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AN APPROACH TO RELATIONSHIP RUPTURE & REPAIR

EXCLUSIVE CONTENT

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WRITTEN FOR YOU BY JERRY WHEELER, LMHC, NCC



WELCOME

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Please note:

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SAVE YOUR RELATIONSHIP BEFORE IT ENDS (OR BEGINS)



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MEET YOUR COACH



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04



PART ONE

Why relationships fail, and what to do to prevent it.

30



PART TWO

Three domains that require equal amounts of attention in order to rebuild and enhance your relationship bond.

30 RELATIONSHIP ASSESSMENT + SOLUTION

WHO AND WHAT ARE IMPORTANT TO YOU?

07

Big Question #1 is about identifying what you want your relationship bond to look and feel like.

WHAT CAN GET IN THE WAY?

10

Big Question #2 is about noticing the internal "stuff" that your partner can't see, like your thoughts, feelings, emotions, and sensations.

WHAT CAN THAT LOOK LIKE?

13

Big Question #3 is about linking the "stuff" your partner can see to your internal experiences.

WHAT DO YOU WANT IT TO LOOK LIKE?

18

Big Question #4 is about turning toward your relationship bond.

A.T.T.U.N.E

22

An acronym for understanding how to communicate emotional availability in your relationship.

FOUR BIG QUESTIONS

29

A summary of the key takeaways from the Four Big Question Relationship Inventory.



WHY RELATIONSHIPS FAIL



This ebook is an overview of relationship rupture and repair. It explains how committed relationships can begin to fail over time because of a “silent killer” of relationships: a harmful “habit of mind.” In other words, the “story of us” has transformed into a tale of two opponents battling each other from defensive positions in an endless war of winners and losers. Well, ok, not endless. Divorce or breakups reinforce the “all good things must come to an end” adage.

We all have needs, but we don’t know how to communicate them to our partners with our words. We end up expressing our needs with our behavior, or if we’re a bit more skilled at communication, we might use a cryptic suggestion here and there. In other words, we stay safely hidden from our partners and hope (and sometimes demand) they simply know what we need.

They should know, right?



THE PROMISE: YOU CAN TRUST ME

That's it! They should know what we need. We tell ourselves stories about why our partners should know how to meet our needs. After all, if they were committed to us, they would know or try to understand. And when our partner fails in mindreading us, we begin to resent them. They must not care enough, or they are selfish.

That is when we start criticizing our partner, either in our head or out loud. We get defensive when they ask what's wrong with us. They should know, right? That's when we begin to notice what's wrong with our partner. That's when we start to believe they can't change because, after all, they should change if they love us enough.

That's when we've lost the ability to distinguish between the person we're committed to from their behavior. We stand in judgment. We stand in contempt.

Then the relationship fails. We now stand alone.

The good news is much of the negativity and defensiveness is often a product of poor interpersonal skills (notice that you can learn skills). This lack of skill fosters the harmful habit of mind that threatens what otherwise could have been a healthy, fulfilling relationship between two individuals who fell in love. This skill set manifests the promise that every committed relationship builds upon: **trust**.

However, trust is an interesting word that can be difficult to define because it has so much depth of meaning. Sometimes it is easier to define trust by describing behaviors or beliefs.

Trust is the “firm belief in the character, strength, or truth of someone or **something**.” In this context, the “someone” is easy to identify: your partner. However, the “something” is tricky to identify in relationships. Still, failed relationships are riddled with toxic versions of these “somethings” that betray trust: missed opportunities for connection, inadequate or completely absent attempts at relational repair, and defensive maneuvering. These toxic “somethings” erode the trust that your partner's world will stop when you are suffering. These toxic “somethings” become the weapons you wield to defend yourself, too. Left unchecked, your relationship can devolve into two individuals in it for themselves, absorbed by a harmful habit of mind born in relational pain, searching for an escape. After all, we are all biologically hardwired to move toward feeling better, often at the expense of getting better. I call that the “**feel better vs. get better trap**.” It's true: leaving a committed relationship can feel better in the short term. However, maybe the relationship could improve, and the two of you can build a meaningful and fulfilling life together.

How do couples get into the harmful habit of mind?

The answer was revealed earlier: it's embedded in the “somethings” they let slide over and over again... The missed opportunities for connection, inadequate or completely absent attempts at relational repair, and defensive maneuvering. Letting these “somethings” slide is how couples betray the central promise of healthy committed bonds: trust. Can trust be restored? Oh yeah, with a particular set of skills (that are possible to learn). A committed bond is a commitment to using these skills because these skills revitalize and nurture the promise that every committed relationship is built upon: trust.



