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*Tips For Getting &
Keeping Your
Relationship On Track*



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Preface



Humans are social beings. A baby learns to trust its mother instinctively because its very survival depends upon it. When the child learns that their parent will feed them when they are hungry, soothe them when they cry, keep them warm when cold, they can relax and explore the world around them. Securely attached babies, cry less, smile more, and are able to express more curiosity.

The style of attachment that we learn as children will follow us into our adult relationships. However, that does not mean that we cannot experience a secure relationship even if our childhoods were less than perfect. Awareness, willingness to change, and effort are the keys.

Couples, whether married or not, want their relationships to be comforting, safe, and enduring. When there are problems and conflict, it's not often that one partner or the other doesn't want the relationship to be successful; it's just that they are lost as to how to heal the hurts and communicate differently.

In this book, I hope to explain four of the ways that I have seen couples hurt one another, but more importantly how to prevent future hurts.

Pat Bentaur sang



"Love is a battlefield". I say it doesn't have to be.

Introduction

Over the past fifteen years, I have had the honor of working with hundreds of couples. I see the same unhealthy behaviors over and over again. What I have learned is that relationships are crucial to our sense of well-being. Whether you are a man or a woman, gay or straight, we all want to feel respected, heard, and seen in our love relationships.



Relationships are the cornerstones of life and happiness. When I earned my Marriage and Family license, I was excited to specialize in couples and families. Why? Because I find the interaction and dynamics of relationships fascinating. I want to know what's happening in the relationship of every couple that walks through my door. But more than anything, I want to help.

Typically, one of the questions I'll ask in a first session is, "Why did you two get together," followed by, "what do you like about each other, and why was it him or her and not someone else?"

The responses are varied, but the common thread in each relationship's fabric is how one person feels in the other person's presence. We tend to pair up with people who make us feel good about ourselves and nurturing the relationship habits that keep those feelings growing is what this book hopes to promote.

The bond created with the person we choose to share our lives with will have a dynamic impact on our health, happiness, and even our life expectancy. Research shows that people who are in committed relationships live longer than those who are not.

The research also shows less cancer, cardiovascular risk, and fewer strokes in people or are in long-term relationships than their single counterparts. Life feels safer and is more fun when we can share it with another person.



The practice of two people legally tying themselves to one another has been around since Roman times and before, dating to the first recorded history of marriage in Mesopotamia, about 2035 BC. Unfortunately, the purpose of marriage at the time was not necessarily happiness. Marriage had much more to do with economics.

Today, some couples choose not to marry, regarding the institution to be unnecessary and outdated. However, they continue to seek committed relationships. The Pew research center states that marriage is down slightly among couples age 21 – 40, while overall, about 53 percent of the adult population is married.

The research also finds that married couples tend to be more satisfied with their relationship than those living together as non-married couples. The reasons for this aren't clear, but trust may be a factor. Couples that marry report they feel more secure in their relationships than non-married couples.

I have worked with couples who want to deepen an already close relationship and couples who have grown so far apart that they hardly know one another. And I've learned that no matter how bad a relationship has become, there is potential for it to improve.

Does that mean every couple that I see should stay together? Not necessarily. Some couples can heal their past hurts, while others have hurt each other so profoundly and over such a long period that they may never recover. It's not my place to make that decision, but I can provide the needed insight and allow a couple to reach their findings in a safe environment.

This book is designed for any couple that wants their committed partnership to last. I describe four of the most common relationship mistakes that I see in my practice. Most importantly you will learn how to avoid those mistakes, so you and your sweetheart create a healthy, loving, safe space together.



So, for everyone who has ever loved or wants to love and be loved, this book is for you.

Chapter One

Stop Telling Stories

“Don’t believe every story that you tell yourself.”

Remember: *Thoughts are just thoughts.*

We all like to guess what our partners are thinking, but we base our feelings and emotions on an assumption when we are simply guessing. When you’re not sure, ask!

Since our ancient ancestors walked a land of saber-toothed tigers and invading armies, quick decisions were lifesavers. Today, there are not so many threats to our lives, but our bodies still respond as they did back in caveman times. The result is that we create stories around what we believe we know what our partner believes, thinks, or wants, often without asking for their clarification.

