

## Chapter 4. Couples Work

Attachment is the bedrock of human stability. Once our core need for survival and associated basic physical needs are met, love and attachment become central. From the moment we become separated at birth, we yearn for connectedness with the mother we had been united with throughout our previous existence. Sustained disruption of this maternal bond produces crying jags at the moment, and more prolonged disturbance in our internal emotional stability, as well as our capacity to attach externally and develop intimacy with others. Birth is the initial moment of autonomy, followed by an urge to restore connectedness, resulting in a lifelong dance between our needs for independence and intimacy. As it develops, our need for connectedness takes many forms, and can be met in many ways. Our need to feel connected to something greater than ourselves fuels our spiritual growth. We can satisfy our spiritual needs in various ways, via a connection to a higher power, to humanity or life itself, to the universe as a whole, or to certain groups or causes which provide meaning to our lives. Our need to be satisfied with our own core identity requires an attachment to our self, our whole self, with self-esteem tempered by humility. And our need to re-create the stability of symbiotic unity with our mother in utero fuels our need to not only reunite in our mother's warm embrace as an infant, but to reach out and develop other close attachments. As our developing autonomy leads us to explore the world beyond our mother, father, and the immediate family, we seek friendship, and ultimately, a partner to connect with and share life. The intimacy of such an adult partnership is a mature attempt to re-create the stability of our maternal bond, balanced by the needs created by our developing autonomy.

Along the way, we go through stages in which either autonomy or intimacy leaps ahead of the other. The "terrible twos" are the attempt of an awkward rookie to establish autonomy. If autonomy needs are not fostered in childhood, teenage years can be tumultuous, involving spasms of breakaway rebellion, accompanied by sometimes slavish adherence to peer expectations, as we seek a new arena of connectedness to replace the old. If our basic attachment needs have not been met, due to separations, neglect or abuse, our capacity to attach to others becomes damaged, and can take various twisted permutations, including avoidant distancing from others as we seek safety, excessive dependency involving suppression of our autonomy as we desperately

seek closeness, or angry conflict as we bounce back and forth between these two central needs. From the neo-Freudian perspective of Karen Horney, we can move toward, away from, or against others, typically in some combination of the three. To the extent that we have been injured in prior relationships, within our family or elsewhere, we seek safety. But we never fully abandon our central need for attachment and intimacy, no matter how deep we bury it. We all want safe love, but we put a premium on safety if we have been hurt deeply, versus an emphasis upon love if we have been deprived. When our needs for both safety and love have been assaulted by abuse and/or abandonment, we are prone to ambivalently bounce back and forth between these twin needs. Since we have all been hurt and suffered loss of love to some extent, but need connectedness nonetheless, we all engage in the dance. Our need for autonomy is fueled by both the healthy needed to grow and develop our identity, and the need to protect ourselves, yet we seek the closeness and unity with another which we lost at birth. Thus, the dance between connectedness and autonomy, and between love and safety play out until the moment that we separate from life itself. Love requires vulnerability, at the risk of safety.

Who wants to be vulnerable? No one. All of us want to protect ourselves from the vulnerability of being hurt and heartbroken in our relationships. But we also want the benefits of intimacy and closeness in our relationships, and vulnerability is essential if we are to achieve such intimacy. Indeed, emotional intimacy can be defined as shared vulnerability. We can share companionship via involvement in all sorts of positive experiences, but this provides us with only a semi-close friendship. If we cannot safely share our more vulnerable feelings, our sadness, fears, guilt, shame, and frustrations with a partner who understands and validates us, we cannot have true intimacy. And if we cannot take the risk of being rejected and hurt, we cannot open ourselves up to the love which beckons us all. Thus, we must balance our needs for safety and love by wisely determining which situations safely allow for vulnerability, and which ones require self protection. The development of relatively safe intimacy with partner allows us to experience the bonding which we all seek as social human beings, while safely allowing ourselves to genuinely express our innermost feelings and unique identities, secure that we will not be abandoned, abused, or exploited when vulnerable. If we cannot allow ourselves to be vulnerable, we cannot develop the emotional intimacy required for

sustained loving relationships. Conversely, if we cannot protect ourselves from being overly open and vulnerable in unsafe relationships with exploitive partners, or in unsafe moments in typically safe relationships, we are sure to be hurt if not heartbroken. Wisdom is essential in determining how much vulnerability is appropriate in particular situations and relationships.

Revisiting our earlier diagram of the structure of personality, we can visualize the process involved in establishing safe vulnerability, in contrast to the negative consequences of mutual defensiveness between partners. Intimacy requires direct and reciprocal communication between partners regarding both their basic needs, and their vulnerable feelings when those needs are unmet or blocked. Examine the diagram below.

**Husband**

**Wife**

**Outer Layer – Defenses – Unnecessary**

**Middle Layer – Vulnerable Feelings**

**Inner Core – Needs, Desires, and Expectations**

We see two partners, each of whom has basic needs, desires, and expectations within the inner core of personality. A host of vulnerable feelings are found within the next, intermediate level when these needs, desires, or expectations go unmet. Finally, at the outer crust of personality, we find a set of defenses and coping skills, both behaviors

and intrapsychic maneuvers, for managing these vulnerable feelings. In a relatively healthy and intimate relationship, much of the communication occurs on the inner two levels of personality. Needs, desires, and expectations are communicated directly and nondefensively, with each partner feeling safe enough to convey their vulnerable feelings openly, when those needs, desires, or expectations are frustrated or unmet. Direct communication of such vulnerability, met with safe, understanding responses from your partner, results in mutual intimacy.

