

Chapter 3

Personal Change

To grow a relationship requires that each person make a commitment to become the best partner they can be. That does not mean trying to be a different person, or trying to change our personality. Each day we make efforts to respond lovingly from the better part of our nature, from a place of kindness and consideration rather than from ingrained unconscious reactions. We decide to become who we hope to be.

As a rule of thumb, responsibility for every problem in a relationship is shared fifty-fifty. That is not to say each person is equally to blame for specific situations but the obligation to solve core issues lies equally with each partner. If we take sharing seriously, if we are committed to making the relationship flourish, we have to embrace personal change as essential and necessary. We change to help the relationship grow.

Our most common mistake is to believe we cannot change because of the way we feel. We hold our feelings as more essential and central than our actions. Feelings are important but should not be an excuse for behaving badly. In reality, we have less control of our feelings than we do our actions, so it makes sense to focus on what we can alter rather than what we can't. We need to make small positive shifts in our behavior, our communication and our attitudes: we need to act more thoughtfully, communicate more clearly and seek to maintain a positive and helpful outlook on life.

The most effective ways to make changes is to modify one particular reaction, interaction or behavior at a time. Maybe you find it irritating when your spouse does not help in the kitchen or feel hurt that you do not get a warm welcome when you come home. Instead of complaining or withdrawing, consider different ways to respond. During a sharing time, discuss the situation with your partner and offer suggestions of what **you** might do to make thing smoother. Ask your spouse what she/he prefers doing in the kitchen; offer to do something she/he would like in exchange for kitchen help. Be the first to offer a hug when you come in the door; call ahead so your partner is ready for your return. Instead

of falling into ineffective familiar patterns, be creative and take initiative.

It may feel unfair and that we shoulder more of the burden for change than our partner. Think of it as an uncomfortable investment that will bear riches in the future. As you get upset or annoyed, take a moment to ask yourself the questions: “Am I over-reacting?” “Am I blaming him/her too much?” “What is more important: to get my way or to grow the relationship?” Often, our reactions are overpowering and, at first, we have little space to consider these questions. Change is not easy but with time and practice it becomes simpler.

Resistance and Defensiveness

We all tend to resist change, particularly when we feel it is imposed on us. We need stability and predictability in our lives: chores have to be scheduled, bills have to be paid, children have to get to school on time. Disorder and unpredictability create confusion and anxiety. We want to know what to expect from our spouse and what is expected from ourselves. We want to take it easy and not have to worry what will happen next. Settling for the status quo—accepting how things are—is not only the least demanding but also customary for our culture. We cling to what we know and feel uneasy about the new and untried—that requires we change.

The problem with too much stability is that it leads to complacency; we begin to accept the distorted or restricted as normal. If resistance becomes entrenched, if we are unwilling to recognize what is wrong, then we become a casualty of our own defensiveness.

Defensive reactions are automatic responses to perceived threats to our sense of self. We protect ourselves from anything that provokes feelings of self-doubt, humiliation and shame. That is not to say we feel good about ourselves. In fact, we protect ourselves most when we are self-doubting and self-critical. The more vulnerable and inadequate we feel inside, the more we hear every communication as an attack, assume every comment is a criticism. Then we don our psychological armor, fend off, strike back or withdraw. After the battle we nurse our wounds and plan a counterattack.

In general, we protect ourselves from feeling bad by blocking out information that tells us we are wrong or deficient. Recognizing our own flaws and weaknesses is painful and disturbing; it feels like a threat to our being. So we put up barriers to keep distressing information at a distance. Commonly, we avoid focusing on what we do wrong or minimize the importance of our bad habits. We are masters of letting things slide out of awareness; it is easier to disregard than to pay attention. Disremembering is a way to avoid facing the hard facts about our selves. We hide behind the excuse, “I forgot.” Distraction, forgetting, and procrastination are the main enemies of change.

If we cannot hide in ‘passive-aggression’, then an alternative strategy is to deny and strike back. We tend to think of ‘defensiveness’ as angrily refuting our faults and going on the counterattack. The pattern is familiar: “I didn’t do that—look at what you did!” We refuse the message and attack the messenger, persuade ourselves we are not at fault, that harsh retorts are well deserved by our spouse. That is how we get into blaming, critical fights. During these arguments, no one listens to the other—each is too intent on stopping painful information from invading his or her defenses. As a result, both feels attacked and ignored.

