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Habits for Relationship Success

A relationship workbook by

Dr. Sara Schwarzbaum

Ed.D, LMFT, LCPC and founder of
Couples Counseling Associates in Chicago, IL

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Habits for Relationship Success

I wrote this booklet for couples who are interested in creating new habits for a successful long-term, committed relationship. A few educational paragraphs introduce each habit, followed by an exercise. Each exercise is designed for either individual or joint practice. You can do these with or without your partner.

The seven habits are:

Habit 1: Pay attention to your relationship

Exercise 1: Create a relationship vision

Habit 2: Ignore negative thoughts about your partner and show you care

Exercise 2: Create a list of caring activities—that you probably haven't thought about!

Habit 3: Distinguish between touch and sex

Exercise 3: Rediscover touch and learn how to get back into the “sandbox” and play

Habit 4: Recognize the kind of intimacy that is important to your partner

Exercise 4: Ways to recognize your partner's bids for connection and don't ignore them

Habit 5: Talk about sex, be physically intimate in some way, and take time to play

Exercise 5: Ways to talk about sex when talking about sex gets difficult

Habit 6: Before the fight, think about how and when you will react

Exercise 6: Prepare for a difficult conversation

Habit 7: After the fight, be open to your partners' needs and opinions

Exercise 7: Prepare to repair and talk after the fight

INTRODUCTION

According to the behavioral research, it takes about three weeks to create a new habit. The information you are about to read may benefit both of you, even if only one partner seems motivated to learn a new habit at this time.

If you are currently not experiencing distress in your relationship, this information will give you tools to prevent problems in the future. If you are experiencing some problems, completing these exercises without your partner is a sure way to demonstrate to yourself that you are motivated to **be the change you want to see** and to **become a better partner**. Your relationship will change for the better when you thoroughly digest this material, even if your partner does not want to join you at this time.

When you are in a long-term, committed relationship, **you are responsible for the well being of your partner**. Doing or saying something that makes your partner's life better in some small way, every day, is the glue that will keep you together through the rough times that inevitably arise. And, both of you will benefit from your actions. Don't expect perfection at all times. Rather, try to at least set a trend in the right direction.

Note: The information contained in this document is not a substitute for couples counseling. Not all advice is helpful or indicated in all situations.

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Dr. Sara Schwarzbaum

777 N. Michigan Ave, Suite 3200

Chicago IL 60611

BONUS CHAPTER: WHAT IS LOVE

When people think about the meaning of love, they usually have only one kind of love in mind: the kind that does not last. At the outset, romantic love is actually a temporary chemical imbalance that occurs when two strangers meet and are attracted to each other. The reflection they see in their new mate's eyes reveals an incomplete picture of who they are—only their best and most desirable qualities—creating powerful feelings and forward momentum.

Practically everyone craves this heightened feeling and, without it, most love relationships would never get off the ground. However, real love—mature and lasting love—is something different altogether.

When two people first meet, they are strangers not only to each other, but also to themselves. Through getting to know another, we also get to know ourselves. It is only in relation to the other person that we truly learn who we are. Through his or her eyes, we begin to see a much more complete picture of ourselves. If we are lucky enough to have someone honest and brave to point them out, we become aware of our strengths and talents as well as our shortcomings. The best relationship helps us grow and makes us more humble.

When romantic love starts to fade, as it inevitably does, the differences that were on the backburner now come to the forefront, and we can no longer ignore them.

Couples who can struggle through this process towards a more mature relationship learn to master vital relationship skills, which can lead them to a kind of love much more rich and deep than the giddy high they experienced early on. These skills include standing our ground without damaging our partner's self-esteem, fighting fairly (not to mention understanding that even the best couples fight now and then), and calming down when we get upset. Most importantly, we learn when to press on and when to let go.

Many bail out of the relationship when romantic love fades because they are unable or unwilling to withstand the struggle that can ultimately lead to lasting and mature love. And they often mistake the loss of the initial high for falling out of love.

Understanding the difference between romantic love and mature love is crucial if a relationship is to succeed, last, and thrive. Love is not just an emotion, but also an active process of working

through differences. Love is a decision you make every day.

Signs of a mature love relationship:

- You have the ability to change your reactions to your partner
- You can problem solve and compromise
- You can accept and deal with differences
- You can give when it's hard
- You can interrupt a conversation that is not going well and resume it later with better results
- Disappointments don't make you fall apart
- You feel emotionally and sexually connected
- When you feel disconnected, you know how to get back on track

In the next few pages, you can read about how to create new habits that may make you a more mature partner. Read on!

HABIT 1: PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR RELATIONSHIP

Why are relationships difficult and what does it take to make them work?

