

**Human Focus Group™**

**A Relationship Workshop**

## **Living and Loving Together**

### **Building A Relationship That Will Last**

#### **1. Introduction**

I chose the title of this module from a book of the same name by Bob Montgomery, and while I have misplaced the book, I always remember that it was so helpful nearly 20 years ago when we first read it and today continue to use some of its recommendations, now in our 34<sup>th</sup> year of marriage.

A good deal of the module stems from some work by Markman, Stanley and Blumberg (2002), in their book, "Fighting for your Marriage". This workshop has been finally developed in response to a continuing demand by so many people over the last 20 years of my professional life to specifically provide a workshop. Whereas I have counselled many people in respect to their marriages over that time and borrowed this and that by way of handouts, I have never sat down and written a workshop for married couples. So this is a start, albeit just that.

#### **2.1 The four hallmarks of relationships**

##### **2.11 On Being Safe at Home**

The reality is that we mostly show disrespect to people we are closest to. We often find that conflict is one critical element that brings couples to counselling. Those that show the ability for conflict resolution in an effective way generally have good marriages. Thus conflict resolution is a sound predictor of a healthy marriage in the future. One common problem of what can be termed "passive conflict", occurs where one person wants to talk about certain issues and the other withdraws. Some would say this is not the most serious problem, but one that I have found nonetheless will destroy the very fabric of marriage. Of course we often hear the so frequently repeated phrase, "My husband won't talk", and yet a husband who says "My wife nags all the time". Its important to remember that women use communication to build relationships while men generally use communication to make decisions. Having made the decision, communication for men ceases. While for women, once a decision has been made, then the communication actually starts! In fact in order to get an opportunity to speak, its not unusual for women to stir up conflict just to enable some form (any form) of communication.

It's easy to understand how men come to believe that women like to criticise and women come to believe that men don't care. The facts are that women simply want to talk and men want less conflict. This is what I mean by being safe at home, simply the safety to speak your mind.

## **2.12 On being intimate**

While a good deal of people in talking about marriage focus on conflict and its resolution, this is not why we in fact marry. We marry to develop intimacy, friendship, passion and in fact the very core values of our life. This is usually intended from the beginning as a life time commitment. Yet instead of these core values, instead it is conflict that can destroy intimacy. Good communication leads to intimacy and intimacy leads to good communication.

## **2.13 Do your part and be responsible**

Marriage is essentially about teamwork, and to do this you must develop friendship and make the relationship safe. This can be done only when each member does his or her part, with the focus being on what you put in rather than what you take out. In occupational health and safety, there is a saying, “a shared responsibility. The health and safety in any sound relationship is always shared.”

## **2.14 Make your security and future together**

Commitment is a major theme in every discussion on marriage, but this flows to everything. Marriage importantly includes forgiveness, sacrifice, protecting priorities and developing team work. Commitment is the knowledge that the other person is there for us and without that there is no future, no security. This includes making a vision together for the future, in the same way organisations do. I will take this up again in the later part of Part II of this workshop.

Do not do or say things that threaten the stability of your relationship. Try and not act in ways that do not allow the opportunity to bond together slip away. You need a sense of real attachment if your relationship is to work and, above all, last.

## **3.1 Destructive Patterns**

In section two, four hall marks of a safe relationship were discussed. Now lets examine those destructive patterns that put relationships at risk.

The essence of fighting for your marriage is to challenge your own patterns of behaviour, rather than against each other. Research indicates there are four destructive patterns in failed marriages. These are:

- 3.11 Escalation
- 3.12 Invalidation
- 3.13 Negative interpretation
- 3.14 Withdrawal and avoidance.

### **3.11 Escalation**

'What goes around comes around', heard that before? This is where negative and disrespectful communication escalates and becomes more and more negative, and thus destructive. This type of negative communication often spirals into anger and frustration. This starts with simple anger that then moves to destructive comments. Anger exchanged for anger leads to frustration and contempt. Healthy marriages know how to stop escalation before it goes out of control. Without control, people say things that threaten their marriage, things are said that are not easily taken back. As frustration mounts a person may go from wanting to be heard to wanting to hurt the other, even physically! These reckless words do a lot of damage. Even though they are destructive we are aware that people mostly don't mean what they say at these times, but so many times, in some way, they in fact cause the opposite of what they really want.

You may believe people show their true feelings at this point, but I don't really believe that. You need to recognise when things escalate and then know when to stop it. That's easy for me to say, but how? Firstly you can do this by backing off. When one person backs off (not down), the conflict is de-escalated. Secondly, by the simple choice, by one party at least, exercising humility. Unfortunately humility is a word that has been associated with weakness, but it actually relates to strength. When there are a number of encounters that are negative, it may be that you have developed an adversarial relationship, i.e., there is a need to "win", or beat your partner. But how often have you actually later realised you had lost when initially you thought you had won?

### **3.12 Invalidation**

These are always painful put downs, where one person puts down another by attacking the feelings or character of the other. There are obvious forms and then a more subtle form. Invalidation hurts, it makes the other person cover up because speaking up just hurts too much. Preventing invalidation, perhaps could involve a simple statement, my wife's favourite, "*lets rewind that*". This enables the one raising the concern to feel respected, rather than hurt. You don't have to believe what your partner is saying to be true in order to validate their feelings. The amount of validation is no where near a predictor of success in marriage, as invalidation is a predictor of failure. Remember respectful validation inhibits invalidation.

### **3.13 Negative Interpretations**

This occurs when our perception is worse than reality, or when a partner believes the motives of the other is more negative than is the case. This makes dealing with situations more difficult, partly because you are not dealing with reality. The problem with negative interpretations is that they can be less obvious. In addition we all have a tendency to what is called "confirmation bias". In short, we develop a belief then we look for confirmation of what we believe. A man by the name of Carl Festtinger in the 1960's

referred to this as “cognitive dissonance”. This means that once a negative, (or incidentally a positive) interpretation has been made, then we will tend to see what we think. Research also shows us that when one partner reacts negatively to another then that rejection will lead to a negative belief by the person who held the negative belief. Do you see the circularity in all of this?

Negative interpretations can also be a classic example of mind reading. When you mind read positively it rarely does harm, whereas negative mind reading can lead to damage in your marriage. When you consistently make negative judgements about your partner you then feel more legitimised for treating him or her badly, this may even include revenge. Thinking this way may lead you to feel entitled to hurt your partner for some perceived negative interpretation - which of course only escalates the problem.

Negative interpretations sometimes have deep roots in yourself, only you can stop this behaviour. Firstly, ask yourself if you are overly negative in your interpretation. Secondly, you must push yourself to find evidence that will disprove your negative interpretation. For instance, if you think your partner is uncaring, then look for evidence that suggests the opposite.

### **3.14 Withdrawal and Avoidance**

There are so many different manifestations of a pattern of behaviour where a partner seeks to hide from matters of importance. This can be as obvious as leaving the room, or shutting off during a discussion or argument. The withdrawal may come from simply agreeing, for the sake of it, thus ending the conversation. Avoidance is also often a more conscious attempt not to let the conversation happen in the first place. In fact sometimes partners work this out in tandem, so that while one withdraws, the other avoids and of course this ultimately causes damage to the relationship. Unlike the other patterns of behaviour this doesn't have to be overly dramatic. Even lower levels of avoidance can be predictors of a marriage not working. To work on this you have to agree that you are not independent of each other, but rather a team working together.

In marriage the lines of communication need to be open where neither feels the need to withdraw. That means talking without fighting. I have covered this issue further in an appendices – see “Red Buttons and Green Buttons in marriage”.

