

CHAPTER 9

Rewiring Emotional Habits

The Pragmatic/Experiential Method

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I knew I had my work cut out for me from the way Jen and Rob spoke about each other during our first sessions. "Rob is a narcissist," Jen spoke with a matter-of-fact tone. "Whenever I try to talk about how I feel, it ends up being about his feelings, not mine. If I've had a bad day, his has been worse. If my neck is sore, his ankle is killing him. I can't stand to listen to him talk anymore. I just don't like him." Jen explained, "Rob is a carbon copy of my mother, who was also selfish and controlling. Mom was a teenage mother, and I was first to arrive. She had no idea what she was doing. As soon as I had any awareness of what was going on, I realized that I had to be the adult, so I became 'the good little girl,' never rocked the boat, and made sure that everyone was OK." Jen continued, "When Rob and I got married, I was well trained to handle his self-centeredness. I assumed personal responsibility for relieving Rob's stress." Jen's eyes narrowed and her lips tightened as she continued. "I became caregiver of his kids. Whatever he wanted . . . whatever he wanted to do, wherever he wanted to go, however he wanted things to be, I just put a smile on and said, 'OK.' As I matured, I realized this wasn't OK, and I slowly tried to set some boundaries, but it's really difficult to do with Rob because he doesn't see boundaries. If I tell him I can't do something, it's a direct affront to him. I'm not supporting him. Can't I see that he needs some help? I've spent so many years trying to run around and support my husband . . . I have nothing left for him," Jen lamented "I don't know how

to get out. I don't have a degree . . . how am I supposed to support my children? I don't know where to go, I don't know what I would do. It feels wrong of me to deprive the children of their father just because I'm not happy."

Jen and Rob had married in 1989, four months after they met. Eleven years older than Jen, Rob was divorced at the time and had partial custody of his two children. He was a disk jockey for a popular radio station; Jen was working as a cocktail waitress. Rob's kids were now grown, and Jen and Rob had three daughters of their own, Amanda (17), Sarah (12), and Brittney (9).

In my first meeting with Rob, he confided:

"I made a mistake in marrying Jen. If I had it to do all over again, I would marry somebody different. Jen is fundamentally irresponsible. She'd give a person the shirt off her back, and then wonder why she was freezing in the cold later. She's never developed the ability to look at the bigger picture, show restraint, and set priorities. Nowhere is that more evident than with the girls. She won't like something they say or do, and she'll get angry with them and hell-bent on making them do what she wants, and she'll end up saying or doing things that are far worse than the things they were doing in the first place. Seriously, she's turned into one of my daughters. She calls them 'jerk,' and 'stupid,' and says things like 'You look ugly!,' 'That outfit looks ridiculous!' You don't say things like that! Where does that come from?"

Jen and Rob had been referred to me by a friend of theirs (a therapist) who felt that my approach would be well suited to them. Over the past two decades, my colleagues and I at The Couples Research Institute have been developing an approach for improving relationships we call pragmatic/experiential therapy for couples (PET-C). PET-C is based on four assumptions:

1. *A goal of couple therapy is to foster attitudes and actions that are predictive of relationship success and change attitudes and actions that are predictive of relationship failure.* Relationship studies over the past four decades present compelling evidence that there are personal prerequisites for succeeding in intimate relationships (Atkinson, 2005; Gottman, 1994a, 1994b). Some of the most important interpersonal habits involve things that people must be able to do without the help of their partners. In fact, they must be able to do these things precisely when their partners are making it most difficult to do them. Researchers have discovered that the way people respond when their partners do things they do not like dramatically influences the odds that their partners will treat them better or worse in the future. At The Couples Research Institute, we have synthesized decades of relationship research and have identified a sequence of 12 crucial components (summarized in Figure 9.1) that are characteristic of people

1. Self-Reminder: Do Something Different.

Remember to shift your focus from how irritating or upsetting your partner's behavior or attitude is to your own reactions to it. Remind yourself that you don't want to react in ways that never work for anybody, in any relationship. If you can respond effectively in situations like these, your partner will become more understanding and cooperative.

2. Give the Benefit of the Doubt.

- Avoid jumping to conclusions, and with an open mind, ask your partner why s/he acted as s/he did, or is thinking the way s/he is.
- Consider that this situation might not be about right/wrong, but rather about legitimately different priorities.
- Hear your partner out before explaining your point of view or defending yourself.

3. Find the Understandable Part.

Become determined to find any at-least-partly-understandable reasons for your partner's thinking or actions, and acknowledge them.

4. What's Driving My Upset?

Tell your partner why you're upset, or tell your partner why you're having trouble acting or thinking the way s/he wants . . . explain the bigger thing that's at stake for you.

5. Offer Assurance.

Assure your partner that you're not saying that you are right and s/he's wrong, or assure your partner that you're not saying that s/he shouldn't be upset. Let your partner know that you're not saying that things have to be entirely your way.

6. Work with Me?

Let your partner know that you're willing to make some changes and to work with him/her to find a mutually acceptable solution.

If, in spite of your good attitude, your partner disregards your viewpoint or criticizes you . . .

7. Maintain Your Cool.

Don't hit the panic button. Check to be sure you're reading your partner's attitude right. Remind yourself that it's normal for people to want to have their own way. Maybe your partner just needs a "friendly warning."

8. Fire a Friendly Warning Shot (Ask and Offer).

Express irritation at your partner's attitude and clarify your willingness to be flexible and keep an open mind. Let your partner know that you expect him/her to do the same!

9. Stand Up/Engage (only if your partner keeps criticizing you or dismissing your viewpoint).

Get angry and let your partner know if s/he wants a fight, you're willing to give it! Let your partner know that you don't expect him/her to agree with you, but you do expect him/her to be willing to work with you. Make it clear that his/her attitude is not OK with you. Don't back down. Stay engaged and demand that s/he explain why s/he thinks it's OK to dismiss your viewpoint.

10. Reject Your Partner (only if your partner keeps criticizing you or dismissing your viewpoint).

If your partner continues to criticize or disregard you, let him/her know s/he's pissing you off and you don't want to be around him/her!

11. Don't Make a Big Deal of It.

When you're by yourself, let go of the anger, feeling good that you stood up well for yourself. Promise yourself that you'll do it again, if needed. Remind yourself that it's natural enough for your partner to want to have his/her own way. You don't have to make a big deal of his/her stubborn or selfish behavior. It's not a crime that s/he acted this way. S/he crossed the line, and you "let him/her have it." No big deal.

12. Try Again Later.

- "That didn't go very well, did it? You want to try again?"
- Don't try to get your partner to see how "wrong" his/her stubborn behavior was. Don't demand an apology. Go back to the first steps again. Be ready to stand up again, if needed.

who are good at getting their partners to be flexible and care about how they feel (Atkinson, 2006).

2. *People often have difficulty recognizing their own problematic habits because they are unaware that their perceptions and interpretations are biased by their brain's self-serving mechanisms.* Our experience leads us to believe that the way we think and act in any given situation is based on a conscious assessment of the merits of the situation and a reasoned decision to act, but recent brain studies suggest that, especially in emotionally significant situations, our reactions are mostly based on emotional predispositions or emotionally conditioned habits (Damasio, 1994; LeDoux, 1996). We tend to be unaware that our judgments and reactions are influenced by emotional predispositions or reactions because our brains do not prioritize letting us know. As a result, intimate partners often believe that they are right and their partners are wrong when they are not. In this way, the structure of our brains makes it difficult to think and act in ways that are predictive of relationship success.