In this way we avoid responsibility for change, blame our partner for things that are wrong and try to change him/her rather than our selves. We overlook the part we play in creating or maintaining problems and let ourselves off the hook for doing anything about them. If we can convince ourselves we are in the right and our spouse is in the wrong, then our own bad behavior becomes excusable. This is the kind of self-deception that contributes to personal stuckness and keeps the relationship mired in mediocrity.

We have to embrace change willing and wholehearted even though we continue to resist, forget or blame. An enduring commitment to the growth of the relationship, a strong intention to become better at loving and relating, these are powerful means to gradually set us on the track of personal development.

The Process of Changing

Given our resistance and defensiveness, how are we to approach change? First, it is important not to expect growth to be

simple, easy or quick. We do not suddenly become reformed as a result of a single event or simple decision. Positive change takes time, determination and plenty of patience. Mostly we have to start paying attention and make a commitment to do things differently. Below are suggestions of how to tread the path of personal discovery and positive development. Use each step to orient yourself on your change journey.

1. Pay attention to the signs

Change begins with awareness—we have to notice that something is wrong. There are always signs and signals that tell us there is a problem. Our task is to pay attention and take those signs seriously.

The most obvious symptom is that we feel bad in some way: unsettled, uncomfortable or overly emotional. Transient feelings of irritation, sadness or anxiety are normal if provoked by particular situations. But if we are stuck in a negative mood or emotional state for more than a few weeks, it is a strong signal that something needs to shift.

When things are not working in the relationship, usually we sense our spouse is discontented; there is more distance or friction between partners. In a committed relationship, when one person is unhappy, the other partner usually feels unsettled. Caring couples resonate with each other; they intuitively share moods, emotions and even thoughts. Scratchy interactions, inexplicable misunderstandings and a sense of crisis are signals of disconnection. A negative shift in the quality and closeness of the relationship is a ‘canary in the mine’ that tells us to sit up and notice. The rule is: if one person is unhappy, both need to pay attention.

The world tells us in no uncertain terms when we need to change our behavior. Neglecting the essential tasks of living such as paying bills, doing our chores or turning up on time cause all sorts of additional hassles. These hassles are powerful messages. On a more subtle level, dreams, synchronicities and unusual events can be communications from our deeper self that we need to become more conscious and make changes.

Ignoring any of these signs or messages is risky. Problems grow bigger the more we overlook them. The Universe first invites

us to change by whispering in our ear. If we take no heed, it taps us on the shoulder. If we still ignore the message, it hits us over the head with a baseball bat! Notice the subtle signs and avoid the crisis.

2. Take responsibility

We know our resistance and defensiveness cause us to avoid responsibility for personal change. We may not realize that blaming others for our problems effectively renders us powerless. We cannot change anything we are not actively engaged with. Power and responsibility are two sides of the same coin: we are not responsible for things we cannot influence; we do have responsibility for things we can change.

Everything that happens in the relationship is essentially the concern of both partners; we are answerable for 50% of everything. We have to shoulder our share of the load if we hope to earn our share of the riches. That means stepping up, making the first positive move to resolve difficulties, owning up to our inevitable flaws and mistakes. Being willing to take responsibility and address a problem, is the starting point for transformation.

3 Make a commitment

Commitment is the center pivot around which change revolves. Without commitment, we make flabby decisions that come to nothing. Many a resolution fails because it is really a vague desire for change with no real energy or intention behind it. A full intention is an enduring pledge to persevere and keep working on whatever is needed, to remind our selves to stick with it—not simply a wish for something good to happen. When we get all of our being behind an endeavor, unexpected change begins to happen. Commitment initiates the transformation we aim for.

How do we maintain commitment in the face of the demands on our time and attention? How do we stop ourselves slipping back into complacency and forgetting? We need reminders, creative ways to prompt our intention when we falter or lose heart. Commitment cues can be anything: a note on your phone, Stickies on your computer, mentally rehearsing on your drive to work. Alter and rotate your memory aids if they start to

fade into the background. Like any ability, our ability to hold an intention strengthens with exercise and use.