Not so long ago, relationships between men and women were based on a hierarchy—a pecking order. Men acted as the primary earners and decision makers, and women served as the caretakers of all tasks related to children and home. Roles were clearly defined and rarely questioned, and each half of a couple knew how he or she was expected to behave.

Men and women also operated in largely separate spheres following the known rules, obligations and duties of their gender and their social class. Divorce in the middle class was unheard of and there were dire consequences for women if they fell outside the norms. The happiness of each member of the couple was definitely not the reason for marriage which was actually based on the need to get good in laws, combine farmlands, or bear children.

Women often had the company of their mothers, sisters, friends, and neighbors and could confide in them when they needed advice on how to handle their men and their children.

Most women didn't need to rely upon their husbands for emotional support and their sexual longings weren't even acknowledged. Men spent their days and many nights with male bosses and co-workers, didn't necessarily have to rely on their wives to meet their sexual needs, and their emotional longings weren't acknowledged.

Enormous changes have occurred in a relatively short span of Western history. Women entered the workforce in droves, the pill made pregnancy voluntary, and a same-sex sexual orientation emerged from the shadows. Households and neighborhoods are no longer held together by the fibers of three or four generations. Most families can't survive on one income, roles are blurred, and expectations are high.

Most women (not to mention most men!) I know wouldn't go back to that old, oppressive system for all the chocolate in Belgium. But, we're still blindly fumbling our way out of the cave, even 50 years later. Today's couples watched their parents and grandparents play out those predictable scenes and they have no role models for a 21st century, egalitarian relationship. We know we want equal partnerships, but what exactly does that mean?

We want our partners to be our best friends, fulfill our sexual fantasies, support our dreams, share our financial burdens, and accept our flaws. Sure, the divorce rate hovers around 50 percent, but given all that pressure, isn't it remarkable how many couples do hold it together?

No longer forced to stay in unhappy relationships, couples of all persuasions wrestle with a myriad of questions day in and day out, the answers to which are individually demarcated and personal, and designed by each couple from scratch.

So what are the secrets of today's successful couples? And why are relationships so difficult? It is possible to make your own rules, roles, and boundaries. Take the time to consider what you witnessed growing up. Make conscious decisions about what you want to carry forward and what you want to discard.

Most couples stop thinking critically about their relationship after the initial honeymoon stage. When they start living together or they get married, they just assume that things will work out. Imagine that the co-creators of a new start up say this to each other: "Well, now that we started the company, we don't need to talk about it anymore". And yet, this is what couples often do: They expect the relationship to be stable and flourish, even though they don't meet, which is untenable.

Make time to create your own relationship vision. Then, be prepared to stretch and reshape those goals, as some of your partner's ideas will undoubtedly differ. Through the years, priorities and beliefs will shift, and you may need to return to the negotiating table a number of times. But, if you devote some energy early on to crafting a mutual definition of an equal partnership, you'll have your own playbook and relationship rules to draw from.

When couples don't intentionally think through some of these issues, confusion, anger, and resentment often take over. Operating unwittingly from an old family playbook, partners push to assert their version as the right version. So it's worth the time, effort, and sometimes the struggle, to shed light on the following questions to design your own vision, with your own rules and expectations. It's never too late to examine your own rules and beliefs, even if you have been together for a long time.

EXERCISE 1: CREATE A RELATIONSHIP VISION

Couples who have a successful relationship have had a chance to create their own relationship vision. Take some time to think about your answers to these questions and share them with your partner. Have your partner share his/her answers with you. If your partner is not motivated to do this at this time, do it yourself and share your vision with him/her. **First, create the habit of clarifying your vision and sharing it with your partner. Second, create the habit of noticing whether or not you are living up to your relationship vision in your everyday life.**

Instructions

First, print this page and write out your answers. Then, think about whether you are living up to your own definitions in your everyday behavior.

1. What is my vision of a good relationship?

Use the following words to help shape your vision. What does each word mean to you?

Commitment:

Trust:

Communication:

Friendship:

Respect:

Acceptance:

Connection:

Empathy:

Kindness:

2. Answer the following questions and share them with your partner

Is it always possible to make decisions jointly? What does compromise really look like?

What happens if we each have a different opinion about something important? How can I motivate and influence my partner without resorting to bullying, manipulation, withdrawal, or avoidance?

If I feel like having sex and you don't, what is the best way to approach you? If I don't feel like having sex when you do, what is the best way to respond, so you don't feel rejected?

If I want to have a great partner, I need to be the best partner. What are the ways in which I am a good partner? Complete the following sentences:

When I don't like something you do or say, I will try to...

