

Chapter One

The Great No-No

If you picked up this book because of difficulties in your own relationship, then your simple act indicates two important things about you. First, it signifies that you're feeling some pain. I'm not talking about the obviously physical, just-cut-your-finger kind of pain. I'm talking about the kind of pain that hurts somewhere in your spirit. But even though your pain is spiritual, it can still be described in physical terms. If your relationship is in acute crisis, then the pain may feel sharp and piercing. Or if your frustration is chronic, then the pain may feel like a dull ache or perhaps an empty, hungry kind of sensation. Another possibility is a stifling, suffocating kind of feeling. You may associate it with your chest, your heart, the pit of your stomach, the back of your neck or even your head. But wherever you feel it, whether it's subtle or intense, you're still feeling some form of pain. You may also have the disturbing sense that your life wasn't supposed to turn out this way. You started this marriage with dreams that you hoped your relationship would fulfill. You wanted love, respect, and a soul-mate with whom you could share life's experiences. You not only wanted to be nurtured, but you wanted to be appreciated for being the loving person you always knew you could be. You wanted the opportunity to let your love unfold, and now you fear that the opportunity is passing you by.

The second thing indicated by your picking up this book is that you still harbor hope. Maybe it's not a lot of hope. Perhaps it's just the tiniest fraction of hope. However, it's still hope. After all, this isn't a book about divorce. And you're probably also hoping that this book will offer you tools that are effective. You want this help to be practical because you're concerned about results. You're probably tired of skimming the plethora of self-help books that speak of the eight principles of this and the six rules of that and

yet still leave you with unsettling questions of how to get from here to there. Questions like: “HOW can we work on emotional intimacy when all we do is fight?” or “HOW can we rebuild this relationship when all I ever get from my partner is the feeling that *I’m never enough?!?*” You want practical interventions for these kinds of problems.

This book will be practical. You can expect to learn the following:

- Strategies to build love and affection in your relationship
- Exercises to bring you and your partner into closer intimacy
- The real hidden dangers to your relationship that most people don’t know
- Common myths that hinder your relationship
- Destructive relationship patterns such as enmeshment, conflict avoidance and the delinquent helper syndrome
- Six types of conflict including three that can actually help your relationship
- Strategies to manage conflict more effectively
- A strategy for structuring finances in a way that reduces conflict
- Methods to keep your relationship in balance in order to maintain passion
- Exercises to strengthen the healthy parts of your personality that support your relationship

In this book you can thoroughly learn all of these things. Your perspective and understanding may become crystal clear. And even if your vision does become clear, and even if you do see your past mistakes as well as a new and better path, even if all this happens and you rely on this knowledge, but only on this knowledge to help you, then you will probably fail. That’s right. I said “Fail.” Not that I want you to fail. In fact I’m going to do my very best to help you succeed. But if you rely only on your insight

and knowledge to help you, then you will probably fail because the biggest obstacle we all face in emotional intimacy isn't our ignorance. It's our fear. And we usually fear ourselves most of all.

The biggest obstacle we all face in emotional intimacy isn't our ignorance. It's our fear. And we usually fear ourselves most of all.

If you're going to successfully improve your marriage, then you will need more than insight and knowledge. You will need both courage and faith to help you face whatever it is that you fear most about yourself. In addition to teaching you new behavioral strategies, this book will help prepare you for the emotional challenge ahead. Most self-help relationship books shy away from this topic. A few exhort you to get your external life in order and focus on your interests or behavior. That's OK advice, but I'm more concerned that you get your internal life in order. Strategies for changing a relationship usually fail a person who is emotionally unprepared. In fact, most surveys of couples in marriage counseling indicate that only one-third of them report significant improvement. My interpretation of this disappointing percentage is that most people unknowingly sabotage their attempts at marital improvement because of emotions they don't understand or even recognize. The reason why these emotions are so enigmatic is because we don't want to talk about them. We're afraid of them. We collectively keep each other in the dark because we all act as if these emotions don't exist. The emotions to which I'm referring are shame and the fear of shame. And an interesting thing about shame is that, like mold, it grows in the dark.

