

## Chapter 1

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# *An* Introduction to Relationship Bridge Building



*I know of no more encouraging  
fact than the unquestionable ability of man  
to elevate his life by conscious endeavor.*

-Henry Thoreau

## The Road to Effective Relationship Bridges is Always Under Construction

### *Which One Is You...?*

- I often am unable to effectively initiate meaningful relationships
- I often find my important relationships being superficial and unfulfilling
- I often feel powerless and am unable to assert myself in my relationships
- I often find my relationships being full of conflict without resolution
- I often find myself not knowing how to make myself understood in my relationships
- I often find myself longing for relationships that are open and free but I am unable to create them
- I often find myself involved with somebody who actively runs away from me
- I often need to maintain my personal space in all of my relationships
- I often am unable to sustain long-term committed relationships
- I often am afraid that I will lose myself or my autonomy in a long-term relationship
- I often commit myself to unavailable or inappropriate partners

Many people are confronted with these life challenges daily. The core of my clinical work in private practice as a clinical psychologist has focused on these types of life challenges and more. These life challenges were the source of a variety of presenting problems I initially addressed with my clients. Depression, anxiety disorders, low self esteem, substance abuse, eating disorders, and sexual addiction all flowed from the disturbed interpersonal relationships my clients experienced with friends, lovers, family members, and co-workers.

Invariably, we found an enormous potential for change and growth by expanding and improving the quality and breadth of the client's interpersonal relationships. I am sure you will understand me when I tell you "this was easier said than done."

So many of my clients believed relationships were important to have but were too much work to maintain. They doubted their own ability to have quality relationships. I cannot tell you how many times I heard the lament, "Good relationships are something other people can have, but were not intended for me."

Hopelessness permeated their emotional and spiritual well-being. So many of my clients thought of themselves as being completely powerless. Time after time they would tell me how out of control their lives felt. They believed the self-defeating patterns dominating their relationships were unchangeable. I was always left with the feeling my clients believed these patterns had a life of their own.

I always felt so much empathy for their plight. It seemed as if they experienced life much the way a child feels standing outside a candy store without any hope of finding a way into the store.

Often I would get phone calls from people who said, “I understand my problem inside out. I’ve spent years in individual therapy. I’ve read all the books. I’ve seen all the video tapes. I’ve gone to all the workshops. I still don’t know any more about how to do what it is I need to do. I don’t know how to get to where I want to be from where I know only too well I am right now.”

I noticed something else about the people I was meeting. I sensed an underlying cynicism from years of exploring every remedy a self-help book could offer, only to see those books go unread, be misunderstood, or not helpful beyond describing the problem and/or the solution.

Years of trying every quick fix remedy on the market exacerbated their despair with cynicism. Big promises, with little delivery of these promises, had actually undermined people’s openness to considering that there were legitimate and effective ways of creating change. Some people viewed each setback as their own personal failure—discounting any shortcomings with whatever or whomever they had placed all their hopes.

Disappointment after disappointment ingrained the silent belief, “I am flawed and things will never change.”

After meeting so many people with the same story, it was clear to me that something different needed to be done.

The program we call Relationship Bridge-Building is for both individuals and couples who want to enhance the quality of their life. The basic assumption of the program is that emotional and spiritual well-being evolves from effective, satisfying, and fulfilling relationships in all aspects of your life. By mastering universal relationship principles, you can develop the skills necessary to create safe, supportive, and nurturing relationships.

These kinds of relationships are the foundation for both emotional and spiritual well-being. Emotional well-being is a sense of worth, value, and importance to others. Feeling loved and accepted grows out of relationships in which we feel a sense of belonging. Supportive relationships provide affirmation when our partners listen to us and support us.

Spiritual well-being comes from the quality of the relationships that we have with ourselves and others. When we feel safe, supported, and grounded to others, life takes on purpose and meaning. A life of purpose allows us to follow our own path with a sense of security, knowing that we always have a place in this world and that we are cared about.

The truth is, this is not only a program about how to build good relationships. This program helps you create a life of emotional and spiritual well-being. Nurturing relationships are the salve that heals wounds and soothes pain. If your relationships are safe and supportive, they will bring hope and meaning to your life.

The premise of the principles of Relationship Bridge-Building is: by learning to effectively relate to others, you can repair, nourish, and enhance the quality of your life.