When I am very upset, I will take a break and calm down by...

I am difficult to live with when I... Therefore, to become less difficult to live with, I will try to...

HABIT 2: SHOW YOU CARE

Ignore negative thoughts about your partner and show you care: a real relationship.

Disappointment. Disagreement. Out of sync. Out of touch. Lack of balance. Unfulfilled expectations. Unmet needs.

You probably do not associate these words with what happens in a good relationship. That is perfectly understandable. And yet, that's exactly what happens in a real relationship that is successful.

Many of us grew up without watching a real relationship unfold every minute of every day. Our main source of information about successful relationships comes from movies that never show us the sequels to the ever after. And, in spite of our constant connectivity, we lead pretty isolated lives. We don't have role models of successful relationships. Our ideas about what happens are rooted in our imagination, not in reality.

In real relationships:

- We are disappointed
- We don't always get our needs met
- We can be out of touch and out of sync
- There are some things on which we never agree
- Our partner may exhibit personality characteristics that we dislike
- Sometimes, we don't feel love for our partner

In successful relationships the ups outweigh the downs. Periods of harmony follow tough transitions. Disagreements and unmet needs are dealt with. Empathy trumps hostility. Expectations get reconsidered, clarified, and addressed again. Feelings of love come and go.

And, of course, in a real successful relationship, we can repair and apologize, forgive and rebalance. And we do this with respect. And patience. And acts of caring. And acceptance. And love.

According to researcher John Gottman, couples need to focus on the positive and remember what brought them together in the first place. The longer people are together, the harder it is

to consistently say caring things and act in caring ways. A **5-to-1 ratio** of positive to negative interactions is Gottman's formula for divorce prevention. Follow the next exercise for some ideas that will get you started. It consists of a long list of things you can do if you remember not to take your partner for granted, and you focus your attention on what your partner likes and craves. Remember, aim for a trend, not perfection.

EXERCISE 2: CREATE A LIST OF CARING ACTIVITIES

The list below is long. Don't be overwhelmed by the amount, but do read it through a couple of times. This exercise has two possible versions depending on whether it is "Caring Partner" or the "Cared For" partner that chooses the caring activity. In the first version the "Caring Partner" picks the items; in the second, the "Cared For Partner" picks the items.

Instructions

Version 1: "Caring Partner" selects something from the caring activities list below that will make the "Cared For" partner feel good.

Version 2: "Caring Partner" asks the "Cared For" partner to pick from the caring activities below.

Pick two to three activities per day. Do this for three weeks until you form the habit.

List of caring activities

Read the list at least twice before picking an activity. Pick a few activities and set a reminder on your phone or write on a piece of paper so you don't forget to do it. New habits take reminders in the beginning.

- Complete a household repair
- Prepare an entire meal
- Help with the dinner or breakfast
- Go out for breakfast
- Take care of the car
- Shop for things we need
- Do the laundry
- Run an errand
- Take out the garbage
- Feed or take care of the pets
- Offer to do something to take care of child/children
- Tell partner something confidential

- Start a conversation with partner
- Ask partner how he or she feels
- Do something partner asked to do
- Help dress the children
- Give partner a nice greeting when meet after being apart
- Give partner a massage or rubdown
- Talk to partner when he or she asks for some attention
- Try to cheer partner up
- Touch partner affectionately
- Do something to look nice (dress, shaving, etc.)
- Hug or kiss partner
- Make his or her favorite food
- Cuddle
- Do something sexual he or she really likes
- Take together about finances to help us stick to the budget
- Go out to dinner, a movie, or a bar
- Play sports together
- Play games together
- Schedule an enjoyable conversation
- Make some extra money
- Summarize partner's point of view so she or he knows you are listening
- Forgive partner for something
- Ask for partner's opinion
- Smile at partner or laugh with him/her
- Initiate sex
- Be nice to partner's friends
- Say something nice about partner to his/her friends/family
- Pay partner a compliment
- Be nice to partner even though he or she was mean to me
- Praise partner
- Respond to sexual advances
- Bring partner a present
- Show that sex was enjoyable

- Shop for something together
- Talk about his or her friends or relatives
- Consult about making a purchase
- Spend time together having fun
- Plan or help with a social event
- Suggest something fun to do
- Balance the checkbook
- Pay a bill
- Walk the dog together
- Do some needed gardening
- Do the dishes, cleaning, or straightening up
- Mend partner's clothes
- Mow the lawn
- Set the alarm clock for my partner

HABIT 3: DISTINGUISH BETWEEN SEX AND TOUCH

In the following paragraphs you will:

- Learn about the different kinds of touch
- Read about the effect of touch deprivation on mood
- Find out about two misconceptions people have regarding sex and touch
- Learn that not all sensual and erotic activity has to be reciprocal
- Learn one exercise to restore touch and playfulness to your relationship

Types of Physical Touch

Not all touch is sexual or erotic. Some touch involves sexual and erotic activities, such as foreplay and intercourse, but much of human touch is non sexual. Examples of non-sexual touch include touching hair, face or hands, massaging or caressing.