3. *Even when clients have clear understanding of the specific changes needed, old habits often persist because they are woven into the fabric of internal states that are automatically activated in daily living, often without conscious awareness.* When people get upset, they often get caught in automatic, conditioned neural response states that powerfully organize cognition, affect, and behavior and propel them into nonproductive interactions (Panksepp, 1998). There is considerable evidence suggesting that the human brain is equipped with seven executive command circuits that, when activated, exert a strong influence on attitude and behaviors. Each of these brain systems is programmed in a way that helps the host individual survive in an uncertain environment. Once activated, these intrinsic motivational systems carry out their preprogrammed agendas semiautomatically (Panksepp, 1998). When a particular circuit is activated, some behaviors come naturally, and it is nearly impossible to engage in others unless a switch in circuits takes place.

Advances in neuroscience are beginning to affect theory and practice in many areas of psychotherapy, from psychoanalysis to behavior therapy. Nowhere in the field of couple therapy has such research taken more of a center-stage position than in PET-C.

Question: How familiar are you with studies of how intimate relationship partners mutually regulate or dysregulate each other's emotions? Do you sometimes explain the relevance of such ideas to the couples you work with? With whom?

Each of these seven neural systems is programmed to accomplish certain objectives. They focus attention, arouse the body, activate specific kinds of

FIGURE 9.1. Summary: Components of the sequence. Copyright by Brent J. Atkinson. All rights reserved.

thoughts, and motivate the host individual to act upon the world in specific ways. Two of the brain's seven executive operating systems are programmed for self-protection. One program activates an aggressive instinct to defend against threats, and the second activates the instinct to avoid danger.

While all of us are born with the basic neural structure for each of the seven command systems, they are tailored by our unique experiences. In the course of everyday life, different circuits are activated and deactivated largely automatically, outside of conscious awareness, and for reasons we may not be aware of. The types of circumstances that activate command circuits, the threshold for activation of any circuit, and intensity of activation will vary across individuals, depending largely on genetic predisposition, early attachment experiences, and emotional conditioning across one's lifetime.

4. *For a client to make lasting changes in his/her typical reactions when upsets occur, s/he must develop a clear picture of the kind of changes in thinking, attitudes, and actions that are needed, then find ways of practicing these new ways of reacting over and over again at moments when s/he is upset (and usually least able to think and act differently).* A widely held axiom in neuroscience known as Hebb's law suggests that brain processes that occur together over and over again tend to become grafted together, so they are automatically more likely to occur in conjunction in the future (Hebb, 1949). When new ways of reacting are paired with old, automatic, knee-jerk reactions, and this happens over and over again, eventually the new reactions occur automatically each time the old knee-jerk processes are triggered. In PET-C, the therapist helps clients rewire automatic reactions by designing ways for clients to engage in *concentrated* and *prolonged* practice implementing new reactions when old reactions are triggered.

Like PET-C, dialectical behavior therapy with couples also provides a very specific picture of the kinds of self-regulation skills whose improvement can enhance volatile couples' capacity for emotional safety and intimacy (e.g., emotion management, problem management, mutual validation, and mindfulness).

Question: Compare these two therapeutic approaches to helping couples who show such destructive patterns of engagement. Are they incompatible? Are they complementary?

Beyond the advances in neurobiology and the science of intimate relationships summarized thus far, PET-C also has been influenced by or has parallels with a variety of treatment models/methods:

- Some of our methods for working with automatically activated internal states have been inspired by Eugene Gendlin's focusing method (Gendlin, 1981), and methods from Richard Schwartz's internal family systems

model (Schwartz, 1995), while others draw from classical (or respondent) conditioning principles.

- PET-C emphasizes cognitive-behavioral rehearsal, but focuses on *state-specific* cognitive-behavioral rehearsal in the service of the shifting of internal states.
- The assumption that "the attempted solution maintains the problem" utilized by therapists at the Mental Research Institute (Fisch, Weakland, & Segal, 1982) is similar to the PET-C assumption that the way people react when their partners do things they do not like dramatically influences the odds that their partners will treat them better or worse in the future.
- PET-C shares with Bowen family systems theory the premise that destructive interactions are driven by automatic patterns of emotional reactivity (Bowen, 1978). PET-C also focuses on the *positive* role of the brain's attachment-related emotional systems—a perspective that also undergirds Susan Johnson's emotionally focused couple therapy (Johnson, 1996).
- At certain points in therapy, PET-C uses methods similar to Daniel Wile's "becoming each partner's spokesperson" (Wile, 2002), while the practice of taking "session breaks" is shared with the Gottman method of couple therapy (Gottman, 1999).
- PET-C shares with the narrative therapies an emphasis on changing the beliefs or stories that each partner has, but PET-C prioritizes changing beliefs that fuel contempt in relationships.
- PET-C endorses the solution-focused method of getting clients to do more of what is already working whenever possible. However, we do not hesitate to challenge clients to try something altogether different, even if they have no reference for it in their previous history.

PET-C explicitly incorporates the theoretical perspectives and technical elements of about a half-dozen different couple therapy traditions. Indeed, probably the majority of couple (and other) therapists have such eclectic/integrative leanings.

Question: "Eclectic" (a.k.a. "technical eclecticism") therapists call upon interventions from theoretically diverse methods, often pairing the use of particular techniques with particular problems; theoretically "integrative" therapists combine different theories, usually identifying one dominant theory; and "common factors" therapists emphasize therapeutic processes they believe are central to all therapy models. If you think of your clinical style as calling upon a variety of treatment models, what describes you better, "eclectic" or "integrative"?

PHASE I

From my individual assessment sessions with Rob and Jen, it was clear that each of them was reacting to the other in ways that placed them squarely in the company of people who rarely get the kind of understanding and cooperation from their partners they would like to have. Rob was upset about the way Jen conducted herself, yet both his internal and external reactions to Jen were making it statistically unlikely that Jen would be able to accept his feedback. Conversely, Jen was upset about Rob's "self-centered" behavior, yet her reactions to him were characteristic of those whose partners are unresponsive to their pleas for consideration.

I prepared to challenge Jen to consider that the single most important thing she could do in order to get more respect, cooperation, and understanding from Rob would be to learn how to react in ways that are highly predictive of relationship success when he did things that seemed disrespectful or self-centered. The logic I would propose to her would be simple: If you want to be treated well by Rob, you need to learn to think and act like people who almost always get treated well by their partners. And you certainly *don't* want to be thinking and acting like people who almost never get treated well by their partners. In my first therapy sessions with Jen as well as throughout treatment, I would be relying on the *pragmatic/experiential method*, which involves starting out pragmatically, then going experiential as needed. I'd begin talking with Jen directly about the kind of (pragmatic) changes in her attitude and actions that I believed would be necessary for her relationship with Rob to succeed. My doing so would likely activate internal states in Jen that would interfere with her being able to accept and implement my advice. I'd then need to work experientially with these states, helping them shift.

Jen believed that Rob was the main villain in the story of their relationship. Although she knew that she often reacted to him in nonproductive ways, she felt that her contributions to their relationship problems paled in comparison to his. This skewed perspective fueled her resentment. I knew that I would have to find a way to help her recognize mutual culpability for the condition of their relationship or her efforts to make needed changes would be short lived. She'd try, but down deep inside she'd feel like she shouldn't have to be trying because he shouldn't be so selfish in the first place.

