

O

THE OPRAH
MAGAZINE

← Oprah →
from working out
to stepping out

O's guide to a fresh start

Body, Mind, Mood Transformations

Be inspired. Be very inspired.

LOVE BREAKTHROUGH

The idea that will turn your relationship around

you're doing everything right—why can't you lose weight?
plus: Dress to look 10 lbs. thinner

SEAN PENN: the O interview

One of the greatest actors of his generation finally opens up

JANUARY 2005



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Champagne for Your Brain

I'VE ALWAYS WANTED TO learn Spanish. Like a can't-put-it-down novel on a blustery winter day, language is an instant passport to another world—an experience that stretches me beyond the woman I was last year, last month, yesterday. “The excitement of learning separates youth from old age,” Rosalyn Yalow, a physicist and Nobel Prize winner, said. “As long as you're learning, you're not old.”

Consider this issue your freshman guide to tackling the fun stuff—like taking a great photo, reading someone's palm, or putting on tap shoes and dancing. Starting on page 138, you'll meet ten adventurous writers who've tried these feats and more. Got shaky hands and two left feet? No matter. The triumph is not just in the mastery but in the attempt. So go ahead. Fall down. The world looks different from the ground.

I know, I know: January's the month when getting back on the treadmill might seem more urgent than booking cello lessons. We thought of that, which is why we've included—hold on to your love handles—“How to Dress Ten Pounds Thinner.” On page 110, *O's* downsizing team gives you (and the eight women who tested our approach) smart

and chic ways to make the least of what you have. But after you read “Shortcut to Bliss” (page 136), by David Servan-Schreiber, MD, you'll be eager to exercise anyway—weight aside, there's compelling evidence that a 20-minute workout three times a week is a powerful mood lifter.

Picking up a skill—whether it's kayaking or whipping up soufflés—is one way to enrich your life. Another is to see someone in a new light. In “The Love Breakthrough” (page 128), couples therapist Brent Atkinson, PhD, explains how you can transform the way you view and react to your partner. Our self-protecting impulses can block the love we crave—but we don't have to let them.

This year you might decide to set aside your preconceived ideas about people, whether you've known them for years (your best friend might have a story you've never heard) or are meeting them for the first time. When I did that during my interview with Sean Penn (page 100), I discovered that Hollywood's so-called bad boy is one of the most interesting and profound thinkers I have ever encountered. Do the labels you've stuck on others and yourself still apply? Why not take another look?

Opal



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This month's mission: transformation
(look for the stories in purple)

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"I'm right; you're wrong." "You never check in with me first." "You ignore me in public." News flash: These ordinary little annoyances are potentially ruinous for 80 percent of couples. Is there any

way to stop the downward spiral? Couples therapist **BRENT ATKINSON, PhD**, argues yes, but first you'll have to do the one thing that's hardest for you...

ILLUSTRATION BY GUY BILLOUT

The Love Breakthrough

SOMEbody PLEASE *get me out of here!*

Grace had to check to be sure that she hadn't actually blurted the words out loud. She'd come to this wedding reception as a favor to her husband, Adam, whose friend from high school was getting married. Adam was sitting at the main table, laughing and having a great time, while Grace was stuck listening to a plump, middle-aged woman chatter about her poodle. Grace thought, *This is the last place on earth I want to be right now.* She looked repeatedly in Adam's direction. Finally catching his eye, she motioned for him to come over. But Adam shook his head and mouthed "I can't!" *Bullshit*, thought Grace. She'd already seen other members of the wedding party leave the table to talk to their families. *This is so typical*, she thought. *He drags me here, then abandons me.*

After what seemed like an eternity, the dancing began. Grace's irritation yielded to a sense of anticipation as Adam smiled and began walking toward her. But he never made it across the room. He was intercepted by three friends who insisted that he go outside with them to smoke cigars. Adam held up one finger, signaling to Grace that he'd be there in a minute. Before she could register a protest, Adam disappeared out the door. Grace sat and stewed, planning what she would say to him when he returned. Ten minutes passed,

then 20. After a half hour, she walked out of the reception, got in their car, and went home. Adam eventually returned and searched for Grace. It dawned on him that she had left. He called her cell phone, but she didn't pick up. He shook his head, muttered "What a baby!" and then went back to the party. At 4 o'clock in the morning, Adam slipped into the bedroom, grateful that Grace was sound asleep.