### **3. 1 Changing roles, Changing rules**

#### **Major Differences between men and women**

In picking up where we have just left off, it's important to understand that in a marriage where one withdraws and the other avoids, there is a definite risk of failure. Yet, I suggest that the causes for this separateness have a deeper meaning. Sometimes women feel shut out by their husbands and then make the assumption that their husbands don't care about their relationship. It is

true that women tend to seek communication, but yet in doing this men sometimes feel hassled by their wives. They just don't want to fight, rather, instead, seek harmony. For this reason men may wish to avoid intimacy, but that is not to say they don't want it. While women see intimacy as being more about communication, men see intimacy more by way of shared activities. This is quite often characterised by a woman asking to talk about intimate matters, while a man may wish to instead take a walk or make love. In the case of women, there is more emphasis on intimacy, while men place more emphasis on physical connections. Think about little girls and boys; girls talk in small groups, where boys are more likely to be involved in some activity with rules, and thus play sport. In this way intimate relationships are critical for girls and this is likewise true for women.

### **3.2 Withdrawing and Avoidance Revisited**

Why may a partner withdraw? a) The person doesn't want to share or even seem to be interested in intimacy; b) not wanting to change; c) withdrawal is used as a power, with the pursuer in the weaker position and is thus manipulated; d) withdrawal is aimed to stop a fight they can see coming.

It is unlikely for the most part that (a) is true. (b) on the other hand, has some merit and withdrawal could be used as a defence mechanism. (c) is singularly the most destructive reason and referred to as a passive aggressive move. Most likely (d) is the main cause, i.e., by avoiding intimacy, or to withdraw is to avoid conflict. Men are more likely to withdraw than women. When men go into conflict avoidance, intimacy becomes less and less important. So instead of feeling comfortable talking, talk is then aimed to avoid conflict. When the risk of conflict passes, the withdrawers can get, again, drawn in to conversation. It's interesting that people can be most vulnerable when they care about the relationship, because they care and then avoidance and withdrawal seem to be appropriate. Likewise it is withdrawal and avoidance of the other that causes so much pain and places the relationship at risk.

For instance, when you want to do something good for the relationship and your partner fails to respond, it can be interpreted that he or she doesn't care. This is definitely a time to look for evidence that he or she does care.

### **4.1 When what you heard is not what I said. Understanding filters in communication**

You may say something quite harmless, but your spouse gets mad at you. We have all had these moments when what we say is misunderstood and this then leads to the biggest arguments. Misunderstanding drives an angry word from one and then both, none of which is usually intended. The problem in these situations is often filtering and these cause something different to come out in response, compared to what goes in. When what you said is not what your partner interpreted, then a filter is at work!

There are many filters we collect over time, based on what we are feeling at the time, e.g., our culture, our upbringing. In all it is suggested there are five of these and they are as follows:

- 4.11 Distractions
- 4.12 Emotional States
- 4.13 Beliefs and Expectations
- 4.14 Differences in style
- 4.15 Self Protection

These filters are generally quite self evident and understandable. It has been repeatedly shown that distractions to communication cause confusion, these are internal and external. The internal ones include the actual states of readiness to listen. Remember, just because you are ready to talk doesn't mean your partner is!

In respect of emotional states, we actually give people benefit of the doubt when we are in a good mood, or give positive attribution, or conversely if in a bad mood a negative connotation to what they are saying. In this way our mood affects our behaviour and the way we filter information. All of us have had times like this when our emotional state colours what we hear and prevents clear understanding of what is being communicated.

Beliefs and expectations lead us to make assumptions and in this way are filters. Studies in cognitive dissonance, or as indicated earlier, having a negative expectation, can lead you to look for examples of proof. This is indeed a filter and is included with others such as second guessing, mind reading and crystal ball gazing. Sometimes we can project our expectation so that people seem to express themselves in the way that we expect them to, but in doing so are not providing accurate communication as to how they feel. Christmas is a good time, when everyone has their expectation filters on and we have all experienced those Christmas times when no matter what we do things go wrong!

Difference in styles can lead to filtering, e.g., style of expressive vs reserved, and so filtering through our own style can distort communication. Self protection is the last filter and this operates when our fear stops us saying what we truly feel. We hide our desire because revealing ourself increases the risk of rejection.

Get in the habit of announcing your filter when you have one. For instance, if you have a bad day, let your partner know that you are having a bad day, i.e., it's not them. By acknowledging this, you reduce the adverse impact on communication. The two issues to remember in respect of filters is: a) everyone has one; b) they are neither good nor bad, but rather what is important is whether you let them distort your communication.

## **5.1 The Speaker Listener technique: a tool for communicating better**

This technique allows you to deal with difficult situations, such as sensitive emotional issues, e.g., money, sex and in-laws.

### **5.11 The Rules**

1. The speaker has the floor. Use a designated item to represent the floor (eg the TV remote), a specific object that allows everyone to know you have the floor.
2. Sharing the floor. After the speaker has spoken then the other takes the floor.
3. No problem solving is allowed at this point, rather the focus is on good discussion, not coming up with solutions. When you focus on solutions you avoid listening.

#### **Rules for the speaker:**

1. Speak for yourself. Talk about your thoughts, not mind read others. Try and use "I" statements
2. Don't go on and on. In fact, if the person is to actively listen, then they need manageable pieces, not a monologue. Remember, having the floor allows you to not worry about interruptions, so pause and think.
3. Stop and let the listener paraphrase, allow this and if it isn't what you said, gently correct the misunderstanding.

#### **Rules for the listener:**

1. Paraphrase what the speaker is saying which shows the partner you were listening, ask for clarification.
2. Don't rebut, nor offer an opinion. Even if you are hurt, you will eventually get the floor. As a listener your task is to simply listen in the service of your partner. Don't ridicule, even non-verbally for instance, by making faces.

### **5.12 Key Activity Paraphrasing**

The best way to show you have been truly listening is to paraphrase what you thought you heard or understood. This could begin with something like, "what I hear you saying is...." or "Its sounds to me like.....". The speaker can then assess whether the listener is on target. Sometimes this can be suggested by the speaker by getting the listener to restate the communication and doing so is the first step to avoiding miscommunication. It's important to make sure that you, the listener, validate the speaker, showing them that you understand that you understand that they are speaking from their perspective - not perhaps stating facts. It doesn't help when you make faces or gestures that show some other response, as if you are ridiculing or simply being sarcastic. In this way you can keep communication on track.

In all of this, again remember, when the speaker has the floor they speak, you listen. It's an interesting observation that the good Lord gave us one mouth but two ears! When the speaker asks a question, the first step is to ask the listener to paraphrase the question, then hand the speaker the floor. This of course all takes practice, later you can customise the technique to suit you, but in the early stages try doing what I have described so far.

### **5.13 Points to Remember**

1. When first using this technique, focus on non relationship issues first, i.e., safer ground.
2. The speaker listener technique adds some predictability to the outcome.
3. Work together to fight negative patterns of behaviour, rather than with each other.

### **5.14 Managing issues and events better**

Fire is not a dangerous destructive tool unless it occurs without control. In fact, some fires bring comfort and much needed warmth, while other fires burn back, making the environment ultimately safer. This analogy holds true for communication, especially in respect of how fighting develops. Our relationships can be like that, our relationship can dive into out of control situations and into conflict even because of just a little spark. Yet solving conflicts can be invigorating and worthwhile experiences as they can increase a sense of unity and closeness. There are times, events and issues some that are damaging and touch off explosive issues. This section is aimed to help you better deal with those events and issues that cause the friction, that sets off the spark and leads to hostility.

When people are asked what normally sets off one of these fires, they commonly say: a) money, and; b) children. In other studies they have found it was: a) money; b) sex, and; c) communication. There are others of course, e.g., housework, religion and politics, just to name a few.

