

Creating More Intimacy and Love with the Word No

Jessica could feel Aaron's grip tighten around her waist as he pulled her closer to his lips. His passion for her was intoxicating and yet something in the pit of her gut was saying no. Aaron was everything she wanted in a man. In fact, a part of her had craved this moment for a long time. Why then, did she feel so torn and confused? She had deep feelings for Aaron and the last thing she wanted to do was hurt him or discourage him. If she said no now, would he ever make a pass at her again? And if she did say no, how should she say it? These questions confused Jessica even more and her fear immobilized her so that she was unable to speak. In the end, she was swept away by Aaron's passion, but her conflicted emotions didn't allow her to fully enjoy her dream come true. Instead of erotic splendor, what she experienced more closely resembled being pulled apart.

Like many people who don't know how to assert healthy boundaries, Jessica found herself simply giving in rather than risk the relationship. Can you relate?

Most of us have been caught between a desire to maintain the congenial aspects of a connection and a desire to avoid something we are not ready for. And most of us have little clue how to navigate these seemingly contradictory desires so that our needs and the needs of those we care about are fully met.

One reason we have difficulty with boundaries, is because we are not taught how to say no in a way which preserves our connection with others. In fact, most of us are never taught how to say no at all.

I have a vague memory of feeling entitled to say no as a very young child. But by the time I was five years old, my no was of no consequence. My strict and dogmatic father had instilled in my young mind a fear of defying authority. In time my acquiescence would extend to the church I was raised in and eventually to peer pressure in college.

I doubt that parents who demand compliance from their children realize to what extent they are setting them up to bow before the pressures of conformity from less than ideal sources. But if we teach our children to simply obey, they are more likely to feel compelled to follow the group even if that group indulges in dangerous behavior.

As adults we often struggle to hear our inner knowing, that part of us which has thoughts and feelings which can sometimes run counter to the wishes of others, even those we are close to. Finding the courage to speak our truth, let alone assert a healthy boundary can seem daunting.

Perhaps a first question might be what is a healthy boundary?

Boundaries create a safe container and each of us needs to know what is contained within our personal boundaries. Your preferences and needs define who you are and what works best in your life. While expanding your world to include the unfamiliar can be a fulfilling growth experience, it is important to balance that open-minded approach to life with a sense of what works best for you. Some experiences might be right for others but limiting or even destructive for you. It is your responsibility to know what you need at any given moment and learn how to communicate that to others.

Some people fear that boundaries will leave them feeling lonely. Others are terrified of hurting those they love with their no. We are after all social creatures and it is only natural that we are concerned about our impact on people who are important to us, especially when we depend upon love, companionship and even resources from those people.

I learned to assert boundaries when I was newly sober and seeing a therapist for my anger and depression. Until then, I had no idea that failing to assert healthy boundaries could backfire on me producing all sorts of emotional fallout such as resentment, anger and even depression. I thought my emotions were something to be controlled. What I didn't realize at the time, was that rather than control my emotions, I needed to learn to channel those feelings into positive action instead of negative reactions. As I became more honest with myself about my feelings, I was better able to assert my boundaries.

Today in my work as a relationship coach, my clients often struggle with resistance to learning healthy boundaries. In an effort to encourage them, I often refer to airline safety instructions which state: "put your oxygen mask on first, then help your child/friend/relative to put their oxygen mask on." Since most people have traveled in a commercial jet at least once, they get it. But my analogy references the fact that we are better able to help others if we attend to our needs first. That is an important aspect of healthy boundaries. But my dear friend, Tom, recently shared this with me:

"I always thought that appropriate boundaries meant me keeping certain people and energies away from me. Saying 'no' to other people. But now I understand that good boundaries also involves me containing and not extending my energy system too far outside myself into territory that is not mine to protect. Saying 'no' to myself. "

I like the way Tom has shifted the "no" from others to himself. That feels more empowering to me.

After reading Tom's words, I more fully grasp a major fear that I suspect is present for a lot of people - fear of alienation and separation. This was not intuitively obvious to me because I grew up in a home where I had zero privacy and no self-determination and therefore the idea that I was entitled to healthy boundaries was immediately attractive to me. But now I get that others might have a deeper fear of losing connection than I did when I first learned to assert boundaries. And learning how to assert healthy boundaries can arouse that fear for them.

So how do we resolve our need to have our desires honored with our need to feel loved and accepted?

Believe it or not, one of the simplest ways to practice asserting healthy boundaries is to teach your loved ones to say no to you. In fact, if you know how to *take* a no with your heart wide open, you will be much more adept at *saying* no with your heart wide open. And that really is the key - keeping your heart wide open!

Below are tips for saying no while creating more love. Rather than wait to try these techniques on a loved one, why not invite them to practice these steps on you? The good will extended by inviting their no will go a long way toward establishing trust and increasing intimacy.

Look for the Yes that Follows Your No

If you think that someone has to win and someone has to lose, then you will find it very difficult to say no with love. It will feel like you are hurting someone you care about. But if you believe in win/win propositions, then you will be better able to envision a compromise or alternative that can meet your needs and the needs of another. On the other side of your no, exists your yes. If you fully express your no, you will be better able to find your yes. To get to your yes, use the three steps I call Assert, Affirm and Invite.

Assert, Affirm and Invite

This three-step process is a very effective formula for increasing more intimacy, love and partnership while asserting healthy boundaries. First you *assert* your boundary, then you *affirm* the value of your relationship and finally you *invite* this person to join you in a win/win alternative scenario.