See the “Menus” below. The Touch Exercise starts after the “Menus”.

Touch Deprivation

It appears that touch deprivation affects mood, the immune system, and our general well-being. Most research on this topic has been conducted with newborns or the elderly, showing strong associations between lack of touch and alterations in mood. When children and the elderly are not touched, their mood, attitude, and overall well-being may suffer. The same is true for adults. If adults are not touched on a regular basis they can get more irritable. We know that couples who don't touch each other for a long time suffer from touch deprivation.

Why is it so hard to get back into the “sandbox”?

When you are in a bad mood, you may not feel like touching or being touched by your partner. Or, when your partner does something that upsets you, you may not feel like touching or being touched. Children can often get back into the “sandbox” and continue playing after a fight, without even thinking about how they do that. For adults, it gets harder to do that, but necessary to avoid the cycle of negativity that often leads to touch deprivation. When you then stop getting back into the “sandbox” to play, you get even more irritable, and you feel like touching/being touched even less often, which makes you or your partner even more upset or irritable. If this

sounds all too familiar to you, you have entered a vicious cycle.

Now, it's hard to know whether you are more irritable because you haven't been touched by your partner in a long time, or whether you don't feel like touching/being touched because you are in a bad mood based on what your partner did to you a while ago.

Two Misconceptions About Human Touch

1. Physical touch always has to lead to sexual touch and to intercourse.

Human physical intimacy and erotic pleasure are complex activities and not as natural as we may believe they should be. Many feel anxious about sharing their bodies. Additionally, the hormonal cocktail that fuels passion and erotic desire in the first stages of a relationship doesn't last. And on top of it, people vary in how much sexual activity and touch they want. Some want more, some want less. This is normal.

Things get complicated when couples who have a different level of sexual desire start to avoid touching each other and don't communicate verbally what they want or don't want. They stop the playfulness; they stop touching each other's faces, shoulders, hair, hands, or backs. That's understandable: If you think that if you touch your partner, sexual intercourse will necessarily follow, and you are the one with lower desire, you will stop touching to avoid sex. And if you are the one with higher desire, you may stop touching your partner to avoid further rejection. To avoid intercourse, many couples stop touching all together. Obviously, physical touch can lead to intercourse, but not always.

2. All physical intimacy or erotic activity has to be reciprocal and equally desired at the same time.

Not all sensual or sexual activity should be a reciprocal intimate moment. Much of physical and erotic activity is about knowing what you want and being comfortable asking for it, and knowing what your partner wants, and being comfortable giving it.

Can you think of yourself as someone who can give touch for a few minutes without the expectation of getting anything for it? Can you tolerate receiving pleasurable sexual and non-sexual touch without the pressure to give anything in return? Which one is harder for you?

You don't always need to be in the mood for Chinese food in order to please your partner who may be in the mood for cashew chicken. Similarly, you don't need to be in the mood for sex or even for being touched yourself to give a back rub or touch your partner if that's what he or she wants or requests. Conversely, just because you feel like getting a long hug, or you want your

partner to touch your back or your face or hair, does not mean that she or he has to want the same thing as you. And, most importantly, it doesn't necessarily mean that it will lead to intercourse.

EXERCISE 3: GET BACK IN THE SANDBOX AND START TOUCHING

The following exercise is for when you are ready to get back into the “sandbox” and “play” again with your partner. You can do the exercise when you are ready to:

- Separate touch from intercourse in your mind
- Give pleasurable touch to your partner even when you are not in the mood to receive it yourself
- Receive pleasurable touch from your partner without thinking that you need to give anything in return
- Receive touch even when your partner does not want it at the same time

When you are ready to get back into the sandbox, align your mind with your body, get rid of the misconception that all activity needs to be reciprocal, and try this touch exercise. See menu of touch activities after the guidelines.