In contrast, when one partner chooses to aggress, withdraw, or otherwise defend himself/herself to avoid vulnerability, their partner has a choice of either remaining vulnerable and thereby risking additional hurt, or of reciprocating their partner's defensiveness. In choosing an example, keep in mind our basic fight or flight physical survival defenses, and on an interpersonal plane, our options to go away from (flight), against (fight), or toward (intimacy) others. Let's assume that partner #1, the husband, is typically angry and blaming when defending himself, and that partner #2, the wife, typically withdraws and withholds when defending herself. Perhaps there has been a miscommunication regarding a date, and she is a half hour late arriving at the restaurant. He feels hurt and rejected, misperceiving that she didn't care enough to write down the date, while she feels sure that she remembered correctly, and can't understand why he is so aggravated. Illustrated in the following diagram, a vicious circle ensues, in which he responds to hurt or frustration (on the middle level of vulnerable feelings) by aggressing (on the outer, defensive level). She in turn feels hurt and threatened (on the middle, vulnerable level) by his anger and blame, then protects herself (at the outer, defensive level) from these vulnerable feelings by withdrawing from him, going silent and withholding affection and communication. Which in turn invites him to feel abandoned and further hurt (on his middle, vulnerable level), whereupon he resorts to additional anger and blame, which is again threatening to her, etc., etc. A vicious circle ensues, often resulting in an escalating cycle of defensiveness between partners, as they argue over the chicken and the egg and engage in the blame game regarding who is truly at fault for this conflict.

**Husband**

**Wife**

**Outer Layer - Defenses**

Anger/Blame vs Withdraw/Withhold

**Middle Layer - Vulnerable Feelings**

Abandoned/Hurt vs Fearful/Threatened

**Inner Core - Needs, Desires, Expectations**

Love/Safety Love/Safety

Given our imperfection as human beings, we are all prone to excessively rely upon defenses at times when feeling threatened. Thus, we should expect our partners to do the same. The crucial moment comes when our partner has regressed into a less healthy, more defensive zone within him/herself, and we have a choice of either 1) choosing safety by regressing into immediately self protective defenses as well (which will likely result in an escalating cycle of mutual defensiveness), or 2) inviting healthy resolution of the conflict and reestablishment of closeness by remaining vulnerable (which may result in additional hurt if one's partner remains defensive, but may prove beneficial if one's partner allows him/herself to be vulnerable as well). In relatively healthy relationships, the cycle of defensiveness is broken when the defensive partner responds positively to his/her partner's continued healthy vulnerability when feeling threatened. The repair attempt is accepted, and healthier communication ensues. In contrast, in a relatively unhealthy relationship, or in an unhealthy moment, a partner's continued vulnerability is viewed as an opportunity to reinforce one's own superior position over a vulnerable opponent. Repair is rejected in favor of combat. In healthy relationships, partners

tend to respond favorably to each other's vulnerable attempts to invite each other out of the defensive position, thereby abbreviating their conflicts, and repairing the brief damage. In unhealthy relationships, partners are quick to match and escalate their partner's defensiveness. Put more simply, we can either join our partners in the pits, or hold out for them to rejoin us at a higher, healthier level of functioning when they are ready to do so. This is the case both at the moment, and as a general strategy when a relationship has deteriorated to the edge of the divorce cliff.

When a relationship has deteriorated to the point where partners are considering divorce, vicious circles like the one noted above have typically become entrenched. For example, it is not unusual for caring but codependent, submissive wives to seek therapy to deal with their more controlling, self-centered husbands. If the husband joins her in couples therapy, their dynamics can be dealt with directly, but all too often, one partner is too threatened to participate. So what is the wife to do in this situation? Typically, she spends her initial office time complaining about her husband's behavior, which is understandable given her distress. However, these complaints are typically chronic, reflecting her resentment and helplessness in dealing with his controlling and self-centered behavior. She is stuck in a hostile dependent position, focusing externally on things which she cannot control, specifically, her husband's behavior. The way out is via independence, and not necessarily through divorce. She needs to re-empower herself, by focusing upon something she does control, namely her own actions and reactions.

Each partner has a healthy and an unhealthy zone of personality. In a relationship gone awry, partners are stuck relating to each other from their unhealthy selves. In our example, the self-centered, controlling husband feels aggrieved and angrily criticizes his wife, who is guilted or intimidated into submission. She in turn feels hurt and resentful, and withdraws her affection, which hurts him further, and the cycle begins anew. Their situation cries out for someone to take the initiative, to move into their own healthy zone of behavior, and invite their partner to join them, despite the fear that their vulnerability will not be reciprocated. Whether we are dealing with a specific situation, or an entrenched pattern of relatedness with divorce overtones, one or the other partner needs to take the risk of displaying healthier but more vulnerable behavior, inviting their partner to do the same. Even in the

worst of relationships, each partner has a healthy zone of personality. In his less defensive moments, the self-centered, controlling husband can see his shortcomings, and recognize their impact upon his wife. When he is occasionally strong enough to allow himself to be vulnerable (which is more likely when he is in touch with his fear of losing his wife), he can even acknowledge the shortcomings and apologize for his behavior. Likewise, a submissive, codependent wife can sometimes overcome her fear long enough to muster the courage to assert herself, or manage her hurt and resentment to allow herself to display loving behavior in the hope that it will be reciprocated.