It goes something like this:

" That doesn't work for me but I really love that you want to spend time with me. I would love to spend more time with you too. Would you like to do this (insert your win/win alternative) instead?"

Even if the other person is no more drawn to your suggestion than you are to their suggestion, they will get how much you value the relationship and that is likely to create good feelings between the two of you whether you can agree on a plan of action or not.

You can incorporate these three steps whenever you fear conflict in a relationship. Just remember:

1. Assert
2. Affirm
3. Invite

Some of us assume that when someone says no to us or we say no to them, we are not just saying no to the outcome or opportunity but to the person. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, by saying no to things which do not work for us or call to us, we are able to more effectively say yes to the things we really want to share with the people in our lives. As counterintuitive as it may be, learning to assert healthy boundaries makes us more available for partnership, intimacy and love. So do yourself and those you care about a favor and say no when that is your truth.

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Heal Shame and Increase Your Personal Power!

Healing shame is a vital step toward realizing your full potential and can have many unexpected benefits.. For instance, if you are less controlled by feelings of shame, you may have more energy and enthusiasm to explore your creativity, find your passion, realize your purpose, and find fulfillment.

I create a profoundly shame free experience for my clients in part, because I've had a long, personal history with shame. It's been an intense journey which continues to unfold to this day. The process of healing shame is, for me, on-going. But it does get easier.

There was a time when the shame itself evoked feelings of shame. Now I greet my shame with love and acceptance, with a tenderness akin to parental love. But that didn't come automatically. I had to work for it.

As a child, I was not encouraged to love myself. My parents did love me but that love was compromised by their own shame. When people don't love themselves, when they find aspects of themselves so objectionable that they deny their existence, there is a tendency to project that shame and self-hatred onto others. I was routinely the object of that projection and its infliction left deep wounds in my psyche.

My mother was afraid of her own dark memories, preferring to repress the trauma of incest, rather than deal with her grief and rage. Instead, she preached a gendered shame which blamed women for anything men might do to them. When she incurred injuries from my father's violent temper, she blamed herself for not being a more submissive wife.

My father lived in constant fear of being cowardly or ineffectual. This was how he viewed his father, and his life was a reaction against those perceived weaknesses. In an effort to ensure he was not seen as weak, my father became an imposing tyrant who insisted that his wife and daughters live in fear of him.

My father rarely missed an opportunity to humiliate us. His verbal attacks became a lethal assault on my personhood. He was also physically and sexually abusive. But somehow he still saw himself as a loving father. My father was obviously in denial.

Denial may make a difficult situation temporarily more tolerable, but it prevents us from connecting with the truth or finding authentic responses to reality. It perpetuates shame, and dooms us to repeat dysfunctional patterns passed down from previous generations.

Family secrets are like threads which when pulled unravel the fabric of everything you think you know about the people who share your DNA. As I came out of my own denial, I became aware that there was rampant sexual and physical abuse on both sides of my family. Because of this, my origins have also been a source of shame for me.

My family of origin was deeply dysfunctional, but this did not occur in a vacuum. We were members of a conservative Christian cult which enforced a plethora of prohibitions while requiring that we dress and behave differently than "the world." I was homeschooled and lived in isolation, removed from the culture. By the time I left home to attend college, I felt like an alien from another planet. Fortunately, I possessed extremely adaptive social skills so I fit in very well, but I lived in fear that my friends might discover my strange past and reject me.

As soon as I left home, I began breaking every rule I had been forced to obey. I dressed provocatively and began smoking, drinking and taking drugs. I indulged in sex with various partners. I continued to give my academic success precedence, however, as that was something my father disapproved of. He didn't want me to attend college because I was "just going to get married and have babies anyway." So as an act of rebellion, I made the honor roll.

Our parents may have the best of intentions when they try to redirect our behavior to something they deem more socially acceptable, but unfortunately, the message many of us take away is that we are not okay the way we are. Many of us have been encouraged to "act polite," to "say nothing if you can't say something nice," to "behave like a gentleman" and to "act like a lady." Rarely have we been admonished to "share how you really feel" and to "feel free to disagree if you see things differently."

Raised this way, it is difficult not to absorb the message that our thoughts and feelings are not welcome in this world. Most cultures, place a high premium on conformity. And since our very survival is dependent upon membership in the group, we work hard to sublimate our true selves in favor of "fitting in" and "getting along."

Fear of being ridiculed, ostracized, scape-goated or otherwise dealt with in a manner which is prejudicial, unfair and even life-threatening, keeps most of us confined to societal expectations. It takes personal strength to choose thoughts, feelings and behaviors that are not condoned by the majority.

For most of us, it isn't until we reach a crisis in our emotional or physical health, that we find the incentive to move past our fears and locate the courage to stand up for our true thoughts and feelings no matter how different those may be from what we are told we should think and feel.

Although my childhood presented many obvious forms of abuse, your childhood need not have been traumatic for you to suffer from shame. Most people suffer from some sort of shame, even if that shame does not lead to debilitating coping mechanisms. The absence of crippling dysfunction does not mean shame is harmless. Shame erodes self-esteem, compromises our ability to achieve and creates an additional stressor on our mental and physical health.

