



AN END TO ARGUING

Tools, practice, and wisdom that can prevent
destructive conflicts in your relationship

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Chapter 1: The Differences Aren't the Problem

The next best thing to preventing conflict is having the skills to manage differences effectively. Differences are inevitable in relationships; conflict is optional. It's the differences in our personalities, our styles of relating, our perspectives, and our temperaments that make us attractive to each other and allow us to have a fuller, more complete experience of life. We rarely are strongly attracted to people who are just like us. Differences turn into conflict when one or both partners try to coerce the other to do, say, think, or feel what they want them to. Conflict occurs when both partners are engaged in a struggle to resist each other's efforts to become dominated or controlled by the other.

Most of us don't come into their marriages with highly developed conflict management skills, but these abilities can be cultivated through practice on the job. While most couples have an abundance of opportunities to practice the art of conflict management, the great majority of them fail to take advantage of those opportunities. They choose instead to either grudgingly accommodate each other, engage in various forms of manipulation or coercion, or simply practice denial. These strategies are all potentially destructive to relationships and often lead to continual cycles of pain, resentment, and alienation.

Some couples are motivated by intolerance, not necessarily of the differences, but rather of the emotional pain that they experience in the face of them. It is often this pain that finally motivates them to learn how to manage their differences more respectfully and responsibly. While many marriages are characterized by defensive, avoidant behavioral patterns that diminish sensitivity to pain and promote a kind of numbness that makes suffering more tolerable, successful couples tend to be more honest with themselves and each other in regard to their emotional discomfort. This willingness to feel the pain, rather than to deny it can generate a strong motivation to learn more effective ways of working out their differences.

Relationship differences generally are not "resolved" in the sense of eliminating them, but rather they are held in a context of acceptance, respect and understanding. Even those differences that are irreconcilable will not necessarily damage, and can even enhance a relationship if they are viewed from this perspective. A key factor in the process of handling differences skillfully is our willingness to be open to learn from one another and from our own experience, to observe the consequences of our actions, and to integrate what we learn into our relationship.

Even the happiest of couples sometimes experience negative emotional states. They just tend not to get stuck in them for prolonged periods of time. The ability to move quickly through distressful mind states isn't simply a gift that is possessed by the lucky few, but rather is a capacity that can be developed with practice. By adopting an attitude of acceptance and openness towards our own feelings and those of our partner, we can become less reactive and defensive with each other. Even people with fiery temperaments can learn to smooth out rough edges and often move through painful emotional impasses in minutes rather than days or weeks.

The challenge is often to shift our intention from trying to convert our partner to our point of view, to trying to understand their perspective and see things from their vantage point. We deepen our capacity for empathy with practice and intentionality. Few of us come into adulthood with these capacities fully developed. For most, marriage is the crucible within which we strengthen these capacities. And of course other enhancements to our abilities such as individual or marriage counseling, personal growth workshops, books, CD's, and professional seminars can make a huge difference as well.

While there is no generically “correct” way to resolve differences, successful couples share an underlying respect for the differences between them. It is this perspective more than anything else that allows for the kind of engagement that transforms anger and pain into compassion and gratitude. When we have a clear sense that differences not only needn't be eliminated but they are valuable and necessary aspects of the relationship, we thrive. And the desire to thrive is one of the primary motivators for getting into relationships in the first place. It does require the willingness to put in the time and the effort, but the payoffs are far greater than the cost of the investment. But don't take our word for it, find out for yourself.

Chapter 2: Having a Conversation About Having a Conversation

Linda: I had to learn this one the hard way. In the early years of my relationship with Charlie whenever there was something that I felt that we needed to discuss, particularly something that was bothering me, I would launch into a conversation, leading with my concerns, often before Charlie had any sense of what was going on. Not surprisingly, he often didn't know what hit him. To put it mildly, this wasn't the best way to begin the conversation. While I usually felt like I was just being honest about my feelings, Charlie often felt like he was being broadsided by a truck.

Consequently, the result was that I was now dealing not only with the initial disturbance that had motivated me to speak out in the first place, but in addition, with Charlie's (understandable) defensiveness and reactivity. Over time (more than I care to admit), I came to realize that Charlie was interpreting my gestures to heal a rift between us as a surprise attack, which didn't exactly predispose him to being open and conciliatory. I didn't want him to feel guarded, but I had no models from my past experience of how to initiate important conversations in a respectful way. I was completely unaware of how crucial it is to set the stage for an important dialogue.

