

52 LESSONS FOR A BETTER RELATIONSHIP



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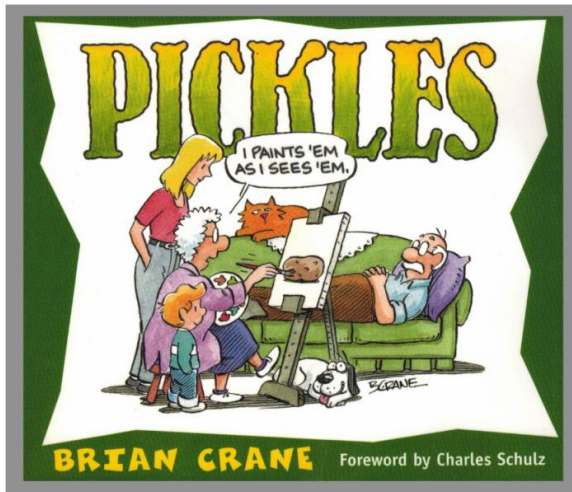
A Special Thank You to...

Sephora and Arthur for being the wonderful models on the cover and in the book.

&

Brian Crane, the artist of Pickles, who gave me permission to use four of his comic strips. I've been a big fan of Pickles since I was a boy, so having his artwork in my book is a tremendous honor.

The Pickles comics in this book can be found in the following treasury available in stores and online:



Please Note: All the lessons in this book are the responsibility of the author, and in no way should they be held against the above contributors who simply gave me permission to use their work out of the kindness of their hearts

Dedications

Chad: To my wife. Thank you for helping me see life in a very different way and for challenging me to be a better man. You have been the best teacher and student I could have.



Table of Contents

A)	Introduction	p9
B)	The 52 Lessons	
1.	A Letter to Myself for when I Turn 50	p18
2.	How Do I Know if I'm In Love?	p25
3.	The 10 Most Common Mistakes People Make When Listening	p27
4.	Treat Your Partner Better Than Your Cat	p33
5.	What Happened to our Relationship?	p36
6.	The Stereotypical Dynamic of an Unhappy Relationship	p41
7.	A Great Tip to End Nagging	p45
8.	The Five Love Languages?	P50
9.	We Hear What We Feel	p53
10.	The Ultimate Communication Tool	p57
11.	Tips to be a Great Listener	p61
12.	It's Always 50% Your Fault	p65
13.	Assuming: A Very Bad Choice	p69
14.	Even Darth Vader had a Good Side	p72
15.	You Might Not Be as Crazy as You Think (or your partner thinks)	p75
16.	Eye Rolling Destroys Relationships	p78
17.	The 5 Most Important Apologizing Rules	p82
18.	Beware of the BUT	p86
19.	A Tip to Help the Stressed People in our Lives	p89
20.	Stop Saying "I Don't Care"	p91
21.	Are You Too Kind?	p93
22.	12 Types of Words that Help Us Feel Loved	p97
23.	How to Carry a Conversation	p99
24.	How to Start a Sensitive Conversation	p105
25.	The Four Kinds of Joking	p109
26.	Is Someone You Know Passive Aggressive?	p114

27. Dealing with Victim Mentalities (which sucks)	p121
28. How to Deal with Criticism Better	p125
29. Three Valuable Phrases for a Happy Marriage	p129
30. You Might Suck at Communicating & Not Know It	p132
31. Men are the Head of the House?	p135
32. You either have ADD or You're a Guy	p137
33. Ladies, Please Stop Doing This	p143
34. What Men Like Better than Porn	p146
35. Why Girls Marry Losers	p149
36. Why Women Struggle with the Trades	p152
37. Men are Becoming Weak	p156
38. Men Aren't as Dumb as their Wives Think... Sometimes	p160
39. Why Someone will Choose Work Over their Family	p163
40. A Tip for Enjoying Life More	p167
41. Another Tip for Enjoying Life More	p170
42. 12 Reasons the Amount of Sex Might be Lacking in Your Relationship	p173
43. Sex, Open Relationships, & Being Happy	p177
44. Why People are Drawn to Affairs	p180
45. Emotional Affairs: Here's a fun topic (Bonus: A List of Reasons Why People Cheat)	p183
46. How Do I (Re)Build Trust?	p191
47. It's Hard to Trust When...	p194
48. Parenting Tips from Someone who Shouldn't be Giving Them	p198
49. How to Save Money	p202
50. The Almost Perfect Fight	p206
51. Fun Questions to Ask Each Other	p210
52. Going Deeper	p212
C) Conclusion	p218

Let's Get this Started



Introduction

I don't like books. (That's probably not the best way to start a book.) Actually, that's not completely true. (Starting with a lie is arguably worse.) I don't like how I have a pile of nonfiction books taunting me to read them when I don't have time... because I'd rather watch TV. (TV is my best friend; it's as sad as it sounds, but we don't get to visit very often, so it's special when we get to see each other.) At the same time, I find most nonfiction books full of filler and can be reduced to a couple pages. The one exception is a good biography. I looovve celebrity biographies. I promise I'm not a creeper... at least in public; I have a wife, so I know how to occasionally fake being normal enough.