Issues are like geysers that build up pressure, then just explode like hot water, sometimes over every one in the vicinity, so too, this is like people. Indeed this is a useful analogy because people get burned by the result of the building up of pressure. Thus it's very important to deal with issues and events as they occur, rather than avoiding them. Not doing this can cause that sudden eruption, sometimes even over the smallest events. All couples I think have an "old faithful geyser", the type that just comes up every time tensions get high, coming back time and time again. For some, the only time an issue gets attention is when you are fighting about it.

These fights may often happen at inopportune times, e.g., leaving for work, or coming home when you are all done in. It is very important to try and stop issues and events dragging you into fights that tend to erupt at the worst of times. It's funny, isn't it, but when these events occur at work, for instance a boss is rude to you, you realise it's not the time to address it and you put it

aside and continue on. Yet when the same happens with our partner, it is sometimes obsessively confronted and so often when neither of you are really ready. At work it's not that you are denying there is a problem, it's just you know there is a time and a place.

### **5.15 Hidden issues often drive and underpin the presented issues**

How often do arguments start with what appears to be a central issue, but one that really masks a deeper conflict, one rarely addressed. Perhaps an interpretation of a situation flavoured not just by filters, as indicated earlier, but a deeper more emotional agenda, such as fear of abandonment, jealousy, recognition, integrity, acceptance, power, etc. The fact that fury follows the most simplest of events should in fact alert us to there being a deeper cause.

#### **5.151 Hidden issues of control and power**

In a relationship this is the single most important critical element. The disparity of power and the feeling of being inferior, all can lead to even the smallest issues which may symbolise that disparity becoming problematic. Thus if the struggle is about power, then it should not be surprising that money becomes a contentious issue. This is especially true if one party sees themselves as being the income producer, regarding the other simply as a beneficiary. You can see this when a man (who often assumes the right to power and dominance in a marriage) works for a wage and the woman cares for the children and home. So often the man sees himself as the worker and is thus not only entitled to control and take charge of the money, but through his benevolence the rest of the family exists.

While I agree this has changed somewhat over generations, these hard wired male dominant characteristics may be much more deeply rooted, thus providing a source of hidden fury when matters of money are raised. On the other hand, women may have abandoned a career only to be relegated to what she may see as a parasite, or more simply put, living off the husband's wage. The resentment is thus two fold, a push and pull leading to mutual resentment.

#### **5.152 Sex**

Sex is another area where there may be conflict. The man may believe that he should have a right to sex, while women feel unloved if they do not have intimate relations with their husband. In a Melbourne Study released this week the average number of times couples engage in sex in Australia is 1.8 times per week and the number of times they would prefer is 4-5 times a week. The disparity alone must indicate some statement about satisfaction. However, I want to approach this from a slightly different perspective. The first is that for the man the orgasm is the critical end point of having sex. I suspect this is simply because men can only procreate if they orgasm. In the case of women, they can indeed reproduce without an orgasm and thus they have a slightly

different focus on intimacy. Thus think of the problem that can be created when a man wants sex and the woman is not ready; rejection can be badly felt and resentment sets in. On the other hand, what happens when the man doesn't want sex, women feel likewise rejected. Moreover, because the sexual act is only part of a more general need for intimacy, they may feel unloved, and this may lead to one or the other finding "love" elsewhere. When I counsel couples I am at pain to explain the difference between sex and intimacy and point out that making love is not just about intercourse, but the phrase conveys the notion of "building" love. I will take this up again in Part II of this workshop.

### **5.153 Recognition**

Recognition is certainly another source of overt or covert conflict. Tied very much into how much you are valued by your partner and for what you do. So often husbands don't feel valued for what they bring in, "Hey I am out at work all day!" Whereas women feel their husband's don't think what they do at home is real work! Interestingly this is even the case when they work outside the home. How long has it been since you told your partner you appreciate what she or he does?

### **5.154 Commitment**

Commitment issues are those concerns raised by the fact that you believe that you are going to be together no matter what. This I believe is about making an ironclad guarantee of continuation, raising the question "Are you going to stay with me?" This idea of commitment is even more than simply good communication because it is a statement of loyalty, being together no matter what. It transcends communication because it is the core value of a long term relationship. Commitment means to cherish the person for a lifetime. Have you discussed this with your partner? Have you reinforced this as a core belief and critical part of your relationship. In establishing the certainty of commitment then, this as a hidden issue, doesn't cloud the way in which we communicate. A fairly simple situation such as going away on a business trip is just that, it doesn't raise questions of commitment, nor for that matter the next hidden issue, integrity. Again the idea of commitment is taken up later in the workshop.

### **5.155 Integrity**

This occurs when you feel that your level of honesty, commitment or any core value for that matter is being challenged or judged by your partner. Next time you are tempted to challenge you partner's integrity, motives or intent, remember you are fanning the flames.

### **5.156 Acceptance**

Probably the greatest hidden agenda is the need to be accepted. I recently asked a group to devise some standards for their behaviour and the first word that was spoken was acceptance, the second "respect". If this is true for a

group of peers, then how much more important would it be for a couple? The two notions that I have come to be more than aware of as I work as a psychologist are, firstly the fear of abandonment and secondly the fear of rejection. In all that I have said so far I am convinced that so often the fuel that actually fans a fight or argument comes down to these two fears in us all. Thus establishing mutual acceptance is the key to ensuring that a relationship has the essential values, so that each feel: a) respected; b) connected; c) safe, and; d) accepted by our spouse. Rejection, or at least perceived rejection, drives so many of the other issues.

This is especially the case when one partner feels the other doesn't act in a way that they feel they should. For instance, and to take perhaps an exaggerated example. If I wish to cross dress, but I am fearful that to do so would mean rejection. I may not do it at all, repress it and become anxious and uptight. How does my partner interpret this "uptightness" given she is unaware of my unfulfilled wish, perhaps she blames herself or acts as if she is being rejected, i.e. "You are not happy therefore it's my fault." Or yet another scenario might see me become deceitful and use lies to cover my behaviour. This pattern of behaviour, even if not fully realised by my wife, may raise her concerns that, for instance, there is someone else. This began if you remember because of my fear of rejection. In avoiding the problems that rejection brings and to increase the mutual need for acceptance, *openness* must become the corner stone of any healthy relationship.

## **5.2 What to do when there are hidden issues**

- a) Recognise when they are operating and start talking about them constructively. This is only possible when you operate as a team.
- b) Focus less on problem solving and more on listening. Importantly listening increases validation. Perhaps feeling invalidated is a core hidden issue in the first place.
- c) Quite often hidden issues can not be resolved, but rather you just share them with mutual understanding and respect. They are not issues that need to be solved, but rather opportunities to know each other better than you have ever before.

## **6.0 Problem Solving**

All couples have problems and some never resolve their problems in a lifetime together. Happiness is not based on not having problems. Many pathways to unhappiness lead from thinking that problems have to be resolved. However, this part of the workshop is about problem solving because most can be resolved if you at least have a strategy. Research has shown there are some basic considerations before starting, these are:

1. All couples have problems
2. Problem solving is best solved by teamwork
3. Most couples take the quickest solution, but in so doing do not always generate lasting solutions.

What are the problems that you have, or rather what drives the problems? For instance, perhaps they are driven by personalities, i.e. one is neater than the other, and perhaps one is more impulsive than the other? Some differences such as being the life of the party can be what attracted you to them in the first place. Yet this can become a source of great difference later. Ultimately it is accepting the other for what they are that is critical.

There are problems that lead to conflict all of which regularly occur in the life of any relationship, what school to send the kids to, where to go on holidays, what house to buy, etc. In these situations you will either work side by side, or against each other. Now, if some of the hidden issues that were indicated above are operating, then these will often obstruct the solution. For instance, if your hidden issue is one of power, than to concede is to loose. Or if recognition is the hidden issue then perhaps the problem will get bogged down in that the decision will lead to more about being validated. Your problem is that so often the solution is seen as one winning and the other losing. For this to be avoided try collaborating to an achievable and acceptable solution.