His eyes popped open at 9 A.M. to the sound of the coffee grinder. *Uh-oh*, he thought. *It's time to face the music.* He crept behind his wife and gave her a hug. She endured it silently until he gave up and released her. Playing dumb, Adam asked, "Why did you leave last night? I was looking for you." Grace rolled her eyes and replied, "Yeah, you were looking really hard, weren't you?" Her sarcasm let Adam know he was in the doghouse—a place he was all too familiar with.

Adam was still reeling from the abrupt change he'd seen in Grace since they'd gotten married three years before. Her independence was one of the things he had found most attractive about her, but as soon as they said "I do," she morphed into a demanding, controlling nag who constantly required his attention—or so it seemed to him. Adam let out an exasperated sigh and backed away, thinking, *Here we go again.* They didn't speak for the remainder of the day or the following morning. In fact, when they came in for their therapy session three days later, they still hadn't spoken.

MOST PEOPLE BELIEVE that certain ways of behaving in relationships are correct and others are incorrect. This is true to some degree. We would probably all agree that physically assaulting one's partner is wrong. But marriage researchers have found that the vast majority of things couples argue about involve areas in which there is no evidence that one partner's standards are better or "healthier" than the other's.

Take selfishness—most of us think it's bad for relationships. The problem is that there are so many potentially legitimate yardsticks for measuring piggishness, and we tend to use our own, not our partner's. Grace believed that Adam's behavior at the reception was selfish—he was thinking only of himself. But Adam believed that Grace was the one who acted badly. He wouldn't dream of restricting her desire to be with her friends.

In my office, I explained to Grace that if she wanted to believe that Adam's actions were wrong, she had every right to. But in doing so, she'd be putting herself in the company of those who are destined to fail in their relationships. The choice was hers. I wouldn't try to stop her.

But I could and did tell her that evidence from studies spearheaded by John Gottman at the University ▶

