

P A R T 4

*U*nmet Emotional Needs



*My creed is that: Happiness is the only good.
The place to be happy is here. The time to be happy is
now. The way to be happy is to make others so.*

-Robert G. Ingersoll

We Give In Order
That We May Receive



*If my hands are fully occupied in holding on to
something, I can neither give nor receive.*

-Dorothee Solle

A second theme that runs deep beneath the surface of the circumstances of your conflict is your unfulfilled *emotional needs*. Our emotional needs are the heart and soul of what brings two people together. When your relationship is working for you, rest assured that your needs are getting met. When you feel like you're stuck in a web of conflict and emotional distance, it's likely that either you or your partner is feeling depleted—that in part or in whole, the source of the conflict is some emotional need going unfulfilled.

Have you ever thought about the pain that's beneath all the *noise* that gets stirred up between you and your partner? Have you ever made the connection between your unfulfilled emotional needs and the level of noise that's present in your relationship? It's sad, but true. So much of what precipitates conflict between two people is really a smokescreen for the pain that two people feel when their needs aren't getting met.

I was doing an interview on the radio recently. It was the kind of show where listeners called in and asked me questions about their relationships. One woman, Mary, called with a question about her extramarital affair...

"Dr. Frisch, how come I don't feel at all guilty about the affair I'm having?"

"Perhaps you feel justified in having the affair in the first place," I suggested.

"Absolutely!" Mary said rather pointedly.

"And is anger the only thing you feel towards your

husband right now?"

"Doctor, I've been furious with him for years," Mary replied.

"So, Mary, is this affair your way at getting back at him?" I wondered out loud.

"The no good S.O.B. deserves it. After all he's put me through, he deserves what he's got coming to him."

"Mary, it sounds like you've been through a lot with your husband," I responded.

"Doctor, you don't know the half of it. He's had at least five affairs that I know of in the last four years. Why twice I've caught him in my own bed with another woman."

"You must feel betrayed by your husband," I said.

"You're damn right I do. But it's much more than betrayal. It's all the ways he ignores me. He never wants to spend time with me. For years, I've felt like I have to beg him to pay the least bit of attention to me. At least the man I'm with now pays attention to me. I don't have to act like a lap dog just to get him to notice me."

"So you're finally getting some affection from a man?" I asked.

"You know, I hadn't thought about it that way, but you're right. When my husband and I first met, I always felt so cared for. There wasn't anything that he wouldn't do for me, but that stopped a long time ago. Back then, I felt important, like he cared about me. But now it seems like I have to go elsewhere for all that."

"Let's look at it this way then. What is it that you're getting from this other man? It's easy to see that a part of you is wanting to punish your husband for the times he has cheated on you. But it seems to me that there must

be some other void that this affair is filling for you.”

“It’s like I said, I don’t have to beg for attention. This guy makes me feel like I matter, like I count. With my husband, I’ve always felt, well, invisible is the best way to put it. I mean, I swear, I feel like I’m no more than a piece of furniture to him, disposable at that.

“But with my gentleman friend, I feel like he’s there because of me, that he’s interested in me. And because of that, I feel like I’m alive again.”

“Mary, what do you mean about feeling alive again?” I asked.

“Do you know what you have to do to yourself when you are ignored for so many years? Do you know how you have to deaden yourself on the inside in order to numb the pain enough to simply get through the day? I’ve spent years feeling like a piece of dried out driftwood. There’s only so much aching, so much unfulfilled longing that I could endure. The only way I could cope with it all, was just by deadening myself.

“Do I feel bad about this affair? No way. For the first time in years I finally feel alive.”

Sadly, this is true for most of us: the choice we make is to ignore much of what’s taking place rather than risk the confrontation that could make things different. We ignore our partner’s behavior. We ignore our emotional longings. Our feelings shut down, we don’t blinder to our partner’s actions, and sadly we deny our needs. Where once there was love and compassion, there remains only smoldering hostility that becomes masked by indifference and apathy.

You could hear all of this in Mary’s story. The longer Mary talked, the more her emotions shifted. Initially, she

was indifferent. As I poked around, trying to understand the underlying relationship issues buried beneath her extramarital affair, her indifference turned to anger and retribution. Finally, she touched upon the core of her pain—a profound sense of deprivation. For Mary, there was more than payback going on in her affair. In fact, payback was merely the *vehicle* used to express her deeper pain. Mary had been deprived for years—deprived of the one thing she wanted, forgot wanted, the thing she *needed* most—she needed her emotional needs met.

