

The Relationship Institute

www.therelationshipinstitute.org

Key Concepts for Change in the Couples Therapy Approach of The Relationship Institute

1. Of all the various types of relationships, having a truly good marriage is the greatest challenge. In being the most intimate relationship it challenges each of our weaknesses and vulnerabilities. It is the only relationship in which we make the choice to tie our life in exclusive ways to that of another, no matter how much either of us changes, for the rest of our lives, with the agreement that neither of us will leave the other. Therefore it is necessary that we learn new ways of dealing with these changes, ways that will allow and indeed encourage the relationship to grow.
2. We were initially attracted to our partner not only for the reasons we are aware of, but for unconscious reasons as well. Most often quite unbeknownst to us, we were also attracted to this person because their personality make-up is such that it brings up our unresolved issues and conflicts, our weak points. So our commitment to the relationship must include a commitment to work on our own issues and our own contribution to the difficulties in the relationship.
3. Within a few years of the beginning of a committed relationship the differences between partners start to tug at the relationship and require that we find new ways to grow and incorporate these differences into the relationship.
4. These differences in a relationship do not diminish over time: personal change is inevitable. So we all need to learn how to appreciate and respect our differentness, continue to define ourselves and handle the attendant anxiety. However, all of us fight change, *especially when it is not our idea*. When this happens, a battle begins in which one of us is promoting the change (consciously or not) while the other is resisting. This is called **differentiation**. It is the process by which we define and respect our differences as individuals tied together. *It is a normal, healthy and necessary part of a growing and evolving relationship*. Yet most of us do not know how to respond to change in a relationship without feeling threatened and rejected. One of the goals of our couples therapy approach is to help you identify how you are or are not defining your self and differentiating. This is an important first step. We then want to help you recognize the stress that differentiation creates, and help you deal with it constructively with your partner. To do this we will help you and your partner recognize the source of each of your own personal discomforts so that you each can learn how to **self-comfort**. In so doing, you each will be able to learn from your own distress instead of being controlled by it, and the relationship can then start to grow.

5. The central aspect of our therapeutic approach will involve both of you learning a new way to be intimate, in particular, a new way to achieve **conflict intimacy**. This is based on two primary processes. The first is **self-intimacy**, being keenly aware of your own self, your feelings, desires and thoughts. And second is a unique form of communication that *is not focused on resolution of differences*. Instead, it is based on helping the speaker to own that this is about him or her self, to express self clearly and to learn more about him/herself. And just as important, it is based on helping the listener to learn to listen well, to not take the other's feelings, desires and thoughts personally, but rather see them as a reflection of whom the other is.
6. We each need to take responsibility for being **self-intimate**, that is, being aware of our feelings and where they are coming from, and acting to take care of our self, based on what our emotions are telling us about our self and our reality. This does not mean being self-centered, only caring about our own feelings and desires enough to pay attention to them. That's pay attention to them, not be controlled by them. Self-intimacy involves treating our feelings and desires as important, but not always as most important in our relationship. Sometimes we must choose to put our own feelings and desires aside, to not act to satisfy them when they are in conflict with our partner's. One of the most mature, differentiated choices we can make in a relationship is seeing that at times acting on our partner's feelings and/or needs instead of on our own is actually an expression of self-love and self-respect.
7. Intimacy results from two people communicating well who they are, be it verbally, physically and/or through actions. This is a two-part process consisting of expressing self as well as listening to who the other is. But not all intimate behaviors are soft, warm and positive. When our partner tells us that s/he is angry with us or even that s/he no longer finds us attractive, that is an act of intimacy. It is our challenge to listen, to really try to understand where s/he is coming from and to help our partner learn about him/herself by really hearing the person and by asking questions. It is our challenge not to take what we hear defensively, not to behave defensively, not to attempt to talk our partner out of his/her feeling, desire or thought, not to put the focus of the interaction back on us, and not to attack him/her. This is what leads to **conflict intimacy**: the non-avoidance of painful, difficult subjects and the non-defensive reaction to them. **Conflict intimacy** is not focused on conflict resolution, but rather, on healthy, differentiated conflict process.
8. As a partner in a committed relationship each of us has a responsibility to communicate to our partner through our words and actions who we are. We cripple his/her ability to be a good partner if we do not do this. How can they be a good partner to us if they do not know who we are, how we feel and what we like and don't like? In addition, if we shirk this responsibility to communicate we deny our relationship intimacy, blocking not only ourselves from being able to experience the fullness of life that results from a healthy, growing, intimate relationship, but our partner as well. For the same reasons, we also have the responsibility to listen and empathize when our partner is being intimate and genuine with us.