Each person is different. And their pain is individual. Some people came to my office with marital issues, problems with infidelity, depression, or eating, drug or alcohol problems. Others came in just feeling bad. Hopelessness permeated their emotional and spiritual well-being. What we learned was the source of all that emotional pain ran deeper than just the problems they initially talked about. What we learned was the sense of being disconnected from themselves and other people created the real emptiness and loneliness they were experiencing. The empti-

ness that chemicals, food, sex, or material things were trying to fill was the symptom of a person in need of interpersonal connection.

And the answer applied to many different people—from the businessman whose infidelity stripped meaning out of his life, to the mother of three who gave herself away for her family. Whether they felt isolated and lonely or filled with despair, their common story was a search for meaning and fulfillment. To everyone who asked, “Where is the answer?” the response rang clear—change and growth do not have a quick fix. Any real life challenge needs time and commitment to create new solutions.

After spending time listening to many people, I decided that working in the context of small groups was the most effective means for bringing about healing and change. By building relationships with people in these groups, the group members could develop the skills necessary to elevate all of their significant relationships.

And as the people in the groups established real belonging, they could begin to experience a sense of worth and value. Feelings of isolation and alienation could be replaced with something more satisfying.

Well, the result of this project turned into six groups called Bridge Builders. The groups did something called Relationship Bridge-Building. The name Bridge Builders came from the first exercise we learned to do as members of the groups. It’s tough to describe the exercise here, but it involved some string and kind words, and for some reason, dozens of people seemed to hang on to the name of Bridge Builders.

Over time, the results of this program demonstrated that a combination of active guidance and willing partici-

pants was a powerful combination for creating growth and change.

But success did not come without its risks. I instinctively knew I would be asking people to experience awkwardness, discomfort, and even pain. The program exposed the participants to the very things they feared the most.

Therefore, a personal growth experience built on this kind of paradox needed to be safe. So we began to find ways to strike a balance between challenging people and making sure that their rights and dignity were respected at all times. And that seemed to be an almost magical ingredient.

While I was writing this book, I talked to a woman who has found herself through the Bridge-Building process. She has embraced everything contained in this book and more. As I shared my plans to put all this down on paper, I asked her what she thought.

“I think writing down an experience like this is tough,” she said. “Knowing the skills is one thing, but connecting them to your soul is something else.”

“Your soul?” I asked.

“Yea, the point of this story is not just about how to get along with people. It’s the great, unbelievable things that happen when you learn to connect with it all.” A smile filled her face as she said, “It’s not just mastering Involvement, Personal Freedom, Responsibility, Communication, and all that. It’s experiencing the gift of being full and involved in so many aspects of your life.”

We talked for a long time about the things to be gained and then I shared my concerns for putting these ideas in a book. “For one thing, it’s tough to explain everything fully on paper, and you never know if you have answered all of the reader’s questions,” I said. “And it’s

tough to encourage people when you are not actually there with them.”

“Steve,” she said, “what I’ve learned is when you need support, look in the mirror and decide for yourself how best to proceed. As you read through the book, you’ll realize that each person’s path is individual to her or him. There’s a lot in there and everybody will take or leave things as they need them. There is no right or wrong answer.”

I asked her about her experience in Relationship Bridge-Building and she said, “It’s an involved path, sometimes I feel safe, light, and free. Other times, everything seems dark, uncomfortable, and confusing. It may not always be as clear to you, the important thing is that you try.”

She thought for a second and said, “Sometimes I remember my feelings being locked shut with big warning signs saying, *ENTER AT YOUR OWN RISK*. Trying to enter those parts of myself only seemed to cause despair and fear. It is critical to respect these feelings as well. There is a lot to be learned from the parts of yourself that you are not ready to open up. But, those feelings may be best acknowledged and left unentered, until you feel more ready.

“It’s a journey, and the things to be gained along the way are tremendous. Don’t worry, there’s no specific order that these things must be entered and mastered. Find your own order of entering and mastering them, and take the time to make them your own. The only caveat is, the more you move forward the better it gets, until you eventually move to the biggest challenges for you.

“If there was one thing I could tell someone reading the book, it would be to embrace the spirit of those words you shared with me when I first started.”

## Bridge Builder’s Spirit

*You enter the forest  
at the darkest point,  
where there is no path.*

*Where there is a way or path,  
it is someone else’s path.*

*You are not on your own path.*

*If you follow someone else’s way,  
you are not going to realize  
your potential.*

-Joseph Campbell