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Emotional Intelligence in Relationships: Handouts

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EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IN COUPLES THERAPY
ADVANCES FROM NEUROBIOLOGY AND THE SCIENCE OF INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

Introduction

New Answers to Old Questions

This book introduces a new way of understanding and navigating relationships, and provides a guide for therapists who want to use this new understanding to help distressed couples improve their lives together. The new approach results from advances in two independent fields of scientific inquiry: neuroscience and the science of intimate relationships. New studies in relationship science have identified with a high degree of precision what people who succeed in their relationships do differently than those who fail, taking much of the guesswork out of the question of what it takes to make a relationship work. Meanwhile, ground-breaking discoveries in the field of affective neuroscience provide new answers to the age-old question of why people persist in outmoded ways of thinking or acting, even when they know it would be in their own best interest to change.

Advances in the Science of Intimate Relationships

Over two decades ago, researchers set out to find exactly what people who succeed in marriages do differently than people who fail in their marriages. In the first year of these studies, researchers carefully observed and measured everything that could possibly be related to whether their marriages succeeded or not (attitudes, communication styles, amount of anger, amount of tenderness, etc). They put participants in apartments equipped with video cameras in every room in the apartment (except the bathroom!) and recorded everything each of them did. They also asked them to have conversations about specific topics while the researchers monitored their heart rates and measured their physical movements, even taking blood samples at various points in conversations. When the researchers were satisfied that they had measured everything that might be related to the couples' eventual success, they simply turned them loose and then tracked them down up years later to see how they were doing. Which couples were divorced? Which ones were unhappily married? And which ones had thriving marriages? Not only did the researchers succeed in pinpointing the interpersonal habits that distinguish people who succeed from people who fail, but they found that some interpersonal habits are so crucial that the absence of them virtually guarantees marital failure. By measuring the relative presence or absence of specific interpersonal habits, researchers found that they could predict the likelihood of a marriage's success or failure with 91% accuracy (Gottman & Silver, 1999)! People who have these crucial habits almost always end up in happy marriages, whereas people who don't almost always end up divorced or unhappily married.

These studies are revolutionizing our understanding of intimate relationships. Before them, marriage therapists had to proceed on the basis of what they thought couples needed, or what generally accepted theories in the field told them to do. Now, for the first time, we have scientific evidence about what it is that couples who succeed and those who fail actually do differently. This information has been filtering into public awareness through books such as John Gottman's *Why Marriages Succeed for Fail* (1994a)*, The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* (Gottman & Silver,1999), and *The Relationship Cure* (Gottman & DeClaire, 2001). These studies present compelling evidence that there are personal prerequisites for succeeding in intimate relationships. Those who want to succeed in love must have specific interpersonal abilities, and we now know exactly what these abilities are. If people have these abilities, the chances are very, very good that they will be treated with respect and admiration from their intimate partners. If they don't have them, the evidence suggests that the future of their relationships will be quite dim.

Some of the most important interpersonal habits involve things that people must be able to do *without the help of their partners.* In fact, they must be able to do these things precisely when their partners are making it most difficult to do them. Researchers have discovered that the way people respond when they feel misunderstood or mistreated by their partners dramatically influences the odds

that their partners will treat them better or worse in the future. All people in lasting intimate relationships feel misunderstood or mistreated at one time or another. At these times, some people respond in ways that make it less likely that their partners will mistreat or misunderstand them in the future, and some people respond in ways that dramatically increase the odds that they will be even more misunderstood or mistreated. The way people respond to the worst in their partners plays a central role in determining whether or not they will experience something better from them in the future. These studies suggest that most people vastly underestimate the potentially positive influence they can have on their partners. Evidence suggests that people can dramatically influence the way their partners treat them. This is because a person's level of motivation has so much to do with how his partner interacts with him or her. People are almost guaranteed love relationships in which they feel respected and valued if they have certain interpersonal abilities. The good news is that when people find themselves in relationships in which they feel consistently misunderstood or mistreated, they don't have to wait around, hoping that their partners will start treating them better. They cannot largely take the matter into their own hands. They can't control their partners, but they can dramatically influence the odds that their partners will treat them better in the future. How? *By making sure that they are responding well to the things their partners do or say that are upsetting to them right now.*

In chapter 3, we'll take a detailed look at what "responding well" means. Some of these habits that predict relationship success are obvious. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that people who tend to start out discussions with harsh criticisms won't be likely to succeed any more than those who are unwilling to accept influence from their partners when making decisions. Some of the important predictors have more to do with what a person is *thinking* than what she or he says or does. Two different husbands may each apologize and adjust their plans to accommodate when their wives criticize them harshly for forgetting an important appointment. One Husband will end up divorced, and the other will remain happily married. Why? While husband 1 apologizes and adjusts his plans, inside he's thinking thoughts like, "She shouldn't get so upset over such a little thing"; "If it's not one thing, its another!"; "She's never satisfied!"; "I would never act like that if she forgot something!";"She's just like her mother!" In contrast, husband 2 is thinking things like, "Why is she so upset?"; "There must be more going on here than meets the eye"; "My forgetting about this must mean something to her that I don't really understand"; "I've got to find out the emotional logic behind her reactions." Although the outward actions of the two husbands look the same (apologizing and accepting influence), clearly these husbands have vastly different attitudes. This is because attitudes are as potent as behaviors when predicting relationship success or failure.

In all of my years working with couples, I have rarely encountered a couple in which one partner was meeting the prerequisites when the other partner wasn't. Granted, the shortcomings of one partner are often more public or provocative than the shortcomings of the other (i.e., one partner flies into rages and throws things while the other tries to placate and calm down the raging partner), but when all of the prerequisites are considered, we find that partners in distressed relationships are generally a match for each other. But partners entering therapy rarely see things this way. Inwardly, if not outwardly, people generally think that the shortcomings of their partners are more serious than their own. Usually, this is because there are certain "dysfunctional" things that their partners do that they know they don't do themselves. What they don't realize is that there are many different interpersonal habits that are predictive of relationship success or failure. They tend to focus on the particular dysfunctional habits of their partners, not realizing that some of their own habits are just as powerfully corrosive to the relationship. Fortunately, people who are able to see and modify their own dysfunctional habits will most often find that their partners follow. This is due to the powerful combination of abilities that people destined for relationship success have. They require that they be treated with respect, but they also make it easy for their partners to treat them with respect at the same time.

The bottom line is this: If people want their partners to treat them better, they need to think and act like people who usually get treated well by their partners. Researchers have studied people who naturally elicit respect and cooperation from their partners, and have identified exact how they do it. There are specific skills and attitudes involved in knowing how to bring out the best in others, and there is evidence that people who know how to do this are more successful not only in their intimate relationships, but in most areas of their lives. Of course, we all have the ability to do this sometimes, but the people who succeed in getting respect and admiration from their partners can do it even when they feel really misunderstood or mistreated. These are the moments that separate the men from the boys, and the women from the girls, psychologically speaking. If people can't stay on track in these times, they are probably not going to be among those who end up with partners who understand, respect, and care about

them. However, if they develop the ability to respond well during these times, they will find that their partner will begin treating them in a different way.

At our couples clinic, each week we encounter people who tell us stories about how poorly they have been treated by their partners. After spewing the details of their mate's most recent episode of incredibly selfish or disrespectful behavior, they usually look at us as if to say, "Now how am I supposed to respond to that?" Half of these people are already convinced that there is no good answer to this question. In fact, they resent even having to ask the question, believing that they shouldn't have to deal with this situation in the first place. But the evidence suggests that if they continue dismissing the question, they will kiss their relationships goodbye. Marital success has more to do with responding well when one's partner seems selfish or inconsiderate than it has to do with avoiding actually being selfish or inconsiderate in the first place. It is not that selfish or disrespectful behavior doesn't matter, it does: Repetitive, selfish behavior is destructive in relationships. The problem is that people are not very reliable judges about what truly selfish behavior is, the reason being that there are hundreds of yardsticks for measuring selfishness, and people tend to use their own, not their partners' yardsticks. Let's take a hypothetical example: A wife accepts an invitation to go out with her friends on Friday night without asking her husband if that would be okay with him. The husband considers that to be really inconsiderate, and feels justified in criticizing her harshly for it. But the fact is, this wife wouldn't be upset at the husband if he made similar arrangements with his friends without consulting her. In fact, the wife has a quite different ideal for how a relationship should be. In her view, partners should each be free to make other arrangements unless plans between the two of them have been specifically made. She wouldn't dream of being so selfish as to try to restrict his freedom by asking him to consult her every time he wanted to plan something with his friends. Obviously, he doesn't see it that way, and he lets her have a piece of his mind! Well, if she wasn't behaving selfishly before he harshly criticized her, now she is! She slams the door in his face. Feeling perfectly entitled to his contempt, the next time he sees her he is sneering at her for her childish tantrum. Needless to say, her response to his contempt isn't exactly what he was hoping for.