Jen looked nervous, as if she were awaiting a verdict from me. I began, "Jen, I want you to understand that I won't be satisfied until it feels to you that Rob cares more about your feelings . . . I really won't. I don't want to see you walking around the rest of your life feeling last on his priority list. So everything I'm about to say is in the service of helping you get more understanding and respect from Rob, OK?" Jen looked relieved and replied, "I just can't see that ever happening." "I know," I assured her. "So let's take a closer look, Jen. For me,

the question is . . . Why is Rob like this? Why doesn't he consider your feelings more?" Jen retorted, "If you spent 15 minutes with his mother, you'd know." I smiled and nodded. "So at this point, you feel hopeless, because it seems like he's basically selfish by nature, right?" Jen nodded, and I continued. "It's hard to understand, because you're not like him at all in this way, right? And you resent it, because it seems like he has treated you worse than you've treated him, and this has gone on for 20 years!" Jen nodded. "So this is the main thing I want to talk to you about today, Jen." She studied my face, looking for clues about what was to come. "I'm worried that your beliefs about Rob and your relationship are going to shut down the possibility of things changing before we even get out the door." Jen frowned, and I quickly added, "I know you come to these conclusions about Rob and about your relationship honestly, and I'm certainly not saying that you shouldn't feel the way you do." Jen's expression softened, and I continued, "I just know that if we can't get them to change, it's pretty much game over. I'm not going to be able to help you. There's a ton of evidence from decades of relationship research that says, if you're convinced that you are less to blame for your relationship problems than your partner, it'll lock him down and make it all but impossible for him to change.

It may well be that helping the partners in distressed relationships understand how they each contribute to their problems is one of the central mechanisms of change across the many couple therapy approaches that exist.

Question: Within your own preferred way(s) of working with couples, how do you go about trying to help partners "own" their roles in their shared conflicts and difficulties? What do you find to be the biggest challenges to such efforts by you?

It's very unusual for people who feel that their partners are looking down at them to change. Do you know what I'm saying? Statistically, it is very unlikely that Rob is going to be able to say, 'OK, I think I get it. I'm screwed up and you're not. Here, let me fix myself for you!' " Jen interrupted, "But he *is* screwed up!" I was pleased with her honesty. My expression was soft as I replied, "Jen, there's no question that Rob has some bad habits, but to me, it looks like you have some habits that are every bit as destructive as his." Jen's jaw dropped. "You're serious?" I felt a twinge of adrenaline shoot through my veins, and I realized I'd just engaged Jen's battle instincts. She thought I was turning on her.

At that moment, I knew that I'd activated a specialized part of Jen's brain that was programmed for self-protection. For the next few minutes, this brain system would be frantically scanning my face, analyzing my tone and reading nonverbal cues for signs of threat. Although I had a good deal of evidence to

support my claim that she was as much to blame as Rob, and I was prepared to persuade her that recognizing her own culpability would be the key to unlocking Rob's potential to change, now was not the time. At that moment, logic was irrelevant, because the part of her brain that could process logically wasn't available. She would be preoccupied with sensing my stance toward her—my attitude. I was relieved to notice that that twinge of adrenaline had not activated my own battle instincts. I knew that I had to be perfectly at ease in the next few moments. Any sign of alarm, panic, irritation, or frustration from me would further incite her self-protective instincts.

Jen was on the edge of her seat. I smiled. "Jen, you know I like you a lot." She rolled her eyes, and couldn't help smiling just a bit as she protested, "Don't be nice to me at a time like this!" I ignored her plea. "You know it's true! I think you're great! I love your honesty, and your no-bullshit approach to life, and I think Rob's lucky to have you." Jen settled back into her chair, and I continued. "And that's why I'm telling you this stuff. I'm only talking about it because I want you to be happy and have the kind of marriage you've always wanted. I think you've got yourself roped into a corner, and you're strung up so tight that there's no room for anything different to happen. What's got you roped down is your belief that Rob is the bad guy here. As long as this is how it seems to you, it's unlikely that he'll be able to change. Beliefs like this are the kiss of death to relationships. If you're hoping he'll change, first you're going to have to loosen the choke hold you've got on him . . . release the death grip, you know, lay down your weapon. Your weapon is your belief that he's the main problem here." Frowning, Jen muttered, "Well, that's how it seems to me." I responded, "Well you've gotta go with how things seem to you. I'm mean, you can't bullshit yourself. You can't sugarcoat your own thinking. All I'm saying is that if you're gonna come to this conclusion, you'd better be pretty damned sure you're right, because if there's a chance you're biased, and that you could be just as responsible as Rob is for how things are, and you're acting like he's the villain, then you're pretty much sending your relationship down the river. On the other hand, if you can open yourself up to the possibility that you've contributed just as negatively as he to where you guys are today, for the first time in a very long time, your relationship has a chance."

Predictably, Jen was unsettled by my words, and she spent the rest of the session grilling me with questions about why I thought she was as responsible as Rob for their problems. Like most distressed partners, Jen had fallen prey to the brain's inherent tendency to pay disproportionate attention to things that are threatening. She perceived Rob's actions as dangerous to her well-being, so she paid more attention to them than to her own behavior. I explained to Jen that she was making one of the most common mistakes that people make in their marriages, but this mistake is deadly. Using examples of real situations Jen had described to me during previous sessions, I explained how her typical reactions

when she was upset with Rob were almost opposite to those of people who know how to get their partners to treat them well.

Although Jen was trying to understand the significance of what I was saying, at various points in our conversation I could sense waves of defensiveness arising in her. At one point, clearly irritated, she snapped, "Why do you keep talking about *my reactions*? I'm sure I could react better, but don't you have the focus backwards? It seems like you're letting him off the hook and saying that this is all about *my reactions*! Doesn't he have some responsibility to stop doing things that are hurtful to me?" Jen was raising a legitimate point, and I had a good answer to her question, but years of experience have taught me that even a brilliant and compelling answer will bounce off a person who is in a defensive state of mind. First, I'd need to cultivate receptivity. Jen was still shaking her head as I began. "Jen, I think you're raising a good question, and I'll tell you my thoughts about it. But first let me say that I'm not trying to tell you what to do, or how to think. If I were you, and in my heart what my therapist was saying didn't seem right to me, I'd bag it. And I expect you'll do the same, all right?" Jen answered, "Thank you for saying that, but I respect you, and I want to hear what you have to say." She seemed genuine and receptive, whereas 30 seconds before she was decidedly not. This is consistent with my experience with most people. It doesn't take that much to reduce defensiveness and cultivate receptivity, even when you are saying things that are really hard for people to hear. When I'm able to drop my agenda temporarily and engage in receptivity-cultivating methods (see Figure 9.2), clients usually become less defensive.

Jen was waiting for my response. "Sooner or later, every single married person feels mistreated, and that happens regardless of whether they're actually being mistreated or not. People who know how to react effectively when they feel offended or mistreated get treated better and better as time goes on. Those who don't know how to react effectively get treated worse. It's that simple. The way you react to Rob when he does things that are upsetting to you will dramatically influence the extent to which he'll care about your feelings and be willing to be flexible and take your needs into account in the future. In other words, when it feels to you that Rob is out of line, and the focus should be on him, it's actually show time for you. *You're up to bat*. It's *your* moment on stage. The same is true for Rob. If he wants you to change the way you treat him, he'll need to learn how to react more effectively when you do things he doesn't like."

Jen broke off eye contact and stared out the window. Again, I took this as my cue to shift from trying to influence Jen to becoming more receptive to what was going on in her. "Jen, I know this is a lot to take in. I'm sure you'll need some time to think it over. I'm just hoping that you'll keep an open mind. Honestly, I'm not sure I could if I were in your shoes. You've been through a lot, and I'm asking you to make some serious changes in the way you think about

1. Indulge yourself in the positive qualities of your client. The client should sense that you are fond of him/her.
2. Take the time to let your client know that you "get" what it's like to be him/her.
3. Look for ways to put yourself on the same level as the client.
4. Assure the client that you're not trying to tell him/her what to do or what to believe, and that you're of the opinion that s/he should do or believe whatever seems right to him/her.
5. Operate from a state where your *first reaction* is to welcome and accept whatever the client says or does.
6. Invite the client to share his/her reservations . . . welcome them . . . be happy when they come.
7. Look for ways to help the client avoid feeling shamed for having relationship habits that predict bad relationship outcomes.
8. Remind the client that you think his/her partner's habits are just as off track as his/hers are.
9. Avoid getting a "serious tone" as you talk. Share your thoughts directly, but keep it relaxed and light.
10. Let the client sense that you're not getting your jollies from pointing out his/her bad habits. Rather, you're being truthful because you like him/her and you want him/her to have the kind of love and respect from his/her partner that you know s/he can have.
11. Follow each moment in which you challenge the client with one of the above ways of cultivating receptivity.