9. This healthy, intimate communication is difficult to achieve when we fear being rejected by him/her. This fear can often be recognized when we feel anxious and threatened by differences that we have with our partner. This fear of rejection and aloneness causes us to want to avoid the anxiety caused by the differences. As a result, we will often react in old, regressive, “childhood” ways. Examples of such regressive relationship reactions are: denying or acting as if we are not hurt, angry or disappointed, becoming numb and shutting down, becoming more dependent on pleasing our partner, attacking our partner either directly or passive-aggressively, becoming more dependent on pleasing our partner, moving to make premature compromises, etc. All of these types of behaviors result in distancing ourselves emotionally from not only our partner, but from our self as well. A major goal of our work with you will be to help you and your partner see that times of anxiety in your relationship present the greatest growth opportunities that each of you and your relationship will ever have.
10. **Mirroring** is an important, advanced process in the art of achieving intimacy. It is the act of one person making an observation about his or her partner to that partner, and making it from a position of differentiation and compassion. It is not telling your partner how you want him or her to change or how he or she “has to” change. It is one partner holding up the mirror to the other. Then your partner looks at his or her image as reflected by you, and gives it honest consideration. Most importantly, while looking in the mirror, your partner is holding on to his or her own sense of self. This can be one of the most positive processes in an intimate relationship, powerfully leading to self-growth.
11. The strongest and healthiest long term, committed relationships are comprised of two people who love each other and who are each well defined, **individuated** individuals who have achieved healthy **affection intimacy** and healthy **conflict intimacy**. And they are both able to maintain their individuation even when they are experiencing the **growing pains** of the relationship. By growing pains we mean the times differences between the two of you emerge and result in relationship **tension**.
12. When such **growing pains** occur we often regress to the primitive mechanism of **symbiosis** in order to avoid or eliminate the **tension** that the differences or changes cause. This mechanism is defined by our desire to merge with the other and in so doing eliminate the tension. We become symbiotic with our partner, co-dependent, replacing differences with similarities. Along with this tendency comes many powerful, unhealthy assumptions that can be brought to the relationship such as “If you love me, you will agree with me”. Also, a symbiotic request carries with it a demand for compliance that entails the other partner having to give up his/her sense of self. Such symbiosis not only stunts the growth of a relationship but also threatens its very continuance. When both members of a couple have the love, commitment and courage to not avoid these growing pains, but to embrace the tension they cause and work it through, their relationship and their love will flourish.

13. The **Necessary and Sufficient Conditions for Relationship Healing** are:

1. Both partners want to save the relationship.
2. Both partners respect the other as an equal.
3. Both partners feel deep love for the other.

If #1 does not apply there is no chance.

If #1 does apply but #2 and/or #3 do not apply there is still a chance if, through working on the relationship, they come to apply.

14. Just as an individual goes through stages of development, so do couples go from one stage to another. There are three stages of couple development. They are: **Symbiosis**, **Differentiation**, and **Synergy**.*

Stage 1: Symbiosis

This is the initial, “romantic” phase of a love relationship. It is when two people merge in love and become more a “we” than two separate individuals, a time when you experience the joy of giving to and being given to unconditionally by your partner. The drive to achieve this merging developed evolutionarily since it increased the chances of survival. So each of us is driven at a very deep, instinctual level to form this symbiotic bond. In this stage, our differences are minimized or overlooked and the best parts of each other are emphasized. Anything seems possible and you are filled with happiness to have found in the other this “missing part” of yourself. But this happiness is in part based in fantasy. That is, the skewed perceptions that support this merging of the two of you, this symbiosis. When reality inevitably starts to intrude, this fantasy is revealed and the relationship must grow and change if it is to endure and flourish. But without this stage there is no foundation of love and commitment for the relationship to build on in the future.

Stage 2: Differentiation

As each individual “I” starts to re-emerge from the symbiotic “we”, the differences that were hidden in Stage 1 become apparent. Each of you discovers attributes of your partner that you don’t like, resulting in disillusionment and disappointment. This is a very challenging and sometimes painful time as conflicts start to occur. Unless a couple engages healthy, effective ways of working through these conflicts, the relationship will get stuck here and will deteriorate. But these very same conflicts also present the most hope and opportunity for helping the couple advance through this stage of development. If the tension created when differences and conflict arise is not reacted to regressively, but instead is met head-on by two partners intent on staying differentiated and on treating each other with respect, the intimacy they achieve will be enhanced and the relationship will grow.

Stage 3: Synergy

This is the stage in which increasingly the “whole” that is “we” becomes greater than either of us individually. This begins to happen as each of us is not only able to experience the joy of the union of our love, but we can also be our self and are loved and respected for being who we are even with our shortcomings and our differences with our partner. Healthy affection intimacy and conflict intimacy have been established and the differentiation of each partner is solidifying. The love and the felt intimacy in the relationship are deepening and continue to grow over time. Conflict doesn’t block but rather catalyzes the love bond to grow ever stronger and richer.

15. Especially in a committed relationship, each partner needs to work to overcome his or her limitations. Each person needs to acknowledge his or her limitations and make vigorous efforts to work on them. These limitations fall into three categories: **self-imposed limitations**, **trauma-imposed limitations**, and **genetically imposed limitations**. Self-imposed limitations are based on the fear of failure. An individual places such a limitation on his or herself to keep from taking a risk, trying a new behavior or way of being, for fear that they will fail at it. This is a common hindrance to fulfilling sex, for example. Trauma-imposed limitations are based on a person’s fear of being hurt, and result from incidences from his or her past, sometimes from very early in their life, when he or she was traumatized interpersonally. This type of limitation keeps a person from opening up and becoming intimately vulnerable with his or her partner. Instead he or she remains well defended and “safe” through withdrawal, incongruence or defensive anger. Genetically imposed limitations are the physical or intellectual abilities that each person does or doesn’t have. Instead of thinking of these as relationship dealbreakers (“He’s not smart enough for me.”) they need to be acknowledged and accepted as part of who each person is, part of what makes him or her who he or she is, not as a determiner of his or her worth. They are more often used as excuses to avoid intimacy and vulnerability than they are true factors in a relationship.

16. Our couples therapy is based upon the belief that by helping two people achieve a healthy, intimate love relationship we are helping them to build a life that is richer and more fulfilling than either of them could have alone. We believe that each person in a committed love relationship, especially a marriage, has a very serious responsibility to make every effort to work through the problems and the pain that every relationship, no matter how good, goes through. That is what commitment is about and that is what will result in self-respect and in no regrets.

* #12 above is adapted from Bader, Ellyn and Pearson, Peter, [In Quest of the Mythical Mate](#).