work very well. Then you need to decide with your partner what you want to do. Often having a fun joint activity can be a great way of moving your focus back onto each other and becoming “present.”

### **Day 28 Action Step**

Experiment with having a technology-free day or (gasp !) weekend.



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See what it's like to not be connected to your friends or not check your email 30 times a day.

Notice the quality of the connection with your partner when you take technology away. Notice how present you can be with just the two of you and no technological distractions.

I recommend you negotiate a technology-free night, day or weekend together on a regular basis so that you can increase the amount of quality time you spend being present with each other.

## **Day 29: *How Your Baggage Can Help Your Relationship***

Have you ever wondered why you chose to be with the person you're with?

Perhaps you've had this thought at one of those times when your partner is just driving you crazy—or you're fighting and just can't seem to see eye to eye.

It's no accident that you've chosen this particular partner. And the fact that he or she annoys you and irritates you at times is more reason to understand why you've chosen to be with this person.

### **We choose partners who *cannot* meet our deepest needs**

It's a fact that there is no such thing as a perfect relationship. If you believe that one exists, you're going to end up pretty sad and lonely as you search for one.

Even the best couples and the most seemingly "perfect" relationships all run into problems and experience conflict at one time or another.

When you first met your partner, you might have believed he or she was amazing, incredible or maybe even perfect for what you were wanting in a partner.

As time goes on, you probably started to see flaws and little annoying habits, and perhaps you've even felt disillusioned at times, or you've fantasized about being in another relationship with someone who can give you more of what you want.

Couples' therapist and author Harville Hendrix thinks that we choose partners who actually cannot meet our deepest needs and desires. And I tend to agree.

In your development, you probably experienced some difficult times, as we all did. Times when you didn't get your needs met, or you weren't supported in a way that you wanted.

Hendrix believes that, as adults, we then subconsciously seek out potential partners who we feel can resolve our unmet childhood needs, pain and disappointments. And at the start of a relationship, it often feels like your partner can do that. But as time goes on, what becomes clear is that your partner can't give you what you want, or meet that deep unmet need, or resolve your childhood pain.

This can be a shocking and disappointing discovery. And for some relationships, it's the beginning of the end.

And here's the rub: you've also chosen a partner who is looking for his or her needs to be met by *you*—and it's likely that you can't meet those needs or completely provide what he or she wants, either.

See the dilemma here?

But it's actually a beautiful dilemma. It's beautiful because each of you can actually grow as individuals and as a couple when you recognize this fact.

Let me give an example.

*John lost his mother at a young age and had to become extremely independent, as he was on his own a lot while his father was at work. His father was unable to provide a consistent and loving environment for John because he was focused on providing financially for the family. John learned to not rely on anyone and to be completely self-sufficient.*

*His partner, Jenny, was raised by a very dominating mother who was extremely controlling. Jenny resented her for being so dominating and not letting her live her life as she wanted. When Jenny met John, she loved how independent he was and that he let her have her freedom—and John liked how Jenny seemed so attentive and loving to him.*

*At the beginning, this was a match made in heaven; but as time went on, each became clear that something wasn't working. John started to resent that Jenny was so independent and wanted to do things on her own, and Jenny started to get angry when she perceived that John was controlling her by asking her to give up what she wanted to do to spend time with him.*

*Each of them carried a childhood wound that they unconsciously thought the other could heal. Jenny was hoping she could be accepted and loved for who she was without being controlled and John was hoping he could depend on someone for the first time. None of this was spoken and much of it was unconscious, but the very thing they wanted from their partner, was the very thing their partner struggled with.*

*It was only through working through their own childhood wounds in relationship counseling that they discovered that they had chosen each other for a reason. They both needed to grow and develop, and the very thing they found challenging was the very area where they needed to grow.*

*Over time Jenny learned to be able to surrender herself to John and not perceive that he was controlling her. This became possible through addressing her unfinished business with her controlling mother. John learned to lean on Jenny and not be so self-sufficient. As Jenny started to move toward him and stop pulling away, he began to trust her and the relationship more and feel that it was safe for him to accept her love and support.*

In some ways they are the perfect couple because of their imperfections. They needed to be with each other so they could heal their past pains and develop as individuals.

