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# MAKE YOUR MARRIAGE CONSCIOUS

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Insights and Tips  
From a Therapist, Husband, and Father

## Background

I created this guide based on my experience, not only as a couples counselor, but also as a husband and a father. This is a series of insights and vignettes from my work with couples as well as what lessons my marriage has taught me. It's far too easy to want to look only at the ways to make our relationship better. But it is the understanding of our partners that helps us apply that new behavior from those relationship skills we learn. My hope is that this guide helps you rise to a new level of understanding of your partner so that you can have a more fulfilling and intimate relationship. You and your partner deserve it.

John Harrison



## Your Partner Doesn't Have to Be Your Best Friend

It sounds perfect. Not only is your husband or wife your husband or wife, but they're also your best friend. For those couples that can claim this as part of their marital bliss, they really have the best of both worlds. But not all couples are best friends. Nor do they have to be.

One of the things that let me know my wife was "the one" is that she never pressured me to tell her we were best friends. My wife knew when she met me that I had formed many close friendships before I met her from my past experiences in school, college, and the military. I have a group of brothers that will be my best of friends to the day I leave this earth. This is one of the things my wife likes about me.

For many couples the aspect of friendship becomes a point of contention in a relationship. When did this happen? More than likely the fact that marriages and relationships have become more equal partnerships in the last 40 plus years might have something to do with it.

One or both of the partners may want the whole package. Romance, intimacy, friendship. When one of the partners enters into a relationship already having close friends, they can feel a ton of pressure to be a "best friend" to their romantic partner.

Establishing friends for many people is not a casual happening. Length of time knowing someone, experiencing life events, hardships together, forming bonding experiences. All of these can play a significant factor in how we chose our friends. Some people are extremely loyal to their friends and form lasting bonds with those people that last a lifetime. They take friendship seriously.

- If your partner is one of these loyal and choosy people, be grateful that they are letting you into their lives.
- Focusing on their virtues of loyalty as a person can remind you that you've chosen a solid mate. Don't let their existing friendships with others get in the way of what you and your partner have.
- Chances are when you marry a loyal person, your friendship with them will grow and strengthen over time. That's a good thing.

### Marriage is different than friendship

You have something with your spouse that they will never have with their friends. Complete intimacy. Physical and emotional intimacy. Your spouse does not have this with their friends. They have this with you.

Friendship is different than marriage. Here's why.

- Close friends have an unconditional relationship
- Marriages are conditional whether you want to recognize it or not
- Close friendships do not contain the sacrifices and personal learning experiences that marriage can bring into your life

Marriage comes with everything. The good and the bad. Being intimate with your partner means you are vulnerable with them in ways you cannot be with your friends. You share aspects of yourself in marriage that friendship cannot duplicate.

In marriage you experience with your spouse

- Raising children together
- Taking care of one another in trying times
- Death in the family
- Birth of a child
- Family crisis

- Financial hardship

Marriage is much more than friendship and it will present challenges for both relational and personal that only marriage can do.

A wise person once said, "Marriage is a sacred laboratory of personal growth and exploration, if the couple allows it." This is complete intimacy and it transcends friendship.

If anything, you should encourage your spouse to have close friends outside your marriage. As long as your partner is not withholding from you, their close friendships with other people allow them to stay grounded in who they are. Remember the person you married was a separate person before you met them. They have lived an entire life shaping who they are as a person and this includes close friendships that they have formed outside of their relationship with you.

Spouses with close friends don't have to feel a burden to be everything to their partner. Feel frustrated that you can't always understand your wife? Be glad they have a good friend that can give them what they need in the form of support that only a friend can give. Congratulations! You've probably married a healthy and grounded person who can maintain strong relationships. Chances are this means your marriage is relatively strong and grounded too.

Do you really want to know EVERYTHING about your spouse?

The fact is your husband or wife's friends know just about everything about them. You don't. And you shouldn't. Possessing the need to know everything about your spouse doesn't increase intimacy, it kills it. It can be the seed of jealousy and trust issues. Leave well enough alone. Be the husband or wife your spouse married. Also know you don't have to be everything. Nor should you.

If you are married to your best friend then be grateful! You have found a partner that is complete in ways that probably only one person in this world can be. If you are in a serious relationship, or are married, and feel that a "best friend" status is lacking with your partner, don't be discouraged. There's nothing wrong with this. Exploring your relationship for what it is and what it can be, regardless of your friendship with your spouse, can bring you a closeness with the person you love in ways no other relationship can deliver. And that's a good thing!

## Change in a Relationship is Hard

When couples come to their first session for couples counseling I ask them this question: "What would you want to see change in your relationship for this process to be a success?"