When a relationship is approaching the divorce cliff, and this wife is seeking psychotherapy in the hope of saving her marriage, she can either remain in the same pathological dance, helplessly complaining about her husband's behavior while remaining in her own unhealthy zone, or she can take the risk of engaging in a concerted effort to enter her own healthy zone, and display consistent assertive and loving behavior. She can assert herself (not submit or aggress) in response to her husband's self-centeredness, control, or undeserved criticism, take responsibility for her own withholding of affection, and display more loving behavior. Of course your reply is, "but what if...". One of three outcomes follows when you take the ball into your own court and focus upon producing healthy behavior yourself, and then put the ball in your partner's court. Either your partner responds favorably and joins you at this healthier level of functioning, or they don't. If they do, you are relating on a healthier, more intimate level, at least at the moment, and if this mutual maneuver is repeated frequently enough, your relationship improves in the long term as well. If not, the ball is back in your court, and you have two remaining options. You can either drop back down into your unhealthy self and reciprocate your partner's pathology, or you can divorce. In two of these three scenarios, you are better off, because you have learned to more consistently remain in a healthy zone. If he reciprocates in a healthy way, you have become more healthy, both personally and in your relatedness with your spouse. If they don't, and you divorce, you can eventually take your healthy behavior into another relationship with a healthier partner. By learning to not reinforce a partner's unhealthy behavior via your own complementary pathology (e.g., submitting to excessive control, or accommodating self-centeredness or unfair fighting), you are less likely to attract the same kind of partner. You win either way, by becoming more healthy, either

within your current marriage, or in your next relationship. If, on the other hand, you feel a need to save the relationship at all costs, with a partner who is intransigent, then you may well pay at an exorbitant rate. While power is not a good dimension to dwell on in a marriage, the reality of marital power politics is that from one angle, the person who is least invested in the marriage has the most power. If you feel that you have to stay in the marriage, even at the cost of your selfhood and self-respect, you're likely to lose both, along with the marital dreams which you've already lost. Your intransigent partner will likely exploit your dependency and remain rigidly entrenched in his unhealthy behavior.

I remember age ten or so, when I threatened to leave home, over some long forgotten minor trivia, when visiting my beloved grandmother. She wisely counseled me to make sure I took a jacket, because it can get cold out there. This was her kinder version of "Don't let the door hit you from behind on your way out." My jacket and I ran away for well over an hour, and to this day, this episode still holds my personal record for my longest exercise of the nuclear threat in a relationship. If your spouse is quick to play the nuclear card, he or she is essentially telling you, "If you're not unhealthy enough to accommodate to my typical unhealthy behavior, maybe you're unhealthy enough to accommodate to my nuclear version of unhealthy behavior." If you are not independent and internally stable enough to accept divorce under even the worst of circumstances, then you are empowering your partner to write the pathological bottom line in your relationship, and you are reinforcing his or her behavior. Not that you have to leave, but if you are capable of leaving, or being left, he, or she will have a healthy fear of losing you in the absence of positive change, and will think twice before escalating to nuclear threats. Again, the focus is upon your own behavior, not your partner's, and in this case deals with your capacity for independence. The basic concept is that you can only control your own behavior, hope for the best response, and then choose your course of action based upon your partner's pattern of responses. You cannot control their behavior, and therefore, if you focus primarily upon their behavior, you remain stuck in a helpless position, complaining while waiting for them to change. To empower yourself, focus upon what you do control, yourself. If the worst does come to pass, and you end up choosing or reluctantly having to divorce, I recommend *The Divorce Book* by Matthew McKay et al. to help comfort you through the many dilemmas of this difficult process. But learning how to avoid reinforcing

your partner's unhealthy behavior is likely to improve your relationship, and keep their jacket in your closet. If not, you must allow yourself to believe that you can not only survive your wounds, but ultimately thrive again.

Likewise, at the start of psychotherapy, we often find couples stuck in a blame game, each complaining regarding their partner's behavior, insisting that they are only reacting to the partner, who is primarily at fault. Typically, each spouse attempts to triangulate with the therapist, trying to seduce the therapist into going two on one against the partner, hoping to get the therapist to change the partner's behavior. Regardless of the content of the complaints, this process of mutual blame and attempted triangulation must be challenged by the therapist. A couple of concepts are essential at this initial stage of couples therapy. Foremost is responsibility, the concept that every person, including each marital partner, is 100% responsible for their own behavior. No one makes you behave in a certain way. If your partner is over controlling or self-centered, only you decide whether to submit and accommodate. Yes, you may feel intimidated, but only you decide how to deal with your fear, and whether to submit or assert yourself. And if your partner is withholding and unaffectionate, only you decide how to respond to your hurt feelings. You have a variety of options. You can retreat and drink a six pack, criticize her for being a cold bitch, have an affair, or perhaps ask her what it would take on your part in order to encourage more loving behavior on her part. These and a host of other options are your choices, and the choice that you make is 100% your responsibility. If you choose poorly, she did not drive you to drink, or force you into an affair. Thus, at the start of couples therapy, the blame game must be addressed vigorously, with each partner moving toward acceptance of the notion that their partner does not MAKE them do anything. Only you are responsible for your choice of how to respond when your partner is displaying unhealthy behavior. Only you are responsible for your own choice as to whether you engage in a complementary unhealthy behavior, or a more healthy response.