### **Day 29 Action Step**

Think about the aspects in your relationship that you find particularly difficult. Write down a list of the things you find hard or that annoy you about your partner.

Now consider your own personal history and see if there are any links between what you've experienced and where your relationship challenges you.

Notice when you're challenged by your partner and ask yourself, "What can I learn about myself from this?" The answers will reveal where your growing edges are and where you can develop further as an individual.

### Day 30: *Are you an Island, Wave or Anchor?*

In his book *Wired for Love*, Stan Tatkin speaks about how a person's attachment style can affect both the way that person deals with conflict and his or her ability to form a secure relationship.

*Wired for Love* is a guide to understanding your partner's brain and learning how to promote love and trust within a romantic relationship. Tatkin teaches ten scientific principles you can use to:

- Avoid triggering fear and panic in your partner
- Manage your partner's emotional reactions when they do become upset
- Recognize when your own brain's threat response is hindering your ability to act in a loving way.

By learning to use simple gestures and words, you can learn to put out emotional fires and help your partner feel more safe and secure. The no-fault view of conflict in Tatkin's book encourages you to move past a "warring brain" mentality and toward a more cooperative "loving brain" understanding of the relationship.

Based in the sound science of neurobiology, attachment theory, and emotion-regulation research, this book is essential reading for couples and others interested in understanding the complex dynamics at work behind love and trust in intimate relationships.

In *Wired for Love*, Tatkin classes individual attachment styles into three categories: islands, waves or anchors. We all fit into one of these categories based on how we tend to respond in our relationships. Here's a brief summary of the different attachment styles, as described by Tatkin:

### **Characteristics of islands**

People who are islands tend to:

- Like to be alone and enjoy their own space
- Have been raised to be self-sufficient and tend to avoid people
- Learn early on not to depend on people
- Often feel crowded in intimate relationships
- Be in a world of their own
- Self-soothe and self-stimulate
- Not turn to others for soothing or stimulation
- Find it hard to shift from being alone to interacting
- Under-express their thoughts and feelings
- Process internally a lot

### **Characteristics of waves**

People who are waves tend to:

- Feel a great deal, emotionally
- Have had strong attachments in childhood, but these attachments were inconsistent
- Have helped soothe a parent or both parents who were overwhelmed
- Have felt rejected or turned away by one or both parents
- Focus on external regulation and ask others for soothing
- Find it hard to shift from interacting to being alone
- Over-express and like to talk about all the details
- Stay in close physical contact to others
- Often think they are too much and nobody can tolerate them

### **Characteristics of anchors**

People who are anchors tend to:

- Come from families where there was an emphasis on relationship
- Have experienced justice, fairness and sensitivity in their families
- Love to collaborate and work with others
- Read faces, voices and deal with difficult people well

Our attachment styles get hard-wired into our brains from an early age. Understanding your attachment style is not about pathology; it is about helping you to deal with your natural state and improve your relationships.

Understanding how you move towards and away from others and how your partner moves towards and away can help you to improve your relationship.

The brain can react in two major ways when we are relating to others and Tatkin calls these parts of the brain *primitives* and *ambassadors*.

### **The brain primitives**

Primitives within the brain are concerned with:

- Keeping us alive above all else, i.e., “shoot first, ask questions later”
- Very fast responses that are automatic and unconscious
- Reactions that don’t require a lot of resources
- Memories from the past being triggered by current events
- Identifying what looks good and what doesn’t look good

### **The brain ambassadors**

Ambassadors require a lot of energy and resources and are related to the higher-thinking areas of the brain. These areas require glucose to run effectively and stop working when primitives are activated.

Ambassadors are concerned with:

- Making rational decisions
- Thinking from an adult perspective and weighing all the options
- Logical thought and making sense of difficult situations
- All higher functions of the brain, including complex negotiating and reasoning

This all sounds well and good, but one of the main issues when couples fight is that the primitives are activated and they overtake the ambassadors.