### What Couples Want From Their Relationships

They want:

"to communicate better"

"to have better intimacy"

"to get back to where we were"

"to stop fighting over the same things"

These are things EVERY couple should get. You deserve it and so does your partner. So if both people want the same things, why aren't you both able to make that happen? What's getting in the way of the changes you want?

### What Gets in the Way

What's getting in the way of progress and change in your relationship? Often what prevents change from taking place is that one, or both, of you are not wanting to make the changes you are actually seeking.

We are an externally focused society. We want other people and circumstances to change to get the changes that we want. Yet, we are simultaneously hesitant to make these changes internally. We want our voices heard and our needs met. But we also ignore some important factors that get in the way of getting what we want. Here are some of the reasons that you aren't getting the change you seek.

### 1. You Are Being Emotionally Reactive

Usually couples come to counseling talking about the changes they want to see from a rational perspective. Talking about better communication, intimacy, and connection are all rationally expected needs in a relationship. The problem is that most of the time that you approach these subjects with your partner you aren't coming from a rational mindset. You are emotionally charged or triggered. It makes sense that no progress is being made on the issues you want to see changed. When you are triggered you aren't as open to change.

### 2. You Aren't Listening to Each Other

At least one of you, or both of you, are not actually listening to the other person when they are talking. You are not listening to what they are saying. You are thinking about how you are going to respond. Nothing gets in the way more of the "better communication" that you want than not listening to what your partner is actually saying. It's hard to improve on better communication and intimacy when the ways that you talk about your problems more resemble a debate than a collaboration.

### 3. You Aren't Allowing Your Partner to Change

Just because you ask your partner to make the changes you want to see in your relationship doesn't mean you don't have any responsibility in manifesting the desired change. You have an extremely important role in seeing the desired change develop. You have to take what they are giving. Most people would say, "Yeah, of course! I know that." But it's not that easy. If you are still angry and resentful about what has happened in the past, it will be very easy to hold onto that resentment. When you do this you are doing two things. First, you are denying yourself what you want. You don't deserve that. You deserve to get what you need in your relationship. Second, you are emphasizing the past instead of giving attention to the desired change you seek. How can your partner know their changed behavior is desired if you are punishing their new behavior by bringing up the past?

## Ways to Help Break the Cycle

### 1. Step Into the Rational Adult "You"

Couples frequently tell me that they struggle to put the things they learn in sessions into practice when they get home. Why? In session I encouraged couples to stay with their "rational adult" selves when they are communicating with one another. It's hard to put into practice, though. When they get home, they fall back into their old habits and destructive communication patterns by reacting from their "wounded self", or triggered emotional side. Put conscious attention to being the part of you that is a responsible adult (and parent). How can you and your partner get better at being your "rational adult" when you do get triggered?

### 2. Take a Time Out

It seems kind of simplistic and silly but it worked when you were a kid. Taking time to calm down clears your head. It



makes it less likely you'll say or do something you regret. It's probably something that you do with your kids. It's not a punishment. It's a way to think clearer and less reactive. You are basically parenting yourself. No shame in that.

*Here's what you do: You and your partner agree (not during an argument!) that you both are allowed to call a "time out" when either of you is triggered. There is no exception. You honor that agreement and allow the partner that calls the time out to take a 20 minute break. Once that time is up, the partner that calls the time out has to do a "check in". If they need more time, more time is granted. Agreed on a set amount of times of separation that can be used. Three or four iterations of 20, 30, 60 minute separations is reasonable. Make a plan that works for both of you. When you come back together you are to take a 24 hour moratorium on the subject you are fighting about. No talking about it unless you want to begin to argue again.*

### 3. Agree to Use Reflective Listening

I mentioned earlier how couples tend to listen with the intent to respond. This is how to effectively listen to your partner.

*How it works: "Transmitting and receiving". One partner says what they want to communicate (no more than a minute of talking) while the other partner's job is simply to listen. When the partner talking is done speaking, the other partner is to repeat (as well as you can) back what the partner just said. Upon repeating what the partner said, they ask "did I get that right?" If the answer is "yes", they are done. If the answer is "no", the partner who is transmitting gets to add what the partner missed and then their partner is to repeat back what they heard. Do this until the partner transmitting is satisfied that they have been heard. Switch. The partner*

*that was transmitting now listens, and the other partner now has a turn to talk.*

#### 4. Give Attention to Emotional Pain Without Being Reactive

If there are emotional issues that you feel are unresolved, give them the appropriate attention they deserve. Do not depend on expressing your emotional needs only when you are emotionally triggered. This doesn't work as I explained previously. Once you and your partner have practiced better ways of communicating with each other, you will be better at listening from them what used to trigger you. You will be able to handle what they are emotionally triggered by without being triggered yourself. It's a win-win. Both you and your partner deserve to have the space to talk about your emotions and be heard. You aren't entitled to unload on them and they don't have a free pass to unload on you.