FIGURE 9.2. Cultivating receptivity.

things . . . and that's a lot to ask." Jen shook her head and interrupted me, "You know what, if it's the truth, I need to hear it."

The session lasted 90 minutes, and at the end Jen said, "So, obviously, this is all new, and it's kind of throwing me off. I don't know what I'm supposed to do now." I responded, "Let Rob off the hook." To make this task concrete, I asked Jen to write Rob a letter formally releasing him from the role of villain in the history of their relationship. I clarified, "In this letter, I'd like you to present a compelling case for why your previous belief that he was bad guy in the story of your relationship wasn't fair, and assure him that you're going to try to keep a more balanced perspective in the future."

In PET-C, there are three goals for the first phase of therapy:

1. *Getting each partner on board* (helping clients understand that the single most important thing they can do in order to get more respect, cooperation, and understanding from their mates is to learn how to react to the upsetting things they do in ways that are highly predictive of relationship success)
2. *Getting each partner down off the high horse* (helping clients understand that

their own dysfunctional habits have contributed as powerfully to the condition of their relationship as have their partner's)

3. *Healing conversation* (helping partners discuss hurtful historical moments in productive and meaningful ways)

At this point I had worked with Jen on the first two goals. Now I directed her toward the third goal—to have a healing conversation with Rob about a past hurt. I prepared Jen for this conversation, spending an entire session making sure she understood that she would dramatically influence the odds that Rob would be able to care about how she felt by the attitude she brought into the conversation and the stance she maintained throughout. I told her, point by point, everything I knew about how she could cultivate receptivity while talking to Rob about her feelings.

While I was working individually with Jen, I was having parallel sessions with Rob. His perspective on the relationship was just as biased as Jen's had been. To him, it seemed that Jen was irresponsible and took advantage of his hard-working nature. He saw her as being like a child who couldn't delay gratification. He said he didn't mind working more than she did. What irked him was her lack of appreciation for all of the extra things he did to make up for her inability to focus, prioritize, and get the most important things done. Rob's condescending attitude was palpable, and I could see why Jen had developed so much resentment. It helped me to remember it was likely that, to a degree, Rob was judgmental because his brain was playing a trick on him. Like most intimate partners, Rob's and Jen's nervous systems were wired so that the very same conditions that made one of them feel calm and stable made the other feel anxious and unstable (Atkinson, 2009). Rob's nervous system was calmed by structure, predictability, and controlling the future. He simply felt better when all his ducks were in a row. But for Jen, structure, routine, and a steady diet of all work and no play created a sense of restlessness, boredom, and sometimes claustrophobic-type panic. Rob attributed his ability to keep his nose to the grindstone to his decision to lead a principle-driven life. He was fond of saying things like, "Sure, we'd all like to play, Jen, but somebody has to get things done!" The truth was that Rob *couldn't* play until work was done. His nervous system prodded him to work first and play later, just as Jen's nervous system drew her toward a more spontaneous approach to life.

Rob didn't understand that his belief that all people should work first and play later was an emotionally convenient belief for him to hold—one that was biased by the characteristics of his nervous system. Rob felt physically bad when Jen interfered with the structuring of his world. It was no wonder that he was critical of Jen's looser approach to life. While it made her feel good and stable, it sent his anxiety through the roof.

My approach with Rob was nearly identical to the way I approached Jen in our first sessions, weaving direct challenges with methods for cultivating receptivity. Across two sessions, I proposed that he consider the following:

1. His belief that Jen was more to blame for their relationship problems made it statistically unlikely that she would care about his feelings or be interested in meeting his needs.
2. Of course, if Jen really was more to blame for their relationship problems than he, then there was nothing he could do about it. But if there was another explanation for what had happened in his relationship (other than one that characterized Jen as flawed and cast her in the role of primary villain) he desperately needed it.
3. Personally, I didn't think he'd need to look very far. It seemed clear to me that he had contributed just as powerfully to their relationship problems as she.

I went on to explain to Rob how I believed he was making a fundamental relationship mistake—believing Jen was wrong or out of line when she wasn't. I proposed that most of the time in the past, when he'd felt that Jen's priorities were out of line, they weren't. They were just different than his. This didn't mean he should just back off and just let her do whatever she wanted—it just meant that the reason why she needed to be willing to make some changes wasn't because she was wrong, but because she was married to him and needed to care about his needs and priorities as well as her own. It helped Rob to realize that he didn't need to accept her priorities; he just needed to accept that there wasn't anything wrong with them. He could still ask her to change, but he also needed to be willing to change his priorities some too, in order to meet in the middle. Both of them would need to stretch their natural way of prioritizing things in order to strike a balance.

Each time I sensed Rob becoming defensive, I dropped my attempts to persuade him and welcomed his objections and reservations, assuring him that I'd certainly accept that he might not agree with what I was saying. I clarified that I felt that it was my responsibility to just give him my point of view. In the end, Rob did come to recognize the validity of what I was saying. I think he knew already that he needed a different way of looking at his relationship, and when he sensed I wasn't judging him, he began interviewing me carefully about exactly how I thought he was off track in his interactions with Jen.

As I had with Jen, I also talked to Rob about moments when he felt particularly hurt or betrayed by Jen. He recounted vividly a situation that had occurred only a few months before, when it seemed to him that Jen had intentionally turned the girls against him. I validated his feelings, then added, "Jen

really needs to understand how much that hurt you, Rob. Can I help you talk to her about it?" Rob agreed, and as I'd done with Jen, I reviewed the evidence suggesting that the attitude he brought into the conversation would dramatically influence the odds that Jen would care about his feelings. I also discussed common pitfalls that could derail the conversation.

Joint Sessions Begin

It was in the eighth therapy session when Rob and Jen read their letters and discussed past hurtful moments with each other. Until then, we'd met all together just once, in the first session. Although I often schedule conjoint sessions sooner than this with couples, it isn't uncommon for it to take this long. Relationship changes were happening before the first conjoint session took place. By the sixth and seventh sessions, I could feel a shift in the way Jen and Rob were talking to each other. I knew they could feel it, too.

Jen read her letter first: "I haven't been fair." Jen's lip was quivering. "I learned when I was young that nobody in my family was going to care about my feelings and that it was my job to make sure that everyone else's life went OK. When I married you, I had hopes that you would care about what I wanted, but the fact is, I didn't know what I wanted. I'd learned not to even ask the question to myself, let alone ask someone else. So instead of figuring out what I wanted and asking you directly for it, I expected you to know, and blamed you for not knowing. And I thought that it was my job to give you what you wanted. And I resented you for that, too. I never learned how stand up for myself. Instead, I've blamed you." Jen stopped and looked softly into Rob's eyes. "I've spent a lot of years thinking that you were more dysfunctional than me . . . (*smiling*) but Brent has been setting me straight! He says he can teach me now to stand up better for myself and ask for what I need, but I told him he's got his hands full!" Jen paused for a moment, then spoke slowly, "Rob, I'm sorry for all the years I was convinced you were the bad guy in our relationship, and I'm going to try to change my attitude."

