



# Reinventing Relationships

~ An After Forward ~



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## Reinventing Relationships ~ An After Forward

The following notes were completed at a time when I have been taking a particular approach with couples whose relationships are in trouble. The type of problems that they encounter, have a commonality and are also found among couples who in fact may never seek help. These notes are aimed to incorporate, in just a few brief pages, some particular ideas that couples have responded to, and have indicated that they were helpful in assisting them improve their relationship.

### Background

John Gottman, as some of you reading this précis will know, is a favourite author of mine, and he has spent many years examining relationships. John has taken me away from a rather myopic focus on communication to one that emphasises friendship instead. That is not to say that communication is not important, and I will come back to that shortly, but John emphasises that friendship is ultimately the key to happy couples. John derived a good deal of his theory from his so-called "love shack" experiments in Northern America over the last 20 years. He asks people to spend a weekend in this pleasant retreat while he films them. You will be happy to know this isn't in the bedroom or the toilet.

Like most who study human behaviour, it's not very long before couples, despite being filmed, start to behave the way they normally would. Some of us who have been unfortunate enough to view reality television have seen the evidence for that.

The end result of viewing thousands of hours of video footage of couples led him to the conclusion that friendship, rather than simply communication, is the key to a good relationship. It was this notion of friendship I want to return to later

### A comment about communicating

Most of us have had the experience of participating in courses that have been aimed to improve our ability to communicate. Easy, perhaps in the classroom, and to some extent, in our more general lives, but I fear much more difficult in our life as a couple. The dictum "when in stress we regress", is a phrase I coined in the 80's when conducting management training. I suggested then we can train people to change their communication style, but predictably under pressure or in crisis people's personality and fundamental style is likely to return to the fore, almost no matter what techniques have been taught.

However, I would also refer you to my Building Resilience Workshop, in which I suggested that there are no bad personalities, simply creative or destructive ways in which we use them. Oddly enough, this always seems to be much more obvious when we are involved with people we love. How many times have I heard one partner say; *"You wouldn't speak to one of your employees like that"*. I am quick to point out that they are hardly likely to be passionately in love with an employee, or indeed have the same sense of responsibility or concern for employees as you might have for your children. When emotions are involved communication changes!

## Pre-requisite Foundations

In "Reinventing Relationships", a course I conducted for couples, I point out that there are four hallmarks in any sound relationship. These are: a) feeling safe; b) shared responsibility; c) intimacy; and d) planning. (see: [www.heas.com.au](http://www.heas.com.au)) These four hallmarks are critical to any relationship. This 'after forward' to that course makes some assumption that at least those four principles or hallmarks of a relationship are in place. If they are not in place, or you don't understand what they are and why they are important, do not read any further, but rather go back to Reinventing Relationships and at least read through the notes, or the overview that appears at the end of these notes and after the relationship questionnaires.



*I'm crazy about my husband because he's man enough to express his feelings and emotions.*

## Returning to friendship

These notes stem from my encounter with John Gottman's ideas about friendship. By way of background I want to first explain just for a moment an experience that Michele, my partner, and I had when presenting a lifestyle course for the war veteran population.

We decided, as an "ice breaking" exercise, (it was a week-long course) we would use something rather typical to help everyone get to know each other. A lot of these people had not met before, but in the main they were there with their partners. You may be familiar with the "ice breaker" techniques; it allows a facilitator to introduce a non-threatening strategy for introducing and getting to know his or her audience. This particular exercise involves five questions – your favorite film, your favorite book, your favourite food, the most inspiring person you can think of, and who would you like to be trapped on a tropical island with. On this occasion however we used a slightly different strategy and we asked each couple to respond for the other.

We had conducted six courses when the pattern became clear (we have since run 31) i.e., the couples' on the courses average score to these quite trivial questions about their partner was just three. Making this even more surprising, these were not people who had been married for a short period of time, but by our 'guesstimate' at least 25 years.

