

Connected
The Art of
Building
Relationships

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Introduction

The motivation for writing *Connected: The Art of Building Relationships* began with my realization that many people struggle with building and maintaining strong relationships in all facets of life.

Whether the issue is relationships with family members, co-workers, peers, or romantic relationships, many of us need help in learning how to be close to people.

Throughout this book I describe the value of intimacy, vulnerability, and passion in all types of relationships.

By the way, when I use terms like “intimate” and “passionate” some of you may have to remove your heads from the gutter. I am certainly not an expert on sex, and this is not another program on “how to enhance your sexual performance in eight easy steps!” When I refer to intimacy and passion, I am encouraging you to let go of your ego and control. Open your heart, and you will truly make joyful connections with people.

So many of us trudge through life reacting to situations and fears, missing out on countless joyful experiences. Far too many people are spending their lives reacting to their environments rather than creating them. Why?

Many people lack vulnerability, intimacy, and passion in their relationships.

As we grow, we give ourselves the opportunity to create a better reality for ourselves and connect with people in ways we may never have thought possible.

In writing this book, I have used numerous points of reference from my own life. I have been a counselor for people battling alcohol and drug abuse for over twenty years. I have seen the destruction of families and relationships as a result of this terrible problem first hand. Although this is my professional experience, the scope of this book is much broader. I may refer to situations I have dealt with professionally in order to illustrate certain points. Please do not alienate yourself from these points even if you have never experienced these situations in your own life. Your ability to think about, feel, and relate to the emotions involved is far more important than having the actual personal experience.

Another major frame of reference is my experience with my own family. I will spend some time describing my relationship with my wife and how it

developed. It is a great example of letting down walls and connecting with another spiritual being on all levels. I am extremely grateful to my wife for her patience with me as I went through the process of removing my fear and tapping into my inner passion and love.

Being a parent is another major point of reference. Through working with other parents over the past twenty years, I have learned a lot about how to positively demonstrate my love as a father. My daughter, by being herself, has helped me to remain in a place of curiosity, passion, and joy.

Finally, my relationship with my in-laws provides another major point of reference. For the thirteen years I have been married, we have lived next door to my wife's parents and grown close as a family. Through our experiences together, I have been able to learn a true definition of family and how this particular connection is one key to a successful and passionate life. These are not my only frames of reference, but they are certainly the primary ones.

This book will answer some questions that are extremely important to creating strong relationships. Most of us are on an unending existential search to find meaning and purpose in our life, and I want to share some simple ways to improve the quality of our lives. As we search for ways to define ourselves, we may attempt to find meaning through our work, through our possessions, through the performance of our children or through our marriages and romances.

There is no doubt that we ultimately define ourselves by our relationships.

It would be difficult to define ourselves without the reflection we receive through those around us. It is vitally important to determine whether our closest relationships challenge us to be better people. No matter how close the relationship, those we spend time with should create an enhanced sense of self. Any relationship worth maintaining should *enhance* our lives. Whether it's your mother, brother, cousin, boyfriend, girlfriend or your mechanic, your relationships should provide you with joy.

How is this possible? Begin with an in-depth look at some fundamental belief systems and perspectives. The process continues by being able to identify different types of relationships and our roles in them. Finally, it concludes we are in a state of perpetual growth and possess the ability to change any factors in our lives that stop us from being vulnerable, intimate, and passionate.

This is a fun and exciting journey. No one has to do this alone. Let's get started and build a more joyful and passionate life!

Chapter 1

The Challenge of Understanding Intimacy

“My friends tell me I have an intimacy problem. But they don’t really know me.”

~Gary Shandling

When most people hear the word intimacy they conjure up images of adults in “adult situations.” Because of the sexual connotation of the word intimacy it can be difficult to engage someone in a conversation on this topic without becoming at least mildly uncomfortable. So let’s start by clarifying what I’m talking about when I refer to intimacy. I like to define intimacy as:

closeness and familiarity; closeness that comes as a result of having the courage to be completely engaged and connected

But how do we become completely engaged and connected in a relationship? It starts with a better understanding of ourselves.

