

P A R T 7

*M*aking Molehills
Out of Mountains



The only way to even approach doing something perfectly is through experience, and experience is the name everyone gives to their mistakes.

-Oscar Wilde

The Blueprint for Resolution



*For the things we have to learn before we can do them,
we learn by doing them.*

-Aristotle

Let's move forward by first reviewing where we've been. Making molehills out of mountains is a process of conflict resolution that enables you to forge understanding, resolution, and forgiveness out of the disagreements and unresolved conflict that exist between you and your partner.

The mechanism that enables you to create such a transformation is a relationship skill I've called *pinpointing the issue*. Remember, the first premise of pinpointing the issue is that there are *two* levels to most unresolved conflict—the *circumstance* and the *underlying relationship issue*. The circumstance is the event that *precipitates* the conflict between you and your partner. The underlying relationship issue is the *unacknowledged* issue embedded in the circumstance of the conflict. I have discussed with you the four likeliest themes that the underlying issues might be: 1) feeling unaccepted; 2) unmet emotional needs; 3) feeling unappreciated; 4) power and control.

The second premise of pinpointing the issue is that many times two people choose to focus *only* on the first level of the conflict by trying to fix *only* the circumstances of a disagreement without acknowledging the underlying relationship issue. When this happens, it's inevitable that the circumstances of the conflict will continue to reappear until the presence of the underlying relationship issue is acknowledged and resolved.

The third premise of pinpointing the issue is that you have a *choice* as to how you'll address any existing conflict—fixing *only* the circumstances or fixing *both* the circumstances and resolving the underlying relationship

issues. The advantage of addressing both the circumstance and the underlying relationship issue? By resolving the underlying relationship issue, you'll likely eliminate the need for the circumstances of the conflict to reappear in your relationship.

The fourth premise of pinpointing the issue is that there are signs and symptoms, think of them as cues, that an underlying unresolved relationship issue is present in your conflict. Let me take the time to identify for you what some of those cues are.

The first cue is what I refer to as being *stuck in the circle*. Being stuck in the circle is a familiar experience for most of us. Can you think of those times when the same disagreement appears over and over again? The disagreement doesn't go away no matter how much you try to make it go away. It's like a piece of toilet paper stuck to the bottom of your shoe. You can't seem to shake it no matter how hard you try.

When you begin to notice that you're revisiting an issue time and time again, it's likely that you're *stuck in the circle*. You may be noticing that all of your attempts at fixing the problem aren't working. If this is true for you, perhaps it's time to consider that there's an underlying unresolved relationship issue to address as well.

A second cue that might indicate the presence of an underlying relationship issue embedded in the circumstances of your conflict is if your reaction to what precipitated an argument is *out of proportion* to what actually precipitated the argument.

Here's how a friend of mine notices this cue when he runs into it with his wife. "Steve, I can tell that there's more to a disagreement than just the disagreement itself,

when on a scale of one to ten, the event we're squabbling about is a *two* but my reaction to that event is a *twelve*. That's when I know it's time for me to step back and figure out just what the hell else I need to be working out with my wife."

Here's an example of what I mean. Perhaps you and your partner come home one night and discover that your dog has tipped over the garbage can. While you begin to clean up the mess, your partner blames you for your dog's actions. Not only are you blamed for your dog's actions, but a whole list of grievances that date back to the first time the two of you met comes spilling out of your now agitated partner's mouth. When this happens, it's a good sign that there's much more going on than who's responsible for what an unattended dog does around the house.

One of my favorite cues that tells me I need to focus on an underlying relationship issue is when I begin to realize that I'm *keeping score* with somebody. You know, I'm keeping track of all the unfair things that are being done to me by somebody else. Or I make note of every mean thing said to me. There are times that I keep track of every inconsistent behavior that a person acts out. You know, those times when they do the very things to me that upsets them when I do it to them.

Scorekeeping is a sure sign that somebody's feeling unappreciated, that they're somehow feeling as if they're being treated unfairly. Unfortunately, taking ownership of those feelings often gets lost in all the work it takes to keep track of every perceived wrong that has been perpetrated.