General Guidelines for the Touch Exercise

- Schedule the touch activity in collaboration with your partner, i.e., is this a good day/time for you? What other days/times would be better for you?
- The one who wants to be touched is in charge of reminding the partner that it is time (not the other way around). You are the one who schedules and reminds.
- Try not to expect that your partner will reciprocate. If your partner wants a turn with touch, he or she would find out if this is a good time for you.
- For this exercise, try to avoid the expectation that this touching time will lead to “other things,” i.e., sexual intercourse.
- Guidelines for Couples Who Have Not Touched in a Long Time

If you haven't touched or been touched in a long time, this will not be easy. The more time you have avoided touching or being touched, the less natural or more forced this will feel. This is normal. Here are some guidelines if you have not touched or been touched in a long time, to start you off in the direction of a virtuous cycle.

- Pick items from the menu, but I recommend starting with menus 1 and 2.
- Try not to move too quickly from one menu to the next.

- Stay with the exercise for a minimum of two and a maximum of five minutes
- Do the exercise a few times until it feels comfortable and natural, before you move on to items in the other menu.

Touch Exercise Steps

Step 1. Pick three items from the menus (see below) that you think are pleasurable for you.

Step 2. Ask your partner to spend no more than five minutes doing the three things you picked.

Step 3. Start playing!

Remember to separate giving pleasure from receiving pleasure. Your partner does not necessarily take a turn following yours and your partner needs to do his/her own requesting at a time when it is convenient for you, just as you requested.

Menu 1 Non-sexual Touch—Basic

- Long Hugs
- Cuddling
- Embracing
- Touching hair
- Long kisses on the cheek
- Touching face
- Scratching back
- Touching shoulders

Menu 2 Non-sexual Touch—Advanced

- Touching waist
- Holding hands sitting down
- Holding hands walking
- Moving hand up and down the back
- Long kisses on the mouth
- Caressing face
- Caressing hair
- Combing Hair
- Massaging back
- Massaging feet
- Touching or massaging each finger from hand

- Massaging shoulder
- Caress or massage legs
- Touching or massaging toes
- Caress or massage arms
- Caress or massage under arms

Menu 3 Sexual Touch—Basic

- Caress breast with hands
- Caress nipples
- Caress pubic hair
- Caress penis
- Caress testicles
- Touch vagina
- Touch clitoris
- Touch belly button
- Caress hips
- Touch or caress buttocks

Menu 4 Sexual Touch—Advanced

- Touch sexual organs with hands, mouth and tongue or with other sexual organs.
- Intercourse
- Orgasm

Final thoughts

Remember that it may be more difficult for you to give without receiving or to receive without giving. Which is easier for you? Can you communicate your expectations clearly and kindly?

HABIT 4: RECOGNIZE DIFFERENT TYPES OF INTIMACY

What is intimacy? Creating intimacy in a relationship can seem mysterious and elusive. Most people want it, but what is intimacy, really? Most of us have a picture in our heads about what intimacy looks like. But everyone's picture is different. What is your idea of an intimate relationship: Passionate sex? Slow kisses on the cheek? Long talks where you reveal your innermost thoughts? Walking the dog side by side without speaking?

Intimacy is a quality in a relationship that can take on many forms. The end result? Lasting feelings of closeness develop.

Intimacy and healthy relationships go hand in hand, yet everyone has different ideas about what intimacy is and how it is created. What makes each partner feel close to the other may not be the same, and that's ok.

Intimacy can be identified as:

- Knowing your partner in depth, and yet tolerating that you cannot know it all. Accepting your partner for who she is, even if you dislike some aspects of the personality
- Risking vulnerability by allowing your partner to know you, faults and all
- Knowing where you end and your partner begins. Clear boundaries help foster intimacy

Are There Superior Forms of Intimacy?

Even in healthy relationships, people cannot be intimate all the time in all areas. One form of intimacy moves to the forefront, while the others take a back seat. Sometimes, men and women understand intimacy in different ways. Not one way of being intimate is superior or inferior to another.

Couples that function relatively well are not worried about which form of intimacy is better. Instead, they are focused on making their intimate moments flexible, fun, and exchangeable and attended to.

Forms of Intimacy

Cognitive/Intellectual: Interactions where individuals exchange thoughts, share ideas, and enjoy

the similarities and differences between their opinions.

Experiential/Spiritual: Interactions where people get together saying very little to each other, not sharing too many thoughts, feelings or words, but being involved in activities side by side.

Emotional: Interactions where two people comfortably share their feelings or empathize with the feelings of the other person, to understand and increase awareness of the other person's emotional life.

Sexual/physical: Interactions, which include a broad range of sensuous activities ranging from hugs, kisses, caresses, all the way to intercourse.

When a high sexual desire person is partnered with a low sexual desire person, or when a highly verbal person is partnered with a less verbal person, it is important to accommodate each other's ideas for increasing intimacy, rather than vying for which form of feeling close is a better expression of true intimacy.

There is no hierarchy of intimacy. All forms are equally worthy of consideration. What is yours?