Many people today have grown up in families with varying degrees of dysfunction. Whether due to alcoholism, drug addiction, neglect, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, or sheer coldness, many of us have been exposed to factors that have left us in a state of self-protection. In spite of these factors, many people are able to let go of their pasts and move forward in their lives by building close and intimate relationships firmly rooted in trust and love.

They are able to do this by realizing that they are not slaves to their family’s behavioral patterns or genetic pre-dispositions. Although these patterns and predispositions clearly have an effect on an individual’s behavior, they are not the only determining factors. They get to a point of finding their own definitions of success and happiness and begin surrounding themselves with people who support them in their decisions. Once you let go of your past, you too, will be able to identify the differences between what is a negative pattern or predisposition and what you want in the here and now.

Who Wrote This Story?

A term that is often used to describe these patterns is “scripting.”

***Scripting* is when we take on certain behaviors because of cultural or family influences.**

The reason it is so important to address the issue of scripting when talking about relationships is because we can find ourselves negatively reacting to certain situations without realizing why.

Another form of scripting is when we associate with certain groups and take on the characteristics of that group. For example, a person who grows up in a family where the parents are divorced will be more likely to see divorce as a viable solution to marital problems. That doesn't mean that they will divorce later in life; but because of this exposure, it is more a part of their reality than it would be for someone whose parents stay married.

Scripting can be evident in our everyday lives, from the cars we prefer to the people we attract.

Many of us find ourselves repeating negative patterns over and over again simply because the patterns are comfortable. Without becoming aware of the scripts we play out in our lives, it is impossible to change.

Many people spend their lives merely repeating the patterns that have been passed down generation to generation. Whether this is a child-rearing philosophy or a religion, many people simply continue living the script. How often do we see someone attend a certain college only because every male in his family went there? He may have no interest in this particular institute of higher learning but is painfully aware that, if he doesn't choose this pre-written path, he may be risking his relationships or his inheritance.

Sadly, many will go through this process beginning in elementary school, continuing all the way through college, eventually engaging in a career they don't like, married to someone they don't passionately love, hanging out with people they are bored with, and raising children they will eventually resent. Unwittingly, these people wind up sapping away their own children's enthusiasm and joy with no better explanation than "that was how I was raised, and I turned out OK.

Why is "OK" acceptable? Why do so many people envy others' successes while lamenting their own plight in life? I believe it is due to a fundamentally flawed definition of success and happiness. In order to appropriately define success and happiness, we must let go of the idea that our family scripts, genetic predispositions, or cultural codes enslave us.

We must learn to define our own lives by pursuing our joys and passions with people we love.

A tremendous amount of confusion happens when people look into their past experiences in order to initiate change in their lives today. They recognize destructive patterns and make the decision to further investigate why they operate the way they do. The primary problem with this is that people become so stuck in their pasts, they wind up being obsessed with self-discovery. As a result of this obsession, their patterns don't actually improve, but worsen.

I am not a believer in wallowing in our past. The past merely provides a frame of reference. It gives an explanation as to how we form certain perceptions and opinions. The past alone cannot provide the appropriate motivation to change. Becoming obsessed with the past can create a situation in which a person actually reinforces the negative pattern. A person with this obsession can paralyze his or her ability to take positive action. It is in action that we change. The negative *behavior* must change in order to let go of a pattern.

Action is in the now.

Dealing with the past gives us some answers to the question of why. To create change, we must recognize the pattern and take action.

As a child, our interactions with our families teach us how to relate to other people and establish patterns that appear later in life. If Dad always complains about Mom and launches into lengthy diatribes about the "craziness of women," this will have an effect on how we relate to women. If Mom waxes poetic about the sad state of chauvinistic cavemen in her life, this will influence our relationships with men. Interests of parents, brothers and sisters all sway our perceptions. However, we are not slaves to these perceptions, and we must learn how to identify, and subsequently change, our negative scripts.

There are several ways to identify scripts:

Preferences or tastes

Often, the preferences we have are developed as a result of who we spend a significant amount of time with. Children will often take on the likes and dislikes of their parents or siblings. When we explore why we like or dislike certain people, places, or things, we often find our families feel the same way.

