

**Your Partner Is As Emotionally Healthy as You Can Tolerate  
“I not sure I know who this person is any more!”**

It’s human nature: If I’m unhappy in our relationship, I expect you to change. That’s just the way people are—we never look at ourselves first. When we realize we’re unhappy in a partner relationship, we quickly point out all the changes that our partner needs to make in order for us to have a happy relationship again: “I’m all right, Jack, it’s you that needs fixing!”

When something goes wrong between me and my partner, I sincerely believe I’m only reacting to my partner’s hurtful behavior. I assume that if that hurtful behavior is stopped, then I can be sweet and pleasant again too. We believe that the partner has to shape up before we can put away our defensive behaviors.

Unfortunately, relationships aren’t that simple. *What neither partner can see is their unconscious agendas working underground.* Actually, two forces must be reckoned with when partners reach this place in their relationship:

- 1) The Power Struggle— each partner is trying to be his/her separate, different self, assert his or her will, and gain personal power over the other,
- 2) The Personal Psyche (emotional state plus defense mechanisms) of each, which determines whether healing of the relationship is possible, the amount of work required to bring it about, the degree of healing that can take place at any particular time, and how fast that healing can occur.

**Revisiting the Power Struggle.** To understand the Power Struggle, we must look at its unique components. We have touched on it briefly before, acknowledging that according to Harville Hendrix’s IMAGO theory, the Power Struggle is the second stage of a primary love relationship. It’s supposed to begin, and it’s supposed to end. In a culture that allows couples to be attracted to and choose their own partners, this Power Struggle is a predictable and completely normal stage of any marriage. If both partners stay alive and stay together, the Power Struggle arrives as the Romantic Love stage winds down.

Recapping further, in its early stages, the Power Struggle manifests with disillusionment: “My partner is not who I thought he or she really was,” “My partner reminds me of other people who hurt me (usually family members),” “I’m not as happy as I had hoped to be,” “My partner doesn’t listen to me any more,” “My partner doesn’t try to please me as she or he once did,” etc.

When the relationship arrives at this point we become very focused on how *different* the two of us are and conclude that our choice of a partner was really a mistake. And, sadly, for many couples the relationship ends right there. Having learned very little about how to make a relationship work, they bail out of that marriage and start looking for somebody who will be “right.” When that “right” person shows up, the cycle will start all over again, with Romantic Love followed by the onset of the Power Struggle—you see where I’m going with this.

**Disillusionment can equal opportunity.** When the Power Struggle begins, instead of deciding that the relationship is over and divorce is the only way to go, a wonderful opportunity is presenting itself to the couple. If they will make the

commitment to go to work on the relationship, both partners can learn a great deal and find deeper satisfaction in that relationship and life. The Power Struggle is a big “STOP” sign. The relationship has gone as far as it will go, unless both partners address some vital issues. And they can rarely do this without becoming educated, guided, and supported by a trained professional, who is what Frank Pittman, MD, refers to as “a friend to the marriage relationship”

Suppose a partner has begun to work most of the time, or gets caught up in too many involvements away from home, or is alcoholic or depends on other chemicals, or is having an affair, or withdraws energy from the partner relationship in some other way to invest it elsewhere. What happens with the other partner? Initially that partner often pursues the unavailable mate; after a time, however, he or she distances also, and now there’s a definite ‘**disconnect**’ between the two. Perhaps this distancing partner has also been over involved with something besides the relationship—kids, friends, church, spending money, going to school, being sick, sleeping a lot, etc.

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It really doesn’t matter which partner begins pulling away from the relationship first. Someone will; it’s predictable. None of us is equipped to stay as close to anyone over an extended period of time as when we’re first in the throes of Romantic Love.

**We got hurt before, we don’t want to feel hurt again.** Early on, in our families of origin, all of us were hurt emotionally in one way or another, and those hurts are still there deep down inside. As a result, we carry with us into adult life a genuine but often unrecognized fear of getting as close to another person as one must be in order to live healthily with one partner in a trustful, long-term, connected relationship.

During Romantic Love, we reveled in the belief that the wonderful partner who’d come into our life couldn’t or wouldn’t ever mortally wound us. We believed that we could trust that partner absolutely, placing our total emotional safety in the other person’s hands. We are able to do this fearlessly in the Romantic Love stage, because both partners are under the euphoric spell of the endorphins being produced in our brains. We are “high” on love!

Without this absolute trust in one another, we would never commit to another person for a lifetime, and this level of trust is a component of the unconditional love we all long for. We dream of being able to free fall into our lover’s arms and always be caught and cherished for who we are.