A few years ago, someone recommended a biography, and since I have limited time, I borrowed the audio version from the library (I'm also cheap) and was instantly hooked (a much better addiction than some other choices like alcohol, drugs, or eating vegetables at every meal – gross). Celebrity biographies are full of great stories from people who have lived way more interesting lives than a regular person. No offence if you're a regular person like me, but we're kind of boring. You know how some people will say, "My life is so interesting I could write a book"? No, sorry; you might have some interesting moments, but overall, it's like me – who cares? (And yes, that's a jab at people who love to post everything they do on social media... a jab written with love.) Arnold Schwarzenegger, on the other hand, is famous and his biography is incredible (although long like his name). He's also someone other people won't mind hearing me share stories about unlike a random, regular person: (me) "I was reading a biography about Steve." (listener) "Who's Steve?" (me) "A random person no one cares about, but my life is that boring." Arnold starts with his childhood in Austria where he grew up without indoor plumbing, which meant sharing the same bath water with family (yum), and then as a teenager, he was required to be in the Austrian army where he was a tank driver (like an action hero). After that, he made his way to America where he was working out four hours a day, working for Weider, attending various classes, working construction jobs, and eventually, with some help from friends, he became a millionaire through real estate ventures. All this was before he became a Hollywood icon, which he was told would never happen because of his name and accent. (Someone was terrible at their job.) My favorite moment was about a picture included in the book of Arnold and President George Bush Sr. on a toboggan going down a hill together taken by Barbara Bush. It's an excellent shot with the perfect angle... because she was seconds from being run over by them, which is hilarious... until you read that this broke her leg (oops). Liking this picture doesn't make me a horrible person (a statement a horrible person would say). I like it because it humanizes these three American icons. It makes them seem like real people you can actually meet and have a

conversation with, which is what a good biography does; it helps you feel like the celebrity's friend. (I really need to get out more.)

The biography that originally got me hooked was Andre Agassi's. It was so good it made me want to watch tennis... until I tried and remembered why I don't watch it – it's soooo boooooorring (said as slow and boring as possible to represent tennis). The book is incredible at demonstrating the struggles of top athletes with their journey to success, the fight to stay at the top, and the painful decision to retire. Another great biography was Brook Shields's, which was extra interesting because she dated Agassi, and by reading the two books, you get to see two different perspectives on their temporary relationship – good times. The craziest relationship story Shields had, however, was with Liam Neeson. At one point they were engaged and when he went to another city for work, he forgot to call her... ever again. I'm not sure if that means they're still engaged, but I am sure that makes him a turd. (Ghosting someone is a bad way to prove that you suck.) In Shields's biography, the best lesson I learned was how alcoholism can really affect a relationship, especially between a mom and daughter. Shields claims that she was always very kind to her mom even though her mom struggled with alcoholism. At least she was until her mom received help to become sober. That's when Shields admits to suddenly becoming venomous, and that continued until her mom started drinking again, which is when Shields reverted back to her original nice state. It was like Shields's personality balanced her mom's – if one was nice the other was mean. The idea that we balance each others' personality is something to keep in mind when dealing with others, especially our partners because *sometimes we mirror someone's actions* (e.g. you yell, I yell) *while other times, we balance* (e.g. you yell at the kids and I become the gentle parent the kids go to for comfort, which can be a form of backstabbing the partner if we're not careful because we make them the villain).

In a good biography the celebrity appears to be honest about their triumphs and failures. Alec Baldwin's biography is excellent at this. The one chapter is a particularly interesting as it gives a glimpse into what it's like being on cocaine. (At least it's interesting to me since I've never

done it.) It's made even better when you listen to him read it in the audio book. (I also borrowed that from the library – yea, free books that don't clutter my house when I'm done.) Baldwin then describes how AA helped him achieve and maintain sobriety for over twenty-five years, which is pretty amazing, especially when he's as rich and famous as he is. This idea of sharing honestly is what I strive to do in this book with my main purpose of sharing a story being to teach a lesson (which is good when I'm a nobody with a pretty boring life).

My favorite biography is Rob Lowe's *Stories I Only Tell my Friends*. His second book, *Love Life*, is also excellent, but his best stories are used in the first book. Lowe's life was so interesting, his friend, Mike Myers (the comedian and not the fictional murderer... although I'm guessing you knew that), told him he *had* to write a biography because his stories were so incredible; now that's saying something. For instance, as a kid, Lowe made homemade movies with his fellow “uncool” schoolmates, Sean Penn and Emilio Estevez – the Mighty Duck man! (Old people like me will get that Will Ferril reference.) Estevez is Charlie Sheen's brother and the son of Martin Sheen – even as a kid Lowe had crazy connections. What made me laugh is Lowe claims his first big break was the movie, *The Outsiders*, and he lavished his castmates with praise, but none more than Patrick Swayze – he loved Swayze. In Patrick Swayze's biography (I also read that one), however, Swayze barely talked about the movie except to say how much he liked his castmate... Tom Cruise – ouch. Swayze's biography was painful to read in the one section because he gives a motivational blurb about how he had cancer, but he was going to beat it. Um, we are in the future and know how that ended. If you don't, one of his biggest roles was in *Ghost*... I think that's all I have to say about that. (And that inappropriate moment is why TV is my best friend.) This idea that two people can have very different perspectives is really good to keep in mind. In fact, some couples, even those who think they know their partner really well, can be surprised if they take the time to have deeper conversations. These are the kinds of conversations where we also learn things about ourselves as we share and process what's said. This leads to one of my biggest rules in communication:

Don't assume the worst of others. (We'll discuss this later... ooh, it's like a cliff-hanger.)

I'm guessing you can tell how much I love biographies because I keep talking about them, but as a therapist who works under confidentiality, it's refreshing to be able to hear great stories I can actually talk about, especially when I'm so uninteresting: (person) "You have a normal family, you don't watch sports, and you have a job you can't really talk about? Yea, I think I'll find someone more interesting than you to talk to now. I'd say no offence, but this could be the most interesting thing to happen to you for a while."

One of the best lessons I've taken from a biography was from Kunal Nayyar's. He was in *The Big Bang Theory*. He played Sheldon... or Raj; I always get those two mixed up. As a more naturally negative-minded person, I love how positive Nayyar is, which is best witnessed in his lesson for going into interviews and auditions: ***Go into the meeting with the belief the interviewer wants you to be the perfect choice because that will make their life easier.*** As someone who used to think I needed to constantly prove myself and earn other people's love, even with family and friends, this blew my mind. Nayyar's mindset will naturally reduce anxiety and build confidence whereas mine... not so helpful. It is also a great reminder that when we get interviewed (or perform), people are subconsciously cheering for us because it makes their life better. This also means, when we start a job, our success makes the person who hired us look good, so they should do what they can to support us. This thinking is so much better than what I grew up with – you always have to prove yourself worth – and something I need to continue working on (or I can stay the same and enjoy greater anxiety problems – tough choice). Do you see why I love biographies so much? I get to learn important life lessons from successful people while gathering a few great stories along the way.

To take Nayyar's concept even further, the people in your life who care about you want you to be successful both individually and as a couple because they want the best for you... and it likely makes their life better

because who likes whining? Everyone has a list of people cheering for them and wanting the best for them (or they've lived their lives terribly wrong). If your family and friends don't want the best for you, they suck, and you should do your best to be happy in order to rub it in their faces! (Arguably not the best motivation; I should probably work on that, too.)

Unlike the biographies I love, this book is meant to be concise and to the point (get it? I was redundant by saying, "concise and to the point" because I think I'm hilarious... yes, my wife shakes her head at me all the time). Time is a precious commodity, and I don't want to waste yours. (See? I can be a decent person.) Even more importantly, I don't want to waste mine. (That's why I said I was "decent" and not "great.") When I write a book, I end up reading through it at least 10 times, which means filler is 10 times the waste for me – no thank you. I have TV to watch.

Unlike other books, this has at least 52 very practical lessons. I say "at least" because there are 52 chapters each with one main lesson with many of the chapters also having a side lesson or two. This means you're going to be 52+ lessons smarter by the end of this book. 53+ lessons smarter if you consider my recommendation to read celebrity biographies as a lesson – you're welcome.

This book is also unique from other books because readers are encouraged to focus on one lesson a week (or one a day if you're in a rush) in order for them to be fully considered and/or practiced. You'll notice the lessons have been put into themes in order to help drive home important messages. You will also find that being emotionally healthy in relationships isn't that complicated. You might even respond, "I think I knew that lesson already." Fortunately, even if this is the case, reading it will reinforce its importance. Being healthy may not be complicated, but it's really hard to do because being self controlled (i.e. being assertive) can leave us twitching as it's the opposite of what we feel like doing. For instance, hiding from conflict (i.e. being passive), yelling (i.e. being aggressive), or rolling your eyes (i.e. being passive aggressive) may feel natural, but we need to avoid doing these things as they are very

damaging to the relationship. Fortunately, the more we work at being self controlled, the easier it becomes (sometimes), the more natural it can feel (on occasion), and the more others will respect us (if we're lucky). The best part about acting properly is we can be proud of ourselves, which builds our own confidence and, in turn, encourages better behavior in the future that will, in turn, help our partner's build trust toward us. This creates a very positive cycle that reduces conflict in the future – yea. ***In its simplest description, being self controlled and acting properly is being nice, which includes saying please, thank you, and I'm sorry.*** You know the rules good parents teach their kids? That's what we should follow for how we treat our partner. Logically, it makes sense (hopefully), but it can be brutal trying to be nice to the person we live with because after a long day and/or a history of irritations, we can have very reduced filters for talking and listening, and sometimes we really just want to be rude to someone (or maybe that's just me). Love, however, is about offering patience, kindness, and self control without being a doormat.