Forms of self-sabotage

Many forms of self-sabotage or self-destructive behavior are described as "hereditary." A more accurate description would be scripting. I'll use alcoholism, a common scripting pattern, as an example. Although there is an age-old debate about whether or not there is a genetic predisposition to alcoholism, I am going to focus on the behavioral aspect. When a child is raised

in a home where alcohol abuse is prevalent, there is a strong likelihood he will react to his environment by abusing alcohol himself. Growing up in an alcoholic environment doesn't guarantee the child will abuse alcohol, but it certainly increases the odds. When this person discovers he is abusing alcohol as a reaction to a scary or negative environment, he has begun the process of script identification. This reaction is a comfortable, familiar behavior, but comfortable and familiar do not necessarily mean positive.

Relationship choices

Most people are familiar with the saying, "We marry our mothers (or fathers)." What this means is we seek a partner who exhibits certain character traits with which we are comfortable. Remember, comfortable doesn't necessarily mean positive. Many people find themselves involved in relationships with people who provide a sense of security, even when the relationship is very destructive. The flip side to this example is seeking character traits in a partner that are familiar, secure, and very positive.

Career choices

Some tasks seem to come naturally to certain people. This often has a lot to do with scripting. When we are exposed to something regularly, we will understand it much better. This includes acquiring skills that seem extremely difficult to develop. Being exposed to something isn't a guarantee we will prefer it, but it certainly predisposes someone to develop this preference.

In scripting, our actions stem from an emotional reaction. When there is a negative scripting pattern in our lives, we have emotions connected to it. For example, if someone grew up in a home where there was a lot of yelling, the same person may react emotionally to loud voices or shouting. The emotional reaction may never change, but the response certainly can. Changing our responses is how we can make powerful changes in our lives.

People become victims to their scripting when they allow their feelings to control what they do. Emotional reactions are often irrational and create many problems in relationships. Once an emotional reaction takes place, the people we are interacting with will generally react emotionally as well. As a result of an emotional exchange, we wind up saying things we don't necessarily mean, and everyone involved walks away with hurt feelings. If we are emotional, it is best to pause and think about our response.

When we are able to separate our emotions from our actions, we take back our personal power.

Once we take back our personal power, we start to form more joyful definitions of success and happiness because these definitions will no longer be based solely on familiarity. When we form joyful definitions of success and happiness, we begin to choose more positive relationships.

Your Success is Determined By You

How do you define success? What brings you true joy? I am grateful for all the life experiences I have had because I continue to learn more and more every day about what brings me joy and success. Many people look at their own life experience with regret or sadness. Many build compelling arguments as to why their past is regrettable and sad. I look at my experiences as being critical tools in building the life I have today. I have changed plans several times. I have begun down several paths and decided that they weren't the right paths for me.

One contributor to my happiness today is the relationships I have formed through these life experiences. My success today is in large part defined by surrounding myself with people who share my excitement about life. I surround myself with people who do exactly what they want, how they want, and with whom they want.

The skeptic will cry out, "This is not possible! Life deals you situations you cannot handle with such a Pollyanna view on life!" Certainly, situations come up and bring about sadness, discomfort, pain, or disappointment. However, when I go through life with a foundation of love and passion, I am always in possession of whatever emotional tools I need to cope with life's challenges.

As long as I live surrounded by people with whom I have vulnerable, intimate, and passionate relationships, I will always be successful.

While defining success and happiness, it is important to take a deeper look into several factors. For example, many people have a very rigid view on success. To some, success is only defined by their financial situation and how well they are set up for the future. Although a healthy financial situation can provide someone with a degree of security, it certainly will not fulfill someone's need for connection on personal and spiritual levels. Financial well-being certainly is no replacement for the security that comes from having close, intimate relationships.

Those who achieve financial success benefit from it even more when they are able to enjoy the fruits of their labors with people they love.

We see people who use money as a means to manipulate or coerce certain behaviors from their families. Those people do not allow their financial success to enhance their relationships. Sadly, the dependants of the financial manipulators see money as their primary source of security. They will allow themselves to be coerced and manipulated and wonder why they don't trust anyone.