New couple Sandy and Jack are spending an afternoon at home but are working on projects in different rooms. When Sandy walks in on Jack, she sees Jack turn his phone over. She makes a snap judgment. He’s cheating on me!

“Jack, I saw you turn your phone face down when I walked into the room. I know you are hiding something from me.”

Jack could have many reasons for turning his phone down on the table, but Sandy immediately connected it to the meaning that he is not trustworthy. She felt betrayed and unloved, all over a simple movement of Jack’s phone.

Since Sandy was accusatory, Jack becomes defensive, and soon the two are arguing about his defensiveness. Their heated exchange lasts an hour, and hurt feelings go deep. The main issue is that Sandy made up a story in her mind to fit what she saw. She interpreted his action as a threat to her and their relationship, but was it? Before she started her accusations in the “fight” mode, she should have waited for an explanation.

What Jack might not know is that in another relationship, Sandy was deeply hurt by another man cheating on her, and when she saw him turning his phone over, her brain tried to protect her from being hurt again. What she needed to do was slow down, take a breath, and ask the question that is behind her concern, even if she experiences some discomfort in doing so.

hurt

cheated



To handle things better, Sandy could have first given Jack the benefit of her doubt and asked him what was up with the whole turning-the-phone-over deal instead of creating a story in her mind that might not be true.

Ideally, instead of frowning, putting her hands on her hips, and bitterly asking Jack what the hell he was doing, Sandy would sit down next to him and gently ask, ***“Jack, I notice you always put your phone face down when I walk in the room. How come?”***



That approach is less accusatory and gives Jack a chance to answer a simple question instead of thrusting him into fight-or-flight mode. Sandy may need to ask more questions if he hems and haws, but he might surprise her with a plausible answer.

“ Yeah, I started doing that at work when there are a bunch of people around. I don't want my incoming texts to be a distraction to myself or my office mates; it's just a courtesy. **”**

At that point, Sandy doesn't have to apologize for asking a question, and if she wants, she can add some background by telling him why she felt hurt and worried.

Trust is critical in any relationship, and asking questions instead of making up your answers goes a long way in setting a firm foundation to build love and trust. Another example can amplify those thoughts.

Peter and his wife Janice are proud parents of a beautiful child just about to have a first birthday. They've adjusted their busy lives to the new addition, and Janice begins making plans for a big birthday blowout. She's exuberant and excited about their child's first birthday, and she hires a pony, invites both sides of the family, and orders an expensive cake. Peter is livid. Does he wonder why they can't have a small party for just the three of them?



After Janice unveils her plans, Peter says, ***“You never want to have family celebrations with just our family. You don’t care that we are on a budget and that I don’t always want a crowd here. You never think about my feelings.”***

Janice is hurt and confused. Didn’t Peter just tell her last week that he wanted to have his family over soon? She thought she was doing what Peter wanted. Once again, the communication issues are complicated by Peter creating in his mind a story for what he thought Janice was thinking. No matter how well we know our spouses, we don’t know what they are thinking at any one time.

In Peter’s case, he assumed Janice knew they were tight on money. But he also believed that meant the same thing to her as it did to him. She may have thought there was enough cash to pay for the party and that it might even be what he wanted. Peter could not know what Janice was thinking without asking her.

Peter could have asked Janice, ***“How would you feel about our next family celebration being just the three of us? I think it might be fun, but would you feel disappointed?”***

Given a chance to respond, Peter may have been surprised to learn that Janice welcomed the idea! And, she may have even been relieved to hear he wouldn’t be disappointed in her if she didn’t always include other people.

When we ask questions, we validate our partner’s thoughts and feelings—taking that a step further, give them a chance to respond and listen actively.

***Takeaway
Tip***

Ask, don’t tell. Be careful of the stories that you are creating in your head. Check it out with your partner. There is a high probability that you don’t know what they are thinking or feeling so ask!



Chapter two

Mother's Come Second

"Happy Mother's day to the person who uses your voicemail like a podcast".

Friends and family are necessary parts of our lives, but our partners should always come first.