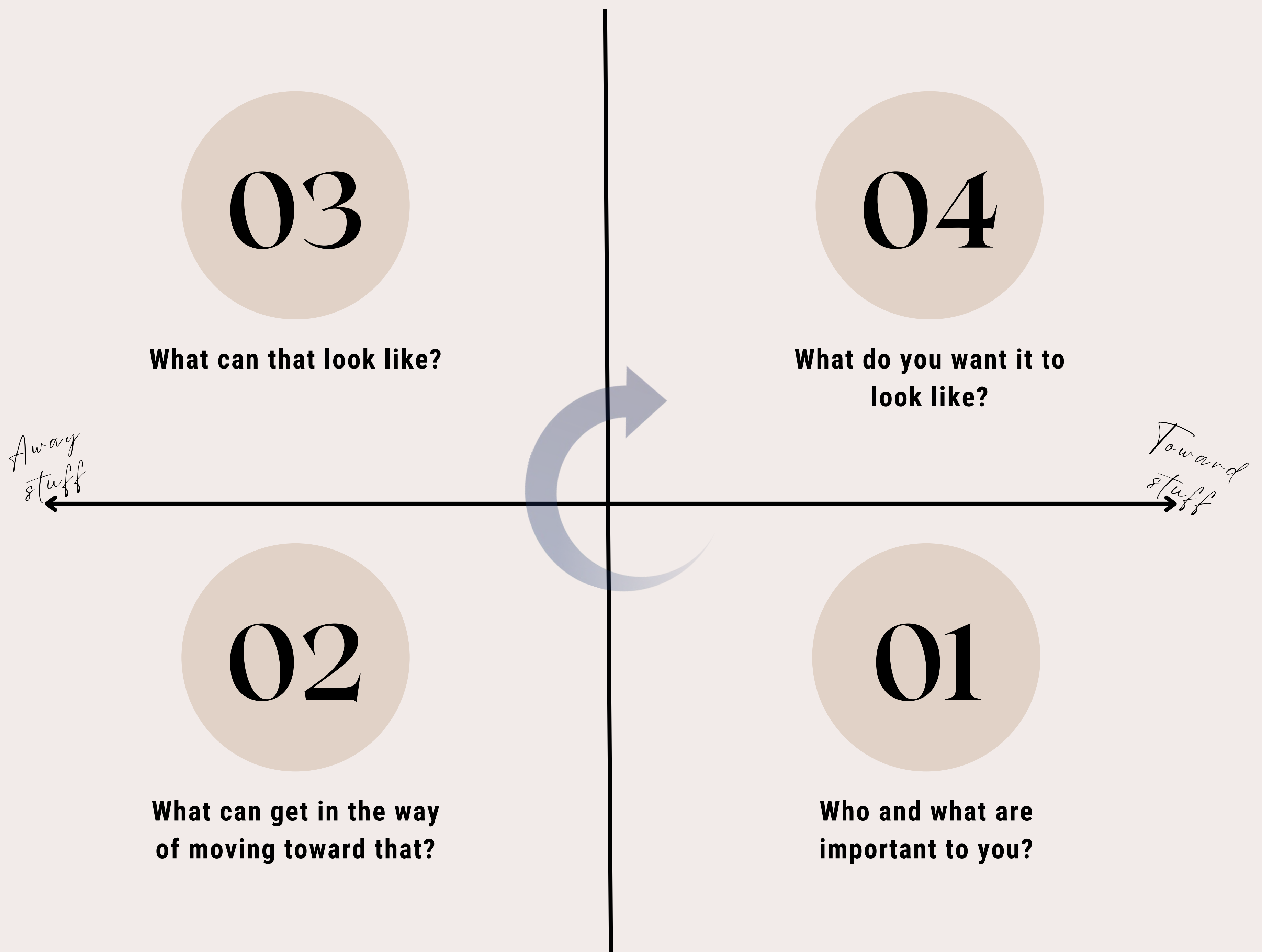
Feel better vs. Get better Trap



4 BIG QUESTIONS

This ebook overviews a skill-based approach to fostering healthy and fulfilling committed relationships, and addresses four Big Questions:

*Stuff your partner can see
(behaviors)*



*Stuff your partner can't see
(thoughts, feelings, emotions, sensations)*



Big Question

WHO & WHAT ARE IMPORTANT TO YOU?

The "Who" might be easy to identify: Your Partner (and hopefully you!).

The "What" can be more difficult to identify.

This ebook overviews a **skill-based approach** to fostering healthy and fulfilling committed relationships. This approach addresses four domains, identified by four Big Questions:

- (1) Who and what is important to you?
- (2) What gets in the way of moving toward that?
- (3) What does that look like?
- (4) What do you want it to look like?

Big Question #1: Who and what are important to you?

This question concerns "**toward stuff**" your partner can't see because it's in your head and heart. The answer to this question is about your values, and the "Who" may be easier to identify (your partner, and hopefully, you!). The "What," in this context, really has to do with the space between two committed people: the "**bond.**" Our focus in this section will be on the **relationship bond.**

My proposal is that the integrity of your **relationship bond** corresponds to your ability to trust feeling seen, heard, and understood in your relationship. Here's why:

- **Feeling seen + heard + understood = feeling valued.**

Let's keep the math going:

- **Feeling valued in the relationship = feeling significant in the relationship.**

A trustworthy relationship bond communicates, "You're significant to me, and I am here for you."

The answer (in this context) to Big Question #1: Trust (in your relationship bond)

*Trust in
your bond*



THE PROMISE:

"You can trust my world will stop when you're suffering"

Trust in a relationship can be expressed as the question: **"Can I trust you will be there for me when I need you?"** Of course, other versions exist, such as: "Can I trust you'll choose me over your job?", "Can I trust you'll choose me over your friends?", "Can I trust you'll care for our children?", "Can I trust you'll come home at a reasonable hour tonight?" "Can I trust you won't talk down to me?", "Can I trust you'll choose me over your parents?", "Can I trust you'll help create a stable life for our family?" or "Can I trust you to care more about this relationship than yourself?".

When you look over these questions and search underneath them for the implied meanings at the center of what is being asked, you may find the two "leaps of faith" individuals make when committing to a bond with another:

- (1) Do I know this person?
- (2) Will this person be there for me when I need them?

These two dimensions manifest the sense of trust in committed relationships, and the dimensions suffer when one or both partners do not have the skills necessary to foster and maintain a healthy relationship bond.

Trust Dimension #1: Do I know this person? a.k.a. Transparency

Don't confuse transparency with honesty. Honesty is simply about lying and deceit, and is only one transparency attribute.

Being transparent in a relationship is also about the authentic sharing of feelings, fears, concerns, ideas, thoughts, hopes, ambitions, aspirations, motivations, etc., with one's partner. In other words: Is my partner who they appear to be within our relationship? However, what if your partner is genuinely evil AND transparent about it? Transparency has a third attribute that speaks to how you are treated in the relationship. In other words: Will I be treated with respect? Transparency in a committed relationship can be summed up in the following question: **Is my partner truthful, authentic, and respectful?**

Trust Dimension #2: Will this person be there for me when I need them? a.k.a. Certainty

This second dimension of trust concerns your partner's intentions, motives, and behaviors toward you. It's about the question: Am I a priority? In other words: Am I confident that my partner will be there for me when I need them to be?

In summary: Trust in the relationship bond = Transparency + Certainty

*Trust =
Transparency +
Certainty*



Big Question
01

TRUST

“ —
| *You're*
| *significant to*
me, and I am
here for you. |
— ”



Big Question

WHAT GETS IN THE WAY?

What thoughts, feelings, emotions, stories, beliefs, and/or sensations try to get in the way of moving toward who and what are important to you?

Big Question #2: What can get in the way of moving toward who and what is important to you?

This is the “away stuff” your partner can’t see, and is composed of your feelings, emotions, the stories you tell yourself, your beliefs, and your physical sensations. Think of this away stuff as the icky stuff that goes on inside your head and body that pulls you into emotional (and sometimes physical) suffering and works very hard to stop you from trying to ‘think ’ or move toward your relationship bond. This is the stuff that desperately wants to get away from the pain. This is also the stuff that can be difficult to put into words.

Many of us were not taught to be able to talk about our away stuff well when we were growing up, and some of us even learned to reject and possibly hate the parts of ourselves that experienced this away stuff. A great exercise to begin taking inventory of this away stuff is the **XYZ Inventory**. Write the following sentence on paper: “I feel X when you do Y in this situation (Z).” Now fill in the blanks for as many adverse situations as you can remember. If words are tough to find, Google an emotion list or the “Emotion Wheel”, for some helpful terms to assist you. The XYZ Inventory exercise will help you organize and clarify some of your lived experiences within your relationship. Don’t forget that you can do this for positive emotions, too! It will also help you get comfortable with the language you’ll need later as you begin to practice the relationship-building skills you’ll need to move toward your relationship bond.

I’ll try to explain the away stuff in more detail.

The away stuff is composed of the thoughts, feelings, emotions, stories, beliefs, and sensations that try to get in the way of moving toward who and what is important to you. Your brain and nervous system are naturally motivated to push you away from a perceived threat, and in this context, we’re talking about the emotional pain triggered by your partner. If emotional intensity runs too high, your brain and body use whatever tools they think are necessary to interrupt and either get away from (flight or freeze), overpower (fight), or sometimes appease (fawn) the perceived threat. Anything to stop the threat: a.k.a. “survival mode” (fight, flight, freeze, or fawn). It’s survival mode that interrupts the complete processing of conflict in relationships.

In addition, to avoid pain in the future, your thoughts can become stories, and those stories can eventually become beliefs. Beliefs have rigidity and can be reinforced by the “Zeigarnik effect.” Named after Lithuanian-Soviet psychologist Bluma Zeigarnik, the Zeigarnik effect occurs when an activity (conflict, in this context) that has been interrupted (by fight, flight, freeze, or fawn) may be more readily recalled. It postulates that people remember unfinished or interrupted tasks better than completed tasks. So what are the incomplete or interrupted tasks in this context?: The disagreement, conflict, argument, spat, fight, all-out brawl, etc. Suppose a couple’s adverse events are not fully addressed and processed promptly (or processed at all). In that case, the brain can repeatedly remember and ‘play-back’ the incident, over and over in each partner’s mind, like a movie replayed with the same ending.