Rob sat still, tears rolling down both cheeks. After a moment of silence, he wiped his eyes and replied: "I know that I contributed to how you have felt about me . . . I've given you reason to feel that way. And . . . I want to make sure that you feel comfortable telling me when things are hurting you, so that I know what to do. Um, so, thank you . . . and . . . we have to roll up our sleeves and just move forward. This is gonna take a lot of work, ya know? But you know, today you made coffee and you offered . . ." Rob drew a sharp breath and tried to maintain composure. Tears flowing and chest heaving, he finished, " . . . you offered to give me breakfast . . . and that felt good." Rob felt the softness of Jen's hand on his neck. It was a truly tender moment, and I felt honored to be there.

Later in the session, it was Rob's turn. Rather than reading his letter, he chose to use it as a guide as he spoke. "Jen, I've blamed you for things that weren't your fault or that you had no control over. And I don't know why . . . maybe because I just felt so miserable about me, I've had to blame you. But I don't like to do that . . . I don't like to tear you down and I just don't . . . (*fighting back tears*) You have a very big heart. You're an angel really, and I really believe you have this ability to want to serve and do things and make a difference for people, because you love doing that. You love helping people, and I squash that in you. I bring in negativity, and it hurts you, it's hurt your purpose and it hurts who you are." Tears were flowing freely down Rob's face. "I know that, uh, I know that I've made you feel unloved. I know that I'm guilty of stealing your joy. There's so many things that I wish I could take back . . ." Rob went on to talk about a specific thing he wished he could take back—his actions when Jen and their daughter Sarah were in Italy. Rob knew that she had felt injured by his behavior, but up until now, discussion about the topic had consisted of Jen accusing and Rob defending. This time was different. "I was miserable and I wanted you to be, too," Rob said. "I could have called you and made you feel less anxious about everything that was going on at home, but I didn't." Rob continued, "I don't expect you to ever forgive me for that, but for whatever it's worth, I feel awful about it. (*more tears*) I just haven't been able to show it." In the moments that followed, Jen confessed that because she had wanted very badly to take this trip and she was worried that Rob would try to prevent them from going, she had deliberately deceived Rob about many details surrounding the decision to go. Rob was stunned, and I could see his generous attitude beginning to fade. I knew Jen could feel it, too. I asked to speak with Rob privately for a few moments. Alone, using the same methods for cultivating receptivity I'd used in previous sessions to challenge his condescending stance toward Jen, I was able to help Rob avoid fueling the resentful feeling that Jen's words had triggered. When he returned, he looked directly at Jen and spoke softly, "I appreciate you admitting that it was wrong for you to lie to me, but the truth is, I don't have any right to judge you for it. I've done so many harmful things. In a way, I don't blame you for deceiving me. What's important is that we just stop hurting each other and start working together."

This was one of those sessions that therapists live for.

All therapists experience "sessions that therapists live for" and work with clients (couples) who stand out as having been especially rewarding to have worked with.

Question: What client couples have stood out for you in this way? Why? What does your identifying those particular couples say about you both personally and professionally?

For the first time in 15 years, Jen and Rob had exposed their hearts to each other, and experienced tenderness in return.

PHASE 2

Getting each partner to the point of being willing to risk vulnerability and "let the other off the hook" is the job of the therapist in Phase 1 of treatment. This is no small task. That is why it is so easy to overestimate the impact of accomplishing it, but years of experience have taught me to keep perspective. All of the work I had done with Jen and Rob was necessary, and the session in which they read their letters to each other got therapy off to a running start, but I knew that much more effort would be needed from each of them for lasting change to occur. Over decades, each of them had developed highly predictable, automatic habits of reacting during upsets, and these habits don't usually change overnight. Sooner or later, the goodwill and positive feelings generated in Phase 1 would give way to the normal frustrations of living with someone who has different priorities and preferences, and old, emotionally conditioned reactions would return. The degree of success in changing their relationship would depend on rewiring emotional habits. During Phase I, Jen had developed an intellectual understanding of how her typical reactions to Rob's seemingly selfish behavior were at variance with the set of habits that are predictive of caring and cooperation from one's partner. Rob had developed a similar understanding of his habits. Now each of them needed to actually *change* these habits.

The first step toward developing new reactions when feeling upset involves getting a clear vision of what more effective reactions entail. I reasoned with Jen, "If you don't know, even in theory, how to respond effectively when Rob does things that upset you, there isn't a snowball's chance in hell that you'll actually be able to respond effectively when they really happen." For the next few weeks, Jen became a student of her own behavior. With my assistance, she studied her typical reactions when Rob did upsetting things until she knew them backward and forward. More important, she developed a clear picture of how she *wanted* to react. Fortunately, she did not have to generate this picture from scratch. I helped her draw from decades of research on how people who are good at getting understanding and cooperation from their partners go about doing it. Jen read about these well-researched habits in a personalized, computer-generated workbook, *Developing Habits for Relationship Success* (Atkinson, 2006, 2009).

Jen recognized that most of her upsets with Rob involved situations where Rob had assumptions about how she should be acting and was criticizing her for not doing a good enough job. Using flowcharts like the one pictured in Figure 9.3, Jen began reviewing every upset that occurred between her and Rob. Jen's typical reaction when feeling criticized consisted of a combination of panic and