When we enter a romantic, adult relationship, our family and friends should remain important. Wasn't it your mother who took care of you when you were sick? Didn't she listen to your hurts and disappointments? We owe our mothers a great deal of gratitude for all they sacrificed for us.



When you live with your partner or are a married couple living together, the two of you are now a family. Over the years, I have seen couples get into fierce fights over the boundaries that are not set with their mothers.



One such case is that of George and Mary. George was an only child whose father left him and his mother when George was only three years old. His mother coped with her loss by turning to George for comfort. He has memories from a noticeably young age of soothing his mother's distress. She called him her little man.

As a result, George grew up believing that he was responsible for his mom's happiness. Although he and Mary are now a family, his mother still calls several times a day to check in with him, which can be inconvenient and stressful for George.

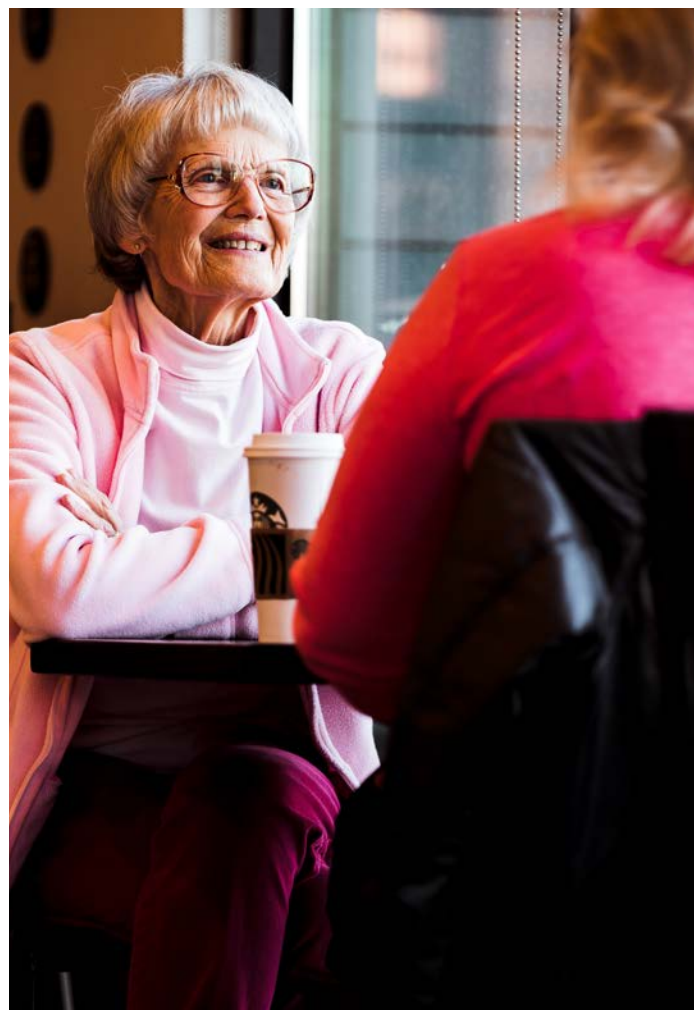


During those calls, his mother complains about her day, how her life has turned out, and stresses how much she misses George, even though she just saw him last week. Even when he and Mary have planned a quiet evening alone, George will answer his mom's call.

Mary likes George's mom, but she feels that George pays more attention to his mother's emotional needs than hers. Mary's final straw was when George took a call from his mother when she and George were in an intimate embrace. Mary demanded that George tell his mother that he would talk with her twice a week and no more. George's Mom needed to share her daily life with her own friends and respect that Mary is now his primary family.

Putting demands on our spouses can be difficult and result in hurt feelings. Doing so when it deals with a close family member, especially a mother is particularly tricky. George has a close relationship with his mother, who has already set a long-term pattern of demanding his time and attention. So, a few things need to be considered and addressed.

Mary is already prioritizing her relationships, with George coming first. But she'll need to remember that keeping his mother involved in their lives is also essential. To do so, she can be proactive by calling his mother herself before any changes occur. It can be completely neutral and friendly, but it will help George's Mom feel valued and important.