And so the story goes. It began with the husband's *perception* that his wife was being inconsiderate. If he had been able to respond differently, she may have been willing to try to work out a more mutually satisfying plan. But he felt perfectly justified in his reaction. After all, hadn't she done the selfish thing first? But she doesn't see it that way. She believes that he is the one who was selfish, trying to control her by limiting her freedom to schedule time with her friends. She wouldn't dream of selfishly restricting him like that! Of course, his priority on collaboration isn't any more selfish than her priority on mutual freedom. As the discussion unfolded, she didn't respond any better to the perception that he was being selfish than he did to the perception that she was being inconsiderate, and so the whole thing blew up. But it all would have been avoided if either of them had been able to stand up for themselves without putting the other person down.

The track record for professional marriage counseling is not particularly impressive (Gottman, 1999). A massive *Consumer Reports* survey in 1995 (Seligman, 1995) revealed that, among consumers of various kinds of psychotherapy, consumers of marital therapy were the least satisfied. I believe that marital therapies have been relatively unsuccessful at least in part because therapists often inadvertently reinforce the notion that intimate partners can succeed in their relationships without meeting the prerequisites. Therapists support this notion each time they attempt to help partners get more of what they want from each other even though they are going about trying to get it in ways that were clearly predictive of martial failure. For example, to help her get her point across, a therapist might reframe a wife's harsh criticism as a desperate cry for connection. Or, a therapist might help a wife view her husband's stony silence as his decision to confine himself to a life of loneliness rather than attack his wife. Often, therapists make progress with couples by going back and forth, softening one partner a little bit, then softening the other, then back to the first partner, and so on. As each partner experiences the other as a bit more willing to give, they become more willing themselves, and things gradually get better. If a therapist is sufficiently skilled in this softening process, couples can make remarkable progress in a relatively short period of time. However, each partner may leave therapy thinking that the progress happened because their partner finally became more reasonable. It is possible for marriage therapy to "succeed" without either partner developing any more ability to respond well when feeling misunderstood or mistreated. Beneath the tenuous progress, they might still have the same attitude that they entered therapy with: "I'll change my reactions to my partner if my partner changes his reactions to me." People who have this *quid pro quo* attitude generally don't get treated very well for very long (Gottman & Silver, 1999; Murstein, Cerreto, & MacDonald, 1977), and this may be why there is such a huge relapse problem

among couples who improve during marital therapy. While therapists are busily helping partners capitalize on small increases in the reasonableness of their mates, they are reinforcing assumptions that will eventually undo the progress. Those partners who believe that things improved because the therapist got their partners to change often leave couples therapy with an uneasy feeling about their progress. They feel relieved that their partners finally got a clue, but also feel just as powerless to influence the state of their relationship as they did before therapy. Each of them is haunted by the unspoken question: "What's to keep my partner from starting to treat me poorly again?"

On the other hand, partners who use therapy to increase their abilities to respond to each other in ways that are predictive of success leave therapy with an entirely different feeling. Such partners have confidence that the relationship changed to a large part because they became better at meeting the prerequisites for a happy relationship. They have seen the powerful, positive impact that the hard-earned changes in their attitudes and actions have had on their mates. They come to realize that, to a large extent, the future of their relationship is in their own hands.

The approach to couples therapy described in this book begins with the assumption that, if people want to succeed in their intimate relationships over the long haul, they must meet the prerequisites for relationship success. They must accept the assumption that the single most powerful thing they can do to get more respect and caring from their partners is to more fully develop the ability to think and act like people who stand a chance of getting respect and caring. They must become *more concerned* about how they respond to the upsetting things that their partners say or do than they are about the upsetting things their partners are saying or doing.

The new information about the prerequisites for relationship success should be of great interest to all therapists, regardless of theoretical orientation. For example, narrative therapists will be pleased to learn that new studies confirm that the beliefs and stories that people have about their relationships exert a powerful influence on their success or failure. Cognitive behavioral therapists will not be surprised to learn that people destined for relationship success think and act differently from those destined to fail. Emotionally focused therapists will find support for their assumption that successful partners own and express attachment-related bids for connection more often than unsuccessful partners, and Bowenian therapists will find support for the idea that relationship success is related to the ability to stand up for one's own viewpoint without putting the other person down. But the studies on factors that predict relationship success will also help therapists of various orientations refine the focus of their interventions. For example, there are *particular types* of relationship narratives, attributions, and differentiating moves that almost always destroy relationships and other types that ensure relationship success. These studies have identified the specific moves that people in successful relationships make when they need to stand up for themselves, and they have identified how successful partners make and respond to bids for connection.

Advances in Affective Neuroscience

Developing the habits that support relationship success is probably the single most important task a person can accomplish in his or her lifetime. Evidence suggests that those who succeed in their marriages will live an average of four years longer than those who don't (Gottman & Silver, 1999). They will have an average of 35% less illness, have healthier immune systems, will be substantially less likely to become violent, homicidal, or suicidal, and less likely to experience an emotional or mental disorder. They will have a lower risk of being involved in automobile accidents. The children of those who succeed in their marriages will have fewer health problems, better academic performance, more social competence, less depression, less problems with social contact, more ability to regulate their emotions, lower heart rate physiological reactivity when experiencing negative emotions, and lower quantities of stress-related hormones circulating in their bodies (Gottman, 1994b). Many people assume that the cost of improving their marriage will be too great for them in personal terms. They assume that, in order to keep their partners happy, they will have to "give in" most of the time. But the evidence simply doesn't support this notion. People who meet the prerequisites get more cooperation from their partners, not less. Given the huge benefits and minimal costs, why do so many people go through life failing to develop the habits that would virtually guarantee their success in one of life's most important endeavors?

New answers to this question have recently emerged from the study of the human brain. There is a mounting body of evidence suggesting that people keep doing things that they know they shouldn't do, and they fail to do things they know they should do because their brains are programmed to make

decisions for them. New studies reveal how the brain becomes *conditioned* to respond automatically to certain cues by activating *neural response programs* that propel people into specific patterns of thinking and action. The human brain is equipped with seven such neural response programs, each set up to produce powerful internal states that dictate how people respond in any given situation. For the most part, people don't volunteer for these internal states, they simply find themselves under their influence. When any one of them is activated, a person may lose the freedom to choose her thoughts and actions freely. It is as if, at that moment, someone else is in charge. She cannot act differently because she's in the grips of a neural state that is preprogrammed for a specific purpose. In order to respond differently, she must first experience a shift in brain states.

In chapters 1 and 2, we will take a close look at the ground-breaking neuroscience studies that have identified the brain's neural response circuits.

There's a good deal of evidence suggesting that the brain gets wired for specific kinds of neural activations very early in life, and that once the activation patterns are set, they can persist throughout a person's life. These automatically activated neural operating systems can be the greatest advantage a person has in navigating the demands of everyday life, but they can also be the source of a person's distress. When things go well, people automatically experience the motivation to love, to care, to seek comfort, and to defend themselves precisely when they need to. Motivation arises on its own accord. But sometimes the needed neural operating system doesn't kick in when needed. For example, people don't miss loved ones when apart from them, they don't feel empathy when others are upset, or they just don't enjoy opening up to others. When the appropriate internal states don't show up on cue, the best they can do is fake it. A husband might not exactly be lying when he says, "I miss you honey," but the "missing" may be more theoretical than heart felt, and at some level his wife will know this. He is saying the right words, but they are hollow. Other times, neural states that produce defensiveness or withdrawal kick in precisely when people need to be open-minded or engaged with their partners.

When intimate relationships become distressed, there are nearly always problems with the conditioned activation or suppression of each partner's neural operating systems. Research on internal response circuits suggests that problems come in three varieties: (1) When a person gets caught in the "pull" of an internal response circuit, and is unable to do what is needed (e.g., when the "anger program" kicks in, and a person just can't listen to his partner when it would ultimately be to his or her benefit to do so); (2) when a person avoids doing or saying needed things because to do so would likely trigger an uncomfortable internal response circuit in him or her (e.g., when a person is unable to admit when he's wrong, because doing so triggers an anxious or vulnerable state in him); (3) when a needed response state simply doesn't show up (e.g., when a person needs to respond to his partner with tenderness or caring, but he finds himself preoccupied with other things).