Although not everyone agrees on definitions, it is important to identify shame and distinguish it from guilt. I believe that shame attacks who you are, while guilt warns you that something you have done is not working for you. This definition is also preferred by recognized shame expert, Brené Brown, Ph.D. who shares in her interview with Judith Stadtman Tucker in "Motherhood, Shame and Society" for *The Mothers Movement Online*:

In the simplest terms, shame is about who we are, not what we've done. Unlike the paralyzing effects of shame, guilt often prompts us to make amends or change our behavior. Feeling guilty doesn't produce the same feelings of being trapped, powerless and isolated.

While guilt can play an important role in our lives, shame is always destructive. If we lie or steal, guilt can guide us toward more pro-social behaviors. As social creatures, it is important that humans operate with a conscience and guilt plays an important role in that. But shame attacks how we feel about ourselves.

Shame is experienced as a core defect confirming that we are not worthy of love or forgiveness; that we can never measure up or be enough. Shame attacks who are. There is a profound difference in not only how we feel with shame or guilt, but how the two emotions cause us to behave.

For instance, if you feel guilty about something you might be more inclined to search out ways to make amends or balance the inequity your actions have created. But if you feel ashamed, you are more likely to indulge in self-pity, withdraw or seek sympathy. Shame causes us to shrink energetically while guilt can actually motivate and expand our energy.

Shame separates us and condemns us to living in emotional isolation. We may be surrounded by people and meaningful relationships, yet because of shame, we tend to hide some key aspects of ourselves from others - even the people we love.

Being dishonest or keeping a lot of secrets can be an obstacle to healing shame. After all, we are "only as sick as our secrets." I began healing my shame when I first got sober. In the twelve step groups I attended, I learned that keeping secrets would lead inevitably to getting drunk again, so I practiced rigorous honesty in order to dispel my shame and protect my sobriety.

Participating in twelve step groups gave me one of the most important tools I acquired for healing shame: making amends. At first, the idea of "making amends" sounded like I was blaming myself for what was done to me, and I feared it would only lead to more guilt and shame than ever. But that is not what is intended by "making amends," and that is not what happened.

Early in my journey of recovery, I was for the first time truly getting in touch with the fact that I was not to blame for being molested by my father. I had to work hard to feel my anger and outrage. . But it was worth it, because moving into my anger was healthy.

But now in twelve step groups I was being asked to inventory "my part." Was I being asked to accept "the blame" for my own victimization? If that were the case, I would have eliminated twelve step groups from my support system. But in practice, "making amends" ended up creating a sense of empowerment for me.

Before I could even consider my amends, I had to get in touch with how horrible the abuse was, and to know without a doubt that I did not deserve to be abused. By getting in touch with my anger over what was done to me, and at the same letting go of my fear and my defenses, I was free to explore whether I had in any way behaved in a negative way. I explored my deepest motivations. Was there any part of me that wished my father harm? Did I bring hate or negativity into our interaction?

Of course, even if I did, that does NOT mean I am to blame for the abuse my father perpetrated. But acknowledging where I felt guilty about my behavior or my mind set allowed me to begin to free myself from shame. I became better able to separate the various factors so that I felt even less responsible for my abuse than I did before I claimed "my part." As I became less identified with what was done to me, I became better able to experience myself as innocent because I had examined all my motivations and no longer felt burdened by the impulse to hide from the truth. In this way, the truth really did set me free.

Perhaps most importantly, I learned to make amends to myself -- for the ways in which I abandoned myself including blaming myself for what was done to me.

While it may sound silly, my experience of making amends to myself has given me a greater sense of connection to and respect for myself. I feel less fear and have more empathy for me, which helps to heal my shame.

This process is entirely counter-intuitive, and flies in the face of our natural response to shame which is to run and hide. Doing an inventory on the shameful event or fact can reveal how we blame ourselves. Making amends to ourselves can be freeing. Finding that thing which we wish we had done differently, can empower us in ways which are uniquely transformative..

Feeling compassion for yourself, allows you to realize how unjust attacks on your innocence and your individuality are., As your shame is replaced by compassion for yourself, you'll find that you have more genuine compassion and empathy for others.

Shame is a heavy burden to carry through life. It can weigh on your heart and mind, diminish your sense of worth, and cripple your creativity. It's important that you find a safe person to share the events that have created shame for you. When you experience understanding and empathy from a safe support person, your shame will begin to heal.

Brené Brown developed "the Shame Resilience Continuum" which asserts that shame is bolstered by blame, while the antidote to shame is empathy.

I couldn't agree more. I've seen empathy work miracles in my own life, and in the lives of countless other people. As an Empathy Expert, I am deeply grateful to facilitate the healing of shame for my clients. It is an incredible gift as well as a sacred privilege.

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Are You Too Angry?

I would be willing to bet that at various times in your life, you have been accused of "focusing on the negative" or "getting too angry" or "making a big deal out of nothing." Sound familiar? Maybe you have even said this to someone else?

Most of us have been taught that our anger is an undesirable emotion, something we need to control. In fact, the ways in which many of us have been reprimanded for our anger tend to create a sense of shame. We might have been taught to apologize when we get angry.

But is anger the problem? Or might it be how we interact with our anger which causes us and others so much discomfort and even damage? Could anger ever be an emotion that we would welcome and embrace as having a positive influence on our lives and the lives of those we love?

What might be a way to use anger for good?

"The anger burned in me like a fire. At first I didn't know what to do with it. But I found that, if I didn't react against it or jump to any conclusions and stayed what I call 'Christ-centered,' it had its own wisdom and intelligence. It would change into a deep feeling of caring, which then gave me a clearer sense of what I wanted to see changed and what I could do about it."