Why be nice? Because the odds are the other person will be nicer to us. Being nice makes our own lives easier. If you don't want to be nice for the other person's sake, be nice for selfish reasons: "I'm going to be nice to you because I want you to suck less... which I say with love." On the other hand, ***if we're mean to someone, we can expect them to be mean back.*** For instance, if we ever yell at someone, we can assume they'll yell back unless they're too scared to in which case we become a bully. If we ever yell at someone who yells at us, or if we're ever rude to someone who is rude to us, we are not the innocent victim; we are an active participant and just as guilty. As the saying goes, "When you point your finger at someone, three others point back at you," while the thumb is in its own little world possibly getting ready for battle (if you're cool enough to settle conflicts with thumb wars).

This book gives a lot of great tools for helping people know how to have better relationships, but it's up to you to put them into practice. It also uses some lame humor to make your partner look better: "At least you're not like the author." By reading this book, you're on a good path

because, if nothing else, it gives you something to share with your partner. There is good in all things, and hopefully, it'll be easy to see the good that comes out of reading this book

May this book be a blessing to you and be a catalyst to having a more meaningful and fulfilling relationship.

Author Suggestions:

If you're reading this with your partner, after each lesson you should ask a therapist-y question like:

- 1) What's going through your mind after reading this?
- 2) On a scale of 0-10, with 0 being not at all and 10 being the most possible, how good are we at this? What would make us lower? How can we move up?
- 3) Is the writer a super genius or a just a genius for coming up with this lesson?

If you're reading this by yourself, you can find a point from the lesson and ask your partner something like "I read that a healthy couple does (blank). Do you agree with that or is the author misguided?" The question I don't recommend, but fun to think about: "The author says people who aren't willing to read a book as a couple either don't love their partner enough or they're too afraid and weak. Do you agree with him or did you want to give reading it with me a try?"

The Lessons:

Let the real fun begin



Tip: You are allowed to disagree with things said in this book. After all, 10 years from now, there's a chance I might disagree with something I've included. Ultimately, the main hope is this book will help create healthy discussion and lead to you having a better relationship. That means even if you bond in hating me (hopefully not), my goal is still achieved. Good or bad, this book is a win-win. Have fun!

Lesson 1

A Letter to Myself for when I Turn 50 (in 10 years)

Please Note: When putting this book together, I turned 40. (I'm definitely not bragging... more crying inside.) The following is a letter I wrote to future me when I turn 50. This lesson is different than the others insofar that it's... well, a letter to me. (Starting off with some selfishness – genius.) I've included it in this book and made it the first lesson, however, because it gives you the potential for a more personal connection with me (you're welcome) while teaching a couple really great lessons. It's also strong role modelling as writing letters are a great way to reflect on the past, present, and future. At the end of this letter, I have three things you can do for yourself based on what I've written, which will hopefully prove the relevance of this lesson and that I'm not just really into myself.

Dear future me (a more wrinkly and hairier back version of present me);

If you're reading this, you're turning 50... that sucks. I'm turning 40 today, and I'm thinking this is terrible, but I'm sure you'd be happy to trade places. Maybe the technology will be to the point you'll visit me in your time machine or talk to me through an old radio like in the movie *Frequency*, but I'm guessing there's a very slim chance of that happening since, you know, those options aren't real. There's a better chance of you visiting me as a ghost, which means something worse happened than turning 50. Out of curiosity, do you still go off on random tangents like I do at 40?

As you'll remember (hopefully... or you'll have gone senile earlier than expected), we're not getting a 40th birthday party because we're in isolation with the threat of COVID. In the last month, the world has been bounced around like it's a shoe in a washing machine. You'll know the results, but right now we only have a guess as to how long this will be, how many lives will be lost, and how bad the global economy will be after everything settles. Fortunately, you've been very blessed and you have hope that you'll be fine. You do video therapy sessions (no holograms yet) and your wife is booked for her C-section April 30 for your second daughter whose name is still not even close to being chosen. Hopefully when you read this that'll be different (there's a good chance). What hopefully won't be different is Gracie (now two years old) is the light of your world. She's saying no and can fake cry (they're called the terrible twos for a reason), but her innocence is a joy to behold. The way she grabs her toy microphone and stands on something like a stool in the kitchen and sings is wonderful (and very off key). And her laugh is the most beautiful sound in the world. Her biggest laughs come when she hears you or her Mommy laugh when we're in the car listening to a stand-up comedian.

The past decade has been... well, insane. It started with turning 30 (that wasn't fun), and being at a special church service to which you brought

your youth group. When the pastor said, “This is for those in their 20s,” the young person beside you whispered, “That’s not you anymore,” which was brilliant and terrible all at once. Even though you were 30, you were about to go into a whirlwind five years of getting two more Masters degrees, publishing a book, getting ordained, going to Las Vegas and Europe, running incredible mission trips to Chicago, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, and then being able to propose in Disney World. Throw in some serious betrayals and losing your second youth pastor job because, again, the church couldn’t afford you anymore (and the next church you joined as a member was shut down... so you might be cursed). Those five years were exciting and terrible in the ways most experience in their early 20s, which basically meant you were 10 years behind growing up. Fortunately, despite making poverty level income (the joys of being a youth pastor) and experiencing some serious hurts, which made you angry at this period in your life for awhile, you’re now able to relook at it as a huge blessing (there is good in all things) as it was great preparation for you to become a very capable psychotherapist from your first day and give you some wonderful experiences you wouldn’t have had in a normal nine to five job. Overall, this will likely be the most interesting five years of your life as you are now pretty boring like most grownups.