This is hard work. And it is work. Be kind to yourself (and your partner)! Make a commitment to each other that you will no longer accept "same old". Make this commitment to not only your partner, but to your relationship, your family, and yourself! Be open to taking the steps to get the change you want to see.

Marriage is an awesome place of commitment, growth, and everything else in between. There's plenty of upside to it but it also comes with some myths and misconceptions. There can be a tremendous amount of pressure, and false obligations that surround our perception of marriage. Both coming from in the marriage from the spouses and from outside the marriage via family and society. Being able to identify marriage

misunderstandings can help couples avoid a lot of pain down the road.

## 10 common marriage misconceptions

1. Marriage should resemble the wedding day.

No. Weddings are a celebration of new beginnings and family. Marriages are much more than that. Intimacy, vulnerability, commitment, and patience are all great attributes of a marriage. Fun is what you have with your friends. And if you want a lasting marriage with your spouse, you'll need more than friendship. Look at it this way. Your marriage will be much more fun when you and your spouse can deal with the inevitable difficulties.

2. Marriage shouldn't be work.

I don't think work should feel like work either. But sometimes it does. Anything that is worth sacrificing for will involve some work. Look at it this way. The payoff of a good marriage is worth the efforts. Instead of the saying marriage is 50/50, it should be "100/100." As in you giving more than "your equal share". If you and your spouse do this, you'll thank each other because when one of you can't pull their weight, the other will be there.

3. Marriage will automatically make you closer as a couple.

It will make you closer. But only if the individuals in the marriage are open to being closer. The act of marriage alone won't do it. Reference again to intimacy and vulnerability.

4. You and your spouse are a unit and no longer individuals.

“The minute two people cease being the individuals who entered the relationship, the unit begins a slow downward spiral.” As mentioned by a friend. Emphasis on the slow aspect. It might not be apparent at first, but when one or both of the people in a marriage stop being individuals, the relationship will always suffer. Either that or the relationship becomes so codependent that when without the company of their spouse a person is dysfunctional.

#### 5. Getting married will solve problems of trust and insecurity.

Got big problems trusting your partner and want even more problems? Get married. Issues of trust in a relationship are serious. Nothing outside of hard work and attention needed to save a relationship will suffice. Marriage won't solve these issues.

#### 6. You can change your partner.

The only changing that you're doing in a marriage is changing yourself. Surprisingly, you might find that when you change your relationship changes in ways that actually help you get what you wanted in the first place. Always place the focus of change on what you can change.

#### 7. Your spouse is responsible for making you feel better.

Feeling anxious, angry, or depressed? You want to open up and talk to your partner about it. You don't want to unload on them. You don't want to look to them to give you the answers or to know “exactly what you want” when you are hurting. Your partner's job is to support you. Your job is to do the self work. The saying “happy wife equals happy life”? Somebody's getting left out.

#### 8. Kids will improve a marriage.

Kids are great. Having kids doesn't improve a marriage. Having kids will test your marriage's level of patience and commitment in a way that only having kids can. Learning how to have a marriage with kids will improve a marriage. But only if a couple welcomes the challenges of having a family. Once children arrive, letting them get between the relationship you have with your spouse will hurt intimacy.

9. You can continue your social life as is.

You can try doing this but it's doubtful you can sustain your old social life. Attempts to maintain it will likely result in a decline in connection with your partner. Add kids to your relationship and your social life will, and rightfully should, be drastically diminished. This doesn't mean that you and your spouse can't find ways to socialize together but it won't be what it was before you were married.

10. Marriage has to be perfect or it's a failure.

It depends on what you and your spouse see as "perfect". If your idea of perfect doesn't include accepting the inevitable challenges and difficult times of what marriage brings, you'll never be content. Focus instead on what you have and how to make it better, instead of the "idea" of what you want to have. It's too easy to see "other couples" and want what "they have". It's possible to be realistic in your marriage wants and needs and also hold out for better.

These are just my thoughts as a married man for 5 years. I'm sure I'll learn more as I go, but isn't that the point? What other marriage misconceptions have you learned aren't true?

## What Troubled Marriages are Lacking

The most often heard comment in my office a few weeks into couples counseling: “I honestly thought we would come into counseling and you’d tell us that HE was the one who needed most of the work! Now I can see where my own stuff is adding to the problems we are having.”

It is very common for one partner, or both, to come into couples counseling looking for me to say one thing. These partners want me to confirm that they are not to blame for their relationship falling apart, their partner is.