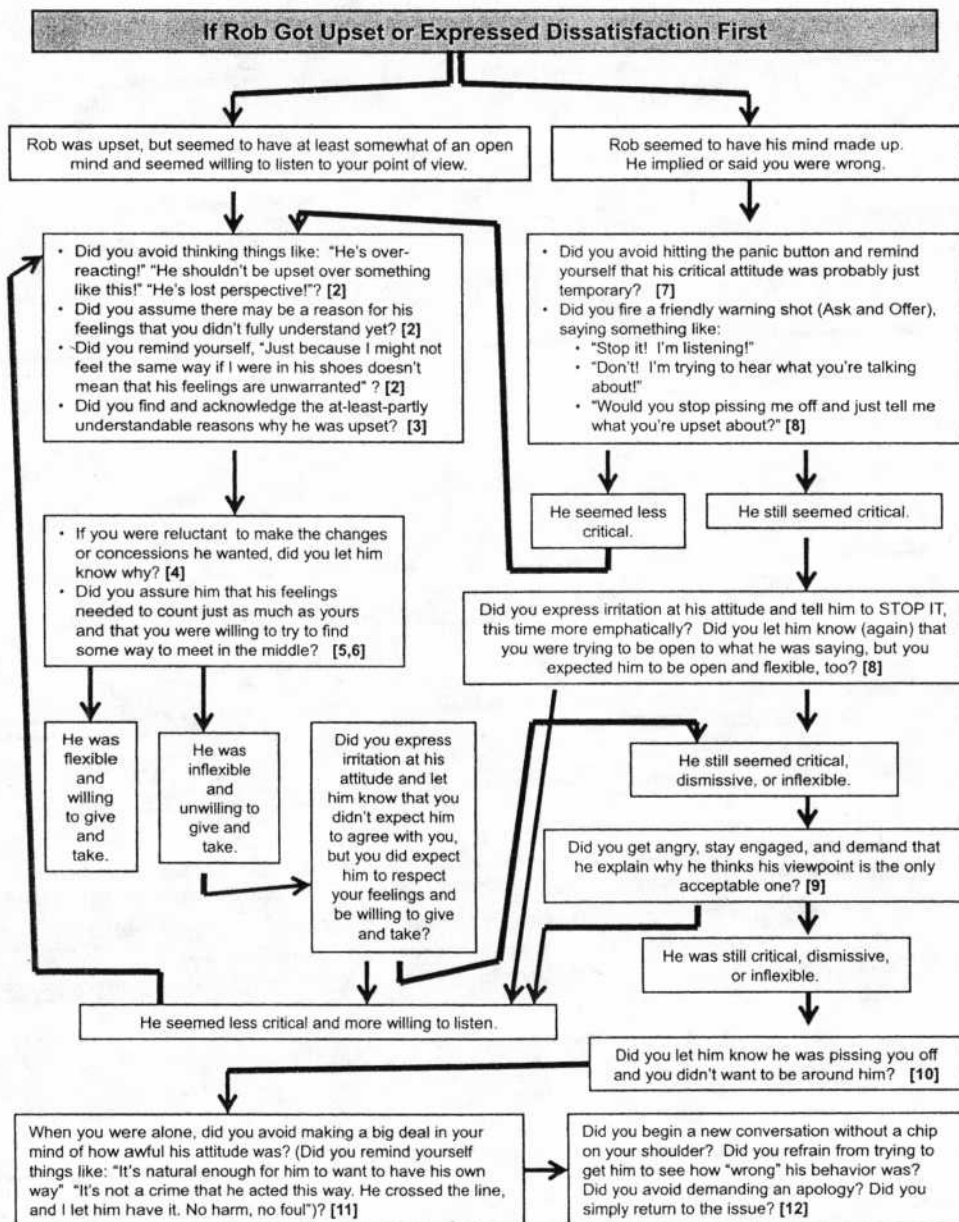


FIGURE 9.3. Review chart: If Rob got upset or expressed dissatisfaction first. Numbers in brackets [] refer to components of the sequence implemented. Copyright by Brent J. Atkinson. All rights reserved.

disgust. Internally, she usually found herself thinking things like, "He has no idea what he's talking about! If everything doesn't go the way he wants, he has to throw a fit!" Jen usually attempted to explain and/or defend her actions, but she felt that almost without exception, her explanations went unheard by Rob. Typically, she lapsed into counter criticism ("My priorities aren't screwed up, *yours* are!"). While all of this was happening, another part of her brain was generating ideas about how to "calm the big baby down." She felt compelled to pacify Rob, if for no other reason than to escape from his negativity.

Over a period of weeks, Jen developed a clear picture of how she *wanted* to react when she felt criticized by Rob. Specifically, she wanted to (1) avoid hitting the panic button and refrain from making a big deal in her own mind of how awful Rob was for criticizing her and/or failing to consider her priorities or opinions; (2) express irritation at his apparent conclusion that his priorities or standards were *the* correct ones, and hers were substandard; (3) let him know that his feelings were valid, and she was willing to be flexible; and (4) let him know that she expected the same from him.

Meanwhile, I helped Rob develop a clear picture of how he wanted to react when Jen failed to meet his expectations. Rob typically found himself thinking things like, "She doesn't see the big picture. She's acting impulsively. Her priorities are out of whack." Behaviorally, Rob usually got angry and lectured Jen about her shortcomings. I reviewed situation after situation with Rob in which he felt Jen's priorities were out of whack, each time challenging Rob's assumption that her actions were substandard, helping him see her choices as legitimate—just different than his. Rob had spent two decades allowing the mindset that Jen was wrong to go uncontested, and he struggled to be open to what I was saying. I drew heavily from the methods of cultivating receptivity summarized in Figure 9.2.

It helped Rob to know that I was not shooting from the hip with my recommendations for change, and that researchers had spent decades studying how people who know how to get their partners to treat them well go about doing it. He devoured the readings about the habits that are predictive of relationship success summarized in his personalized workbook (Atkinson, 2006, 2009), and like Jen, he began reviewing each upset that occurred between them in retrospect, identifying precisely where his reactions departed from those that are predictive of relationship success, visualizing himself back in each situation, thinking and talking to Jen differently than he had. Rob realized that most of the time when upsets happened between him and Jen, *he* was the one expressing dissatisfaction or feeling upset first. Thus he found the review chart from his workbook pictured in Figure 9.4 applicable in most situations. Rob developed a plan for reacting differently when Jen's behavior failed to meet his expectations. Specifically, he planned to take a step back and remind himself that (1) just because he might not like how Jen was thinking or acting didn't mean it was

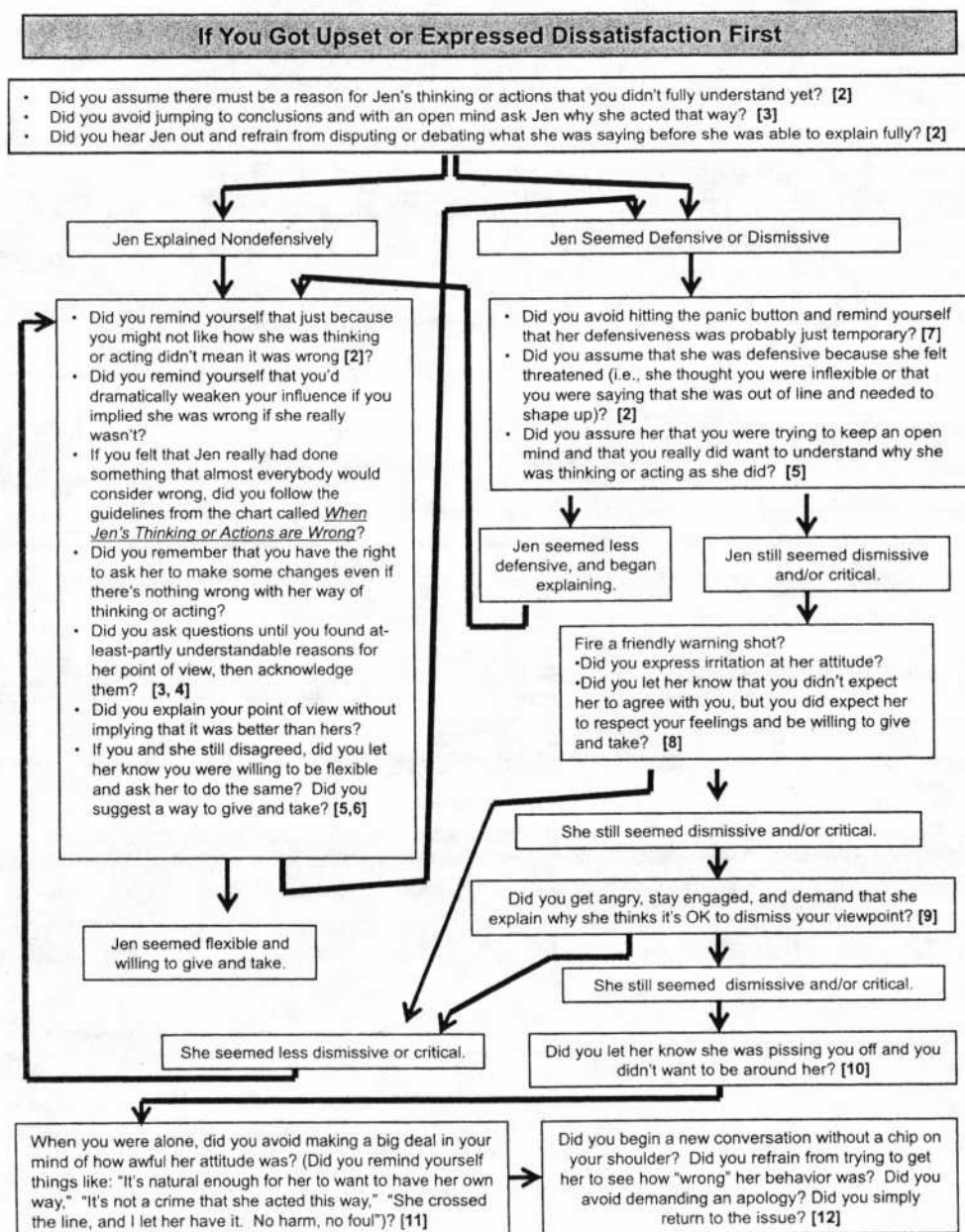


FIGURE 9.4. Review chart: If you got upset or expressed dissatisfaction first. Numbers in brackets [] refer to components of the sequence implemented. Copyright by Brent J. Atkinson. All rights reserved.

wrong, and if he implied that she was wrong when she wasn't, he would dramatically lower the odds that she'd care about how he felt and see his viewpoint as valid; (2) he was likely biased in his perceptions about how Jen should be acting, and he should get out of the business of deciding what her priorities should be and get into the business of privileging her priorities as much as his own, regardless of whether they made sense to him; and (3) when their priorities conflicted, rather than trying to trump her priorities with his, ask her to work on a plan for meeting him in the middle.