**Why does the shine wear off?** If we start out in Romantic Love with such high hopes, such wonderful expectations, why can’t it last forever? It can’t last forever because:

- 1) We still have old unresolved emotional baggage, and we drag it with us into our relationships, and
- 2) We have to *grow* in order to evolve into all that we were originally designed to be.

The dusty old trunks full of childhood junk stay in the closet during the honeymoon and often for several years, but eventually they have to be opened, sorted through, and cleaned out.

Human beings are social creatures by nature. We all want close, connected relationships, and we love how those feel. Being in a close, intimate relationship for an extended time is more than our psyches can tolerate, however, and our old defenses

around control begin to kick in. This is the essence of the Power Struggle in a committed love relationship.

That being so, the Power Struggle is tailor-made to help us get old unresolved issues healed, with the goal of finally growing into the emotionally healthy partner capable of experiencing the love we have always wanted. Our desire for this love never leaves us. We will continue to long for it and pursue it until we have actually experienced it, or at least until we have realistic hopes that we can and will experience it at some point.

The clarity we're missing is the understanding that we must all *stretch and grow* into the person who is emotionally healthy enough to experience this love. Nobody ever told us the journey to lifelong love with a partner required us to *grow*. Our cultural myths, plus Romantic Love, convinced us that we've arrived at this place of emotional health and love by connecting with the "right" partner. But when the Power Struggle breaks out, it leads us to believe we've wound up with the "wrong" partner instead. Yet both stages are necessary to bring us to the *place of growth*.

**Who's in charge of me, anyway?** Now let's go back to that statement, "Early on, in our families of origin, all of us were hurt emotionally in one way or another, and those hurts are still there deep down inside." What I'm talking about here is *actual control* versus *perceived control*. As children, of course we felt controlled, because we were. We don't ever forget what that felt like.

Then, as adults in partner relationships, when the Power Struggle begins, we re-experience the feeling of being controlled that we felt in childhood with a parent. We are programmed to interpret control that way, and at an unconscious level it feels familiar to us. When our partner begins exerting some sort of control on us in adulthood, we intercept the new control and superimpose our old impression and experience of control over it, making the new control feel like the old control we experienced as a child. That is our *perceived control*.

Let me share an experience of my own. My father was alcoholic, very abusive and aggressive. My husband, on the other hand, is thoughtful and sensitive most of the time. Years ago, he might ask me where I would like to go out for dinner, suggesting steaks or seafood. What a nice guy!

Yet, in my head, I heard, "You cannot have Mexican or Italian food, because I want steaks or seafood." What I heard in my head had nothing to do with my husband's intent, what my husband was suggesting, or what was in his head. He was actually trying to be thoughtful and offer some ideas, while I was feeling controlled and repressed by his simple suggestion.

Why in the world was that? It was because in those days I was still programmed to believe I did not have choices or was not allowed to make up my own mind about anything, because my father never allowed that, and I was still playing by the old home-based rules. So I superimposed my father's control and lack of consideration for my wishes over my husband's thoughtful suggestions and ended up feeling the same control and manipulation from my husband that I felt from my father. And just deciding where to go out for dinner became a power struggle for me. This is another example of how our unfinished issues from childhood affect our relationships today.

**When parental control goes awry.** Part of the natural order of raising a child is for parents to have a significant amount of control in order to keep the child safe and

teach the child about life. None of us had perfect parents, however, and none of us became perfect parents, so the natural process of raising a child gets interrupted by the dysfunction of each of our parents.

Some of us grew up in homes where we were noticeably controlled by one or both parents hitting, yelling, slapping, being critical, comparing us to others, demeaning, punishing, withholding affection, bullying and threatening us, shaming us, and teaching us a fear of closeness—not surprising, since we couldn't trust them to be close to us without hurting us. One part of us loved these parents, but another part of us was and still may be very angry and resentful of their disregard for us.

Then there are those of us who grew up in homes with parents who controlled us more subtly. They were terribly busy, had no time for us, weren't available to us physically, emotionally, or both. Maybe they had to work very hard to make ends meet, maybe they were ill, depressed, or not there for us in some other way (divorce or death, perhaps).

As children of such parents we perceived them as trying hard, and we excused their dismissal of us and rationalized their busyness and unavailability to us. We sympathized with them, felt sorry for them, didn't want to disappoint or upset them because they had "enough to worry about," couldn't allow ourselves to feel angry with them when they left us through divorce or death (which they "couldn't avoid"), or felt sorry for them because they'd had a "hard life" and didn't get help for themselves ("poor thing").