Zeigarnik effect

In a relational context, the Zeigarnik effect proposes that conflict that has been interrupted by fight, flight, freeze, or fawn may be more readily recalled, and may influence the formation of a harmful habit of mind.

Rigid negative beliefs begin to form that attempt to “make meaning” out of the suffering: the emergent belief that your partner may not be “good” and may have negative and unchangeable personality traits that seem to explain why you’re unhappy in the relationship. These thoughts that have become beliefs may sound like “my partner is selfish”, “my partner will never change,” or “my partner is a bad person.” The Zeigarnik effect creates the “silent killer” of relationships discussed earlier: the harmful “habit of mind.” And failing to fully process conflict can influence the Zeigarnik effect.

The short answer to Big Question #2 (What gets in the way) is a harmful habit of the mind (created by the Zeigarnik effect).

*Unprocessed thoughts
become stories, and
stories become beliefs.*



Big Question
02

HARMFUL HABIT OF MIND

“ —
| *The “silent
killer” of
relationships is
a harmful
“habit of mind”.* |
— ”



Big Question

WHAT CAN THAT LOOK LIKE?

What behaviors can get in the way of moving toward who and what are important to you?

Big Question #3: What does that look like? (We are adding this to “away stuff”)

If you remember, the “away stuff” in Big Question #2 is the icky stuff that goes on inside your head and body that your partner can’t see. We are now adding the icky stuff that your partner can see: behaviors that move you away from who and what is important to you (and, in this context, your relationship bond). The motivated movement away from who and what is important to you, seemingly toward what may feel better (flight, fight, freeze, or fawn), is about your brain and body’s survival processes. To be clear, flight, fight, freeze, and fawn are about feeling better (surviving) and defending yourself against perceived harm. **The cycling between internal and external stuff can create a “Crazy 8” pattern.** I think of the “8” as an infinite loop that represents ongoing movement between internal and external away stuff, perpetuating conflict and eroding the kind of trust we discussed earlier. The Crazy 8 is what begins to take over relationships and can drive partners into emotional (and physical) isolation from each other. The Crazy 8 becomes the relationship, and moves back and forth between internal and external stuff with varying intensity. Emotional isolation in relationships can become a self-absorbing harmful habit of mind as the focus shifts from interdependence to self-reliance: I’m no longer in this for us; I’m in this for me. I’m out! (The ultimate away move)

Let’s talk about some examples of what the away stuff can look like. Distressed couples, and even not-so-distressed couples to some degree, can get caught in a common Crazy 8 called the “**pursue-withdraw**” pattern. This can happen when one partner wants more closeness or connection than the other. Keep in mind everything is on a spectrum of intensity, and pursue-withdraw at higher levels of intensity can look like someone chasing the other, like when one person leaves the room during an argument with the other in pursuit, refusing to stop the argument.

At lower levels of intensity, pursue-withdraw can look a bit more subdued, like a simple bid for connection that is ignored. Paradoxically, pursue-withdraw can also happen when both partners want closeness and connection. Still, one partner feels like the other person isn’t there for them (lost trust), especially if a harmful habit of mind has begun to form, as discussed above. Pursuers “chase” to preserve the relationship and withdrawers withdraw to maintain the relationship. Crazy, right? The pursue-withdraw Crazy 8 is crazy because, most of the time, both partners tend to see the other person as someone they want to connect with. Still, both partners are left feeling unseen, unheard, undervalued, insignificant, and possibly abandoned. Different common Crazy 8 patterns, many of which are versions of the pursue-withdraw pattern, include:



Six Common Crazy 8 Patterns

01

Good Guy vs. Bad Guy

The Good Guy strategically presents as weak and submissive, with the underlying strategy to get the more dominant, frustrated partner to escalate the attack to make it clear who is the Bad Guy.

02

Actor vs. Heckler

The Actor becomes excessively dramatic during an argument, and the Heckler's objective is to mock the 'performance' by revealing the true motive behind the dramatic behavior.

03

Yeller vs. Martyr

Like a ticking time bomb, the Yeller jumps from silence to explosion with little observable provocation. The Martyr "keeps score" and racks up points as the unfairly attacked, unarmed, and unjustifiable receiver of criticism.

04

Critic vs Stoic

The Critic employs sarcasm, while the Stoic uses no response as their response. Of course the Stoic can be a strategy in any of the Crazy 8 patterns.

05

Truth-finder vs. Truth-dodger

The Truth-finder starts by "innocently" wanting an explanation for what they are doing to cause the other person distress. The Truth-dodger deflects by becoming intensely elusive with half-truths or evasive answers, hoping the Truth-finder will go off track and focus on a subject that is easier to answer.

06

Table-turner vs. Self-doubter

Table-turners are masters of deflecting criticism back onto the other partner by gaslighting them, reflecting what they are being accused of in the first place: "What about you? You do this all the time! This is your problem." The Self-doubter inevitably takes full responsibility for the problem and promises to change.



Crazy 8 Patterns

"Away stuff" your partner can see (behaviors)



"Away stuff" your partner can't see (thoughts, feelings, emotions)



FOUR BEHAVIORS THAT PREDICT

Divorce

The Crazy 8 patterns described above all contribute to the emergence of the harmful habit of mind that serves to erode trust in relationships, effectively predicting their failure. Take a look at the patterns above closely, and within each pattern you may see what Dr. John Gottman refers to as the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” that predict relationship demise. John Gottman, Ph.D., is an American psychologist and professor emeritus of psychology at the University of Washington, whose work focuses on divorce prediction and marital stability through relationship analyses. Through decades of research, Gottman identified four behaviors that predict divorce. Gottman posits that being able to identify the Four Horsemen in your conflict discussions is a necessary first step to eliminating them and replacing them with healthy, productive communication patterns, giving couples the best opportunity to save their relationship. Gottman's “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” are:

01 CRITICISM

Typically begins with the word “You”, as in “You never...”, “You don’t...”, or “You should...”.

02 DEFENSIVENESS

Typically is triggered by criticism. Self-protection in the form of righteous indignation or innocent victimhood in an attempt to ward off a perceived attack.

03 CONTEMPT

*Contempt comes from a place of superiority, and sounds like disrespect, mocking, sarcasm, ridicule, and name-calling and can look like mimicry, eye-rolling, or scoffing, among other behaviors. **Gottman’s research identified contempt as the “#1 predictor of divorce”.***

04 STONEWALLING

Typically triggered by contempt, stonewalling occurs when the listener withdraws from the interaction, shuts down, and stops responding to their partner. Notice that stonewalling looks a lot like the “freeze” and/or “flight” survival strategy.



Big Question

03

CRAZY 8 PATTERNS

“ —
| *Criticism,*
| *defensiveness,*
contempt, and
stonewalling
predict divorce. |
— ”



Big Question

WHAT DO YOU WANT IT TO LOOK LIKE?

Perhaps another way to ask this question, based on what we have discussed above, is:
How can we build trust in our relationship and move toward our bond?