The discovery of the brain's neural operating systems is of huge importance for those of us who are trying to make sense of why partners often persist in self-defeating interactions, even when they know that it would be in their best interest to change. People fail to think and act in ways that promote relationship success because they repeatedly find themselves in the wrong frame of mind when certain types of thinking or action are needed. They cannot sustain needed attitudes or actions because the juice that fuels these attitudes and actions isn't there. The wrong brain state shows up, and they find themselves with attitudes and urges that take them in the wrong direction. To get better at meeting the habits that enable relationship success, our clients must first develop more ability to influence their own internal states. Many times, the problem isn't knowledge (they often know very well what they need to do), or ability (they've done it many times before), the problem is *motivation*. Precisely at the moments when they need to think or act differently, they don't feel like it. They're not in the mood, because something that has happened has activated a brain state that simply doesn't support the kind of thinking and action needed to promote relationship success. They can try to override the internal state and act in ways that aren't supported by it, but this is a bit like trying to accelerate from zero to 60 miles per hour while driving in fourth gear. A person might be doing all the right things (letting the clutch out slowly while giving it some gas), but he won't be able to get where he wants to go unless he shifts into first gear before accelerating. All of the effort in the world won't keep the car from stalling out unless this person shifts first. Most of the time, relationship problems stem from gear-shifting problems, or more precisely, state-shifting problems. Anyone who wants more cooperation, respect, or caring from his or her partner must get better at the ability to shift internal states when the needed states don't automatically show up.

The discovery of the brain's neural operating programs helps explain why psychotherapies sometimes fail to promote lasting change. New narratives, attributions, and behaviors learned in therapy

will only persist to the extent that they become woven into the fabric of neural response programs that automatically swing into gear during the course of daily living. Further, because the brain operates in state-specific ways, new ways of thinking or acting while in one brain state will not necessarily persist when another neural state becomes active. Regardless of the type of change a therapist is trying to promote, it will only last when the change becomes integrated into the brain's conditioned response patterns.

In his book *The Emotional Brain*, neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux (1996) suggested that successful psychotherapy therapy literally rewires the brain for more flexibility by forging new neural networks that were not previously associated. Psychotherapy can create new levels of neural integration in the brain by promoting the growth of new neurons, the expansion of existing neurons, and changes in the connections between existing neurons (Cozolino, 2002). Problems arise when various parts of the brain aren't communicating well with each other. Daniel Siegel (1999)noted:

> *"Mental functioning emanates from anatomically distinct and fairly autonomous circuits, each of which can be dis-associated from the function of others… Various mental processes may thus be functionally isolated from one another with the blockage of integrative circuits." (1999, pp. 319–320)*

Siegel provided an example of how psychotherapy promoted new levels of neural integration within the brain of an attorney whose career was threatened by her angry outbursts with clients:

> Within these states in the therapeutic session, her experience of being "out of control" was joined by the reflective and supportive dialogue with her therapist. She was able to listen in her agitation but remained hyperaroused. However, she now had two objects for her attention—her internal state and the external dialogue. As time went on, she was able to begin to reflect on the nature of her own mental processes. She could picture her circuits with an excessive flooding of activity; she could notice her tense muscles contributing to the feedback to her mind that she was furious...Therapy allowed her to experience emotionally flooded states, and within that state of mind, she could use relation and imagery to "lower the energy of her circuits" and the tension in her body. Her metacognitive cortical capacities were strengthened and made more accessible during her rages in ways that were not possible before. Such capacities allowed her to use previously inhibited pathways during this state of mind to alter the way she processed information. What had been a blockage in information processing and an inhibition in the flow of energy now became more adaptive states of mind. Her capacity for emotional regulation, and thus for self-regulation, became more flexible and more effective. (1999, 261–262)

The kind of neural integration experienced by Siegel's client is similar to that experienced by distressed partners who participate in the clinical approach described in this book. Part II of this book provides concrete, step-by-step interventions for helping clients rewire their brains for more flexibility.

As I have worked with couples over the years, I have often been struck by how predictable and rigid their reactions to each other are as they struggle to influence each other. To any outside observer their reactions are clearly counter productive. When they are calm, clients often readily acknowledge that these reactions need to change, but when they get upset, it is as if the part of their brain that knows this gets shut off. They get caught up in internal states that dictate their reactions to each other. In couples therapy, we help clients develop the ability to use their brains more fully during stressful situations. We do this by helping them use previously neglected parts of their brains precisely at the moments when their old, emotionally driven neural response programs are "up and running." As we help them do this over and over again, new neural connections are formed, enabling their brains to respond in a different way. They become more able to use their whole brains as they navigate difficult circumstances in their relationships.

The Book

This book is divided into two sections. Part I provides a detailed exploration of the exciting discoveries we have touched here. In chapters 1 and 2, we ground-breaking studies in the field of affective neuroscience are explored that provide new clues about why people persist in self defeating ways of thinking or acting, even when they want to change. Studies described in Chapter 1 challenge the

long-held assumption that cognition is the primary organizer of human experience. A host of studies suggest that our brains are set up to favor the influence of emotion. Chapter 1 invites the reader into the world of Susan and James, a couple whose relationship was hijacked by the activation of overly self-protective neural states that dictated their interactions. We will review what brain scientists have learned about how the brain's self-protective states operate, and take a look at how this information can be used to short-circuit the activation of these states.

In Chapter 2, we move on to explore the lives of Loretta and Jack. Unlike James and Susan, Jack and Loretta weren't fighters. Rather, they suffered from a lack of emotional connectedness in their marriage, and had drifted apart. In Chapter 3, we will review findings that suggest partners fail to connect because they have limited access to the brain's intimacy producing states. Researchers have discovered that our brains are equipped with four special-purpose internal response systems which, when activated, naturally draw people closer, and produce strong emotional bonds. I'll show you I used this information to jump-start dormant intimacy-producing neural states in the couple. The text will demonstrate via Loretta and Jack how this helped them to experience genuine desire for emotional and sexual connectedness.

Chapters 1 and 2 explore the question of *how* people change, but in Chapter 3, we move on to explore *what* people in distressed relationships need to change, describing studies that suggest there are prerequisite abilities that people must have in order to succeed in their relationships. For example, we will explore how effective partners stand up for themselves without putting their mates down, and we'll review the specific moves made by people who both require that they be treated with respect, and at the same time make it very easy for their partners to treat them with respect.

The second part of this book is devoted to a detailed description of the methods and assumptions of Pragmatic/Experiential Therapy for Couples (PET-C), an approach that helps partners rewire their brains for more flexibility, enabling them to meet the prerequisites for relationship success. In Chapter 4, we'll review the phases of PET-C, the assumptions that inform the approach, and the basic tasks that skilled PET-C therapists accomplish. We will look at how the PET-C is used to facilitate greater awareness of the brain states that often prevent partners from implementing the habits that predict relationship success, and how PET-C helps partners develop the ability to shift into brain states that make needed thinking and action possible. We will explore the integrative nature of PET-C, compare it with other prominent approaches to couples therapy, and consider how PET-C incorporates aspects of other clinical models into its unique theoretical base.

In Chapter 5, we will look at how the PET-C therapist uses assessment sessions to develop a clear picture of the patterns of automatic internal state activation\suppression that characterize each partner's interaction in the relationship. We will look at methods that can be used by therapists to uncover the pathologizing explanations that clients often use to make sense of upsetting aspects of their partners' thinking or actions, and show how therapists can identify various forms of contempt that partners often secretly harbor. We will also detail methods for assessing the extent to which each partner is currently engaging in the 10 habits that predict relationship success, the specific issues over which partners are gridlocked, the bigger issues at stake behind each partner's position on gridlocked issues, and significant past hurtful experiences that each partner has experienced in the current or past relationships.

When couples begin therapy, partners are usually caught in mutually reinforcing patterns of interaction, fueled by the automatic activation of self protective internal states in each partner. A state in one partner automatically activates a predictable state in the other, which triggers or perpetuates a predictable state in the first partner, and so on. In Chapter 6, we will review three levels of intervention that can be used to help partners shift internal states during therapy sessions, freeing them to interact in ways that are predictive of relationship success.

Most people who are in distressed relationships believe that, for their relationships to improve, somebody must convince their partners that they need to change. In Chapter 7, 8, 9, & 10 we will review how the PET-C therapist uses state shifting interventions to help partners become receptive to the idea that the best way to change their partners is to change themselves. Once partners become committed to changing their own habits of reacting in upsetting situations, a second phase of therapy begins in which each partner receives personalized tutoring in the skills of emotional intelligence, using his or her own relationship as a workshop for practicing these skills. In Chapter 11 and 12, we will review how the PET-C therapist helps clients become expert in responding effectively in any upsetting situation that occurs with their partners. Clients generally enter phase two faintly aware of the extent to which their interactions with their partners are governed by the automatic patterning of internal state activations inside of them. Methods are described in Chapter 11 and 12 for helping each partner become more aware of what is

happening internally in the midst of interactions with his or her partner. Clients learn to recognize cues that signify the activation of specific internal states, and they become more adept at recognizing the "triggers" for these mood states.