Once this principle of 100% responsibility is accepted (at least intellectually, at the moment, for it will have to be revisited repeatedly), we can then move on to a discussion of what EACH partner must simultaneously change in the relationship, as opposed to who needs to change first, or most. The idea is to develop a shared narrative, in which the couple agrees regarding who needs to change what. Both the

presence of negative behaviors, and the absence of positive behaviors by each partner are discussed. It is helpful at this point for each partner to voice their own needed changes, albeit with some gentle input from their partner. If each partner is primarily focused on their own need for change, they can then commit to making these changes simultaneously. The prospect of significant change in the relationship is bolstered tremendously by two people working on their own behavior at the same time. Conversely, the likelihood of progress plummets when the blame game reigns. Since you cannot change your partner's behavior, two partners who each primarily focus upon the other's behavior only multiply their mutual helplessness, frustration, and inaction. If we can develop a shared narrative of each partner's contribution to the marital pathology, as well as a blueprint of the behaviors needed by each in order to move to a healthier level of interaction, the marriage is empowered to change. While periodic regressions into the blame game will occur, the therapist needs to consistently avoid triangulation, while redirecting the couple to keep in mind their mutual responsibility for the demise of the relationship, and its improvement.

The focus is also upon win-win solutions. The goal is to construct solutions which allow both partners to win simultaneously, rather than engaging in contest to see who will win and who will lose. Even if one partner wins a particular battle, the spouse loses, and the marriage loses, and accordingly, the winner loses as well. In the midst of a dispute, we must ask ourselves what potential solution would be satisfying to each of us. Once we ask this question, new solutions quickly become obvious. When debating whether to go to this or that movie, a win-win solution might be a double feature, or this movie this weekend that movie the next. In the absence of a win-win philosophy, a contest ensues involving a battle of wills, or an escalating debate regarding who is right and who is wrong, when the answer is that the mutual process of interaction is wrong. Recognizing this requires mutual humility and shared responsibility for conflicts. In the absence of these qualities, each contestant often seeks better ammunition, and unfair fighting ensues.

We are all familiar with some of the weapons involved in unfair fighting. Name calling is demeaning. Cursing is a message that you are willing to intimidate your partner, and resort to intimidation, with the threat of increasing aggression if he or she does not back off. Dropping the D-Bomb, the threat of divorce, either directly or subtly (e.g., "I can't take this anymore"), warns of the nuclear option when

conventional tactics are insufficient. The use of the words “always” and “never” add ammunition via exaggeration. Bringing up the past is also a powerful weapon, which allows you to prosecute a pattern of behavior, and a criminal identity, rather than a single crime. Comparing your partner to their disliked parent is an especially dirty trick. Playing the crazy card by asking if they've taken their psychiatric meds is likewise well below the belt. There is no end to the weapons that humans can invent and resort to in political and marital combat.

John Gottman has probably produced more marital research than any other psychologist. In his *Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, a book which I would recommend to any struggling couple, he cites a variety of behaviors which predict marital success or failure. In particular, he focuses not upon whether couples argue, but how they argue. Gottman describes the “four horsemen of the apocalypse,” criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling, behaviors which progressively sabotage a marriage. He contrasts criticism, involving an attack upon a partner's personality, with complaints, which address a more specific behavior. Contempt goes a step further, and involves a poisonous expression of disgust. Defensiveness is a means of avoiding responsibility for your own behavior while blaming your partner. While such defensiveness momentarily protects you via “the best defense is a good offense” strategy, your partner is likely to respond more vehemently, both to fend off this attack, and because his or her concerns are not being heard or validated. Eventually, in order to defend against chronic attacks by the first three horsemen, stonewalling occurs, wherein the overwhelmed party avoids communication, and perhaps acts as if he/she couldn't care less, to avoid being flooded emotionally. Usually the partner who is least proficient in verbal combat resorts to stonewalling. When this occurs consistently, healthy communication has died, distance ominously replaces arguments, and in the absence of divorce, a couple is at risk for leading parallel lives involving a deafening silence, next to each other rather than with each other.

Healthy fighting, on the other hand, involves a willingness to take responsibility for one's own behavior, and the courage to risk vulnerability by discussing feelings in a respectful, nondefensive manner. The classic distinction between “I” and “You” statements is relevant here. Complaints beginning with “You are...” become blaming statements which invite defensiveness. In contrast, concerns beginning with “I feel...” focus, at least initially, on yourself and your feelings,

rather than your partner's behavior, and tend to invite listening, and a more empathic response. Early in couples therapy, partners often cite communication as their biggest problem. This is often accurate. Whether the content of their disputes involves parenting, money, affection, in-laws, or other issues, it is the process of their communication that has gone awry. As they flee from vulnerability, when expressing their feelings, unfair fighting tactics become necessary in order to win the contest, and eventually stonewalling ensues in order to close the floodgates. A renewed willingness to accept responsibility and risk vulnerability sets the groundwork for healthier communication.

