

Getting the Love You Want: A Guide for Couples

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Part I: THE UNCONSCIOUS PARTNERSHIP

Chapter 1: LOVE, LOST AND FOUND

One of the core ideas of Imago Therapy is that the underlying cause of most couples' discontent lies buried beneath the surface. Superficially, partners argue about household chores, money, parenting styles, their next vacation, or who is spending too much time on their cell phones. Outside of their awareness, however, each one is being compelled by an unwritten agenda that was formed early in life: to recover the sensations of being fully alive and joyfully connecting with which we came into the world. Although the specifics of each person's agenda are unique, the overriding goal is the same: to experience with the partner the same sensations they experienced with their caretakers. And they assign their partner the task of making it happen! "Partner, I expect you to satisfy the unmet emotional needs that I brought from childhood."

Chapter 2: CHILDHOOD WOUNDS

There's a three-word sentence that we use to describe this phenomenon: "Energy follows attention." In other words, what you focus on is what you get. If you keep focusing on the way your partner frustrates you, that's what you will see. But if you temper your view with the knowledge of your partner's struggles and your own, you will feel more compassionate for your partner and accepting of yourself. Compassion, the experience of co-feeling, is an essential component of love. Both of you accepting each other's challenges from the past is a precondition of the ability to receive the love you want.

From our view, these scars are very active in adult intimate relationships and show up constantly when a partner turns away or shows a still face when the other is trying to engage. An instance of this in our relationship occurred in a hotel room overlooking a Florida beachfront. I (Helen) woke up early, looked out the window at the rising sun over a glowing beach, and then turned to my work. When Harville awakened, he looked at the same scene with a loud and appreciative exclamation. I was tempted to explain to him that I had already seen the beautiful view and was now working on an important email. But I recalled the "Still Face" video and moved to the window to join Harville's enthusiasm for the rising sun and the shining beach, rather than be a still face. If I had not joined him, his excitement would have had no echo. The power of this experience led us to include it as a technique we recommend to couples in our workshops and therapy, to cultivate curiosity and wonder by echoing the joy (or the sadness) in their partners.

THE LOST SELF

We have now explored one important feature of the vast hidden world we call the *unconscious partnership*, and that is our storehouse of unmet childhood needs, or unfulfilled desire to be nurtured and protected and allowed to proceed unhindered along a path to maturity. Now we will turn to another kind of childhood wound, an even subtler kind of psychic injury called *socialization*, all those messages we receive from our caretakers and from society at large that tell who we are and how we have to behave. These, too, play a compelling but hidden role in our relationships with our partners.

TOOLS OF REPRESSION

If they believe that girls should be quiet and feminine and that boy should be strong and assertive, they only reward their children for gender-appropriate behavior. For example, if their little boy comes into the room

lugging a heavy toy, they might say, "What a strong little boy you are!" But if their daughter comes in carrying the same toy, they might caution, "Be careful of your pretty dress."

Chapter 5: THE POWER STRUGGLE

WEAPONS OF LOVE

But to a therapist, global words like *always* and *never* are an indication of a childhood wound. These are clues that the "past injury" is activated in the present relating.

"When you are frustrated, provoke the people around you. Be as unpleasant as possible until someone comes to your rescue."

This man, like the rest of us, was clinging to a primitive view of the world. When he was an infant lying in the cradle, he experienced his caregiver as a large creature leaning over him, responding to all his needs. He was fed, clothed, bathed, and nurtured, even though he could not articulate a single need. A crucial lesson learned in the preverbal stage of his development left an indelible print in his mind: other people were supposed to figure out what he needed and give it to him without his having to do anything more than cry. This arrangement worked fairly well when he was a child, in adulthood, his needs were far more complex. Furthermore, his wife was not a devoted mother hovering over his crib. She was his partner, and she had needs and expectations of her own. Although she wanted to make him happy, she didn't know what to do. Lacking this information, she was forced to play a grown-up version of pin the tail on the donkey: "Is this what you want? Is this?"

When partners don't tell each other what they want and constantly criticize each other for not giving it to them, it's no wonder that a rupture forms in the relationship.

Part II: THE CONSCIOUS PARTNERSHIP

Chapter 6: BECOMING CONSCIOUS

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A CONSCIOUS PARTNERSHIP

In an unconscious partnership, you cling to the idea that your partner is a mind reader who can intuit your needs. In a conscious partnership, you realize that you have to develop clear channels of communication so that both you and your partner can get the specifics of the love you both want.

You accept the difficulty of creating a lasting love relationship. In an unconscious partnership, you believe that the way to have a good relationship is to fall in love with the perfect mate. In a conscious partnership, you realize you must *be* the right partner. As you gain this more realistic view, you acknowledge that creating a good relationship requires commitment, discipline, and the courage to change.

BECOMING A LOVER

We all have an understandable desire to live life as children. We don't want to go to the trouble of raising a cow and milking it; we want to sit down at the table and have someone hand us a cool glass of milk. We don't want to plant seeds and tend a grapevine; we want to walk out the back door and pluck a handful of grapes. This wishful thinking finds its ultimate expression in love relationships. We don't want to accept responsibility for getting our needs met; we want to "fall in love" with the ideal mate and live happily ever after. The psychological term for this childlike view is *externalization*, and it is the cause of much of the world's unhappiness.

Chapter 7: COMMITMENT

THE NEED FOR COMMITMENT

Our second order of business is to help couples define their relationship vision. Before we heard all the things they *didn't* like about their relationship, we wanted them to articulate how they would like it to be. In other words, what would it be like if they had the relationship of their dreams?