Awareness of the internal states that govern one's reactions in upsetting situations is crucial, but often not sufficient to promote lasting change, because at the moments when clients need to use this awareness, they are often caught in neural states that carry their thoughts in a different direction. Once activated, a neural response program has a momentum of its own. In order to engage in different thinking and action when it is needed, the client must develop the ability to think and act differently *in the moments when the state is active*. In Chapter 12 we will review how PET-C therapists help clients accomplish this through repetitive practice designed to recondition automatic internal reactions. Through these practices, clients rewire interfering internal states for more flexibility, making it possible for them to think and act in ways that are predictive of relationship success.

When the second phase of PET-C is successful, partners begin experiencing increased respect and cooperativeness. Critical as these changes may be, they will not be enough to ensure a couple's lasting happiness. Long-term studies on relationships suggest that the absence of fighting on its own is not sufficient to predict good relationship outcomes. Couples who succeed don't just stop fighting, they form powerful positive emotional bonds. They become best friends, experiencing warmth, fondness, and admiration for each other on a daily basis Each of our brains is equipped with four executive operating systems which, when active, naturally produce feelings and motivations that draw intimate partners emotionally closer to each other. In the Introduction, we will review how the therapist can help partners increase access to these intimacy states.

Interest in the PET-C model has grown considerably in the years since it was first introduced (Atkinson, 1998, 1999, 2001), and several training formats are now available for those who are interested in developing expertise in it. From our training experiences, we have identified a number of factors that contribute to the success of individuals becoming skilled PET-C practitioners. Chapter 13 highlights some of the insights we have gleaned on this topic, and some of the training methods we have used.

Conclusion

New studies on factors that predict relationship success point to the critical role that emotion plays in the course of intimate relationships (Gottman, 1999). Until recently, we understood relatively little about emotional processes in the brain, but since the mid 1970s, neuroscientists have made dramatic progress in uncovering the mysterious mechanisms of emotion. Let me say clearly at the outset that almost nothing about the brain processes involved in emotion can be stated with absolute authority. Affective neuroscience is still an infant field, which means that many conclusions are still in the realm of correlation and possibility. And high-tech tools notwithstanding, the task of mapping the emotional brain is simply a staggeringly complex undertaking. Each human brain houses up to 100 billion neurons, each of which is capable of making, literally, thousands of connections with other neurons. Attempting to understand this intricate, electrochemical mesh to emotion, a concept that itself encompasses an enormously complex set of phenomena, is a truly daunting task.

Nonetheless, as the "black box" beneath our craniums is slowly and painstakingly being pried open, its contents deserve our close inspection. For while more time and research will be needed before new discoveries become widely accepted, new perspectives on the emotional brain hold the promise of more potent and effective ways of doing therapy. This new knowledge has transformed my clinical work with couples, inspiring an approach that empowers emotion and thought to work in common cause, rather than at cross-purposes, to help people manage their most volatile feelings. Whatever a therapist's current orientation, be it cognitive, behavioral, affective, or some blend thereof, I believe that the newly charted links between our neural circuitry and our most primitive passions merit open-minded and thoughtful consideration.

Core Differences in Ways of Maintaining Emotional Stability
(Legitimately Different Ways of Navigating Life)

1 **Independence vs. Togetherness**	**Independence-First** ➢ Often prefer to engage in activities and tasks independently ➢ Each partner mostly assumes responsibility for meeting their own needs and completing their own tasks. ➢ Rather than assuming responsibility for anticipating each other's needs, each partner expects the other to speak up when they need something. ***Dream:*** Not having to worry about inadvertently hurting someone by one's inattentiveness. Not being responsible for someone else's happiness. ***Fear of Accepting Influence:*** I'll spend my whole life meeting my partner's needs, and I'll be neglected. ***Critical Stance****:* You want me to read your mind! You expect too much! You're too needy! You want me to do things for you that you're perfectly capable of doing for yourself! You're too needy!	**Togetherness First** ➢ Often prefer to engage in activities and tasks together. ➢ Each partner counts on help from the other in completing tasks or shouldering burdens. ➢ Each partner anticipates the needs of the other, and attempts to meet them without having to be asked. ***Dream:*** That my partner would take my feelings into consideration without my demanding it. A feeling of companionship. Never having to be alone. ***Fear of Accepting Influence:*** I'll feel like I'm in this world alone. There will be nobody looking out for me but myself. I've got no backup. I'm on my own. ***Critical Stance****:* You live in your own little world! You're self-centered (or selfish)! Any moron would have realized that I needed help. I shouldn't have to ask!
2 **Present vs. Future Orientation**	**Invest in the Future First** Delay gratification. Work first, then play ***Dream:*** To share a secure future together. ***Fear of Accepting Influence:*** If we goof around along the way, we may invest inadequately in our future happiness. ***Critical Stance:*** You're lazy! You're irresponsible! You're like a child who has to have everything right now!	**Live for the Moment First** Invest in the future, but not at the expense of enjoying the present ***Dream:*** To have a life where you enjoy each moment. ***Fear of Accepting Influence:*** Life will be a continual chore. What's the point, if you don't enjoy it along the way? There will always be more work... enjoyment will fade. ***Critical Stance***: You're anal, neurotic, anxious, etc.
3 **Degree of Structure**	**Predictability First** Seek security, predictability and order first, then feel safe to experiment within the safe parameters. ***Dream:*** To have a safety net so that life feels more stable, less anxiety-provoking. ***Fear of Accepting Influence:*** If you don't plan it, it might not happen. Life will be out of control. ***Critical Stance:*** You're reckless!	**Spontaneity First** Seek adventure, creativity, open-endedness first; the rest will fall into place. Be more structured only if a more spontaneous approach fails. ***Dream:*** To avoid boredom. Life as an adventure! ***Fear of Accepting Influence:*** Slowly dying of boredom. Life will be dull and meaningless. ***Critical Stance:*** You're boring! You're a coward!
4 **First Reaction to Things You Don't Like**	**Slow to Upset** Getting upset doesn't help anything. Don't make a big deal of things. It's not the end of the world if everything doesn't go the want you wanted it to. ***Dream:*** To have a partner who doesn't freak out when I fail to meet his/her expectations. ***Fear of Accepting Influence:*** That life will become a never-ending series of things to be upset about. **Critical Stance:** You are never satisfied! You're a negative person. You're not happy unless you have something to be upset about!	**Readily Upset** It's normal to feel upset when something seems wrong, deficient or less than it should be. If nobody gets upset, nothing ever changes. **Dream**: To have a partner who understands that there's nothing wrong with getting upset if something bothers you. ***Fear of Accepting Influence***: That I'll go through stifling my feelings. I'll feel like a Stepford wife. **Critical Stance:** You're a fake. Underneath it all, you get just as upset as I do. You're just afraid of a little conflict! You're a wimp!
5 Resolving Upset Feelings	**Problem Solving First** Feel better by doing something about the upsetting situation. Solve the problem or make a plan and you'll feel better. ***Dream:*** To have a partner who lets by-gones be by-gones --who has a positive attitude toward life. ***Fear of Accepting Influence:*** I don't want to "fuel the fire" by giving her negative feelings too much attention. ***Critical Stance:*** You're a hopelessly negative person, a whiner, a victim. Stop feeling sorry for yourself and get over it. Either do something about it or get over it!	**Understanding First** Feel better by feeling understood. ***Dream:*** For someone to understand what its like to be me. To avoid loneliness ***Fear of Accepting Influence:*** If you let go of upset feelings before feeling understood, you will never feel understood. You'll just fix things on the surface. ***Critical Stance:*** You could care less about how I feel. You just want to pretend the whole thing never happened!

Introduction to Core Differences

One of the most important findings made by marriage researchers in the last 30 years is that, the vast majority of the time, when partners get upset with each other, neither of them has done anything that is intrinsically wrong. There are many different ways of navigating life that can work in relationships, and people start a downhill slide when they assume that their priorities or opinions are better than their partners'. One of the most important differences between a people who know how to get their partners to treat them well, and those who don't is that those who get treated well are suspicious of their own tendencies to assume that their priorities or opinions are better than their partners.

Different people develop radically different, even opposite ways of making their way through life, and maintaining emotional stability. What works for one person doesn't necessarily work for another and the failure to recognize this basic fact fuels many relationship gridlocks. People don't usually consciously choose their style of coping in life. They just discover ways of navigating life that make them feel more stable. When there's a mismatch between the coping styles of each partner in a relationship, situations arise that are ripe for relationship discord.

A lot of times, people try to present logical, compelling arguments for their coping styles, even backing up their preferences with philosophical or theological propositions. For example, a person who discovers that, for her, life feels most stable when it is predictable, will tend to gravitate toward a philosophy of marriage that emphasizes responsibility, commitment, and discipline. Her relationship dreams will center around the safety and security that comes when two people join forces against the chaos of the world around them. Another person may discover that for him, life feels best when he lives it wide open, taking risks, and treating life like an adventure. This person will gravitate toward a philosophy of marriage that emphasizes spontaneity, and will see his partner as a coadventurer. His life philosophy will center around the benefits of boundless living, and his relationship dreams will center around the beauty of having a companion on this adventure called life.

