

A Lasting Relationship: Not for the Faint of Heart

Life is difficult". This is the first sentence of Scott Peck's book "The Road less Travelled". Peck states that life is a series of problems, and our natural tendency is to want to avoid problems, instead of facing them. This tendency to avoid both the problems and the emotional suffering they bring is the primary basis of much of mental illness. *Mental health* on the other hand, is "an ongoing process of dedication to reality at all costs". It is a willingness to face problems head on and grow in spite of and because of them.

Since most of us have this tendency to avoid our problems to a greater or lesser degree most of us are mentally healthy to a greater or lesser degree. Some of us will go to extraordinary lengths to avoid problems and suffering and end up being "stuck" in our lives – because when we avoid legitimate suffering, we also avoid growing. Personal growth is the "gain" we receive from "pain", when our problems are faced with the discipline, perseverance and the hard work necessary to resolve them.

Many individuals I talk to come to discuss relationship problems. *Frequently couples assume all differences should somehow resolve themselves just because they love each other.* Conflict surprises them! Then if these problems are denied, blamed on the other or completely ignored, a relationship quickly becomes unhealthy. A healthy relationship entails a willingness to work through difficulties. Facing them directly fosters understanding and perspective.

A healthy, harmonious relationship is built by two people committed to doing so. Therefore, *the choice we make for a life partner is one of the most important decisions we ever make.*

When you want to create a healthy, committed relationship with someone you are hoping will be a lifelong partner, *there are both positive principles of pursuit as well as warning signs to consider:*

1. Before you date: Determine to build a relationship of depth and caring. This begins with you knowing what you want for your life, what your foundational

beliefs are, what is important to you, and what your expectations are – both of yourself and others. What qualities do you offer another? What do you want your life and your marriage to be like?

2. It's not just about you: The purpose of dating goes beyond having another person make you feel good about yourself, or avoiding loneliness. A good marriage consists of two people willing to move beyond their own individual self interests to allow new perspectives and experiences. There is an immense change from "me" to "we".

3. Why now? Make sure you are developing a relationship because you are ready to do so, not because you are trying to please someone (a parent, friends) or because you are rebounding after a recent hurt. **Warning sign:** Avoid being with someone who has had a recent break-up. They need time to both grieve the loss of relationship as well as understand who they are without a partner

4. Respect yourself and expect to be respected. If respectful behaviour is not established early in the dating relationship, it won't happen later, either. Don't compromise your values- if your "no" is not respected, then neither are you. **Warning sign:** How this person treats significant others in their life demonstrates how they will treat you. Do not tolerate unkindness, cruelty, rudeness or dishonesty.

5. Don't let the relationship move too fast. Take it one step at a time. It is hard to "cool down" a relationship that has got "too hot" too soon. **Warning sign:** The other person seeks instant intimacy. Someone who develops an immediate attachment or pressures for an immediate commitment may have unhealthy dependence needs.

6. Don't over-expose yourself: Don't discuss your personal flaws and inadequacies in great detail when the relationship is new. Don't expose your vulnerabilities to this person until they have earned your trust over a longer period of time. If the relationship ends, you will be unhappy with your private life being exposed to someone who no longer cares for you. Keep the mystery and dignity in your relationship. If the other

person begins to feel trapped and withdraws for a time, give space and pull back.

7. Don't depend entirely upon the other to meet every emotional need. Maintain friendships, interests and activities outside the romantic relationship even after marriage. **Warning signs:** Watch out for someone who makes you responsible for their feelings. Their emotional reactions (e.g. anger, loss of self control) are their own.

Finally, if you are in the process of building a relationship to last whatever difficulties life may bring, understand that *the ultimate secret of lifelong love is the by product of a steel-clad determination to make it work.* It is not a task for the faint of heart, yet it brings more joy than words can tell.