Given the opportunity to talk about it, her pain came bubbling to the surface along with the needs she felt were unmet. Attention. Affection. Being noticed. Feeling cared about. Trust. Feeling safe. These are but a few of the emotional needs that each and every one of us have. And take notice, none of these can be fulfilled in a vacuum. These needs can only be fulfilled by the people who are in our life. This is why we create relationships.

Can you see how the unmet emotional needs Mary was experiencing turned her relationship inside out? Our emotional needs are at the bottom of the push and pull we experience in our relationships. There’s a silent arm wrestling match that takes place between people that sounds something like...

- Honey, we need to spend more time together vs. I need some time to myself.
- You are constantly taking me for granted vs. I feel like I matter to you when you make time for me.
- I feel like you hardly know me vs. thanks for taking some time so we could catch up with each other.

- I feel like you care more about that damn computer more than you do me vs. you're the most important person in the world to me.

And once you make the decision to talk about the pain rather than act it out, you have created an opportunity to resolve the underlying relationship issue rather than merely fix the circumstances of the problem. My friend Sylvia taught me her secret to the success of her marriage that she and her husband Duane discovered 35 years ago.

"Steve, it's just like that commercial on television, you know, that medicine for an upset stomach—that one where it says *takes a lickin but keeps on tickin*."

"No Syliva, that's for Timex™ watches, not Pepto-Bismol™."

"Oh yea, well, whatever. You get my point, don't you?"

"Can't say as I do," I responded with a perplexed look on my face.

"Duane and me, we agreed years ago, that there were two ways we could stay married to each other. Duane said to me, 'Syl,'—you know how Duane calls me Syl, 'Syl,—you know how muleheaded you are about everything. I figure we can keep bumping heads with each other for the next thirty years or we can try something different.'"

Syliva continued, "Duane went on to explain how we were squabbling about everything. He wanted to do his thing. I wanted to do mine. We never seemed to be there for each other. It was like we were two strangers sharing the same house.

"We fought constantly. Nothing ever got fixed from all our fighting. Oh sure, we were surviving all the bull that

we did to each other, you know, it was never enough to break up over, but Duane's point was, don't you want more out of our marriage than just surviving how awful we can treat each other?"

"I see what you're saying," I said to Sylvia.

"I told you Mr. Big-Shot, my Duane doesn't talk much, but when he does, he usually says something mighty important."

"So how's that the secret to your marriage, what's that got to do with a Timex watch?"

"I'll give you a *for instance*. Whenever I tell Duane we need to talk, he'll act like he can't hear me, you know like he's asleep in his chair. Then I say to Duane, 'Duane, we can either talk about it or ignore it. If we ignore it, our marriage might take a *lickin but keep on tickin*, but is that what you want?'

"You see what I mean? Whenever one of us is feeling kinda down about things, whenever we need the other person, we gotta get their attention sometimes.

"In the old days, we used to fight about things without talking about things. You know how Duane likes to play all his sports, leaving me behind, or how I like to go for walks with him and he always complains he's too tired. Whenever we feel like we need something from the other, if ever we don't listen, then we just say, 'takes a lickin but keeps on tickin' and we know we better put our marriage first. We know it's time to check in with each other, to connect and see how we can better be there for each other."

Duane and Sylvia's solution makes a lot of sense. The art of making molehills out of mountains is predicated upon an appreciation for how damaging unspoken hurt

can be between two people in any relationship. You can grow calluses over the original wounds, but the wound never heals. Indeed, the wound festers away, leaking its poison all over the people in your life. And the wound that runs deepest is the longing we experience when our emotional needs go unfulfilled.

Rest assured it doesn't have to stay that way for you. As always, you have choices in the matter. As I continually encourage you to believe, a little bit of know-how can go a long way to transform much of the conflict in your relationships into healing, understanding, growth, and love.

Howdy Neighbor!



*Not what we give, but what we share,
for the gift without the giver is bare.*

-James Russell Lowell

Bridge-Builder's Tip



Secure connections are created by inviting your partner into your world.

Volumes have been written about what I'm going to tackle in the next two chapters of this section. I don't want to oversimplify what is truly a complex subject. However, if you gain a heightened sensitivity for the two emotional needs I'm about to discuss with you, you'll soon discover that your relationships become considerably less conflictual, and more importantly, much more rewarding.

Secure connection. Emotional safety. I offer these two emotional needs as targets for you and your partner to stay focused on. When you feel things shifting in your relationship, bring your focus back to how safe and secure you feel with your partner. If you feel like the sand is moving beneath your feet, that something's amiss in your relationship, it's time to clarify for yourself how safe you're feeling. Trust me, by consistently honoring your need for a secure connection and emotional safety, most of your other emotional needs will automatically get met along the way.