The second half of the decade was just as crazy, but completely different as you got married, moved out from your childhood home for the first time (living at home until 36 is very brag worthy), completely renovating your house, and developing your therapy practice, which was booming before the virus hit. Before your 40th birthday, you had your house paid off and were trying to decide what to do next house wise (or your wife was trying to figure out what to do next because you wanted to stay debt-free). You had performed a lot of wonderful weddings including ones for Jim Carrey’s nephew and Doug Gilmour, which are lifetime highlights for you. You have four books almost ready to publish (including this one). In this half of the decade, you met up with your favorite actor, Zachary Levi, three times because God presented some unique opportunities including having coffee with him at Starbucks in

New York City because you had the courage to ask and he was nice enough to say yes. You had hoped to convince him to do a book with you, and even though he wasn't interested (shocking), it was pretty incredible how you even got to meet him once. These experiences remind you to keep persevering and to try new things even though you can't help but get really discouraged at times as everything you dream of accomplishing falls flat in some way. Hopefully it'll be different at 50.

This past decade you've worked hard to treat yourself the way you treat others because how you treated yourself was worse than any schoolyard bully. The change was and continues to be a lot of work, but it's been a huge improvement. That being said, I'm going into this next decade with an underlying fear I have to fight from thinking about because it can really bring me down and I have no control over it – death. This past decade you almost lost your sister to cancer, but she's fortunately still here and as vibrant as ever. The next 10 years, however, will at least see the passing of your wife's grandparents and who knows who else, especially when we have some older friends. The biggest fear, however, is losing Mom. She's currently 74, and in 10 years she will either be gone or at risk of dementia starting, which isn't much better. Of course, there's a chance of anyone in the family dying, especially with this virus going around, but I have a strong fear of losing Mom because she's always been a foundation for me and her age is in the danger zone. Fortunately, I do well to fight these fears and make sure we enjoy as much time together as we can together. I even convinced her, my sister, and wife to go to Disney World together last year, which means I got to go to Disney twice in five years. That was pretty amazing (and a sign of how manly I am.)

Speaking of death, one of the notable things I've recently done is finally come up with my list of what I want said at my funeral (it's not as morbid as it sounds). It took several years, but the list is now complete and posted on the fridge as a reminder of how I ultimately want to live. My wife said that my list are all things I'm already doing, which was a wonderful compliment and a sign that I'm on the right path. I guess you'll know if you've stuck to this path and/or changed any of the goals.

What Chad Wants Said at His Funeral (Without people needing to lie)

- 1) I walked with God in an inspiring way
- 2) I was a light to the world making where I went better
- 3) My family knew they were a priority
- 4) I surrounded myself with good people
- 5) I developed and used my talents well
- 6) I had some really cool experiences and accomplishments
- 7) I used my time and money well
- 8) I was a role model of being emotionally healthy
- 9) I was wise (e.g. I bit my tongue, picked my battles, let people have emotions, etc.)
- 10) I was a safe person (i.e. I was patient, kind, and self controlled)

As you likely remember, when you were a youth pastor, you wrote letters to carefully selected young people every Christmas where you wrote seven compliments to encourage them. For this letter, I've decided to do the same for me with my wife's help. These are compliments we believe God would give me if He was writing this list.

1. I've grown my sense of self worth an incredible amount (I had more to grow than most) as I am better at treating myself as well as I treat others.
2. I'm very good at taking responsibility for my part in a conflict and to pursue ways to improve.
3. I've been very responsible with what I've been given, especially money.
4. I've developed healthy humility where I observe without judgement and acknowledge my own mistakes and successes in a fair way.
5. I've been very good at forcing myself to see the positives in all situations even though my natural tendency is to only see the bad.

6. I've become very good at being thankful in all circumstances as God commands (although I'm aware this ability is at risk of being destroyed with something traumatic like the death of a loved one).
7. I've developed a sense of wisdom – I'm not traditionally smart (no argument from my wife), but I am very good at seeing things from what I think is a more God-like perspective and breaking them down into simpler forms whereas most people tend to complicate things.