If the call can alleviate some jealousy and any lingering doubt about each other's future role, so much the better. It shouldn't include demand from Mary about the number of calls George will take from her.



As for George, since Mary has already asked for some serious boundaries, he can improve the situation by speaking with his mother to reestablish their number of calls and interactions to a more suitable weekly total.

Mary and George should approach the issue like the team that they are. Then they can consider the best way for George to approach his mother, based on her past and her current emotional condition. If she misses her son and is lonely, she might benefit by finding other outlets such as hobbies, community groups, or perhaps taking classes that she might enjoy. The main point is that Mary and George are now the primary families. Of course, his Mom is still important but their needs as a couple must come first.



Be Careful When Sharing with Other People

Other couples I've worked with have had similar problems over the years, including Martin and Wendy. In their case, it wasn't so much the daily intrusion of a parent, but a situation where Wendy was sharing too much information outside of their new family.

Martin and Wendy lived together for a little over a year and were still feeling their way around their partnership. When there were issues that Wendy was unsure of, she often called her mother for advice.



One evening Martin overheard just such a phone call that Wendy was having with her Mom. To Martin's dismay, Wendy described in great detail an argument that she and Martin had a few days before. Martin thought the disagreement was over, but, for Wendy, it wasn't. To make matters worse, Wendy was highly critical of Martin.



While waiting for the phone call to end, Martin wandered around their house, sulking and feeling both hurt and betrayed. ***Was nothing sacred to Wendy?***

When she finished her call and found him in the living room, he looked up at her angrily and shouted, ***"I will never again feel comfortable in front of your mother. That was totally humiliating. Why did you share our fight with her and make me out to be a bad guy?"***

"What, you were eavesdropping on my phone call?" Wendy asked. So now she was angry, and they both felt guilty.

"It was an accident. I was just looking for you, and thank goodness I did. How do you think that makes me feel to hear you talking about me like that?"

Wendy tried to explain that her mother was her best friend, and she just wanted to talk to someone about their argument and maybe get some advice.

Martin wanted Wendy to understand the main issue was the incorporation of extended family in their relationship. Whatever problems Wendy and Martin were having, discussing an argument at length and in a hypercritical manner with Wendy's mother wasn't going to help things.

When it comes to relationships, whatever issues the two of you are having are between the two of you. No mothers allowed.

**Takeaway
Tip**

Put your partner first. Stay close with your family while also creating boundaries around your romantic relationship. Moms are essential people, but your partner comes first.