Through individual sessions, Jen and Rob were becoming clearer on the specific ways they wanted to react to each other differently when upsets happened—at least in theory. During the same period, I was helping them actually implement these new ways of reacting during conjoint sessions. I alternated between a 90-minute conjoint session some weeks and individual 60-minute sessions other weeks. During conjoint sessions, I asked each of them to talk about issues they often disagree about. Typically, as they spoke to each other, old habits got triggered, and I intervened in one of two ways. First, each of them granted me permission to step into the flow of conversation and speak for them momentarily. Rather than discussing with them how they could react more effectively, this method involved *showing* them an example of it in real time. Often, I was able to do this without interrupting the flow of the conversation.

This PET-C intervention is reminiscent of the technique used in the practice of psychodrama called "doubling," in which the "alter ego" or "auxiliary ego" (here, the PET-C therapist) doubles for a client to express thoughts and feelings for that person that have been unexpressed. It is a way of exploring unexamined inner experience as well as, of course, modeling adaptive interpersonal behavior.

Question: Helping partners use and improve their relational "voices" is common in couple therapy. Identify three or four other ways couple therapists can help to strengthen partners' relational voices.

During one conjoint session, Rob became upset when Jen talked about her plans to take the kids to the water park the following Saturday. Rob felt that their number-one priority should be to clear out the basement so that he could set up a recording studio, which would translate into the extra income they desperately needed. "Jen, in a perfect world there would be time for us to go swimming every weekend, but we're not in a perfect world. You're not gonna go running off again, leaving me to bail us out of the financial mess we're in!" Jen sat silent, jaw clenched, signaling that the panic/disgust combination was alive inside of her. I stepped in and spoke for her: "Stop it, Rob! I'm trying to care about how you feel." "Stop what? I seem to be the only one who's in touch with

reality here!" Rob was responding as if Jen had said the words herself. Continuing for Jen, I clarified, "Rob, your ideas on our financial crisis and what to do about it are exactly that—*your* ideas. Not everybody sees the world the way you do, and the rest of us aren't as stupid as you seem to think. I'm willing to try to be flexible, but you make it real hard when you act like God and everybody knows obviously how our weekend should be spent! I need you to respect my feelings, too!" I looked at Jen, checking to see if the words I'd spoken for her were an acceptable representation of her feelings. She nodded. Later, she told me that the most helpful thing about hearing me speak for her wasn't the words, but rather the tone or attitude I had as I was speaking. She said, "It seemed firm and generous at the same time. I don't think I've ever done that."

Across 2 months of sessions, I stepped in countless times, sometimes speaking for Rob, sometimes Jen. This method didn't always work, and I used session breaks as another tool in helping them practice new reactions during conjoint sessions. For example in one session, Rob began talking about his frustration at coming home to see the house in total disarray (e.g., the kitchen a mess, laundry half done and strewn around the house, half-eaten plates of food in the living room, kitty box overflowing). Sensing that Rob was falling back into his old critical attitude, I stepped in early and spoke to Jen for him, saying, "It was frustrating to get home and see the place in shambles. I just wanted to relax, but I couldn't while the place was such a mess." I glanced at Rob and could see that he was satisfied with what I'd said so far. I continued, "I know that not everybody cares as much about clutter as I do, and you were probably doing other important things that prevented you from giving attention to the house . . ." Out of the corner of my eye I could see Rob rolling his eyes and shaking his head. Turning toward him, I said, "It doesn't look like you can get with what I'm saying for you. Am I right?" Rob simply continued shaking his head, looking angry. I suggested that we take a break, and Jen went to the waiting room. I spent 20 minutes helping Rob work with the part of him that felt critical of Jen. Gradually he was able to digest the idea that Jen's behavior might not really be wrong, and that it would be in his own best interest to keep an open mind about it. When Jen returned to the session, he said to her, "I know that there are going to be times when we frustrate each other because we have different priorities, and of course, I want you to have my priorities, but I realize that a lot of times you probably feel the same way. Last night was just one of those times for me, and I guess I just want to be sure that my priorities are at least on your radar screen." Jen looked relieved and assured Rob, "Believe me, your feelings were front and center for me. I knew it would be rough on you to find the house like that, and I kept hoping I could find time to at least pick up a bit, but it was one crisis after another. I can give it some attention today." Rob smiled and replied, "Sorry to be such a pain in the ass." Jen and Rob had completely pulled out of their usual spin, and I could tell it felt great to them.

Conjoint sessions facilitated successful changes and generated good feelings between Jen and Rob, but between sessions, Jen and Rob were relapsing into their old patterns of interaction as often as before. Recent advances in our understanding of the brain explain why changes facilitated during therapy often do not translate into everyday life. When they were calm, Rob and Jen knew very well how irrationally they thought and behaved during upsets. But when they actually got upset, the parts of their brains that knew this shut off. The neural networks involved when they were thinking clearly were rarely active when the neural processes that generated their self-defeating habits were active. Conjoint therapy sessions were effective because I helped them activate brain processes involved in clear thinking precisely when their old neural response programs were up and running. In these moments, they changed because they were able to use more of their brains. But one session per week was not enough to rewire habits that had been hardwired over decades. I knew that I would need to find more consistent or concentrated ways for Jen and Rob to practice new reactions. But practicing new reactions alone would not do the trick. They'd need some way to practice thinking differently *at the moments when they were actually upset*. I knew that if the neural networks involved in new thinking were active when the old neural response programs that drove their ineffective reactions were activated, and this happened enough times, eventually these two distinct neural processes would bond, so that whenever the old neural response programs became active, new thinking would arise automatically. In short, I knew I would need to find a way to help Rob and Jen practice new reactions under "game conditions," that is, when they were actually upset, and usually least able to apply new ways of thinking.

At The Couples Research Institute, we have developed a variety of methods for facilitating such practice. One of them was particularly helpful for Rob and Jen. I asked Rob to carry around with him a small digital audio recorder for a period of time. I explained, "Whenever something happens that makes you feel upset or dissatisfied with Jen this week, please just turn on the recorder and express your feelings as if you were talking directly to Jen. Don't worry about how you're coming across. Just express the way you feel in an unedited fashion. Then some time before the end of the day, I'd like for you to try to adjust your attitude and record a second version of your complaint, this time speaking from the place inside where you're able to be as open-minded and flexible as possible without being inauthentic."

By the end of one week, Rob had recorded 14 complaints. In an individual session with Jen, I transferred the complaints to my computer, then cranked up the volume. Out came full-bodied attitude from Rob. Predictably, Jen found herself in her typical panic/disgust response state, but unlike real life, here she had the luxury of pausing to observe her reactions. In everyday life, she was usually so caught up by her reactions to Rob that she never had the space to

grapple with them. But this was different. We could turn on and turn off Rob's attitude at will. I began by helping Jen pay close attention to the physical reaction she had to Rob's critical tone. Practicing with one complaint, then another, she developed the ability to (1) stay physically relaxed; (2) avoid hitting the panic button and instead say things to herself like, "He's upset, but no need to worry . . . I know what to do," "Actually, this is a good thing, I need the chance to practice," "It's not exactly a crime . . . it's normal to think you're right and others are wrong," "I can handle this"; and (3) express irritation while also assuring him of her intent to care about the fact he is upset (e.g., "Stop it! I'm trying to care about what you're saying!").