Let's start with a secure connection. In my estimation, this is the most profound emotional need we have. Your relationships are the cornerstone of your emotional and

spiritual well-being. They're the source of much of the emotional sustenance you depend upon in your day to day life. The more stable your connections are with the people who matter most, the more grounded and secure you'll feel.

So much of what we desire is derived from the nurturance we receive from other people. Tenderness. Caring. Affection. Belonging. We all know how good it feels to be loved and cared for. After all, that's why we go to all this bother in the first place. These are but a few of the emotional needs that can only be met, in part or in whole, through our involvement with other people.

Therein lies the vulnerability you experience in your relationships. You know only too well how tentative your connection to anybody can be at any point in time. Relationships are dynamic, ever-changing. The strength of your connection with your partner shifts and changes. You come together and drift apart. An intense feeling of closeness exists at one point, yet somehow that closeness can transform into the precipitant for the two of you to retreat from each other.

Other times you may experience you and your partner drifting apart, incapable or unwilling to find your way back to each other. The retreat is shrouded in the ways you have of creating, maintaining, and sustaining conflict. Yet sadly, the pain created from feeling disconnected, from feeling too far away from your partner, can all too often go unspoken. Does any of this have a ring of familiarity for you? Are there times when your emotional need to feel securely connected to your partner goes unstated as you focus on everything else but the pain of feeling disconnected?

Let's do a reality check. Are there times that you feel like your partner's attentions, or their emotional presence has diminished or disappeared altogether? Do you recognize the feeling of trepidation, even distrust as your partner becomes more emotionally unavailable? Do you have words for the emotional undertow that tugs at you as you attempt to get your partner to emotionally renege with you? The connection that once was so consistent, so dependable is seemingly gone, vanished into thin air.

That's what's at the core of much of the discord that you and your partner create as it relates to your emotional need for a consistent connection. As your need for a stable connection gets frustrated, the pain derived from your insatiable desire to have your partner be close and your partner's inability or unwillingness to do so bubbles beneath the surface.

How about the other side of the coin—your need to maintain a certain amount of distance and the fear that the amount of that distance stirs in your partner. Here's the point. Lurking beneath the surface of much of your conflict is the unexpressed pain created by two people doing the dance of creating a connection that carries an incredible burden. The burden? How to keep things both *safe enough* and *fulfilling enough* for two people to create and sustain emotional intimacy in their relationship.

Think of all the words we have to describe that emotional disconnect. Abandonment. Withdrawal. Retreat. Betrayal. Unavailable. Non-committal. Think of all the reasons we create to justify that disconnect. Fear. Punishment. Ignorance. Indifference. Think of all the pain that is stirred up when you feel disconnected from your partner. Isolation. Loneliness. Alienation.

These are the corrosives that eat away at our emotional and spiritual well-being. It's easy enough to see why. The emotional underbelly of feeling disconnected is discouragement, anger, resentment, and depression—an emotional state that takes on a life of its own, spiraling out of control.

But when we're grounded by stable connections with people who honor and respect ourselves, our emotional world takes on a whole different hue. For instance...

A few weeks ago a gentleman was completing the process of leaving one of my Relationship Bridge-Builders groups. When someone leaves the group, we take three weeks to say good-bye. It's important to say good-bye in a way that brings honor to all the blood, sweat, and tears that each group member has invested in building caring, nurturing relationships with each other. This gentleman was no exception. He was truly loved by each group member.

As the time was winding down in his final session, our departing group member was asked what it was he would be taking from his experience in the group.

As he thought about the question for a moment, tears began to well up in his eyes. When he finally spoke, his voice quivered as he softly said, "Family. What I have gotten most from my experience here is a sense of family.

"I never had that before. I have never known what it's like to be loved by so many good people. Learning how to get close and *stay close* to you guys has been the greatest gift to me."

He paused for a moment to collect his thoughts. The person sitting next to him offered a Kleenex. He wiped his eyes and continued. "Knowing how much you care

about me, feeling free enough to be able to express it, that's meant everything to me. I carry you guys around with me wherever I go. Your words of encouragement ring in my head everytime I try something new. Your loving glances calm me whenever I'm feeling overwhelmed."

He chuckled to himself as he saw the irony in what he was about to say. "Knowing how much you care about me has empowered *me* to care about *me*. I never realized before I joined this group just how little I cared about myself, but being here with you week after week, the kindest gift of all was you letting me into your world, accepting me no matter how awful I behaved, I was able to finally accept myself, even begin to love myself."