(see Managing Differences – an exercise at the end of Part II)

## **6.11 Problems Solving Strategy**

### **Basic Steps**

Create an environment of mutual respect. Couples should discuss the problems – the foundation for solutions. You should not try and move onto a solution until you perfectly understand the other. Perhaps the ‘speaker listener’ technique will help.

**Step 1 Agenda setting:** Keeping focussed is important. For instance, if the problem is large, eg money, then it is better to break it down into smaller parts, requiring specific answers in order to achieve a better strategy to overcome financial problems more generally.

**Step 2 Brainstorming** is used in business settings and also works well for couples. First, accept that any idea is okay to suggest, don’t evaluate it either, verbally or non-verbally. Instead have some fun with it. The best thing about this process is that it allows you to work as a team. If you can resist the temptation to criticise, you can come up with some creative ideas.

**Step3 Agreement and Compromise:** In this step you come up with an agreed position, this often involves compromise. This step requires you to come up with a specific solution. When it’s not specific it’s easier not to execute. It is through this phase that you have to decide on a time and a date, not just an action. Again compromise here is important, because it is through compromise you can work as a team and then compromise becomes more like collaboration, a truly win-win situation

**Step 4 Follow up:** Follow up has two advantages. First it causes you to assess whether the solution has worked, and secondly it reinforces responsibility. This phase is crucial, there is an adage, that if you follow to plan you plan to follow up.

## **7.0 Keeping conflict under control**

In every human endeavour there is conflict, but it is essential that you manage this conflict to avoid permanently damaging your relationship. Some strategies, in respect to better managing these conflicts and avoiding damage to your relationships, can and should involve six ground rules, these are:

**Rule #1.** When conflict is escalating call time out, agree though to come back to discuss it. This ground rule can stop escalation, invalidation, withdrawal, avoidance and negative interpretation. Perhaps you need to identify a particular signal when this time out rule applies. This use of time out is not to be exploited as a form of avoidance. This will especially seem to be the case if one partner uses it more than another.

**Rule #2.** Engaging the speaker-listener technique. This ground rule is more important than most, for it is the failure to listen, (especially by thinking about what you are going to say next) that causes a lack of understanding and invalidation. Even by raising the need to use this technique is a signal to the other that you want to talk about it seriously.

**Rule #3.** Completely separate problem discussion from problem solution. Solution and expression of problems are different parts of the process. If you don't understand the partner's problems, then it's probably too early to move from expression of the problem to a decision. If this is done prematurely then the problem is not likely to be solved, but instead enter into a conflict.

**#4 Timing.** You can bring up problems at any time, but it is also possible for the listener at any time to say this is not a good time. However this ground rule should not be abused and used to constantly avoid. Here setting up a time is important when the time will be set aside, but a time set up by the partner who is not ready. In other words the person who is not ready takes the responsibility for the timing. This is normally between 24-48 hours, a time when both are ready for it. So many choose times that are quite inappropriate, e.g., tea time, bed time, going out, going to work etc. This is so true when one or the other just walks in from work. In other words, when stressful times are occurring, it is the least appropriate time to discuss, because filters such as distractions are particularly difficult.

As a final point to this ground rule, perhaps you could agree that some times are never good times and accept that it would be out of order to start discussions at this time. For me that is bed time. There is nothing worse, than being tired and then upset, then trying to sleep. This ground rule establishes the importance of both a time to talk and a time not to talk.

**#5 Couple meetings:** most couples don't set actual times to meet to discuss. This rule may sound absurd to some, but the problem is that our busy lives often prevent discussion and this delays time to talk. This way the time is set permanently each week to discuss issues. It may be useful if you are taking this meeting idea from business to also have an agenda. And like a good business, circulate the agenda between yourselves in preparation. Another good point to this is that if you have a gripe, you may be able to delay it, knowing you have a time that you will meet and discuss the issue. Incidentally the emotion that is often in the gripe, including spite, may have settled by the time the meeting comes a long.

**#6.** Make time for the great things, punctuality and hospitality. It is important that you schedule time for relaxation, having fun, making love etc, when problem discussion is excluded from these times. Make time for the great things, these are the things that brought you together. During these times don't bring "issues" up. One of the worst experiences in marriage is the feeling you are walking in a mine field or walking on eggs, wondering when the next crisis or "blow-up" is going to occur. This living on the edge is so destructive in marriage and in fact causes not just the partner anxiety, but makes the other anxious as well and thus more likely to react themselves. You no longer feel free to express some things, if not a lot of things to your partner and this causes that separateness where people live or cohabit, but certainly not live and love together.

*End of Part 1.*

Post Script

This is what my editor said:

"Roger, I thought this has been very good so far. I think you could expand on this last sentence a bit more. Perhaps it is because I am experiencing it at the moment, but when two people work and there are children involved, it is quite possible to go for weeks without a true conversation of substance! It can be very lonely, even if you do still see each other every day. Your relationship with your partner is neglected – not even given basic maintenance because of busy lives and other responsibilities. How can one expect something to thrive if it is not attended to? This is when all those other risk factors you are talking about are magnified!

## **Living and Loving Together**

### **Part II**

#### **1. Developing a friendship and a partnership**

We find in Genesis, God putting Eve, with Adam as a partner. Quite a politically correct word used today. Partner in Hebrew means more than the casual relationship it can mean today, but gives a meaning of standing together, toe to toe, giving someone your best. It's this friendship that needs to grow and when it doesn't, in a marriage at least, the relationship falters. The purpose of this part of the program is to assist you, restore and deepen your relationship, or as it will be referred to "friendship".

##### **1.1 Friendship**

A friend is someone who supports you, to be there to catch you, provides a safe haven, a person we can have faith in, depend upon and we can relax around. Research has shown that the love and affection that friends give offset the trials and tribulations we face sometimes on a daily basis. In some recent research in the Australian Medical Journal it was suggested that the number one predictor of depression was loneliness. In a later journal, the number three predictor of coronary heart disease was isolation. People who have at least one good friend seem to do things better and achieve more. The most powerful aspect to friendship is the deep feeling of intimacy that develops from it. Being able to do and be something without judgement. In terms of intimate conversation, men generally like to be doing something, e.g., working on a car, playing golf, etc. Whereas women prefer to-do it simply face to face, e.g., "over coffee". These differences may need to be kept in mind when trying to develop intimacy in marriage. Remember from Part I, women want to build their relationships through communication, while men want to avoid fights. For some men, discussing intimate things is a risky business and thus they may avoid it.

When intimacy develops it is usually because there is mutual self disclosure. In my professional practice I have endeavoured to do this with clients and patients. Some know as much about me as I do about them. There are boundaries to this though, and where some private disclosure could be seen as disloyalty toward my family I retreat into privacy. I mention this connection between disclosure and intimacy because as a practitioner I try to gain trust and develop an understanding of their circumstances, i.e. "where they are coming from". I believe this can be better achieved through intimacy. I have found that disclosure will come only when the client or patient feels safe, sees me as a friend, which then in turn allows the development of intimacy.

Yet intimacy and self disclosure are only two components. The third, while related, is trust. When there is no trust, intimacy is more difficult and lack of intimacy leads to lack of friendship. When intimacy can not be gained, because it is a powerful human need, we may seek to be intimate with

someone else. It is the intimacy of another we all crave. It's easy to see how many relationships start as platonic, but because of the shared intimacy, love springs. From that physical affection may follow and lead a couple to an intimate relationship that simply complicates their lives. This can be especially damaging when one or both of the parties are in another relationship. But how often has the excuse been given for an extramarital relationship, "But you just didn't seem interested", "You weren't there for me", "I needed someone, etc". How many poor taste jokes start with something like, "There was this lonely housewife...."