So it got Michele and I to thinking, what is it that these people talk about to each other and how does that relate to the notion of friendship? You see, I think the key to friendship is knowing the other person, their concerns, their worries, their likes, their dislikes, etc. Surely this is what friendship is about. You may not know things about acquaintances, but really good friends you would know some of their most intimate details and their biographical stories.

So it struck us that this poor score may be reflective of some inadequacy in their relationship, or at least the way in which their friendship developed. For instance, was one of the reasons that they didn't know all the answers to the above five simple questions because they had simply gotten into the habit of not talking, or worse still, ignoring each other? We decided if this lack of awareness was true in respect to this rather simple and trivial quiz, then how true may it be in relation to the more deeper and profound issues that may never be discussed? Attached to these notes you will find two of John Gottman's questionnaires, i.e. "Building Blocks for Relationships" and "How well do you know your partner".

These are certainly worth completing, and perhaps sharing with your partner. For friendship is undoubtedly the key to any sound relationship. Friends would know the answers, not just to all these questions, but also they would feel affirmed and appreciated by the other.



*I'm crazy about my  
husband because he  
brings home the  
bacon!*

*(I just wish he'd leave  
some of the other stuff  
at the store!)*

### **"The Story of Us" and returning to communication**

A further technique that we developed during our lifestyle program was to introduce popular film to demonstrate some of the key points in healthy communication and how in one session we show how quickly good communication can deteriorate into an argument and worse. If you have completed the Reinventing Relationships module, you will find there is a reference there to the "Story of Us", starring Michele Pfeiffer and Bruce Willis. We show two segments of that film; one part is towards the beginning of the story, the other at the end. Again, if you have participated in our course, you will recall that Bruce Willis and Michelle Pfeiffer are acting out the role of a couple

who have just returned home from Rome, and are having a simple conversation in bed, which should have ended in a rather splendid way, instead it deteriorates. They use almost every single destructive strategy of communication. Do you remember this from the course "re-inventing Relationships? These were:

**Escalation**

**Invalidation**

**Negative interpretations**

**Withdrawal and Avoidance**

(see handout at the end of this précis)



Of course the argument they have proves to be a watershed that shortly thereafter leads to their separation. Of course, it is a film of redemption, and towards the end both of them realise that they have a history together and they want to keep that history, not just because of the kids, but because they worked so damn hard on it over the years.

A glitzy, perhaps even gooey film for some, but I have never seen anything like in that bedroom scene that within a few minutes encapsulates all the negative and destructive aspects of communication. So even if you don't watch the whole film, I think just scene 17 on your DVD will give you three minutes that you will undoubtedly (as all of us do) identify with.

This has led me to some hope that I could find more films like "The Story of Us", because quite interestingly, yet not surprisingly, it seems when I show the film people are able to learn a lot more from the descriptive portrayal than simply words, even perhaps more than those words in this document.

### **Newsflash Fighting with your spouse makes you sick!**

When married couples argue, the emotional scars might be just the beginning. Research in the latest 2005 issue of the **Archives of General Psychiatry** shows that the stress of a half-hour domestic dispute is enough to slow down the body's ability to heal itself from physical wounds by an entire day. The study included 42 healthy married couples, aged 22 to 77, who had been married for an average of 12.6 years. Couples made two 24-hour visits to a hospital research unit. On the first visit, they were instructed to interact with each other in a supportive way, while on the second visit, they discussed a marital disagreement such as money, communication or in-laws. A vacuum pump was used to produce blisters on each partner's arm, and the wounds were examined several times over the following 12 days. Researchers found that couples' wounds healed more slowly following the argument than after the supportive discussion. And couples who were highly hostile towards each other in both sessions healed 60 per cent more slowly than couples with low levels of hostility.

## **Affection and Affirmation: The ultimate two elements**

There are two things that I have learnt about being married to each other for over 36 years, and I believe these are common and true for all women and men. The first of things is "affirmation", and the second is "affection". Fortunately I was able to find an Australian film that demonstrated these two elements repeatedly. Most of us have seen the Australian film 'The Castle', which involved the Kerrigan family. I would like you, at some stage, to watch that film together, because I think you can ask yourself "to what extent can we identify with the Kerrigan's".

