

How to Use the Course

You enjoy being together, everything is going well but you sense something is missing; there could be more. Maybe you've hit a rough patch and there is more friction than you wish; certain issues don't seem to resolve. Maybe you feel stuck or off-track somehow. Just like most couples, you want your relationship to grow, to be richer and more satisfying—but it is hard to know how to begin or what to do. You picked up this book to see if it can give you some insight or guidance.

The intention of this course is to inform, enliven and enrich your time together. If you delve into it fully, you will discover greater awareness and understanding of each other. It will help you get unstuck and support you to love more deeply and freely. Most of all, it creates an opportunity to explore, to experiment and to learn together.

Naturally, this book has its limitations: it is not an alternative to counseling. If you and your spouse have reached an impasse, if you are not able to speak honestly and listen to each other, if there is separation or divorce on the horizon, then you need impartial and probably professional help. Find someone who you both trust, who can help you resolve whatever is problematic and who provides guidance that translates into progress. Commit to at least three months of attempting to work things out.

On the other hand, if you are already working on the relationship and you want to do more, the information and exercises in this book will be invaluable. All the suggestions have been tried and tested. They work—not for everyone but for many. The course is packed with ideas and applications; you are bound to find at least a few that are right for you and your situation.

How to Start

This course invites you to look honestly at all aspects of your self and your relationship and make a commitment to change and grow. This commitment is fundamental; without a strong and enduring intention to attend to the relationship, it will continue on the same path set in the past—for good or ill.

For the course to be of benefit, you have to put it into practice. Reflect on the ideas, ask yourself the questions and, most

importantly, share and keep sharing with your partner. It is not enough to read the words and think they are interesting. You have to act with awareness and make positive changes to your everyday experience. Change does not happen overnight and you need to be patient and persevere.

No doubt one of you is more interested in reading the book and trying out the suggestions. It helps for you (the initiator) to first skim through the pages to get a sense of what is required. Then invite your spouse to be involved. Look for the topics and suggestions that resonate with both of you. It is important to get your partner engaged and invested in the process. Be sensitive yet encouraging.

When you agree, start working together on whatever chapters seem most relevant. The course is designed to progress from one topic to another but you can decide to skip sections or go back to them later. Each chapter is short and rich with information. You may need to read a particular chapter more than once before you approach the exercises.

At the end of each chapter are questions to consider on your own and conversational topics to discuss with your partner. The questions and prompts are aimed to highlight particular aspects of your relationship; they are not ends in themselves. Take time to ponder the questions alone and write notes to help you remember.

If you are busy, it is better to put the course on hold rather than rush through a section. It is important not to address the questions and attempt the conversations when either of you is in a bad mood: feeling tired, stressed or resentful may lead to blaming and conflict. Pace yourselves but keep moving forward.

When you have both read a chapter and completed the individual questions, set up a sharing time to talk about the topic and your responses. You may need a period to ponder and digest the information but do not put joint conversations off too far into the future. After each chapter, keep practicing what you have learned as you move on to the next section.

Do not get bogged down in details or things that are confusing—move on if you are not ready or the information does not apply. The book is meant to be guidance, not a grind. The

material may be demanding but rise to the challenge with a light heart.

Sharing Time

Nothing will change in your relationship until you share your thoughts and feeling with your partner. To be fully open with each other is not easy so you need to create a safe space for it to happen. None of us allow our selves to be vulnerable in the middle of a workday or when chores and activities demand attention. It is not appropriate to open your inner self to another on the fly. You have to give yourself space.

The first and most important decision of this course is to create a time each and every week to be together—your sharing time. Of course, it is beneficial if you can do it more often than weekly. The sharing time is a special period of between thirty minutes and one hour that you set aside to connect, share and discuss.

Many couples find the idea of scheduling a special time to talk intimidating and even scary. In fact this may be just the issue that keeps a couple from getting unstuck. When resentments have built up, when discussion have led to greater conflict, when hopelessness has set in, it is very difficult to even imagine sharing. This is where you both need to agree to give it a try and commit to a period of no less than 6 sessions.

Sharing time should have the following qualities: safe, quiet, uninterrupted and regular enough that it becomes habitual. It should not be rushed, pressured, stressed or invaded. If you have children, make sure they know not to interrupt except in an emergency.