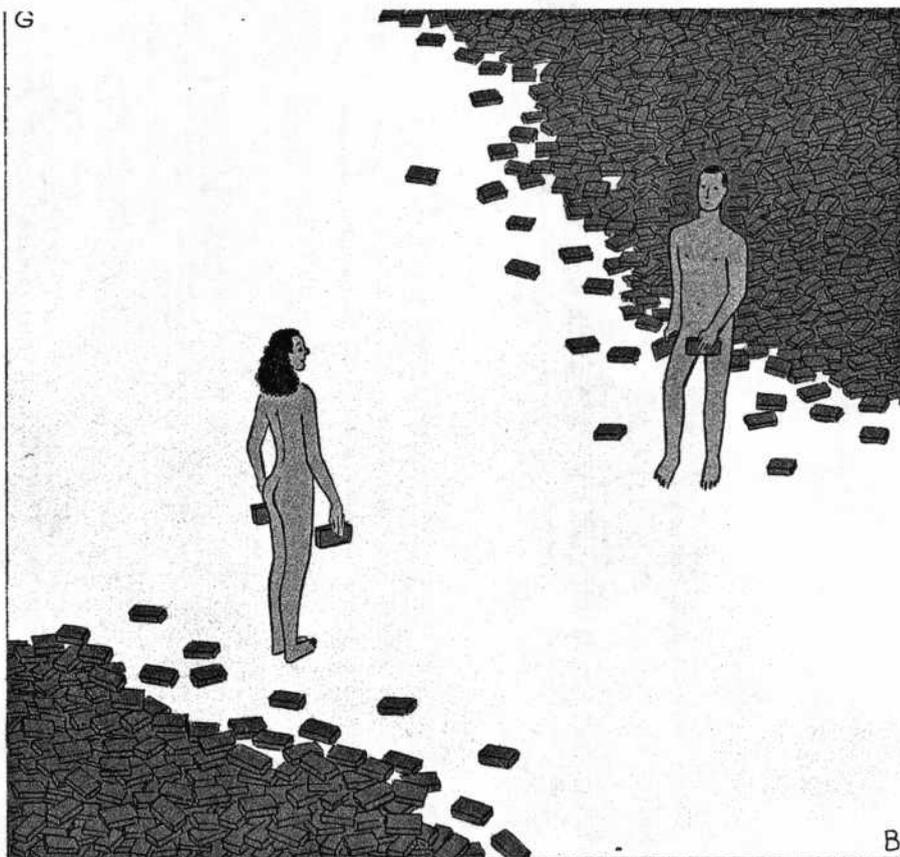


of Washington suggests that if Adam and Grace continue with their critical attitudes toward each other, the chances of their marriage surviving over the long haul are less than 20 percent.

I also explained that Adam's responses weren't any more effective than Grace's. He had made it clear that he thought Grace was overreacting and that her expectations were out of line, but Adam needed to know that beliefs like this are highly predictive of divorce. Partners who succeed in their relationships recognize that conflicts are not usually about right or wrong, they're about legitimately different expectations. I told Adam it was important he recognize that Grace's needs at the reception were just as legitimate as his.

I could see them struggling with this information. To Grace, dropping the idea that Adam was wrong would be like letting him off the hook. If he wasn't the bad guy, did she really have a right to be upset?

The way our brains are wired, the most effective way to solicit cooperation is by exposing vulnerability.



Finding new ways of thinking when you're calm doesn't necessarily transfer to moments when you're upset.

It's natural to feel agitated when your expectations are ignored, I explained, and she had every right to insist that Adam take her feelings into account. But Adam would be more able to do this if she could give up the idea that he did something wrong and instead explain to him how she felt. Once Grace realized her critical attitude was working against her, she saw the value in not blaming Adam. Instead she confessed that she felt unimportant to him and was afraid he cared more about his friends than her. This was a bold move on Grace's part, leaving her vulnerable. She braced herself for his response. But Adam's eyes softened immediately, and he offered an unsolicited apology, assuring her that he would try to be more sensitive to her feelings.

I wasn't surprised. I've spent 20 years as a marriage counselor, witnessing the profound rewards partners like Grace and

Adam reap once they've adjusted their attitudes toward each other. The way our brains are wired, the most effective way to solicit understanding and cooperation is not by attempting to prove oneself right at the other's expense. It's by exposing vulnerability. This is a difficult adjustment for anyone to make when feeling threatened, but in relationships where an emotional bond exists, evidence suggests that our brains are set up to respond to vulnerability with empathy.

A week later, Adam and Grace sat sullenly on my couch. The day before, Grace had decided to surprise Adam by showing up at his office to take him out to lunch. Adam wasn't as pleased as Grace anticipated because he'd already planned a working lunch with a colleague who was helping him with a project. Reluctantly, he broke his plans and went out with Grace, but she was incensed by his attitude.

What happened here? The couple had experienced firsthand the enormous benefits of abandoning critical judgments of each other, yet less than seven days later, they were locked into the same defensive attitudes that had created the impasse at the reception.

G **RACE AND ADAM** aren't unique. I've spent years patting myself on the back after helping couples experience heartfelt changes during therapy sessions, only to watch them show up the next week as miserable as ever.