If these two people marry each other and have relationship problems, they are likely to be gridlocked over issues related to predictability versus spontaneity. For example, they might gridlock over parenting issues, such as whether the children should have a firm bedtime or not. The "orderly" parent will get upset at her spontaneous partner's tendency to ignore the children's bedtime, accusing him of being irresponsible. And the spontaneous parent will judge the orderly partner's insistence on a consistent bedtime, accusing her of being too rigid or controlling. These partners are likely to come to therapy claiming that their own philosophy of parenting is better than their partners', but in fact, each of them is just following a personal coping style. The spontaneous person fights off boredom and the intolerable constricting feeling that comes from too much structure, by making life an adventure. He applies this same approach to parenting. If he tried to operate with the level of structure, order, or discipline that his partner thinks he should have, his anxiety would go way up, and life would feel unstable to him. On the other hand, the orderly person reduces her anxiety through structuring life and making it predictable, and her position on gridlocked issues will usually reflect this. If she tried to function with the level of spontaneity that her partner thinks she should, her anxiety would go way up, and she would feel unstable. Relationships succeed when each partner drops his efforts to prove that the other's position on the issue is inferior, and acknowledge that their differences probably arise from their different, legitimate coping styles.

In our research, we've zeroed in on five basic differences in ways people maintain emotional stability that most frequently lay beneath the gridlocked conflicts that couples come into therapy with.

Independence First vs. Togetherness First

The first of the core difference areas involves the extent to which a person's most basic inclination is to operate independently or to operate together with his or her partner. We rarely encounter clients who want to operate independently all the time, nor do we encounter clients who are unable to function unless their partners are alongside of them. It's more a matter of a person's first inclination. Independence-first people prefer to operate independently a greater portion of the time and togetherness-first people prefer to share tasks and activities together. For example, when they go grocery shopping, independence-first partners often want to divide and conquer (divide the shopping list and each partner accomplish different tasks) so that they will finish sooner and can spend more of the day doing other things they want to do. But for togetherness-first partners, what's the point in going shopping together if you're not going to be together?

Under stress, independence-first people need space in order to be able to think things through. On the other hand, togetherness-first people draw immediately toward others, and seek a measure of emotional comfort which then helps them to cope with the stressful event. Togetherness-first people often get their feelings hurt by independence-first partners when stress arises, because their efforts to connect are often rebuffed by the independence-first partners– not because the independence-first person doesn't want to offer support, but rather because the togetherness threatens this person's own emotional stability. Like each of the other core personality

tendencies I'll discuss here, the togetherness-first and independence-first tendencies are not simply preferences (e.g., "I like chocolate more than vanilla"). They are ways that people maintain emotional stability, and if they are tampered with, anxiety skyrockets. When stress arises, independence-first people don't just want some personal space, they need it, and if they don't get it, they may be emotionally unstable. The same is true for the togetherness-first people. When stressed, emotional contact with their partners may be a necessary part of their process of emotional stabilization. Each person's way of maintaining emotional stability messes with the other's. It's no wonder that partners often become critical of each other. But the fact is, there's nothing wrong with either person's tendencies.

Some of the most rigid gridlocks we have seen in our work with couples arise from the different assumptions that independence-first and togetherness-first people have regarding who is responsible for whose needs. Togetherness-first people want relationships where each partner assumes responsibility for knowing and anticipating the needs of the other, and helps the other shoulder tasks and burdens, whenever possible. They involve themselves in helping their partners without being asked. Independence-first partners aren't like this. They like relationships where each partner mostly assumes responsibility for shouldering their own tasks and burdens. They dislike the idea of having to guess what their partners need, and prefer to rely on direct requests from their partners. They can be heard saying, "If you want something, just ask for it. Please don't expect me to read your mind."

When there's a time crunch, or when they're tired, independence-first people are especially annoyed when their partners expect help from them. They want their partners to meet their own needs, and they expect to do the same. Because independence-first partners don't ask for support nearly as much as togetherness-first partners, a lot of times, they feel burdened by their partners, and even resentful. They dream of relationships where both partners pull their own weight. They often think that their partners are being too dependent or needy. Of course, togetherness-first partners feel offended by the implication that they are overly-dependent. For them, mutual dependency is healthy. In fact, from their perspective it seems barbaric to go through primarily thinking about yourself. They dream of relationships where others would care enough about them to volunteer to take their needs into consideration without their having to ask. Togetherness-first people often believe that their independence-first partners are selfish, and can often be heard saying things like, "You never think about anybody but yourself!" or "You are so self centered!" But independence-first people believe that their togetherness-first people are the ones who are truly selfish. They feel that their partners selfishly demand constant attention, and try to make others responsible for meeting needs that they could meet themselves. Again, the important thing to realize is that neither partner is right or wrong – they simply have different preferred ways of navigating life. Successful partner avoid judging each other, and instead look for ways to meet in the middle.

Invest in the Future First vs. Live For the Moment First

A second core difference area involves how much people feel they should delay present gratification for the sake of investing in future happiness. Some people function best by delaying enjoyment until they have fulfilled all of their present responsibilities. Others function best when they combine work and play. The second group prioritizes enjoyment of each moment more highly than the first group, reasoning that there is always more work to do, and if you wait to enjoy life until all responsibilities are fulfilled, you might miss some of the good parts of life. These people find it difficult to stay focused on work to the exclusion of play, and often gravitate toward careers that enable them to mix the things they love to do with their job requirements.

Invest-in-the-future-first people don't have the same requirement that work be mixed with enjoyable activities. For them, work is work, it doesn't have to be enjoyable, it's just something that you have to do, like it or not. Unlike live-for-the-moment-first people, invest-in-the-future-first people find it difficult to relax and enjoy themselves while important tasks are looming overhead. They feel more stable when they stay on top of their responsibilities.

Each partner has a legitimate idea about how an ideal relationship should be. The invest-in-the-future-first person dreams of a relationship where both partners work hard, sacrificing the present for the sake of a more secure future, when they can relax together. The biggest fear of invest-in-the-future-first people is that life will become unstable because important responsibilities go unmet while the couple is enjoying the present moment. Live-for-the-moment-first people dream of relationships with partners who will live in the present moment with them, not forever putting off the good part of life until later. Their greatest fear is that life will pass them by while they are preoccupied with monotonous routine.

This core difference area lies behind many gridlocked issues that couples present in therapy. If partners are unable to maintain a "different, but legitimate" view of each other's core tendencies, they'll be on a slippery slope toward trouble. The invest-in-the-future-first person will begin seeing the live-for-the-moment-first partner as childish, unable to delay gratification, and the live-for-the-moment-first person will see the invest-in-the-future-first person as neurotically chasing some form of security that is impossible to have.

But the fact is, there's no evidence that one of these orientations works better in a relationship than the other. Invest-in-the-future-first people often find it hard to believe that two live-for-the-moment-first people could survive in a relationship together. But they do… all the time, as do invest-in-the-future-first people who are paired together. Actually, most people have both orientations in them. It's just a matter of how much. Live-for-the-moment-first

people are also quite interested in investing in the future. Just not as much as invest-in-the-future-first people. Sometimes, partners who are mismatched in this dimension become more extreme in reaction to each other. If they were living alone, they'd be much more balanced. An invest-in-the-future-first person might be unable to relax and enjoy the moment partly because it seems to them that their partners are always wanting to live for the moment. And live-for-the-moment-first people may always be pushing for having more fun now because it seems like if they don't push, their partners will never want to relax and just enjoy life.

The fact is, there's an upside and a downside to both of these orientations. Live-for-the-moment-first people may actually enjoy each passing moment more, but run the risk of ending up in less-than-optimal circumstances. Invest-in-the-future-first people may control their future, but be less able to enjoy it when it comes, because they tend to always be occupied with what comes next. People who succeed in relationships respect their partners orientation on this core difference dimension, and simply try to find ways to strike a happy medium.

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Predictability-First vs. Spontaneity-First

Another core difference that often underlies relationship gridlocks involves the level of predictability or structure each partner needs in order to function best. Predictability-first people do best when they're able to minimize chaos, and organize their lives in predictable ways. They like to have all of their ducks in a row, and know what they can expect. They prepare for life's challenges, leaving little to chance. The very same conditions are threatening to spontaneity-first people. Spontaneity-first people thrive on the unexpected, and they often have vigorous brain circuits for PLAY, which are activated easily.

Partners who are different in this area have vastly different ideas about what they want out of relationships. For predictability-first people, one of the best things about having a partner is that two people can cover more ground when it comes to the task of being in control of life. Their greatest fear is that if they let go of structure, they won't know what to expect, and they worry they might be unable to handle it if they're ill prepared. Spontaneity-first people don't worry as much about this, because they specialize in improvising with life's unpredictable turns. What they want out of a relationship is to have a co-adventurer, a cohort in a wide open exploration of life. The greatest fear of spontaneity-first people is that life will become boring, meaningless, and amount to just going through the motions. Monotonous routine can trigger a sense of claustrophobic-type panic in a spontaneity-first person.

