

THE RELATIONSHIP SKILLS WORKBOOK

A Do-It-Yourself Guide to a Thriving Relationship

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments . . . xi

Introduction . . . xiii

PART ONE The Possibility: Real Self, True Connection

CHAPTER 1 Would You Rather Be Right or Be Happy? . . . 3

CHAPTER 2 Speaking the Unarguable Truth . . . 13

PART TWO Listening to Your Body

CHAPTER 3 Understanding the Five Basic Emotions . . . 29

CHAPTER 4 Feeling Too Good . . . 41

CHAPTER 5 Emotions: Energy in Motion . . . 45

CHAPTER 6 The How-To's of Moving Emotions . . . 51

CHAPTER 7 Bringing It Back into Relationship . . . 59

CHAPTER 8 Advanced Tips for Emotional Mastery . . . 63

CHAPTER 9 Emotional Flow: Blocks and Unblocking . . . 73

CHAPTER 10 Relationship as Emotional Healer . . . 87

PART THREE The Route to True Power

CHAPTER 11 Taking Healthy Responsibility . . . 95

CHAPTER 12 Three Toxic Habits to Break . . . 103

CHAPTER 13 Empowerment through Integrity . . . 111

CHAPTER 14 Making Great and Successful Agreements . . . 117

CHAPTER 15 From Power Struggle to Empowerment . . . 131

CHAPTER 16 Judgment and Defense . . . 141

CHAPTER 17 The Triangle: Getting Stuck
in Power Struggle . . . 147

**PART FOUR Living the Biggest Relationship
You Can Imagine**

CHAPTER 18 A Dream Come True . . . 159

CHAPTER 19 Appreciations . . . 163

CHAPTER 20 Moving between Expansiveness
and Contraction . . . 169

CHAPTER 21 Creativity and Play . . . 171

CHAPTER 22 Choosing Aliveness . . . 175

CHAPTER 23 Choosing Love . . . 177

CHAPTER 24 Learning to Love Yourself . . . 179

EPILOGUE Traveling the Path to a
Magical Relationship . . . 183

APPENDIX 1 Quick Guide to Making a Choice . . . 185

APPENDIX 2 Sample Answers to Arguable/Unarguable
Truth Exercise . . . 187

APPENDIX 3 The Inner Map . . . 189

Notes . . . 195

Resources . . . 197

About the Author . . . 201

TOOL KIT EXERCISES

- Try It Out . . . 9
- Committing to Happiness . . . 11
- Describe Your Sensations . . . 15
- Moving from the Arguable to the Unarguable
(Sensations and Emotions) . . . 18
- Calibrating Your Yes and Your No . . . 21
- Unearthing What You Really Want and Don't Want . . . 21
- Tracking and Translating the Arguable . . . 25
- Shifting a Conflict . . . 26
- From Sensations to Emotions . . . 38
- Translating Your Emotions . . . 39
- Upper Limits and Rest . . . 43
- Upper Limit Detection . . . 43
- Moving Emotions Process . . . 57
- Openhearted Listening Checklist . . . 61
- Moving through Emotions Together . . . 62
- Time-Out Worksheet . . . 78
- Labeling Your Drifts . . . 80
- Creating a Shift Repertoire . . . 85
- Committing to Shifting . . . 85
- Conscious Complaining . . . 86
- Committing to Blaming or to Taking Responsibility . . . 106
- Moving from Blame to Power . . . 107
- Blame and Complaint Log . . . 108
- Blame and Complaint Diet . . . 108
- How Do I Know I'm Taking 100 Percent Responsibility? . . . 109

| | |
|------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| What Does Feeling Powerful Actually Feel Like? . . . | 112 |
| Dialing Yourself into Your Life . . . | 116 |
| Integrity Inventory . . . | 116 |
| Getting to the Bottom Line . . . | 127 |
| Making a Great and Successful Agreement . . . | 128 |
| How I Created This/What I'll Do Differently . . . | 136 |
| How I Try to Control Others . . . | 140 |
| Practicing Moving Out of Judgment . . . | 142 |
| Practicing Moving Out of Defensiveness . . . | 143 |
| Power Inventory . . . | 145 |
| Becoming Aware of the Triangle . . . | 150 |
| The World and the Triangle . . . | 150 |
| Getting Out of the Triangle . . . | 152 |
| Knowing When You're in the Triangle . . . | 154 |
| Your Relationship Well-Being Bank Account . . . | 155 |
| Intending the Relationship You Really Want . . . | 160 |
| Lighting the Appreciation Flame . . . | 165 |
| Appreciating Your Partner . . . | 166 |
| Appreciating Yourself . . . | 167 |
| Generating and Receiving Appreciations . . . | 168 |
| Tracking Your Contraction and Expansion . . . | 170 |
| Moving from Contraction to Expansion . . . | 170 |
| Follow Your Impulses . . . | 173 |
| Follow Your Impulses Together . . . | 173 |
| How Can We Have More Fun? . . . | 174 |
| Choosing Aliveness . . . | 176 |
| Creating Connection . . . | 177 |
| Dates and Mystery Dates . . . | 178 |
| Date Plan . . . | 178 |
| Learning to Love Yourself . . . | 180 |
| Writing Love Letters . . . | 181 |

THE POSSIBILITY: REAL SELF, TRUE CONNECTION



part one

The mind does not wish the best for you.
It is listening to the heart that will
lead you to happiness.