When I first read this John Robbins' quote from an interview by Stephen Bodian in the September/October 1988 issue of Yoga Journal, I cried. I suppose I wondered if I could ever be capable of such an exquisite level of compassion.

One thing I did not question is the link between fully experiencing your anger and being able to respond with empathy. I have long known that true empathy for those who have hurt you and genuine forgiveness for the crimes committed against you can only follow a courageous and honest experience of your anger and grief.

This might seem counterintuitive. But if you numb any of your emotions, you will unfortunately numb all your emotions. So if you really want to connect compassionately and if you truly want to forgive, you must be able to face your painful emotions in a way that neither denies nor reacts. You have to learn to manage your anger while fully experiencing it and that requires a level of emotional awareness and maturity which is rarely taught.

In fact the world seems rather mean spirited, with no shortage of bullying, name-calling, road rage and online flaming. In an increasingly rude social environment, there are endless examples of the wrong use of anger.

Ironically, the destructive use of anger that permeates our culture has its roots in a deep-seated shame about anger. If from an early age you were admonished not to be angry, you may have learned to hide your anger, to present a "don't care attitude," or perhaps breakdown in tears instead of revealing your rage.

Our relationship with anger can be gender specific too. Men sometimes feel more comfortable expressing anger than sadness. And the opposite is generally true for women, with tears being more acceptable than a display of rage.

Gender differences aside, what tends to be universally true is that we are given the message that anger is something to be controlled and even eliminated. Our anger is rarely greeted by others as a gift.

But what if your anger is in fact a huge gift? What if there are ways your anger can benefit and improve your life and your relationships?

I invite you to consider some of the important functions of anger.

Anger can notify you when something is not in your best interest. You can think of it as a sort of alarm system. If you're angry, then something needs your attention now.

Stop what you are doing and consider what might have caused your anger.

Once you've isolated the source of your anger, you may wish to eliminate it from your life. Or you may prefer to find healthy ways to assert a boundary in order to deal in a positive way with the person, situation or circumstance that has caused you to feel angry.

Either way, the trick is to use your anger as an alarm system, and then as an incentive to assert your needs. Used this way, your anger can propel you into positive action. Your anger can guide you away from denial and toward your intuition. Your anger can teach you to respect and honor your own sense of knowing.

If this sounds too good to be true, you are not alone. The vast majority of us never learned how to manage our anger. Consequently, angry emotions often lead to a long list of negative outcomes.

Acting before you think (or thinking from your "reptilian" brain) can cause you to say and do things you will regret. When anger is not properly managed, it can lead to reacting instead of responding. And ultimately your anger can turn into resentment. Resentments are extremely damaging to your relationships and your health.

But when you learn how to manage your anger, your ability to connect with others compassionately is magnified dramatically.

Here is a summary of the important roles anger can play in your life, and of the pitfalls associated with anger when it is not properly managed. In my next blog entry, I will explore the eight steps of anger management. In the mean time, remember that your anger really can be a beautiful gift and that will become ever more apparent as you learn how to feel your anger without acting it out.

Important Functions of Anger:

1. To let you know when something is not in your best interest
2. To provide incentive to eliminate what is unacceptable
3. To propel you into action
4. To guide you from denial to your intuition

Pitfalls of Anger that is not Properly Managed:

1. Acting before you think
2. Thinking from your "reptilian brain"
3. Reacting instead of responding
4. Moving from anger to resentment

As always, I am here to help. If you wish to learn a new relationship to your anger, one which honors your true feelings while maximizing the love and intimacy in your life, drop me an email at Veronica@TheShameFreeZone.com

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Five Reasons You Aren't Winning That Argument and Five Simple Steps to Win in Your Relationship

If you experience some of the same old arguments cropping up over and over again with your partner, you certainly are not alone. But as much as misery loves company, wouldn't it be wonderful to finally be rid of those conflicts?

Over the course of your life, you have probably invested more energy trying to fix your relationships than almost any other endeavor. Most of us do and yet no matter how smart, capable, accomplished or otherwise successful we may be, the vast majority of us find relationships to be one of the most difficult and often confusing aspects of our lives.

After awhile, it can seem like there is no winning. Even if couples seek professional help, it often leads to disillusionment. As soon as they leave the therapist's office, the same conflicts rear their ugly heads destroying all hope that anything might ever change for the better. But whether they seek help or go it alone, many couples find themselves repeating familiar arguments for what can seem like forever.

Jane was at her wits end with her husband, Tom, of ten years. No matter what she did, he would not stop insulting her when they were out with their friends and family. It might seem like a small irritation to an outside observer, but after a decade of this, Jane felt like slapping the snot out of Tom.

Tom insisted that he was just having fun teasing Jane and accused her of taking herself far too seriously. Jane told Tom she felt like he didn't value her or their relationship enough to treat her with the respect she deserves. Whenever Jane went there, Tom just rolled his eyes and started playing one of his favorite video games. At that point in the now well-worn argument, Jane would storm out of the room and call one of her girlfriends to complain about Tom.

When their tempers cooled, both Jane and Tom would find a way to share a smile and give each other a hug. They would remember what they loved about each other and resolve not to fight like that again. But of course they did fight like that again and again and again . . . just like most couples do. In fact, their friends laughed at them and told them that was "just the way it is," that all couples go through it and after a while you learn to live with it.