All the logic, reasoning and adult responses can be lost in an instant once the primitives are unleashed. The challenge is to soothe your primitives and activate your ambassadors . . . easier said than done when your brain is telling you that your survival is at stake!

### **Tips for fighting well in your relationship**

- Fight friendly—say something reparative or friendly when you're in a fight, e.g., "I love you, honey."
- Face your partner directly and make good eye contact while fighting.
- Avoid asking questions, instead, make quick statements that help to release tension between the two of you, e.g., "Honey, let's grab a bite to eat and come back to this later." However, it's essential that you come back to the issue at a later time to work through it.
- Repair your fights quickly following the fight in order to reduce the creation of bad memories that get stored in long-term memory.

### **Day 30 Action Step**

Choose one of the tips above and use it when you next get into a fight with your partner. (Ideally, I want you to experiment with this as soon as possible, but please don't create a fight just for the sake of trying one of these tips!)

Notice what happens when you introduce a different strategy into your fighting.



## ***Day 31: Share Appreciations to Grow Your Emotional Bank Account***

You've finally arrived at the final day of this 31 Day challenge!

It isn't called a challenge, but you may have felt challenged if you followed all the action steps throughout the month.

Building a better relationship is not easy. It takes attention, work and perseverance. Sometimes you will stumble and sometimes you will fall, but you can always pick yourself up, learn from the experience and continue to improve your relationship.

I believe that relationships can be the greatest gift any of us can have in our lifetime. I also believe in the incredible power of relationships to heal us and help us grow. For this reason, I don't believe relationships are meant to be easy. If they were, we would likely just discard them and take them for granted—easy come, easy go.

One of the best things about being in a relationship is the enormous potential you have to develop yourself as an individual. As a single person, you can certainly do personal development and improve yourself, but I think there are limits.

There's nothing like having your partner push your buttons to make you realize that you still have some growing to do. And it's this ongoing growth, development and challenge that help to make you become a better person and build a better relationship.

### **What do you appreciate about your partner?**

One of the most important things I've seen couples do to improve their relationships is to share appreciations with one another. Such a simple concept is incredibly powerful for improving the resilience and strength of your relationship. It's also an area that gets regularly disregarded or overlooked in relationships.

When you are grateful for what you have in your relationship and you share this with your partner, you're adding to your foundation of trust, love, safety and resilience.

I think of this as making deposits into your "emotional bank account." The more deposits you make, the greater the savings you have to draw on when the going gets tough. If your emotional bank account is depleted, there will be very little to draw on when you hit some tough times—your good will, trust and love will be in short supply, which will make it harder for you to bounce back from challenging times.

### **Day 31 Action Step**

Sit with your partner and share with him or her, "What I appreciate about you is . . .," or, "What I am grateful for in this relationship is . . ."

Be specific, rather than general. For example say, "I appreciate when you do the laundry," or "I appreciate how you do the dishes," and not more conceptual things like "I appreciate that you are kind."

Ask your partner to reflect back what he or she heard. If you were understood correctly, share another appreciation.

Once you have finished sharing your appreciations, ask your partner to summarize to make sure that he or she heard all your appreciations.

Swap roles and have your partner share his or her appreciations with you.

Notice what it's like to give and receive appreciations and start to informally incorporate the sharing of appreciations into your everyday life.

### *About the Author*

Clinton Power is a counselor and Gestalt therapist, who is passionate about assisting singles and couples break painful patterns of relating so they may create relationships that are respectful, loving and life-affirming.

Clinton is a clinical member of Gestalt Australia and New Zealand and the Psychotherapists and Counselors Federation of Australia. He is a Gestalt practitioner who works in a way that focuses on deepening the experience of being in relationship.



Clinton is regularly featured in the media on the topic of relationships and has been interviewed by MSN.com, The Sun-Herald, Cosmopolitan and Virgin Inflight Magazine. He has a particular interest in how technology and social media is impacting relationships today and singles who have problems forming long-term relationships.