If there were ever such a thing as a worldwide conspiracy it would be this: that no one wants to admit that we are all influenced by fear throughout our everyday existence; that along with the more positive emotions of love, curiosity, sensuality, and the desire for pride and self-actualization, we are similarly motivated by the fear of shame that both nips at our heels and narrows our vision of opportunity. But a conspiracy involves people getting together to covertly communicate. What do we call it when people are secretive about something and they covertly *discourage* communication? An

“un-conspiracy” or a “reverse conspiracy”? Somehow, those don’t quite work. For want of a better name, I’ve resigned myself to calling it “The Great No-No.”

At this point, let me invite you to get a more personal feel for this subject. The following self-exam lists personal challenges that we all experience. The items are framed in the first- person plural, “we” instead of “you,” because I don’t want you to feel individually targeted as if the rest of the human race doesn’t struggle along with you. If you’re feeling especially adventurous you might ask your partner to take the exam too and then compare your answers.

The “No-No” Self-Exam

Instructions:

Make a copy of this self-exam so you can write on it. For each item, write in a “0”, “1”, or “2” to indicate how frequently or how relevant each item pertains to you. Do not leave any fields blank and use the following key:

0 = Never or irrelevant 1 = Occasionally 2 = Frequently or very relevant

- _____ We don’t try something new because it might feel “silly.”
- _____ We keep focusing on responsibilities because they seem all important.
- _____ We don’t take time out to wonder and explore.
- _____ We consider fun to be unimportant.
- _____ We hesitate to pursue our heart’s desire because of other people’s opinions.
- _____ We don’t request a “favor” from our partner because it might be turned down..

- _____ We accuse our partner of being selfish or insensitive so that we don't have to make a request.
- _____ We only comply with our partner's expectations and don't initiate our own plans.
- _____ We don't take time in our day to daydream about possibilities.
- _____ We raise our voice while arguing.
- _____ We focus on how to change our partner instead of how we want to be.
- _____ We try to show how independent and strong we can be.
- _____ We focus on our partner's forgiveness instead of devising a plan for correction.
- _____ We refuse to acknowledge a mistake even though we're aware of it.
- _____ We wake up in the morning and initially feel uneasy and anxious for no reason.
- _____ We make pride the most important thing in our lives.
- _____ We insist that our partner must change before we do.
- _____ We don't tell our partner when we're angry because it wouldn't be nice.
- _____ We try to make our partner love us by sacrificing what is important to us.
- _____ We make approval more important than truth.
- _____ We let obligations control our time and we don't schedule any time for enjoyment.

- _____ We use sarcasm against our partner.
- _____ We dredge up old resentments as weapons.
- _____ We invade or refuse our partner's privacy.
- _____ We fail to establish our own privacy.
- _____ We hold onto unrealistic hope in a truly abusive relationship.
- _____ We hide lying or dishonest behavior.
- _____ Total (Sum up the column when finished)

The purpose of this exercise is to let you confront some of your own defenses, not for you to obtain a score. However, I know that some of us have a proclivity towards measuring things. Therefore, let me interpret the following. If you score 5 or less then you are exceptionally free from shame. If your score is above 40 then you're experiencing a lot of defensive inefficiency. Your life may be disrupted in a number of spheres. Most people score between 10 and 40.

All of the items in the preceding self-exam involve our fear of shame. We fear and try to avoid the shameful sense that we're unimportant and undeserving. Shame takes different forms, but in this context shame is the pain of feeling that we're somehow *less* than we're supposed to be. While guilt is a negative feeling about what we do, shame is a devaluation of who we are. It's about whether we perceive our very existence as being important. And this fear of shame plays out on a totally symbolic level. In our civilization we no longer fear cave bears and saber-toothed tigers. Instead, we fear a loss of stature in our own self-evaluation. Because this self-evaluation isn't about physical reality, what we're really afraid of is something symbolic. We fear the symbolic meaning of a mistake or a poor performance. We're afraid of the negativity in a disapproving glare, a sarcastic comment, a forgotten date, a raised eyebrow, or a bored sigh. We're vulnerable to the personal devaluation inherent in a raised voice, an irrelevant interruption in the middle of our talking, inequity in our relationships, having another person tell us how we

feel, the lack of pursuit by people who say they still love us, and especially, the experience of not being asked about what we want or how we feel.