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Children and Divorce (and How Parents Can Help)

Divorce is a difficult process for everyone involved. For parents, it is often a time of grief and anger about the loss of the relationship, as well as increased stress and worry about the future. Unfortunately, divorce is just as difficult for children. Adults frequently underestimate the impact that divorce has on children's lives. I recall working with a young boy who referred to this transition in his life as "my divorce." This was a good reminder that this huge change had affected him as much as it had his parents.



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Like adults, children feel a range of emotions about divorce. Some of the feelings children commonly experience are discussed below, as are some ways parents can help.

Sadness & Grief

Regardless of how bad things were in the marriage, children experience divorce as a loss. This is true even in families where there has been domestic violence or addictions. Children may be relieved that the fighting is over (or reduced), but they also grieve the loss of what was familiar to them. Change is difficult for us all, and children are no exception. As the late family therapist Virginia Satir observed, "Most people prefer the certainty of misery to the misery of uncertainty." In addition, children no longer have access to both parents all of the time. I've heard many children say, "I miss Mom when I'm at Dad's and Dad when I'm at Mom's." It can be comforting for children to take photos or

other objects back and forth that remind them of the absent parent, as well as to have the opportunity to maintain contact through telephone or email.

Anger

Children often feel angry about the changes that have taken place in their lives. After all, no one asked them whether they wanted this to happen! Children are powerless when it comes to divorce, and none of us like to feel powerless. It can be hard for parents to

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Stop the Blame Game

The day had only just begun and already Tom and Jan were blaming each other.

"Did you remember to call Mom yesterday about sitting for us on Saturday?" asked Tom with a slight edge to his voice. "No, I was too busy dealing with the kids to get to it" replied Jan abruptly. "But you said you would take care of it and it's already Thursday. You know how Mom is about getting late notice" said Tom now showing his irritation. "Look if you're so worried about it, why don't you call her yourself?" retorted Jan defensively. "Typical!" shot back Tom, as he stood up and began leaving the room angrily. "Looser" muttered Jan rather loudly under her breath.

Tom and Jan spent the rest of the day not speaking to each other. Throughout

the day each replayed that morning's argument over and over in their minds, each time nursing their anger and resentment just a little more, each becoming surer that the other person was to blame for all problems in the marriage.

Jan went to bed alone that night. Tom went to the couch. Both lay awake, each feeling trapped, hopeless and discouraged - neither believing him or herself to be responsible for their troubled marriage or capable of fixing it.

Dr. David Burns, in his book *Feeling Good Together* states that there are three ideas that are the basis of Cognitive Interpersonal Therapy, which if we understand them, can change

our lives. The first idea is that "we all provoke and maintain the exact relationship problems we complain about", but don't realize that we do this. The second idea is that "we deny our own role in the conflict because self-examination is so shocking and painful and because we are secretly rewarded by the problem we're complaining about"... The third idea is that "we all have far more power than we think to transform troubled relationships – if we're willing to stop blaming the other person and focus



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An Alcoholic's Gratitude

Mary grew up with an alcoholic father and she promised herself that she would never marry anyone who was a heavy drinker. But now after 18 years of marriage she finds that her marriage is much like that of her parents. Her husband, John, drinks almost every night and quite heavily on weekends. Mary tries to avoid the arguments her mother and father had but John becomes verbally aggressive when he's been drinking and it can be difficult to avoid harsh words at times. Many nights Mary has silently cried herself to sleep.

Over the years Mary has worked hard to shelter her two boys from the effects of their father's drinking. But they are both young teens now and it is obvious to them when their father has been drinking. She has stopped answering questions like "Why does dad drink so much?" There is no good answer for that. Mary began attending Al-Anon, an offshoot of Alcoholics Anonymous which offers support and encouragement to family members and friends of the alcoholic. This was a lifeline for her.