Why do people so easily forget the lessons they pick up? Recent neuroscience studies suggest that new insights often don't last because they aren't integrated into the brain states that become active when the insights are most necessary. Finding a new way of thinking when we are calm doesn't necessarily transfer to moments when we're upset. When we feel threatened, our brains automatically kick in to modes designed for self-protection—not relationship bliss. During studies dating back to the 1950s involving electrical

stimulation of the brain, researchers were able to see the moods, desires, and concerns of patients change dramatically. For example, upon stimulation of a specific region of the brain, a patient in a study conducted by Robert Heath at Tulane University threatened to kill the physician nearest him at the time. In a similar experiment, the patient couldn't explain why he was so sure he'd been wronged only a few moments earlier. He knew the electrical stimulation had made him feel angry, but when the self-protective mode in his brain was electrically activated, he trusted his perceptions more than logic.

Neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux at the Center for Neural Science at New York University has identified the neural mechanisms that help explain how this happens. Relying mostly on findings from studies on animals, LeDoux discovered that emotion has a privileged position of influence in the brain. His studies suggest that our brains are set up so that self-protective emotions can hijack the conscious mind for periods of time, driving us to act in ways that we may later regret. Although Grace left the previous therapy session armed with new knowledge about how to bring out the best in Adam, when he balked at going to lunch with her, Grace was seized by an impulse to criticize him. She couldn't apply the new way of thinking she'd learned the previous week because she was in an operating mode that was programmed for self-protection—not mutual understanding. When she questioned Adam's priorities, his walls went up immediately.

FORTUNATELY, our brains are not only equipped for self-protection; we're also wired for love. Neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp and his colleagues at Bowling Green State University have found neural pathways for four specialized social brain states that produce feelings that draw us closer to those we love: One state produces a feeling of vulnerability and a longing for emotional contact, a second produces feelings of tenderness and urges to care for others, a third produces the urge for spontaneous and playful social contact, and a fourth activates sexual desire. While it's possible to engage in caring actions without the activation of these mood states, such

actions often feel fake, lacking the heart-felt quality that gives them meaning. Caring acts are simply that: acts.

When relationships are going well, the intimacy states are naturally active—and the feelings they produce are contagious. When one person is feeling sad, tender, playful, or lustful, it's easy for the other to feel something similar. For example, Panksepp has found that distress cries of young animals automatically activate the caretaking circuits of nearby adult animals. UCLA researcher Marco Iacoboni believes that this may be because of "mirror neurons" recently discovered in various areas of the brain. Mirror neurons allow us to feel what another person is experiencing. This is why we cry at the movies when we sense the emotions of the characters, even though we don't know them. Mirror neurons help our brains re-create the feelings inside ourselves, allowing us to be powerfully affected by others.

In our first session, when I helped Grace move from her critical stance to a more vulnerable place, I had bet on Adam's mirror neurons, and I wasn't disappointed. When she disclosed that she was feeling unimportant, Adam's brain automatically responded with tenderness.

Counseling can help clients like Grace and Adam develop the ability to shift from critical and defensive postures to more unguarded internal states. Nearly all neuroscience researchers agree on one thing: The mechanism through which the brain acquires new habits is repetition. One of the most enduring concepts in the field of neuroscience is Hebb's law, which states that when brain processes occur together over and over again, the connections between neurons involved are strengthened, so these processes are more likely to occur in conjunction in the future. I knew that if Grace and Adam could think differently *while* they were angered, and if they could do this enough times, the new thought processes would begin spontaneously every time they became annoyed with each other, and they'd stand a chance of eliminating their knee-jerk reactions. Rehearsing new thoughts alone would not do the trick. They'd have to practice new ways of thinking under game conditions—that is, when they were actually furious.

The problem was that when Grace and Adam fought, they seemed completely

unable to avoid their usual interactions unless I was there to help them. Near the end of our second session, Adam remarked, "I wish we could take you home with us!" I replied, "Maybe you can." I made Adam and Grace each an audiotape that they promised to listen to every time they found themselves ready to smack the other upside the head. This isn't unusual; *CONTINUED ON PAGE 163*

Let's Go to the Audiotape

Disagreements resurfacing? Just press "play."

