

More Love Less Conflict by Jonathan Robinson

Introduction to Chapter 1

Building Strong Relationships

If you would be loved, love and be loveable. Benjamin Franklin

You may already think you know what makes for good communication and strong relationships. Most of us tend to think *we* know how to have successful relationships—it's our *partner* that could use some help! Yet, a skilled communicator can connect with virtually anyone. Because they understand the underlying laws of relationships, they can be flexible in their approach and consistently get the outcome they desire.

Since the skills and attitudes that lead to great relationships did not come naturally to me, I am better able to teach them. I had to really study it, dissect it, and learn it step-by-step. I had to see that the habitual way I went about communicating was often pigheaded and ineffective. Fortunately, I soon saw that as I tried these new approaches and methods, the results I received were truly amazing. I think you'll find that too.

What the World Needs Now

In my many years of experience counseling couples, I've found that what most people want above all else in a relationship are moments of care, understanding, and empathy—I use the acronym CUE. When we feel our partners truly “get us,” it feels fantastic. When our partners are upset, we need to take the cue to be on CUE. When they feel we understand their pain or know their joy, they feel loved by us. How sweet that can be. Regrettably, such moments are rare in most relationships.

While we all want to feel understood, the way we tend to communicate makes this harder and harder. Even when communicating face to face, people often misunderstand each other. And talking by phone or communicating by text or email makes empathic understanding even more challenging. Yes, emojis can sometimes help, but they certainly don't replace the impact of a lover holding your hand and having their eyes well up with tears as you describe an awful day. We want to know that our partners truly *care*, and we often don't care what they have to say until we feel that they really *do* care.

When people are stressed, they are generally not at their best. After millions of years of evolution, we respond to stress in one of three ways—we fight, we flee, or we freeze. Perhaps you've noticed fighting words coming from your partner when you've given them some simple feedback. Your statement: “I don't think that outfit will be appropriate for the party” can be met with vitriol and venom: “Look who's talking. You don't look so great yourself.” And the fight is on. Conquer or be conquered. This used to

be helpful when faced with a tiger on the plains of Africa 200,000 years ago, but it is not useful when dealing with your mate.

Another way we're conditioned to react to stress is to take flight, or flee. Once again, when facing a tiger, this is an effective strategy. But if you avoid needed conversations in your relationship, those needs don't magically go away. In fact, they can soon pile up into a wall of resentment. The next thing you know, you're paying your hard-earned money to a therapist to avoid an impending divorce. Since the whole point of a partnership is to share love and joy, fleeing is not an effective strategy.

A third survival strategy people fall back on when under stress is simply to freeze. You can see this in other animals as well. When a mouse's life is in danger, it sometimes simply "plays dead," hoping that the cat won't bother it. In my couples counseling practice, I often see partners "numb out," or simply not communicate anything about what they feel or want. Their hope is that, if they appear frozen, their partners won't bother them and will leave them alone. In fact, sometimes this strategy can work. Even when it does "work" however, the results are less than satisfying for both people. Eventually, partners can simply "give up," as all the love that was once in the relationship is replaced with animosity and resentment.

Because people today are dealing with more stress than ever, it's critically important to know how to communicate when under pressure. Unfortunately, our biologically programmed reactions—fight, flee, or freeze—tend to make matters even worse. Just when we need to be at our best, we tend to lose our heads. So what can couples do to avoid these ingrained instinctive reactions? What they need are new communication skills, and new mechanisms to make sure they use them.

Even though I teach workshops and write books about communication, when severely stressed, I find that it's easy to forget everything I know. For couples who have much less training than I do, I can imagine it may be nearly impossible to go beyond fight, flight, or freeze responses when faced with a big problem. That's why I've developed tools that can work under even the most stressful conditions. Whether your immediate goal is to connect deeply with your mate or to tackle a thorny issue, you'll find practices in this book that can create miracles.

Currently, about 45% of marriages end in divorce—and the failure rate of second and third marriages are even worse. That means people aren't getting better at relationships and communication just through repetition. Most of us have had very little communication training, so our communication skills are weak and ineffective. Learning how to master these skills is a bit like building muscles. The structure of the practices in this book will allow you to build your communication “muscles” in a safe and deliberate manner. Once your communication abilities are well developed, you will no longer need as much structure to get to your desired outcome. You will have the communication strength to handle almost any situation.

Finding the Target

Since care, understanding, and empathy are things that we all want, why are they so hard to get? First, we forget (or don't realize) that empathy and understanding are our true goals. So we often lose track of what the real target is, and spend our time, energy, and words in pursuit of other ends. For example, you think that proving your partner wrong will help you to feel

good—and indeed, feeling you are right and your partner is wrong can temporarily make you feel very powerful. Yet there’s always a price to be paid. It may feel good in the moment to blame our partners and put them down, but the result of such behavior is never more love and less conflict.