Most of us don't fully appreciate how much the fear of shame operates in our lives. One reason is that we don't like to admit to others anything about ourselves that doesn't enhance our popularity. Neither fear nor shame is a hot commodity in the interpersonal status market. We want others to view us as always being motivated by positive emotions. Nobody wants to talk about or acknowledge the negative feelings. And when we adopt a distorted popular image of what being human *should* be, we often fool ourselves about how we really are. We want to fit in. We want to be *normal*. We don't like to admit, even to ourselves, that we have feelings of vulnerability. The irony in this situation is a truth that sounds like a weird distortion of Roosevelt's famous admonition about fear. Only this one goes: "We're afraid of our shame and ashamed of our fear."

We're afraid of our shame and ashamed of our fear.

Another reason why we're unaware of this fear is that the feeling can be very subtle. It's usually not the experience of strong terror. It's more often a subtle anxiety that leads us to react quickly before we even become consciously aware of its presence. Think about whether you've ever experienced the following:

- You didn't apply for a position or opportunity because you thought you might fail even though there was a possibility for success. (Probable dynamic: You were afraid that failure would give you the shameful feeling that you didn't deserve what you wanted.)
- Another person directly expressed their deep affection to you. You became uneasy and changed the subject. (Probable dynamic: You were afraid that you wouldn't be able to say or do *the right thing* in return. You were afraid of feeling the shame of an inadequate emotional performance.)

- You didn't pursue a private interest of yours because your partner wanted you to stay home. You really didn't want to stay home, but you didn't want to cause any friction. (Probable dynamic: You were afraid of your partner's wrath and/or accusations of your "selfishness." More importantly, you were afraid of having to use your anger in a conflict. You were afraid that your own anger would make you appear "ugly," "selfish," or "unloving.")
- At the end of the day, you think about taking your coffee cup to a private place to relax and think. However, you quickly change your mind because you have more important things to do. (Probable dynamic: If this happens only occasionally, you may just have pressing responsibilities. If it happens more frequently, you're probably afraid of letting go of responsibilities because they're your defense. Your activity helps you to avoid feeling shame. Although you tell yourself that relaxing would be too indulgent, you're actually afraid to stop depending on the pride of your accomplishments to prop up your self esteem. You feel driven to accomplish things because you're afraid of otherwise feeling unimportant or inadequate. Many people start feeling depressed and unimportant if they stop frenetic activity.)
- When you sometimes get up in the middle of the night, you think about how quickly time is passing in your life. You feel some of your losses more acutely. You fear your eventual death and you wonder about the overall meaning of your life. However, you never get around to sharing these thoughts and feelings with your partner. (Probable dynamic: You're afraid of talking about these feelings and sounding silly or weird. You're afraid of your partner's possible reaction if you do share them. You're afraid that they might confirm that you're abnormal or perhaps intellectually inadequate for attempting such a weighty discussion.)
- You're feeling taken for granted in your relationship. You indict your partner for a long list of past wrongs. You demand that they change instead of requesting that they sit down with you for some planning sessions. (Probable dynamic: You covertly fear that you're too dependent. You're afraid that being too dependent makes you weak and defective. Therefore, you don't want to appear weak by

making a request. By making demands, you get to view yourself as strong. By indicting your partner for past transgressions, you feel superior as well. More importantly, you protect yourself from having to experience your personal request being ignored or refused. Demands don't hurt as much if they're rejected. A request that is ignored, forgotten, or refused is more likely to stir up the sense that you expected too much for yourself. After all, it seems that if you were truly important to your partner, he/she would have been more responsive.)

- You indict your partner for not being sufficiently available to the children. You omit the fact that you especially want your partner to be available for you. (Probable dynamic: You're ashamed of your dependence again. You're afraid of a more obvious and therefore more painful rejection compared to the subtle one you're already experiencing. While it's true that you're concerned about your children's welfare, it's also true that the children are to some extent being used as surrogates for your own needs. You're afraid of feeling ashamed if those needs were to be exposed and somehow ridiculed.)
- You want your partner to "help" with the household responsibilities. You're critical of him/her not helping enough. (Probable dynamic: It doesn't occur to you that you're holding onto authority by delegating tasks. You're unaware that you're treating your partner as a subordinate. You resist the loss of authority that would come if you and your partner were to negotiate task ownership as equals. After all, it seems that the household *should* be your domain. There's a subtle threat of covert shame if you were to give away some of your control. Your partner's different performance standards might negatively reflect on you. Besides, you don't like giving up your pride in organizing all aspects of your household.)