While many use their bank account to define success, others define it by their ability to engage others in romantic relationships. With every notch in their belt, they feel Casanova himself could never reach the level of romantic excess they have achieved. They believe that their conquests will bring them satisfaction, yet the feeling of loneliness never leaves.

Relationships become nothing more than statistics, and these people must be engaged in a romantic situation to feel fulfilled.

Unfortunately, they never build any level of trust because their motives for establishing relationships are always ulterior. This "conquistador" mentality leaks into all areas of their life. There is no intimacy because anyone they are involved with has to fulfill their external desires. As a result, they are forced to change course constantly for fear that others will realize their superficial nature.

In both of these flawed definitions of success, these people have much more in common than you may think. In both scenarios the only fulfillment is rooted in their ego. This grandiose attitude isolates these people from any real fulfillment in their relationships, as other people are merely a means to an end. As sad as this is, many are raised with these kinds of perceptions of life and of other human beings. The natural maturation process, which takes place through adolescence and early adulthood, has never been completed because the definitions of success remain rooted in a juvenile and self-centered perspective.

Me, Scared?

"Anger is a by-product of fear or hurt," my father-in-law always says. This resonated with me because anger is my Achilles heel. I spent many years feeling alone because of resentments I created when I was angry. I would use my anger along with my intellect to create compelling cases to justify the way I felt.

Taking a deeper look at the source of my anger, I have found it to be either unresolved fears I am holding onto or situations in which I have allowed my feelings to be hurt. I came to realize my unwillingness to *let go* of my hurts

or fears created problems in my life. The anger simply provided fuel for the fire of resentment that burned within me.

A grandiose ego is a common defense mechanism used to mask fear. When someone is insecure and has a fundamental fear around people, an easy way to keep others at arm's length is to give the illusion of confidence through ego. For example, someone who is talented may not feel grateful for his ability or feel good about himself just because he is able to perform certain tasks well. He only responds to the adulation of others; and when he doesn't receive this needed praise, he becomes louder and angrier in order to gain attention.

How many prima donna professional athletes and entertainers fit this description? The sad reality is that these individuals are never able to fully appreciate or celebrate their talents in a meaningful way because they never allow themselves to completely share their gifts with others. They exist with a constant pressure to perform. Therefore, everything they do is motivated by fear. Fear that if they somehow lose their ability, people will no longer love them. Fear that people are only there because of something (usually money) they can provide.

This phenomenon is not limited to athletes and entertainers. We see these characteristics in people in all walks of life. Show me a tyrannical father at home, and I will show you a scared insecure man who only feels whole when he controls others. Employers who micro-manage also suffer from the same insecurity and fear of people. It is expressed by forcing others to believe they are inferior and cannot adequately do their job without the constant supervision of the boss. Finally, parents who force their children to perform for them or other adults live in a perpetual state of fear. These children are perceived as extensions of the parents and must earn the parents' praise.

Another way we manifest fear is through guilt. We look at past actions (because of either embarrassment or retribution from others) and attempt to protect ourselves. Even though the intention is to keep himself safe, the person who holds on to guilt only accomplishes isolation. Although this person may convince himself that people stay around him because he is loved, deep inside he believes the only reason people are still around is because of a flawed sense of loyalty or pity.

The guilty person is extremely manipulative. She is constantly trying to be helpful, but the people being "helped" only become resentful. The guilty person convinces herself she is "needed" so she will never be alone. Unfortunately, she may never feel a true sense of connection to others.

Ultimately, any of these manifestations of fear, anger, superiority, grandiosity, and guilt lead to the core belief: a fear of being alone. When people try to side step these issues, they stop themselves from dealing with what is ultimately the problem. We as human beings are social creatures. So much of

what we do is motivated by a need to feel a sense of community and connection.

We all want to be loved and understood.

Many of us have spent much of our lives being slaves to our scripting and fears and therefore don't know where to begin to feel fulfilled emotionally. When we are able to recognize the ways that we are "intimately challenged" we start down the path of finding some solutions. Those that stay in denial of their fears remain stuck in isolation.

Summary

- *Intimacy* means to be close and familiar.
- *Scripting* has to do with patterns and predispositions that come from family and cultural influences.
- I define success and happiness for **myself**.