It's often difficult for my clients to maintain the gains we've made in our sessions once they leave my office. Giving them audiotapes to listen to in stressful times helps them shift from defensive or critical modes to the open and vulnerable states that are essential for connecting with the people they love. This is an idea you can use at home. Make a tape to remind yourself of things you need to hear but don't usually think of when you're upset. The next time you start to feel anger toward your partner, listen to these prerecorded reminders. Here are some questions that might be useful to ask yourself on the tape:

1. Is it possible that your partner didn't understand exactly what you wanted?
2. Could your partner be stressed about other things, or have a lot on his mind?
3. Is this issue more important to your partner than you realize?
4. Is it possible that your partner doesn't have all the facts that you have?
5. Are you reading between the lines things that your partner doesn't intend to be saying?
6. Are your partner's actions driven by a deeper need that's legitimate and important to him?
7. Is your partner afraid he's going to lose something crucial if he does things the way you want?
8. Would your partner be as angry as you are if the roles were reversed?
9. Is it possible that this situation is about legitimately different needs or expectations?
10. Keeping in mind that 96 percent of the time the likelihood that your partner will respond in a positive or negative way depends on the attitude that you have in the beginning moments of a conversation, how would you like to open this discussion with your partner?

—B.A.

popularity contest." But how do you say that when they're standing? [Laughs.] I didn't feel I did something better than I'd done before, but I did do something I was very proud of.

OPRAH: *People have said that your performance as Sam Byck is one of your finest.*

SEAN: It was the hardest thing I've ever done. My wife thinks it's the best. I don't call it my best, because either I've done something well or I haven't. I think I did this one well. I'd go back and fix some things in everything I've done. Usually, if I've done something really well, I'd only reshoot half the film.

OPRAH: *What feeling do you want people to walk away with after one of your movies?*

SEAN: I want them to think there's a possibility that things can change. In a book called *Freedom from the Known*, Krishnamurti writes that the greatest violence one person can do to another in an intimate relationship is to say "You can't change." That's the bullet.

When you leave the theater, you're either more alone or you're less alone. If there's a single thing I want people to take away from my films, I want them to walk away feeling less alone. ●

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the way our brains work means most of us require outside input when we're enraged. Prerecorded audiotapes are a great way to get an unbiased perspective exactly when we need it. (See "Let's Go to the Audiotape," page 131.)

Grace first used her audiotape just three days later. Without consulting her, Adam made arrangements to watch *Monday Night Football* at a friend's house. When he called Grace to tell her, she was miffed but shrugged it off. As the evening wore on, though, she was flooded by thoughts like *He was single so long that he doesn't know how to be in a relationship* and *This man is an emotional moron!*

She decided that maybe it would be a good idea to listen to the tape I'd made for her: "Grace, if you're listening to this, you're probably feeling that Adam has been inattentive or selfish in some way. It probably feels like he's ignoring your wishes. I'm making this tape because I want him to be as concerned about your needs as he is his own, and I won't be

satisfied until he is." My words helped Grace relax somewhat, although she still felt angry. "Grace, remember in our last session how I was talking to you about the fact that 96 percent of the time, the likelihood that a person's partner will care about how she or he feels depends on the attitude that she or he has in the beginning moments of the conversation? Your attitude can have a powerful effect on Adam, even if he has a bad attitude to begin with. Right now you probably feel that Adam's actions or thinking is wrong, or out of line in some way. If you enter the conversation with this attitude, you can kiss the chances of getting Adam to care about how you feel goodbye."

This statement infuriated Grace, and she turned the tape off. But after a few minutes, she decided to go back to it. "Grace, is it possible that if the roles were reversed, Adam wouldn't be as mad at you?" She had to admit that Adam wouldn't be bothered if she made plans without contacting him.