**Other family dramas.** Some parents, who had little or no satisfactory relationship with their adult partner, put all their energy into their children, expecting in return to be taken care of emotionally by those children. Their theme song goes like this: "After all I've done for these kids, making me happy seems like the least they can do for me." These powerless, pitiful parents are often sick much of the time, addicted to chemicals, or behaving in other ways that worry their families. A part of us loves them, but another part has always felt burdened by and totally controlled by them. If we have families of origin like this, we've come to believe, usually unconsciously, that all close relationships are just too burdensome and require too much energy, so we don't want to and probably believe we can't have any love relationship of our own.

Adults who emerge from all these family dramas will bring huge unresolved issues from childhood into their adult love relationships. No matter how often or how vehemently we tell ourselves, "I'll never be like my mom, or my dad!" or "I'm determined my family won't be anything like my own horrible one was!" we find ourselves recreating these old scenes.

*What we fail to take into account is the power of the unconscious mind.* Old family-of-origin stuff just floats around in there and seeps out of us onto our close relationships and the people we love. And in order to have the relationships we crave and help our wounded spirits heal, we have to resurrect all that old family stuff, examine it, allow ourselves to feel any pain we've been denying, then let as much of it go as possible. And if we can stay together and be caring partners throughout, so much the better for us both and for our relationships.

In putting together these Twelve Foundations Stones for committed love relationships, our work call for us to take a look at how satisfied or dissatisfied we are with our relationships, honestly examine the roles we've been playing in them, listen to

how our partner and kids experience us, and be willing to grow by altering our defensive interactions with these people we love, so that we can stop hurting them, get some healing around our own wounding, and become emotionally safe enough for them to connect with us.

**Old fears revive.** *Until we work on our issues within the Power Struggle, whatever control we felt as a child, we will perceive our partner as having that much or even more control over us.* In trying to sustain an adult, long-term love relationship, our old fears about control revive, and although we couldn't resist effectively as a child, we now begin to act the old drama out on our partner – all that old resistance, plus any new defenses we've picked up over the years.

Let's suppose Art, who had an obviously controlling father and a powerless mother, marries Amy, whose parents were basically unavailable and uninvolved in her life as a child. Perhaps they were neglectful, or perhaps circumstance required their attention elsewhere. Both Art and Amy grew up feeling controlled, Art from noticeable control and Amy from circumstances. Being as resourceful as most children are, they adapted. They learned emotional defenses to protect themselves from feeling so powerless and unnurtured. And as adults, they will continue to use their protective defenses with their partner, in either an obvious or a subtle way.

Chances are that Amy never labeled her childhood experience with her parents as controlling. In fact, because there was so little parental involvement, she probably essentially raised herself, which made her feel powerful, as if she had a great deal of control over her life. But because she was a child and needed parents to show her about life, she grew up shy and lacking confidence, or she may have compensated with an inflated, artificial confidence in herself.

Art, who probably understands quite well that he felt controlled, is determined to make sure that doesn't happen again in any other relationship. Art alleviates his fears about being controlled by aggressively and rigidly controlling others, like his dad before him.

So here now are Art and Amy, both of whom emerged from childhood unable to remain close to anyone for long. Their psyches will make sure, however, that they feel power somewhere in their relationships, and their defense systems will kick in to help them accomplish that.

**It's Saturday afternoon at the Bijou.** I've talked often about the "movie" we have running in our heads and project onto a partner. Watching couples struggle to feel powerful in their relationships is like watching a video of their childhood. Art, who felt very controlled as a child, will perceive his partner Amy as being very controlling, and his old defenses will be set into motion, so that he reacts to his *perceived* control from Amy by 'acting out' against her. Amy might perceive Art as being critical, demanding, shaming, and ungrateful, and his behavior will probably confirm her view of him.

Amy's behavior will match the "control movie" running in Art's head, and he will defend against it just as he did as a child – by fighting, fleeing, throwing tantrums, storming out, freezing up, getting quiet, or whatever worked for him.

Furthermore, because Amy also felt very controlled as a child, at an unconscious level, Art's behavior will feel *normal* to her and will match enough of the "control movie" running in her head that Amy will accept it as a *natural* part of a relationship. She then goes on to defend herself against it just as she did as a child -- by submitting,

freezing up, numbing out, throwing tantrums, running away, fighting, arguing, or whatever worked for her as a child. .

And then Art will come to perceive Amy as a nag, a crybaby, powerless, pitiful, totally empty headed, a drama queen, and her behavior will bear out his description. The old “movie” or “video” is playing, and until somebody rewrites the script, it never ends happily.

**Why behaviors persist or disappear.** To sum up, unless a behavior in either partner is serving a purpose, such as reminding one’s Old Brain of old unresolved issues that need healing, it will soon disappear in the relationship, because one partner or the other won’t tolerate the behavior. So long as each partner is bringing old stuff to the table, however, all that old stuff has to be acknowledged and worked through in order for a new, healthy, connected partnership to form.

