



Module Three- Relationships

The habits we develop while interacting with each other are among the biggest challenges to maintaining healthy relationships. People generally learn how to relate to others from their family of origin and later from their peers and teachers at school. For centuries, parents, teachers, and other well-meaning adults have been doing their best to externally control the behavior of children. The relationship habits listed below have generally been considered acceptable and even necessary behaviors, when disciplining children. And they can render immediate, short-term results. Unfortunately, children learn and carry these Destructive Relationship Habits with them into their adult relationships.

In significant-other relationships, most people use some version of external control--one person attempting to get another person to do something he or she doesn't want to do. Naturally, there will be times when you want your partner to do something he or she doesn't want to do and vice versa. You may even try to get each other to do things neither of you want to do. And sometimes you will even try to force yourself to do something you don't want to do, simply to please your partner. The first scenarios are versions of external control; the last example is just a bad idea. For the most part they all result in misery for you and your partner.

The use of external control doesn't happen overnight. It is usually an insidious process, beginning without conscious awareness. People simply fall into a pattern of behavior that feels familiar to them. Human beings have been trying to control each other since the beginning of time.

Most people look outside of themselves as the cause of their unhappiness or frustration. After all, wouldn't life be practically perfect if the significant people in our lives would simply do things the way we want them to, or do what we think is best for them? Wrong! This is the kind of thinking that perpetuates the misery!

Most of the time people think they are unhappy because the important people in their lives are not cooperating with them. Can't you relate to that? Have you ever had children make decisions that put them in serious danger? Have you ever had a significant other make employment or financial decisions with which you were not in agreement? Did one of your parents ever say something critical to you that rocked your confidence? Ever had a supervisor who micromanaged

your work and never gave credit for your good work performance? I think you get the idea. Any one, or combination, of these things can be a source of unhappiness for us. I'm sure you can add several others to the list.

Whenever we are in situations such as these, it sure feels as if our life would be so much better, happier, and more fulfilling if other people would just cooperate and be the way we want them to be. This may, in fact, be true. However the behaviors we typically engage in to move others in our desired direction are exactly the behaviors that damage, and ultimately destroy, our relationships.

I'm talking about the Destructive Relationship Habits: complaining, blaming, criticizing, nagging, threatening, and punishing. If we are particularly savvy, we can add to the list rewarding to control, otherwise known as bribing.

The pattern is perpetuated because sometimes it works. We can, in fact, get another person to do what we want through external means. When a person's pain exceeds their fear of change, they will change. It is possible to create enough pain for your loved one that he or she will do what you want. However you lose something very valuable in the process. You weaken the strength of the foundation of your relationship.

Use these Destructive Relationship Habits enough and they become ingrained. Our brain forms neural pathways that act like a default program on a computer. Whenever we aren't paying conscious attention, we subconsciously slip into the default mode of controlling others. In order to have healthy relationships, we must become conscious and create positive relationship habits, while reducing or eliminating our use of destructive ones.

Destructive Relationship Habits:

These relationship habits have been used since the beginning of time because at some point, somewhere, people decided that they had not only the right, but also the responsibility, to make others do what they wanted them to do.

One person in the relationship is not happy with something his or her partner is doing. This unhappy person then decides to engage in one of the Destructive Relationship Habits to "persuade" the other person to do what he or she wants them to do.

If these relationship habits are so destructive, why do people use them? The reality is they can work! Sometimes we can make situations so painful for our partner that he or she will cave under the pressure and do whatever we are demanding. This provides what behaviorists call intermittent reinforcement. Their research shows intermittent reinforcement to be the most effective motivator of behavior. What does this mean? When we try to modify a particular behavior and it is only effective some of the time, then we will use that behavior frequently, whether it gets results or not. However we will stop using a behavior that gets us what we want every time, the first time it doesn't work. This makes Destructive Habits an attractive choice.

What is the problem with Destructive Relationship Habits? Well, by definition they are destructive to our relationships. Even though we may get what we want in the moment, using a Destructive Relationship Habit will chip away at the foundation of our relationship. Is that what we truly want for the long haul? Yes, we can sometimes get compliance through the use of destructive relationship behaviors, but they will always weaken our relationship, creating either an overt or covert resistance to us and our requests. Is sometimes getting what we want in the moment worth the damage to our important, significant relationship? Probably not.