Share in your home or some private place—not at a restaurant or in public. You may be unable to meet in the same place and at the same time each week, but do not let it slide. Carve out time together from your busy life. Make it a priority. Put aside your computer; turn off your phone, the radio and the TV. This is important!

In your time together, there will be a temptation to avoid the difficult topics and use the meeting to create schedules, talk about other people or chitchat. The time together does not have to be solemn—humor is extremely helpful—but do not allow it to

become superficial and ‘jokey.’ Try not to deflect or focus only on what is wrong; look for solutions and possibilities rather than disputes. You are both personally responsible for setting the tone of the meeting and making it work.

Every loving couple devises their own special way of sharing—but to start it is helpful to have a structure or regular practice. The intention is to create a special space in which something can happen that is more profound than we expect. Adjust the suggested format below as needed but try to keep to the general arrangement.

Step 1: Quietly connect (2 - 3 minutes)

Sit together not too far apart, almost touching. If you hold hands, do it lightly. Allow your mind and body to settle and get peaceful. Close your eyes if that helps. If you have a meditation or spiritual practice, use it to deepen your inner quiet.

Breathe quietly and evenly. Notice if you are feeling apprehensive and take time to get calmer. Let go of any niggling thoughts or irritations from your outer life. Feel the presence of your partner next to you. Recall those things that your partner did or said in the recent past (last week) that you appreciate and are grateful for. Take a moment to get clear which are the most significant.

When you are both ready, come back. Make simple contact by touching, making eye contact or saying something positive: “That was nice.” Stay quiet and focused on your good feelings.

Step 2: Share positives (5 - 10 minutes)

Take turns to share what you appreciate and are grateful for about your partner. Make soft eye contact; do not let yourself be distracted. When speaking, be specific about whatever happened in the week that you valued. The intention is to give a positive gift to the person you love.

While one person speaks, the other listens with an open heart—to the positive message, not to the details. The listener’s intention is to fully receive and accept the positives. She/he does not speak except to say, “Thank you.” Do not discuss what each other said or meant.

Step 3: Open the conversation (15 – 30 minutes)

This is the time to address the questions and conversations at the end of each chapter. Those prompts are setting off points, not ends in themselves. Use them to start a natural and intimate conversation that goes wherever it needs to. If one or both of you feels the conversation is wandering off topic, return to the prompt and start again. Do not be concerned with pauses, hesitations and false starts. Just keep going until you both feel you have done enough. If time runs out before you are complete, agree to start next week where you left off.

Most often the conversations and sharing are ends in themselves. They help you connect and understand each other better. Other times, they lead to changes in attitude or behavior. The goal of sharing is not to alter your partner but for growth to arise naturally as a result of your time together. Support each other in your intentions to change and celebrate successes.

After a few weeks, it will be natural for one or both of you to want to use the time to address a topic or issue that is not part of the course. Continue to use your familiar format to explore and discuss whatever is important. Again, avoid blaming, criticizing or trying to change each other. Most of all listen and do not interrupt.

Step 4: Close the Conversation (5 minutes)

At the end of the sharing time, it is particularly helpful for each of you to review and even write a few brief notes on what you discussed. It may only be a word or two to use as a reminder.

Note any things you both want to change or work on. Discuss what might get in the way and what you need to do to make positive things happen. Be creative in trying new ideas that might make a difference. Be optimistic and patient.

At the end of your time, do not immediately get up and leave but take a few moments to appreciate each other and say, 'Thank you' for sharing. Complete the conversation on a positive note.

Summary

- Commit to working on the relationship and making personal changes.
- Set up a weekly sharing time:
- Quietly connect
- Share positives
- Open the conversation
- Close the conversations with positive intentions

Practices

Think about the following questions. Jot down a few notes to help you remember:

- Am I willing to make time to share with my partner each week? How important do I think it is?
- What practical difficulties (lack of time, over-scheduling, no quiet place) might get in the way of us meeting regularly? How can we overcome these obstacles?
- What personal issues (anxieties, hesitations, avoidance) might get in the way of us sharing? What can I do to work through these issues?
- What relational issues (conflicts, old hurts, emotional distance) might get in the way of us sharing? How can we work through these issues so the sharing deepens?

Have a conversation with your partner at your sharing time.

- Share your responses to the questions above.
- Discuss: How can we make sharing the most enriching and beneficial times for both of us?