Feeling connected means everything to us, yet sadly, we can be inept at creating and sustaining a meaningful connection. I'm going to suggest to you one simple skill. This skill will help you successfully negotiate the dance of coming together and drifting apart. This skill will cement those times when you're safely connected. It will help you find each other when you've drifted apart.

You'll scoff at me. You'll think to yourself that there has to be more to it than what I'm about to suggest. You'll accuse me of oversimplifying, underestimating the complexity of human interaction, overgeneralizing the influence of this one skill—but I promise you, in all my experience, the quality of any relationship bridge is predicated upon how well you do one thing and one thing only!

The one thing? I call it *checking-in*. Checking-in is a simple skill that enables the bond between you and your partner to grow and strengthen. It's a skill that will enable you to make your connection more and more secure.

By initiating the process of checking-in, you and your partner can create, maintain, and sustain a secure connection that will enable you to support rather than withdraw from each other.

Think of checking-in as the process of taking the temperature of yourself, your partner, and your relationship. You take the temperature by sharing something about yourself—your thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. Sharing about yourself in this very specific way creates a special bond between you and your partner—a bond that makes your connection more and more secure.

How to check-in? There's a simple skill to use when you want to check-in with your partner. I wrote about it in another of my books, *Building Better Bridges*. The fancy term for this skill is *self-disclosure*. In more simplistic terms, I refer to it as the *act of letting yourself be known to the world*. Take it from me. I sit in groups all week long. I watch people go through every gyration known to mankind. The point of all the twisting and turning? To avoid. To avoid being seen. To avoid being exposed. To avoid being found out. To avoid the intensity of a close connection.

Day after day I watch people construct a wall between themselves and the rest of the world. I watch how adept they are at creating emotional and physical distance between themselves and the people in their lives. Sadly, I bear witness to the resultant chaos they create in their lives, the bitter pain that grows out of living in a self-protected world that keeps them safe, yet shuts out the rest of the world.

But I'm never discouraged. I've also had the privilege of watching a transformation take place when a person

gives up the struggle—the struggle of wanting to have great relationships without taking any risks. And the biggest risk of all, the biggest risk that has the greatest return, that risk is sharing who you are with another human being.

I must tell you, my friend, there's no avoiding this one immutable law. Your most important emotional need—feeling securely connected to your partner—is going to be fulfilled through both your *willingness* and *know-how* to open up and let your partner in.

You see we're back to that *willingness* thing and that *relationship skill* thing—*checking-in* and *self-disclosure*. Notice how we're back to that *choice* thing: shut people out or let them in.

Let's look at what happens when Mandy tries to check-in with Sydney. Notice how the lack of self-disclosure keeps a connection distant and how the presence of self-disclosure can forge a bond of love and support.

Scenario #1



"How was your day?" Mandy asked.

"Pretty much the same as usual," Sydney replied.

"That's not saying much," a frustrated Mandy said.

"There's not much to say," Sydney said.

"Well, something had to happen," Mandy said.

"No, not really. I called a few clients. Took a few

orders. Oh, yea. Now that you mention it, they let Alvin go. You remember Alvin, don't you? Been there for at least fifteen years."

"That must have been upsetting," Mandy observed.

"Upsetting? Gee, I don't know. I didn't give it much thought," Sydney said.

"Hey, by the way, did you want to rent a movie tonight?" Sydney asked Mandy.

"Syd, don't shut me out like that. I want to know what's going on with you. You must have been affected somehow, somehow by Alvin being fired," an exasperated Mandy replied.

Sydney was taken aback by Mandy's insistent tone. All this did was serve to make him defensive and somewhat combative. "Shut you out, what are you talking about? You asked me how my day was. I told you. I went to work, did my thing, yada, yada, yada. Now I'm asking you, do you want to watch a video with me tonight?"

"Is there something else that I'm not getting here? If so, please tell me. Otherwise get off my back. What more do you want from me? How can you accuse me of shutting you out?" Sydney asked as he walked out of the room with both eyes glued to the TV guide.

Doesn't this couple remind you of Jack Webb's character, Sergeant Friday? You know what I mean—*just the facts ma'am*. You can see why, can't you? Does this couple connect or merely exchange information?

Name, rank, and serial number. That's Sydney's *modus operandi*. Does that build bridges or walls between two people? Exchanging information is not an invitation to let your partner in, it's an act of keeping your partner out. You give your partner a lot of information but very little

shoe to drop and I'm afraid it's going to land right on me. Can you imagine what would happen to us if I lost my job?"

"Now Syd, I understand how worried you are, but you don't have to let your imagination run wild. We'll be all right," Mandy said, trying to reassure Sydney.