You see, that's one of the problems with scorekeeping. You wind up putting more effort into documenting your

emotional injuries than you do talking about your hurt feelings with your partner. It's a wonderful way to build a case against your partner, but how helpful is it as far as resolving anything? No, if you're putting more energy into tracking how unfair your partner is treating you, you're perpetuating conflict rather than resolving it.

Now, those are the four premises of pinpointing the issue. Don't lose sight of what mastering this principle will do for you. You'll lessen the burden that any relationship bears when there are unresolved relationship issues lurking in the background.

Snide remarks. Slippery evasions. Icy withdrawal. Cool indifference. Biting sarcasm. Stubbornness. These are the slings and arrows we cast when we weigh down our relationships with the emotional baggage derived from our unwillingness to resolve the issues in our relationships. The longer we give life to these issues, the greater toll they take on our emotional and spiritual well-being.

So, give yourself the opportunity to grow into the skills I have suggested throughout the book. Give yourself permission to wrestle with them. Some will feel more comfortable than others. You'll likely feel awkward with many of the shifts I've suggested. You don't have to use them all at once, or any of them at all for that matter.

Nothing is etched in stone. I've merely suggested ways to enhance your ability to lessen the conflict that exists in your relationship. Your job is to adapt those suggestions to your style. In creating your own style, you'll create a way of pinpointing the issue that suits you best.

Once you've pinpointed the issue, what do you do next? Here are some specific guidelines to follow as you begin to talk through the identified relationship issues.

Bridge-Builder's Tip



*Resolve your issues in a climate
of cooperation, not anger.*

Get your marker back out. I want you to underline this message. If you don't understand it, if you don't follow it, if the spirit of what I'm suggesting isn't honored, all of your hard work will go for naught. Pinpointing the issue *cannot* be performed in a climate of anger. Let me repeat that—pinpointing the issue *cannot* be done in a climate of anger. Resolving your underlying relationship issues must be done in a climate of *cooperation*.

Be clear about what I'm telling you. I'm not saying that you can't be, don't deserve to be, aren't entitled to be, angry, hurt, enraged, resentful or any combination of emotions. I'm simply saying that when you get down to the basics of pinpointing the issue, it must be done in a spirit of cooperation, not retaliation.

That makes sense, doesn't it? *Anger* is the energy by which you make a mountain out of a molehill. *Cooperation* is the energy by which you make a molehill out of a mountain.

So, what's the practical application to this? *Don't* attempt to resolve anything in the heat of the moment. If you or your partner are feeling too angry to constructively explore the relationship issues, don't do it at that point. It's okay to walk away until a time exists when cooler heads can prevail.

You can see why it's important to do this work in a

calmer climate, can't you? There's much for you to think about. There's much you need to understand beyond the pain that oozes from the wounds inflicted by your partner. More importantly, you need to see beyond your wounds long enough to see your partner's side of the disagreement, as well. All of this can only be done when you've had the time to defuse your emotions.

So it's okay. Give each of yourselves permission. Don't believe that the heat of the moment is the time to make everything right. Walk away. Cool off. Think things through. Focus on all that you're learning about yourself. Try to understand what's stirring within you as well as your partner. Ask yourself what the situation calls for. Empathy? Validation? Affirmation? Appreciation? Checking-In? Self-disclosure? Taking ownership of your feelings and actions? Letting go of the laundry list?

I told you at the beginning of our journey that I wanted you to have a menu of choices to choose from rather than rely upon familiar actions that sabotage your well-being. Do you see how many choices you have now? Use them! They'll serve you well. But you can't apply them effectively when you're enraged. Remember, the point of making molehills out of mountains is to embrace a process that heals the inevitable wounds that two people inflict upon one another. Use the new choices you're learning in a climate of cooperation.

Bridge-Builder's Tip



*Express your needs rather than
defend your position.*

Do you see the distinction between expressing your needs and defending your position? A position is a stance you take about something in dispute with your partner. Your needs are matters that hold importance to the well-being of you and your relationship.

Think about this for a moment. Is it safer for you to defend your position or express your needs? Which leaves you feeling more vulnerable—"I need you to be there for me" or "Here are my ideas about how and why you're never there for me"?