Preparation is an often overlooked and neglected aspect of skillful communication. When I did finally come to realize how important this was, I referred to this phenomenon as "introductory remarks". I might, for example, say something like, "I have something that I'd like to discuss with you. Is this a good time for us to talk?" or "I have something that is bothering me. It's touchy material and I want you to know that the reason that I'm bringing it up is because I want us to be closer to each other". Or "I want to get something off my heart. I don't want anything to be a barrier between us. Are you available now?"

The main things that I wanted to communicate before initiating the actual conversation was that my intention was to enhance the quality of our relationship and not to criticize or blame Charlie. I wanted to reassure him that I was making a request or extending an invitation to a dialogue, as opposed to making a demand, and that I would respect and accept his response to it, whatever it was. Fortunately, Charlie was likely to accept my invitation, perhaps because I was willing to take "No" for an answer if he wasn't feeling ready to talk. Over time, his "No's" became less frequent, perhaps because I could accept them without trying to coerce him to accommodate my request. By inviting him to choose the time of our talk, I was giving him a chance to prepare himself and affirming his authority as well as mine to influence the process.

All too often a couple will launch into a heated topic (like money, sex, kids, or in-laws,) before they have properly set the stage. They've already gotten off on the wrong foot. The same frightened, anxious, feelings that sent them diving into the conversation are likely to have them continue blurting out statements that are less than constructive. By taking the time to set the stage, we optimize the likelihood of creating the best possible outcome from the dialogue. Taking a contemplative pause gives each of us each time to consider our intentions and desired outcome for our conversation. Taking a few quiet moments prior to engaging with each other helps us to presence ourselves in a way that

supports a spirit of goodwill and an intention of mutual satisfaction, rather than a win-lose outcome.

When I announce my intention as one of deepening the connection that Charlie and I have, rather than one of making him wrong for something he may have done or said, my primary motivation in doing so is not only to put him at ease. I not only provide him with reassurance, but also support myself in speaking my truth. In doing so, I am reassuring myself that I am not simply whining, complaining or being mean-spirited, but am holding an intention that is worthy, legitimate and mutually fulfilling. I trust in my sincere desire to create a loving, cooperative relationship, and one that wouldn't require either one of us to be subordinate to the other in order for both sets of our needs to be met.

Both Charlie and I needed plenty of practice in those days in order to break the decades-old patterns that we had brought to our relationship, and we got it. Old habits don't die easily, but they do eventually dissolve although the process usually takes longer and requires more practice than we think it should. Along the way, however, we get to cultivate other necessary qualities and strengths that serve us greatly, not only in our relationships, but also in all areas of our lives; qualities like perseverance, commitment, vulnerability, trust, integrity, and generosity. Like anything else of value, there are prices to be paid, but in this case, in the final analysis, the benefits far outweigh the costs.

Chapter 3: Downsizing Your Attachments to Preferences

Kristen: Ever since I was a little girl, my fantasy picture of a happy family has included a big beautiful house with a big yard and a dog. The pictures in my mind's eye were vivid, and my attachments to them were very strong. When I married Joel, he was a computer whiz, and very financially fit. It didn't hurt that he was smart and good-looking and that we were both in love. So for a while, my real life matched my cherished image. All went well for several years, at least for the kids and me. I believed that it would go on forever that way, that we would always have a comfortable life and that I would be well taken care of. Then the whole picture shattered.

Joel: For years, my real passion was my artwork, but I didn't trust myself to provide a living with those talents. So I settled for a career that I felt confident would provide adequately for our family's material needs. After almost ten years of earning a good income, but not-so-silently feeling deeply unfulfilled in my job, I finally told Kristen that my work was empty and boring for me and had been for some time. I told her that I just

couldn't stand it anymore, and that I had to leave my field. Initially she was frightened that our perfect life would be jeopardized and she refused to support my plan. I felt like I had been making sacrifices for years by supporting her vision of an ideal life and that it was her turn to support me in going after my dream. For a while there was a lot of tension and arguing between us because we couldn't get on the same page. I'm usually pretty easy-going about most things but on this one I couldn't back down. Kristin finally got the message and reluctantly agreed to support the idea of my changing careers on the condition that if things didn't work out, we would reconsider the decision. After I made the move, we did suffer a marked decline in our economic status. We had to sell our big house and put the kids in public school. It was definitely an adjustment.