"I don't know. I feel like we're both carrying such a big load as it is. I worry about the burden it will put on you. And where's someone my age going to get a job like I have now?"

"Syd, how can I reassure you? We'll both be all right."

"Mandy, just your asking helps. You know how I get when things get all bottled up. I know you'd be there for me, but hearing you say what you said, keeps my mind from racing."

"Oh yea, I know. But thanks for letting me know where you're at. I promise you, though, everything is going to be all right," Mandy said as they both hugged each other.

Do you see the difference between the second scenario and the first? Sydney was more willing to talk about himself rather than videos and television programs. In the first scenario, Sydney became defensive and walked away. In the second scenario, he willingly told Mandy how he was affected by Alvin being fired. Because he let Mandy in, she was able to be there for him rather than having to guess at what was going on with him.

Do you see how checking-in created a secure connection in scenario #2 whereas Sydney's unwillingness to check-in in scenario #1 created a wall? In scenario #2, the connection was created out of Sydney's willingness to be open by using the skill of self-disclosure.

Let's review for a moment. The skills are *checking-in* and *self-disclosure*. The act is letting someone into your world by sharing who you are with them. The means to letting someone into your world is *sharing yourself*. What you share about yourself with another person are your thoughts, feelings, and beliefs.

Checking-in as it relates to the sustaining of a secure connection between you and your partner has a very specific focus—you, your partner, the relationship, and the here-and-now. There's a lot to chew on in that last sentence. Let me pick it apart so that you can better appreciate the enormity of what I'm suggesting.

The hoped for outcome of checking-in is to keep you and your partner connected. The purpose of checking-in with each other is to demonstrate an interest and concern with how each of you are doing.

There are several benefits to inviting your partner into your world. I have already talked about how important feeling understood is. Self-disclosure is the basis for which your partner will best be able to understand you. The more open you are, the less your partner will have to guess at what is going on with you.

Feeling better understood creates a bond between you and your partner. Each new bond that's constructed between you and your partner makes your connection all that much more secure. The ultimate outcome of a more secure connection is a continued feeling of acceptance, feeling cared about, and every other goodie that we so desperately want from our relationships.

When you and your partner take the time to check-in with each other, treat it as the precious time that it is. Use it as an opportunity to focus on the state of yourselves as

well as the relationship. If you're problemsolving with your partner, spend as much time on the underlying relationship issue as you do on the circumstances that created the problem.

Finally, when focusing on the underlying relationship issue, use the following guidelines as a way of talking about yourself and the relationship. You'll discover instantly what a difference the skill of checking-in will make in untangling the conflict you're experiencing, thereby strengthening your connection with your partner.

The Do's and Don'ts For Effectively Checking-in



- Talk with your partner rather than at your partner.
- Talk about yourself or the relationship rather than irrelevant external circumstances.
- Express what you need from your partner rather than relive a laundry list of past wrongs.
- Express the feelings you're experiencing in the moment rather than editorialize with your opinions and judgments.
- Focus on the here-and-now rather than the distant past or the unpredictable future.
- Share pieces about who you are rather than explain your partner to your partner.

- Share pieces about who you are rather than exchange information.
- Share pieces about who you are rather than defending or justifying who you are.

This is a skill that's going to take a lot of practice. It will feel unnatural to you at first. You will feel self-conscious, in some ways, emotionally naked.

The only way this will begin to feel more comfortable for you is to do it over and over again. By undertaking the risk of checking-in with your partner, your partner has a responsibility to you. That responsibility is to honor your efforts at creating a stronger connection with you. You see, the cement that will hold this together for the two of you is trust. You'll need to know that your partner is trustworthy—that no harm or embarrassment will come to you because of your efforts.

So take your time with this skill. You'll backslide, I guarantee it. Just know that when you pull back, it's okay to do so. But you need to understand that you're pulling back to seek cover. Once it feels safe again, commit to coming back out again.

Do you see the paradox I'm suggesting? It's a whole new way of defining what a safe relationship is. I'm suggesting a new way of creating safety for both of you. Emotional safety is no longer buried in the fox-hole in which you've lived much of your life, but nestled in the safety that comes from two people being securely connected.

*B*ecoming Captain of the Safety Patrol



*Tolerance is the oil which
takes the friction out of life.*

-Wilbert E. Scheer

Bridge-Builder's Tip



Treat the words your partner shares with you as the precious gems that they are.

Dale's words caused Marty's body to recoil, much as if he had been struck with a bullet fired from a gun.

"That does it, I'm not doing this with you anymore," Marty shouted.