Defending your position is an accusation that you must prove correct. Expressing your needs is an invitation extended to your partner to join you. Defending your position is a pronouncement that your partner has failed you. Expressing your needs is a declaration of the regard that you hold for your partner.

While you furiously defend your position, any attempt to address the underlying relationship issues will have an inevitable slant to it. Focusing on your position requires that you be right and your partner be wrong. Successfully defending your position hinges on your ability to *debate* your partner rather than *understand* your partner.

Defending your position freezes you in a battle of wits where the only skills that matter are your ability to

explain and justify. Can you see the inevitable harm defending your position inflicts upon your relationship? Championing your position requires you to dismiss your partner.

Can you see the paradox of attempting to resolve conflict by championing a cause? You will inevitably create more conflict than you resolve.

On the other hand, making molehills out of mountains is the end result of two people honoring each other's needs, considering the best interests of the relationship. What are the best interests of your relationship? Do these examples make sense to you? Connection. Honor. Respect. Growth. Honesty. Openness. Interdependence.

Beginning to consider the interests of your partner rather than defending your position can create an important shift between you and your partner. Selfishness will transform into sharing. Competitiveness will transform into cooperation. Antagonism will transform into mutual respect. Self-centeredness will transform into consensus building.

Here's the ultimate benefit of the shift I'm proposing. You cannot possibly begin to understand your partner while you're defending your position. Quite simply, as long as you defend your position, you'll perpetuate a log jam of ill-will. By expressing your needs and honoring the needs of your partner, you'll begin the process of tearing down the walls that have developed in your relationships.

Bridge-Builder's Tip



Identify the issue rather than focus on the problem.

Okay, you've created the appropriate climate within which to begin to resolve the relationship issues. You've taken the time to diffuse the emotional charge that exists between you and your partner. By backing away long enough to let your feelings cool off, you can come back together with the goal of creating a climate of cooperation and respect.

The next step is to make a shift in your mindset. That shift—stop defending your position. The best interests of your relationship are served by expressing your needs rather than defending your position.

Now there's one last shift to be made as you get into the substance of discussing the relationship issues. That shift is what I've been alluding to throughout this book. Shift from addressing the circumstance to discussing the underlying relationship issue. After all, that's what this whole exercise is about. Agreeing to focus on something beyond the circumstance that has precipitated the conflict.

Practically speaking, what that means is for you to take some time to reflect on what the underlying relationship issues are bubbling beneath the surface. I've given you an overview of the predominant themes that you can expect those issues to be. Take the time to figure out how those theme(s) may be a part of the conflict you're experiencing.

Be careful not to overwhelm your partner with a bushel basket full of issues all at once. Take the issues one at a time. You don't have to resolve all matters in ten minutes. Be considerate of your partner. Check-in with them to insure that they're up to moving on with you.

Don't be afraid to take time out. Don't be afraid to put some of the issues off until another time. Try to prioritize the issues you want to explore. At the same time, consider tackling some of the easier stuff first.

Most important of all, don't get lost in the details of the circumstances. You can always come back to figure that one out. Remember, the circumstances have been hiding the relationship problems long enough. Don't be tempted to fall back into that old habit one more time.

The last thing I want to remind you of is your commitment at the beginning of the book—let go of the familiar for something new and effective. The biggest shift of all will be shifting from trying to fix the problem to trying to resolve the relationship issue. Rest assured, with a lot of blood, sweat, and tears you can transform your unresolved issues into the foundation for your relationship's well-being.

These are important guidelines for you to follow when you begin the process of resolving your underlying relationship issues. Don't expect to follow them perfectly. Think of them more as a beacon to guide your efforts. Use them as a marker to let you know whether you've strayed too far from the target you're aiming for. If you can remain mindful of them, they won't let you down.

Hopefully, you have a better sense of what it means to pinpoint the issue and how to go about untangling the

oftentimes complex issues that exist in your relationship. In the next chapter, I'm going to discuss with you some specific tools that will enable you to successfully navigate the choppy waters that get stirred up from trying to pinpoint the issue. As you become comfortable with using these tools, you'll discover that you'll be better able to stay focused on the underlying relationship issues and much less distracted by the circumstances of the conflict.