At 11 o'clock, Adam's car rolled into the garage. Grace took a deep breath and waited for him to come inside. As he walked through the door, he looked apprehensive. Grace began, "Adam, I don't like it when you make plans without talking to me first." Adam protested, "But we didn't have any plans!" Grace felt a surge of irritation but caught herself, and relaxed. "Look, Adam, I'm not saying it was wrong for you to do that. I know you probably wouldn't have been irritated with me if I made plans without consulting you. I just think we're different on this type of thing." In a strange way, Grace said, she felt powerful as she uttered these words. For a moment, Adam seemed confused. This was not the Grace he knew. After a moment of silence, his demeanor shifted, and he said softly, "I could easily have called before I committed to the game. I just didn't think about it. I'm sorry. I really don't mind checking with you at all."

In our next session, Grace relayed these events to me with a well-deserved sense of pride. She was beginning to understand how much the fate of her relationship was in her own hands. As the weeks passed, Grace was still frustrated when Adam seemed inattentive to her desires, but she used the tape every time,

and her attitude began changing more easily. Three weeks later, she reported that she actually began hearing my words in her head without using the tape.

This signaled that her brain was being rewired for more flexibility, and she was no longer driven by the dictates of her automatic judgmental thoughts. Meanwhile, on Adam's tape, I encouraged him to avoid his tendency to discredit Grace's expectations just because they were different from his, and to look for the legitimate needs that drove her reactions.

The disarming of Adam and Grace's self-protective states was only the first part of their therapy, but it opened the way for them to become honest with each other about their needs and fears. Once the critical judgments ceased, Adam was able to disclose his terror of the kind of suffocating dependency he'd experienced as a child from his emotionally needy mother. Sensing his discomfort, Grace was able to assure Adam that she would respect his need for autonomy. Ironically, this made Adam want more connectedness with Grace. In turn, Grace was able to describe the feelings of insignificance she'd experienced growing up as the youngest child in a large family. This helped Adam understand her panic when he seemed inattentive. He was relieved to find that Grace didn't want him to take care of her; she simply needed him to check in more.

Their relationship improved because they learned perhaps the most important lesson that the brain sciences have given us: Our moods and attitudes play a more powerful role in influencing our partners than the persuasiveness of our arguments. Grace found that she could get the understanding and caring she needed from Adam not by trying to prove him wrong but rather by shifting to an unguarded place and honestly expressing her needs and fears. Adam discovered that when he tried convincing Grace that her criticisms were unwarranted, the self-protective mechanisms in her brain rejected his influence. But when he listened to the feelings that drove Grace's reaction, her internal wall came down.

Grace and Adam aren't unique. People often struggle mightily to influence each other's behavior, only to fail because they don't understand that their own critical ▶

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attitudes and moods are triggering their partner's natural defenses. Couples must retrain lifelong neuroemotional habits in much the same way athletic or musical ability is honed through intense training and practice. Lasting change requires new impulses—ones that are formed only by making the same internal shifts over and over. If anything is clear to me from my new understanding of the brain, it's that we will never succeed in outmuscling emotional states with the power of rationality. My experience tells me that when partners are approached with compassion rather than cool logic or blazing argument, internal states will usually shift in ways that create the possibility for real intimacy. Our brains, after all, are wired for love. ●

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I'M DOING EVERYTHING RIGHT...

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Sunday is the day they can rest—and the only day they should weigh themselves.

"I refuse to give up my scale," says Susan, who gets on it at least once a day.

"You like stress?" Jorge asks. "You're adding stress to your life."

"I refuse to give up my scale," she says more insistently. Jorge continues to try to convince her, but finally shrugs. She'll have to work this one out for herself.