EXERCISE 4: RECOGNIZE AND RESPOND TO “BIDS FOR CONNECTION”

A “bid for connection” can be a question, a gesture, a look, a touch--any single expression that says, “I want to feel connected to you.” A response to a bid is just that--a positive or negative answer to your partner’s request for connection and closeness. Couples fare better when they learn to recognize and respond positively to bids for connection.

Because we each have different ways of feeling connected, loved, and cared for, sometimes we fail to recognize a bid for connection for what it is. We have different “love languages.” We tend to give what we want to get. That is not real giving.

Picking from the lists below will increase your awareness of how you or your partner “bids for connection.”

Physical/Sexual

- Take time to just cuddle
- Take time to caress romantically
- Take time to make love
- Take time for any physical affection

Experiential/Spiritual

- Watch TV, read the newspaper
- Listening to music, go to a concert
- Go for a walk, connect with nature in some way
- Go to church, synagogue, or other place of worship

Emotional

- Be curious and ask questions of your partner
- Ask your partner to tell something he or she went through during the day
- Share a painful childhood memory with your partner
- Share your own weaknesses or fears

Intellectual

- Read a book or an article and share its contents
- Discuss a movie
- Talk about religious or spiritual views
- Talk about political, moral or ethical issues

It's important to recognize and respond to the bids for connection from your partner to build intimacy in the way that your partner likes to feel connected. When your partner interrupts your computer activity to discuss dinner, this may be a bid for connection, not just a question about the menu. If your partner wants to connect sexually, this may be a bid for connection, not just an expression of a physical sexual need.

If you continually ignore or respond negatively to the bids for connection, your relationship will suffer in the long run.

In a successful relationship it's important to:

- Figure out what you need to feel connected and ask for it, even if you do not always get what you want (and even if your partner doesn't feel connected in the same way). Don't give up.
- Figure out how your partner requests connection and respond those bids even if you don't feel like it every time.

Finishing the sentences below will help you on both counts:

- Activities I like that make me feel connected to my partner are...
- I feel the closest to my partner when we...
- When I feel lonely, anxious, or fearful I would like to ... to feel closer to my partner.
- My partner requests connection when he/she...
- When my partner wants to feel closer to me, he or she likes to...
- When my partner bids for connection, I generally tend to...

HABIT 5: LET'S TALK ABOUT SEX

Balancing a sense of curiosity and possibility with a sense of security and stability in a long-term relationship is one of the most challenging issues contemporary couples face. Physical intimacy and erotic pleasure are very complex human endeavors. We all get anxious about sharing our bodies, experimenting with something new, and talking about what we like, fantasize, and prefer.

On top of that, the stability and predictability of domesticity can kill desire, which is borne out of mystery and novelty. When you add to the mix that couples may have a hard time getting “back into the sandbox” after a fight or a disappointment, we are really in for trouble when it comes to sustaining a sexual relationship.

Couples often stop holding hands, laughing at each other's jokes, or sitting next to each other on the couch. Those small, seemingly inconsequential gestures help differentiate a partnership from a platonic friendship. For some couples the problem is simply that they have differing levels of desire. Sexual desire incompatibility (one wants more sex than the other) is a frequent problem with couples. Yet, they seldom talk about it.

It is truly amazing how many couples who share so much of their lives together never talk about sex. They don't tell each other what they like or dislike, they don't talk about what feels good and what doesn't. They don't have conversations about how to recognize a bid for connection, how to accept it or reject it, and how to plan for it. And they don't talk about balancing the needs of the high desire person with the needs of the lower desire person.

You'd think it would be easier. Though sex talk is a constant presence in our culture, it is rare to see examples of someone discussing sex with the person they are actually having sex with.

When couples are not tuned in to their sexual needs, unspoken messages are communicated, hurts are never revealed, and vulnerabilities are not shared. Also, couples tend to take each other granted and get lazy. Let's face it! After a hard day's work, children and paying bills, sex may be the last thing on your mind!

And on top of that, it's easy to become selfish when it comes to sex or to withhold it as a means of controlling the relationship. But, when something makes you uncomfortable, you have to talk about it.

Make talking about—and having—sex a priority. A regular sexual connection is important in a successful relationship because it energizes the relationship, makes each person feel desired, and serves as a buffer against the ups and downs of coupled life.

What to do? Let's go on to the next exercise for tips and ideas.

EXERCISE 5: TALK ABOUT SEX. PLAN FOR SEX. PREPARE FOR SEX.

Plan for sex. Sexual encounters are not automatic when the early stage of a relationship wanes. Some people are against planning for sex because it feels unnatural, but they then complain that sex never happens. If you want sex to happen more often, you need to plan for it.