The Tools of the Trade



Relationship skills will not make your work necessarily easier, but not using them will make your journey all but impossible.

-Stanley Phillips

I want to share with you some tools you'll find invaluable. These tools will enable you to more effectively maintain your focus on the underlying relationship issues. A word of caution. You don't have to use all of them all of the time. Nor do you have to use any of them exactly as I've suggested that you use them.

Think of these tools as concrete ways to avoid many of the pitfalls you'll discover once you try resolving conflict the way I have suggested. Remember, our goal is to learn how to more effectively resolve conflict. The key to being effective? Put down your old ways and begin using these new ways.

As a result of using these new tools, you'll discover a new world open to you. The more comfortable you become with these new tools, the more confident you'll feel about yourself. The more confident you feel, the better able you'll be to eliminate much of the long-standing resentment and mistrust that exists in your relationships.

Imagine what it will be like for you to settle your disagreements in a manner that leaves you feeling understood by your partner. What effect will your ability to better respect and honor your partner have on their willingness to be there for you? Can you envision the day when you resolve conflict just as easily as you begin it?

You're much closer to that day than you've ever been before. You have all the ingredients necessary at your disposal. New relationship skills. The tools to implement those skills. The courage to create the necessary shifts I've suggested to you. Most important of all, the patience to see things through.

Bridge-Builder's Tool



Live in the here-and-now by resolving the unfinished business from the there-and-then.

Let's start with a global guideline applicable to all your efforts at making molehills out of mountains.

What we're trying to do is set your relationship free—free from the shackles of unresolved underlying relationship issues. Conflict that remains unresolved does one thing—it leaves your relationship shackled to the past.

You and your partner carry around the energy of all your unresolved conflict like an emotional ball and chain. The energy that I'm talking about? Hurt. Anger. Resentment. Feeling wronged. Wanting to even the score. Do you see the drain these unresolved issues create upon your relationship? How can you possibly be in the moment if you're focusing on all your yesterdays?

Very simply, you need to clean up your past in order to live in the present so that your future can be different. The path to arrive at such an end is to develop the skills that will enable your relationship to be grounded in the here-and-now rather than anchored to the events of the there-and-then.

The whole purpose of making molehills out of mountains is to resolve the disagreements from the past that continue to live and breathe in your relationships to this day. By resolving these disagreements, you can begin to

heal many of the wounds created throughout your relationship. You see, that's the whole reason to go through all of this work. To stop the emotional bleeding. To do away with the hurting. To undo all the ways people have of disrespecting one another.

The process of making molehills out of mountains is the means to clean up the *stuff* that gets in the way of two people caring for each other. So I ask you, are you ready to put down your weapons long enough to stop the fighting and begin the healing? Are you ready to trade in your weapons of destruction for tools of cooperation?

If you're ready to end the war, then the first thing you must do is stop living in the past. Do you get my point? Are you ready for the past to be put to bed? Are you ready to smooth off those rough edges from the past that you continually use to this day as a weapon against your partner?

You see, the choice is a simple one. Do you get more satisfaction from nursing your resentments, righting your wrongs, avenging your hurts, or healing your wounds? Isn't living in the there-and-then merely a tactic—a way of avenging the wrongs you have suffered? Although this may bring some sort of *satisfaction* to those who are so inclined, how does it help you heal the rifts that exist between you and your partner? Here's an important question for you to ponder—does reliving the past contribute to you resolving the underlying relationship issues or keeping them alive?

You see, many of us wrongly believe that the only way to heal the wounds we've experienced at the hands of our partner is by seeking revenge. But here's the truth.

There's only one way your wounds are going to heal. I talked about this earlier in the book. Your wounds will heal as your partner begins to understand what your experiences have been like. You can only get that acknowledgment if you're able to express what's going on with you in the moment—in the here-and-now.