Many couples gridlock over these core personality differences. To a person who prefers structure, a spontaneity-first partner may seem irresponsible, or inefficient. To them, some things seem just basic. "If you take something out of the closet, you put it back in when you're done." They don't realize that the world is full of happily married people who are amazingly loose on when they put things away. And they may be loose on other things, too, like how closely they stick to a schedule. There are happily married people who are never late, and there are happily married people who are rarely on time. They don't expect others to be on time either. The degree of structure a person applies in their life is not one of the factors that's predictive of relationship success or failure. Spontaneity-first people often believe that there is something wrong with their predictability-first partners. They believe they're too anal, up tight, and just don't know how to relax and enjoy life. But fact is, there are pros and cons with each of these ways of navigating life. Most people just feel that the pros of their own preferred way of doing things outweigh the cons. The problem comes only when they expect their partners to act accordingly, rather than trying to meet their partners halfway.

Slow to Upset vs. Readily Upset

A fourth core difference involves how much people allow themselves get upset when things happen that they don't like. Some people experience upset feelings frequently and intensely, while other people have internal mechanisms that dampen upset feelings as soon as they happen. People who have natural dampening mechanisms often pride themselves in their ability to let frustrations roll off their backs, and not make a big deal of it when things don't go the way they want. These slow-to-upset people tend to believe that the world would work a lot better if everybody were more accepting of the fact that life can't always go according to plan, and if people didn't get so bent out of shape when things didn't go their way. This doesn't mean that slow-to-upset people are always willing to "go with the flow." In fact, many slow-to-upset people are effective agents of change who feel that the secret to their success is precisely in their ability to remain calm. Readily upset people create change in almost opposite ways. They use emotional intensity as a primary vehicle for change. Their upset feelings provide internal motivation, and also they motivate others to take notice them.

Readily-upset people tend to value justice and quality over peace and harmony. If a situation doesn't seem fair to them, or if a situation seems sub-standard in some way, they'll sacrifice peace for the sake of shaking things up and creating the impetus toward change. Readily-upset people don't mind "rocking the boat" and are usually comfortable with conflict. To them, anger is a normal and necessary part of life. Slow-to-upset people, on the other hand, tend to feel unstable when anger or tension is in the air. They often value having a peaceful existence more

than being "right." Even if something doesn't seem fair to them, sometimes they'll give in to keep the peace. To them, it's just not worth the hassle of the turmoil that might follow if they assert themselves. They often live by the motto, "Don't sweat the small stuff," a philosophy that really isn't relevant to readily-upset people, because they can get upset without even breaking a sweat! Getting upset simply isn't that big of a deal to them, and they are often able to maintain an inner calm while appearing outwardly upset. In fact, in some circumstances, becoming upset is calming to them.

Slow-to-upset people dream of relationships where partners are accepting of each other's differences and don't freak out when others fail to meet their expectations. They fear that if they became more like their readily-upset partners, life would be a never-ending series of upsets. On the other hand, the dreams of readily-upset people center on feeling respected and influential in their relationships. Their greatest fear is that, to be acceptable, they'll have to stifle their feelings, never rock the boat and pretend everything is OK.

Slow-to-upset people are often very critical of their readily-upset partners, seeing them as being like children who throw temper tantrums if they don't get their own way. Slow-to-upset people can be heard saying things like, "Do you have to get upset over every little thing I do?" and "You make a mountain out of a molehill!" Slow-to-upset people often see readily-upset people as negative, unhappy people for whom "nothing is ever good enough."

Readily-upset people can be equally critical of slow-to-upset partners, accusing them of covering up their true feelings to avoid conflicts. Readily-upset people often believe that their slow-to-upset partners are afraid of their emotions, and they sometimes have trouble respecting slow-to-upset partners because they seem wimpy, and won't stand up and fight.

It's hard for either type person to conceive that the other's way of handling upsets is as legitimate as their own, but the evidence suggests that neither way is better or worse. Two readily-set people often do fine in their relationship, because they know how to take each other. Being upset isn't that big of a deal for either of them. Two slow-to-upset people can do just fine, too. Mismatches are the most difficult. But most people in long term relationships are mismatched, and many of them have great relationships. How to they do it? They come to realize that there's nothing wrong with their partner's style of emotional intensity. Rather than believing that their partners should be more like them, they try to expand their ability to understand and tolerate their partners styles, and ask their partners to do the same.

Problem-solving-first vs. Understanding-first

People are not only different when it comes to how readily they get upset. They also differ on how they make themselves feel better once they are upset. Some people feel better mostly by making a plan for how to change things. We'll call these people, problem-solving-first people. Other people feel better by feeling understood. We'll call these people "understanding-first" people. Problem-solving-first people don't see much value in dwelling on negative feelings, regardless of whether the feelings are their own or their partners'. Their motto could be, "There's no sense in crying over spilled milk." If they can't do something about the upsetting conditions, they often feel better by making a plan that they can later put into action. Once they've done all they can about an upsetting situation, they detach from negative feelings by focusing on other things. They don't spend much time looking for sympathy or validation when they feel bad. Instead, they look for more concrete forms of action on the part of their partners.

Understanding-first people are almost opposite. They know that their uncomfortable feelings can be soothed by their partners in ways that require only a little understanding and validation, and they look for these types of emotional support. It's not that they aren't interested in changing the conditions that make them upset. For them, it's a matter of timing. Understanding and validation come first; formulating a plan of action comes second.

Problem-solving-first people and understanding-first people can become very critical of each other, because their ways handling upset feelings are in direct conflict. Understanding-first people may not be satisfied by their partners' willingness to make changes, and may even reject their partners' practical solutions because they're looking for validation and understanding first, not an action plan. To problem-solving-first people, it seems like understanding-first people just want to complain and complain, but not do anything about their upsetting situations. To problem-solving-first people, it can even seem that understanding-first people want to be upset, and love wallowing in misery! This is rarely true. Understanding-first people continue to be upset in spite of their problem-solving-first partners' offers to change because they are looking for understanding and validation of their feelings before offers for change.

Problem-solving-first people assume that understanding each other is nice, but not necessary in order to function as a unit. They feel that people could spend years trying to understand each other and still be no closer to working solutions to life's problems. But understanding-first people feel that the beauty of intimate relationships is in mutual understanding. They believe that practical problem solving is fine for business partners, but intimate partners should be invested in each other enough to keep engaged in discussion to the point where they really feel understood by each other.

Problem-solving-first people tend to view the apparent refusal of understanding-first partners to engage in problem solving as unwillingness to compromise. This is not necessarily true of understanding-first people, who are

often just as willing to meet in the middle, but only after they've exhausted efforts to promote mutual understanding. It's a matter of timing. Problem-solving-first people see continuing attempts to understand each other as amounting to "beating a dead horse," and believe that people are so different that mutual understanding is an unattainable goal. Understanding-first people don't think so, and they often accuse their problem-solving-first partners trying to sweep feelings under the rug, while proposing superficial fixes.

Problem-solving-first and understanding-first people are wired so differently that it's really hard for them to conceive that there may be legitimacy in the other person's way of operating, but people who succeed in their relationships are intelligent enough to keep an open mind. Rather than judging their partners, they try to meet them in the middle. There are practical ways of doing this. For example, this doesn't always work, but many times things go much better if an understanding-first partner says, "Just give me 15 minutes of your full undivided attention and try to understand me, OK? We can set a timer if you want. When the time is up, I'll try to move out of this mood?" To an understanding-first type person, this might seem crazy, but a problem-solver will have a much easier time listening and caring about upset feelings he or she knows that there's an end in sight. A lot of times, problem solvers are worried that the dwelling on upset feelings will go on. It often seems to the problem-solving-first person that their partners' needs for understanding are insatiable, and they're afraid that if they give an inch of understanding, their partners will want to take a mile. They don't realize that the reason why their partners are so starved for understanding because they never fully get it from problem-solving-first partners, who are, of course, preoccupied with their worry that this is going to go on all night. Things often change dramatically when an understanding-first partner experiences a few moments of full-blown, no holding back support and understanding from their partners. Problem-solving-first people are often amazed and puzzled to see how willing their partners are to shift into problem-solving after a few minutes of serious support and understanding, and understanding-first people are often astounded to realize that their problem-solving partners really are capable of caring about their feelings once they're assured that it really will help to do so.