But a lot of things happen to most couples including a loss of interest in sex with each other and a gradual decline in the depth of emotional sharing. Are we to just accept that as a "normal" part of long-term relationships? Or is there some way we can win at love?

Before answering that question, let's examine the reasons we are failing.

Five Reasons You Aren't Winning That Argument

1. *You Think the Facts Matter:*

Although factual information and logic are fantastic tools in many areas of life, they don't make much difference to our emotional hearts. Our hearts and therefore our emotions drive our relationships to such an extent that the "facts" can become irrelevant.

2. *You Want Your Partner to Agree with You:*

We all want to be "right" but that drive to gain consensus and feel vindicated can destroy intimacy. If you "win," then your partner "loses." Ultimately, that means you will both lose.

3. *You Want to Find a Solution Instead of Feeling Your Feelings:*

Even the best solutions will fail if the underlying feelings are ignored. Unresolved emotions are a powerfully destructive force in relationships. But one reason we avoid our partner's feelings is because we are trying to avoid our own feelings. If you are not used to dealing with deep emotions, it can be frightening. For many of us, "solving" the problem feels safer than exploring our feelings and those of our partner.

4. *You Do Your Best to Ignore Your Partner's Body Language:*

If your partner rolls their eyes in disgust or slumps their shoulders with despair, your words are not getting through to them because they have tuned you out. Continuing to try to make your point or engage your partner in conversation when they have shut down emotionally, is not only insensitive but illogical and unproductive.

5. *You Confuse Solving the Problem with Solving the Relationship:*

Couples fight about a lot of different topics but almost all of those conflicts have deeper issues at their core. If you don't find out what those deeper issues are, your relationship will continue to experience difficulty that can eventually lead to serious trouble.

Now let's look at those simple steps to relationship success. These steps are simple, but there is nothing easy about them!

Five Simple (Not Easy) Steps to Win in Your Relationship(s)

1. *Forget Facts - Focus on Feelings:*

When you find yourself trying to prove that you are "right," stop. Take a breath and ask yourself, "What am I feeling?" If you feel safe to do so, tell your partner what you are feeling. Then ask your partner what they are feeling. If you don't feel safe to share your feelings at first, begin by asking your partner how they feel.

2. *Stop Apologizing and Start Asserting:*

A lot of us turn to apologies when we are not able to reach an agreement with our partner. Saying you are sorry can calm an angry partner and help you feel safer in your relationship. But it is only a temporary fix. If you don't share your true feelings as well as your needs in the relationship, then eventually your frustration will build to the point where you either explode or withdraw from your partner.

3. *Play Show Me Your Movie:*

This relationship game can be a lot of fun! Your version of what happened and your partner's version can be very different. Rather than fight about it, give each other the chance to share your different versions of reality without interruption. While your partner shares their "movie" or version of what happened, sit back and allow your emotions to get swept away just like you do when you enjoy a good movie. Remember, you are not trying to figure out "who is right" or "what really happened." Drop your defensive attitude and cultivate your curiosity! Your objective is twofold. First you want to experience your partner's reality with as much empathy as possible. And secondly, you want to relate your experience so completely that you feel utterly understood. Your respective "movies" will no doubt be very different, so ditch the frustration and allow yourself to feel fascinated. This empathy exercise has the power to create feelings of trust and ease as you both let go of your need to "be right" and begin to understand your different perspectives.

4. *Learn to Validate:*

It takes practice to learn how to validate feelings and it is particularly difficult when your partner's feelings are annoying or disturbing to you. But if you can put your feelings of fear or revulsion aside long enough to truly express caring, concern and empathy for your partner's point of view and emotions, your relationship will become a source of joy instead of frustration. When you validate your partner's feelings, you are not agreeing with them. You are instead, expressing your unconditional love for them.

5. *Stretch to the Middle:*

If you view your relationship as an opportunity to grow and become the person you always wanted to be, you can come to see the inevitable conflicts with your partner as exercises pushing you closer and closer to your goals. The differences between you and your partner can help both of you to shift your patterns so that you are more compatible. If you both endeavor to make positive changes, you will both stretch in the direction of your partner so that you ultimately meet in the middle. This not only can make living together a more pleasant experience, it can also help both of you to be less polarized and more balanced individuals.

Lists can over-simplify life's difficulties and don't always address our problems in a way which is truly helpful. If you want to understand how you can apply these five steps to your relationship(s), drop me an email and I will be happy to help. After all, you deserve to win at love!

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How Your Guilt Can Punish Your Partner and Why You Want to Stop Apologizing

Actually, it's not a good idea to stop apologizing all together. But resorting to repetitious apologies in an effort to restore trust and intimacy with your partner can produce unexpected results. Unfortunately, this guilty approach to relationships often backfires.

Saying you are sorry is a great way to soften the defended energy that is aroused when your actions have hurt someone you love. Saying you're sorry helps reduce the defensiveness which might lead you to explain and excuse your misdeeds rather make amends. And an apology is a great way to let the person you've hurt know that you see what you did wrong and are taking steps to correct it.

But sometimes the words "I am sorry" take us away from love and intimacy.

We are all familiar with people who say "I'm sorry" just so they can gain your trust and get themselves off the hook. It is infuriating when we trust the words "I'm sorry" and let down our defenses, only to be hurt in the same way once again.