That’s possibly true. I’m sure that your partner does deserve some, if not most, of the blame. Your partner will ultimately have to do a lot of work to hold up to their end of the bargain. But what about your own role in change? Not only for your relationship, but for you.

Possibly the most important thing that each partner can do for their relationship is to be willing to work on themselves. The self that they were even before they met their husband or wife. Notice I didn’t say “successful” at working on themselves. Instead I would emphasize being “willing” to change.

Thinking of doing marriage counseling? Itching for change or frustrated that your partner can’t seem to “get it”?

Here are some important questions to ask yourself:

- Are **you** willing to do some self work independent of your relationship? (Yes, there will be relationship work to do. Are you willing to concentrate on you? The you you’ve always been long before you met your partner.)
- Are you willing to let **your partner** do their own self work independent of you and your relationship?
- Are **you** open to being vulnerable in allowing your partner to help you change and grow?

- Are **you** willing to let go of holding them responsible for your happiness?

All relationships are a blessing (as well as a curse at times). Your partner is there to bring about your awareness of self, whether or not either of you realize it. The good, the bad, especially your parts you don't like of yourself. Can you use the context of your relationship to improve not only your relationship but you?

## No Time For a Marriage and Kids

I didn't feel old when I got married. I didn't feel old when I turned 35. I didn't feel old when my wife and I had our first daughter. In April we had our second daughter. Now I'm feeling it. The child coverage in the house has gone from "double team" to "man to man". It's taken its toll. On me. On my wife. On our time together. Making time for your marriage is tough!

It's a common problem

The saving grace in all of this is that I know we're not alone. Plenty of our friends have experienced this. Our parents have lived through it too. But it doesn't take away from the fact that it's vital to a marriage to make sure that we are spending time together as a couple.

What you can do

In the worst cases, the addition of children to an already busy schedule can seriously damage a marriage, or end it. There's no getting around the challenge of balancing a marriage, family, and work. But it can improve. Here are a few tips.

## Scheduling time for each other

Spontaneity killer? Yep. However, it's one of the best ways to make that time with your partner that you desire. Use a calendar and schedule time for you and your spouse. Even if it's not a "date night". Try scheduling time once a week or as much as you can. Don't worry about making it perfect. Worry about putting it into action. Be careful, though. Don't put too much pressure on the scheduling. Sometimes it will work out and sometimes it won't. Just stay consistent.

## Sacrifice personal time

Fall is the season for football widows. I'm as guilty of this as anyone. There was a time when my wife and I had plenty of time for our personal interests and each other. Not anymore. While we still have our "own things", it's become necessary that we want to focus on what's ultimately important. Go ahead and mourn the loss of your weekend golf outings or Friday nights at the bar. But don't worry, things will clear up someday and you'll get some of that "me time" back. But for now, do the right thing.

## Turn off the TV and put your phone down

If you're complaining that you never have time to talk to your spouse but spending 2 hours a night in front of the TV, you might have discovered your problem. Try turning off the TV and putting your smart phone away. See what happens. If it's horrible you can always turn it back on or get back on your phone. On the other hand, if it's horrible, you might have more serious problems.

## Spend your time face to face, not shoulder to shoulder

See if you and your spouse can choose things to do together that involve direct connection to one another. There is a huge



difference in watching a game together than going out to dinner or going on a walk. There is bigger payoff in doing activities that get you reconnected to each other. Maybe you notice a difference in intimacy between both of you when you do face to face activities as opposed to say, going to a movie. Give it a try.

### Making the most of what you have

The biggest killer in a relationship can be stress. If you have a job and kids to manage your time around, you already know this. Make sure you aren't stressing about making time for your and your partner. One of the best ways to do this is taking advantage of the time you do have together when the opportunity arises. Maybe you sit outside on the porch and talk, instead of watching TV, maybe it's making dinner or breakfast together. Whatever you decide to do, don't add more pressure and stress!

However you decide to address making time for your marriage, remember to be kind to each other and yourself. It's hard enough making it all work. Marriage is certainly a challenge, there's no getting around it. Allow the harder times to be an opportunity for you to grow closer, not further apart. Good luck! You've arrived! Now make the best of it!

### The lack of vulnerability in men and how we're playing catch up with women

We are arguably at a time of social change in history like none other. The age of women's empowerment is increasing and has been for the last several decades. Women's position in our society has changed drastically. Women are more self accepting and are more accepted in various arenas, such as the workforce,

than ever. Not just here in this country, but in most parts of the world. Any significant change in men? Not much. Not a lot of change going on. Right now, I would look at it as playing more catch up with women than anything. And it's not that this is a good or bad thing, so before some of you get defensive, hear me out. Women and their roles have changed significantly while men have not and it's affected relationships, marriages, and family life.