Perhaps you have never used any of the Destructive Relationship Habits. If so, pat yourself on the back because you belong to an elite club, perhaps a club of one. At different points in my life, I have used every one of these and occasionally still do so despite my efforts to stop. Let's take a look at these Destructive Habits that others have used with us. You may even notice one or two you've employed on occasion.

Dr. William Glasser and his wife Carleen Glasser, in their book titled *Getting Together and Staying Together*, talk about seven Destructive Relationship Habits. They are:

1. Complaining
2. Criticizing
3. Blaming
4. Nagging
5. Threatening
6. Punishing
7. Bribing or rewarding to control

Do you recognize any favorites of yours?

I like to add guilting to the list. This seems to be a favorite behavior of many mothers. I know, because I am one. You can recognize this pattern in martyr-type behavior, such as saying things like, "After all I've done for you, and you can't do this one little thing for me?" I've actually heard some mothers play the "childbirth card." You know the one. It sounds like this: "I was in labor with you for 36 hours! All I'm asking for is this one thing and you won't do it?" Guilting is actually a subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, variation on punishing.

Naturally, there are more Destructive Habits than the seven listed above--eight if you include guilting. However, if you begin by focusing on reducing just these seven or eight behaviors, then you will likely see a great improvement in the condition of your relationship.

Complaining: People use complaining when they are dissatisfied with a situation. People complain, expecting the other person to change and get on board with their way of thinking. How do you feel when someone complains to you or about you? Complaining is not a behavior that generally makes the complainer more attractive. Most people avoid complainers at all costs. And if the person complaining happens to be complaining about you, then it's even worse. No one likes to have someone complaining about them. It makes a person feel small and not good enough.

Criticizing: Criticizing is another behavior that is destructive to relationships. When most people ask, "What about constructive criticism?" I respond, "Has there ever been a time when you were criticized and felt constructive afterwards?" The answer is usually "no."

Constructive criticism is an oxymoron. However, if people don't have the information they need to determine what quality work is, then I would hope someone would give them that information. I wouldn't call this criticism; I'd call it simply providing information.

Providing information is neither positive nor negative. It's just information. The core of who we are is not under attack. If we want something from our partners we need to tell them so they have the information to make their decision about whether they will comply with our wishes. However, criticizing our partners' perceived character flaw or behavior is not recommended as a way of improving our relationship.

Blaming: People tend to engage in blaming whenever they don't want to accept responsibility for their own unhappiness. When we blame someone for something, we are attempting to point a finger away from ourselves onto our partner. "This is all your fault!" Or "It's all your fault we can't _____." (Fill in the blank with whatever you want.)

The reality is that whatever happened, happened. Pointing a finger in any direction does not change that reality. Instead of attempting to assign blame, it is more useful to go into problem-solving mode. How can the situation be salvaged? Given where we are in the moment, what is the next step to take? If the situation cannot be salvaged, there are three options:

1. Continue to blame
2. Make a note that you won't put yourself in that situation again
3. Forgive the person

Which choice(s) would be best for your relationship?

Nagging: Nagging is another Destructive Relationship Habit. If you have ever been on the receiving end of nagging, I'm sure you know how annoying it can be. When you've asked your partner to do something three times, you can assume he or she has heard you. The only logical conclusion is that your partner is not going to do it or will get to it in his or her own time. Asking another time is not likely to speed the process. Not only will it not speed the process but you can bet it will encourage your partner to pull away from you, damaging your relationship.

Threatening: People threaten when they are trying to control their partner. It's a heavy-handed tactic designed to intimidate their partner into compliance. It usually sounds like, "If you don't do _____, then I'm going to (do something painful to you)." Sometimes the threats are simply implied but used for coercion nonetheless.

Do you think threatening and intimidation is healthy for an adult, intimate relationship? How can threatening strengthen a significant relationship? It can't.

Punishing: When threats don't work some people resort to punishing. Of course there are people who start with punishing, believing a threat might be wasted energy. They may think their partner already knows the consequences so threatening is a waste of time. When their partner engages in a behavior they don't like, they may automatically dole out the punishment.

Men and women, at least in the United States, seem to punish slightly differently. Since these are stereotypes there will definitely be exceptions. However for the most part, a man withdraws attention, and stops listening to his partner. A woman, on the other hand, withdraws affection, usually sex, and/or any words of respect or appreciation. These punishments can be quite effective because people usually choose to withdraw the one thing their partner wants the most. The partner often cannot stand the pressure and will cave under these circumstances. But if you are the person initiating the punishment, do you think your partner will feel closer to you afterward? Do you feel good knowing your partner only did what you wanted after you inflicted punishment? Is this the relationship you really want to have?