Talk about sex. Don't ignore sexual discrepancies or sexual frustrations. Be prepared to show, not just tell. Talk about what turns you on and listen to what turns your partner on. If you want more sex than you are getting, ask your partner what he or she needs in order to be open to doing it more often. If you don't want to do it as often, try to find a balance between your wishes and your partner's.

Prepare for sex. Take a shower, use perfume, or dress in a sexy way. You used to do those things in the early stages of the relationship. Keep doing it.

Do sexy things to or with your partner. Flirt!

Use your imagination and share a fantasy. Try something different every once in a while. Share your fantasies with your partner. Talk about what you want to try sexually but are a little afraid of.

Ask your partner to please you. Talk with your partner kindly about your wishes for more sex. Ask your partner what he/she wants in order to get more attuned to your wishes. Find out what would increase the chances. Ask how to signal that you are in the mood. Talk about sex without blaming your partner.

Just please your partner. Don't wait until you are both in the mood. Not all sex is a mutually intimate moment. Taking care of your partner can be a generous and loving thing to do, even if you are not into it. And intercourse is not the only way. Be creative.

HABIT 6: BEFORE THE FIGHT HOW AND WHEN TO INTERACT

No relationship is devoid of hurts, mistakes, and missed opportunities. Criticisms are hard to take, but learning to be open to complaints and criticisms, and delivering complaints and critical messages so our partner can hear them are skills worth learning. You need to figure out how to get a point across and how to hear the points your partner is trying to make.

People who know how to deliver criticisms or complaints, and whose partners know how to receive them, have a better relationship than those who don't have that skill.

One of the biggest differences between couples who treat each other well and those who don't is their skill in delivering criticisms and complaints and the ability of the partner to respond to them.

We naturally become defensive when our partners criticize us. We tend to listen to refute or to correct what is unfair or wrong. We may become defensive or attack back. And when it comes to delivering complaints, we may do it harshly, or at a bad time, or when we are tired, cranky, or irritable.

This is a big part of what so many couples mean when they say that they have "communication problems": they don't know how to say difficult things to their partners or they don't listen well to difficult things the partner tells them.

How do we listen to criticism without getting defensive? How do we stay connected when we feel like striking back? How do we deliver difficult complaints at the right time and in the right way?

It's important to try to understand where our partners are coming from, even when we don't like how they are communicating. Even when we think they are wrong. Something in their message is saying, "This is important to me." And if you want to be in a successful relationship **you cannot ignore what is important to your partner.**

This is not easy. To listen with an open heart to understand another person requires intention, generosity, commitment, and most of all, practice.

EXERCISE 6: PREPARE FOR A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION

Here you will learn:

- **How to respond when your partner criticizes.** This involves understanding what point your partner is trying to get across to you.
- **How to deliver criticisms and complaints.** This involves figuring out what point you want to get across to your partner.

To respond to your partner's complaints, follow these tips:

1. Make sure that the conversation is occurring at a time that is convenient for you both, NOT when either of you is tired, has had a few drinks, or is hungry, irritated, or busy.
2. Do whatever it takes to deescalate--not intensify--tension. You need to figure out how to **soothe yourself and stay calm**. Take a break, a walk, or a bath or call a friend. If you cannot stay calm it may be better to postpone the conversation until you can calm yourself down. **You cannot have a productive conversation when you're angry, flooded or anxious.**
3. Bring a pad of paper and something to write with.
4. The conversation should not go on forever. Plan how much time you will devote to it. A good rule of thumb is 30 minutes. Some can be done in about 15 minutes. Conversations that go on for more than 30 minutes tend not to be productive.

If you are on the receiving end of criticism from your partner, the following tips may be helpful to keep defense or attacks in check. You will need pen and paper. Listen to the criticism **without planning to argue or refute**. When your partner is talking, write down what he or she is saying to make sure you understand it, even if you don't agree. The key point is to understand what your partner is saying.

This is a good time to be intentionally curious and ask questions about what you don't understand. Because we are so used to having an opinion about what our partner says, this part of the habit is not as easy as it sounds. **Make sure that you understand what your partner is really saying,**

not what you think you partner is saying. Most of us think we are good listeners, but often we are not listening well.

Never criticize a person who is criticizing you. There may be a time to bring up your own points, but that time is not when the other person has started to voice his/her own complaints. Your time will come in a **different conversation.**

It's fine to say, "You hurt my feelings when you talk to me this way." "I need you to bring up just one thing at a time," or "When you start bringing up the past, I shut down and can't listen." If you are having trouble staying calm, stop the conversation. It's perfectly all right to say, "I need a little time to think about what you are saying." Commit to another time and follow through with it, preferably within 24 hours.