Kristen: For a long time after Joel left the company, his former manager tried to entice him back with contract work to develop short-term projects. Each time he was offered a package, I would get my hopes up that he would take it, because the old work was so lucrative. I cherished the idea that we would return to the life that we had previously enjoyed. Back then, I thought that my challenge was to adapt to living on a smaller budget, with a smaller house. But it was actually much greater than that. It was more about adjusting to a whole new life than it was about making a few changes in our life style. This period of time was painful because I was still having trouble accepting the reality of what my situation had become.

Joel: For me, it was a matter of integrity. I felt that I had compromised my values during the years I worked in the computer industry. I knew that I was really done with that chapter of my life. The amount of part time work that I had picked up doing freelance artwork was increasing and I was clear that there was no going back for me.

Kristen: Once I could see how clear Joel was about things I realized that something had to give somewhere. I saw that my attachment to how things had to look was actually part of the problem and that I was going to have to give up my white knuckle grip on my expectation that we would soon be able to go back to the "good old days". At that point it became clear that we would not be able to make it even in a scaled down lifestyle unless more income was coming in and for the first time since before we had kids, I went to work, at first part time, later full time. I didn't just do it because I wanted a comfortable life but because I could see how much it meant to Joel to have the freedom to pursue his passion. I wanted that for him as much as what I wanted for myself.

Joel was aware that I was releasing my grip on what I wanted my life to look like, and he was incredibly grateful that I was making the "sacrifice" to go back to work. Actually it

felt more like a benefit than a sacrifice. Getting back into the work pool gave me a sense of purpose and value that I had missed after so many years of being a stay at home mom. I don't at all regret the time that I had spent at home with the kids. Those were precious years and I wouldn't change them for the world, but I don't know that I would have made the change when I did, if ever, if Joel hadn't taken the stand that he took. He has been incredibly supportive of me, and has always encouraged my professional success. Over time, my attachment to being taken care of financially has turned into a slight preference, particularly since I trust from experience, that we can live on a lot less than I had thought, and that I too can make significant contributions to our family's financial needs. The benefit has of course overflowed onto the kids who are thriving with the time and attention that their Dad provides now that he is no longer at the beck and call of an employer.

Joel: Kristen and I are much closer than we were in those days when I was in the computer industry. I have a huge debt of gratitude to her for hanging in there with me while we made the big life changes that went along with my career change. There were definitely some rocky times that we had to go through but the good will that we had accumulated in the previous years of our marriage got us through the tough times. I'm proud of her for what she has accomplished professionally, and we are both certain that the richness of our family life has been enhanced by the risks that we have taken.

When the real life situations of our relationships don't correspond to our cherished pictures, we may think that the relationship isn't working. What's often more likely to be the case is that the model that we've been operating from is no longer appropriate for the emerging needs of one or both partners in the relationship. The only constant in life is change, and when we get overly attached to the way we think things need to be, there's likely to be some pushback from our efforts to maintain a system whose time has come to change. Most relationships go through many forms and structures in their lifetimes, so it's best not to get too attached to any of them since at some point this too shall pass.

Things change over time. We can't put our relationship into a box, and expect it to remain the way it's been. Life is full of surprises. Great relationships require us to know, accept, and respect each other without judging or coercing our partner into adopting our preferred ways of being, while continuing to honor our own integrity. This is hardly an easy challenge to fulfill but it is doable when both partners are sharing a commitment to the relationship that overrides their personal preferences. Ironically,

when this spirit of good will is mutual, it rarely feels to either partner that they are sacrificing anything that they really need.

You can't always get what you want, and that's not necessarily a bad thing.

Chapter 4: Defensiveness And How To Deal With It

“You're being defensive!” If you've ever been on the receiving end of these words, you know that the last thing that you feel like doing upon hearing them is to drop your guard and open your heart. Ironically, that's probably exactly what the person delivering these words is trying to get you to do.

If you weren't being defensive before you heard this accusation (and it is usually spoken accusatorially), you almost surely will be after hearing it. Defensiveness is a natural response to the perception of a physical or emotional threat. We can't help but feel the impulse to protect ourselves under such circumstances. Over time, with practice, we can learn to replace unskillful forms of self-protection with those that are more effective. This is, as you may have noticed, easier said than done. While many self-help books warn of the perils of getting defensive or provoking defensiveness in others, they often fail to acknowledge how incredibly difficult it can be to eliminate the tendency towards defensiveness.