But how can we tell if the person apologizing is really going to change? For that matter, how can we be sure we are capable of true change when we apologize? After all, how many times have you let yourself down by doing the very thing you said you were sorry for to the same person you apologized to in the first place?

We have all been there at least a few times and, believe it or not, much of our confusion probably began long before we had romantic partners.

As children, most of us were admonished to apologize for things we did which displeased the adults in our lives. We might not have felt all that bad about our actions at the time, but when we were confronted with stern attitudes or shaming pronouncements we quickly learned to say we were sorry — even if secretly we believed we had not done anything wrong. The typical result was a forced and half-hearted "I'm sorry" directed toward our "victim" - often a sibling or playmate.

As children, the words "I'm sorry" can feel like a magic wand that miraculously erases all the tension and ill will, providing us with an easy reset on our human interactions. "I'm sorry" allows us to reengage with the good graces of our parents, family and friends.

However, as we become older, the words "I'm sorry" don't always have the magical effects they did in our childhoods.. Traffic tickets do not disappear when we say we're sorry. And employers have little tolerance for apologies, showing a strong preference for consistent results rather than empty promises.

But our personal relationships often emulate our childhood interactions, and it is here that we may be inclined to abuse the persuasive power of "I'm sorry."

While I don't think we should stop telling our partners we are sorry, there are different ways to apologize. Some work better in the long run than others.

For instance, many abusive partners resort to "I'm SO Sorry, Honey, I promise I will NEVER do it again." The words sound great and the emotions seem sincere, and yet the abusive partner WILL do it again and again. Without a solid plan for changing their behavior, no amount of remorse or guilt will provide the transformation they may genuinely desire. And worse, some abusive partners have

no intention of changing; they simply want their partner to stick around so they can repeat their abusive behavior.

Although most of us are not in relationships we consider “abusive,” the pattern of apologizing but never actually changing is one we can all relate to. Who hasn’t heard the words “I’m sorry, I will never do it again,” only to be subjected to repeat performances of the hurtful behavior from someone you trusted was truly sorry? And who among us has a perfect track record of never doing it again once we have apologized for something? More often than we would probably like to admit, we provide our partners with repeat performances of the things we intend to stop doing, despite our best intentions.

Wishing or resolving to do better next time might feel good in the moment, but by itself rarely leads to positive change. How then can we move toward the change we desire? How can we turn our apologies into something meaningful instead of a mere recitation of “magical” words?

We need to take practical steps that support the change we intend. That might involve reading a self-help book, working with a coach or counselor, taking up a new spiritual practice, or otherwise obtaining help for realizing positive changes in our actions.

And while we are working on our behavior, it is also important to work with the underlying feelings that we experience. The energy of our emotions has a profound impact upon every facet of our lives.

Take guilt, for instance. Guilt is a powerful emotion. We can use guilty feelings to motivate us to change and grow in ways that not only improve our connections with others, but provide us with a more pleasurable and satisfying life experience. Used this way, guilt can evoke positive change in our lives.

However, guilt can also become a habit. When we stay stuck in our guilt instead of allowing it to move us forward into a positive action, guilt can erode our self-esteem and even punish our partner. How?

Well for one thing guilt is an emotion that can create a sense of separation. It is contractive rather than expansive. Instead of drawing closer to your partner and enjoying more intimacy, you may experience more isolation as your guilt becomes a barrier between you and your partner. The end result can be layers of hurt as your partner first suffers the injury that led to your guilt in the first place, and then endures your emotional absence while you indulge your feelings of guilt.

For instance, let’s say you have admitted to and apologized for spending a sizable chunk of your mutual savings on a major purchase such as an appliance or automobile, without first consulting with your partner. Your partner is understandably upset and no longer trusts you to the same degree that they did before your confession and contriteness. It seems like a lousy way to reward you for telling the truth. Nevertheless you continue to apologize, hoping that eventually your partner will finally forgive you and life will get back to “normal.”

But life doesn’t return to “normal,” and your partner doesn’t forgive you. Instead, you find yourself saying “I’m sorry” about twenty times a day while your partner lobs cheap shots at your integrity. What’s wrong with this scenario?

Here's what is lacking:

- 1) Taking Responsibility to Change and
- 2) Empathizing Instead of Feeling Guilty.

Trust isn't rebuilt with apologies. Trust is restored when we become more trustworthy and that is best accomplished when we take steps to change. In this example, proposing an agreement with your partner to consult each other anytime either of you considers an expenditure in excess of an agreed upon dollar amount could create healing and increase the emotional intimacy in your relationship. Enrolling in a money management course might go a long way toward creating change as well as inspiring trust too.

There are many actions you can take to change your patterns and rebuild trust with your partner. What you decide to do is sometimes less important than the fact that you are making a commitment and creating a plan for how to change.

Even though you take concrete steps to change your behavior, your partner isn't going to suddenly "get over it" and go back to "normal." In fact, if they are "normal," they will need time and your attention to heal and move into a place of intimacy and vulnerability with you again. This is where empathy comes in.

Empathy is much more valuable to your partner than your guilt. We all want to feel truly heard and deeply understood. When we are the source of our partner's pain, that can be particularly difficult to provide, but that is when it is needed the most. Giving your partner plenty of time and permission to grieve the loss in trust is a huge gift, especially if you are the source of that loss in trust.

It is far more productive to allow your guilt to move you into taking responsibility for your actions, and into validating your partner's feelings of hurt. If you take responsibility and empathize with your partner, you can also experience a sense of empowerment and increased self-esteem. The end result can be more intimacy and joyful feelings flowing between you and your partner.