Whatever has happened, I hope you continue on this path of developing your strength and that you can be a role model of how God wants people to live. I also hope you can regain some of your ability to dream that's been lost over the last few years and to be in a position where you can better accomplish them (like being a bestselling author). ***Your future isn't written, so live right and make it be as best as possible.*** After all, ***God is cheering for you.***

With much respect and hope
40-year-old me

What to Take from this Letter

1. I recommend that you write yourself a letter that you can read when you've finished this book. Keep it tucked at the back, so you can read it and be encouraged by how much you've grown. You can discuss where you're at and what you hope to get out of this. Maybe rate how well you communicate, reduce potential conflict, and resolve it on a scale of 0-10 with 10 being the best.
2. I highly recommend the challenge of writing 5-10 things you want said at your funeral because they give you guidance for how to live your life. Most people get caught up in the trivial things and/or get distracted, but this can help direct your life to be what you ultimately want it to be. As I've been told by people working with those on their deathbeds, when someone stares death in the face, they tend to ask three basic questions: Did I live? Did I love? Did I matter? Knowing

what you want said at your funeral and striving to fulfill those goals will help you answer these questions with confidence.

I came up with this exercise at my friend's funeral who had some wonderful things said about him like "He lived more in 40 years than most people do in a lifetime." I typically tell people to aim for five things, but for my purposes, I went with 10 because... well, I like to be wild and crazy sometimes.

3. Take some time to write out seven compliments to yourself like I did in my letter. You can do this as a couple or by yourself. Most good people have been taught to downplay their strengths for fear of sounding arrogant, so this can be very difficult, but it's about being honest; emotionally healthy people need to be self aware and self accepting. Having a list like this can be helpful when you feel down and need a reminder of what's great about you and why your partner loves you, which can reduce defensiveness and increase your ability to share love.

How Do I Know if I'm in Love?

I was recently asked, “How do you know you’re in love with your wife?” My wife and I have been together for over 15 years. If you saw us in public, the question this person would more likely have asked is “Do you *love* your wife?” I am not a handsy kind of person. Going through high school without the ability to get a girlfriend (despite trying really, really hard) while seeing couples making out in the hallways (classy) built a solid resentment toward public displays of affection. I swore when I got a girlfriend, I’d never make others feel uncomfortable to be around us... that, and I’m a prude. Maybe it’s because I didn’t get a girlfriend until I was in my twenties (yes, I was that cool), but holding hands is like a prison sentence for my hand. It wants to swing free or lounge in a pocket like a lazy man watching football and eating nachos (oddly enough, two activities I never do). If you’re thinking I’m weird, my wife is right there with you. I don’t like being handsy, but does that mean I don’t love my wife? It definitely means touch isn’t my top love language, but it has no bearing on whether I love my wife.

Here’s the thing; I know I’m not a romantic, so when this friend asked me how I knew I loved my wife, my answer was very real: “When I married my wife, I knew what her faults were and I could tolerate them.” (I said I wasn’t romantic.) Fortunately, I knew enough not to say this in my wedding vows: (bride) “You tolerate me? Be still my heart.” As unromantic as this sounds, it’s what marriage is about: ***I promise to tolerate everything that sucks about you, help you reduce them where possible, and do my best to limit what sucks about me because I love you.*** My wife almost didn’t marry me because she couldn’t stand the fact that I’m a “selective” eater. She says “picky,” but she can be momentarily crazy (one of the things I have to tolerate... and never say because calling a crazy person crazy makes you crazy and/or

going to the hospital... and yes, my bluntness is another thing she has to tolerate). With my eating habits, I see myself as selective like a vegan only less healthy (and less weird... I'd say just kidding, but... no; you're weird if you're that healthy). In fact, my wife needed to date me for eight years before she was ready to say, "I can accept what sucks about you." I, on the other hand, wasn't sure if I could handle being married to someone so perfect; she was and is like Mary Poppins: practically perfect in every way. (This might be a good time to mention that I can be sarcastic, which is a third thing my wife had to learn to accept.)

I know I love my wife because I know what ticks me off about her, but I do my best to be patient, kind, and self controlled even if I'm tired or having a bad day. If I can't, I try to give myself space to prevent snapping at her. That's proper love. Too many people get married over a feeling or a fantasy, but that isn't love. When we say "falling in love," the feeling and fantasy is the "falling" part – it's exciting. When you're no longer "falling" and you've "landed," we are actually "in" love. Anyone who's been here knows love is not exciting; it is not always fulfilling, and many times it doesn't feel like anything besides normal life. There can still be fun, but it's not like at the beginning when you're falling in love with everything is fresh and you're learning new things about each other. Falling in love is exciting because there's a higher risk of breaking up like skydiving is more exciting than watching a movie. (Unless you watch TV in a very different way than I do: "I watch TV sitting in the middle of the highway wearing a skunk costume at night.") On top of this, when you're falling in love, you're both on your best behavior as you're trying to earn the other person's attachment. Actual love is different. We tend to be far from our best as we no longer feel the need to earn or prove anything. We become more complacent and unfiltered; the other person becomes family, which allows our true self to come out, and can make us harder to accept: "You leave your dirty underwear on the floor and have terrible flatulence... that's so hot." The truth is love is work. Falling is easy. When you've "landed" in love there are always cuts and bruises, but you know that life is better with this

person even if it means they help you work on your patience, kindness, and self control (the nice way of saying they can drive you nuts).