Strangely Marty's actions, the words spoken, the depth of Marty's anger, didn't seem to phase her in the least. In fact, it appeared that there was a look of satisfaction on her face, just the smallest hint of amusement in her smile.

"I mean it, Dale. I just can't keep taking this."

"Taking what?" she asked, more annoyed than curious.

"You know damn well what I'm talking about. The way you shoot me down. I feel like I go out on a limb and there you are right behind me, sawing the branch off."

"Marty, don't you think that you're being just the least bit dramatic?"

"Dramatic! You know how hard it is for me to open up to anyone in the first place. And then when I do so with you—what you do with it—it's inhumane.

"I'm not following you," Dale said in her most dis-counting tone.

"Follow this, why don't you! I try and tell you how I feel about you and the next thing I know, you tear into me."

"Give me an example," Dale challenged Marty.

"I don't have to prove this to you, although I can tell you this much. I know when you're doing it. I feel it in my gut. It feels like I've been kicked by a mule.

Unmoved by Marty's protest, Dale's voice became harder rather than softer. "Listen, there are times that you go too far with things. I'm just trying to let you know to cut it out."

"Letting me know is one thing, but you become downright cruel. There's no way the punishment fits the crime. You take what I say to you, twist it, distort it, ultimately you use it against me."

"That certainly is your perception of things, but it doesn't mean that I agree with you," Dale said.

"My God, Dale, I'm not asking you to agree with me. I'm asking you to understand how your actions affect me. This isn't about whether your behavior is justified or not. It's about how unsafe you make me feel. It's about how I feel like closing up like a clam after one of your slams."

"Marty, all I can hear right now is you blaming me. I want to understand you, but I don't get what you're saying," Dale explained.

"It's real simple. I consider the things I share with you to be sacred. They're like precious jewels. But you treat my words like toothpicks that you just snap in half whenever I have displeased you."

Dale started to interrupt Marty, but Marty waved Dale off.

"No, don't. Just hear me out. Opening up to you the

way I do, do you have any idea how vulnerable, how fragile I feel? And then you come along and stomp on me, it's like you are squishing the life out of a bug. It's like you have a sixth sense for what I'm feeling so vulnerable about and then you just go after it.

"I need to feel safe in order to be with you. I need to trust that you aren't going to hurt me, that you aren't going to use my words against me. Worst of all, I never know when it's going to happen. I always have to keep my guard up, I never know when you're going to pounce on me next.

"Don't you get it, Dale, the very way you protect yourself causes me to feel unsafe with you. I can't keep doing this with you if I can't feel safe."

We all have the need to feel emotionally safe with the people in our lives. If you want to create a relationship that's rewarding and fulfilling, you need to insure that both you and your partner feel safe with each other. There's no way your relationship can grow and develop without that condition being met.

Remember, a secure connection and emotional safety are the two fundamental building blocks upon which an emotionally satisfying relationship is built. By fulfilling these basic emotional needs, you'll be that much better able to have many others fulfilled.

In the last chapter, we focused on two skills, checking-in and self-disclosure. These are the fundamental skills to use in order to create a secure connection. However, you can't have a secure connection without an atmosphere of openness created by a climate of emotional safety.

Now this is easy enough to see why. The emotional nutrients of any relationship are openness and emotional

honesty. Feeling emotionally safe is the primary ingredient necessary for emotional intimacy to grow and develop in your relationships. If you don't feel safe, you'll shut down, turn off, and tune out. The connection that you've worked so hard to create will shrivel up, wither away, and all too often, die.

What makes a relationship emotionally safe? Does the word *respect* make sense? Think about your own experiences. Think about the risks that you've taken with somebody. Did you feel like the risks you took were received with respect? Was there a sense of being honored for sharing something about yourself with somebody? Did you feel encouraged to continue taking risks with that person?

Trust makes a relationship emotionally safe. Trust is created out of the track record that you build with somebody. Has experience taught you that your partner works hard at understanding you? Or do your words become the tools that your partner uses to humiliate you? Using your words against you—these are the kinds of experiences that contribute to an emotionally unsafe relationship.

Taking ownership of your behavior is a third way to create an emotionally safe relationship. Taking ownership of your behavior removes the voices of blame and victimization from your relationships. In order for you to feel safe in your relationships, it's critical that you feel safe enough to be yourself without fear of blame and retribution.

Whenever there's blame being projected, nobody can feel safe. Blame makes you feel like a target. When you feel like a target, you must necessarily defend yourself. Feeling like a target, anybody will naturally defend them-

selves first, and build relationship bridges later.