Bribing: Bribing, or rewarding to control, does not mean the same thing as negotiating. Negotiation in a relationship is very healthy and necessary to the long-term success of the relationship. Negotiation involves two willing participants, each interested in helping the other person get what he or she needs, while at the same time meeting his or her own needs. We will discuss negotiating under the Healthy Relationship Habits section.

Bribing simply means that I am going to dangle a carrot of what I think you want in front of you to get you to do the thing I know you don't want to do. Bribing creates resentment because it is experienced as a form of control and manipulation. No one enjoys manipulation, even if the reward is enjoyable. Albert Einstein said, "If people are good only because they fear punishment, and hope for reward, then we are a sorry lot indeed."

No one likes to be controlled no matter how subtly or skillfully the controlling is administered. External control is one thing human beings are almost guaranteed to rebel against. It's simple physics as exemplified in Sir Isaac Newton's Third Law of Motion: For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.

Whenever people engage in a Destructive Relationship Habit, they are setting themselves up for similar treatment. Pushing someone creates the condition where that person has to push back. It isn't always directly confrontational, in your face. Sometimes it comes in the form of passive-aggressive behavior. But there is a push back or resistance created, nonetheless.

There are alternatives to using these Destructive Relationship Habits. There are ways to simultaneously honor yourself and your partner. The first step is to recognize when you are using Destructive Habits. Simply ask yourself if you are trying to get your partner to do something he or she doesn't want to do. Usually you will be able to recognize your use of Destructive Relationship Habits long before you feel equipped to do anything about changing them. This is natural. Of course, the best case scenario is that from this moment forward, you will never use another Destructive Relationship Habit, and will substitute a Healthy Habit instead.

If you aren't able to miraculously stop your use of Destructive Relationship Habits on demand, don't despair. Recognizing their use is the first step--bringing it into your conscious awareness. Once you are aware, then you can decide what you are going to do. Once again we can look to Albert Einstein and his definition of insanity: "Doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." In order to affect positive change in your relationship, you must try something different.

The Research:

In researching 100 happy couples for my book, *Secrets of Happy Couples*, I expected my research to show that happy, satisfied couples have reduced the use of Destructive Relationship Habits and routinely employ the use of Healthy Relationship Habits instead. I wasn't disappointed.

I asked all couples to list the ingredients of their successful relationship --the things they consciously do to nurture their relationship. The top twenty items they listed included all seven of Dr. Glasser's Healthy Habits. Here's what made the top twenty. The Healthy Habits are highlighted in bold print:

1. Communication
2. Respect
3. Trust/Honesty
4. Time together/Quality time/Companionship
5. Support/Encouragement
6. Humor/Laughter
7. Prioritizing the relationship or one's partner over self
8. Commitment/Loyalty
9. Listening
10. Great sex
11. Common interests
12. Accepting
13. Shared spirituality
14. Similar beliefs and values
15. Time apart/Freedom to be one's own person/Individuality
16. Friendship
17. Negotiation/Give & Take
18. Having fun together
19. Physical touch/Affection
20. Understanding/Compassion/Empathy

The Healthy Relationship Habits:

Whenever you bring habitual behavior into your conscious awareness, you increase your options. Without conscious awareness, you are destined to continue the behavior which is motivated subconsciously. How can you stop what you aren't even aware of?

Now that you are paying attention you have more options:

- You can choose to continue using the Destructive Relationship Habits
- You can opt to say nothing
- You can engage one of Dr. Glasser's Healthy Relationship Habits.

In their book, *Eight Lessons for a Happier Marriage*, the Dr. and Mrs. Glasser write about the Healthy Relationship Habits of:

1. Listening
2. Supporting
3. Encouraging
4. Trusting
5. Respecting
6. Accepting
7. Negotiating differences

These are not as simple as they sound. Let's look at each one individually.

Listening: Listening is listed first because it may be the easiest place to start when trying to stop using Destructive Habits. You may already think you listen and perhaps you do. However the level of listening I am speaking of relates not just to hearing your partner, but truly trying to understand where he or she is coming from.

You are listening for understanding. You want to know how your partner sees things. You may not agree with his or her perception but you want to try to understand where your partner is coming from, as best you are able. For such understanding, you must suspend your judgment about what your partner is saying. Approach the situation from a position of curiosity rather than judgment.

Supporting: Supporting simply refers to standing by your partner, lending your support whenever needed.