All of these situations involve the fear of shame. It's subtle and usually operates well beneath our awareness. What's more relevant to the current discussion is that our fear of shame inhibits our ability to change our behavior or negotiate changes from our partner. If our relationship were a car, then our fear of shame would be the emergency brake stuck on hold. We might move forward, but slowly and with great resistance.

**If our relationship were a car, then
our fear of shame would be the
emergency brake stuck on hold.**

In the following vignette, these dynamics are revealed in a case example that happened to coincide with my writing on this topic. It's a good illustration of how the fear of shame can influence our interactions far beyond our awareness. Read about Jim and Marie's argument and see if you can recognize any of yourself in their story.

Anatomy of a Quarrel

Jim and Marie came for marriage counseling to increase communication and to help Jim with his anger management. Jim acknowledged that he had a short fuse and that his raging was sometimes excessive. This was probably accentuated by his tall imposing physique. He was able to keep his anger in check for his upper management position but didn't do nearly so well at home. In contrast, Marie was a rather quiet and petite school teacher. She had emotionally distanced herself from Jim for the past several years. The couple had been married twenty-two years and had three children, two of whom were still living at home. There had been no separations, no violence, and no history of affairs. After a half-dozen counseling sessions, the couple reported their relationship and communication had improved.

During one of the later counseling sessions, Marie reported a recent quarrel. The whole family, except for the oldest son, had been together for their big Sunday dinner. Jim and Marie were both upset about having recently discovered that their oldest son had lied to them. Their son had taken a loan from them under false pretenses. He did not have a job as he had previously led them to believe. During dinner, Jim ranted and raved about the situation. Although Marie was similarly upset about the news, she was also concerned that their other two children were present. For her, Jim's angry venting was spoiling a ritual for family cohesion. Having already learned a new tool from counseling, she asked Jim to come with her into a

different room so they could speak privately. Marie then told Jim that his anger was excessive and that it was spoiling the dinner. Jim protested that he was entitled to his feelings and she shouldn't demand that he give them up. Marie persisted in telling him that she wanted the family to enjoy their dinner without further turmoil. When they returned to dinner, Jim was quiet for a while but eventually lapsed back into his angry venting. After dinner, Jim and Marie continued to quarrel. However, there was now a new dimension. Marie tried to escape Jim's anger by retreating to another room, but Jim followed her and kept up his diatribe. Marie then tried to escape to yet another room, but again, Jim followed her and kept on ranting. Even though Jim was criticizing their oldest son, and not Marie, she had had enough and didn't want to hear any more. The quarrel ended only because Marie had to leave the house to drive one of the children to an event.

During the counseling session when Marie and Jim were describing their recent quarrel, I made some interesting observations. One was that Jim didn't want to talk about the issue of Marie's right to retreat from his anger. When I kept raising the issue, Jim's facial expression was that of bored disgust. He frequently diverted attention back to the subject of his son's deceit. This was a seemingly unintelligent response from a man who works in the field of human relations. I wondered what was really going on with him. Marie then brought up the fact that Thanksgiving dinner was coming up soon, and she didn't want a repeat performance of Jim's anger at the table. I invited Marie to work that out with Jim right there in the session. She then turned to Jim and bluntly stated that she didn't want the issue of the oldest son raised at all during Thanksgiving dinner. She then turned back to me as if she had finished what I had asked her to do. At that point something became clear to me; I asked her about how she had negotiated for Jim's cessation of ranting during the initial dinner incident. When she had him off privately in the side room, did she actually ask him for a *commitment*? Marie's first response was one of confusion. After a bit more discussion, she finally admitted that, "No," she had not asked Jim for a commitment. I then asked Marie to turn toward Jim and actually *ask* if he would agree to refrain from angry expressions during Thanksgiving dinner. Marie halted and turned back with a bewildered look on her face. The ensuing dialogue went something like this:

"This is hard. I'm afraid I'm going to be hurt if he actually says he's going to do something and then he doesn't. That would be really painful."

I replied "Yes, I imagine that might be true. And you don't feel as vulnerable if you merely state your expectations or throw them at him, do

you? You feel a lot more vulnerable asking him for something when there is the possibility that you might be rejected. I would guess that if he rejects your request outright, you'd take it like a personal rejection — or am I wrong about that? Tell me if I'm wrong.”