The impulse to defend ourselves when we feel provoked, attacked or criticized by someone, particularly someone with whom we have an intimate relationship, is strong. It may seem out of proportion to the perceived offense, or even irrational. That is because the words or behavior to which we are reacting may be activating previous unhealed emotional wounds from which we haven't fully recovered. When our “hot buttons” are triggered, we can feel possessed by emotions that are usually kept beneath our conscious awareness, through a range of protective mechanisms. Unfortunately, there are consequences to keeping these feelings outside of our awareness. They include many forms of dis-ease and distress that impact our health and the health of our relationships. Until we can come to terms with our past, unresolved experiences, they remain “incompletions” that we feel compelled to avoid. Thus they continue to block our creative energy, inhibit our capacity to experience intimacy, and cause us to live with an ongoing, low-level of anxiety resulting from a fear of exposing and experiencing undesirable feelings.

Contrary to the advice given in many self-help books, it's usually not possible to simply "let go" of the past. Until we identify the roots of our reactive patterns, we continue to be enslaved by them. The best way to recognize that which we need to see, but have been committed to avoiding, is by being in a close relationship.

Committed partnerships by their very nature will activate our deepest longings, greatest fears, and most intense emotions, primarily because it is within these chosen relationships that our greatest hopes lie. Our desires may be unknown or unspoken not only to our partner, but even to ourselves. Our expectations may be irrational or impossible for a mortal human being to meet. We may feel entitled to having them fulfilled and feel betrayed when our partner fails to live up to what we had believed we had been promised. No one else in our life holds the power that we project on to a life partner. Consequently when we feel disappointed by them, the pain can be overwhelming. One of the ways in which we may attempt to avoid or minimize this pain is by trying to control their behavior in various ways. Defensiveness is one such example of control. Defensiveness can take a variety of forms including; intimidation, withdrawal, blaming, interrupting, counterattacking, guilt-tripping, justifying, explaining, invalidating, rationalizing, pleading, and cajoling, to name a few. Ironically, engaging in controlling practices only adds fuel to the fire when differences are being expressed, intensifying the conditions that may have initiated conflict in the first place.

The solution to this impasse is not so much about changing our behavior as it is about changing the perspective from which we view a given situation. As long as we see our interaction as a breakdown between ourselves and our partner we will feel the need to "correct" the other person so that our anxiety will diminish or disappear. This will inevitably provoke the desire in the other person to react to our controlling efforts with counter measures and before you know it, we're off and running. As many of us know from experience, this cycle can continue and deepen, often with very unpleasant results. We can interrupt this pattern by shifting our perspective from that of a victim to that of a responsible agent who has the power to defuse a potentially volatile situation, and responding with understanding and respect rather than coercion or accommodation.

The habit of defensiveness is not one that easily dissolves, even when we possess a commitment to neutralizing our old emotional buttons. Knowing what you "need to do" is not always enough to do it. Our conflicting commitments, such as those to control things, to seek approval, to protect ourselves, to be right, or any one of a myriad of others, often override our willingness to be vulnerable, honest, and transparent. Yet despite these concerns and conflicting desires, it IS possible for anyone, or any couple,

to interrupt the defensive patterns that tend to show up in our relationships. Yes, it does take effort, time, and courage to expose our vulnerable emotional underbelly in the face of fear. But regardless of the outcome, in the process we can become more loving and lovable, and in so doing greatly enhance the likelihood of creating the relationship and life of our dreams.

Chapter 5: 8 Steps to Finishing Unfinished Business

Unfinished business, unresolved issues, emotional baggage, irreconcilable differences, misunderstandings, call it what you will, but whatever you call it, they're not good for relationships. We call them "incompletions". When we feel incomplete, there is a gnawing feeling that something is not okay, that there's something missing. We don't have a sense of ease, trust, and connection with each other. That seems like a fitting term since their presence leaves us something unfinished or incomplete between us. When we feel complete with each other, there is nothing that needs to be done or said in order for us both to feel secure, at peace, and connected.

Some couples experience an ongoing and pervasive sense of incompleteness because they have failed to adequately address the broken places between them. They may even believe that this feeling is the norm and they no longer even expect to experience anything else. This perception is not only unfortunate but it is also dangerous, because it can cause one or both partners to believe that it is the new norm which can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy that may solidify that belief into a permanent reality.

Incompletions occur whenever an issue isn't sufficiently attended to in a way that both partners feel that it is, at least for the time being, settled. This doesn't necessarily mean that it is resolved once and for all, but rather there is a sense of acceptance of things as they are and that there are no unspoken feelings such as resentment or disappointment that are being withheld. Feeling complete also involves confidence on the part of both partners that their feelings and perspectives are respected, even if they are not approved of.