Friendship is the core ingredient in any successful marriage. Friendship means to help your partner and this includes mutually shared intimacy, listening, sharing of things, views and ideas. The desire to find a soul mate is almost universal. Divorce is too frequently the choice when, in fact, this is too often a 'knee jerk' reaction to a problem such as unfaithfulness, or the end result of years of neglect. Building bridges by friendship is an important strategy, especially if you want to save your marriage. I am often asked what true love is and I think CS Lewis said it well, when he said "When the welfare of the other is more important than your own". Mostly we are not called to lay down our life for our partner, oddly perhaps, we may find that easier than simply putting someone else's welfare first. With that sad lyric by Moving Pictures (doesn't that date me) too often the focus of a selfish intent, "**What about me!**"

## **1.2 Protecting friendship in your marriage**

### **Some principles**

1.21. Make the time. There needs to be time for friendship, not just being together doing the busy stuff of life. Rather take time out. In our 35 Years of marriage we have always found time to be together, (even with 5 kids). Not just going out with friends, which is important, but nights away, often just one, but importantly together and at least every three months. We think this is the key to us remaining friends and the continuing intimacy we enjoy.

1.22. Having Fun. So often when I am talking to couples I find that they are "so busy", that they simply don't have time to go out together and do fun things. Fun and play provide relief from the rigours of serious adult time. It's interesting that in transactional analysis, Bourne refers to the three ego states, Parent, Adult and Child. The argument can be made that to be a complete human, you have to touch all three states, preferably together. You see so often, you spend time in "adult" working mode, getting through the necessities, paying bills, organising work schedules etc. Then, if you have children a lot of time is spent being a parent . The idea of fun feeds the child in all of us and having fun involves some simple steps:

a) Finding the time – this may seem too deliberate, but this may include a schedule – finding a baby sitter for the children needs planning. It is my experience that if you leave it to spontaneity, it may never happen.

b) Protecting fun from conflict (don't do conflict talk, but friendship talk). Many couples try to do too much in the short time they have together. Usually you will find that fun time is damaged by returning to an adult state (resolving conflict). Dealing with issues doesn't maximise the fun time but undermines it. When heavy issues do get raised in fun times, then call time out.

1.23. Strategies for handling conflict. These have been outlined in Part 1. Remember, taking time out when conflict arises to ensure the matter is resolved rather than fester, which can only cause deeper hurt and or division down the track. You need to often take time out from conflict. Thus you have two modes of talk, conflict mode and friendship mode. How many people have you seen go out in friendship mode, but have a stand up argument (to everyone's embarrassment and theirs)? What happened was that they went out, on at least one of them did, with the assumption that it was friendship time, or why else would you be going out for dinner? During the course of that friendship time a matter came up that belonged in conflict resolution time. It was not the right time to discuss it with the resultant disaster. They also broke the rule that when one loses control, the other can not afford to.

1.24 Friendship Talk. Friends talking aren't generally focussed on solving problems; there is no pressure to get something done. When there is a problem with a solution, the friendship talk suffers. Incidentally I heard once that a good friend is described as someone, who is glad to meet you and has no immediate plans for your improvement. In friendship talk there is no agenda of changing the other person. Most of us don't actually want to be told what to do, but rather be listened to. John Gray, picks this up in "Women are from Venus Men are from Mars" when he talks about offering unsolicited solutions.

## **2.0 Sensuality**

There are many reasons that couples do not have a sensual relationship One reason is that often they confuse sexuality with sensuality and of course visa versa. That is not to say that sexual relations are not part of one's sensuality, simply put, one's sensuality is not limited by simply sexuality, or worse still just sexual intercourse. To understand the difference, what do you think of when I say the word "sexuality"? Now what do you think about when I say "sensuality"? Chances are in the first place you thought about intercourse, or foreplay. Whereas with sensuality, chances are you thought about touching, feeling, smelling, perhaps massage, aroma, etc. Sensuality does include physical touch, but not necessarily sex. It may involve holding hands, intimate talking, and non sexual massages. Sensuality and sexuality is so often blurred between couples. Think back to the really early part of your relationship, when you spent a lot of time in sensual mode, as opposed to simply sex. In fact if men were really honest they knew then "to even get to first base", they had to demonstrate softness and sensuality in order to be successful, e.g., romantic dinners, gentle touching, holding hands "whispering sweet nothings in her ears", etc. Many years later it may be straight to "Are you awake?" being the main entrée to sex. During which her most endearing words may be "Are you finished yet".

If you spend more time in the sensual connection you will find that your relationship flourishes. You can have sex with anyone, but you can only make love with someone you love. More importantly it's a whole process, not one that is just measured by, performance, such as orgasm. Note the emphasis on the words 'making love'. If you stop making love (that may or may not include sexual intercourse), you stop loving. Once you stop having sensual relations then a couple may only stay connected through sex. That only causes a lot of pressure on the relationship. For instance, how often have you wanted to feel physically close, but not necessarily wanted sex? There needs to be a time for sensuality both inside and outside the context of making love. Once sex is just a single act rather than part of a process, it becomes mundane, a task, even a chore.

One of the important issues I have stressed time and time again is the over focus on the orgasm, not that it's not important nor a fantastic experience. Yet women have been reading in magazines for years things like the "secret to being multi-orgasmic" and other such matters. The media do women little service in promoting the almost obsessive focus on the orgasm(s). Remember it's the same media who have generated the modern epidemic of anorexia with their portrayal of the perfect woman as being skinny. What people misunderstand is that there are biological differences between men and women that perhaps change the emphasis on the orgasm. For instance in order for men to procreate, they must ejaculate (orgasm). Thus without orgasm, there is no chance of men fulfilling their biological role. On the other hand, women can most certainly fall pregnant with achieving orgasm. Thus the orgasm is relegated, at least biologically. In this way it may be that a woman needs more to be cherished and touched, or to use a very old word, adored. Men need the same, but the orgasm certainly plays a fundamental role in achieving sexual satisfaction.

Sensuality provides us with both attachment and arousal and in this way sets the stage for better sexual experiences. One major problem is that couples, I find, do not communicate their need for sensual experience. They make assumptions about knowing what their partners want. It's a mistake to assume what your partner likes and does not like, thus missing out on a mutually satisfying sensual and sexual life. I think the reasons that assumptions take over is that even though couples have often been married for years, they find talking about such things as threatening. Often men take such discussion as criticism, worse still challenges to their manliness. On the other hand, women may feel they are not good enough and worse still become somehow jealous despite there not being a real person with whom she is competing.

One mistake I think that people who have been married for a long time make is that they make assumptions about their partner, not realising that people change. These unstated conflicts, often lead to withdrawal and this can be interpreted as that the other is no longer interested. Some may think that you shouldn't have to be told, that your partner should know. This falls into the category of mind reading and mind reading is the basis of faulty communication as we learnt earlier in the course when discussing conflict.

This doesn't necessarily mean communicating during sex, which agreeably can cause a loss of spontaneity, but rather find time to talk about what makes you feel good in terms of making love. I realise that it's a tough subject for some, but I think it's the risk of rejection or simply plain embarrassment that are the main barriers to this discussion. This may be especially true of older couples who were brought up with some curious views. A relation of mine, not much older than me, was told by her mother sex was a "chore" and she should remember that. Or as in Victorian times women were told to "lie back and think of England". Whereas I am more than aware we scoff at this type of view, how many, due to religious indoctrination or some poor experience as a child, or adolescent have what I refer to as "hard wired" behaviours as a result? If you have "hang-ups", as we referred to them in the 1970's, perhaps it's time to offload such faulty thinking and see a counsellor. All our behaviours can be changed, some are just more difficult to change than others.

Ultimately I think that people don't fall out of love, they just don't nurture it, and this I believe is ideally best done through friendship, fun and sensuality.