It's easy to be supportive when your partner is doing what you want. It's more challenging to be supportive when doing so may create difficulty for you. This is either a time for negotiating (discussed below) or supporting your partner and then determining what you need to do to also get your needs met.

When you are supportive you recognize your partner's accomplishments and support him or her when things are challenging.

Encouraging: I have been asked, "What is the difference between encouraging and nagging?" Well, there's actually a big difference. When you encourage people, you are encouraging them to do something they already want to do. When you nag them, you are encouraging them to do what you want them to do. Big difference!

Encouraging is for times when your partner needs a cheerleader. He or she is considering something that could potentially bring great joy but might just need a little encouragement to carry it through.

In order for you to be a helpful encourager, you need to control your own fear about whether things will work out. You may worry if your partner does a particular thing, that it will somehow take him or her further away from you or endanger your happiness in some way. While this is possible, when you can be the encourager it is more likely that your partner will move closer to you.

Sometimes your fear of losing your partner is something that keeps you from using Healthy Relationship Habits. This fear comes from a place of illusion. Your partner is never yours to own. Yes, in marriage you make promises. You want to believe those promises will last a lifetime. But the reality is that people are free to come and go in our lives. The tighter you try to hold onto someone, the greater the likelihood that he or she will leave.

Even if you are successful in getting the person to stay, do you really want a relationship based on guilt and obligation? Sometimes the Healthy Habits seem counterintuitive because we have been raised to believe in external control. But know that every time you use Destructive Habits, you are weakening the strength of your relationship.

Trusting: Of the happy couples surveyed, 49% said that trust was crucial to the success of their relationship. Many of us come into relationships with baggage from previous ones, possibly making it difficult for us to choose to trust. Many say trust is earned. However I believe that if you have made a decision to be in a relationship, then you must also make the decision to trust, until you receive information to the contrary. Trust is a true gift in a relationship.

If you've exercised poor judgment in the past, instead of using that as an excuse not to trust, begin to think of it as a situation that helped you develop more discriminating instincts. When you learn to trust yourself first, it becomes easier to trust others.

If your partner betrays your trust, then put your trust in your higher power. Know that you will survive and actually be stronger for the experience. You have learned a vital piece of information.

After the betrayal you will have decisions to make about your relationship. Not all relationships end when trust has been breached. Some couples can overcome dishonesty and even infidelity, by finding their way back to trusting each other again. In fact, relationships can survive and even become stronger as a result. These will be decisions you will need to make if and when your trust is violated. But don't let someone else's lack of integrity define you. Your partner is only human and will make mistakes. Infidelity may be one of them. Don't let that mistake make you feel that you are somehow "less than"--as if you're not good enough or are a fool for trusting. Trusting your partner is the way to a healthy, satisfying relationship.

Respecting: Respect is a very interesting concept. In a relationship, you should never do anything that demeans or reduces your partner's self-esteem. This is typically caused by the Destructive Habits of criticizing, blaming and complaining, which should be avoided at all costs. However there is more to respecting than avoiding these Destructive Habits. Many will tell you that if you follow the Golden Rule, then respect will be the byproduct; but I disagree. The Golden Rule says, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." This implies that respect looks the same for all people and this is not the case.

Let's take, for example, a simple yet common difference between men and women. Typically, when a woman is upset about something, she needs to vent, often talking about her issue over and over again. She is not necessarily looking for a solution, but simply needs to process the issues out loud. If her partner knows how to respect her, he will let her vent as long as it takes while listening for understanding.

On the other hand when a man is upset about something, he usually needs to retreat somewhere within himself to figure things out. Since talking helps the woman feel better, she will frequently nag her partner to tell her what is bothering him. In order to truly respect her man, she needs to give him the space he needs, and trust that he will come back when he is ready.

In the area of respect, I recommend following the Platinum Rule: "Do unto others as they would have you do unto them." This will require more "listening for understanding" to realize what respect means to the other person.

Accepting: Acceptance is one of the more challenging habits. I always say you have at least three options in a dissatisfying relationship: You can change it, accept it, or leave it. When you are attempting to change it, there are usually two ways to do it. Most of the time, you try to change your relationship by getting the other person to change so you can be happier. This is when you will likely engage in the Destructive Relationship Habits.

A more productive way to improve your relationship is to change yourself, which happens when you implement the Healthy Relationship Habits. If your attempts to change have been unsuccessful and you don't want to leave the relationship, then accepting is what is left available to you.