When an incompleteness doesn't get addressed in an open and timely way, it impairs one's ability to experience deep connection. Like an undisposed bucket of garbage in the kitchen, the longer it sits there, the more foul-smelling it becomes. Many of us, in our efforts to avoid the risk of opening up a potential can of worms choose instead to build up a tolerance to the smell of decay rather than take out the trash. Developing this

tolerance has the effect of diminishing the motivation to clean things up. And the vicious circle remains unbroken.

Getting complete requires the willingness to risk upsetting the applecart, something that we are more inclined to risk if we trust that we can work through any problems that may be exposed in the process. If we are inexperienced in the art of managing relationship differences, we're not likely to have much confidence that the process is likely to lead to a successful outcome. All the more reason to learn more about handling incompletions. Although there may be some uncomfortable moments in the process of acknowledging unfinished business, we are much more likely to become skilled in this work by addressing issues directly when they arise, than by avoidance.

Here are some guidelines for addressing incompletions that you may find useful.

1. Acknowledge to your partner that you have an incompleteness. This can take the form of a simple statement such as "There's something that I feel unfinished about and I'd like to speak with you about it. Is this a good time?"
2. If they say 'no', seek to create agreement to a time that will be convenient for both of you. (Note: be specific and make sure that you both have an adequate amount of time available to do the matter justice. Assume that the conversation will take longer than you think it should) If your partner says 'yes', go to step 3.
3. State your intention in having the conversation. It should be something that will ultimately benefit you both, such as "My hope in having us both address my concern, is that I can feel more complete and that we can both experience greater trust and understanding with each other."
4. Provide your partner some guidance that will help him to know how he can best support you in this process, such as: "It would be helpful to me if you can just let me explain to you what I'm feeling and needing without interrupting me. I don't feel that I've been successful at making my feelings and concerns clear and I'd like to try again. When I'm done, I'd like to hear your response and I'll do my best to understand you. I really appreciate your willingness to have this conversation with me now."
5. Express your feelings, needs, and concerns and make any requests that you would like your partner to respond to. Try to speak in terms of your experience, as this will diminish the likelihood that your partner will feel blamed and will be less likely to become defensive. If he does become defensive or interrupts you, ask him if he can let you finish and that you'll be

able to be much more open to what he is saying after you feel that he's heard you.

6. Show him the same respect that you've asked him to give you by listening attentively, not just to his words, but also to the feelings that underlie them. Try to resist the temptation to "correct" him if he says anything that you disagree with. There will be time for this later. Keep in mind that not disagreeing with someone does not necessarily mean that you agree with him.
7. Go back and forth until you reach a point at which it feels that the energy between the two of you has lightened up and you both feel more relaxed, understood, and hopeful. An incompleteness doesn't have to be absolutely resolved in order to create a positive outcome. Some incompletenesses require many conversations before they become reconciled to the satisfaction of both partners.
8. If you hit an impasse that despite your best efforts becomes intractable, rather than trying to push through it, take a break in the conversation or agree to resume the dialogue at another time, after you both have reset your intentions.
9. If either of you don't feel complete at the end of the conversation, create an agreement to continue the dialogue at another (preferably agreed upon) time.
10. Regardless of the outcome, thank your partner for joining you in your commitment to deepen the quality of trust and understanding in the relationship.

This is admittedly an abbreviated version of the process of getting complete; you'll learn a lot more in making the effort and by noticing the consequences of your interactive patterns. To the best of your ability try to be respectful, non-judgmental, non-blaming, and responsible in your words. Most of us are much more sensitive to blame, judgment, and criticism than we seem to others to be. The less defensive and reactive you can be, the more open your partner is likely to be.

Becoming more skilled in the process of getting complete is a great way to break the habit of avoidance and is one of the best things that you can do for your relationship. There is a learning curve to the process, but it doesn't take a genius to master it. You might as well go for it. You've got nothing to lose but your incompletenesses!

Chapter 6: Competing Commitments

If simply understanding what it takes to resolve relationship conflicts, reading a book, listening to a CD, or watching a DVD would be sufficient to get the job done. As you may have noticed however, generally speaking, it's not. "Just say 'No'" or "Just do it", or most of the other buzz-phrases of self-help advice that we hear on a daily basis don't seem to be enough to get us to implement the suggestions offered by the speaker or author of the words. It's not for lack of information and well-intended advice that doing the right thing, particularly when it comes to relationships is usually much easier said than done.