Exercise

1. Name five things you either do or say you like, only because people you are close to have these preferences. (Example: I say I like fried chicken. I really don't, but *everyone* in my family does.)
2. Name five traits of someone whom you would consider to be a successful person.
3. Name five traits *you* possess that make you feel successful.

On some of these exercises you may not come up with five things. That's okay. The idea is to help you to begin identifying what *you* believe versus what is simply a script. As we are able to clearly see the difference between our definitions of success, happiness, intimacy, and relationships as opposed to those definitions that are simply conditioned reactions, we are able to take more responsibility for our lives. As we take more responsibility for our lives, our relationships become closer.

Chapter 2

Exposing Some Limiting Beliefs

“I’ve often thought that my lack of intimacy with those around me is the fault of those around me.”

~ Luke Ford

There are many limiting beliefs pervasive in our society that stop people from feeling a deep sense of connection. Exposing these beliefs allows people the opportunity to walk through the fears that adversely affect *all* relationships.

As I stated in the previous chapter, most people’s biggest fear is isolation. I believe this is a much larger fear than the fear of death. We know death is inevitable. Isolation, however, only happens as a result of a series of choices and actions. We *choose* to respond or react to anger, fear, or hurt. We *choose* between holding on to resentments or letting them go. We *choose* to either live in the moment or obsess about the past or future. All of these choices lead to either creating strong relationships or being isolated.

We possess the power to change our ways of thinking and our modes of operating at all times. If your priority is to enjoy your life and to enjoy the people you are surrounded by, then you must be willing to make any changes necessary in order to reach this goal. In this chapter, we will explore some dangerous misconceptions about people and relationships that lead many to live lonely lives.

“You Complete Me”

“You complete me” is a popular phrase in the Cameron Crowe movie, Jerry Maguire. Jerry Maguire is a high-powered sports agent, played by Tom Cruise, who has a difficult time connecting with other people in a meaningful, intimate way. Jerry goes through a difficult period in which he is fired from the agency he works for, loses his fiancée, and has his biggest client move to his fiercest competitor.

Jerry falls in love with his assistant, but continues to have a difficult time opening up with her. Eventually the relationship deteriorates. At the climax of the movie, Jerry bursts into his assistant’s house and declares, “You complete me.”

The movie shows the importance of vulnerability in relationships. I am using this statement to illustrate a dangerous perception many people have, that relationships are 50/50.

We have all heard people say, “Relationships are 50/50.” To believe in 50/50 relationships is to believe we have control over the thoughts and feelings of others. As arrogant as some people can be at times, I think we can all agree that there is absolutely no way to control the thoughts and feelings of another human being. We may influence or motivate others, but we certainly can’t control them.

The belief that relationships are 50/50 is based on the premise that we meet the other person half way and that at this middle ground, a positive and productive relationship is formed. If this were true, there would be serious limitations placed on our abilities to grow and change as individuals.

Another problem in a 50/50 dynamic is someone is always keeping score. There is an unwritten rule that “you owe me one.” The genuine attitude of service is removed. Service is real when there is no agenda. Anyone who helps someone else with “quid pro quo” in mind does not possess an attitude of service.

The reality is that if we are dependent upon other people to “complete” us, we can never be truly at peace without others performing exclusively for our satisfaction. So unless you are only half of a person (and I doubt that you are,) you realize this belief is based on a false premise.

Although some relationships begin as a result of one person’s needs and another person’s ability to meet those needs, it still requires 100 percent participation in order for the relationship to become positive. Once a person finds someone to meet his needs, he begins to open himself up and communicate what his needs are. The person who is able to meet these needs then empowers the other to make any necessary changes in life to move forward and deal with that problem.

This is not a 50/50 proposition. It is as a result of each person giving 100 percent. Both involved parties begin the relationship with some specific individual goals. Each individual finds a level of compatibility with the person to whom they are attracted. The relationship is able to begin in a healthy way because of this understanding.

One example of this is in therapeutic relationships. A therapist’s primary responsibility is to diagnose the problem in her client’s life and help formulate a plan to rectify it. Any responsible therapist will recognize early in this process whether the client has any true desire to change. However, if the client is simply seeking someone to validate his negative behaviors or ways of thinking, the therapist has a responsibility to end the relationship. If she doesn’t end the relationship, then she will create a dependency. The client will then “need” the

therapist in order to continue to justify his actions, and the therapist “needs” the client in order to feel useful by “helping” someone.