Now this film is a comedy, and unless you are particularly eccentric like Darryl Kerrigan, and you have children that are certainly intellectually challenged, then you may think that there is little you have in common. Bill Collins an Australian film critic says we should watch good films at least three times. I invite you to watch this film, not this time for the story line, but by way of understanding the family dynamics.

The comedy aside, the story also betrays some real issues, cultural and social as to what it is to be an Australian. The film also highlights the critical elements in successful relationships, not just between partners, but between children as well.

So while my two-element theory of successful relationships may seem at first too simple. Feedback has indicated it is both practical and easily applied even to the point of making substantial changes in your relationship overnight. These elements, I believe, are the fundamental core values found in all good friendships and consistently desired by all of us, i.e., we just want to be valued and loved.

### **Affection and Affirmation Portrayed**

In "The Castle", young Steve Kerrigan tells us at the beginning of the movie that his "dad is the back bone" of the family. He says, "That mum is the other bone". Steve later says "The only reason I love that house is because it had mum and dad in it". Can you say that about your parenting? Is dad the backbone of the family? Is dad the leader, because that's what the word "father" means? Do you tell stories to your kids? In the film, Yvonne tells how Darryl and she first met while she was on a date with someone else. Examine closely next time why she was struck by him. She called him "lanky", but as a man who had "obvious principles". Steve, Darryl's son, tells us "Dad just loves his kids to death". Steve talks about present giving as being important, he reminds us that after one particular father's day Darryl said, "That it was the best father's day ever". Do you remind your children that you are appreciative of them?

Darryl waits for his son Wayne to return home, he still unconditionally loves Wayne, who is in gaol for an armed hold up. One of Darryl's biggest concerns is how he will tell Wayne (the son that must have let them down so much), that the home is going to be compulsorily acquired by the government, and that there won't be a home for him to come home to. This level of unconditionally is an exemplar of how we as parents should love our children.

However I want to go back to the way in which Darryl and Yvonne relate to each other in this movie. There is continued and open affection between them. They obviously show and tell each other how much they mean to one another, but importantly, they touch. It would seem to me that Yvonne couldn't see the flaws and even often stupidity of Darryl, even when he buys a chicken coup, jousting sticks or invests money in dogs that haven't won in years. What kind of tolerance

and affection do you show each other? And what kind of affection do your kids see? What kind of lessons about marriage and family are your kids learning as a result of your relationship?

The second of these almost ridiculously simple strategies is that of affirmation. From the beginning of the film to the end, almost irrespective of Darryl's concerns, he finds the ability to affirm his wife. There is one point in the movie where his son said "He was so down he even stopped complimenting mum on her cooking". Ultimately it's not what you do occasionally in terms of your relationship, it's more what you consistently and persistently do that makes the difference. Darryl consistently and persistently affirms his wife. For instance, Darryl in the kitchen, "And what do we call this darling?" Yvonne's reply "Sponge cake". Darryl says "And on the top", Yvonne says "icing". Darryl says, "Well kids, why would you want to go out when this comes up night after night?" Later, when she is giving him a beer stein for his father's day, Yvonne says, "I should do pottery". He says, "You would be good at that". How many times have we missed an opportunity like that and rather said instead something sarcastic like "What would you want to do that for?"

Another example of Darryl Kerrigan's ability to affirm, "This is a beautiful dish, what do you call them again?" Yvonne (smiling graciously) says, "Rissoles, everyone knows that". So even in the minor every day mundane matters, Darryl reminds Yvonne that she is not just loved, but affirmed in everything she does. As I say, if you haven't seen the film, I suggest you do.