When it comes to dealing with conflict in relationships, for example, many of us are aware of the admonitions to speak from your feelings rather than your thoughts, judgments, and advice, and to practice non-reactive listening without interrupting or "correcting" your partner, and to practice vulnerability rather than defensiveness when trying to settle a difference with you partner. These practices are useful and if we can exercise them they will undoubtedly make a positive difference in the process. That, however, is a big "If".

Yet, despite what many of us believe, the reason that "walking the talk" can be so difficult is not because we lack willpower, commitment, self-discipline, or sufficient motivation. Not that these factors don't play at least some part in the process, but generally speaking, they are not the source of the problem. The real issue has to do is, in a word (or two, to be precise) competing commitments. Competing commitments (CC's) are simply desires that we have that for a variety of reasons, we are less than fully conscious of, that are in conflict with our conscious desire that we have been unsuccessful in trying to fulfill.

One of the questions that we most frequently hear from students in our seminars is: "I know what I need to do [to improve my relationship], so why can't I do it?" It's always the same answer. Competing commitments. The solution to what can be an incredibly frustrating situation is not to get rid of the CC, but to bring it into conscious awareness, so that we can recognize it, acknowledge it and identify the needs or desires that it seeks to satisfy, so that we may more capably fulfill it's agenda without diminishing our ability to successfully meet those of the commitment we are consciously trying to fulfill.

CC's frequently play a big role in area of interpersonal conflict since most of us have other concerns that can compete with our desire to achieve harmony in our relationship.

Although it seems when we are in the middle of a painful interaction with someone, particularly a loved one, that we want nothing more than release from the pain and frustration of a downward descent into the hell of verbal and emotional warfare, there may actually be other (usually unconscious) desires that we have that compete with this one and may distract us from it or even sabotage our efforts to get free. Examples include:

- A commitment to avoid the vulnerability that reconciliation often requires
- A commitment to seek revenge or get back at my 'adversary' who I want to punish for causing me to feel pain or unpleasant emotions
- A commitment to be right about something
- A commitment to avoid humiliation
- A commitment to be loyal to another person who may disapprove of this relationship
- A commitment to demonstrate strength and not appear to be weak
- A commitment to avoid the feeling of being controlled by anyone
- A commitment to prevent others from taking advantage of me
- A commitment to keep others from getting too close to me
- A commitment to keep others from getting angry at me
- A commitment to avoid punishment by lying or being overly accommodating

These examples represent a few of the commitments that compete with an intention to successfully resolve interpersonal conflict. Until the competing commitment(s) can be brought into conscious awareness and addressed, it will continue to impede our efforts to attain our goal of creating an outcome to our interaction that we each find satisfying. And as most of us have discovered, sometimes the hard way, unless each of us is satisfied with the outcome, the outcome would ultimately be unsatisfying to us both. Interactions that leave one person feeling good at the expense of the other feeling defeated or diminished, have a way of coming back in the not-too-distant future in ways that indirectly but clearly express the disappointment and resentment of the partner who "lost" the argument.

"Winning" at the expense of another, is, in the domain of relationships, inevitably a Pyrrhic victory. Unless both partners feel satisfied with the outcome there will inevitably be consequences such as increased resentment, detachment, increased criticism, coldness, and avoidance that can inflict long-term damage to the relationship.

Uncovering CC's can help us to recognize whether our intended outcome is one that will ultimately lead to an increase in mutual satisfaction or is a manifestation of a win-lose game. Knowing that our partner's well-being is a significant factor in the quality of our own well-being helps us to clarify our priorities and seek to make each of these desires equally important. We refer to this understanding as an example of "Enlightened self-interest". In engaging in a relationship from this perspective, we become less predisposed to assume an adversarial or combative stance when we are dealing with the preferential differences that we each have.

Another one of the reasons that CC's inevitably show up whenever we focus our energies and attention on making changes in our relationship patterns, (or in making any other changes in our lives) is that for every action that we take, there is an equal and opposite reaction. You don't have to be a physics professor to know the truth of this principle. It is in the nature of reality that we humans tend to resist change, no matter how well intended it may be, even change for the better. Better the devil you know than the devil you don't know. Why do many of us believe that? Because we hold an underlying belief that things could always be worse and that as bad as they may currently be there is always something to lose by taking the risk of making a change in our relationship or in our lives.