Reliving in exquisite detail every crime that's been perpetrated in the past brings everything out in the open, but it does little as far as healing the wounds of the relationship. To work towards that end, you need to stop using the hurts of the past as a weapon and begin using the skills we have discussed throughout this book in the here-and-now.

You need to stop using the hurts of the past as an excuse to make your partner jump through hoops of contrition.

You need to stop using the hurts of the past as a wedge that you place between you and your partner.

What you need to do is work on the relationship as it is today.

You need to work towards creating a climate of understanding by being emotionally forthright.

You need to work towards creating common goals that will enable your relationship to grow rather than decay from the baggage of the past.

The here-and-down is a powerful balm for what ails any two people. Quite simply, the here-and-now is a bridge between the wounds of your past and the hopes for all of your tomorrows.

Bridge-Builder's Tool



Focus on behavior not personality.

Once you shift from the past to the here-and-now, there's a second shift that's necessary to make. Begin to focus on your partner's behavior rather than their personality.

Do you understand what the distinction is? Do you attack somebody for who they are or do you express how that person's behavior affects you? Do you belittle every characteristic, idiosyncrasy, way of thinking and feeling, that your partner exhibits or do you identify specific behaviors that create a problem for the two of you? Quite simply, do you believe that the formula for you getting along with your partner is predicated upon them changing *who* they are or *what* they do?

Take it from a pro, there's very little that you can do to change somebody's personality characteristics. Answer this question for yourself—just who's likely to change the essential pieces of who they are, even if they could, just because those pieces are displeasing to you?

Isn't it more likely that your partner will simply feel attacked, disapproved of, and unaccepted by you when you focus on those aspects of who they are rather than trying to understand them? And if that's true, what reaction do you think you're likely inviting?

Anger, resentment, justification, blame, defensiveness.

Now that seems pretty self-defeating, doesn't it? Focusing on your partner's personality is like pouring gasoline on a fire. It merely escalates the level of conflict you're attempting to resolve in the first place. Just remember, if your partner is busy defending themselves from your attempts to change who they are, they'll never be able to listen long enough to begin to understand where you're coming from.

Behavior on the other hand, is an easier pill to swallow. You can see that, can't you? It's less personal, although it may still sting. But more importantly, behavior is something we can more easily modify than our personality. Behavior is something we have a choice about. Behavior is an area of our life that we have more direct conscious influence over.

Although dealing with the underlying relationship issue will always sting, it will always be uncomfortable, you can more effectively make molehills out of mountains by focusing on a person's behavioral choices rather than personality. For instance, what's safer for you to hear? "When you leave the dishes in the sink for me to clean, I feel angry." Or "Why are you so lazy? Can't you stop being irresponsible long enough to think of me? You're more like a child than an adult, now get in there and clean up the kitchen."

"When you leave me out here waiting for you for a half-hour, I feel like I'm unimportant." Or "Don't you ever think of anybody but yourself? You're so selfish. How inconsiderate can you be? I'm nice enough to come down here to pick you up from work and this is the thanks I get, you ingrate!"

Do you see how focusing on a person's traits will lead

I trust you can see that focusing on your partner’s personality is a short-sighted solution to a long-term problem. On the other hand, focusing on your partner’s behavior is a long-term solution to enrich the well-being of your relationship. Living the spirit of this tip will go a long way towards relieving much of the tension in your relationship. More importantly, focusing solely on your partner’s behavior will restore respect, elevate trust, and enhance the good-will between you and your partner.

Bridge-Builder’s Tool



Use “I” statements rather than “You” statements.

Okay, you’ve got the appropriate focus, the here-and-now. You’re starting to make the distinction between who your partner is and the actions your partner takes. Next, let’s explore some very specific ways to talk about the conflicts that exists between you and your partner.

This tool is an important guide for how to more effectively express yourself when you’re trying to focus on the underlying relationship issues. Using I statements is an important means of defusing much of the defensiveness that is present when two people are working on resolving conflict.

By using *I* statements when you express yourself to your partner, you can lessen the defensiveness in your interaction. The less defensive the two of you feel towards each other, the better able you are to *hear* each other. Creating a climate where you can *listen* rather than *defend* is a prerequisite to using any of the other skills we have discussed throughout this book.