Summary

The five core difference areas I've described so far aren't' the only ones that are can be difficult for couples to navigate. They're only some of the most common ones. Another common difference involves how quickly people make decisions. *Some people feel best when they make decisions fairly quickly, not wasting a lot of time deliberating*. Other people feel better when they take their time and consider all of the possible options very thoroughly. There are pros and cons with each style. Quick-decision people often cover more ground. They make decisions and then throw themselves into courses of action and can be halfway to accomplishing goals goal in the period of time it takes slower-decision-making people to just make up their minds. But, if the decision made is flawed, this person could be wasting time running down the wrong road. A more thoughtful decision-maker might actually save time by taking more time making a well-thought out decision. The point is that neither style of decision-making works better or worse in relationships. People gravitate toward styles of decision-making that somehow them feel better them, and minimize anxiety.

Core differences like these are so difficult to work with because each partner's way of maintaining emotional stability interferes with the other's way of maintaining stability. It isn't just inconvenient that your partner has a different coping style. ***His*** natural way of navigating life messes with yours! Its no wonder that you might feel that your partner's behavior is wrong. Your coping style is so natural to you, that it seems just basic. It's normal for you to view your partner's behavior from within your own framework. But if you're smart, you'll learn to distrust this feeling. Studies confirm that each of the different ways of navigating life that I've described can work just fine. Usually, when your feel that your partner's way of prioritizing or going about doing things is wrong, it really isn't. It's just different.

This doesn't mean that you should just back off and let your partner do whatever he wants. No, you should ask your partner to make some changes – but not because **he's** doing things wrong. Rather, because **he's** in a relationship with you, and your expectations are just as important and legitimate as **his**. Of course, **he** has just as much right to ask you to change as you do. Successful partners stop criticizing each other and simply work out compromises. I say simply, but of course it's not really simple, because each of you has to literally expand your ability to tolerate stress. If you're a predictability-first person, it's stressful to endure clutter or disorganization, and if you're a spontaneity-first person it's stressful to have to live life in a more structured way. And there's no reason why either of you should have to change other than if you're in a relationship with someone who navigates life differently. On the other hand, it wouldn't hurt either of you to become more flexible. In fact, this is what usually happens in successful relationships. Partners become more flexible in their coping styles over time, in order to accommodate their mates.

The Prerequisites for Relationship Success and Ten Habits that Enable Partners to Meet Them

MANAGING CONFLICTS

Prerequisite #1: Soft Startup

Predictive Habit #1: Avoiding a Judgmental Attitude

Predictive Habit #2: Standing Up for Yourself Without Putting Your Partner Down

Prerequisite #2: Accepting Influence

Predictive Habit #3: Finding the Understandable Part

Predictive Habit #4: Giving Equal Regard

Prerequisite #3: Effective Repair

Predictive Habit #5: Offering Assurances

Prerequisite #4: Respecting Your Partner's Dreams; Holding on to Your Own

Predictive Habit #6: Understanding and Explaining What is at Stake

CONNECTING DURING NON-CONFLICT TIMES

Prerequisite #5: Five Positives for Every Negative

Predictive Habit #7: Curiosity about Your Partner's World

Predictive Habit #8: Keeping Sight of the Positive

Predictive Habit #9: Pursuing Shared Meaning

Predictive Habit #10: Making and Responding to Bids for Connection

The Brain's Executive Operating Systems

Neuroscientists have made significant advances in unraveling the complex puzzle of human motivation in the past two decades. There is considerable evidence at this point suggesting that the human brain is equipped with seven executive command circuits which, when activated, provide the motivation to accomplish specific tasks which enhance chances of survival. Once activated, these intrinsic motivational systems carry out their pre-programmed agendas semi-automatically. When a particular circuit is activated, some behaviors come naturally, and it is nearly impossible to engage in others unless a switch in circuits takes place. It's an evolutionary advantage to have a series of special response programs related to survival. Rather than having to put together a coordinated effort from scratch for each new challenge, these special-purpose neural systems automatically produce motivation to accomplish critical tasks necessary for survival, such as defense, assertiveness, curiosity, learning, eagerness, directed purposefulness, care-taking, affiliation, creativity, skill-development, and reproduction.

Each of the seven neural circuits systems is programmed to accomplish certain objectives. When any one of them is activated, it organizes the rest of the brain and body for accomplishing specific tasks. It focuses attention, arouses the body, activates specific kinds of thoughts, and elicits emotion that will help the host individual be an effective agent acting upon his or her world. Executive command circuits are cognitive/behavioral/affective circuits. That is, when they are activated, a coherent and predictable pattern of cognitions, affect, and action-tendencies arise at once. As an individual develops, various thought and action patterns are recruited and become part of various circuits. When one of these circuits is 'up and running,' we tend to think the same kind of thoughts, experience the same kind of emotional quality, and experience the same action-tendencies each time. Each of the seven executive operating systems can be summarized as follows:

SEEKING: When this system is stimulated, humans experience curiosity, interest, anticipation, craving, expectancy, engagement, excitement, eagerness, directed purpose. It leads people to energetically explore their worlds, seeking for resources -- from nuts to knowledge. It produces an invigorated feeling of anticipation we experience when we actively seek thrills and other rewards*. Evolutionary Advantage***:** Motivation to learn, effective agency in the world.

RAGE: Stimulation of this circuit produces feelings ranging from frustration to intense anger, thoughts that overflow with blame and scorn, memories of past transgressions, and the urge to strike at the offending agent*. Evolutionary Advantage:* Motivation to protect

FEAR: Activation of this operating system produces feelings ranging from anxiety to intense fright, thoughts on a continuum from worried to catastrophic, and motivation to escape existing circumstances*. Evolutionary Advantage:* Motivation to escape danger

LUST: When activated, this system produces feelings of sexual arousal in humans, thoughts oriented toward sexual fulfillment, and urges to engage in sexual activity*. Evolutionary Advantage:* Motivation to reproduce

CARE: This system produces spontaneous feelings of warmth, tenderness and concern for others, thoughts about the welfare of others, and urges to act in nurturing ways toward others*.* Evolutionary Advantage: Protection of your own.

SORROW: Normally activated by separation from important persons or circumstances, feelings associated with this neural command system include variations of loneliness, sadness, and disappointment. When the SORROW system is activated, it produces thoughts centering around the obtainment of social contact and urges to move toward possible sources of nurturance. *Evolutionary Advantage:* Motivation for affiliation, solicitation of support.

PLAY: Activation of this brain circuit triggers the urge to vigorously and spontaneously interact with others. The accompanying emotion can be characterized by joy or delight, and thoughts are generally positive in nature. *Evolutionary Advantage***:** Motivates creativity, experimentation; intrinsic healing properties of physical agents released in play.

While all of us are born with the basic neural structure for each of the seven command systems, each of them is tailored by our unique experiences. In the course of everyday life, different circuits are activated and de-activated largely automatically, and outside of conscious awareness, and for reasons we may not be aware of. The types of circumstances that activate command circuits, the threshold for activation of any circuit, and intensity of activation will vary across individuals, depending largely upon genetic predisposition, early attachment experiences, and emotional conditioning across one's lifetime. Many studies suggest that early attachment experiences affect the structure of the developing brain, setting automatic patterns of command system activation and suppression into motion.

Reacting Effectively When Upsets Occur

The First Steps

1. **Self-Reminder: Do Something Different**
   Remember to shift your focus from how irritating or upsetting your partner's behavior or attitude is to your own reactions to it. Remind yourself that you don't want to react in ways that never work for anybody, in any relationship. If you can respond effectively in situations like these, your partner will become more understanding and cooperative.
2. **Give the Benefit of the Doubt**
   - Avoid jumping to conclusions, and with an open mind, ask your partner why s/he is thinking or acting this way.
   - Consider that this situation might not be about right/wrong, but rather about legitimately different priorities.
   - Hear your partner out before explaining your point of view or defending yourself.
3. **Find the Understandable Part**
   Become determined to find any at-least-partly-understandable reasons for your partner's thinking or actions, and acknowledge them.
4. **What's Driving My Upset?**
   Tell your partner why you're upset, or tell your partner why you're having trouble acting or thinking the way s/he wants... explain the bigger thing that's at stake for you
5. **Offer Assurance**
   Assure your partner that you're not saying that you are right and your partner is wrong, or assure your partner that you're not saying that s/he shouldn't be upset. Let your partner know that you're not saying that things have to be entirely your way.
6. **Work With Me?**
   Let your partner know that you're willing to make some changes and to work with your paratner to find a mutually acceptable solution.