WHEN THE WOMEN RETURN TO THE hotel for lunch—Dr. Ro has ordered salads, sandwiches on whole wheat, and bowls of fruit—it's time for their session with Martha Beck, author of *The Joy Diet* (Crown) and *Expecting Adam* (Berkley). "I believe losing weight is about telling the truth," says Martha. She means a kind of truth beyond admitting, say, that before bed you tend to devour a pint of chocolate chip-cookie dough ice cream.

Her theory is that we all have an "essential self" who wants to live our "right life." But so often our real life is not

our right life. If work or intimate relationships are keeping us from what we really want and need, she says, "the essential self kicks up a fuss through eating, addiction, and getting sick."

Martha has already had private phone consultations with the women, and after the food-toss exercise, as they finally start to eat, she focuses her attention on them one by one and tries to figure out what is kicking up the fuss inside of each.

For Dorine, it's fear. With a husband, who is in recovery for substance abuse, and two young children to care for, she sometimes feels crushed by her financial and emotional burdens. "We're programmed to fear that there won't be enough," says Martha, "enough food, money, love." She explains that this kind of anxiety goes back to the time when we were hunter-gatherers and in constant peril of starvation. "You feel, *I'm in danger*. So you calm yourself by eating."

"That's amazing," says Dorine. "I never saw it that way."

Martha moves on to Michelle. "You're thinking, *I'm sick and tired of having other people tell me what to do and not having it work*." Michelle nods. Martha encourages her to talk about what it's taken for a black woman to succeed in corporate America. "I think you've experienced severe racism. Your anger is enormous and appropriate. I want you to celebrate every bit of it."

Michelle's cool exterior cracks and she begins to cry. "It's hard, working in the corporate world. My family in the South had inherited land that was taken from my grandparents by a white person.... I'm aware every time I'm discounted and overlooked because of my race. I will not accept it."

Martha asks, "What are white people thinking?"

Michelle takes a moment. "You're not good enough. Who do you think you are?"

Martha says, "I want you to own that you are pissed."

Michelle wipes her tears and nods.

When Martha gets to Susan, she reminds her of something she seems to have forgotten, that she is in charge of her own life. "You are free. For you this is a real issue," Martha says. Susan is divorced, lives and works alone, and is the main caretaker for her mother. Martha sees her as someone who has thwarted her own desires in

order to do what's proper and fulfill her obligations. "Susan, you are a bohemian dancer, a free spirit who is cut off from your heart," she tells her. "The part that is not cut off says, *Please feed me something*." Now it's Susan's turn to cry.

"When you started tearing up, you turned away from your food," Martha observes. She explains that when the women are actually addressing the reasons they are feeling fear or anger or frustration, they won't feel hungry. "If you're processing that mountain of emotional energy, you can't eat. Your relationship with food is an amazing passage to your deepest issues."

Martha's two goals are to help these women find their essential selves and reach the point where they don't need the advice of the experts. "The instructions are inside you," she says. "They don't need to come from an authority figure. Your body knows what it needs to eat."

After one long New York day, Dorine, Michelle, and Susan head home. They are told to check in with each other and with the experts weekly over the next three months, and to start trying to really "do everything right."

THERE MAY BE SOME WOMEN IN America who don't know that eating junk food by the bucket and getting no exercise is the reason they can't fit into their old pants, but Dorine, Michelle, and Susan are not among them. As they embarked on their various programs, they all found it helpful to have their dietary pitfalls outed and structure brought to their previously erratic workouts. But once they returned to the stresses and conflicts of normal life, each acknowledged that the core of her weight struggle was emotional.

For Dorine, talking with Martha was like a jolt from a defibrillator applied to her psyche. In their first phone conversation, Dorine hadn't mentioned her husband's substance abuse problem, for which he is now in recovery, but Martha intuited it after ten minutes. When Martha told her, "You can't hold him up," it clicked. Dorine returned to California and realized she was trying to solve his problem and live his life for him. She had gained weight from waking up in the middle of the night and—discovering him gone from *CONTINUED ON PAGE 166*