How Couples Build Trust

Here's a zinger: **Trust is built through conflict!** The conflict between committed partners is inevitable, and when viewed from a positive state of mind, an invitation to understand one another better within the relationship. This perspective is a fundamental paradigm shift from the harmful habit of mind discussed earlier and proposes the antidote to the harmful habit of mind: a positive habit of mind. And if you want to take this to another level, the positive habit of mind invites you to transform your own uncomfortable away stuff (that your partner can't see) into an **opportunity to get to know yourself better...** to identify and understand your own needs that may be revealing themselves to you (and your partner).

Big Question #4 is about committing to **practice** pivoting out of the away stuff and intentionally turning toward the toward stuff. The pivot out of away stuff is about working very hard to reframe conflict as an opportunity for emotional intimacy: intentionally turning toward getting to know your partner better and yourself, too. This intentional pivot is made possible by a positive habit of mind and must be practiced because it most likely won't come naturally (thank you, survival mode!). We want to avoid Big Question #3's domain altogether, the away stuff your partner can see, namely Gottman's "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" and the Crazy 8 patterns described above. However, if we find ourselves in away behaviors, we can still commit to **practicing** pivoting back toward our relationship bond.

This pivoting takes a lot of practice, and skills can be learned. In fact, what do you think the term "commitment" means in the context of committed relationships? It means two individuals are committing to practice turning toward their relationship bond, even when faced with the away stuff that tries to get in the way. "Commitment" is not just a word or an idea; commitment is the toward things you and your partner can see; commitment is about behaviors you both can trust; commitment is letting your partner know they are seen, heard, understood, valued, and significant in the relationship.

So how do couples build trust in committed relationships? The skill of attunement.

Attunement is a set of skills that communicate emotional availability to another person, fostering a sense of being seen, heard, understood, valued, and significant. Attunement answers the question, "Are you here for me when I need you?" with a resounding "Yes!". Dr. Dan Siegel, a clinical professor of psychiatry at the UCLA School of Medicine and executive director of the Mindsight Institute, says: "When we attune with others, we allow our internal state to shift, to come to resonate with the inner world of another. This resonance is at the heart of the important sense of "feeling felt" that emerges in close relationships." Attunement is what many of us did not learn from our parents or other caregivers, which may influence why many of us struggle with this skill in our adult relationships.



ATTUNEMENT

Attunement in a relationship is intentionally **turning toward** your partner in three fundamental contexts:

1. Everyday **touchpoints** (toward or away stuff) that are an opportunity, or a lost opportunity, for connection
2. Fully processing the deeper meanings embedded in current and past **flashpoints** (away stuff)
3. Paying close attention to **turningpoints** (toward or away stuff) that occur during conflict

Each of these contexts asks, “Will my partner be there for me when I need him, and is he the kind of person I think he is?” Think of every interaction as a sort of “**trust test**” designed to answer that question. The only way to pass the test is to turn toward, or attune to, your partner (and your partner, in return).

01

TOUCHPOINTS

Little moments throughout our daily lives when our partner expresses some sort of need, unconsciously or consciously. Something like, “I’m exhausted” after returning home, or “Did you see the moon last night?”

02

FLASHPOINTS

Unfortunate incidents where we have innocently missed a touchpoint, or actively turned away from our bond. This is where Gottman’s “Four Horsemen” and the Crazy 8 patterns live.

03

TURNINGPOINTS

Mindfully tracking touchpoints and the use of criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling in discussions, and turning toward the other with non-defensive curiosity.

Trust test



LEARNING ATTUNEMENT

01



NOTICE

Noticing the negative emotion or behavior before it escalates (mindful awareness)

02



SEE

Seeing it as an opportunity for emotional intimacy (choosing and committing to a positive habit of mind)

03



VALIDATE

Validating or empathizing with the emotion (validating is not the same as agreeing with)

04



SEEK

Seeking to understand and clarify meaning ("Help me understand"; "Tell me more")

AWARENESS

A

Awareness of the emotion (Pay attention to what is going on, and gently ask for clarity!)

TURN TOWARD

T

Turning toward the emotions (Choosing to turn toward emotional intimacy)

TOLERANCE

T

Tolerance of the emotional experience (Self-awareness of emotional overwhelm)

UNDERSTANDING

U

Understanding the feeling (and if you don't, "Help me understand.")

NON-DEFENSIVE

N

Non-defensive listening (Watch your body language!)

EMPATHY

E

Empathy toward the emotion (This is about believing and having compassion for your partner's truth)



WILL YOU BE HERE FOR ME?

Learning Attunement in Couples

There are only four steps in attunement, and they are not difficult to learn (but may be difficult to employ when emotions are running high). They are:

1. Noticing the negative emotion or behavior before it escalates (mindful awareness)
2. Seeing it as an opportunity for emotional intimacy (choosing and committing to a positive habit of mind)
3. Validating or empathizing with the emotion (validating is not the same as agreeing with)
4. Seeking to understand and clarify meaning (“Help me understand”; “Tell me more”)

Attunement Skills

Dr. Gottman noted the word “ATTUNE” can be used as an acronym to assist in remembering the fundamental components of attunement:

- Awareness of the emotion (Pay attention to what is going on, and ask for clarity!)
- Turning toward the emotions (Choosing to turn toward emotional intimacy)
- Tolerance of the emotional experience (Self-awareness of emotional overwhelm)
- Understanding the feeling (if you don’t, “Help me understand.”)
- Non-defensive listening (Watch your body language!)
- Empathy toward the emotion (This is not putting yourself in your partner’s shoes; It’s simply about believing and validating their experience, believing and having compassion for their truth)

Although attunement is not a complex skill, it is difficult to do unless one **decides** to do it (positive habit of mind). **The decision to practice attunement is what “committed” means in “committed relationships”.**

Practicing attunement can be complex, especially for individuals who survived their childhood by learning to dismiss or detach from their emotions. This survival strategy can come back to haunt present-day relationships because these people can ignore, or completely separate themselves from the feelings of others, as well (namely their partners).

Or, practicing attunement can be equally as difficult for individuals that survived their childhood by overpowering the emotions of others with their emotional behavior, bulldozing their way through relationships.

Childhood survival strategies were not consciously chosen and were necessary for emotional survival. However, at some point, we all become responsible for our childhood survival strategies that are no longer effective and prudent, and committed relationships are where they tend to show up! Our present-day partners are closest to us and can unknowingly trigger these survival strategies. However, once a person decides to practice attunement, it is possible to improve (and an attuned partner can create a safe space for this). But remember: **It’s your responsibility to know your needs** and to communicate them effectively. An attuned partner is really good at asking about your needs when things get difficult.



A



AWARENESS

What's going on? vs. "What the hell is going on?"

The objective of understanding (in conflict) is to reduce the perceived threat of conflict by gently communicating interest in your partner's perspective (their truth). This is about cultivating a **culture of curiosity** in your relationship, and intentionally expressing interest in the lived experience of your partner.



T TURN TOWARD



The objective of turning toward (conflict) is also about reducing the perceived threat of conflict by converting “Here’s what’s wrong with you” into “**Here’s what I feel, and here’s what I need.**”

Turning toward is about transforming each negative emotion into a **roadmap** toward fulfilling a positive need. This can be tough because many of us do not have the language to articulate our needs. After all, many of us were not taught this growing up. Many of us were taught to worry about (and manage) other people’s needs (like our parents, siblings, or peers, among others). Articulating our needs can require a **mental shift** from what is wrong with your partner to what your partner can do that might work. Note: Turning toward in this context means it’s **your job** to figure out what your needs are, not your partner’s job. This means **intentionally** using your own negative emotions to uncover what your heart is trying to communicate. Here are some highly generalized examples:

sadness = something feels missing/lost
anger = something feels unfair/unjust
disappointment = unmet expectations
loneliness = felt disconnection

These are somewhat oversimplified examples of unmet needs revealed by negative emotions. However, they may help with the language you need to begin the needs identification process. Do you remember the XYZ exercise we did in Big Question #2? Let’s add something to that exercise and make it the **XYZ* Inventory**.