“No, you're right. That's how I would feel.”

I continued: “That's really a kind of fear. It's subliminal, but your reaction just now indicates that you don't ask for a commitment because you're afraid. Do you think that the same fear was operating that night after the dinner incident? I mean you didn't actually ask for a commitment then either, did you?”

Marie leapfrogged ahead a giant step at this point. We had had previous discussions about the possible influence of her uninvolved parents when she was a child.

“You know it makes sense, but I guess I really didn't realize it at the time. Remember we talked before about how, when I was growing up, my parents really ignored me. I didn't ask for anything back then either. I couldn't. There was no use.”

I tried to give her support. “And it helped you to survive. It really fit back then. It helped you survive it without getting overwhelmed with pain. For a little child, feeling rejected is almost like feeling annihilated. But that was then and this is now. Go ahead and *ask* Jim this time. Ask him about Thanksgiving dinner. Give him an opportunity to get involved with you.”

Marie proceeded to do a commendable job of asking for a commitment. Of course by this time Jim was really primed. He even articulated back to her his detailed commitment to avoid expressing anger during Thanksgiving dinner. Marie was pleased.

The next part of the session focused on how Marie had previously complicated the original argument by confronting Jim about his anger's intensity. I pointed out to Marie that Jim's poor timing in ranting during dinner was a valid issue. However, why was she evaluating its intensity? I confronted Marie and told her that Jim had been correct in one respect. He accurately perceived that she was trying to invalidate his feelings. When she did that, she ruined her chances for successfully confronting him about his timing. Marie was perplexed. She asked if it really was all right for him to get so angry and loud.

“Did he attack you at all? Did he hit you or threaten you? Did he use sarcasm on you?” I asked.

“No,” Marie replied.

“Well, if the two of you had been alone and he wasn't intruding on

your privacy and there was no dinner to be disrupted, then would you have been OK with his intense anger? You know, if the two of you were just privately discussing your son?”

She replied, “I really don’t know, probably not. I don’t think I’ll ever feel comfortable when he gets like that. Is it really OK for him to get like that? I really don’t know. I’m not sure I really know what is normal or what I really should expect.”

Marie’s comment about not knowing normalcy was a surefire indicator that she was struggling with her past. We talked about her family background: that her parents yelled and sometimes got violent, that her mother often hit her, and the near absence of loving attention from either of her parents. Marie agreed that she associated Jim’s intense anger and loud expression with the lack of safety she experienced as a child. We discussed how some people are relatively comfortable around their partner’s intense anger because they’ve never experienced violence. She eventually accepted the interpretation that her parents’ violence had left her over-reactive to her husband’s non-violent anger. Marie and I discussed how she would need to accept her husband’s anger. She would also need to learn how to retreat from Jim in situations where she felt too uncomfortable.

The remaining piece of the puzzle was Jim’s tendency to follow and intrude on Marie’s privacy whenever she wanted and needed to retreat. Even if Marie could accept that Jim had “a right to his feelings” (as he termed it), Jim was still programmed to block Marie’s right to retreat in future conflicts. At this point, I figured that Marie’s preceding disclosures might have made Jim less defensive. I decided to try a new tack.

“Jim, what’s the story on your following Marie when she’s trying to calm herself down?”

Jim thought for a moment before replying. “I just didn’t want to leave it before she could understand. I could tell from what she was saying that she didn’t understand the situation. I didn’t want to end our discussion with a lack of understanding.”

“But Jim, at that point she was no longer listening. She was hearing your anger and reacting to that instead of your ideas. You would never have gotten her to understand by continuing with your ranting, especially by violating her privacy.”

“I know, I know. But you asked me what was going on back then and I told you. I had this very strong frustration that I wasn’t being understood. I just couldn’t leave it like that.”

I took a chance. “So you couldn’t leave it because that’s a very painful

feeling, an almost unbearable feeling for you not to be understood about something you feel strongly about....and then to be left, maybe that plays in there too. How about it, Jim? How about the possibility that you've felt that before?" I watched Jim closely because something about his demeanor indicated we were onto something important. I continued pressing. "Where does that come from? Who used to do that?" Jim's sudden stillness and inward gaze confirmed my hunch. "Who was it, Jim...who was it?" I waited and was determined to say nothing until Jim answered me.