Simply having a clearly defined target will get you half way to your goal of more love. I learned the importance of having a clearly defined target while in college. One day, my roommate challenged me to a game of one-on-one basketball. He was a great basketball player. In fact, he was the only freshman on the varsity team. However, I felt I could use my brain to overcome his talent. I accepted his challenge on one condition—that I be allowed to place a one-ounce object anywhere on the court before the game began. My roommate accepted my terms, and we headed for the court. Once there, I took out my one-ounce object—a blindfold—and placed it in a strategic location—over my roommate’s eyes. Then I announced: “Let the games begin!”

Admittedly, it still ended up being a rather close game! But I was able to beat one of the best basketball players around because I knew exactly what the target was—and he did not. Despite my total lack of skill, I found that, if I threw enough balls in the general direction of the basket, sometimes one would go in. In the same way, if you throw enough words in the direction of care, understanding, and empathy, you will occasionally score. You don’t need to say the perfect words if you aim for the right target.

The Four Horsemen

Once you know what the right “target” is for good communication, you need to learn what the main obstacles are to hitting that target. There are four

distinct culprits that get in the way of expressing care, understanding, and empathy. I refer to them as the Four Horsemen of the Relationship Apocalypse: denigration, denial, dismissal, and distraction. When partners engage in any of these behaviors, it foretells that significant problems lie ahead.

Denigration is a way of belittling our partners. The most common way of doing this is through blaming them for all our problems. I see it all the time in my counseling office. Couples blame each other for stupid stuff like not squeezing the toothpaste from the bottom, or shutting the door too loudly. When you denigrate someone, you feel self-righteous or angry, and both of those feelings take you farther away from your goal of emotional connection. In fact, when we use complaint and blame as a strategy to change our partner, it never really works. Instead, it simply keeps us from seeing how *we* may have contributed to the difficulty at hand.

Denial is the second culprit that keeps us from care, understanding, and empathy. When we deny a problem, we don't even recognize that there *is* a problem. Men tend to be better at this than women, but we've all been there. For example, for a long time, I denied that I left dishes in the sink. I eventually learned, however, that denying my role in the conflict did not make the dishes magically disappear. In addition, I learned that denying that I left my dishes in the sink did not do much to appease my wife. In fact, quite the opposite. Denial may seem to work in the short term, but it always comes back to bite you.

The third obstacle to getting what we want in relationships is *dismissal*. When you dismiss or belittle your partner's feelings, you miss an opportunity to show your empathy and care. Even little comments like "You

shouldn't feel so upset" or "It's not that big a deal" can make your partner feel misunderstood. The truth is that, if our partners feel we don't really understand their feelings, it will be even harder for them to let those feelings go and move on. Frequently, I see men quickly dismiss their partner's feelings and instead try to solve the problem at hand. Solving problems can be a nice thing to do, but first you need to acknowledge your partner's feelings about the situation. If you dismiss those feelings, he or she probably won't be receptive to whatever solutions you bring forth.

The final barrier to connecting more deeply with your partner is simple *distraction*. Over the course of a single day in America, the average person consults a smartphone an average of 143 times, and watches almost four and a half hours of TV. Amazingly, 20 percent of people regularly look at their smartphones during sex! That's a lot of distraction. We all need to be entertained once in a while, but if your media consumption, drugs, or other distractions keep you from connecting with your mate, you've got a problem. Overcoming distractions is one more reason why deliberate communication exercises can be so helpful in removing the various obstacles to deeper connection.

Mahatma Gandhi once said: "I have only three enemies. My favorite enemy, the one most easily influenced for the better, is the British Empire. My second enemy, the Indian people, are far more difficult. But my most formidable opponent is a man named Mohandas K. Gandhi. With him, I seem to have very little influence." Gandhi clearly understood how hard it is to change our behavior. It's easy to tell our partners that they need to change. The real question is: "Are *we* willing to change?"

Learning anything new is usually difficult. But I've learned that, with the right information, the right tools, and a clear goal, change is possible. In fact, miracles are possible.

Simple and Easy Practice

The next time you're experiencing a nice connection with your partner, ask about his or her view of how you both handle stress as a couple. You can simply ask: "What have you noticed about how you and I relate when we're stressed? What patterns do we typically fall into?" Listen and affirm what your mate says. Being aware of a pattern or problem is the biggest step you can take to overcoming it. Once you've heard your partner's perspective, you can offer your own insights. You may even offer a strategy or two from this book. Talking about your "stress patterns" is a great way to step out of them. If you can bring humor to such a conversation, you get major bonus points. You may find that the next time you're both stressed, remembering your typical patterns might prevent you from diving deeply into them.