Joyce Buckner has summed this dynamic up neatly: “We don’t pair up with a partner who is more or less evolved than we.” No matter how much we’d like to believe otherwise, we don’t marry this “impossible” person by accident. We pair up with a partner who carries about the same amount of woundedness from childhood as we. It’s as if Nature planned that way, sending us partners who can help us heal, if we will both welcome the invitation and stay for the whole party.

Because my own family was so obviously “sick,” my husband and I accepted that I was the partner with the “most problems.” For a long time I went along with this assumption, until I began to grow into healthier beliefs, at which point I began to question the “squeaky clean” of my husband’s family. And a time came in our work as a couple -- as that time always will come -- when my husband had to examine his own relationships and family-of-origin history. As we both began to recognize that the family he came from was just as “sick,” or as dysfunctional as mine, I have to admit this discovery brought me great comfort. His family just hid their shortcomings better!

**We do our growing up together.** So long as we fail to grow up emotionally, so long as either of us remains in our emotional child state, *we really cannot allow our partner much growth*, because we aren’t equipped to handle it. We’re still operating out of our old defenses, and they won’t work – won’t be tolerated by an emotionally healthy partner. Those of us who came from controlling homes designed our defense systems to cope with people who inhabited adult bodies but emotionally had never grown past being a child. Our parents lived like that, and so did their parents and their parents, *ad infinitum*.

So, when partners begin to work through their issues *together*, they begin *slowly* to grow up emotionally. I say “slowly,” because our psyches cannot tolerate fast growth. A decision to move into new ways of doing relationships and become willing to alter our behaviors requires our psyches to reshape our entire defense systems into healthier ways of coping and interacting. Defenses can be let go of eventually, but changing *instantly* from operating within a structure of childlike emotions to a system of adult, healthy coping mechanisms would cause a breakdown of the whole organism.

**Getting “worse” can be getting better.** So we must progress in tiny baby steps, with partners moving ahead by small increments, almost simultaneously. If one partner moves too quickly, the relationship will be disrupted. That’s why if only one partner is in therapy and growing, the relationship will usually get worse. The partner in therapy is most likely getting healthier in his/her ability to operate in close relationships, and

whatever problems have clung to the relationship are going to demand resolution. The healthier that partner gets, the less dysfunction he/she will be willing to tolerate.

Yet this “getting worse” can actually be what needs to happen! The “getting worse” partner who hasn’t been willing to learn new, healthier ways of being in relationship is being sent a message that the old ways are dead, and change is happening. He/she can stay stuck in unhappiness and the Power Struggle, or else decide to participate in the journey to emotional growth and health.

The same is true when one partner’s dysfunction goes so far off the *other* end of the spectrum as to become life threatening – usually involving some form of addiction. The relationship will get worse, because the better-functioning partner’s psychic limits have been reached. All relationships can tolerate a certain amount of dysfunction, but too much dysfunction will devastate any system.

Collapse of a relationship is not always a calamity. Many times a relationship is crying out for drastic change, as one partner decides to stop putting up with abusive behavior. The relationship will be devastated, but for a positive end. It needs to be devastated, at least in the old shape. Transformation is trying to happen.

Dillon and Diedra had been married for thirty years, and throughout their marriage, the drinking of both had increased. Eventually a business breakdown, coupled with a health crisis, forced Dillon to come to grips with his alcoholism. He joined Alcoholics Anonymous, embracing sobriety enthusiastically and working hard to maintain his recovery.

Soon Diedra was complaining: “I don’t who this person is anymore.” She chose to separate from Dillon without asking for a divorce, moved to city some distance away, and rented an apartment, living there on her own for several months before deciding that her better course was to reunite with Dillon and learn to live with the new person he was becoming. And in the end Diedra, too, acknowledged that she needed help for her own drinking problem.

The collapse of a relationship may be the catalyst that allows partners, with help and education, to reorganize their relationship into a functional, genuinely loving partnership. In many instances the collapse of the old is essential for a new beginning—for example, when so much damage has been done that neither partner can recover under the old system. Just about everything in the old system must change, but again, *very slowly*, as each partner learns to regroup, tolerate the new, and stretch into the potential that was always there, just blocked by old unexamined baggage. This work takes patience, practice, and perseverance. If both partners can be encouraged to remember that it’s not one or the other who needs “fixing,” it’s the relationship itself, they may choose to stay with the task long enough to experience the great benefits that will come from building a marriage that is “we” based. As the exploration and transformation progresses, on the solid awareness of the Twelve Foundation Stones, the relationship doesn’t become easy—no relationship is—but it becomes the sacred space where we can find the love for which we have always longed.