Over time John began to realize that Mary and the kids were getting on with their lives while his drinking was getting progressively worse. He knew he had a problem. One day a close colleague invited John to an AA meeting to help him celebrate his own year of sobriety. John had not even been aware that his colleague had a drinking problem and so he agreed to attend. At the meeting John joined a room full of men and women all struggling with alcohol just like him. He listened to their stories which detailed many of their daily struggles but also their many victories over their addiction. He left that meeting feeling inspired and hopeful that he could stop drinking also. He committed himself to attending regularly.

Mary was thankful that John was attending AA but he was soon attending up to seven meetings each week and was often not home before the boys had gone to bed. Someone had suggested that beginners should try to attend 90 meetings in 90 days and John had taken this on as a challenge. Mary did not feel right about complaining about John's absence but she would make casual remarks to John that she was losing

her husband to his new found friends. So John decided to invite Mary to attend a meeting with him. At least then she might understand how important the group was to him. Mary agreed to attend the next meeting with him.

The theme of the meeting was Gratitude and several members got up to share their stories. It was a shock to Mary when John walked to the front to share his story. John explained how his years of drinking had almost cost him his job, his family, and his health. As he looked around at the faces he now knew so well he began to cry softly as he said "You guys have saved my life and I will be so ever grateful. I have felt accepted, supported, and encouraged at every meeting and I don't know where I'd be without you. Thank you." Then John sat down.

Mary said little as they drove home that evening. Although she was grateful that John was no longer drinking she felt deeply hurt that he could not acknowledge that his wife had held their lives together for so many years. She had protected the boys, made excuses to friends and relatives, kept his dinner warm during his many late nights, mowed the lawn when he couldn't get out of bed, sacrificed her social life, did the cleaning, the shopping, the cooking, the laundry and a million other tasks that kept the family functioning. She had done everything she could think of to maintain the semblance of a normal family. It now appeared to her that John simply took all of that for granted.

It is not uncommon for many alcoholics in the beginning stage of recovery to place a lot of focus and attention on their ability to remain abstinent. John had been self-focused during his addiction and is now self-focused on his recovery. He will likely see his new AA friends as very important in this process. Despite Mary feeling unappreciated she would be wise to encourage John as he attends his AA meetings and strives to remain abstinent. If John sticks with his program he will soon be back as a recovered, sober member of the family. And as he becomes other-focused he will eventually



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acknowledge his gratitude for all that Mary has done both before and after his recovery from addiction.

In this scenario, Mary received valuable support by attending Al-Anon. She was able to receive advice and encouragement as she learned how to address her own needs and how to best cope while living with an alcoholic. John, in turn, received valuable support in addressing his alcohol addiction through his participation in Alcoholics Anonymous. The following is a brief description of these two organizations.

Al-Anon/Alateen, known as **Al-Anon Family Groups**, is an international fellowship of relatives and friends of alcoholics who share their experience and strength in order to give hope, comfort, and support to those associated with the addicted individual in their lives. Alateen is an offshoot of Al-Anon and is their program of recovery for young people aged 13 to 19 who are affected by another's drinking.

Alcoholics Anonymous is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem with alcohol and help others to recover from alcoholism. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. There are no dues or fees for AA membership as they are self-supporting through their own contributions. AA is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organization or institution and neither endorses nor opposes any causes. Their primary purpose is to help alcoholics stay sober and to help other alcoholics in the process.

Books

**Marriage Can Be Great! ...
no really**
by Denis Boyd

**Parenting Teens Without
Power & Strings**
by Rick Hancock

Children and Divorce (continued from front cover)

cope with a child's anger in general, let alone at this difficult time. Let your child know that it is okay to feel mad but not to be mean, and help them find healthy ways to express their anger.

Worry & Fear

Divorce disrupts children's sense of order and predictability, which can be frightening for them. They may worry about who is going to take care of them, where they'll live, and whether they'll get to see both parents regularly. Let them know they are safe and that you will continue to take care of them. Routines and rituals also help children to feel secure, particularly around transition times, which are often difficult.