It's what we're "not taught"

So, what happened? Why are men struggling to keep up with all of this change going on? There are a few possible reasons. A big one is that in our society we still look at expressing emotions and feeling as a weakness. This isn't just men, but it's also the women in their lives expecting them to maintain this false sense of bravado. Men feel a tremendous amount of pressure to maintain the role as provider and fearless protector. Another reason is that we weren't taught to give ourselves space to be vulnerable and emotionally expressive. Most of us men were never modeled this from our parents and our fathers. But before we go and blame dad, we have to realize that he wasn't modeled vulnerability from his father either. "So what's the big deal?", you are probably saying. Why do you need to be more emotionally sensitive or vulnerable? Well, if you're young, single, and not in an intimate relationship of any sort, you probably don't need to be. However, most of us men end up falling in love, thinking we have the perfect relationship, getting married, having kids, and then running into problems down the road. A lot of us don't know how to connect in ways that our partners and kids need us to. There's more to being a provider than bringing home the paycheck.

Taking control of the relationship

As a therapist I see couples who are having relationship issues and there is one common dynamic 9 out of 10 times. The woman is dragging the man into counseling because she can't get through to him on many levels. These are areas such as shared common interests and goals, and intimacy both physically and emotionally. The woman has found she is empowered enough to make a move to get her and her partner in counseling and now she's pissed and wants change. This is hard change for the man, however. This is a huge shift and it's not like the man can all of a sudden learn new skills overnight. It takes coaching, patience, and vulnerability. She's asking him to be open and vulnerable to receive change for the first time in many cases.

It didn't take long for me in my relationship to see where old patterns of communicating weren't working. It's not that I was doing anything wrong, or intentionally wrong, it's that I had not allowed myself to see past my perspective. Once I began to take some risks, both personally and inter-personally, and connecting with some male mentors my relationship with my wife changed in positive ways I could never imagine.

I actually enjoy working with dysfunctional couples. It's not that I enjoy seeing their misery, it's that I know what kind of positive changes are in store for the relationship. And as a man, it's rewarding for me to see another man willing to allow himself to grow not only for his wife and kids, but also for himself.

“I was weak, now I'm strong, so go sc\*\*w yourself” A losing relationship strategy

It's not that we need to bash men or women and our flawed relationship strategies, we just need to shed some light on why they're dysfunctional. Let's just call a spade a spade.

I previously mentioned the obvious change in women across the last several decades and how it has changed relationships. Part of that change is the empowerment of the individual woman. The strengthening of boundaries. The courage to say no and stand up for one's self, especially in relationships. This is all really important stuff.

So where is that a problem in relationships? To keep it simple, a completely autonomous stance of "I don't need you" doesn't send a good signal of relational stability into the marriage or partnership. Let's face it. Men need women and women need men if they're committed to being in a relationship. It's yin and yang. Cats and dogs. Peanut butter and jelly. To forsake the man in the relationship and his needs is just as bad as the man withholding from the woman.

To be fair, most women I see in couples counseling do not take this approach. It something, however, that can potentially undermine the empowerment of the relationship.

Think of it like this. You've fought hard and have done a lot of personal work getting back in the boat with your partner. You've been able to take control enough to help him steer the boat, or now you're steering it all together. Great! Now don't go and sink the boat by undermining the needs of the relationship.

## The need to be "right"

What is it that drives us to seek truths or cling to culturally accepted beliefs? When faced by others who have different

beliefs, why do we at times feel so threatened? We seek others who tend to hold our viewpoints and when around those who we differ with we may refrain from intently listening to their viewpoint. In conversation we formulate the words in our minds to refute what they are communicating while they are talking to us instead of listening to what they are saying. Being right is justifying. It is validating. It brings us worth and value. For example, as a parent being “right” brings us security and a sense of role fulfillment. However, is it necessary to be “right”? Does emphasizing a “correct viewpoint” bring more issues and problems than simply “letting things go”?

The psychology/counseling fields discourage the concept of a “right” or an absolute way of being or thinking. This is called the “righting reflex”. Most people can appreciate this needed aspect of a therapeutic or psychological approach. Feeling accepted, appreciated, and acknowledged are intrinsic human needs. People come to therapy to escape the outside polarized world of “right and wrong” and allow themselves the opportunity to be free. Free to be themselves without judgement. We all want to fit in and we want to belong with something greater than ourselves. However, we will all feel rejection at some point. This perception of rejection may not be a total rejection of self but simply a rejection of “part” of self, such as our ideas, thoughts, or opinions. However, we tend to guard these parts of self as if they are part of who we are as individuals. We cling on to our believe systems as if it is who we are. When our ideas, or opinions, are refuted by others we can tend to feel “less than”. There is a disruption of our perceived sense of self and reality and this doesn’t feel good! If we can appreciate that we all have a need to be acknowledged and appreciated, it’s possible that we can better understand our own “righting reflex”. Is the “need to be right” more about the person we are

trying to convince or is it more about protecting that part of us that seeks approval and the need to be validated?