As you can see, no one is actually being helped. Because the therapist and the client are dependent on one another in this scenario, both individuals are actually being harmed. They have a true 50/50 relationship. They have sought out each other to fill their self-centered emotional needs. If this client had a sincere desire to change and the therapist had encouraged the client to change, the relationship would have involved 100 percent participation from both parties.

As an employer, I depend upon my employees having a 100 percent commitment to their jobs. They depend on my having a 100 percent commitment to mine. As a result of these commitments, we have strong working relationships.

Any successful business is built on the foundation created by strong relationships.

Whether it is the employer to employee, co-worker to co-worker, or the business’ relationship with its clients, a business cannot succeed without all of these relationships functioning in a positive manner.

These business relationships’ success is predicated on an individual’s ability to be 100 percent committed to it. If these relationships were viewed as 50/50, one party would be in a position to do nothing but react to what the other party is doing. We are all aware that this dynamic is never effective in business, yet we try to make it work in the other relationships in our lives.

A primary factor in the belief in 50/50 relationships is a fundamental fear of taking complete responsibility for one’s own actions. In a 50/50 dynamic, a person is dependent upon the behavior of someone else in order to feel or experience anything. If that person is happy, it is because of the person who completes them. If he is upset, it is because someone else caused the situations that brought about the emotional discomfort.

When you enter into a relationship with the knowledge that no one else has the power to change the way you feel, you are more likely to be vulnerable.

It is this kind of vulnerability that allows a relationship to be mutually beneficial and intimate.

It is imperative to understand that success in any area of our life relies on our ability to commit ourselves to it. If we only apply fifty percent of our ability to anything we are trying to create, we will fall short of our goal.

In relationships we must commit to giving 100 percent of who we are.

Relationships that are built on this foundation will succeed. Each individual will find qualities about him or herself and the other person that are useful. This is how we form relationships that allow each person involved to grow and change. We will be both inspired and be an inspiration to others. This is not a 50/50 proposition. This is giving 100 percent of who we are as we discover new interests and continue to grow and change.

Relationships Are Hard Work

Another fundamental belief is that relationships are “hard work” and involve “sacrifice and compromise.” What a sad perspective on living! These negative attitudes are prevalent in today’s society because we place a premium on a lack of responsibility in one’s life. It seems that everywhere we turn, people are blaming someone or something else for their plight in life.

Relationships are hard when we are unwilling to accept that our decisions, words, and actions have a ripple effect. All relationships involve two people coming together therefore flexibility is critical. This doesn’t necessarily mean that there must be “hard work” in order for a relationship to work. In fact, I will go so far as to say that if a relationship is extremely difficult to maintain, it probably shouldn’t exist. Before making that determination, however, it is imperative to make an honest self-appraisal.

If we take responsibility for our actions and words, our relationships are *always* a reflection of our current state of mind. When we feel conflict with another person, our first responsibility is to look within ourselves to see whether we have somehow wronged the other person. If we discover that our actions have been clean, we can find comfort in the awareness that our behavior or attitude is not at the root of this conflict.

If we continue to attempt to engage this other person in conversations about this conflict, we are simply perpetuating the problem. Our responsibility to ourselves at that point is to take a step back and allow the other person the freedom to work out whatever issues they may have. Of course, we want to be liked; but unfortunately, we cannot force anyone to like us. We need to realize no matter how well developed our people-pleasing skills are, some people will not respond the way we want them to. So what is the alternative?

To live in the moment. To live in freedom. To be filled with joy. To be passionate about what we believe in and love.

If we are doing these things, we are being true to ourselves. If we are being true to ourselves, we will continue to attract people into our lives who enhance all of these qualities and whose qualities we enhance.

I Will Make You Love Me

We have all seen angry, tight-jawed people who live in a constant state of cynicism. They find no joy in life. They are constantly afraid of people trying to take advantage of them. They also happen to be the same people who manipulate and take advantage of others.