### **3.0 Spirituality and core beliefs in living and loving together**

The notion of spirituality in relationships is yet another dimension in any relationship. So far I have stressed the importance of friendship, fun and sensuality. Whether or not you are religious or spiritually inclined your core beliefs are important to any intimate relationship you have. Don't be confused by spirituality and religious beliefs, many who are not religious still have a profound sense of spirituality. One's spirituality is very much about core beliefs and while religiousness may be involved in core beliefs, for others it is not. Core beliefs are more than just general beliefs, but specific and critical values you have about life. When couples are able to develop communication in the area of core beliefs, then their relationship grows. It takes it away from superficiality to depth in the relationship and makes it more satisfying.

Many studies show that spirituality in a relationship is beneficial, for instance studies on religious values, (remember just one form of spirituality) indicate that couples who are more religious are more satisfied, they have lower levels of conflict and higher levels of commitment. Those who have a sense of their spirituality are more likely to make sacrifices for the other and less likely to be selfish. It is the dynamics of spirituality when translated into marriage, that keeps them strong.

For those whose spirituality is expressed by some religious faith, research again clearly shows the benefits for those couples who practice their faith together. This is true of my own marriage, and while my wife has a significantly different view on many things to me, our core values remain similar and the practice of attending church is shared. Yet it's more than that because we have the fundamental core beliefs established and shared, then in many things we have a shared world view. Again some work (Dixon, 1985) suggested that couples who have stayed together for 50 years and were

happy, were more likely to have developed a shared vision, a belief system including the meanings of life, death and marriage. It's then easier to develop a relationship.

The Christians have a saying that “the family that pray's together stays together”. In our house we allow a sense of holiness to be present, by having places set aside and various icons in our house, we recognise the importance of holiness in our lives. Importantly, if you have overly confused religion, worse still a specific religion such as Catholicism, with being the only expression of spirituality, then you may have lost some of the important aspects of spirituality available to everyone. In turn that may not be a loss for you, but for everyone in your family.

Relationships are most like to be affected by core values as well as family expectations, so just what are these core values?

### **3.1 Core Values**

- (a) Commitment
- (b) Respect
- (c) Intimacy and
- (d) Forgiveness

These are four values that time and time again are not just the basis for a successful marriage, but the failure to include them or act them out are the most likely reasons your marriage will fail. You can see when these core beliefs are shared the chances of success obviously improves. While the role of each of these values is, in fact, somewhat self evident, one key element in each is “genuineness”. Eric Fromm, a 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, made the observation that there was a type of love which he referred to as “pseudo” love. In many ways this can look like real love and thus can be easily confused (at least at first) but it is a “love” that is, in fact, manipulative, even evil. When it manifests it is ultimately conditional love. This is often expressed by words such as “After all I have done for you”, “If you really loved me then....”, etc. This pseudo type of love in a relationship fails to genuinely meet the above core values. The result could then be worse than not having the core value in the first place. Think about infidelity, would it not be better for me to say I do not rate faithfulness in a relationship and give no assurances from the outset, rather than pretend and later only deceive my partner? Like, forgiveness, you may say you forgive, but then bring up the same thing time and time again, not just a little later, but perhaps year after year. Truly loving someone is forgiving them unconditionally and in fact then never mentioning it again. To do otherwise, do you see, is just pseudo forgiveness?

### **3.2 Relationship and Family Expectation**

Undoubtedly all marriages from time to time struggle, not because of what goes on just inside a marriage but from expectations and relationships that stem from outside of it. These outside influences are often humorously

characterised, even if undeservedly so, by reference to the “Mother in Law”. Of course it's rarely just one person, but a range of influences. These influences by others are especially difficult when they attack the core beliefs you hold and impinge on you and your partner. This may not only happen when someone interferes or “causes trouble” in the present, but you may find that influences from childhood and adolescence can, in adult life, cause difficulties in your relationship. In a relationship it is important to remember that even though at times, as a couple, we may agree about our shared core beliefs or perspectives, these have nonetheless developed differently, from our unique developmental experiences.

For instance, the chances are that if you came from a house where alcohol was a problem, then perhaps you abhor alcohol. On the other hand you may carry that problem with you into a new relationship. Thus the new relationship starts with two people with quite different views, say, about drinking. Similarly you may agree on the importance of discipline (a core belief), but you may view quite differently the role and style of discipline that should be used, based most likely on your own experience. Thus the strict disciplining of children, may remind the other of their own brutal childhood and in so doing cause the other to react strongly against your discipline. This may cause one parent to be more indulgent than the other. This conflict of course can actually cause an even worse outcome for the child due to inconsistent parenting messages. This may not only confuse the child, but then allows the child to be manipulative, playing one parent off against the other.

It was not my intention here to discuss child rearing practices, but rather to point out that these expectations and even interference in our relationship can have a profound influence on the family dynamic. A case in point. Jack and Jill have been married for 8 years, both are working professional people. They have two children, a daughter aged 7 and a son aged 4. Jill had an alcoholic father who mistreated her mother, who was submissive. They were not particularly poor, but her father's drinking, and his regular absence, meant that many of her expectations as a young girl were not met. Jack on the other hand while not having the perfect childhood, enjoyed quite the opposite experience to Jill. Thus when it came to child rearing practices, Jill had a significant need to ensure that their daughter had everything, as once was commented sarcastically “What do you give the child that has everything?” Simply, “more”!

The effect of this having “everything and more” was to cause their daughter to have a great expectancy of wanting and expecting everything her heart desired. This was compensated for by lavish parties and a focus on her and for her an unhealthy focus on gifts. Jack on the other hand, could see what was happening and became resentful. Jill could hardly see that it was her own neurosis she was working through. As you might guess a quite unhealthy circumstance. We await, of course, for the longer term impact of all of this on their daughter. Interestingly enough, instead of the daughter becoming an indulgent parent, the reverse may be true. In creating a focus solely on her as an individual, we can sow the seeds of self absorption, perhaps then she will neglect her own children. This may not be so much in terms of presents,

which are easily enough ordered or bought by others, but perhaps through lack of quality time, especially the giving of intimacy. In being told so often you are “special” and spoilt throughout one’s childhood it’s easy to see how the seeds of narcissism can be sown.

It wasn’t my intent to take such a major digression from the intent of this section. What I have tried to show so far is that expectations can come from outside, but they can also come from our own developmental experiences. However whether the influence is from the past, even a neurosis, or from meddling parents, friends, etc, the most important suggestion I can make is that you think of being a team. The sacredness and absolute integrity of the two of you as a team is the critical factor in overcoming these types of problems. I have always been struck by the words of the marriage ceremony which suggests you are no longer two people but one. While it is important that you both feel a sense of personal identity and not smothered by the other, you necessarily have to think like a team.

### **3.3 Why you can’t always get what you want**

This program has been very much about helping you stay on track. For all of us there are any number of obstacles that cause the marriage to stumble. In frustration many give up. We live in a “throw away mentality”, when the cost and or the effort of fixing something is simply not worth it. Sometimes the obstacles are created by others and become challenges for us. While at other times we actually set up our own obstacles as we feel our expectations are not being met.

Obviously the first step is to talk together and work out whether the expectation is reasonable enough and whether each one of you can meet those expectations. Why do expectations matter so much? Expectations become a central theme in marriage. There are expectations about simple things, i.e. who puts out the garbage, money, household chores etc. Yes you even have some expectation about sex. You have expectations though about deeper issues, how power will be used, the level of commitment, etc. Often happiness is when those expectations are met. It’s not surprising to find the link between happy marriages and the fulfilment of role expectation.