Having addressed responsibility and vulnerability, we can turn to companionship and affection. During an initial session, I typically ask a couple to tell me when was their last date. I sometimes cringe when I ask the question, fearing that I will hear "What do you mean? We're married" in response. It is nearly as bad when neither of them can remember their last date. If they tell me that their last date occurred three months ago, I may ask them to remember their first date, and what would've happened if after the goodbye kiss, he asked if he could take her out again three months from then. They of course laugh, as if this is preposterous. But is it not just as outrageous to assume that once the commitment is sealed, no further work, or I should say play, is necessary in order to maintain the loving companionship of a marriage? Marriages, like individuals, need nurturance. Often, families swallow marriages, as squeaky little wheels steal the marital oil, leading to a breakdown of the family engine, the marriage. To remedy this, I will often suggest a novel approach to dating. Depending on their family responsibilities, I will recommend that they structure their dating on a weekly or biweekly basis, just as they plan their work life or visits to the children's ballparks, as a given. I further insist that they alternate full responsibility for arranging the date. This means, for example, that when it is the husband's turn, he arranges the babysitter, as well as the reservations, tickets, etc. Alternating 100% responsibility for dates decreases the likelihood that this responsibility will be diffused and abandoned. Additionally, I discourage movies as a frequent dating strategy, as you are more next to than with your partner in a movie, and little interaction takes place (except amongst teenage partners). Instead, I suggest that novel dating be arranged as often as possible, that is, a date in which you experience something which neither partner has engaged in previously. Maybe you'll love it, maybe you'll hate it, but

you'll love it or hate it together and have something new to talk about. Check out the roller derby, an opera, a cattle auction, Ethiopian food with your fingers, a piano bar, a sunset picnic on the beach, anything that takes you out of the box. And better still, make it a surprise! Tell your spouse what to wear and when to be ready, but nothing else until he or she discovers it for them self. By adding a little novelty, intrigue and surprise, we are adding positive emotions, shared excitement in place of the routine. We are invigorated the relationship, taking the time to creatively pleasure each other. Try it out for yourself.

As for affection, we are once again faced with vulnerability. Expressions of affection can be met with indifference or outright rejection. And once again, the solution lies in en-courage-ing and committing yourself to healthy behavior on your own part, then putting the ball in your partner's court. Often, we take each other's love for granted, and fail to engage in the little niceties which characterized our courting behavior. It is ironic that we choose one person, out of a billion or so potential mates in our generation, to spend our only life on earth with, and then take them for granted, or worse still, use them as a safe, available target for dumping our frustrations. In many cases, we neglect our spouses due to distractions involving parental and job responsibilities, without any ill intent or resentment. It is important to remain mindful of each other's needs, including needs for respect, attention, and affection. Attention and respect pave the way for affection.

Returning to our spotlight on the featured author of this chapter, John Gottman focuses not only on what goes wrong in deteriorating marriages, but also what behaviors generate a successful marriage. Yes, one must avoid the "four horsemen," but there are also healthy behaviors which generate closeness. Amongst his seven principles for marital success, he specifically cites enhancing your love maps, nurturing fondness and admiration, turning toward rather than away from your spouse, and allowing your partner to influence you. Love maps refer to your familiarity with your spouse's needs, desires, preferences, interests, opinions, feelings, memories, and attachments. In other words, how intimately familiar are you with the map of your spouse's internal psychological landscape? And as Gottman notes, how much can you actually love your partner if you don't know who they are? You may feel your resistance sprouting at this point, perhaps with the exclamation, "Of course I know my wife, I've been with her for 30

years!" Yes, you probably know her better than anyone else does, but how detailed is your map of her inner space? Check out Gottman's exercises, including his love maps questionnaire, and the twenty questions game, in order to test how well you know and understand your spouse. In a similar vein, how would you describe your husband's life at age 11, age 7, and age 14? To the extent that you have difficulty answering, you might have fun with a history game. Ask your spouse about his experiences and feelings at a certain age. What was his 3rd grade teacher like, who was his best friend that year, and what did he look forward to doing in his spare time? What was his biggest fear at age 8, and what were the highlights of that year? Now let him pick a year and ask you. You may be pleasantly surprised at how much you discover about each other. Mutual understanding breeds emotional intimacy.

Gottman's second principle for successful marriage involves nurturing your fondness and admiration for your spouse. Remind yourself of the positive qualities of your spouse, why you fell in love, what you miss about her after a weekend apart, and what makes you proud of him as you watch him in a group from a distance. Each of these gets you in touch with your fondness for your spouse. As Gottman notes, "...fondness and admiration are antidotes for contempt. If you maintain a sense of respect for your spouse, you are less likely to act disgusted with him or her when you disagree." And just as the history game can help you discover and understand your spouse better, sharing mutual recollections of falling in love and other positive early experiences together can "fan the flames" of admiration.