If you are able to stay calm, repeat back to your partner what he or she has said to make sure you got it right. Ask your partner if you got it right.

If your partner says you heard correctly, ask what you can do about this in the future and make a commitment to try. Make sure you keep writing down what your partner is requesting of you and repeat back the request to make sure you got it.

If you can agree to the request, say so and commit to the change. If you cannot agree to the request, say "I need to think about what you are saying and I will get back to you." Actually think about it and get back to your partner.

No one likes being the target of criticism, but a lot can be learned from the challenge. With practice, we can enhance our capacity to listen differently, to ask questions, to get our intensity down, and to move toward, rather than away from, the other person.

We can learn to apologize for the part we can agree with and wait our turn to speak about our own issues. If you have ever responded to criticism and anger defensively, it may take some getting used to, and some practice to form these new habits.

If you are trying to deliver a complaint or criticism to your partner, the following tips may be helpful. Follow tips 1 through 4 above to set up the conversation.

- Think about what and how you want to say ahead of time. Try to figure out what the goal of your conversation is. Practice what you want to say before you say it.
- Deliver the complaint to your partner in two or three short sentences, without exaggerations and without criticizing your partner's personality. Just state the facts, as you understand them, and why this issue is important to you.
- State your feelings. Try to go beyond expressing frustration or anger and see if you can get

to the softer feelings: feeling dismissed, left out, not relied on, not heard, etc.

- Tell your partner that you just want to make sure he or she understands your complaint or criticism (and your feelings), noting that you are not seeking approval or agreement.
- Ask your partner to repeat what you said; make sure that he or she captures all the nuances. If partner gets it wrong, tell him or her to ask clarification questions.

If at any point, you or your partner gets defensive or angry, it's time to end the conversation and reschedule for another time, preferably within 24 hours.

If you are thinking the above exercise is too much work or too artificial or unnatural, don't worry, once you practice some of what I suggest and get used to it, it will feel more natural and less forced. **Remember, a new habit needs to be practiced for at least three weeks.**

HABIT 7: AFTER THE FIGHT - REPAIR AND TALK

All couples fight. Fights are unavoidable in an equal partnership.

1. A fight is an attempt that you make to get a point across that your partner is not able to hear at this time.
2. A fight is an attempt by your partner to get a point across that you are not able to hear at this time.
3. A fight is stalemate that is the result of points 1 and 2

What each of you says in the effort to make a point just leads the other to feel that his or her own point is being ignored. At any moment in a fight, what each of you says in an effort to be heard makes the other one feel unheard.

After a fight, we tend to do some of the following, none of which are helpful to learn from the fight:

- Leave it to our partner to make the first move.
- Go on as if nothing ever happened.
- Try to talk about it again, unsuccessfully.
- Make some kind of peace offering, i.e. offer to help with dinner, make a joke, etc.

Have you already identified which is your preferred style? These are not helpful strategies if you want mutual understanding in your relationship.

If we can understand fighting as failed attempt to get a point across, we can improve our ability to learn from our fights, and we can talk about our fights afterwards without resulting in a second fight.

It's only after a fight when our ability to think resurfaces, that we can attempt to make our points more clearly and are ready to listen to the point of our partner.

Fighting can improve your relationship if you learn the steps to talk after a fight. Are you ready to give it a try?

EXERCISE 7: PREPARE TO REPAIR AND TALK AFTER THE FIGHT

Here are three steps for talking about a fight after a fight that are guaranteed to **not** lead to another fight.

1. Switch from blaming your partner to sympathizing with him or her. **Take your partner's point of view.** What points was your partner trying to make? Ask questions to try to understand what your partner was trying to say. You don't have to agree; you just have to understand.
2. **Talk about your contribution to the fight**, without talking about the contribution of your partner. For example, "I know I said harsh things, I had a bad day and I took it out on you." If you do this, your partner is more likely to acknowledge his or her contribution to the fight.
3. Move to this step only after completing the previous two. Use "I" statements versus "you" statements. Make sure that they are not accusations disguised as "I" statements. What points were you trying to make? How can you rephrase your point in a way that is more precise, and to the point?

If you get into another fight, you may not have done those three steps in that order.

CONCLUSION

Thank you for reading this book and I hope you found the relationship habits and exercise helpful! If you can learn to become the partner you want to have by creating these habits, you will have a good chance of inoculating your relationship from the inevitable ups and downs. You will be on your way to give your relationship the tools, skills, and habits it needs to succeed in the complicated modern world.

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