Take all of the sentences you wrote out in Big Question #2 and add a comma at the end, with the following sentence add-on: “, and I would like you to do *.” The sentence should now read: “I feel X when you do Y in this situation Z, and I would like you to do *.” See what needs you come up with as you take inventory of past adverse incidents with your partner.



XYZ*

T



TOLERANCE

With tolerance, each partner intentionally believes that in every adverse emotional event, there are always two different but equally valid perceptions of the event. Each partner “tolerates” the other’s perspective, and works very hard to value it.

Further, the commitment to turn toward the relationship bond requires each partner to believe they can learn from the other’s perspective. Tolerance is seeking first to understand and intentionally **withholding attempts to persuade, change, or deny your partner’s experience**. Tolerance is about understanding emotions are not an attack on you and that boundaries are for behaviors, not feelings and emotions. Tolerance is a recognition that it makes sense to talk about emotions and that it is crucial to inquire about your partner’s perspective. Tolerance is distinctly different from agreement, appeasement, or compliance. Tolerance is about inviting understanding and connection rather than defensiveness and disconnection.



U



UNDERSTANDING

The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People®, Habit 5: Seek First to Understand, Then to Be Understood® is the habit of **empathic communication**. Dr. John Gottman says, “I think that [seeking first to understand] changes the job description in conflict from persuading one’s partner that one’s point of view is worth understanding to trying to find out one’s partner’s perspective and trying to understand it.” Understanding is about curious exploration, not “search and destroy”. Of course, seeking first to understand is difficult when you feel attacked for being responsible for your partner’s emotions and are already defending yourself... a.k.a. “away stuff”. However, when you think about it, understanding is facilitated by **taking no responsibility** for your partner’s feelings and trying to **understand** them instead (stay **curious!**). The objective is simply seeking to understand, and that is enough. However, it’s critical to understand that people usually have more than one emotion simultaneously, swirling around in varying intensities until a waterfall takes shape. Emotions tend to cascade like a waterfall that makes its way over big and little rock formations. People tend to process only the ‘big rock’ emotions, and gentle questions like, “**Is there anything more?**”, or “**Do I have that right?**”, may be necessary to explore fully, and understand, what is going on for your partner.



Stay curious!

**Take a moment to process this page*

N



NON-DEFENSIVE

Witnessing your partner's emotions and emotional behavior can often feel like an attack, as if you are responsible for what they feel and how they behave. It is true: you may have triggered their feelings and behavior. However, you are not responsible for it, even if their words and body language say that you are (their behavior). This perspective is essential to facilitate your ability to turn toward your relationship bond by avoiding your defensiveness. Attunement requires managing your defensive behavior because, just like your partner's behavior is their responsibility, **your behavior is your responsibility**. Your partner may trigger your defensiveness, but they are not responsible for it.

[Take a moment to process the last few sentences because non-defensive listening may be the most challenging skill to manage and master as you navigate your journey through this.]

Managing your defensiveness is complex, and learning to acknowledge it out loud during conflict can be a significant step toward yourself, your partner, and your relationship bond. Something like, **“I'm starting to feel defensive, and we may need to pause for a few minutes,”** can do wonders for a relationship bond and buy some time for cooler heads to prevail. Even smaller words like “that's hurtful” within a discussion is a gentle way of acknowledging your emotions while simultaneously communicating a need to your partner. Note: The example doesn't say, “You're making me defensive...”, which is one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: criticism.





Empathy, in this context, is about a positive habit of mind that sees conflict as an opportunity for **emotional intimacy**, chooses to **turn toward** the relationship bond, and communicates **deep interest** in understanding the complete picture of what is going on for your partner. Dr. Brené Brown, an American professor, lecturer, author, and podcast host, known in particular for her research on shame, often discusses empathy, and she offers four attributes of empathy:

- **Perspective taking:** Being willing to see and feel the world through your partner's eyes.
- **Staying out of judgment:** Being open to what your partner is feeling (**believing their truth**) and refraining from comments that invalidate their experience (away stuff like criticism and contempt)
- **Recognize emotions:** Looking within yourself and remembering what it is like to have the feeling the other person seems to be feeling and perhaps gently naming it out loud. This is called **“reflecting feeling”**, and it sounds something like, “It sounds like you are feeling frustrated. Is that right?”
- **Communication:** Reflecting on feelings and naming the emotion you think you see. This sounds like, “You are disappointed in me right now. Is that right?”

Empathic (attuned) listeners become keenly aware of the distress and pain of their partners and connect to what it is like to have the feeling their partner seems to be feeling. This allows the empathic listener to have a **“that makes sense”** experience, reducing defensiveness and perhaps allowing space for personal accountability: the “holy grail” of managing conflict and repairing relationships productively. Something like, "I may have been too harsh, and understand why you're upset".



“That makes sense”