You see at the conclusion of all of my study, and more than 36 years of marriage I am convinced that the key remains that of affirmation and affection as the most important. I use the vehicle of the film "The Castle", because I think in all its simplicity the film demonstrates what I have found so lacking in too many relationships. I have tried to encourage people to give up criticizing and directing each other (direction is sometimes an implied criticism) but people frankly must have found this too difficult, (even for a day). Indeed it is hard to change behaviours that are well entrenched and almost involuntary. However, adding some new behaviour may be simpler, so my challenge is, to show more affection everyday and offer random acts of affirmation as often as you can also on a daily basis.

**Good luck and Merry Christmas,  
Roger and Michele  
December 2005**



[On Lake Geneva New York 2005]

# Bids for Connection: The Building Blocks of Emotional Connection

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I sometimes get ignored when I need attention the most.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. My partner usually doesn't have a clue as to what I am feeling.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. I often have difficulty getting a meaningful conversation going with my partner.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. I get mad when I don't get the attention I need from my partner.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. I often find myself becoming irritable with my partner.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. I often feel irritated that my partner seems not to be on my side.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. I have trouble getting my partner to listen to me.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. I find it difficult to get my partner to open up to me.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. I have trouble getting my partner to talk to me.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Scoring:**

**Strongly Disagree: 0   Disagree: 1   Neutral: 2   Agree: 3   Strongly Agree: 4**

**Your score for questions 1-3: \_\_\_\_\_**

Scores below 8 mean that you are direct in your relationship. This is great news for your relationship, because you have the ability to state clearly what you need from this person. If your score is 8 or higher, you may be too reticent in bidding. The other person in your relationship may feel as if they have to be a mind reader to understand what you are after.

**Your scores for questions 4-6: \_\_\_\_\_**

Scores below 8 mean that you are not overly forceful in expressing what you need from this person. Your relationship benefits from this quality of yours because it's easier for the other person to hear and understand what you need. If your score is 8 or higher, you may be expressing so much anger in your bidding that you are turning this person away. Maybe this is because of past frustrations, or maybe it is the way your personality is.

**Your score for questions 7-9: \_\_\_\_\_**

If your score is below 8, this means you have a high level of trust in your relationship. If your score is 8 or higher, this reflects a problem with the level of trust in your relationship. You may need to do more to win this person's trust. Some people accomplish this by concentrating more on responding to the other person's bids rather than trying to get the other person to respond to you.



# How well do you know your partner?

	Yes	No
1. I can name my partner's best friend.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. I know what stresses my partner is currently facing.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. I know the names of some of the people who have been irritating my partner lately.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. I can tell you some of my partner's life dreams.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. I can tell you about my partner's basic philosophy of life.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. I can list the relatives my partner likes the least.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. I feel my partner knows me fairly well.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. When we are apart, I often think fondly of my partner.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. I often touch or kiss my partner affectionately.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. My partner really respects me.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. There is fire and passion in this relationship.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. Romance is definitely still part of our relationship.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13. My partner appreciates the things I do in this relationship.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14. My partner generally likes my personality.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15. Our sex life is mostly satisfying.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
16. At the end of the day my partner is glad to see me.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
17. My partner is one of my best friends.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
18. We just love talking to each other.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
19. There is lots of give and take (both people have influence) in our discussions.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
20. My partner listens respectfully, even when we disagree.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
21. My partner is usually a great help as a problem solver.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
22. We generally mesh well on basic values and goals in life.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Add up the total number of 'yes' responses.**

**Your score: \_\_\_\_\_**

**18 or more yes answers:** You have a lot of strength in your relationship. Congratulations!

**8 to 14 yes answers:** This is a pivotal time in your relationship. There is much strength you can build upon but there are also some weaknesses that need your attention.

**7 or fewer yes answers:** Your relationship may be in serious trouble. If this concerns you, you probably still value the relationship enough to try to get help.

# Reinventing Relationships- A Summary Handout. \*

Probably all of us have friends and family members that suffer anxiety and depression related to their relationship with their partner or other family members. Divorce rates escalate, while spousal abuse is likewise increasing. Anxiety and depression is nearly twice as more prevalent among females than males, while substance abuse is more than twice as prevalent among males than females (Andrews et al 1999) Relationships are a mental health issue they impact on health, and of course ill health impacts upon relationships.