GAIL KALI

WOULD YOU RATHER BE RIGHT OR BE HAPPY?

chapter 1

A couple airs their frustrations:

“She just doesn’t hear me. I try talk to her,
and she doesn’t listen.”

“I try to listen, but all I hear is how bad I am.
It’s better if I just stay away.”

“What happened to how things used to be?”

When we first get involved with someone, we generally experience some of the best feelings available to our human bodies and psyches. When we’re in love, we have access to ecstasy. We are being seen for our best selves, and we’re seeing our lover at his or her most wondrous. Both of us are enjoying the deep emotional and physical intimacy of sexuality that can be a mystical experience, bringing us to the heady aliveness of being completely in the moment as we touch into each other’s divinity. All too often, however, this initial experience passes away (sometimes rather quickly) and is replaced by power struggle,

conflict, and strife. The choice then seems to be to get used to life without ecstasy or to search it out elsewhere.

It is my belief and my experience that the passion, connection, and aliveness that are the hallmarks of new relationships are available no matter how long two people have been involved. In fact, I now expect to feel these things with my partner all the time, so that if we're not, it's a sign that action needs to be taken. In other words, if we're not feeling ease, flow, and aliveness (that is, *happy*) in our relationship, our internal alarms go off, and we take the actions to move back to that state.

Try out the idea that your natural state, your true essential self, is relaxed, open, curious, tuned in, and in harmonious flow with the universe. You're a river, just happily rolling along. Then, as occurs in life, *something happens*.² Someone cuts you off in traffic; you get an overdue notice; your dog gets sick; your partner says she's bored in the relationship. Suddenly the ease becomes constriction, your view of life narrows, and you have the sensation of life falling in on you. It seems like someone else's fault. You feel dammed up and begin to swirl in an eddy of confusion and stuckness.

Moving from ease to constriction is what happens when our brains get triggered. Relationship offers the precious gift of illuminating the triggers that we'd assumed were just part of us, so we can move through them and back into the ecstatic energy that life offers. This workbook is basically about how to notice the triggers, move through them, and come back into ease and aliveness. I believe it is possible to become conscious of triggers, to nonjudgmentally acknowledge them, then to choose a new path back to an open heart. I believe conscious relationship allows us all to choose love.

Most people want passionate, connected relationships where they can show up and be seen, known, and loved for who they really are. Is that true for you? It may come as a surprise to find out that closeness, connection, passion, and authenticity

require you to be connected to your *body*. It sure was a shock to me. I was so used to relying on my mind, I had no idea why I didn't feel connected to my partner. It might sound a little strange, in this culture that emphasizes mind over matter, but what I've found is that my mind tends to be very unhelpful when it comes to moving through conflict. Following the wisdom of my body, though, allows me to get to the real issue quickly, and back to heartfelt connection.

Deep intimacy requires curiosity, wonder, and the ability to find the truth of one's experience deep in one's body. That might sound like a tall order, for those of us who were raised with the importance of being "reasonable" or who, perhaps, have honed our debate capabilities. Unfortunately, being great at arguing the fine points or keeping our feelings to ourselves takes us in absolutely the wrong direction. Scoring points, even winning the argument, might provide a momentary sense of satisfaction, but the thrill of competition sours in the wreckage of someone finally being declared the loser. (Once, while on a road trip, I argued with my partner through the entire state of Nebraska. While making the trip seem faster, it did nothing to resolve the issue or create intimacy.)

The hard habit to break is that of *arguing*. Arguing is a sign that we're in our heads, out of our bodies. Arguing is about beliefs, ideas, thoughts, and stories. It disconnects people. It's the opposite of being intimate.

So, get ready for a whole new way of being. Here is how it works. Keep breathing—it's a big step.

Anytime we make a statement that is arguable, that is, a statement that is about right or wrong, or good or bad, we have moved out of connection with our deepest, most essential selves. We argue over beliefs, and beliefs come from our conditioning, from what we've been taught by other people about how to live. Our true selves exist beyond what we've been taught to believe. Our essential nature is inborn. Intimacy happens when we're able to connect from one true self to another.

Here's the moment for a crucial choice. It comes down to this:

Would you rather be right or be happy?

Consider some examples of choosing to be *right*:

"I can't ever get a word in edgeways with you."

"You are such a slob."

"I am such a jerk."


"This will never get better."

"People are so thoughtless."

"Why are you always late?"

You're so inconsiderate and disrespectful."

"You never really cared about me."



Would you
rather be right
or be happy?

Each of these statements invites agreement or disagreement. They are proclamations that pull for debate, where evidence must be produced to reach a verdict: Who is really right? And, more importantly, who is wrong? It is the mind at work, analyzing, judging, and compiling data.