Big Question

04

ATTUNEMENT

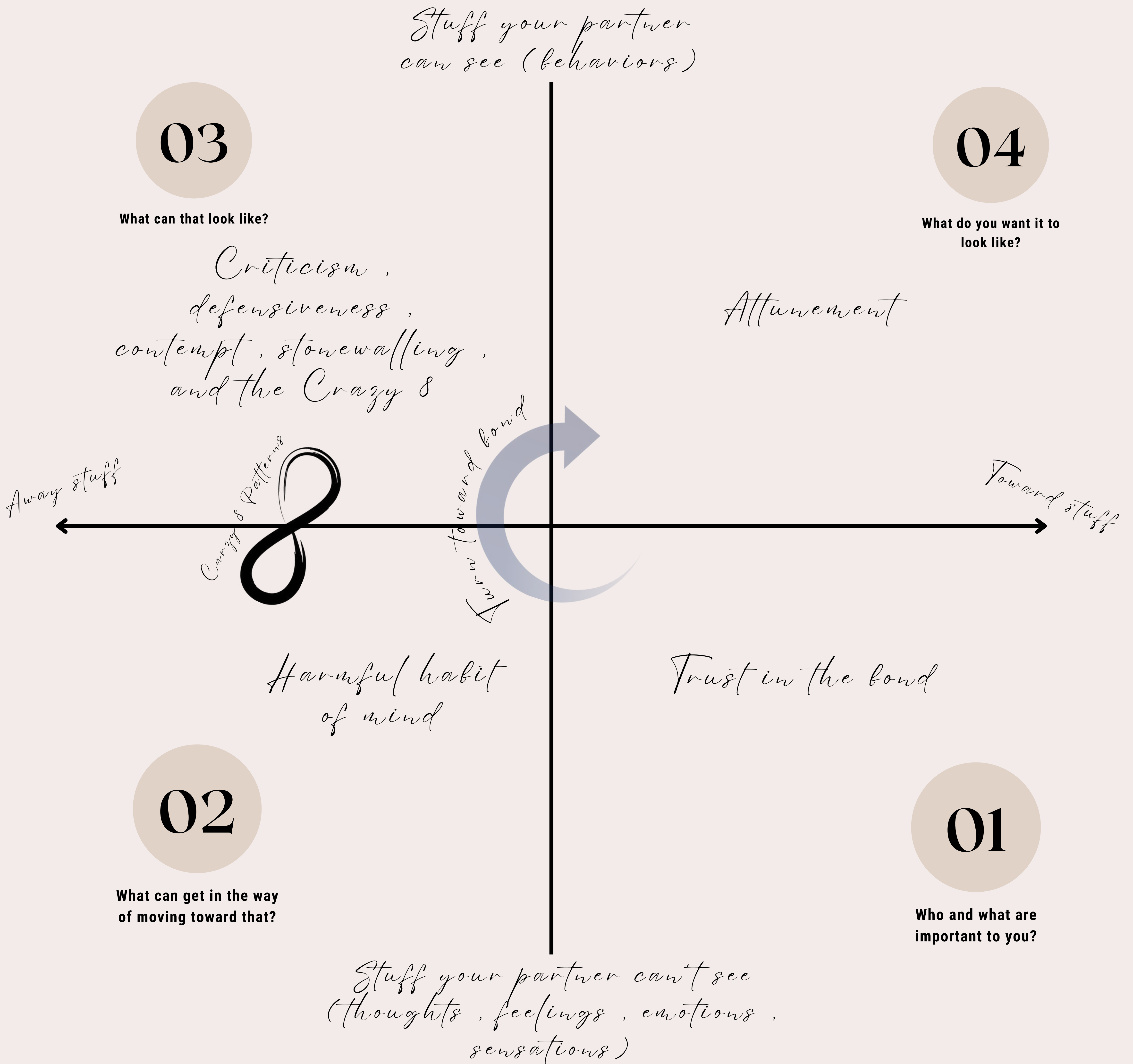
“

Sees conflict as an opportunity for emotional intimacy, chooses to turn toward the relationship bond, and communicates deep interest in understanding the complete picture of what is going on for your partner

”



Four Big Questions Summary



PART TWO

This relational rupture and repair approach applies attunement skills in three fundamental domains of interaction in committed relationships:

01

DEEP FRIENDSHIP

Deep friendship requires wanting and working to understand each other's internal lived experience, the mutual sharing of fondness, the commitment to move toward connection with each other, and an intentional positive habit of mind.

02

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Conflict management is approaching your partner in a way that protects the bond of your relationship, and it requires the identification of the core issues that inform disconnection and the patterns of interaction that trigger defensiveness.

03

COMMON PURPOSE

Common purpose is one part individual and one part couple: the union of two that interdependently serve each other's life dreams and foster shared meaning.



DEEP FRIENDSHIP

(TOUCHPOINTS)

Deep friendship requires wanting and working to understand each other's internal lived experience, the mutual sharing of fondness, the commitment to move toward connection with each other, and an intentional positive habit of mind. This looks like “**serve and return**” touchpoints in daily life, which work like a game of tennis or volleyball between partners. One partner “serves” by reaching out for interaction and connection—with eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, communication, or touch. A responsive and attuned partner will “return the serve” by first noticing, then acknowledging the invitation to connect. These are the “being there for me” touchpoints that build trust in the relationship bond or erode trust if left unreturned. Gottman’s research has discovered a rough hierarchy of “being there for me” moments that sort of move up a ladder of cognitive or emotional effort from a partner:

- Simple requests (e.g., “Can you get me a glass of water?”)
- A bid for help or coordination (e.g., help with an errand)
- An offer for the partner’s interest or excitement
- A bid for conversation, or for just venting and sharing events of the day
- Stress reduction & Problem-solving
- Humor, laughter
- Affection & Playfulness
- Adventure & Exploration; Learning something together
- A bid for intimate conversation
- Emotional support: Understanding, compassion, empathy
- Sexual intimacy

The successful “being there for me” touchpoints described above yield a form of compound interest in a “relationship bank account” and can create emotional space for the inevitable away stuff that happens, allowing for even more room to repair the relationship when and if away stuff happens. Touchpoints are investments in the relationship that pay dividends later, especially when you or your partner need the benefit of the doubt in conflict. They form insulation around the relationship bond that protects the couple from the coldness of difficult interactions.

Deep friendship's serve and return nature is compromised when one partner, or both, refuses to play the game, or can't because they're not even paying attention. When one partner turns away (refuses to play) from the other by dismissing, ignoring, or not noticing (innocently) the other partner's attempts at connection, trust in the relationship erodes. From that perspective, these “being there for me” touchpoints are essentially pass/fail “**trust tests.**” Interestingly, Gottman’s research found that couples who had divorced six years after their wedding had turned toward their partner’s “being there for me” touchpoints an average of 33%. In contrast, the couples who were still married six years after their wedding had turned toward their partner 86% of the time.

In summary: The key takeaways from the Deep Friendship domain are being attuned enough first to notice the “being there for me” touchpoints in everyday life and then responding to them.

Serve and return!



CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

(TURNINGPOINTS & FLASHPOINTS)

Conflict management is approaching your partner (turningpoints) in a way that protects the bond of your relationship, and it requires the identification of the core issues (flashpoints) that inform disconnection and the patterns of interaction that trigger defensiveness. **This means you have to be curious about what's happening for your partner.** Embedded in core issues and harmful patterns are personal stories born long ago that operate in the shadows of experience, often unconsciously intensifying reactions to conflict and threatening the relationship.

There is a flow to conflict that draws heavily upon the skills in Attunement Domain #1, namely the “being there for me” touchpoints that can become a turningpoint (toward your relationship bond), or a flashpoint (away from your bond):

1. Conflict happens
2. Turningpoint vs. Flashpoint #1: Attunement or Invalidation/Dismissal/Defensiveness (regarding your partner’s Truth)
3. Turningpoint vs. Flashpoint #2: Tolerance or Overwhelm (regarding the emotional intensity of your partner’s Truth)
4. Turningpoint vs. Flashpoint #3: “Zeigarnik effect” or no “Zeigarnik effect”. If you fully process each other’s Truths, they won’t linger over time. On the other hand, if either of you avoids processing the other’s Truths, they remain unhealed emotional wounds that may get infected, susceptible to reinjury in a future conflict.
5. Turningpoint vs. Flashpoint #4: Trust or No Trust. Do I know this person, and will they be here for me when I need them?

So what does it mean to “fully process” each other's Truth?

The ability to fully process each other's Truth is wholly dependent on two fundamental assumptions:

- (1) Perception is everything
- (2) There are always two equally valid points of view in every conflict.

If perception is everything, arguing about the facts of what happened is harmful and prevents partners from getting to the bottom of what is happening on a deeper level. Arguing about the facts also makes attunement impossible because the focus is on “my truth” versus “your truth.” Attunement demands being interested in “your truth”.

After each partner understands “your truth,” a couple must collaboratively pass through an “admitting phase,” where each partner shares what might have triggered their behavior, including a story that explains what previous experiences, possibly in childhood, have created these triggers. This opens the possibility for collaboration on operating in a manner that protects the relationship bond because both partners understand what is going on in the other.