My wife and I are continually working on our patience, kindness, and self control for each other (I'm really good at giving her reasons to work on this) and that is how I know we are in love. It's not as exciting as when we first started dating, but it's comfortable and safe like jogging pants and our favorite old sweater. Love is not a fantasy; it's a reality that's pretty darn good and one day, with some work and practice, it'll be really darn good as trust, respect, and appreciation (and boringness) abound.

This week may you realize what real love is.

Lesson 3

The 10 Most Common Mistakes People Make When Listening

Side Note: I originally wrote this with just seven mistakes that weren't as well defined as the following, but as I've used it in therapy sessions with couples who want direction for how they can grow, it's developed into what it is now. This likely means it'll still grow as I work with people in the future, but it's still valuable for where it is now. Ideally, you'll go through this and share how you can each improve at listening. From my experience, this is the most important

overall lesson I will share in this book. You may connect better with other lessons, but this is a great foundation for seeing we all have areas to improve even in something as simple as listening. It also points out that we need to be patient with our partner because we need them to be patient with us as we all have areas to improve.

While working with couples, I've recently heard a number of guys claim they are very good listeners, which makes the wives burst out into laughter. It's really great these husbands can make their partners laugh, but unfortunately, that wasn't their goal. As the wife's laughter suggests, these confident guys actually suck at listening. Whenever I hear someone claim to be a good listener, I have a Disney's *Aladdin* cartoon moment in my head. After the Sultan says, "The one thing I pride myself on Jafar is I'm an excellent judge of character," which leads to Iago saying, "An excellent judge; yeah, sure... not!" Of course, instead of "judge of character," what I hear is "An excellent listener; yeah, sure... not!" I especially like this because it's a '90s movie with an '80s reference by saying "not," which means I get to be out of date with two different decades being represented. That's pretty impressive (yea, me). The reality is if you're a couple in marriage therapy, there's a 99% chance you *both* struggle at listening to each other. I know I'm not perfect at listening to my wife (I blame her for that... because that's mature), but it's amazing how we are all guilty of doing some (or many) of these 10 key mistakes when listening to our partners. As in most cases, this is a list that's better for self reflection and not accusation... unless you're "mature" like I can be.

- 1) **We make assumptions:** Asking good questions helps the other person feel cared about and helps prevent wrong assumptions. Unfortunately, most people seem to have lost the art of asking engaging questions (i.e. questions that push the conversation further), which leaves the other side feeling unimportant and/or unable to fully process their thoughts. This causes people to feel unsettled and/or have some bottled up feelings, which leads to further issues down the

road, especially if the person finds someone else who is better at engaging them in conversation.

One of the most damaging assumptions is assuming the worst of someone else; for instance, people are too quick to assume someone is trying to hurt them. Assuming the worst hurts the assumer, “I can’t trust you to love me properly,” while also hurting the other person if they weren’t trying to be hurtful, “Why would you think I was so mean?” The odds are, however, if the other person isn’t hurt or you’re not in a fight, they’re not trying to hurt you, so if something feels hurtful, you should double check (we’ll discuss how later).

- 2) **We are listening for words to throw back into the other person’s face:** This is a technique people are taught to use on debating teams (I’m cool enough to know that). *It’s like verbal dodgeball.* You dodge, duck, dip, dive and dodge (an early 2000s movie reference) in order to avoid the words you don’t want to hear and then grab what you can to hurl back at the person in hopes to knock them out. This works for a debate team, but not with someone you care about (especially when you sleep beside them).
- 3) **We try to fix it (an issue for problem-solvers like men and moms):** Unless people ask for your advice, it’s best to keep it to yourself because the person sharing will likely feel controlled or that you’re implying they’re too dumb to see the simple answer. When people vent and share their struggles, they typically just want to complain and get stuff off their chest. They don’t want anything solved. They want to be affirmed and helped to feel like they have a right to feel that way. Venting is potentially great for bonding (a concept many guys struggle to understand), but the receiver needs to realize the emotion being shown isn’t an attack or something they need to worry about fixing.

Tip: Fixing includes meddling. Unless someone asks you to, don’t go behind their backs to “fix” something, especially since being the middle person likely gets you attacked from both sides.

- 4) **We boss the other person around (a problem for protectors):** Bossing people around includes saying things like “Calm down,” “Relax,” “You’re overreacting,” and “This isn’t a big deal.” Even if the person saying these things is trying to be helpful, these comments usually cause the other person to feel worse. If the person being told this is angry, they’re likely going to lash out (e.g. “Don’t tell me to relax! This is a big deal. I’m not stupid!”) or if they’re scared, being told something like “It’s not a big deal,” will make them feel crazy for feeling scared and make them panic even more. It’s better to affirm the person: (listener) “This is scary,” (scared person) “So I’m not crazy for being scared?” (listener) “Not at all, but fortunately, you’re so strong you can handle it.”
- 5) **We make the speaker feel stupid:** Top options in this category include eye rolling, talking down, correcting, demanding an example (e.g. “When have I done that!”), or disagreeing with the other person (e.g. “But...”). All of these make the other person feel stupid, which is going to cause them to shut down or lash out. Even a calm voice asking, “What do you mean?” at the wrong time can cause the other person to get angry and want to scream. Even worse is asking, “Why would you think that?” No matter how innocently it’s asked, it can make the other person feel they’re being told, “You’re crazy for thinking that.” When people share something, they want to be understood and validated. They don’t want to feel interrogated, be asked a question they can’t answer in the heat of the moment, or made to feel they’re weak or stupid for feeling what they feel no matter how silly it might seem to the listener.
- 6) **We look distant or not engaged:** When people share something, they want to feel like they’re a priority and what they have to say matters. This means if you want to anger the person talking to you, go on your phone, look away, pretend to fall asleep, roll your eyes, or act like you’re too good to listen (e.g. think of an obnoxious teenager).