“Reinventing Relationships” is a couples’ based program that has been designed by HEAS based on the core difficulties we have identified in counselling of clients over the last 20 years who present with “marital difficulties”. The expectations of marriage and the understanding of gender differences are primary causes of disharmony, but also the failure of a marriage to thrive and grow. This is because so many couples fail to understand that successful relationships reinvent themselves over a lifetime of marriage. The often-heard phrase “I love him but I am not in love with him”, so often exemplifies this failure to thrive.

In this hour or so we have to discuss the problems of relationships, I have chosen, among all the hundreds of angles from which I could approach this problem from I thought I would share with you some of the major elements in this part 1 of our program. The full program can be found in [www.heas.com.au](http://www.heas.com.au) under the “papers and presentations” button, (it’s in a PDF, so you will need adobe). What follows is a summary that has been completed by way of an overview to ensure you have the significant points from that workshop.

## The four Hallmarks of a safe Relationship

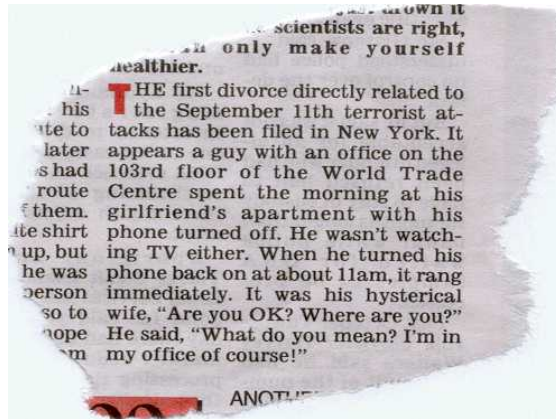
1. Being Safe at Home
2. Intimacy
3. Shared Responsibility
4. Planning



[\*Note: ideally these notes are best understood by attending our 1-2 hour Reinventing Relationships Workshop -Please contact HEAS on 4925333 for further information].

## Destructive patterns in relationships

1. Escalation
2. Invalidation
3. Negative interpretations
4. Withdrawal and Avoidance



## Towards Better Communication

Communication Filters:

1. Distractions
2. Emotional states
3. Beliefs and expectations
4. Differences in style
5. Self protection

Hidden Issues that often drive presented issues

1. Sex
2. Recognition
3. Commitment
4. Integrity
5. Acceptance

## The Speaker – Listener Technique

### The rules

The speaker has the floor

Sharing the floor

No problem solving – (when you focus on solutions you are not listening)

### Rules for the Speaker

Speak for yourself (use "I" statements)

Don't go on and on

Stop and let the listener paraphrase.

### Rules for the Listener

Paraphrase and ask for clarification if necessary

Don't rebut or offer an opinion

Don't ridicule (or make faces including rolling the eyes)

### Points when first using this technique

1. Focus on non relationship issues first its safer ground
2. The speaker listener techniques allows some predictability to the outcome
3. Work together to fight negative patterns of behaviour rather than with each other

### Newsflash!!!!!!!. What do "you" and "I" say about Marital Health.

Simmons and others in Psychological Science (2005) found that when couples used "I" (first -person singular) and " we"(first person plural), they were more successful in resolving conflict and more likely to report marital satisfaction. The authors suggest that when "we" is used the subjects had a greater sense of shared responsibility or stake in the problems being discussed, this helped them collaborate effectively. Couples who have a sense of "we-ness" have enhanced problem-solving skills and have as a consequence lower rates of long-term distress and dissolution than other couples. Volume 16 number 1

### The top ten things you can do to destroy your relationship

- Think only of yourself
- Push shove or slap one another
- Refuse to accept your differences
- Ignore signs that you are growing distant
- Avoid dealing with key issues
- Put one another down and escalate often
- Leave no time to talk as friends
- Emphasis on me versus you
- Stop doing things together
- Regularly shorten the long term view