Gottman goes on to discuss the value of turning toward rather than away from each other. Dozens of times a day, your spouse will make a comment or express a feeling. How do you respond? Do you listen without commenting? If so, how does he know whether you are listening, ignoring him, or wishing he would shut up? If you respond, does your response begin with an "and" or a "but?" In other words, are you affirming or negating him? If you appointed an internal bean counter to keep track of these dozens of minor interactions per day, what story would be told by the eventual tally? And what about the monthly or yearly tally? While each interaction may be insignificant in itself, the pattern over time has a massive impact on your relationship. When you consistently turn toward your partner, responding to their "bids" for attention, validation, or interaction, you display your interest and respect. Gottman notes that couples often turn away from each

other during these day-to-day interactions, “not out of malice, but out of mindlessness,” taking each other for granted while preoccupied with other issues. This would quickly change if you were in danger of losing your spouse. Not that you want to dwell on such catastrophes, but you can profitably use your anxiety regarding such a loss in order to access your gratitude, and count your blessings regarding their presence, in order to be more mindful of their needs in a given moment.

A fourth ingredient cited by Gottman in his recipe for marital success is the willingness to allow your partner to influence you. This issue essentially involves power sharing, and given our gender differences regarding control, it is typically more salient for men than women. That is, most wives can accept the influence of their husband, but men, particularly those from a more traditional mold, tend to feel more easily threatened by female influence, resisting it were an infringement upon their manhood or male prerogative for control. In this light, it is not surprising that Gottman's longitudinal research showed that men who accept their wives' influence experience happier marriages and are less likely to divorce. This is an issue of respect, not just power sharing and decision making. Even in quite traditional marriages, where the husband is respected as the head of the household and the seat of decision making, Gottman found that “emotionally intelligent husbands have figured out one big thing: how to convey honor and respect,” by accepting influence and seeking input prior to his decision. Thus, one can honor and respect one's spouse in many ways, by seeking a deeper understanding, expressing fondness and admiration, turning toward bids for attention, and accepting influence. Decreasing the influence of the “four horsemen,” especially contempt, is essential if we are to decrease our tendencies to move away from or against their spouse. But the above approach strategies are likewise essential if we are to move toward our spouse and build a foundation of respect and admiration, which in turn paves the way for affection. At the same time, these positive strategies create a cushion of positive regard for our spouse, which allows us to tolerate more negative moments with less annoyance.

As for affection, we all enjoy, and often expect, an anniversary card from our spouse, expressing their love for us. But random, unexpected expressions of affection often carry more impact. When was the last time that you left a love note in your partner's purse, in his lunch bag, or on the car seat? These unexpected expressions of love tell your partner

that you are mindful of their special place in the center of your universe. We all know this, but how often are we mindful of it, and more importantly, how often do we express this awareness? I remember cringing in a marital session many years ago when an emotionally deprived wife asked her husband, "Do you love me?" only to hear the response, "I married you didn't I?" This moment is the epitome of taking a spouse for granted, and acting as if commitment eliminates the need for affection. Our ongoing need for affection can take many forms, be it verbal, physical, or sexual. As Gary Chapman notes in "The 5 Love Languages," our preferred way of receiving love may be quite different from our spouse's preferred way of giving it. I may prefer words of affirmation, or quality time, while you may prefer receiving gifts, acts of service, or physical touch. Discovering your partner's primary love language, and choosing to practice that language, especially if he or she reciprocates, can have a powerful impact.

Our gender differences likewise yield conflict in the sexual arena, as women typically feel the need to experience emotional intimacy before engaging in sexual intimacy, whereas men are often more capable of sex for pleasure, or seeking closeness via sexual bonding. One can look at sex from two perspectives, as one of the best drugs available, a dopamine delivery device to provide pleasure, or as making love, a means of sharing emotional intimacy via a fusion of mind and body, love and sex. Both are enjoyable, but in a given relationship, the relative mix of these two types of sexual relatedness both reflects and impacts the quality of the relationship. As women are quick to remind us, there is also a big difference between sex and nonsexual physical affection. As men, we sometimes focus excessively on sex, ignoring the need for nonsexual physical affection, or using it as a transition toward sex. Hugs are the daily staple of nonsexual physical affection, and like kisses, can be delivered with meaning, or in a more perfunctory manner. A robust hug or a soft, lingering kiss delivers far more affection than an obligatory stiff hug or peck on the cheek. But do we slow down, live in the moment, stay in touch with the value of our spouse, and take the time to share quality physical affection in a nonsexual way? The same goes for verbal affection. Daily "I love you"s are important, but are they delivered with meaning, or matter-of-factly, with the required, rote "I love you too" response? Take the time to do an inventory of your affectionate transactions. Does the bean counter say "yay" or "nay" to the quality of your "I love you"s, hugs, kisses and sexual interactions?

Even in healthy marriages, there is often plenty of room for improvement.