Divorce is also scary for children because it suggests that love can end. Children reason, "If Mom and Dad can stop loving each other, they can stop loving me." They may seem clingy and need extra attention and reassurance. Tell them frequently that you will always be their parent and you will always love them, and provide that extra bit of nurturing they seem to be looking for.

Guilt

Children frequently feel a sense of responsibility for their parents' separation. They often believe that if they'd behaved

better, or tried harder, things would have turned out differently. I often hear parents say, "I know some children blame themselves for the divorce, but my child knows better." Don't assume that this is true. Let your children know that the divorce happened because Mommy and Daddy had grown-up problems that they couldn't work out. It had nothing to do with your child or anything they did or did not do. It is important to remind them of this frequently.

Conflicted about Loyalty

Children often feel like they have to "choose sides" or love one parent more than the other. They may feel guilty talking about or showing affection for one parent in front of the other. Let your child know that it's okay for them to love both parents equally. This can be a hard message for parents to give, so be aware of the nonverbal signals you're sending! Most children are great at reading body language and facial expressions, and children of divorce tend to be experts. I remember an eight-year old girl saying to me, "My Mommy says it's okay for me to love both parents the same, but I don't think she really means it."

More Ways Parents Can Help

Another way you can help your

children cope with any of these feelings is to simply acknowledge what you see. Sometimes parents worry that naming the negative feelings they observe in their children will make it worse. In fact, the opposite is true. Adults and children alike

Let your children know it is okay to love both parents equally.

actually have a positive physiological response when someone recognizes and identifies what they're feeling. Other parents worry that they will "guess" their child's feeling incorrectly. This is possible—but if so, your child will let you know, and may even correct you!

It is also helpful to let kids know that these feelings are common among children going through separation or divorce. Children don't often talk amongst themselves about what this experience is like. Many believe that they are the "only ones" to have these feelings. It is comforting to know we are not alone.

If you are concerned about the way your child is adjusting to the changes in his or her life, it can be helpful to seek out professional help.

Stop the Blame Game (continued from front cover)

instead on changing ourselves...". He further states that change can happen quite quickly, but that we must be "willing to work hard and experience some pain along the way...".

Each of us plays a part in provoking and maintaining the relationship problems we complain about, primarily through our need to defend and justify ourselves. The problem with self-justification is that it tends to perpetuate the conflict by putting the other person on the defensive – they will try even harder to justify their position and in turn, so will we. What develops is an ongoing tit-for-tat pattern of score keeping and retaliation. This cycle has been termed "the blame game" because both parties take turns blaming the other person, while refusing to acknowledge any validity in what the other has said. By allowing ourselves to get caught up in this cycle of blame we provoke and

maintain the very behaviours we complain about.

The blame game makes us blind to the part we play in the situation. We will often rally support for our perspective rather than reflect on any possible validity in what the other person is saying. When we receive such support in the form of sympathy, it can serve to reward our lack of acknowledgement and instead, further enmeshes us in the problem. To recognize that we are responsible for the problem and that we can even be rewarded for maintaining the situation is humbling, but it is also the essential first step in improving the situation.

Burns states that the power we have to change the problem lies in the courage to take 100% responsibility for our part of it. This taking of 100% responsibility is not the same thing as saying that we are fully to blame for creating and maintaining the whole problem. Rather, it

is an assertion that in order for things to change and improve in our troubled relationships we must stop waiting for the other person to change first and begin making the change in ourselves. By taking responsibility for ourselves we build credibility in the relationship, which in turn encourages the other party to do the same. We no longer place blame on the other person but instead focus only on trying to be fully responsible for our own behaviour. It is the recognition that to deny our own responsibility and demand that the other person acknowledge theirs would only result in maintaining the status quo – i.e. continuing to play the blame game.

By having the courage to change ourselves, we change the relationship as a whole. By taking 100% personal responsibility we come to realize that though it takes two to play the blame game, it takes only one to stop it.