Even more difficult to navigate is our communication with our children. While it may be easy to walk away from a conversation with a friend or co-worker, the emphasis on being “right” can be especially difficult to give up when we are dealing with our kids. We may tend to think “I know better and it is my job as a parent to make sure they know what is right”. That makes sense, right? How else is a child supposed to learn? Unfortunately for our parental urge to protect, the learning process for a child has a lot to do with their own experiences and learning from their mistakes. As parents we can only do so much. This fact can lead us to feel vulnerable and anxious. We simply cannot hold our kids hands, nor can we force them to learn anything. They have to be willing to accept it. We know this is true as we were children and young adults once finding our way through life feeling out our own boundaries and self-identity.

This look inward at our perceptions of “right and wrong” can be a great opportunity to learn about self. We have the ability look internally and check our intentions or motivations. We may end up asking ourselves “Why do I need to have all of the answers?” or “What if we are both right and both wrong all at the same time? What does that mean?” The questions are endless. The process seems to be full of opportunity to expand one’s worldview, though probably not without some discomfort. None of that matters unless we have the intention to listen and understand more and project less. Are we trying to make progress or be right? Are we seeking happiness or do we want to be right?

Your partner can’t read your mind.

Yeah, yeah. We all know that our partners can't read our minds. But do we really get what that means?

Are you frustrated that you can't seem to get what you need? Are you not feeling understood by your partner?

Ask yourself these things:

- Did you actually tell your partner what you want him/her to do for you? If not, why?

It makes sense that we should tell people what we want but we often don't. Reasons of viewing self, or needs, as unworthy is common. Simply not knowing how to ask might also be contributing to the breakdown in communication.

- Do you feel like it's his/her job to know what you want?

It's not your partner's job to know what you want and need. They can learn more about what you want them to know but only if you communicate your wants and needs to them. A good way to know if you're stuck in this mindset is if you feel resentment towards your partner (and others for the same reasons).

- How are you communicating what you want? Is it in anger? Does your partner seem to get defensive easily?

Communicating is one thing. Feeling entitled to "vent your frustrations" on your partner because "you feel you have the right to" is another thing. If you are mad because you're not getting what you need, it might be because your behavior is pushing your partner away. When your partner feels threatened, it's harder for him/her to listen to you because they are on the defensive when you are acting out your anger.

You deserve to get what you need from your relationship. To make that happen it's vital that you see how your communication, or lack of it, might be getting in the way. Your relationship deserves better openness. So do you.

## Don't Be Passive Aggressive

A couple that's been coming to see me for couples counseling for a few weeks has an on-going problem. Like many couples with marital issues, Jenn and Kyle have communication issues. Their particular issue is that they don't know how to express their anger with one another without being passive aggressive. They're unable to effectively tell each other what's wrong with them without holding in their frustration until it boils over in dysfunctional ways.

What does being "passive aggressive" look like?

Most of us have been passive aggressive in relationships. We're not proud of doing it. And when we realize we've been acting passive aggressively, we might recognize that it's simply not an effective way of communicating what we really want to say.

Here are some common ways that people in a relationship communicate passive aggressively:

- Bringing up the past

Jenn is upset with Kyle coming home from work later and later. She waits to tell him that she's upset until a fight ensues. Jenn reminds Kyle that 2 months ago he lied to her about being out with his friends until 3am. The next day they talked about it and Kyle apologized recognizing his mistake. The problem with Jenn bringing this up again is that it has no bearing on what they are currently dealing with.



- Expressing anger about the wrong issue

Kyle is angry that Jenn hasn't been spending much time with him. He waits to express his anger with her until she doesn't answer his phone calls one afternoon. Although Jenn had a perfectly good reason that she couldn't answer her phone, Kyle blows up on her pointing out the missed calls. Instead of telling his wife he has missed spending time with her, he picks a fight over the missed calls.

- Withholding from your partner

Jenn is still pissed at Kyle for having to cancel their dinner one night due to a work conflict. She doesn't tell him how much it bothered her that they couldn't go out for a dinner that she was excited about. Instead of telling him she is upset, she has been withholding sex from him since that night they missed their dinner plans. She tries to express her feelings of being hurt by withholding her affection.

- Getting back at your partner

Another way Kyle displays his passive aggressive nature is by imitating the behavior that he is upset about. When he doesn't think that Jenn is answering her phone when he calls because "she is ignoring him", he does the same to her. For the next couple days, Kyle ignores phone calls from his wife as if to say "see what it feels like?"