When, in spite of your good attitude, your partner disregards your viewpoint or criticizes you

7. **Maintain Your Cool:**
   Don't hit the panic button. Check to be sure you're reading your partner's attitude right. Remind yourself that it's normal for people to want to have their own way. Maybe your partner just needs a "friendly warning."
8. **Offer and Ask**
   Express irritation at his attitude and clarify your willingness to be flexible and keep an open mind. Let your partner know that you expect him/her to do the same.
9. **Stand Up/Engage** (only if your partner keeps criticizing you or dismissing your viewpoint)
   Get angry and let your partner know if s/he wants a fight, you're willing to give it! Let your partner know that you don't expect him/her to agree with you, but you do expect him/her to be willing to work with you. Make it clear that his/her attitude is not OK with you. Don't back down. Stay engaged and demand that your partner explain why s/he thinks it's OK to dismiss your viewpoint.
10. **Reject your partner** (only if your partner keeps criticizing you or dismissing your viewpoint)
    If your partner continues to criticize or disregard you, let your partner know s/he's pissing you off and you don't want to be around him/her!
11. **Don't make a big deal of it.**
    When you're by yourself, let go of the anger, feeling good that you stood up well for yourself. Promise yourself that you'll do it again, if needed. Remind yourself that it's natural enough for your partner to want to have his/her own way. You don't have to make a big deal of your partner's stubborn or selfish behavior. It's not a crime that your partner acted this way. Your partner crossed the line, and you "let him/her have it." No big deal.
12. **Try again later**
    - "That didn't go very well, did it? You want to try again?
    - Don't try to get your partner to see how "wrong" his/her stubborn behavior was. Don't demand an apology. Go back to "The First Steps" again. Be ready to stand up again, if needed.

When You Get Upset or Express Dissatisfaction First

- Assume there must be a reason for his/her thinking or actions that you don't fully understand yet.
- Consider that this situation might not be about right/wrong, but rather about legitimately different priorities
- With an open mind, ask your partner why s/he is acting (or acted) that way
- Hear your partner out and refrain from disputing or debating what s/he is saying before s/he's able to explain fully.

Partner Explains Non-defensively

- Ask questions until you find at-least partly understandable reasons for partner's point of view, then acknowledge them
- Look for the bigger needs that drive each of your feelings.
- Let partner know you're willing to be flexible and ask him/her to do same. Suggest a way to give and take.

Partner seems flexible and willing to give and take

Partner Seems Defensive or Dismissive

- In your own mind, avoid making big deal of partner's reaction.
- Ask yourself: "Is partner really as defensive or dismissive as it seems, or am I misreading him/her?" Ask for clarification.
- If partner is clearly defensive or dismissive, consider that maybe it's because s/he thinks you're inflexible, or that you're saying that s/he's out of line and needs to shape up. Offer assurance and clarify your message.

Partner seems defensive or dismissive

Express irritation at your partner's attitude & clarify your willingness to be flexible and keep and open mind; Let him/her know that you expect him/her to do the same.

Partner seems defensive or dismissive

Get angry and let partner know if s/he wants a fight, you're willing to give it!

Partner seems more receptive

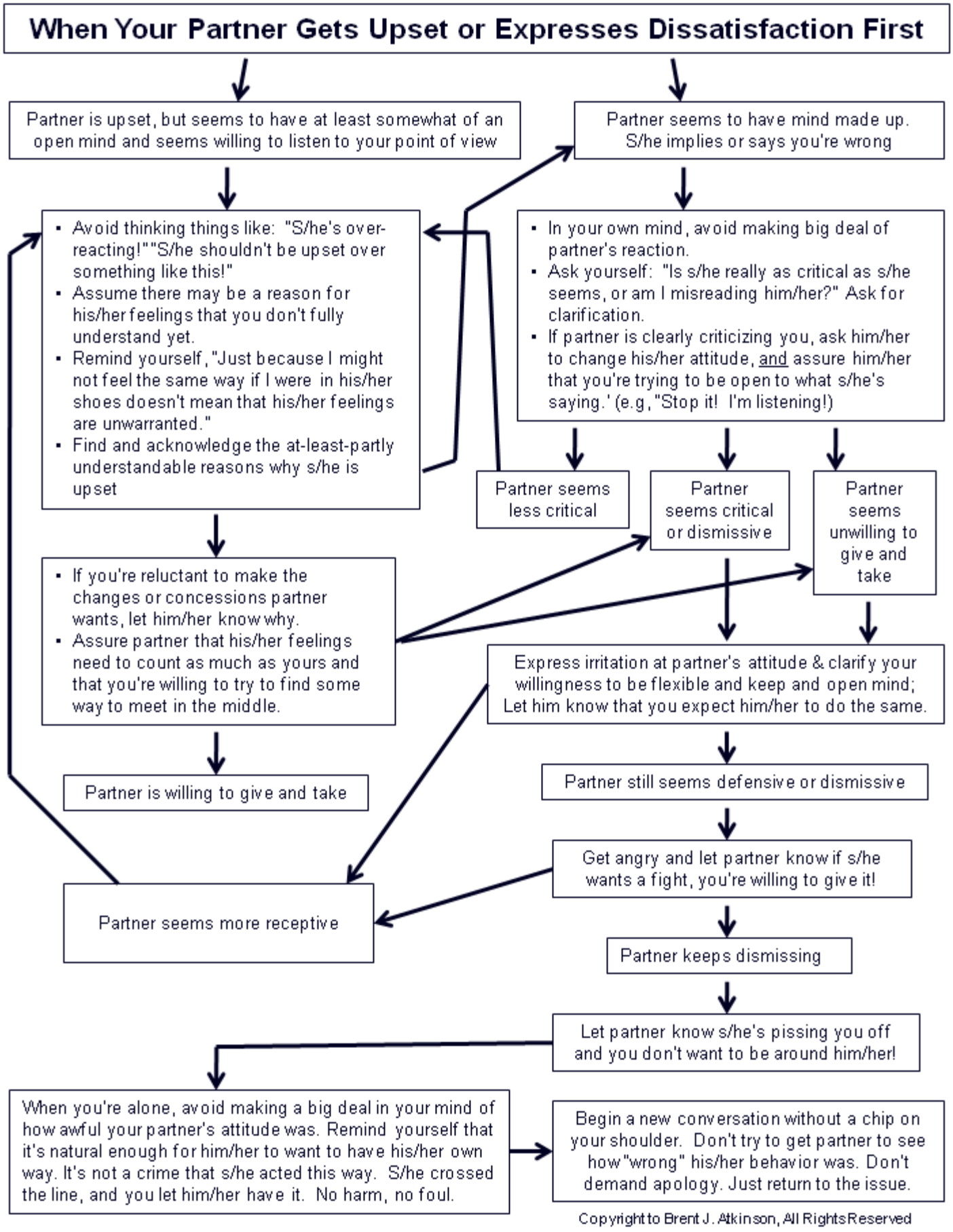
Partner keeps dismissing

Let partner know s/he's pissing you off and you don't want to be around him/her!

When you're alone, avoid making a big deal in your mind of how awful your partner's attitude was. Remind yourself that it's natural enough for him/her to want to have his/her own way. It's not a crime that s/he acted this way. S/he crossed the line, and you let him/her have it. No harm, no foul.

Begin a new conversation without chip on your shoulder. Don't try to get partner to see how "wrong" his/her behavior was. Don't demand apology. Just return to the issue.

When Your Partner Gets Upset or Expresses Dissatisfaction First



Rewiring Emotional Habits

When they are calm, clients often know very well how irrational their thoughts and behaviors often are. But when they become upset, the part of their brains that knows this shuts off. The neural networks involved when they are thinking clearly are rarely active when the neural processes that generated their self-defeating habits are active. Successful therapy sessions are probably effective because therapists help clients activate the neural processes involved in clear thinking precisely when their old neural response programs are up and running. In these moments, clients change because they are able to use more of their brains. But when therapists aren't there to help them, they often revert back to their old neural habits. They get lost in their old reactions. It's as if they need some sort of outside input at these moments to help them "snap out of it."

The therapist makes audio recordings for clients to listen to at home at various points during an argument. Clients don't need to remember new ways of thinking when they were upset, they just needed to remember to turn on the CD player, and the therapist's voice directs them through a similar thought process that has been effective in helping the client shift during therapy sessions. The therapists voice actives the neural networks involved in new thinking at the same time as the "emotional takeover" neural networks are active. When the new thinking and reactions are paired with the old activations enough times, the new thinking and reactions will arise automatically whenever the old activations are triggered.

Audio-Guided Preparation for Launching a Complaint

The therapist makes a recording for the client to listen to when s/he becomes upset, *before* speaking with his/her partner about it.

Audio-Guided Preparation for Responding to a Complaint

The therapist makes a recording for the client to hear after listening to, but before responding to his/her partner's complaint

Audio-Guided Repair

The therapist makes recordings for each client to listen to after a failed argument, to help each client prepare for a "repair" conversation.

Practicing with Pre-Recorded Critical or Dismissive Comments

The therapist helps clients practice thinking and acting differently when their typical interfering states are activated by listening to some critical or dismissive comments, recorded ahead of time by their partners. During individual sessions, the therapist and client study the internal reactions that arise in the client as she is listening to her partner's critical or dismissive comments. In those moments, the therapist helps the client experiment with new ways of thinking that help her shift internal states. Once the client has discovered a new sequence of thinking and reacting that is effective, she practices it over and over again as she repeatedly listens to her partner's annoying voice.

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