If your apology is heartfelt, but doesn't lead you to this place of joy and intimacy, then there is a good chance you are getting stuck in the guilt. Guilt can motivate positive change, but guilty feelings should not become a way of life! Guilt can separate us from those we love, essentially causing us to abandon them. What those we hurt need most is our responsible action, our empathy, and our understanding of their pain. Endless apologies and self-recrimination are an indication that guilt has become entrenched. Rather than leading to growth, it can destroy connection with self and others.

By using your guilt as motivation to take concrete, practical steps toward positive action, you can create a variety of uplifting outcomes for you and for those you love. In this way, even potentially devastating mistakes can catapult your relationships into more joyful dimensions than ever before. But you have to ride the guilt like a wave until it deposits you upon the warm shores of personal responsibility and growth. When you develop a taste for this process, the sky is the limit!

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Whose Fault Is It?

Did the adults in your life ever intervene when you had a conflict with another child? If your experience was anything like mine, you might have been asked questions such as "Who started it?" or "Whose idea was this?" How did those sort of questions make you feel? I think the first few times I was asked questions like these, I told the truth. But in short time, I realized the questions were a set-up. If I admitted that it was my idea, I would be blamed for whatever had gone wrong.

My role in my family was that of the scapegoat, and as such I regularly received the "credit" for anything which went wrong. It wasn't a fun role but in some ways I suppose it made me feel special and important, though in a completely dis-empowered and demoralizing way.

Now that I am an adult I can still feel that old familiar sense of being at fault if anything goes awry. It is such a well worn emotional habit that I have to work really hard to overcome my impulse to take the blame and feel bad about myself. Fortunately I have learned many helpful ways to change these old tapes and free myself from the oppressive feelings. And I get to share those tools with my clients.

For instance, I often work with couples who have suffered an infidelity. In one such instance, the husband was sure his wife was to blame since she was the one who had the affair. And in many ways that was true. The affair and choosing to lie about it was entirely her doing. But the truth has many sides to it. I asked this couple to consider how the marriage had degraded to the point that the wife felt a desire to have an affair. This didn't sit well with the husband as he really wanted his wife to "pay" for her transgression. In fact, he was so intent upon blaming and punishing her that it was difficult for him to focus on healing the marriage.

His anger and hurt are understandable. And yet, at some point we do need to disengage from our reactions long enough to decide how we want to proceed with our lives. In this particular case, the husband eventually learned to move past his rage and fully express his sense of betrayal and loss of trust in a way which invited a heart connection. The wife not only took responsibility for her dishonesty and made amends to her husband, but she dug deeper to discover why she felt the need to take a lover and lie about it. Although she entertained the idea that she might not want to be in the marriage, she eventually decided that what she really wanted was to feel safer to express her true feelings with her husband. She was able to move toward that goal by finding the courage to state her truth even when it might result in a conflict. As this couple learned more positive ways to express their feelings and assert their needs, the marriage was transformed from one of acrimonious finger pointing to a partnership based upon mutual respect and honesty.

Not all infidelities are so easily dealt with. Some couples do decide to move on and find other partners. But regardless of the outcome, getting away from the blame game creates more conscious

choice and the freedom to create your life on your own terms. It removes the shame and showers us with options instead of ultimatums.

How does this work?

The first step is to see "blame" as a falsehood. There is a reason the word "blame" rhymes with "shame." They are kissing cousins! We all need to take responsibility for our actions, but that is a far cry from blaming, condemning, accusing, indicting, pointing the finger, and incriminating either ourselves or others.

There is little if anything to be gained from a punitive approach to misdeeds. Positive change is much more likely to result from taking responsibility for our part while asserting our true feelings and our needs. For the most part, this is not something we learn in our formative years. Instead we are taught to find fault, assign blame and enforce punishments. And that approach creates dishonesty, distrust and dis-empowerment.

If, however, we can learn to take responsibility for our part, we can move beyond "blame" into an opportunity to experience more personal power!

This was not easy for me to understand at first. I really wanted to escape feeling responsible because it almost always led to feelings of shame and low self-esteem. But over time I came to realize that when I focused on my part, I was actually focusing on the one thing I have control over: me! Redirecting my focus from my attempts to justify, excuse or explain myself to how I could do things differently in the future really put me in the "driver's seat" of my life. I was no longer a victim but rather someone coming from choice who is fully empowered to direct my life.

The effect that this shift in perspective has on our relationships with others is enormously positive. If we show up to take our fifty per cent (or 20 percent, 10 per cent, etc.), the other person is more likely to claim their part as well. And even if they don't, you won't care as much as you might think. The personal satisfaction that results from taking responsibility for your part is far more empowering and freeing than blaming anyone. You will have more joy and beauty in your life, and far healthier relationships, if you are no longer controlled by the "blame game."

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When All Else Fails, You Can Play "Show Me Your Movie!"

Maggie saw Jim kick the family dog. His foot firmly connected with Grover's belly, sending him into a humiliating skid on the kitchen floor. The dog yelped and peed on the floor but he wasn't injured. Maggie was shaking with anger and a little bit of fear. It was bad enough that Jim had been yelling at her, but now he was abusing their dog? He would pay for his lapse in judgment, but right now she just wanted to get away from him. She stormed out of the kitchen and slammed the door to her bedroom.