Once we arrived at the sequence of physical, cognitive, and behavioral reactions she ideally wanted to do when she felt criticized, we practiced implementing these reactions with fresh complaints until it began to feel natural for her. By the end of the session, as soon as she heard his tone, she began relaxing, reciting self-reminders, and then she stopped the recording and actually said the things she needed to say to him out loud, as if he were present. Within a period of 1 hour, Jen had developed an ability to react in ways she had not been able to do even once in the history of their relationship.

The sessions in which Jen practiced with Rob's recordings had a profound effect. In fact, after just one session she came in reporting that Rob had launched a criticism the same day, and to her amazement, she had found herself relaxing rather than panicking, and reciting the self-soothing reminders she's rehearsed. Clearly delighted with her newly developed abilities, she reported, "When I actually spoke differently to Rob, you should have seen the look on his face. He stopped dead in his tracks!"

Experience has taught me that several conditions must be present for practice to be effective: (1) Clients must be highly motivated; (2) clients must know *precisely* what to practice—physically, cognitively, attitudinally, and behaviorally; (3) they must practice at moments when they are feeling upset; and (4) the new thoughts they practice must have the effect of creating genuine attitude shifts. Simply reciting things to oneself is not of much value unless the things recited have the effect of helping one shift internal states.

The recordings were also an important tool that Rob used in his practice. Listening to his own recordings helped Rob realize that while he was working hard at trying to avoid criticizing Jen, he often neglected to challenge the attitude that fueled his criticisms. On the surface, he was making "I" statements and talking about his feelings rather than telling her what she should be doing, but he sounded inauthentic. The recordings helped him realize that the real goal was not to stop criticizing Jen—it was to keep an open mind about the possibility that her actions or priorities *really* might be as legitimate as his.

Rob and Jen used other practice methods to develop new reactions to each other, but practicing with the recorded complaints seemed to work the best for

them. Given the power of such methods, it is tempting to implement them earlier in therapy. But in the beginning, most partners are not motivated to put in the effort required to develop new emotional habits. Often, they do not even think they need new emotional habits. They think their *partners* need them! The first phase of therapy always involves cultivating receptivity and getting each partner to the point where he or she is highly motivated to change his/her own reactions.

PHASE 3

When they began therapy, Rob and Jen were frequently caught in the pull of their brains' self-protective mechanisms. The first order of business was to help them recondition their brains in a way that allowed them to think and act more flexibly when they were alarmed or upset. As Rob and Jen spent less time in fight/flight mode, I turned my attention from decreasing negative interactions to increasing feelings of fondness and affection.

Studies suggest that partners who demonstrate more interest in each other, engage in more acts of caring and consideration, notice more positive things about each other, and express more appreciation to each other have relationships that are more satisfying than do couples who do less of these things. However, recent brain studies suggest that intimacy-enhancing behaviors such as these are likely to affect relationships differently *depending on the areas of the brain that drive them*. The trick to intimacy involves figuring out how to "turn on" the brain's intrinsic motivational states that automatically make us actually *feel* more interested in our partners, invested in our relationships, and desirous of increased levels of attention from our partners. In the brain, there is a big difference between caring actions that are driven by a principled decision to act (e.g., "It's the right thing to do," or "It's how a good partner should act") and caring actions that emanate from one of the brain's natural motivational systems. The former will feel like work—the latter will not.

As Jen and Rob began acting more respectfully toward each other, I sensed an automatic increase in positive feelings, but I did not want to leave this process to chance. Because they had been hurt so many times, each of them had gotten out of the habit of making bids for connection. They were afraid to allow themselves to *want* each other's love and affection. The feeling of *wanting* affection and attention emanates from one of the brain's seven executive operating systems. When this circuit is electrically stimulated, people experience feelings that they describe as emptiness, loneliness, or the feeling that something (or someone) is missing. This brain system produces a yearning for meaningful contact with others, and is particularly active in the younger members of all mammal species, who must depend on the protection of others for survival. However, there

is an abundance of evidence that in healthy adults, the circuit remains active throughout life, providing the motivation for human contact. Nature's plan does not involve emotional self-sufficiency. Scores of longitudinal studies suggest that individuals who cut themselves off from the need for emotional comforting from others do not function as well as individuals who continue to experience a need for emotional comforting throughout their lives (Siegel, 1999). When soothing emotional contact is consistently available, individuals develop a sense of security that allows them to avoid wasting energy being overly vigilant to danger (Cozolino, 2002). Neuroscientists believe that this brain system is central to the forming of secure emotional bonds that buffer individuals against stresses throughout their lives (Panksepp, 1998).

Early in their relationship, Jen and Rob each regularly experienced longing because loving attention from each other was readily available. They felt eager to be with each other, and they missed each other when apart. As they began feeling hurt and disrespected by each other, their longing circuits went dormant and each stopped feeling needed by each other. In individual sessions, I asked Rob and Jen to talk with me about what they used to love about their relationship. The goals in these sessions were to (1) get them interested in having more of the kind of attention and caring from each other they formerly had, (2) help each of them realize that there are skills involved in eliciting genuine interest and caring from one's partner, and (3) emphasize that these skills begin with allowing oneself to feel the desire for attention and nurturing from one's partner.

Jen had difficulty allowing herself to want attention and nurturing from Rob. She was relieved when the fighting and accusations abated, and stated plainly that if this moratorium continued, it would be good enough for her. I talked with her about the evidence suggesting that the absence of fighting alone does little to ensure the long-term health of a relationship, and that unless partners are genuinely fond of each other, their relationships continue to be at risk of backsliding and ultimately dissolving. I helped her realize that one of the main reasons why she did not allow herself to want more from Rob was that she thought he already wanted too much from her. If she allowed herself to want more, she feared that he would feel even more entitled and increase his demands for her attention. I prepared Jen to talk to Rob about this in a nonblaming way, and gradually she did allow herself to want more attention and nurturing from him. For the first time in years, she began making bids for connection. Rob also worked hard to shift his critical attitude about Jen's relative emotional self-sufficiency. Even on a good day, she needed less emotional contact than he. Over the course of a few sessions, I helped him understand that healthy people have different levels of need for togetherness, and the single most potent thing he could do to make Jen want even less contact with him would be to think of her lower level of need as dysfunctional or selfish. In the past, Rob had indeed thought of her this way, and he often saw her efforts to connect with him as

weak and insufficient. Of course, this was demoralizing to Jen, and she withdrew further. This pattern shifted when Jen began to sense that Rob's perspective was genuinely changing. As his critical attitude lifted and he began expressing gratitude for each small effort Jen was making to connect, she experienced a new kind of freedom and authentic desire to spend time with him.

Longing is just one of the four brain systems that draw humans closer together. A second system produces feelings of tenderness, empathy, and concern about the anxiety and discomfort of others. A third system produces a carefree, fun-loving state of mind that results in lighthearted teasing, playful banter, joking around, and other forms of spontaneous and enjoyable exchange between partners. A fourth system creates sexual interest and arousal, inspiring intimate sexual contact between partners (Panksepp, 1998). Before therapy ended, we explored and resolved a variety of attitudes and actions that were blocking the full activation of each of these brain systems in Rob and Jen. In all, therapy spanned 7 months and involved 28 sessions. Six months after therapy ended, Rob and Jen reported that they had experienced two "tailspins" when they relapsed into old patterns, but on each occasion, they pulled out of the spin within 24 hours. They reported excitedly that they had auditioned together for an upcoming community dance performance and were busy with rehearsals. Jen summed it up: "He still drives me crazy, but he's my best friend." The look in her eyes, more than the words she spoke, gave me confidence that the changes they experienced in therapy were still alive and well.

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