It is surprisingly easy for couples to create this vision—even those who are in turmoil. To get them started, we ask them to list a series of positive statements beginning with the word *we* that describe the kind of relationship they would like to have. They are to frame these statements in the present tense as if the future were already here. Here are some examples: “We enjoy each other's company,” “We are financially secure,” “We spend time together doing things we both enjoy,” “We spend more time together as a family.”

Chapter 8: DISCOVERING YOUR PARTNER

TO KNOW IS NOT TO KNOW

The un-knowing process is an essential step in transforming your relationship. It's a paradox. The only way to discover your partner is to first not know them. You don't assume you know what your partner wants. You don't negate what they feel. You listen and invite them to share their experience. You move into the stance of curiosity. But how do you move from this abstract concept into practice? How do you stop the internal and incessant chatter in order to discover your partner? Simply, you need to discover your partner—as separate from you.

UNDERSTANDING YOUR PARTNER'S INNER WORLD

Throughout the course of your relationship, your partner has given you thousands of hours of testimony about his or her thoughts and feelings and wishes, but you have in turn registered only a fraction of this information. In order to deepen your understanding of your partner's subjective reality, you need to train yourself to listen and communicate more effectively.

THE IMAGO DIALOGUE

We call this new way *Imago Dialogue*. Imago Dialogue involves three different steps—mirroring, validating, and empathizing.

The Imago Dialogue plays a number of roles in the creation of a conscious partnership. First of all, it focuses your attention on the actual words your partner is saying. If you are like most people, you do not pay full attention when your partner is talking. When you should be listening, you are instead responding to the impact of what you are hearing:

THE SETUP

1. Use *I* language: For example, instead of blurting out, “You made me feel so ashamed when you treated our neighbor that way,” you say, “I felt ashamed when you treated our neighbor that way.”
2. Avoid all criticism: Instead of making critical remarks about your partner's character, focus instead on how you experience your partner's behavior. Instead of saying, “You are always late. You have no sense of responsibility,” you say, “When you are late, I feel frustrated and scared.”

THE THREE STEPS OF THE IMAGO DIALOGUE

Mirroring

After checking for accuracy, and the Receiver got the Sender's message "right," the Receiver then asks, "Is there more about that?" This gives the Sender the chance to expand on the topic.

Validating

Once couples have become adept at mirroring each other, we encourage them to go onto the next step of the Imago Dialogue: *validating*. In this part of the exercise, couples learn how to affirm the internal logic of each other's remarks. In essence, they are telling each other, "What you're saying makes sense to me. I can see how you are thinking and why you would think that way."

Once you have listened to your partner and fully understand what they have to say, you then strive to see how their thoughts make sense to them. You do not have to agree with your partner. You need to see them as they are, not as you wish them to be. Many people spend much of their time trying to get their partners to think the same way they do—this is a common obstacle to experiencing connection—but it is important that you affirm the logic of your partner's thinking—to see your partner as an "other" and no longer an extension of yourself: "You are not crazy. From all that I'm learning about you, I can see why you think that way."

Chapter 9: CREATING A ZONE OF AFFIRMATIONS

CARING BEHAVIORS

Almost without exception, when couples began artificially to increase the number of times a day that they acted lovingly toward each other, they began to feel safer and more loving. This intensified the emotional bond between them, and as a result, they made more rapid progress in their relationship.

WHY DOES IT WORK?

This need to be unconditionally "gifted" come straight out of our childhood. When we were infants, love came without price tags. At least for the first few months of our lives, we didn't have to reciprocate when we were patted or rocked or held or fed. And now, in adulthood, a time-locked part of us still craves this form of love. We want to be loved and cared for without having to do anything in return. When our partners grant us caring behaviors independent of our actions, our need for unconditional love appears to be satisfied.

THE FUN LIST

As time went on, we asked couples to engage in several high-energy, fun activities a week. These were to be spontaneous, one-on-one activities like wrestling, tickling, massaging, showering together, jumping up and down, or dancing. Competitive sports like tennis qualified only if a couple could play the game without stirring up tension.

Chapter 10: DEFINING YOUR CURRICULUM

THE TRUTH ABOUT CRITICISM

This leads us to the first general principle about criticism:

Principle 1: Many of your repetitious, emotional criticisms of your partner are disguised as statements of your own unmet needs.

There is another piece of information that can be derived from criticism, one that usually requires a great deal of soul-searching. It is possible that the woman's criticism of her partner is a valid statement about herself. In other words, while she is berating her mate for his lack of organization, she may be just as

disorganized as he is. To find out if this is true, she could ask herself a general question: “In what way is my criticism of my partner also true of me?”

Chapter 11: CREATING A SACRED SPACE

WHAT IS NEGATIVITY?

It's no wonder that our partners feel depressed, stay late at work, drink too much, don't want to make love, or stay up late by themselves. Being with us is not a safe place to be. They experience being chopped up into little pieces, dissected, and rejected.

To get the love we want, we need to eliminate negativity in all its forms.

the negativity that we express toward our partners comes back like a boomerang and affects us as well. That's because the old brain does not know whether the negativity is being directed outward or inward. This theory has been backed up by studies showing that when one person yells at another, the person being yelled at produces more of the stress hormone cortisol. That's to be expected. But perhaps more interestingly, the same increasing cortisol is seen in the angry person as well. One could say that any negativity that we direct towards others is a form of self-abuse.