Communicate your need, and focus on your bond



COMMON PURPOSE

Common Purpose is one part individual and one part couple: the union of two that interdependently serve each other's life dreams and foster shared meaning. This is how you both move through time together, prioritize your time and resources, and tell the stories about your lives together. In many ways, common purpose is an organic outcome of deep friendship and healthy conflict management. However, knowing and understanding each other's life dreams may require intentional and attuned discussion of the topic. Further, individual life dreams are often the source of the hidden expectations that fuel the felt disappointment that triggers conflict in the first place.

Many of us don't readily see the expectations we have of our partners and ourselves before those hidden expectations are betrayed (leading to disappointment and anger). We didn't even know those expectations were there, but we know when they're not met! However, a committed relationship built on deep friendship and healthy conflict management is the perfect environment to begin exploring those topics!

Many of us are forgiving toward our own mistakes in relationships and less forgiving of our partners' mistakes. Many of us also see ourselves as having very few negative traits and qualities. Our partner has most of the negative qualities that have caused the historical turbulence in our relationship, right? It's our own positive attributes that have allowed the relationship to survive this long, right? (Remember the Zeignarik effect? This is what it sounds like.)

Turning toward Common Purpose can sound like, "You know, I'm guessing the two of us are in this relationship for the same reasons," or "She just wants to feel loved as I do," or "He's allowed to feel things intensely, just like me." Taken further, it can sound like, "I want to do that for him," "I want to do that for her," or "I want to do that for us." Intentionally talking about Common Purpose is a fantastic way to foster shared meaning and deep friendship. Doing so will also assist in conflict management when emotions run high. One common purpose could be eliminating criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling in the relationship!

*Staying in love is
about the commitment to
turn toward the
relationship bond.
That's your common
purpose.*



Updated
Four Big Questions Summary

*Stuff your partner
can see (behaviors)*

03

What can that look like?

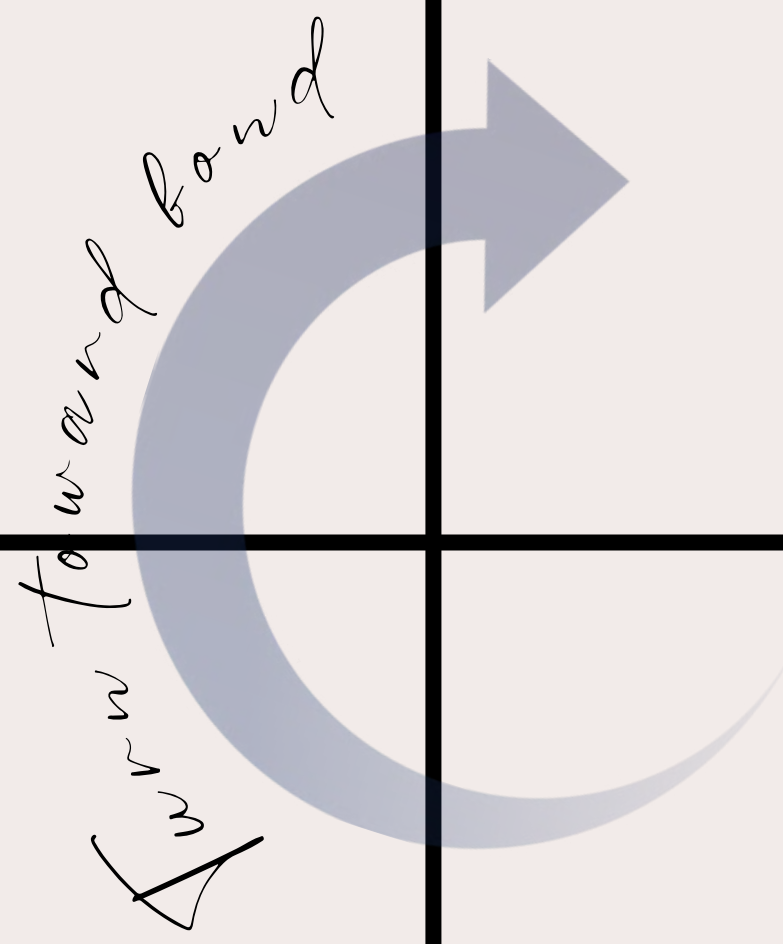
*Criticism ,
defensiveness ,
contempt , stonewalling ,
and the Crazy 8*

04

**What do you want it to
look like?**

*Attunement
Turning toward
Touchpoints
Curiosity
Repair*

Away stuff



Toward stuff

*Harmful habit
of mind*

*Trust in the bond
Deep friendship
Conflict management
Common Purpose*

02

**What can get in the way
of moving toward that?**

*Stuff your partner can't see
(thoughts , feelings , emotions ,
sensations)*

01

**Who and what are
important to you?**



MOVE CLOSER STAY LONGER

A great mantra to adopt when practicing attunement is “move closer, stay longer.” Move closer to understanding your partner’s internal experience by staying in the uncomfortable feelings a little longer each time. When you need to step away, gently tell your partner: “I’m getting overwhelmed, and I don’t want to lose it. I need some time. Can we come back to this in 20 minutes?”. Then, move closer, and stay longer when you come back. Repeat as many times as necessary to preserve the bond.

COMMON PURPOSE



THIS WILL BE DIFFICULT

All of this is way easier said than done. However, I sincerely hope some of the concepts and perspective shifts offered in this ebook will help you transform your relationship into one built on deep friendship and common purpose. There are two quotes I love that seem to sum up much of what I talked about in this ebook:

“We are not thinking machines. We are feeling machines that think.”

- Antonio Damasio

Attunement is seeking to understand your partner as a feeling machine that thinks (and behaves). Your partner has an entire world of lived experiences you may not know, which influences how they operate in your relationship. Help your partner feel safe exploring those experiences with you, so you can build beautiful experiences together.

“Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.”

- Albert Einstein

Attunement can't make your relationship simpler, and not much can. However, I hope some of the suggestions in this brief ebook are pretty simple to understand and may help you move toward deep friendship, shared meaning, and common purpose.

Stay curious about your partner's inner world, and gently ask about it. Do the same for yourself.