The best way to diffuse that vicious circle is to blame less and take ownership more often. Being open to seeing your part in any dynamic with your partner enables your partner to feel much more open to seeing their part. That is the formula to resolving conflict and making things feel safe for you and your partner.

What I'm suggesting to you is the need to develop an emotional tone in your relationships. The tone expresses something special—the essence of which may seem somewhat simplistic to you. What this essence communicates is that you and your partner are for each other. Cooperation supplants competitiveness. Understanding displaces judgment. Acceptance blooms where criticism once ruled.

Whenever there is a prevailing sense of emotional safety there's a feeling of warmth and camaraderie. You feel safe in the knowledge that you have at least one person on your side wanting to be there for you rather than being against you. Life feels a little lighter, your burdens feel a little easier to bear.

Emotional safety is not something you can simply wish to have happen for you. There are things you can do to create that climate. Much of what we have discussed in earlier sections of the book are part of the puzzle. Things like acceptance, empathy, and validation. Now let me suggest more tools that will assist you in building emotionally safe relationships. Using these skills will build trust into your relationship. The presence of trust will enable the two of you to feel safe with each other in order to take more and more risks that will build an even more secure connection.

Bridge-Builder's Tool



*Use information to understand your partner,
not to use it against them.*

Laurie's face had turned a bright red. She was so embarrassed. All she wanted to do was find a hole to climb in and hide.

"I told you that in the strictest confidence," Laurie said. "How dare you bring that up again!"

"I'm just trying to prove what a hypocrite you are," Ralph said.

"A hypocrite? What's that have to do with anything?" Laurie asked.

"It has everything to do with it. All I'm saying is last week you told me all those things about you and your mom. And I can't help but think that if that is how you are with your mom, then...."

Laurie cut Ralph off before he could complete what he was about to say. "'Then,' nothing! One has absolutely nothing to do with the other.

"But I'll tell you this much. I can't believe how offended I feel. I can't believe that you would take what I told you, twist my words, and then try and apply them to a completely different set of circumstances."

"Why not? It seems like a perfectly normal thing to do. You make all these promises to me and expect me to believe you. I'm just pointing out that there's no reason

to believe you, based upon what you told me about you and your mother.”

By now, Laurie was more hurt than embarrassed. Tears were running down her cheeks. She couldn't believe how betrayed she felt.

“Ralph, you're missing the whole point. I told you that stuff about me and my mom, because I wanted you to better understand why it's so hard between her and me. I sure as hell didn't expect you to take that information and blow it out of proportion in every other aspect of my life.”

“I'd be a fool not to,” Ralph said.

“No, you're a fool for doing it,” Laurie said.

“Why's that?”

“Because you're causing more damage by misusing what I told you than the damage you fear I'm going to create in the first place.”

“How do you figure?” Ralph asked.

“Because I'm going to think twice before I tell you anything anymore. I don't like having to be so guarded with anybody. I'm going to resent you for what you've just done to me and I'm going to resent you for not being able to trust you in the future.”

“Why can't you trust me?” Ralph asked.

“Because I don't want to have to worry about what you're going to do with something once I share it with you. When I open up to you, I'm just sharing a part of myself with you, I'm not looking to have it shoved back into my face two weeks later when it suits your purposes to do so.”

The skills we have talked about in this book have one aim—diffusing conflict by *better understanding* your partner and more *effectively expressing* that understand-

ing to your partner. Your best intentions will be defeated if all the new ways you have to express yourself are used against you.

It's a very simple proposition. You and your partner both deserve to be treated with respect as you learn how to pinpoint the issues in your relationships. You need to understand that the skills you're learning are tools of healing, not bullets to be loaded in a gun to be fired at your partner.

Healing through understanding is the goal. Don't take your sights off that target. Understanding is created through all the new ways of communicating we've talked about.

These ways of communicating are sacred. They need to be honored as such. Communication is most effective when it feels safe to express what you need to express.

Take some time to review the list I have created below. Think about how this list may enrich your relationship. Is there at least one pointer on this list that you can adapt immediately?

This list of do's and don'ts can open up doors to the people in your life. But you know, this is no instant formula to happiness. You must be willing to practice these skills and be ready for the inevitable disappointments that come with trying something new.