When we fail to acknowledge our resistance to change and our attachment to the status quo, it's easy to become frustrated with ourselves, others, or circumstances that we believe to be in the way. Every new possibility contains the seeds of both desirable and undesirable consequences. When we can bring into awareness, a recognition of the mixed feelings that we have regarding specific anticipated changes, it becomes possible to come to terms with this conflict. Since there can be no guarantee that a change in our way of dealing with others will always be for the better, it's natural to have some ambivalence about, or resistance to change, even when one's current situation is unpleasant.

While we don't have to eliminate our competing commitments to avoid risk or prevent pain, unless we can acknowledge the specific fears or concerns that we have regarding our situation, we're likely to become immobilized by the conflicting internal forces that are generally present within us whenever we are seeking any kind of a change. Once we have brought our CC into conscious awareness, we can begin to identify the underlying need or concern, and therefore address it. Investigating our ulterior motives that come into conflict with our conscious intent can illuminate hidden anxieties that we fear may cause us pain or loss if our intended outcome comes about.

One way to illuminate a concealed concern is to ask yourself if there could be a potential downside or negative consequence to the fulfillment of your desired outcome. When we see ourselves doing the very things that we know don't work, we may judge ourselves harshly as being stupid, lazy, or uncommitted. As many of us have discovered, the decision to "just do it" even when you know HOW to do something that you want to accomplish is rarely enough to get the job done.

There are times when knowing the how is enough, particularly in the realm of technical matters like changing a tire, mowing the grass, or programming the remote (well maybe not programming the remote). But when it comes to relationships and other matters that are less technical and oriented towards the more emotional or abstract aspects of life, all bets are off and instruction manuals usually are not enough to cut it.

Uncovering hidden commitments can be a challenging and daunting process in that it requires us to be willing to recognize aspects of ourselves that may be incongruent with our self-concept. Our conscious mind tends to feel more comfortable and secure focusing upon and even at times distorting or exaggerating our more positive traits. Competing commitments sometimes reveal less attractive, but real aspects of ourselves that may reveal qualities and tendencies that don't reflect so positively on us. We may, for example notice that we are sometimes willing to be dishonest in order to gain approval, or be intimidating with others who we assess as being inferior to or weaker than us. We may find that we sometimes default to being resentful when we don't feel confident that we will receive what we want from someone.

The price that we have to be willing to pay in order to become more skillful in moving beyond conflict and into authentic connection is to risk the possibility of seeing ourselves more clearly, more accurately, more realistically, rather than through eyes that could be distorting our perception towards our ideal image of who we want to see ourselves as being.

In a world in which many of us are satisfied to live with a certain degree of self-delusion, one might ask, "Why bother facing what could be some unpleasant truths about who I really am?"

Our answer to that question is because it is only by relating truthfully and openly with others that we can move beyond conflict, and experience the fulfillment and pleasure that comes with genuine and wholehearted connection. Uncovering your hidden

competing commitments can not only promote deeper and more meaningful connections with others, but it can lead to the experience of a degree of self-trust, self-acceptance, and self-worth that is rare and valuable beyond words.

The price we need to pay to experience this transformation is the willingness to risk seeing ourselves as we are, warts, gifts, imperfections, beauty, and all. The desire to become free from the cycle of repetitive unresolved painful conflict can be the impetus that finally provokes us to begin the journey that not only leads to deep connection with others, but to the greatest gift of all, unconditional self-love.

Enjoy the journey.

Chapter 7: Vulnerability Can Be Disarming

Arguments don't end when one person overpowers another. Submission to an intimidator might interrupt the heat of the battle, but at best, it's a temporary truce, not a permanent resolution. Even with a truce, there is generally a not-so-subtle tension that is present in the relationship because conflict has been driven underground. Bringing out the big guns- threats, name-calling, insults, loud yelling- always exacts a painfully high price. While you may win the battle for temporary dominance, you will, in all likelihood, lose the war. The "victory" will involve a diminishment of trust, good will, caring and respect.

To move toward resolution during times of distress, and conflict, it's necessary to do the one thing we want most to avoid: get vulnerable. The peace of understanding will not come as a result of efforts to get our partner to stop fighting and start listening. It will be much more likely to come as a result of the openness that arises out of a willingness to disarm ourselves of our verbal defenses. This requires us to give our partner (who probably looks more like an opponent at this point) the receptivity and honesty that we want him or her to give us. This kind of vulnerability takes trust and courage. We must put down our own sword and shield even at those times when we most fear counter-attack. To do so does not mean to put yourself in harm's way, but rather, to speak from the truth of our present experience, rather than focusing on our partner's part in the breakdown, and trying to get them to see things our way.