Do you see how this tool is a fundamental ingredient for creating a climate of reconciliation? I statements are the language of taking ownership. *You* statements are the language of blame and shame. It really is that black and white. Effectively resolving conflict with your partner is predicated upon your willingness to take ownership.

It's very simple. Taking ownership means developing a better awareness of yourself. It means being aware of how your behavior affects your partner as well as being aware of how you're affected by your partner's behavior.

But taking ownership only starts with awareness. If all you are is more aware, you'll have only accomplished half of the job. The next step is expressing what you need to express. Feeling wronged by your partner is not a license to go through life as a victim. Taking ownership requires you to work things through with your partner.

So, become as aware as you can be of how you allow your emotions to rule you. When you're hurt and angry, do you take ownership of your emotions or do you disown them by blaming your partner? You see, there's that thing about choices again. Acknowledge how you're feeling or disowning those feelings by blaming your partner.

You can see the damage that disowning your feelings by blaming your partner does, can't you? Just what are the words that convey blame? It all starts with finger pointing. And verbal finger pointing always starts with, "You... On the other hand, taking ownership always starts with "I...

And you can easily see what impact either style has on your partner. "You... serves as a cue. It signals your partner to prepare to be attacked, criticized, or discounted. And when we hear that signal, we prepare to defend and counterattack. How much listening takes place in that climate? How likely is it that you're going to be heard?

On the other hand, "I... serves as a cue as well. It's a signal that you want to share something about who you are. You want to share something important about you with me. It signals that this is a time to listen to you

rather than argue with you. And so, if we're of a mind to listen to you, we'll feel freer to listen rather than ready ourselves to be attacked.

We're talking about something very fundamental here. It's another one of those shifts. I'm encouraging you to shift from a posture of blame and verbal finger pointing to a posture of responsibility by taking ownership.

Blame escalates conflict. Taking ownership transforms conflict into resolution. Blame demeans both you and your partner. Taking ownership elevates the esteem of both you and your partner. Blame keeps your relationship chained to the past. Taking ownership emancipates your relationship into the here-and-now.

People look at me in disbelief when I suggest something so simple as taking ownership and communicating that ownership through the use of I statements. However I assure you that this is a very powerful formula for reducing the antagonism that creeps into anybody's relationships.

My point is simple. Your willingness to examine your part in any piece of conflict will contribute much to the well-being of your relationship. Your ability to express your ownership by communicating with the use of I statements will cement the resolution you and your partner are working so hard to create.

Bridge-Builder's Tool



Express how you're affected by your partner's behavior rather than interpret the meaning of your partner's behavior.

Here's the choice—interpreting your partner's behavior or articulating how you're affected by your partner's actions. So many relationships get swallowed up by this. I see so much damage caused by the endless time that people spend interpreting each other's behavior.

The point of making molehills out of mountains is to take ownership of how you're affected by your partner's behavior. Yet, how many keep that information to themselves?

Most people avoid expressing how they're affected by another person's actions by interpreting what motivates somebody to do something. Quite simply, they shift the focus from themselves to the other person. There's no way you can resolve any relationship issues when you continually take the focus off yourself and attack your partner.

Now, we may be adept at interpreting our partner's behavior, but it doesn't help the situation, even if our interpretation is correct. You see, interpreting another person's behavior only makes that person defensive.

I see no advantage at all in telling someone how you interpret what their behavior means. It's just like good

advice. It's seldom asked for and rarely followed.

On the other hand, if we focus on what the literal behavior is, if we focus on how we are affected by that behavior, we stand a greater chance of being heard and effecting change.

For instance...

"You treat me the way you do because of the bad relationship you have with your mother. Can't you see how all the crap you dump on me is because of all the hostility that you have towards your mom? If you learned how to respect your mom, you would learn how to respect me."

Or, "I understand how upset you are. However, when you start yelling at me, I feel hurt and defensive which makes me want to lash out at you. I deserve to be treated better by you and you deserve to be treated better by me."

How effective is interpreting why somebody's angry with you (you treat me the way you do because of the bad relationship you have with your mother), as in the first example?