Here's what passive aggressive behavior in a relationship leads to:

- Walling off from our partner
- The feeling of walking on egg shells
- Hiding the truth from our partner and feeling we "can't win"
- Less intimacy

- More anger
- More hurt

What keeps us from communicating what we'd really like to say?

So why are we passive aggressive with our partners? Like most of our behaviors, acting out passive aggressively is a learned behavior.

Where does it come from?

- Families that keep secrets
- Learning from passive aggressive parents
- Feelings of unworthiness
- Feelings of shame and guilt
- Feeling righteous or being grandiose

How to say what we really want to say

This part takes a mutual understanding between both partners. It requires using healthy boundaries and respect.

Nobody wants to be told to "be honest" only to have their honesty thrown back in their face!

1. Agree that there is a problem with one or both of you have a problem being passive aggressive.
2. Ditch the shame in admitting that you (and or your partner) can be passive aggressive.
3. Listen to one another! Don't overlook what you're partner is saying only to focus on what to say next.
4. Recognize that you have a right in your relationship to voice what you are thinking and feeling as long as you are respectful in doing so.
5. Refrain from using sarcasm. Don't let your sarcastic humor spill into serious matters in your relationship.

Like with any relational skill, learning how to be more upfront with your communication takes practice. So too does learning how to help a partner be less passive aggressive. Both partners have a responsibility. So say what you have to say. Listen to your partner. Ditch the sarcastic tendencies as it can be a communication killer. With a little effort and understanding you might discover closer and more intimate communication and closeness in your relationship.

## Communication breakdown

Talking logically is how we prefer to interact. Using our intellect allows to clearly and coherently express ourselves, communicating in the most efficient and courteous manner. What happens when we get angry, however, is a different story. Intellect and rational thinking usually get thrown out. The “heat of emotion” clouds our thinking and in times of extreme anger or frustration we are left with our emotions that are basically running rogue.

There is nothing wrong with anger, or being angry. It's what we do with it that matters. How well are we communicating our anger? Are we taking time to explain it in a way that makes a situation, or a relationship, better? Is the anger being used to inflict guilt or hurt on someone else? Or is it more productive if we use it to heighten our own awareness or explain ourselves to the person we are talking to? When we hear about things such as anger management, it's easy to think that it's possible to stop being angry. It's not possible. Anger is always going to be there. It's not good, it's not bad, it just is. What we do with it is our decision.

## Moving beyond non-productive arguments

For those people with kids, imagine this common scenario. You've got a ton of things to get done and your child is upset or in a bad mood. Whatever it is that is bothering them is drawing you away from what it is you are doing. Do you react by yelling back at them or do you show them compassion as you understand that 2 year old's can be moody? We know that the solution exists in understanding our child, not yelling at them. The solution is not on the same level as the problem. We rise above the problem to see what is really going on because we are invested in the outcome, not the conflict itself. We have the ability to see that conflict is not a part of the solution.

When we are dealing with adults, most likely in relationships, our pride and our "need to be right" reflex gets involved. Anytime we are involved in an argument, we have choices to deal with it in rational ways and in emotional ways. Rational thinking tells us that we all have faults, we're all human, and that we all have bouts of irrational behavior. Emotional based, or reactionary, thinking tends to assign blame, fuel conflict, protect ego and pride, and looks to be "right". Many times an argument tends to end up with two people on an emotional level projecting their emotions on the other. Neither are actually listening, they are simply thinking of their next response. The reason that we don't do this with kids is that we understand children lack a level of insight and communication skills. Our error in thinking when dealing with each other as adults, is to ignore or forget that we all have character defects and shortcomings that we bring to the interaction. It's easier to assume the other person is negligent, as opposed to acknowledging their simple faults.

Just like children, we as adults may not know how to deal with certain situations, react to them in a constructive way, or we

may not possess certain ways of communication. I can think of several times leading a group where men talk about how they did not learn how to express themselves because their father was physically or emotionally absent. Coping skills do not necessarily come about simply through maturing with age. We can still keep in mind, that while someone may not have a certain communication skill, it is still their responsibility to seek their own self-improvement.

Patience and understanding of self and others will go a long way in improving how we effectively deal with others and relationships. When in an argument or conflict, we need to ask ourselves “are we seeking a solution or resolution?” or are “we wanting to be right?”. Chronic problems, such as reiterated resentments, rehashed grudges, and avoidance of responsibility can perpetuate because they are kept in place using the same methods of communicating. Solutions and resolutions only exist on a level higher than the problem.