We have all heard the expression, “Misery loves company.” Their relationships are built on some common and unhealthy foundations. These foundations include: “blood is thicker than water,” “this relationship is mutually beneficial,” or “I need them/they need me.” Notice that none of those statements have anything to do with attraction, joy, or love. All of those types of relationships involve some form of coercion or manipulation. People engaged in these kinds of relationships rarely experience any kind of pleasure because they will always find something or someone to complain about.

I was recently told about an elderly woman who had spent most of her life rearing children. She had grown up on a farm and had worked very hard. She got married in her late teenage years and almost immediately started having children. She was very manipulative and used the power of her maternal role in her family as a way to coerce and control the behavior of her children. By the time her children were out of the house, she was ready for the next phase of her life. Her children were always around, but their motivation was to seek her approval. Her husband of many years eventually passed away, and she was left alone.

A few years later, some friends from her church organized a trip to Europe. She reluctantly went. Did she enjoy the sights, sounds, beauty, and fellowship on this trip? No. Because she wasn’t in complete control of the situation or her environment, she simply complained the whole time. She complained about the weather, the food, and the people. She didn’t take any pictures. She didn’t bring home any experiences to share with her eager and curious family. Sadly, because of her self-centeredness, this woman missed out on another opportunity to connect with her family in a way that would have positively impacted everyone involved.

Her objective in this scenario is coercion. By being negative and filled with self-pity, this woman was seeking attention from others. She knew her family would want her to have a wonderful experience in the twilight of her life. She also knew if she described her trip as a horrible time, her family would bend over backwards to please her and try to make her feel better. As a result, all involved parties are held hostage by coercion and guilt.

The efforts of the family to make the woman feel better have nothing to do with love. They are reactions to the fear of being honest with her about her attitude. Everyone involved would rather avoid discomfort than be completely honest. When “feeling better” is the only objective, people become willing to

accept being treated in a manner which would normally be unacceptable. Most often this kind of treatment is displayed in family relationships and in romance.

In reference to romance, many of us have experienced the axiom of “the person who loves the least is in control of the relationship.” Consider this classic scenario: Jim was always known as the strong and silent type, an emotionally quiet man. He was able to deal with most situations swiftly and with a high degree of confidence. He wasn’t openly scared of anything, and many were intimidated by his presence. Suzie was an attractive, vivacious woman whom people loved being around because she brought a spirit of fun and enthusiasm to everything she did. She was very open about her feelings and wasn’t afraid to share them with anyone who was willing to listen.

They began dating on the recommendation of a mutual friend, and the relationship seemed to be an instant success. After several months, they decided to get married. In time, the couple settled into their marriage and, as is normal, some problems began to arise. Suzie began to feel that Jim didn’t pay enough attention to her. She began to complain that she couldn’t get Jim to share his feelings with her. Suzie tried everything she could think of to get Jim’s attention. She made herself more sexually available. She picked fights with him. She even tried ignoring Jim, which was highly ineffective. Jim was clearly in control of the relationship.

Suzie finally realized that she was beginning to compromise herself in an attempt to change Jim. Through her attempts at coercion, she was driving herself crazy trying to accomplish an impossible task. As she let go of her attempts at changing Jim, she began to feel better about herself. She came to terms with the fact that the only person she could change was herself. Our motivation to change must be based in a desire to feel better about ourselves, regardless of the performance of others.

When I *know* I am the only person I have control of, I can form relationships from a position of strength and self-worth.

Suzie accepted the fact she was not happy with how *she was living* and this had nothing to do with Jim. As she continued to grow as a person, Jim began to realize his distance was creating loneliness. He sought help for himself and became more emotionally engaged. Relationships built on this foundation, benefit all who are involved and will certainly flourish.

Looking Out for Number One

This chapter illustrates only some of the relationships that we are exposed to, but certainly not all of them. The common thread through the examples I mentioned, as well as others you may think of, is: when we operate

from a foundation of fear, we make our fear of isolation come true. In today's world, many of us are so obsessed with security that we actually make ourselves insecure. In the spirit of "getting ahead," people will sacrifice those they love to make more money or build connections simply to make more money.