Later that evening, she approached Jim in the family room while he was channel surfing. "We need to talk," she intoned. Jim looked rather sheepish but he agreed. Tears began streaming from Maggie's eyes as she expressed her shock and dismay that Jim would take his frustration out on Grover. As Jim listened to Maggie's recounting of what happened, he was horrified. How could she think he would do such a thing? "I did no such thing, Maggie! I merely yelled at Grover. I realized that was the wrong thing to do when he peed, but all I did was yell!" Jim was adamant that he would never touch any living thing out of anger, let alone kick a defenseless dog. How could Maggie attribute such a despicable action to the man she claimed to love? Jim was inconsolable at the thought.

Needless to say, since Maggie and Jim could not agree about what happened earlier that day in their kitchen, there wasn't much they could do but continue to argue about who was right and who was wrong. It devolved into an argument that would last for years, and never be resolved. Whenever another conflict arose, it always came up.

Does this sound familiar? Have you ever had the experience of recalling events completely differently from the way someone you are close to remembers it? Have you felt utterly shocked by a close friend's, family member's or romantic partner's version of what happened? You remember what happened in detail yet it seems like this other person whom you usually trust and feel close to is suffering some sort of memory lapse. You are sure they are sane but in this moment they seem to be having a severe lapse of their senses.

Most of us have experienced some version of this many, many times. It is a huge issue for couples. She is certain he said or did one thing, while he swears he said and did something different. He knows it is her fault, but she can recall every single thing he said and clearly he is to blame. This dynamic is so common in couples we refer to it as "He said, She said." And yet, few of us know how to sort out the facts in a way that satisfies both parties. How can this all too frequent rift in partnership be solved?

This may sound insane but when all else fails, you can play a game! Not just any game, but a very specific game. I refer to it as "Show Me Your Movie" and my partner introduced me to it. He has an advanced degree in psychology and although he doesn't seem to think that counts for much, I find that his educated insights often produce the most delightful strategies for solving interpersonal conflicts. At his prompting, I learned how to play "Show Me Your Movie" when we were experiencing a complete departure in our versions of "what happened." Rather than allow our interaction to follow the all too common path of trying to "convince" each other that our version is the "right" one, we played this game. The end result was beautiful! Our hearts opened as we laughed and cried and experienced each other's version of reality as if we were watching a movie. We felt connected at the heart again and somehow "who was right" didn't seem as important anymore. In fact, we could forgive each other for seeing things differently.

Would you like to try this game? Next time you get into a deadlock with your partner or someone else that you are close to, try this:

1. At Home, Forget the "Facts!" ONLY Feelings Matter

Few people are able to agree on what is or is not a fact. Intelligent and well-meaning people disagree all the time. And yet, a lot of people attempt to "prove" they are right and the other guy is "wrong." The fact is that our feelings shape our perceptions, and so even when you are attempting to be logical and factual, you probably are less so than you think.

And no matter how much you may enjoy "winning" debates, your home is no place for such displays. In intimate relationships, "winning" an argument translates to losing the love we want. Each time we "prove" our partner "wrong," we ultimately lose because we fail to acknowledge our partner's valuable contribution and we diminish their role in the relationship.

While I recommend that you cultivate a preference for feelings over facts in general, you may not be ready to make such a sweeping change. In that case, you can at least agree that for the sake of this game, what's most important isn't the "facts," but the feelings. So find the feelings, yours and your partner's, and allow that to take center stage.

2. Take Turns

Agree who will share their movie first. While your partner is recounting their version of what happened, don't think about anything else, just immerse yourself in their experience and allow their emotions about their story to touch your heart. Then when they are done, express your empathy and identification with their story. See if you can describe their experience from their point of view.

Once they feel totally heard and understood, ask if they are ready to hear your movie. If they are ready to listen with empathy and enthusiasm, or at least curiosity, you can share your version of what happened. But be careful to tell it like you were telling it for the first time and avoid anything which smacks of asserting that your version is the "right" one. For instance, don't say things like "I know for a fact." Instead, say things like "In my movie, what happened was . . ."

3. Listen, Feel, Empathize and Enjoy the Movie!

When listening, suspend your critical observations and allow yourself to get pulled into your partner's story as if you were sitting in a movie theatre allowing the story to sweep you away and impact your emotions. Laugh, cry, get caught up in the storyline without trying to figure out how your partner's reality might impact you. At the points where their "movie" differs from your own, you may be tempted to shut down, but remember partnership is better served when we are able to perceive conflicting viewpoints simultaneously. Become an impartial observer as well as an enthusiastic movie-goer!

4. Don't Try to "Solve" the Problem

Most importantly, don't try to solve the conflict or come to an agreement about what did or did not happen, and what should or should not be done about the disagreement. For now, at least, focus on connecting at the heart level and feeling your partner's emotions in your own body.

Too many of us try to "solve" our conflicts instead of connecting empathically with the emotions. What happened is in the past. What matters is how we want to live moving forward. And what really

defines an intimate relationship is the quality of the heart connection. We can tend to forget that when we are bent upon "winning" an argument. But "winning" only corrodes our relationships. What we need is understanding and emotional safety.

If you have any trouble playing this game, it might help to have a third party who is experienced with the process guide you a few times until you get it. This is just one of the many techniques I teach the couples I work with so they can enjoy each other more fully. Location is no barrier. I do this work over the phone just as effectively as I do in my Northern California office. Give me a call, text me or drop me an email. Let's play Show Me Your Movie!

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