So what can we do? We should start in identifying our own limitations allowing ourselves to become aware of what we are doing that isn't serving us. We can't feel guilty about what we find, though. Remember we all have things to work on. This allows us to develop a greater capacity to understand and accept others. Simply put, we all have room to give ourselves and others more understanding, love, and compassion. Maybe it makes sense to start there.

## Letting Go of the Need to be Right

It feels really good to be “right”. To be able to win that argument and get that last word in. You have just spent a tremendous amount of energy in arguing with your partner, or whoever it might be. The last thing you want to do is to let go, stop, and not “win”.

So what's the problem with being right?

But here's the question. If you were sitting in a boat with your partner and your words were poking holes in that boat, would you keep insisting to be right? Would you persist with the argument only to know that the boat would sink?

When we hold onto the notion that we have to win an argument, we are causing direct harm to our relationship, our intimacy with our partner, and to our friendship with our partner.

Because even if we win, and know that we are right, that means that the other person has to be wrong. Since your partner is in the relationship with you, you're going to suffer too.

Don't be that guy or girl

Have you ever been around someone who HAS to be right? It's probably not your favorite person to hang with and it might even be someone who you despise.

Nobody likes being told they are wrong! Don't do it to your partner! Nobody likes when someone is being an asshole.

So what do I do if I know I AM right?

If you've gotten this far in the article and you still don't know why you should give up on needing to be right when arguing with your partner, read no further. The remainder of this will not apply to you.

If you do want to learn some ways to change up the dynamic of conflict and tension with your partner, here are some suggestions and tips.

How to disarm an argument when you know you are right

But...but...you KNOW you are right. Your partner is wrong. Now what?

- Give yourself a pat on the back, you are the king of logic. You win even though nobody else cares. Now....
- Remind yourself in the knowledge that this argument was never about right and wrong anyway.

This argument was more than likely about a pattern of tension, or contention, between you and your partner. It just so happened that you chose to blow it up over who's in-laws are more intrusive.

- Listen to what your partner is saying.

Don't "hear" her while you're really thinking of what to say next. See if you can notice underlying feelings she might be trying to communicate. It's no coincidence that those same feelings pop up in different arguments.

- Be present with what your partner is saying.

Turn off your "fix it reflex". Don't try and fix what your partner is feeling or thinking, just listen. You can't fix your partners feelings anyway.

- Call a timeout.

If you are both still unable to step away from being right, wanting to "win" the argument, and you're now neglecting not only each other's feelings, but your dignity in the moment, step away. BUT only do this if you have pre-planned what this time out means.

Make it simple.

You know YOU don't like it when your partner tries to discredit you and tell you that you are wrong. Don't be the person that does it to them.

Conflict is inevitable in relationships but it's doesn't have to hurt and undermine the relationship. Sometimes conflicts can be solved, sometimes they can't, but insisting on being right only insures one thing. It insures that your partner is wrong. That's not fair to your partner or your relationship.

## Your "soul mate" isn't "perfect" for a reason

Relationships are challenging at times, especially as we grow as adults. Relationships go through phases and stages. Ideally, we would like to choose a partner that moves through the growth of the relationship with us. We start from the "honeymoon" period where each partner presents him and herself as the ideal mate. We're kind of like living and breathing Facebook profiles. Putting our best, ideal self out there for our new partner to see. Of course they reciprocate, which makes us "fall in love" even more. Everything is fun, exciting, and new. We say to ourselves, "This is the one! I've found them!" Of course that honeymoon ends and each person exposes themselves for who they are. The good, bad, all of it.

Obviously, that person we honeymoon with wasn't real and now we're left with the truth. Two flawed individuals who are far from perfect. Sometimes these relationships last and evolve into life long relationships. Most of the time these relationships end. That's ok. We'd rather end up with the "right" person and not settle.

It's also very common for people to date the same type of person over and over. Why is that? We see this in our friends



and can't figure out why they can't "find someone better". Why? At some level of our subconscious we seek challenges for our "stuff". We could call that emotional triggers, baggage, insecurities, whatever. We seek out partners that put us into the very uncomfortable position of dealing with the parts of ourselves that need attention and healing. The same goes for our partners in that we do this for them. All of this is unavoidable. Our minds tell us that we're looking for that "nice guy that treats us right" or that "woman who knows exactly how to give me what I need". Don't buy it. Your greater sense of self doesn't actually want that. It wants the challenge of growth.

Committed partners are there to push each other to grow and change. Of course, none of this is actually enjoyable. But it is necessary. Even past relationships that seemed like disasters had a key part in the evolution of who we are. Our minds imagine a scenario where a relationship can exist without conflict and discomfort. Our greater awareness and sense of self knows better. Most of the time what we have is exactly what we need in our relationship. Happiness, pain, conflict, and all. We might call that "perfect".

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