How effective is identifying the behavior (yelling at me), and how I am affected by it (I feel hurt and defensive)?

You always have a choice as to how you're going to address the issues in your relationship. You can choose steps that create understanding or perpetuate anger and mistrust. Interpreting somebody's reason for doing something perpetuates misunderstandings while expressing how you've been affected by somebody's behavior builds a bridge of understanding.

Bridge-Builder's Tool



Check things out.

This last step is critical to avoid the inevitable misunderstandings that arise when two people are doing the best they can to express themselves. After all, it's easy to understand how misunderstandings arise.

Making molehills out of mountains is very much like walking a minefield. The land mines that we need to navigate are the sensitivities that we have, the sensitivities that our partner has, and the inevitable vagaries of the spoken word.

The point I'm trying to make is that dealing with your unresolved relationship issues will challenge you to effectively communicate with your partner. There are many obstacles you need to overcome. The trickiest obstacle you will struggle with is the static created by the combined influences of your emotions and your life experiences. You see, those two influences combine to create an inherent bias as to how you choose to understand what is being said to you.

Because of this phenomena, your sincere attempts at pinpointing the issue can be undermined by the filter through which you hear what is said to you. If you can accept your fundamental vulnerability to that phenomena, then you are half-way there.

Once you recognize that you often color what's said to

you and done to you by your own subjective filters, you can take action to dilute the impact of your filters.

For instance, when you're confused by what your partner is doing or saying, why not get out of your head and check out with them what you're experiencing and understanding?

Or, if you're wanting to see how well you're understanding something that your partner intended to communicate, get out of your head and ask them, "This is how I understood what you just said to me—is that what you meant?"

Or, if you're familiar with the way you may distort things from time-to-time, you can become sensitized to being aware when those distortions appear. And again check-out with your partner what they are meaning by what they've said to you.

The point's a very simple one. Don't let your filters sabotage your attempt to resolve the issues that may exist between you and your partner. Be wary of the ways you interpret the events in your life. Use the simple skill of *checking things out* in order to keep your relationship grounded in the here-and-now rather than keeping it stuck in the misunderstandings created by the distortions created from your past.

Well, there you have it. Throughout this book, I have shared with you many of the tools I teach everyday in my private practice to people just like you. Some of these tools work better than others. Some of these tools suit one individual more so than others. What I can tell you with great assuredness is not what tool will work best for you, but what enables any of them to work at all.

The secret ingredient is you. Your courage. Your com-

passion for yourself and your partner. Your sincere desire to do the work rather than just go through the motions. Perseverance through the hard times. Understanding and kindness. You need a heavy dose of kindness to get through all of this.

The people who are most successful with these tools have only one aim in mind. They're eager to create the most loving relationships that bring honor to themselves and care and respect to their partner. For those people, to do anything less is just not acceptable.

*M*oving on Down the Highway



*We don't receive wisdom; we must discover
it for ourselves after a journey that no one can take
for us or spare us.*

-Marcel Proust

A long time ago, in the early days of my practice, I had a client say to me, “Okay, I’ve been in therapy for months now, yet I still have the problems I had before. How come all of these problems haven’t gone away? What’s the deal?”

I said, “No, you’re fine. If I understand what you’re saying, what you call the *problems*, will probably not go away. They’re part of who you are. I mean, the difficulties and loose ends that you and I find in everyday life are part of who we are as individuals.”

He looked up at me and said, “I came in here wanting you to promise me that I could stop being such an ass in my personal life. You only told me that I could be shown the problem, I never heard you say that I could find the solution. I want someone to give me a pill or something in order to make me better.”

I rubbed my hands against my face and said to him, “That’s not the way this deal works. I may get thrown out of town for telling you this, but, the truth is, real growth does not come from the wisdom of a psychologist, it comes from inside of you.”

“Then why am I here?” he asked.

We sat there for a long moment of silence. Finally I said, “Let me tell you a story. I once worked in a hospital. Every day I would show up and do my job. I got to know the nursing staff and they got to know me.

One morning this woman with a white uniform walked around the corner. I had never met her before, so I stood up and said, “Hi, I’m Steve.”