In the tension of the moment, Marie's patience abandoned her first. She blurted out the answer for her partner, as is all too common among couples in counseling: "It's his dad! He used to tell me his dad would yell and scream and then leave home for days at a time."

By now, Jim was beginning to mobilize. He also probably didn't want his wife to continue talking authoritatively about his most vulnerable subject. He echoed Marie:

"It was my father. He was a bad drunk and he'd just take off for days, usually after he got real mad about something." He nodded while saying this, then became silent and continued with an inward expression with his eyes not focusing on anything around him. He remained still while I picked up the conversation.

"Let me guess at something, Jim. Back then, could you talk to him at all? Could you ever get him to understand you?"

Jim's facial expression was saying a lot. In addition to the change in his facial color, the telltale glint of welling tears was beginning to show along his lower eye lids. By now his voice had become more "breathy" from painful emotion and the tightening in his diaphragm.

"No... I never could get him to listen...especially when he was angry. Everything came down from him but nothing could go back the other way. I didn't dare....not when he was angry. He was a real rage-aholic. An alcoholic and rage-aholic, too.

"So Dad would rant and rage and he would act in such a way that you never felt understood by him....and then he'd up and leave you. Is that how it was? Did I get that right?"

Jim didn't answer. He just sat there, teary-eyed, looking miserable.

I continued. "It's a heck of a coincidence, but you know it's really not a coincidence, don't you? I mean, you can't stand for Marie to leave you without your being understood. It has both elements there. You can't stand it when you're not understood, and you can't stand to be left. So you try to avoid that old awful feeling that you are worthless, unimportant, like

a nothing, but you avoid it in a desperate kind of way. You continue raging and you don't allow Marie to have her privacy to collect herself. Tell me if I'm off-base."

Jim replied very solemnly: "No. You're not off-base. In fact, I think you're hitting the nail right on the head. I just never looked at it like that before. He continued to reflect. After a while he concluded, "I've got a lot to think about."

The rest of the session flowed with understanding and cooperation. We all now had a common model for what had really transpired during the day of the infamous dinner quarrel. The blaming had stopped and both Jim and Marie were now more receptive to each other. It was obvious that we had opened up issues for each that they would be examining for a long time to come. Before they left, I gave each of them an assignment to practice certain self-suggestions. I wanted them to consolidate their gains. A lot of additional work would be required, but we had established a good start.

The reason why I present this little vignette is to further clarify the biggest obstacles people face when attempting to change their own emotionally-rooted behavior. There's a good metaphor to help you with your understanding. Imagine that most of your relationship behaviors are like plants that have roots extending way down into deep emotions. You can't see all the roots but they're vitally important to what happens up above on the surface. In Jim and Marie's case, what can we conclude about some of their obstacles? Let's take that same question from a different angle. Let's suppose both Jim and Marie were not in counseling and were trying to improve their communication on their own. The central questions would then be the following:

1. What feelings would Marie have to endure if she were to start *asking* Jim to commit to suppressing his anger in certain situations?
2. What feelings would Marie have to endure if she were to start accepting that it's often OK for Jim to express his intense anger?
3. What feelings would Jim have to endure if he were to start accepting that it's OK for Marie to disagree and "not understand" his position?
4. What feelings would Jim have to endure if he were to start accepting Marie's retreat from his anger and her withdrawal to her privacy?

Taking it from the top, this is how I would answer the questions.

For #1 (Marie’s asking Jim to commit to suppressing his anger in certain situations): Marie would have to wade through her fear that Jim would either refuse her request or possibly even ignore it. But it wouldn’t be the actual refusal that she would fear. She would be afraid of triggering her old shame of feeling unimportant and worthless. She had originally felt that way about herself when her parents were self-absorbed and oblivious to her need for attention. She had worked many years to become a worthwhile and important human being. She didn’t want her worst fears confirmed: that she’s still the same little girl who isn’t worth being noticed. It’s important to note that even with full knowledge of her fear’s origin, she will still have that fear. That’s because insight and awareness don’t prevent the triggering of painful shame in a person’s memory. The latter is a neurological event. Insight can help modulate the feeling, but it doesn’t prevent it. So, the simple version of my explanation is that Marie would have to endure the discomfort of subtle fear. The technical term is “anxiety,” but it’s still a type of fear.