The Do's and Don'ts for Creating Emotional Safety



- Don't take for granted what your partner is sharing with you. It may strike you as unimportant, but don't mistake that as being true for your partner. Treat it with the respect that you would want accorded to what you might share.
- Don't twist the meaning of what's being shared with you. Check it out with your partner how you're hearing what has been said to you. Make sure you understand what your partner is trying to communicate, not what you want to understand from it.
- Don't throw information in your partner's face. Be clear that whatever your partner shares with you, it's not going to be used as ammunition against them in the future.
- Honor your partner. Let your partner express what they need to express. By not personalizing what your partner expresses, you will reduce the defensiveness that can arise from honest communication.
- Listen to your partner. Your partner is not looking to have their feelings debated. Avoid attempting to argue away or fix away somebody's feelings. Be a sounding board that affirms your partner's feelings.
- Thank your partner for taking the risks that they have taken with you. Acknowledge the importance of what you have been entrusted with. Let your partner know that you understand the risk they have taken.

Bridge-Builder's Tool



Heal the hurts in your relationships rather than store them up as ammunition.

"All right, that's enough already!" Pat said angrily.

"Enough! I'm just getting warmed up," Barb said.

"Stop it, won't you?" Pat pleaded.

"Oh, you think I should go easy on you now?" Barb asked.

"Yea, don't you think I've been through enough?" Pat reasoned.

"You think you should get a free ride just because you quit drinking? What do you think I've been through the last fifteen years?"

"I know what you've been through, Barb. You've been telling me nonstop now for the last three hours," Pat said.

"You don't think I'm entitled to blow off some steam? I had to watch what I said when you were drinking because I didn't want to set you off. Now you're saying you're too frail to take responsibility for the things you did to me?"

"No, I'm not saying I'm frail. I'm saying it's unfair to keep beating me over the head for every crime I committed. What good is it going to do either of us to keep citing me chapter and verse about every last thing that I've done to you?" Pat asked.

"It makes me feel better," Barb shouted.

“I’m glad it works for you, but it makes me feel like crap,” Pat said.

“I’m tired of worrying about your feelings. When are you going to start worrying about mine?” Barb asked.

“I can’t possibly begin to do that until you stop launching these missiles at me. If I didn’t have to dodge every misdeed I’ve done, then perhaps I could start thinking about you and your feelings.”

I call it *laundry listing*. Keeping track of all the slights you have suffered at the hands of your partner, never shy of reminding them about the sins they’ve committed.

But laundry listing is merely a device that fans the flames of conflict rather than makes molehills out of mountains. I’m not saying that you aren’t entitled to feel hurt or angry or betrayed. I’m merely asking how does clinging to your laundry list serve the overall well-being of your relationship?

That’s why resolution is so important. Think of all the unresolved issues in your relationship as jagged edges that you and your partner continually trip over. How does it feel to have those jagged edges tossed around, days, weeks, even months after the crime was committed?

Part of resolving conflict means that you have to let go of the past as you move towards living in the here-and-now. How do you practically let go of the past? In a word, forgiveness. If your goal is to create a climate of emotional safety, forgiveness is the final stop to that destination.

There’s no getting past this ultimate truism. Making molehills out of mountains is one part awareness of the underlying relationship issue, one part

effectively communicating that awareness with your partner, one part letting go of your hurt and anger, and one part forgiveness.

Can you see how important forgiveness is in the equation? Do you recognize how you have a tendency to hold onto the hurts and slights that have come your way? Do you keep track of them, constantly replaying them in your head, throwing them up in your partner’s face from time to time?

What prevents you from letting go of feeling *wronged*? Is forgiveness a place you want to wind up with your partner as you work through the issues in your relationships? There are many people who choose to live in the energy of their hurt and pain. Many people I work with choose—that’s right it’s a choice—to stay hurt, to feel wronged rather than forgive.

The choice is a simple one. Live in the energy of self-righteous indignation or the energy of forgiveness. Self-righteous indignation perpetuates the cycle of wounding, whereas forgiveness heals. Self-righteous indignation creates pseudo-power for the wronged, forgiveness empowers both parties. Self-righteous indignation widens the split between two people, forgiveness forges a bond of caring and intimacy.

How does that last paragraph fit for you? Can you identify at least once in your life where you chose to cling to the energy of self-righteous indignation rather than grow into an energy of forgiveness? Let’s walk through this step by step. Let’s see if we can identify what keeps you stuck in your hurt, anger, and resentment. Just what will you need to let go of in order to create an energy of forgiveness?

a climate of retribution. You have the power to create a climate of kindness and understanding or a climate of belittlement and ridicule.

You have an enormous opportunity to empower your partner to join you in your efforts to create a relationship that is built upon a foundation of emotional safety. Don't be seduced by the allure of revenge. Revenge is a mirage that embitters rather than resolves. Creating a climate that's safe between you and your partner is hard work. But it's a critical element to sustaining the well-being of your relationship.

Don't sell emotional safety short. You have a *right* to experience it with all the people in your life. You have an *obligation* to create it with whomever you build a relationship bridge with.