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## **Five Day Intensive Training in the Pragmatic/ Experiential (PEX) Method for Improving Relationships**

Most people who are in distressed relationships believe that their partners are more to blame than they are, but studies suggest that partners tend to engage in unhealthy relationship behaviors at approximately the same rates. Studies further suggest that mistaken beliefs about overall blame are no small matter. They fuel contempt – the single most powerful predictor of relationship dissolution that has been found by researchers to date. In the first segment of this training, Dr. Atkinson will demonstrate how you can go straight to the heart of the matter, helping clients realize that they can't have it both ways (i.e., they can't hold on to the belief that their partners are more to blame and also expect that their partners will be able to treat them well. You will learn how to set the stage for healing by helping each partner:

- become aware of studies suggesting that people who believe their partners are “the main problem” are usually mistaken,
- consider evidence suggesting that this mistake is of no small consequence to relationships,
- become receptive to the possibility that the client's habits have been as damaging to the relationship as have his/her partner's,
- listen with an open mind as the therapist paints a clear picture and gives examples of the client's problematic habits,
- understand why it is in his/her own best interest to explicitly acknowledge and accept responsibility for his/her role in the deterioration of the relationship,
- become determined to develop the full set of habits that are characteristic of people who know how to get their partners to treat them well.

Dr. Atkinson will demonstrate how to talk to clients about their detrimental habits in ways that diffuse shame and defensiveness and generate excitement about the prospect of learning more effective ways of navigating the frustrations that arise in their relationships.

In the next phase of the training, you learn how to facilitate healing conversation about past hurts. Most partners have tried to talk about moments in the past when they felt hurt or misunderstood, but these attempts ended in frustration and more hurt feelings. Attempts to discuss old wounds are often doomed from the start because of the attitudes of blame that partners begin the discussions with. But as you help them drop blame and accept mutual responsibility, new opportunities for healing up. Dr. Atkinson will show you how to prepare each partner to 1) talk about past hurts without accusation or blame and 2) listen and allow him/herself to feel genuine remorse for hurtful things said or done in the past.

Knowledge of the habits that make or break relationships is essential for anyone who hopes to sustain a satisfying relationship over time – but often, it isn't enough. Knowing is one thing; doing is another – especially when new habits must be applied in emotionally-charged situations. To navigate a relationship skillfully, one's brain must be wired in ways that enable mood-regulation, self-soothing, response-flexibility, empathy and attentiveness. The neural mechanisms that enable such aptitudes cannot be willed at a moment's notice any more than musicians or athletes can perform skillful maneuvers without many hours of practice. Thankfully, hundreds of studies suggest that the neural mechanisms that enable self-regulation and attunement can be strengthened through practice just as surely as the mechanisms that enable complex musical or athletic movements. In this third segment of the 5-day training, you'll learn how to engage clients in daily exercises that give them the nervous system capacities needed to support these skills needed for relationship success. You'll then learn how to help clients use these new capabilities to forge more effective ways of reacting during emotionally-charged situations.

In the final segment of training, you will learn methods for helping partners experience more mutually enjoyable moments. Studies suggest that partners who demonstrate more interest in each other, engage in more acts of caring, notice more positive things about each other and express more appreciation enjoy their relationships more than couples who do less of these things. Knowing this, you might think that the key to building stronger friendships is to put more effort into doing these things. But it's not that simple. In order for

caring actions to count, they must be *genuine*. Caring acts can be exactly that – caring acts. There's a big difference between caring actions that arise from feelings of genuine warmth and caring actions that are done out of a sense of duty, obligation, or fidelity to one's principles. Studies suggest that the degree to which people experience genuine feelings of warmth and caring is determined to a great extent by the way their brains are wired. Some people have brains that naturally produce an abundance of connecting-type feelings while others have brains that are wired to dampen such feelings. The secret to cultivating intimacy has to do with figuring out how to "turn on" brain processes that automatically make us actually *feel* more interested in our partners, invested in our relationships, and desirous of satisfying forms of attention. Dr. Atkinson will share a variety of methods for helping partners establish routines and practices that enable them to consciously open their hearts to each other, allowing feelings of warmth, tenderness, affection, playfulness, sexual interest and the desire for loving connection to emerge.

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