She looked at me and boomed back in a deep voice, “Yes, I understand you are the Psychologist Intern or something.”

She spoke in a broken accent, I thought maybe it was Swedish. “I’m Nurse Svenson. I work for twenty years in hospital. I do my job,” she said simply. Then she turned and walked away.

Over the next few days I asked other people on the ward about our Nurse Svenson and all of the responses were the same. Everyone alluded to her bedside manner as non-existent, but she was a first rate nurse.

One morning I walked into the room of a patient who was twenty years old. He had a heart defect that was only discovered two years before. Most of his life was normal, but every few months his body would fall apart and he would find himself near death.

Evidently surgery was required to address the problem. I walked into the room while Nurse Svenson was changing a dressing. I didn’t want to bother them so I sat on the other bed for a moment.

“I hate this,” he said. “I can’t move and I can’t do stuff that I like to do. Being here sucks.”

“What does this mean, *sucks?*” she asked while she worked.

“You know, blows,” he said.

“Blows?” she repeated.

“Yea, bites,” he said. “Hey! That hurts!”

“I’m changing this dressing. Yes, it probably does hurt.”

“It’s all bullshit if you ask me,” he said.

“You know,” she said, “when I come to this country people tell me that my way of speaking was bad, but I think you are worse. You talk bad. What are you trying to say?”

“I’m trying to say that I don’t like being in the hospi-

tal. I don't like feeling so helpless. And I don't like being poked and prodded with needles and knives. I want to be playing basketball and living my life," he said.

She worked and thought and soon replied. "I tell you something important. In my job, most people complain about being in hospital. Most people say they belong somewhere else. So listen to me now, do what I tell you—when you feel good, act like it. Then you play. When you feel sick, you belong in hospital. Because when you are sick, this is the best place for you. The only thing worse is to feel sick and act healthy."

She paused and said, "That could kill someone like you. You feel bad, get help, because you are the only one who knows how you feel."

I have a gift for understanding people, I always have. Believe me when I tell you, that was one of the most subtle yet powerful things I have ever heard anyone say.

We all are confronted with the same choices as my young friend in the hospital was. We can complain and moan about this person, that person, our boss, our lover, our family. How they don't understand us or respect us. How they don't give us what we want when we want it.

And we can make everyone else out to be the bad guy. We can stew in our hurt and anger, feeling entitled, believing that somebody else has to change.

But believe me, that's not the ticket out. The only person we have control over in this world is ourselves. We all need to learn to pay attention to how we're feeling. And when we're feeling badly, we need to have people we can turn to so that we can make our world feel safe again. That's exactly the potential that lives within each and

every one of us—learning how to create relationships that support us rather than tear us down.

I don't pretend that it's easy to transform our relationships from what they are to what we would like them to be. But I absolutely assure you that it can be done.

We've been talking about the process of how to make molehills out of mountains by using a very simple skill—pinpointing the issue. But don't overlook this fundamental truism. Everything I've talked to you about in this book has a simple beginning. Everything starts with honoring yourself. Know that you *deserve* to have relationships that are emotionally safe—relationships that nurture your soul. You *can* walk away from situations that are not safe for you. At the same time, be bold enough to walk towards those relationships that will enrich your life.

But even more than that, you need to become more sensitized to your own unique levels of tolerance for the emotional intensity that's created when you build relationship-bridges. The most important thing to keep in mind is that you always have *choices* as to how you will respond when you're feeling emotionally provoked by the very human fears about getting close to another person. These fears will often disguise themselves in the conflicts that arise in your relationships. But you're slowly developing the skills to successfully unmask your fears and sensitivities.

Let me leave you with this one last thought. It bears repeating one last time. I hope these words ring in your ears as you and your partner bravely begin the process of transforming your relationship. Be kind. Have a respectful attitude towards your partner, maintain a loving attitude towards yourself. Persevere, even through the

darkest moments when discouragement soaks your spirit. Rest assured that mastering the skills we have discussed in this book will enable you to navigate the sometimes rocky roads we come upon when we are building better bridges with the people who matter most.

G.B.U.

Steve