As an early adopter of technology, Clinton brought together his passion for technology and psychotherapy to create [Australia Counselling](#), a cutting-edge online directory that helps the Australian public find qualified mental health professionals in their local area. Visitors can also access valuable information on how to improve their mental health and wellbeing from the extensive library of articles.

Clinton Power + Associates offers relationship counseling for couples and coaching and dating consultations for singles in the CBD, Inner West and Eastern Suburbs of Sydney.

To book an appointment or a FREE 10-minute no obligation telephone consultation, please visit their website at [www.clintonpower.com.au](http://www.clintonpower.com.au) to book with their online appointment scheduler.

Please do not copy or distribute this eBook. Instead encourage others to purchase it at [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com).

### References and Resources

[Getting the Love you Want](#) by Dr. Harville Hendrix

*This extraordinary and time-tested book describes the three stages of intimate relationships, provides illustrative case studies and gives helpful recommendations to help overcome the obstacles in those stages and to create a stronger bond between couples.*

[Receiving Love: Transform Your Relationship by Letting Yourself Be Loved](#) by Dr. Harville Hendrix and Dr. Helen LaKelly Hunt

*A guide that explores why people reject love and how to help yourself receive and accept the love of your partner.*

[The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work: A Practical Guide from the Country's Foremost Relationship Expert](#) by Dr. John Gottman

*After a lifetime of rigorous scientific study of relationships, Gottman offers these seven principles to guide couples to lasting and harmonious relationships.*

[The Relationship Cure: A 5 Step Guide to Strengthening Your Marriage, Family, and Friendships](#) by Dr. John Gottman

*Here Gottman provides exactly what the title says: a guide to strengthening your marriage, family, and friendships.*

[Wired for Love: How Understanding Your Partner's Brain and Attachment Style Can Help You Defuse Conflict and Build a Secure Relationship](#) by Dr. Stan Tatkin

*A complete insider's guide to understanding your partner's brain and enjoying a romantic relationship built on love and trust.*

## 31 Days to Build a Better RELATIONSHIP

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[Passionate Marriage: Keeping Love and Intimacy Alive in Committed Relationships](#) by Dr. David Schnarch

*This pioneering book on human intimacy helps couples to explore ways of maintaining and rediscovering their intimate sexual connections, enabling them to keep passion alive and enter areas of their sexual relationships that may have been previously unimagined.*

[Resurrecting Sex: Solving Sexual Problems and Revolutionizing Your Relationship](#) by Dr. David Schnarch and James Maddock

*This book addresses all the major sex issues how to cure the rejection, hostility, and emotional alienation that often accompany sexual problems.*

[Intimacy & Desire: Awaken the Passion in Your Relationship](#) by Dr. David Schnarch

*This book explores why there are problems of desire in long-term relationships and provides exercises that help couples reconnect to their passion and to each other.*

[Hot Monogamy: Essential Steps to More Passionate, Intimate Lovemaking](#) by Dr. Patricia Love and Jo Robinson

*This book helps the reader to pinpoint areas in the sexual relationship that need to be worked on and offers techniques and ideas as to how to resolve these problems.*

[Mating in Captivity: Unlocking Erotic Intelligence](#) by Esther Perel

*A witty book that explores how to sustain desire in a long-term relationship.*

[Hold Me Tight: Seven Conversations for a Lifetime of Love](#) by Dr. Sue Johnson

*Based on Emotionally Focused Therapy, this book teaches how to reestablish safe emotional connection and preserve the attachment bond.*

[Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life](#) by Dr. Marshall B. Rosenberg

*This internationally acclaimed text offers insightful stories, anecdotes, practical exercises and role-plays that will dramatically change your approach to communication for the better.*

[The Intimacy Factor: The Ground Rules for Overcoming the Obstacles to Truth, Respect, and Lasting Love](#) by Pia Mellody and Lawrence S. Freundlich

*This book helps to diagnose the causes of troubled relationships, and provides healing tools that help the reader establish and maintain healthy relationships.*

[Really Relating - How To Build An Enduring Relationship](#) by David Jansen, and Margaret Newman with Claire Carmichael

*This book provides sound, practical advice about how to relate to another person.*