Sometimes a spouse will describe the demise of their marriage by lamenting, "I just fell out of love." As Pat Love notes in "The Truth About Love," there are many misconceptions about love, including the perception that you either have it or you don't. The infatuation stage of "falling" in love is fueled by powerful brain chemicals which induce major personality changes (some would say temporary insanity). As Love notes, "Under the influence of nature's love potion, nontouchers touch, non-talkers talk, and everybody feels happy, and we haven't even gotten to the erotic part yet... It is important, though, to realize that infatuation is merely the earliest stage of love. Do not mistake this temporary power surge for a permanent condition, or confuse it with true love." Loving behaviors flow freely in response to the love drug, which is so powerful that some forsake lasting love in favor of serial infatuation. They fall in love with falling in love. Most of us reluctantly recognize that falling in love it is a precious but temporary stage, and that a more full-bodied, lasting love can be developed and maintained only by continuing the loving behaviors that were initially fueled by infatuation. Love becomes a daily choice, a set of behaviors, not just a feeling that you fall out of. You may fall in love with the aid of your brain chemistry, but you lose love due to behavior, and can alternatively choose to engage in behaviors which maintain and enhance your love. Love goes on to discuss the stages of love, and strategies for improvement or recovery of love, and in a follow up book, promotes "hot monogamy".

At this point, you may ask, "What about commitment?" In some marriages, commitment and loyalty have been abandoned in the form of a romantic and/or sexual affair. Janis Spring has provided us with a quite insightful book, "After the Affair," addressing recovery from infidelity, as well as the distrust it generates. In my own experience, the survival of a marriage in the aftermath of an affair depends largely upon behaviors on the part of the perpetrator. For purposes of discussion, let's say that a husband engaged in a six month romantic and sexual affair. First of all, is he genuinely apologetic, or just sorry that he got caught? Does he understand the full impact of his behavior upon his wife, and truly feel remorse, or just voice what she wants to hear, while secretly craving a reunion with his lover? Is he genuine, that is, honest? Does he acknowledge his mixed feelings in the aftermath of being

caught, or minimize his attraction to his lover in the hope that it can be dismissed as a mere fling? Honesty is essential. You will find yourself wanting to protect both your spouse and yourself from the pain which results from honesty, but such gains will be short lived when the truth inevitably unfolds, resulting in an additional layer of distrust. As they say in political circles, the cover up is more damaging than the crime. Your spouse will have a host of questions regarding your affair, and your answers will breed more questions. Despite your discomfort, answer them honestly. The one exception is questions regarding details of your sexual activities with your lover. Such disclosure leads to visual “memories” on her part which will be hard for her to suppress. But be honest regarding the frequency of your encounters with your lover, and how you deceived your spouse in order to conceal such encounters. Forgiveness is a gift to you, but you need to earn it. On the other side of the coin, if your spouse does not pursue behaviors worthy of forgiveness, you obviously have the choice to stay or to leave, but either way, you retain choice over forgiveness. Years after bonding in love has ceased via divorce, some divorcees remain bonded in anger. When maintained through the years after divorce, this anger takes its toll on you, as well as your children. As Robert Enright pointed out in his helpful book, “Forgiveness is a Choice,” forgiveness helps the forgiver more than the forgiven.

A capacity to experience genuine guilt is also essential. Is your guilt just an annoying feeling to be suppressed? Is your guilt merely a component of your ambivalence, as you seek some strategy which will allow you to simultaneously maintain the stability of marriage alongside the excitement of your affair? Or are you willing to act upon moral guilt, your recognition that you have violated not only your sacred marital vows, but also your own values? Are you willing to pursue behaviors which shut down the affair and prevent any recurrences? If so, you will need to cease all contact with your lover, disclose any attempted contacts from her, and discuss how you handled it.

This brings us to our second criterion for forgiveness and restoration of trust. You will need to engage in an honest self exploration of why you resorted to infidelity, without blaming your spouse. Yes, marital distance or conflict likely contributed to your openness to an affair, and will have to be addressed, but you are 100% responsible for your own choice, amongst many options, to cheat. Your spouse’s behavior did not push you into your lover’s arms. If you fully accept

responsibility for this choice, you have begun your road to recovery, and can now assess your own background and personality to determine the sources for this choice. Regardless of what you find during this determined moral and personality inventory, you will need to act on it. For example, if you find that you are insecure, and that your low self esteem leaves you vulnerable to the attention of other women, you will need to address the sources and solutions for your self esteem deficit. If you use sex primarily as a drug, via frequent use of pornography, lustful lingering gazes at other women, and perhaps additional past affairs, you may want to look into the literature regarding sexual compulsivity and addiction, and work on developing your capacity for intimacy. If you had an affair at work, you may well need to seek a different job. Are you willing to do what it takes in order to atone for your mistake, and prevent a recurrence of this or additional affairs? Action is required, not just words.

Thirdly, and this is often the hardest part, you will need to actively and repeatedly listen to the many distressing feelings of your injured spouse, the hurt, sadness, anger, embarrassment, and fears. You will not want to do this, because these feelings will trigger your own guilt and shame. But your spouse is carrying a truckload of negative feelings as a result of your behavior, and it is your responsibility to help her work through these feelings. You cannot make any marital progress by expecting her to "Get over it," or by telling her "We've been through this before." Sometimes she will resort to angry attacks upon you. Some of this anger is reasonable, since anger is about injustice, and you have perpetrated a marital felony. However, your spouse will need to learn to restrain herself from the retaliatory urge to extract a pound of flesh in order to even out the marital pain. Otherwise, she will unwittingly encourage you to shut down, and avoid the mutual sharing of vulnerable feelings needed to restore emotional intimacy and trust. If your spouse is willing to forgive, engaging in these three behaviors will go a long way toward healing the wounds of infidelity. Then you can more easily address the marital difficulties which disenchanted you enough to consider an affair in the first place, as well as your spouse's other marital concerns.