For years, I reacted to Charlie's unsolicited criticism of me by counter-attacks of criticism, judgment, and blame. Not surprisingly, he countered my counter attack with another, as did I, and we became locked into a closed loop that rarely came to any real resolution. Neither of us ever felt accepted or understood. We were each convinced that we were

right and had no interest in hearing each other's take on the "truth". It wasn't until I stopped saying, "You never listen to me" and "You always have to be right" that the impasse between us began to dissolve. Instead, I said, "I really want us to understand each other and it's so painful for me when we don't connect." By revealing my own frustration and pain rather than "correcting" Charlie's responses, the tension between us softened and we were better able to hear each other.

Personal disarmament is the act of standing undefended, and speaking the feelings, usually fear or pain, that underlie our anger and the impulses to protect ourselves with aggression or other defensive maneuvers. The more I practiced, the less fearful I felt, and the more natural it became for me to drop my guard. I found that courageous honesty almost always brings forth more of the same from the other person. But regardless of how our partner responds to us, undefended communication is itself a transformative gift to ourselves as well as to our relationship. In honoring our truth, we are deepening the development of self-trust, self-worth, and self-respect, while simultaneously bringing greater honesty and integrity into our relationship. I have learned the most from those who have lived their own advice. When we "walk the talk" and give what we desire to receive, the process always becomes its own reward.

Vulnerability provides us with direct access to our own heart and the deeper truth of our own experience. It brings us into greater integrity with who we are. Speaking from vulnerability connects us with ourselves and creates a safe climate for our mutual love and tenderness to blossom. That's a success in and of itself. The gift to our partner is the open-heartedness that gives them access to our underlying feelings of warmth, care, and affection as well as access to their own similar feelings towards us that their anger and fear have obscured from them. I've seen from my own experience, how interrupting the cycle of defensiveness can break long-standing destructive argumentative patterns. There's no denying that disarming yourself can feel like very risky business, but continuing to reinforce the cycle has risks as well. What's your choice?

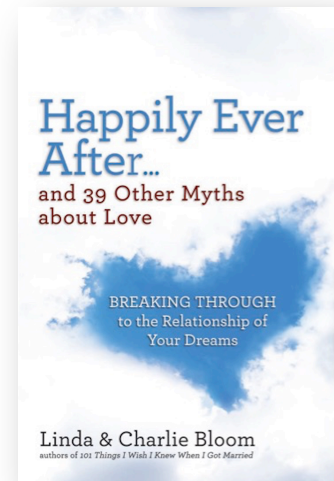
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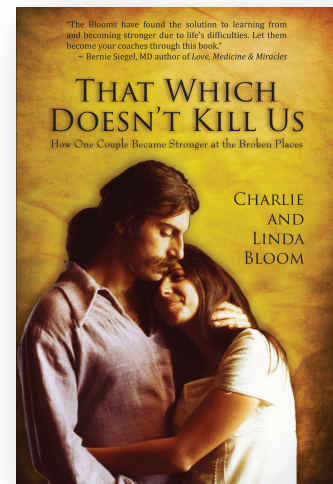
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About the Authors

Linda Bloom, LCSW and Charlie Bloom, MSW are the authors of the best-selling book, ***101 Things I Wish I Knew When I Got Married: Simple Lessons to Make Love Last*** and ***Secrets of Great Marriages: Real Truth from Real Couples about Lasting Love; Happily Ever After...and 39 Other Myths about Love: Breaking Through to the Relationship of Your Dreams***, and their latest book, ***That Which Doesn't Kill Us: How One Couple Became Stronger at the Broken Places***, the story of

Linda and Charlie's ten-year journey that took them through a series of ordeals that crippled their family and nearly destroyed their marriage.



Trained as psychotherapists and relationship counselors, they have worked with individuals, couples, groups, and organizations since 1975. They have lectured and taught at learning institutes throughout the USA, including the Esalen Institute, the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health, 1440 Multiversity, the California Institute for Integral Studies, the Meridian University, John F. Kennedy University, the Crossings, Omega institute, the Institute for Transpersonal Psychology, Sonoma State University, University of California at Berkeley Extension Program, the Hoffman Institute, and the World Health Organization. They have offered seminars throughout the world, including Bhutan, Cuba, China, Japan, Indonesia, New Zealand, Denmark, Sweden, India, Brazil, and many other locations.

Linda and Charlie have been married since 1972.

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An End to Arguing

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