Chapter three

Rules of Engagement

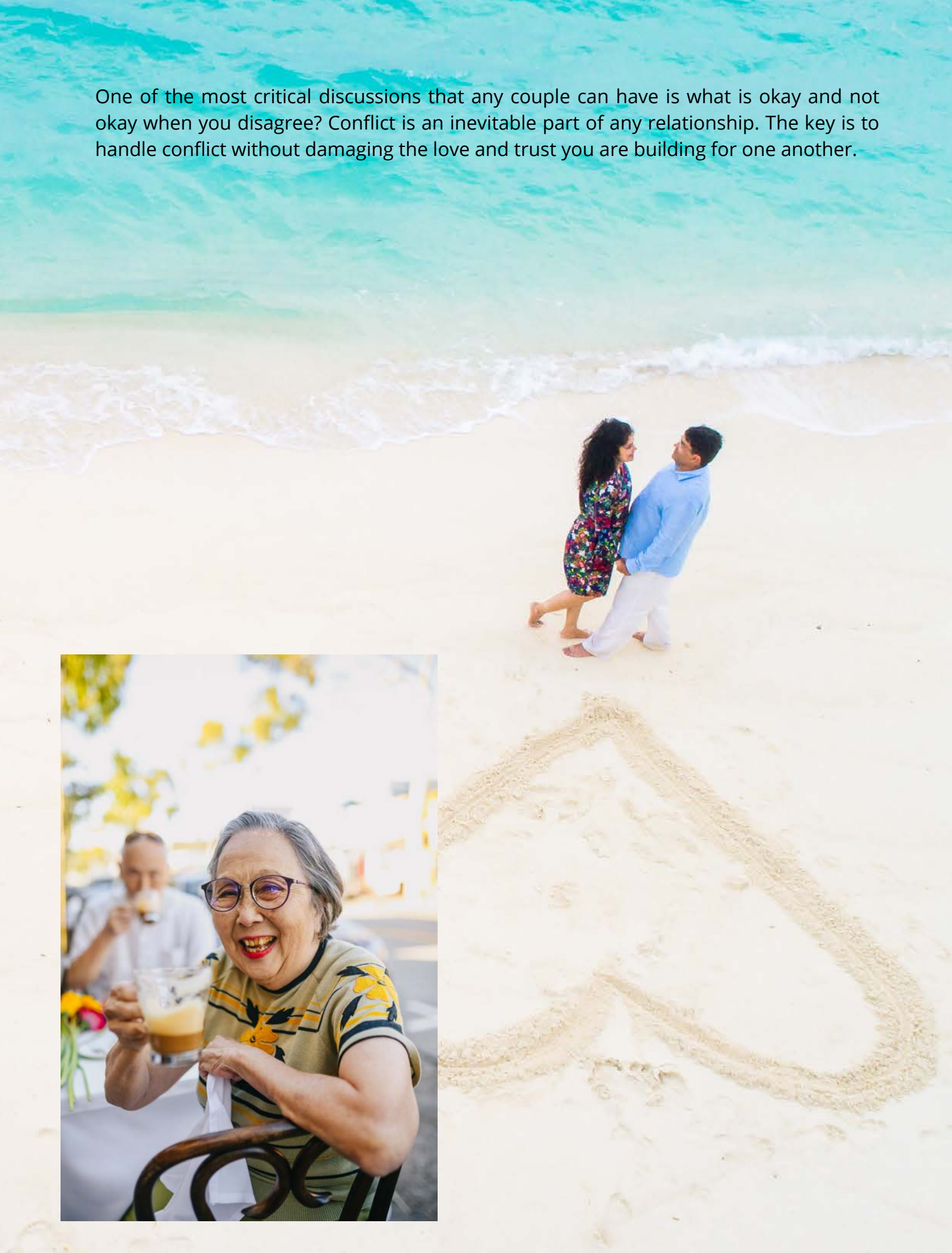
“Sticks and Stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me..... is a lie.”

Agree before you two get into a fight, what is okay and what is not okay.

When we remember to treat our sweetheart the way we would like to be treated, we both benefit. Love relationships can trigger old defenses that may have worked in your favor as a child, but no longer serves you as an adult. Criticism, name calling, stonewalling, and all the rest, may make you feel better in the moment but over time they build distrust and erode love.



One of the most critical discussions that any couple can have is what is okay and not okay when you disagree? Conflict is an inevitable part of any relationship. The key is to handle conflict without damaging the love and trust you are building for one another.





Nobody walks into a new relationship as an expert. Decide ahead of time, that it isn't okay to call names, compare the other unfavorably to their parent, raise your voices, leave the argument without resolutions or throw out the word Divorce or Breakup when things get tough. While you as an individual may be calm and composed at most times, defenses come into play when you and your partner get into a disagreement. Your new partner may be loving and forgiving and the best thing that ever happened in your life, but none of us are without insecurities and some emotional baggage from our life's previous battles.

Because of this, what may seem like a walk in the park to one partner may be dancing in a minefield for the other. You won't know until you get there, but if you are prepared, you'll do better when you do. So, lay some ground rules early in the relationship.



For instance, is calling names good with everyone? I hope not, but you two decide. Although it seems like an obvious answer, many people resort to this childhood practice. Sadly, I have heard couples calling each other very cruel names. This damaging behavior is hard to forget later when you can't even remember what you were fighting over. That means you won the fight but lost the war. ***It is hard to get back on track when the same lips that kiss you are the ones that hurt you.***



Another hurtful fighting tactic is comparing your partner to their parent. An excellent example of where that can go wrong is with Bill and John.

They were a happy couple who liked each other's families and spent time together. One day Bill got into a fender bender, and their car needed some extensive repairs. After finding out that Bill was okay, John started thinking about the cost of the repairs. Now he was worried.