Some people in their marriage set the bar too low and in this way never test their marriage to be the best it can be. Others set it too high which leads to disappointment. Again this comes down to communication so that words used earlier need to be clarified for meaning, what does intimacy mean for you? Your partner? In separate interviews two married people said the following. “It irritates me how he can sit and watch television some times, do nothing, I sometimes wish I could hit him over the head with....”. The other partner said that he valued the fact that in his marriage how they can be in the same room together watching television and happily do nothing, no pressure to talk, just hold hands. He of course valued that time while unbeknown to him his wife disdained it wishing rather she had the time to explore their relationship. Do you see how expectations were not only not compared, but incorrect, worse still assumptions made which could lead to one party acting in a way that has

been referred to as “passive aggression”. I suspect that any kind of negativity he may have picked up would have been put down to a mood, PMT or change of life. So many times men feel quite comfortable about ignoring the fact that they may be, in fact, participating in the cause of their partners unhappiness. Ultimately then being unable to explain the behaviour of his partner, when some conflict or anger arose, I suspect like many men his internal dialogue may simply be “You can’t work them out”.

### **3.4 Managing Expectations**

So how do we manage the role of expectations better in marriage? There are four rules: a) Being aware of what you expect; b) Being responsible about what you expect; c) Being clear, and; d) Being motivated to motivate the other’s expectation, even if you don’t have the same expectations.

Many expectations are, in fact, unconscious, look at Jill’s (mentioned earlier) expectations about her child’s happiness. A major clue to our expectations is disappointment. When you are disappointed, some expectation hasn’t been met. Ask a question, what was your expectation? Imagine that you want to go to the races; your partner has been before and seemed to enjoy it. But for the last two times she has said, “You go, I want to do something else.” You are saddened by that, which may be expressed in anger. Stop there and think about your expectation and hers. Her lack of enthusiasm, struck at deeper issues, for him like including being cared for. Thus you needed to explain how much it meant and why you would have liked her to come. Once that is clearer she most likely would be happy to come, realising that going to the races held a key to far deeper issues. They being aware of the others expectations and the reason for those expectations is critical in a relationship.

However simply having an expectation, even when both are aware of it does not make such expectations solely legitimate, as some are unrealistic expectations. These so often include so called universally accepted truths. That for instance in the marriage you will never do something. I think worse then is the threat that if it does, it will “be all over”. Have you ever known anyone to be an alcoholic and then attempt to recover? Do you think it’s an easy path, of simply giving up? A friend of mine promised his wife after she had left him a second time for his binge drinking, that he would never drink again. six weeks passed and the promise was kept. He was however unbearable to live with (could her expectation have been otherwise even with even a small amount of knowledge in respect to this disease?). A relapse, disappointment, sadness and pain, just over three nights. The same promises but this time 4 months before one night, then recovery, again. Who knows this pattern may be for a lifetime. Yet this is the more realistic path to recovery that a person can expect rather than simply never drinking again. It seems to me that she did the very hard yards for several years when he was drinking, perhaps even remembering what she would have given for just a weekend where he was sober. Now some 16 weekends of sobriety, now with less irritability, she can count the success. However to make a rigid rule that involves absolutes “never and always” is to create impossible expectations and thus pressure in and on the relationship.

Unreasonable expectations obviously lead to conflict. While many are able to manage the techniques in Part 1 of this workshop. This can lead to an assumption that having and using the principle tools will reduce the conflict. One couple told me that when conflict came they handled it better than they ever had, yet they seemed to have more conflict. This was because there was firstly a change in expectation, i.e. They have learned the techniques, and thus expect there will be less disagreement. However they also made an assumption that their expectations were the same, which they were not. It was not until they clarified their expectations did the conflict reduce. In fact with this couple, it wasn't a shared expectation, but an unrealistic expectation of the husband. For some these changes are hard because they involved an assumed loss of authority, respect or simply male or female pride. A lot of our expectations come down to stereotypical beliefs about roles and activities.

We too often assume that our model of the ideal marriage is that of our partners. This can lead to conflict and at some time this can be puzzling, especially when the expressed expectation is said to be the same as ours, but when examined more deeply there are fundamental differences. I think it's akin to sexual discrimination. We have laws and stated expectations of behaviour. It is quite politically incorrect to openly ridicule the other sex, but think about the sexist jokes that abound (and as my mother use to say, "There is a little bit of seriousness in all humour"). Thus in marriage I feel there is a continuing level of dishonesty as one says one thing, but believes another.

Sometimes, one or the other in the relationship expects some form of "mind reading" with those classic words, "He shouldn't have to be told he should know what I want". This stems from a sense of entitlement by one that such expectations, even after 35 years of marriage should be transparent. One of the more subtle implications is the assumption that you can rightly assume your expectations will be met; this is in fact a form of self absorption or narcissism, which is not healthy and ultimately will lead to conflict in your relationship.

You cannot work from a shared expectation unless you share your expectation. Failure to deal with this openly will have you miss out on an opportunity to develop a shared vision. In most partnerships that are successful, each one is trying to please the other. This failure to place emphasis on close attention is the beginning of the end. Those little acts of kindness and thoughtfulness are the key ingredients that keep the marriage alive. Again think back to your courting days, you will recall all those ingredients were present. Today thoughtlessness, the time constraints, our busy lives, all drain us and make the opportunities for having moments of mutual kindness less likely. This in turn causes some disquiet, then when issues arise that need to be managed, they then seem bigger and more difficult to deal with.

#### **4. Forgiveness – Restoring Hope**

As I write these notes I am more than aware that the first reason I wrote them was to in fact improve a week long workshop that my wife, Michele and I, conduct for veterans of war and their partners. Many of whom, if they are not on their second or third marriage, have been married for over 30 years. They come to the course to learn more about the pain their war veteran partners have suffered and perhaps why they have at times been difficult to live with. There is, for so many of them, bitterness, anger, even down right hostility in respect to their husbands who have often been psychologically and sometimes physically abusive to them and their children. Many veterans have acted impulsively, often destroying things. They have been drunk too many times to mention, they have abused and refused medication. They are often angry at the world and prefer the company of other veterans. If not, they prefer to be isolated and expect their wives to become isolated as well. This has given rise to an association for war veteran partners, which has grown at a pace I think that even shocked the initial founders. It has of course a wonderful opportunity to help other women, but it also has the opportunity to reinforce that “all men are bastards”, which aside from being patently untrue, is not healthy in facilitating any recovery process.

When a veteran takes stock of himself, quite often there is a need for redemption. This can only be done for some by being contrite and remorseful. However this is only one side of the coin, the other is the forgiveness of the other person. I use the case of the war veterans, because I cannot think of a group of “ordinary older people”, who are more damaged or who have done so much damage. This is not intended as a generalisation of all veterans, simply those who I come in contact with who, perhaps by virtue of attending our course, may have had a more difficult life than other veterans. In this group forgiveness is of critical importance.

#### **4.2 Infidelity**

One common problem that occurs in marriage is infidelity. I have alluded to the fact that men see specifically the sex act from quite a different perspective than women. It is men, after all, who will go to brothels and pay for sex with a stranger. That is less likely for women. Moreover I am not convinced that men are not naturally monogamous. I am not trying to justify infidelity, rather explain its not as straight forward as some would say, “How can you love me and do that?” I once made a joke, more of a gag, that 98% of men cheat at some time in their lives, the other 2% lie about it. My initial belief was that it is solely a “men” thing’, a belief of course that has been challenged by recent DNA evidence, who estimate the number of children born to the others partner at 80%. In short 1:5 children have different fathers than they think they have. So what does that say about women and monogamy? I am not sure the statistical evidence is as stated here, with all statistics, there seems to be a great variance in percentages, just based on who you read.

Again I probably have digressed a little, but what I am saying is that whether you have many, or just a few, serious or relatively minor episodes of infidelity to deal with, forgiveness and thus redemption is the only way a marriage can grow. Jealousy for instance is a cancer inside a marriage that will see it not only turbulent, but it will implode, destroying the relationship in the same way a virus may.