In other marriages, there has been no infidelity, but love has evaporated and divorce talk fills the air. Commitment issues may arise in the form of one partner berating the other for their distance and lack of commitment. After all, didn't we commit for life, for better or worse?

But if your partner has been contemplating divorce, their commitment is already diluted. He or she is likely feeling that the better is long gone, and is asking whether the worst is yet to come. You cannot profitably expect your spouse to write you a blank check for permanency, regardless of your behavior, if he or she has progressed that far down the road to divorce. It is best to recognize that the marriage is now conditional, based on behavioral changes by both of you. This does not mean that commitment is unimportant, or that restoration of a permanent commitment is not a goal. Instead, we can acknowledge that the relationship has deteriorated to the point that our original commitment is in question, but nonetheless commit ourselves to each doing everything possible to improve the relationship enough to restore a full commitment. Unless, of course, one partner is in couples therapy inauthentically, as a means of avoiding guilt for divorce by claiming they did everything possible to save the marriage. As with all therapeutic endeavors, acceptance of reality is a prerequisite. If you can allow yourselves to accept the unfortunate state that you have devolved into, you have chosen a realistic starting point for reconnection.

Finally, most couples bear children, and given their attachment to their sons and daughters, a lot of emotion is invested in healthy parenting. Disputes are bound to arise. And parental responsibilities are bound to clash with marital needs. These conflicts are universal and inescapable. Sometimes, the family completely swallows the marriage. As you look at your own marital and family dynamics, consider the following exercise. Take a half dollar, a quarter, a nickel and a dime, and trace each of them a few times on a piece of paper. Then take a scissors and cut out the different sized circles. Let's use the example of a family of four, involving a daughter and a son. There are six different dyads in this family: the marriage, the sibling relationship and the mother/son, mother, mother/daughter, father/son, and father/daughter relationships. Adding the family as a whole, we have seven units in this family, not counting the threesomes. Pick the relationship in your family which you consider the strongest, whether it be the marriage, the family as a whole, a sibling relationship, or one of the parent child relationships. Write the name of the participants in this relationship on the half dollar size circle. Now choose the weakest relationship in the family, due to conflict, distance, etc., and write down the names of its members on the dime size circle. Now choose the right sized circle to represent the relative strength or weakness of each of the other family

units. What have you discovered? The dime size relationships often produce the biggest symptoms, loudly or silently, although the half dollar size relationships sometimes have a downside as well, perhaps by crowding out or taking up the energy that should be invested in the dime size relationships. If your marriage is not a quarter or half dollar sized, or if it is smaller than one of the parent child relationships, you are quite likely to have marital difficulties at the core of your family. Increased dating may prove beneficial and even sufficient, unless a wholesale review of the status of your marriage is in order. Oftentimes the family unit will be strong, but there is a dime size parent/child relationship that needs to be upgraded. In our busy lives, we usually find time for family outings, but quality one-on-one time with each of our children, apart from the rest of the family, often gets sacrificed. Ask your spouse to do the same exercise, and then compare the results. Discussion can flow from any glaring results or from disagreements, and decisions to upgrade certain family units can follow your consensus.

In other families, difficulties arise from marital disagreements regarding parental roles and styles. How do you each correct your children, how do you show your love, and do you support each other's parental interventions? It is not uncommon for parental roles to become polarized. Healthy parenting requires warmth, firmness, and wisdom. Not everyone has the same mix of these qualities. Often one spouse, typically the father, will be firmer, while the other spouse, typically the mother, will have more natural warmth. Sometimes these roles become polarized. The warm parent may feel the need to nurture a child following tough discipline by or cold distancing by one's coparent, and the firm parent may feel a need to step in and compensate for lax parenting by one's mate. Further polarization may occur as each attempts to compensate for the perceived weaknesses in the other parent. Eventually this polarization may become a pathological struggle and endless parental dispute between a warm but enabling parent, and a firm but harsh parent. As with other personality dimensions, partners can complement each other by maintaining or even entrenching themselves in their own complementary half loaves, or they can each seek to develop their own full parental loaf, simultaneously. This would involve the firm parent replacing harshness with warmth, confident that their partner is actively striving to substitute firmness for enabling. These changes occur far more quickly if both partners are changing at

the same time, so that neither feels the need to compensate for the others deficit.

We have just scratched the surface of potential problems in coparenting, and there are obviously a host of other content issues that couples can quarrel over. The key is the process of conflict resolution, not the content of the dispute. A good process, based on the principles discussed above, resolves most conflicts the vast majority of the time. Your marriage is the core relationship of your family, and a healthy marital communication process, coupled with mutual respect, attention, responsibility, and vulnerability, will both maintain your family unity, and show your children how to do the same.