John said, ***"Jeez Bill, you drive like your mother. You're always distracted. It's a wonder you didn't get hurt."***

Although John may have been kidding, Bill felt terrible about wrecking their car because he was worried about how John would react. Now his fears were realized. Not only did John insult his mother, but he demeaned her and him as well.

Later, they discussed the accident and John's comments, which led to some new engagement rules: no teasing about each other's parents or making anything but positive comparisons. We often hold our parents in great regard and comparing or insulting them can damage the respect one partner might have for the other.



A similar issue was discussed between Sandy and Abraham. When Sandy was younger, her mother was diagnosed with Bipolar disorder, which made for a challenging and difficult childhood. She did her best to understand her mother's mood swings, but Mom was unpredictable until she got treated and began a strict medication regime.

Sandy's biggest secret was her mother's condition, which was both frightening and at times embarrassing. She was also scared to death that one day she might even be diagnosed with the disorder.

When Sandy changed her mind about a subject or became upset, Abraham would tease ***"Just like your mother. You are acting Bipolar too."***

The pain that Abraham's off-the-cuff comments caused was tremendous for Sandy. Abraham's words so hurt her that she stopped sharing any stories about her childhood with him. Even the happy ones.

Her shutdown caused Abraham confusion. He wasn't sure what was going on, but now there certainly wasn't any chance she would share any of her vulnerabilities with him either. She had lost the trust she had in him that said he would never use her mother's illness against her.

In the session, she admitted that the damage to their relationship seemed like it would never heal. When she said, ***"I can't believe you are using one of the things I fear the most in the world against me,"*** Abraham finally understood.



They both knew there were essential rules of engagement that had to be adhered to and respected. Afterward, their relationship grew to new levels of trust, but it took time.



Although the examples above seem to involve issues created by just one partner, they involve both because of the careless actions or words of one trigger deep-set feelings in the other. That's why some couples flame out early because they never really got to know each other. In order for love to grow, the two of you must create a safe environment to be vulnerable.



If, on the other hand, you have arranged a series of ground rules and want your communication to be honest (and fair), then issues won't get ignored. Sweeping things under the rug just give you a lumpy living room floor.





Your job is to remember that talking civilly helps immensely but can't always solve the issues at hand. Acknowledging the problem is a start, but it won't stop them from feeling the way they do. All you can do at that point is tell them you now understand how important the issue is, but you're not sure how to fix it yet. Then, keep talking, or set a time when you can come back to the subject. Validating their opinion and their feelings is immensely important.

Disagreements are inevitable, so be open and honest, and don't ever attack your partner for who they are or how they think.

Takeaway Tip

Teasing and banter can be fun, and loving partnerships often thrive on it. But when it crosses boundaries or rules of engagement haven't been predetermined, even everyday comments can do damage. Treat your partner with the same respect you crave.



Chapter Four

What's Cheating Anyway?

Hank Williams sang:

"Your Cheating Heart Will Tell on You".



Of course, Hank was right but only if your heart and your romantic partner first agree on the definition of cheating.

Generally, infidelity is viewed as an act involving a third party that violates the standards and boundaries that a romantic couple has agreed upon. In the old days, cheating was much easier to define. Now, with cell phones, computers, and all the apps that accompany them, the definition of cheating has become murkier.





Have an honest discussion with your person. Define whether watching porn, gift-giving, flirting, or discussing things of a sexual nature with another person, is cheating. Is it okay to talk with a former girlfriend on face book? What about going to dinner with a friend of the opposite sex?

The bottom line is to talk about it. Does what happens in Vegas really stay in Vegas or do you need to share it with one another. Better yet, is it okay for it to happen at all?

If a situation does come up in which one of you feels that something inappropriate has occurred, bring it up right away. Find out if your partner also agrees that it was out of bounds.

Maybe the two of you will need to revisit the relationship's boundaries. Whatever you do, keep talking and don't accuse. Clarify and agree on what is okay and not okay and then move on.

Takeaway Tip

Short of finding your sweetheart in bed with someone else, before you accuse them of cheating, the two of you must define, as a couple what cheating is to you.