Jerry Wheeler



Connection

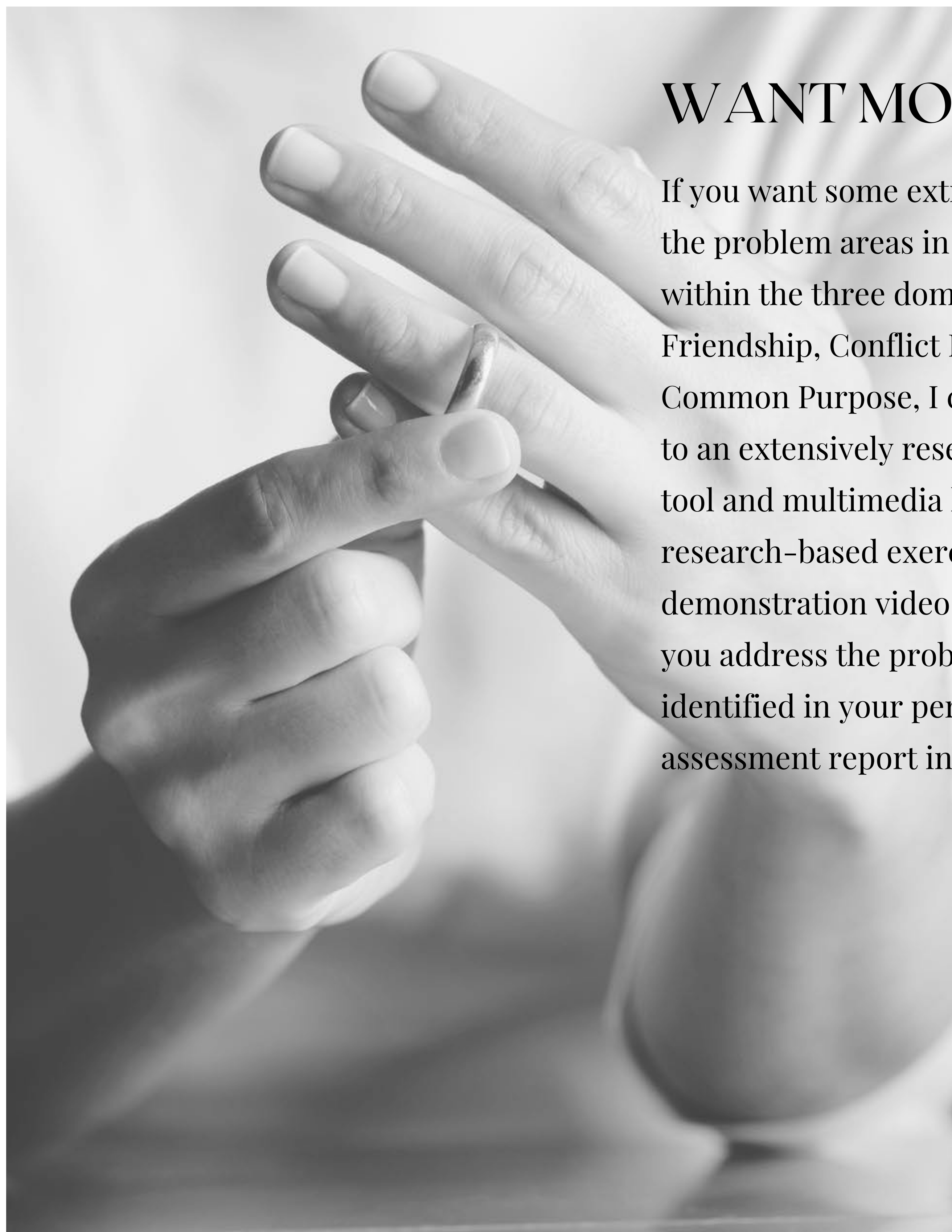
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The energy
between people
when they feel
seen, heard, and
valued. When they
give and receive
without judgement.

Brene Brown

— ”



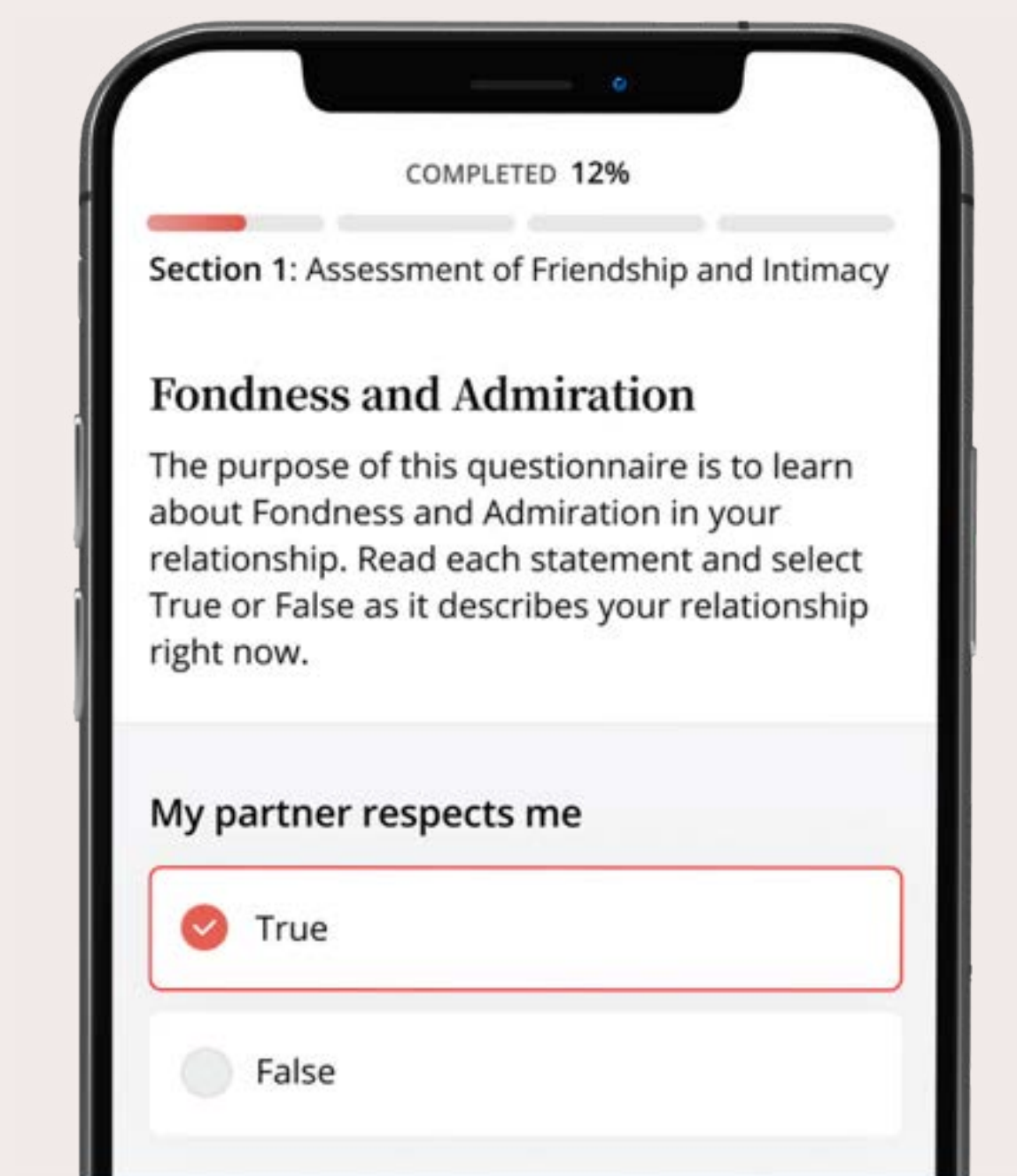


WANT MORE HELP?

If you want some extra help identifying the problem areas in your relationship within the three domains of Deep Friendship, Conflict Management, and Common Purpose, I can give you access to an extensively researched assessment tool and multimedia library with research-based exercises and demonstration videos designed to help you address the problem areas identified in your personalized assessment report in a DIY setting.



ASSESSMENT + SOLUTION



ASSESSMENT

300+ questions about friendship, intimacy, emotions, conflict, values, trust, parenting, housework, finances, individual areas of concern, and more. Each partner completes the assessment individually, then a personalized report detailing the strengths and weaknesses of the relationship will be emailed, along with my suggestions for ongoing work in the modules.

SOLUTION

DIY access to a multimedia library with 13 modules containing 35 research-based exercises and 90 exclusive demonstration videos designed to address the problem areas identified in your personalized assessment report.



Sign up at jwheelergroup.com



WRITTEN FOR YOU BY JERRY WHEELER, LMHCA, NCC

THANK YOU

EXCLUSIVE CONTENT

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