A few years ago, a new family moved into our neighborhood. They appeared to be a close family, and they were very excited about their new house and the prospect of meeting new people. The two children in the family immediately found kids their age in the neighborhood, which helped to make their adjustment relatively smooth. The parents found a church nearby that they liked. The father met some men in the neighborhood to golf with and the mother quickly got involved in local activities through their church and her children's school. Everything seemed to be going very well.

After about two years, the company the father worked for offered him an opportunity to take a job overseas that would provide him with enough money to be able to retire early and enjoy the fruits of his labors. The overseas commitment would be for three years and would mean uprooting his family again. The father made a substantial salary, so financial security wasn't an issue for this family. He anguished over the decision between the allure of a job that provided more money and ego gratification and the security and happiness of his wife and children.

His children were vehemently opposed to making another move. They were very happy with their situation and were terrified at the prospect of having to start over again, especially in a foreign country. The family was slightly insecure because the father was already making several trips to the overseas office and was away from home for up to three weeks at a time. They begged their father to turn down the job.

What would you do in this situation? It's one thing to verbalize your priorities and have pride about where you stand, but it is something completely different to have the courage to act on what you believe. If your definition of success and happiness is internal and your relationships are your priority, then decisions such as this may appear to be difficult, but they're actually not.

The father made the decision to turn down the overseas job. By not taking the job the father confirmed his own system of beliefs. Financial security was not an issue for his family because they had plenty of money. As attractive as the new opportunity was, it was not nearly as important to him as his relationships with his wife and children. He could not imagine placing his egotistical desires above his own emotional security.

Choices like this one come up for people all of the time. Some of them are very difficult because so many factors come into play. Money and ego gratification are very enticing. While they can be a part of a positive definition of success and happiness, they certainly cannot replace the security that comes

from the combination of living a life based on the principles of love and the relationships formed as a result of these priorities.

I realize today that my security is internal. It comes as a result of living a life that is based on success and happiness as *I* define it. My definitions of success and happiness are centered around love, peace of mind, and a strong sense of connection to others. My relationships both reflect and reinforce that fact.

The more we are able to recognize our patterns of fear and negativity, the more we can create positive and loving relationships in our lives.

Fear and negativity are fed by false and negative beliefs about the motives of other people. As a result of these limiting and fearful beliefs, many people use flawed definitions of relationships, such as “Relationships are hard work” and “Relationships are 50/50,” to justify isolation and loneliness. If we see other people as enemies who are trying to take advantage of us, then it will be very difficult to feel a true sense of connection and closeness. When we are able to truly take responsibility for our decisions and actions, we can form definitions of relationships that are rooted in love and enhancement.

Relationships can certainly be complicated. When people come together at any level, there are belief systems, preferences, and motives to be acknowledged. This process does not have to be painful. Although it can be scary, and sometimes frustrating, building positive healthy relationships is one of the key factors in a joyous life experience. The biggest challenge is deciding whether you have the willingness to take responsibility for your behavior.

Summary

- How we live and perceive life is a choice.
- A close relationship consists of each individual’s 100% commitment to its success.
- Flexibility is essential in building strong relationships.
- The only actions I can truly control are **my own**.
- Building relationships can be complicated. In order to build strong relationships I must take responsibility for **my own actions**.

Exercise

1. Answer this question, “Am I cynical about other people’s motives in wanting to get to know me?” Write down the ways you notice your reaction to meeting someone new.

2. Name the ways you expect people to meet you “half-way.” In what ways could the same goal be accomplished if you removed the expectation from the other person? (Example: I always expected Joey to meet me half-way by him cleaning his car. By letting that expectation go, I am able to appreciate Joey more.)
3. Name five rigid beliefs you have that stop you from forming relationships with people. (Example: I would never talk to him because he is _____)
4. Choose three significant relationships in your life. Name five actions each of these people have taken that you have tried to control. What behaviors could you change that would enable the relationship to be healthier?

The point of this exercise is to take responsibility for your behavior. So much conflict is avoidable when we take responsibility for our actions as opposed to attempting to control the behavior of others. This does not mean we cannot establish boundaries. Establishing boundaries is important, but it is important to acknowledge that they have nothing to do with control.