Accepting means that you accept traits, characteristics, and behaviors in another without resentment. Holding onto your resentment is simply another way to try to change the person. Acceptance sounds like this: "I am choosing to stay in relationship with you because that is what I want. I recognize that you are not perfect, just as I am not, but the positive greatly outweighs the negative. I know this is simply a part of you and I accept you fully and love you exactly as you are." Getting to this place with a loved one is truly a beautiful thing.

Negotiating Differences: It is unrealistic to think you can be in relationship with anyone and not encounter differences. Using the Healthy Habits does not mean you need to be your partner's doormat, constantly giving up what you want in favor of what he or she wants. No, being in a committed, healthy relationship means you both figure out win/win/win solutions for the two of you to get what you need--where you win, your partner wins, and your relationship wins because it is strengthened by going through the process.

To determine a win/win/win solution you take turns sharing with your partner what it is that you want. You both listen for understanding. You talk about placing the good of the relationship above either of your individual needs. And then, you figure out a way you can both get what you need in the process.

The key to negotiating differences is that there is no coercion for any specific behavior change from either partner. The negotiation is a freely given gift to the relationship. You both must be willing to place your own individual needs on the back burner, while negotiating what is best for your relationship.

Where to Go from Here:

This lesson has been geared toward the relationship with your significant other. However the principles discussed are universal principles. They can be used in any relationship. You can implement the Healthy Relationship Habits with your children, your parents, your in-laws, your siblings, your co-workers, your supervisor, strangers, yourself--basically anyone in your life with whom you'd like to get along better.

I have one word of caution. If you commit to using the Healthy Relationship Habits and want your partner to do so too, you must guard against the natural inclination to say, "I'm doing this and I think you should too." The reason to use Healthy Relationship Habits needs to be because it will be great for your relationship regardless of what your partner does. This is not a situation where you should say, "I'll do it if you do." Make your changes from a pure place and your partner won't be able to help but be affected.

However, depending on how long your relationship has been less than supportive, it may take longer for your partner to notice your efforts. Don't despair. Keep doing what you know to be right for your relationship. Things will improve. You can't help but feel more loving toward a person who is intentionally trying to love better.

Supportive Exercise:

Please download and complete the Perception worksheet. If you are in a significant other relationship, fill out the form with that relationship in mind. If you aren't currently in a committed relationship, then complete the exercise with some of your prior relationships in mind. You can also use your relationship with a child, parent, co-worker, boss or friend.

In the first column, record those qualities, traits or characteristics of your selected person that "caused" you irritation. Don't hold back. You will do this part of the exercise privately, with no need to share your answers.

Then once you have an extensive list, I want you to imagine how each of the traits, qualities, or characteristics helps you in some way. For example, in my relationship with my one son, I used to get so mad at him because he was a slob. His own room was a mess but what bothered me most was he often left a mess behind in the living room, kitchen and bathroom--all the common areas of the house. When I think about how this helped me, his behavior actually helped me better learn and apply Choice Theory. I recognized his behavior wasn't really the problem. The problem was something was happening I didn't like. I had a problem and I tried to make Kyle take ownership of my problem! Once I made that switch, we had harmony in the home again.

Another example is a person's annoying habit could teach you patience and provide an opportunity for you to practice unconditional love. Yet another example is your partner is a workaholic who fails to spend sufficient quality time with you. You could spend your time bemoaning the fact that you don't get the quality time you want, or you could be grateful for the extra time you have in your life to do other things, such as take care of your aging parents, make new friendships and pursue hobbies.

A final example would be the couple where one is a saver and the other a spender. The saver can appreciate the spender as someone who is teaching him or her to be more spontaneous and enjoy life more, while the spender can appreciate the saver as someone who is teaching him or her responsibility. It's all about your perception and where you place your focus. We will talk more about perception in a later lesson, so if this exercise is difficult for you, then come back to it at that time.

When you are able to find something you can be grateful for or appreciate about the very things you wrote in the "Negatives" column, then write that answer in the "Shifts" column and experience how much better that feels. Making that shift will help you engage in more Healthy Relationship Habits.

You can use this worksheet any time you find yourself angry or frustrated with another's person's behavior. If you are having difficulty finding the positive shift, please use your allotted weekly email to ask my assistance. You are entitled to a weekly email between lessons for questions, assignment review or to process the concepts. Please use it.

Next week we will be talking about the five basic needs that drive all human behavior. I'm looking forward to it.