What do you do if you have been wronged in some way and your partner takes no responsibility? Are you able to get by the hurt and see that perhaps your partner may not have meant to hurt you? Negative interpretations, a filter mentioned in Part 1, can be a barrier to any relationship. Have you ever had one of those situations where your intention was to assist or do something nice but it went wrong? For instance, cleaning up the garage, but in doing so you may have thrown out something your partner valued? On finding out the mistake, your partner becomes enraged, complaining how thoughtless you are, or how you demand to dominate and dictate what goes on. Or you decide to cook a meal and then your partner complains about the state of the kitchen, refusing to appreciate your efforts, but rather focusing on your sloppiness, finally with you making the comment that it's not worth the bloody effort. This will hurt and cause the other to be, perhaps, enraged themselves, leading to a head on clash, where both need time to cool their heels. Reading these notes as an outsider you can see where both parties went wrong. Yet when our emotions are involved we become blinded. Yet it is the same process of forgiveness that is needed, whether the matter concerns a smaller conflict or a larger one.

**Step 1:** Schedule a meeting to discuss forgiveness, prepare yourself to deal with the question of forgiveness and certainly ensure no distractions.

**Step 2:** Set the agenda – identify the event

**Step 3:** Explore the pain and issues that underlie the conflict. Sometimes (more often) the instance or focus was only a superficial conflict, but rather when we peel back the layers we find there were deeper issues. Use the Speaker – Listener technique. During this time, using the garage clean up example, they both should come to understand that, in fact, losing something important, was a mistake, that he felt bad having lost them, but only wanted to please her with the overall state of the garage. While she realised it was the sense of loss of her personal things and what seemed to be another instance of him taking control.

**Step 4;** The “offender”, asks for forgiveness. A sincere apology validates your partner’s pain. It doesn’t mean that you have to beat up on yourself, especially if you don’t think you have done something wrong. Forgiveness is a separate issue from why the infraction or mistake occurred. Listen carefully to the concern of your partner.

**Step 5:** The “offended” agrees to forgive, this is a critical part of the healing. There are several features. The first, in forgiving you are agreeing to commit the event to the past and thus not bring it up in future discussions. Both needs to recognise that forgiveness doesn’t mean that the other will not feel pain, but you are moving on to repair the damage.

**Step 6:** The “offender” makes a positive statement that they will make changes in behaviour and attitude, if this conflict comes from more regular,

or a pattern of, events. You should make amends, this must involve some action that reminds them both that the relationship is valuable.

**Step 7:** This takes time, it's not a quick fix. Some problems take longer and, for some, healing takes longer. It's during that time the other may have to show patience. In fact without it, further conflict can occur as one partner feels they are not being validated for the pain they are working through. Although remember self pity is not much good for anything except wallowing in.

## **5.0 Commitment – Stuck, Stick or Stop**

Every relationship has periods where they appear to be stuck, sticking or stopping. The most likely point frequently made is the stuck part. Perhaps sometimes regarded as a rut. Keeping in mind that the difference between a rut and a grave, is six feet. This sense of being in an apparent dead end may lead to the “what ifs”. What if we weren't married? What if I hadn't married her? Highly committed people devalue alternatives, they don't allow the “grass is greener” on the other side to enter their thoughts. Research shows that the best commitment comes from the sense of “us”. This struggle is well played out in the Film, *The Story of Us* – a movie I recommend for all families. There you will see that a couple who were becoming unstuck get a sense of “us” and in doing so find the real meaning of each other in their lives. There was a couple being married and the priest says “And you will no longer become two people, but one”, when a member of the congregation murmurs, “Yes, but which one”. This sense of “us” is important and will dictate whether you are headed for a stop-separation or being stuck in a rut or sticking together.

## **5.1 Sacrifice**

Our society glorifies self and in this, self sacrifice seems to have disappeared. Throughout these notes I have suggested the damage that self absorption may cause. Sacrificial behaviour means a better relationship. When you benefit the other you show a general concern for what is best . Some research shows that longevity in relationships is best predicted by the investment of sacrifices made in relationships. The willingness to sacrifice is in fact yet another important aspect. This is different from actual sacrifice, but rather simply shows the preparedness to do so is a demonstration of your dedication. This is why withdrawal is so harmful in a relationship, how can you show commitment when there is withdrawal and isolation, whether that be in the figurative sense, by not communicating or physical absence?

## **5.2 The long term view**

When dedication between each other is made, it anticipates the long term. In so doing having a long term view is necessary. No relationship is consistently good, so having a long term view (that we will get old together) no matter what, allows you to rise the occasion when the relationship is under attack. The long term view stretches the perspective out, saving you from being too focused on the right now and losing the perspective of what is usually just a temporary issue. Happier couples talk about the future together – a vision.

Isn't it interesting that a vision and a mission statement are more likely to keep a corporation on track. So what is your mission and vision for the future?

### **5.3 Threatening the long time view**

Commitment can be used like a weapon in a personal attack, the challenge is made by one that the other doesn't have the commitment, or that the other is more committed. Here's an example. **Her:** "I see the dishwasher didn't get emptied again." **He:** "What's wrong with you?" **Her:** "I have the kids to think about" **Him:** "Yes, well I am at work all day earning for you and the kids." **Her:** "What do you think I don't work? Anyway it was my work, before the kids, that got us into this house." **Him:** "Yes and I now pay the mortgage, as well as the car and your visa card." **Her:** "My visa card, if you look last month I haven't spent a cent on myself, it's for these kids of yours." **Her:** This just isn't working out, you don't care about me, just that bloody job of yours." **Her;** "You are never home and you are always cranky, tired or both, we may as well get a divorce." **Him:** "Sure, that's not such a bad idea."

Notice how this has deteriorated and red buttons are pushed with the predictable result – a fight, even mentioning divorce. This type of argument is so poor and because it is so destructive you need to be dedicated to not having that type of argument again and both practice self control.

### **6. Where to from now**

Some have suggested that perhaps marriage fitness and physical fitness share good models for each other. Just as you might work out 2-3 times a week for at least physical fitness. You should develop that type of mentality with regard to your own relationship. Your relationship needs to be regularly renewed.

Practice skills demonstrated and discussed in this workshop. You need to practice more strategies that help you control your life. This especially means resisting being stimulus controlled, i.e., we are controlled by what happens out there rather than what is inside us.

(a) Engage Skills: knowing how and when to use techniques. For instance, you know about the problem solving technique, the speaker listener technique, but when to use them, that is the real skill. The time you need the skill is when they are harder to use and that is why practice is so critical. Your relationship will benefit when you both know when and how to use these skills, and time out for instance will be recognised as a strategy, not just avoidance. That is why these notes have to be read and understood by both of you.

(b) Reinforce: As you learn new patterns of behaviour, for instance as one partner makes a positive effort, make a positive affirmation, reinforce the behaviour. Don't say "Why couldn't you have done this years ago?" Focus on the right now and the future. When was the last time you gave an affirmation or simply give thanks. The effects on the relationship can be enormous, too

often we get caught on the negative. To use an old cliché from Tom Blanchard's One Minute Manager, "Catch people doing things right rather than wrong".

(c) Confidence: is so important in marriage, because confidence causes persistence based on hope. As you devote more confidence to marriage, so the relationship improves. Yet what follows are the top 10 things you can do to destroy confidence and your marriage:

10. Think only of your self
9. Push shove or slap one another
8. Refuse to accept you differences
7. Ignore signs that you are growing distant.
6. Avoid dealing with key issues.
5. Put one another down and escalate often
4. Leave no time to talk as friends
3. Emphasis on me vs you
2. Stop doing things together
1. Regularly shorten the long time view

I always like these types of lists, for if they are true, they also give you a step by step solution to help restore and maintain whatever it is you cherish. This is not an exhaustive list, but with the other ideas in this workshop it should give you more confidence in having a long life, living and loving together.

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