For #2 (Marie’s accepting that it’s often OK for Jim to express his intense anger): Marie would have to endure fear from two sources. One is that she would fear the re-emergence of her feeling inadequate and defective as she had when her mother became violent. As a child, she made heroic efforts but could never be good enough to prevent the violence. By the same childish logic, she was never good enough to stop her parent’s destructive fighting. For Marie to begin to accept Jim’s intense anger, she might start feeling the same old shame that she is inadequate to bring about love and harmony in her family. Even with new conscious knowledge that anger has a valid place, Marie would have to endure discomfort. She would still be afraid that her feelings of defectiveness might re-emerge.

For #3 (Jim’s accepting that it’s OK for Marie to disagree and “not understand” his position): Jim would have to endure the fear that he’s not sufficiently important to be noticed. He would have to endure the covert fear that he’s once again letting himself be treated as an insignificant victim. As a child, he had to hide his thoughts and opinions. He couldn’t afford triggering his father’s rage and disappearance from the family. During these early years of hiding his symbolic self, Jim accumulated a great sense of weakness and unimportance. Now as an adult, he unconsciously fears the re-emergence of those old feelings. To start accepting Marie’s disagreement would stir up the fear that she’s ignoring him just like his father had. And that would stir up the fear that he’s still weak and unimportant.

For #4 (Jim’s accepting Marie’s retreat from his anger and her

withdrawal to her privacy): By now you can probably infer the answer from our past examples. Marie's withdrawal serves to stir up old emotions from when Jim's father disappeared for days. For Jim to start accepting Marie's privacy, he would have to covertly be afraid of feeling worthless and powerless. As a child, he felt worthless and powerless to prevent his father from abandoning the family for long stretches of time. It's not surprising that Marie's withdrawal into privacy threatens to trigger Jim's old shame. Jim is afraid of feeling that old pain. Again, it's probably not a conscious and obvious fear. It's probably a vague kind of anxiety. For Jim to be more accepting of Marie's privacy he would have to wade through that anxiety.

Now let's bring all of our discussion and all of these dynamics down to a simple conclusion. For Jim and Marie to successfully change their conflict behavior, they'll each have to endure fear and anxiety. It's like the popular adage: "No pain, No gain." As Jim and Marie change their behavior, each will be afraid of being overtaken by parts of themselves they're trying to leave behind. Knowledge, insight, and effort won't be enough. They'll also need courage and faith. The rest of us are no different in that regard.

At this point you may be thinking something like "Wait a minute. I didn't get beaten, I didn't have parents who raged, and I didn't have a parent who left for days at a time. My parents loved me and treated me well. All of this fear and shame stuff really doesn't apply to me." If this is what you're thinking, then you're only partially correct. You're probably not as encumbered with old traumas as many of the people who show up for counseling. But you're only partially correct because it's only a matter of degree. All of us (except the purest of psychopaths) pick up shame along the way.

I presented Jim and Marie's case here only because their dynamics were so simple and obvious. For many of us, the origins of our shame are subtle. We may have had the most perfect parents, yet we were still exposed to smaller traumas. We may have been exposed to the teasing of playmates, the occasions when our parents were too depressed or emotionally depleted to notice us, and times when we failed miserably to meet the expectations of our family and friends. We may also have unconsciously adopted the shame of our parents. Our parents may have been so ashamed of certain emotions that they never risked expressing them. For example, they may have been so afraid of anger that they never disagreed, argued, or forcefully negotiated among themselves. Perhaps they were loving parents, but they never touched or verbally expressed their affection. They may have felt so undeserving that they never took off time from work and responsibility to

have fun. Throughout childhood we can't avoid vicariously picking up some of our parents' shame. The other way we pick up shame is from the history of our own relationships. Over time, spousal looks of disapproval, eye-rolls, criticisms, interruption of our sentences, and other minor intrusions can build up accumulated shame in our system. This relationship shame can trigger and combine with core shame from our childhood. The process can be gradual and very subtle, but powerful. In fact, it's powerful enough to knock our relationships out of balance.

The concept of balance is crucial if you're going to understand how to maintain a thriving relationship. This book will teach you how to keep such a balance. It will also teach you some of the things that you can do to successfully counter its greatest saboteurs: your own inhibition and fear of shame.