Intimate connection never happens at the level of mind.

Perhaps a moment of bonding occurs if we agree with each other, but that isn't true intimacy, it's the knitting together of allies against a common enemy: Yes, we understand each other; we understand how the world works. What a relief! Of course, if there is disagreement, there is no possibility for even that brief moment of relief. Ongoing power struggles and stuckness in relationship are generally the outcome of two people trying to work out issues through the right-wrong strategy. This

strategy actually can become toxic over time, as these debates have a way of escalating into character attack and counterattack. The conflict can easily slide from whose action or belief is right or wrong, to whose *self* is right or wrong:

“You’re supposed to turn here.”

“No, it’s up ahead.”

“Why don’t you ever listen to me?”

“I would, if you were ever right.”

“I was right last week when I got us to the concert.”

“Oh, sure, that we had to race to because you were late again.”

“I wouldn’t have been late if I hadn’t had to finish the bills that you said you were going to do. You never do what you say you’re going to do.”

“Who could follow through on anything with someone nagging at them all the time!”

“Oh, so now I’m a nag.”

One reason that the beginning of a relationship feels so wonderful is that each person is seen for the very best of who she or he is. We feel we are with, or we are, the most beautiful, smartest, most considerate person alive. It’s what being in love is all about. As differences inevitably occur, however, and we try to debate our way out of them using logic and trying to win the fight, the gloss begins to wear off. Escalating arguments lead to the use of blaming labels. The other is now too thoughtless,

needy, lazy, cold, slow, fast, obsessive, irresponsible. Too emotional, too rational. Too something. Our initial experience of ourselves and our loved one as truly amazing beings begins to shift to what is wrong. “You’re so caring!” becomes “People take advantage of you.” “You are brilliantly creative” turns into “I can’t believe how much you sit around staring at the wall.” “I love how physically affectionate you are!” degrades into “You only want sex. Why are you so demanding?”

While we might initially respond to this new negative view of ourselves by trying to behave better, it takes effort. We get tired. The new relationship just doesn’t feel as good, as we no longer feel cherished for who we are. We start to defend ourselves, which can turn into escalation and counterattack. Frustrated by our inability to find the wonderful feelings we used to have, we might try harder to use the main tool we have—debate—which takes us to the same dead ends. Ultimately, we may simply try to avoid the conflict altogether, choosing to shut down. And we wonder: whatever happened to feeling in love?

So, what is the alternative? How in the world do we create something different? What can take us out of the downward spin into negativity to resolution of the issue and deeper connection?

Here is a passageway to a whole new way of relating:

Speak from your heart, from your deepest self, from the only *unarguable* truth there really is: *what is going on inside your body.*

Your Commitments

We’ll work more with the skill of shifting to unarguable statements in a bit. But first, as the Hendricks say, any change requires commitment.³

Did anybody feel scared about the *c word*? You might want to take a breath. What I mean by commitment here is to get clear about how you are organizing your energy. Because how

TOOL TRY IT OUT

Get out your journal. Take a breath and notice your inner world. What statements can you make that are based on what is going on inside your body and completely unarguable? Now, can you make any statements about the exterior world and what is going on outside of you that someone couldn't argue with?

Here are some examples of arguable statements, and how to shift them into being unarguable:

Arguable**Unarguable**

It's cold in here.

I feel cold.

You're a slob.

I don't like clothes on the floor.

The world is a mess.

I feel scared about what is happening in the world, and I don't know what action to take.

You don't understand me.

I'm afraid that I'm not making myself clear.

you organize your energy will determine the results you get. As I use the word *commitment* through this book, I'm really wanting you to become conscious of how you're currently organizing your energy and then what you might want to do differently.

So before we really go into some transformational tools, I'd like you to try out some commitments. Speak them out loud and see what they feel like in your body. Proclaim them to the world—or at least, to your partner. Though truly, the commitments you make are between you and you (or, if you like, between you and the universe).

Here's a hint for being able to tell if you're on the right track with your commitments: your body will feel more open, alive, and expanded, versus more shutdown, closed, and contracted.

OK, here's the old commitment for many of us:

"I commit to being right at all costs, and to winning instead of losing—whatever it takes."

What does that feel like? Does your body feel open, expanded, good, or more contracted and closed?

Now, try these out:

"I commit to being open to learning from every relationship interaction. I commit to knowing my deepest, most authentic self and to communicating who I am impeccably to others."

If you actually prefer the commitment to being right, I recommend you close this book now (though if you find a way to happiness through that avenue, I'd certainly like to hear about it). If the commitment to your authenticity gives you a sense of juiciness and possibility, you are on the road that I've found to be endlessly engaging, challenging, and rewarding.

Your commitments propel you forward to a whole new set of possibilities. Making the commitment directs you to the *what*; now we'll start working on the *how*.

TOOL COMMITTING TO HAPPINESS



Now it's your turn. What commitments would you like to make to support yourself on a new path? Write these down in your journal and refer back to them whenever you lose connection to your commitments.

I commit to

And