4. Seek help

To think we can initiate real change without support is a delusion. We all need help, most often to get a better understanding of what is wrong. Human difficulties are more complicated than we first realize. Gaining perspective, being realistic and creating a strategy for change are all essential if we want to be successful. Our first intention should be to understand our selves and the situation with more clarity.

The oft-neglected place we should first look for assistance is from inside our selves. We can ponder, pray, meditate, watch TED talks and read inspiring literature—stories, memoirs and self-help books. These all provide an inner context that supports change. Our unconscious responds to these actions as if they are requests for help. Often it will answer through dreams, intuitions and unexpected insights.

Naturally, we need to turn to our partner for support and encouragement. This may be difficult if we are working on issues that get entangled in the relationship. Asking for help from our spouse makes us feel vulnerable but has the effect of increasing intimacy and connection. Our partner is a mirror to who we are and who we can become. The image may be somewhat distorted but it also has truth and value. We need our partner to be the friend who cheers us on when the going gets hard. Relationship includes the unspoken agreement that both partners seek and accept help from each other.

Help is available in many forms outside the relationship. Couples counseling or individual therapy is an obvious choice—if you can afford it and can find a therapist you trust and respect. Workshops and seminars may initiate change but the effect too often fades with time. A close confidant can be of great benefit but we have to be prudent: leaning too heavily on a friend sometimes come with hidden costs.

5. Take action

Nothing changes fundamentally unless we do something different: we have to take action. Until we successfully modify

how we relate and behave—what we say and how we say it, what we do and how we do it—the relationship will stay the same.

If we decide to be less critical, we have to work on saying more positive things and modulating our tone of voice in discussions. If we want to become more affectionate, we have to make an effort to hug, kiss and caress our partner more often. If we want to be less emotionally reactive, we practice restraint and take a few moments to settle before responding. Focus on making small attainable shifts of behavior rather than trying to change feelings. Keep repeating the new actions even though they seem unfamiliar and feel uncomfortable. When we change our behavior, over time our attitude and feelings will go through a complementary shift.

What about ingrained habits, those things that irritate our partner but seem normal and natural to us: how to load the dishwasher, where to put clothes, when to complete chores, how tidy the house should be, scratching where it itches, talking on the phone, checking Facebook, etc.? Changing habits is problematic if we only do it to make our spouse happy or less irritated—that may not be enough incentive. A first approach is to take the problem seriously and set aside sharing time to understand why these habits are problematic and what about them drives your partner crazy. If changing those habits is really important for your partner, request help in changing them. Negotiate an equivalent change of irritating behavior from him/her in exchange. Work it out!

We have to approach personal change with a long view—with patience and perseverance. Compared to our conscious mind with its rapidly shifting thoughts and feelings, our deeper selves are slower to change—yet the transformation is far more enduring. We want change to be quick and easy, even though we know it is seldom so. If we stay committed to and engaged with change, the easier and more natural it becomes.

Making an effort to change within the relationship creates its own benefits: we feel like a better person and become happier by making our partner happy. The more we practice being loving and considerate, the more love we receive in return.

Summary

- Growth of the relationship requires a commitment to personal change.
- Responsibility for every problem in a relationship is shared fifty-fifty.
- The most effective ways to make changes is to modify one particular behavior at a time.
- We naturally resist change and defend against perceived threats to our sense of self.
- Defensiveness includes avoiding painful information through forgetting, procrastination and distraction.
- We avoid responsibility for change by blaming and attacking our partner.
- Change is a process with the following steps:
 - Pay attention to the signs
 - Take responsibility
 - Make a commitment
 - Seek help
 - Take action

Practice

Think about the following questions. Jot down notes to remind yourself of your answers.

- How committed am I (on a scale of 1-10) to personal development and personal change?
- What aspects of my behavior and attitude do I know I need to work on?
- What do I do that irritates or upsets my partner; why do I not change those behaviors?
- What are my typical defensive reactions: avoiding, distracting, procrastinating, blaming, or other?
- What two things am I willing to do that will make a difference to our relationship? Be specific.
- What help will I seek to do them?

Have a conversation with your partner.

- Share your responses to the questions above.

- Discuss: How can we support each other in making needed personal changes?