- 7) **We need to get *our* point across:** A lot of people try to talk their way out of a problem, but that almost never works. If we want to reduce the fight, we want to help the other person feel understood, which means we need to ***give space for the other person to talk***. I was told in normal conversation we need to give three seconds of silence in order to let someone formulate their thought and answer a question. That being said, if someone takes three seconds to answer me, I assume I've asked a bad question and need to rephrase it. This also means we need to listen to the other person and not just plan ahead for what we're going to say next, which is a problem almost everyone has when things get heated. We forget that ***we need to listen first and talk second*** because just talking amps up the conflict or shuts the other person down, which leads to resentment.
- 8) **We take every word as Gospel truth:** When people are angry, we exaggerate (e.g. "You always..." and "You never...") and say threats or other things we don't mean (e.g. "I'm going to knock your block off" – an '80s reference). When we listen, we need to filter out the garbage to figure out what the point the person is actually trying to make. Things like "I want a divorce!" or a child yelling "I hate you!" in the heat of a fight are usually just expressing, "I'm angry and want you to back off!" Thus, comments like these should be blocked from our memories to protect us and our relationship (and ideally addressed when things are calm).
- 9) **We take things personally:** Yes, it's natural to take digs and nasty words from our spouse personally, but we shouldn't if we want to be a good listener. We should let what's said go through one ear and out the other as we try to find a way to help them feel cared about and understood. We need to remember ***if we're listening, it's not about us***. Of course, anger makes us dumb, which means at certain point we need to ask for a time out and give a time for when we return to continue talking because nothing we say will help when emotion is too high. If someone is upset, we need to protect them from hurting us.

Tip: When a spouse is attacking, the real message is usually “I’m hurt and trying to express it. Please care.” Thus, the worst thing we can do is focus on defending ourselves; keep it about them.

10) **We defend ourselves:** When people are angry, they don’t care **why** you did something; they want you **to care** they’re upset. Sure, when someone tries to punch us, we need to block it to protect ourselves, but as soon as we swing back, we are now in a fight and escalating it. The same happens when we try to explain what we did because it makes us appear uncaring. Even worse is to yell at them because then we just look like a jerk. Ultimately, the best way to block harsh words is to consider what’s underneath what’s being said: **Don’t get caught on the surface of a fight.** Look at the root in order to see what’s really going on. This is typically something like the person doesn’t feel loved, respected, affirmed, understood, or safe. Address this, and you can help prevent a fight; defend yourself, and you’ll escalate things.

So, what is a good listener? Simply put: **A good listener is someone who helps the other person feel heard and validated.** It’s about hearing more than just words; it’s about hearing what the person is actually trying to say, but struggling to express it properly. We need to go beyond the words to understand what’s behind them. Your partner isn’t crazy or stupid; they’re just trying to express their hurt.

This week may you try to actually listen.

Treat Your Partner Better than Your Cat

Do you treat your partner better than your cat? Some of you are thinking: “It’s a cat; who doesn’t treat their partner better?” Um, almost everyone, and I don’t just mean the weird ones who have a quorum of felines and have so much cat hair on their clothes, people with allergies can’t be near them – that’s a bad life choice... unless that’s the goal. Consider this: Your cat can be a jerk; your partner can also be a jerk. If your cat and partner are both a jerk at the same time, who do you forgive quicker? Be honest; it’s probably the cat, which means we’re showing more love to the cat than to our partner. Either way, ***how we treat our cat should be a benchmark for how much better we treat our partner.*** In general, I’ve always been bad for treating cats better than people. I remember as a kid being in the shower and seeing one of my sister’s long strands of hair stuck to the wall and being like “That’s disgusting! Ew, ew, ew. I’m not touching that!” After making a cup with my hands to catch and throw water at it in order to get it down the wall and in the drain, I needed another shower to feel clean. Meanwhile, after my second shower, I’d put on my clothes that were covered in cat hair and I was like whatever. Even worse, later that day my cat coughed up a hairball, and I was like: (calm) “Gross,” but it still wasn’t like seeing my sister’s strand of hair in the shower, which means I showed more love to my cat than to my sister. That’s not good (hopefully you’re aware of that). For those of you wondering, the hairball was cleaned up... by someone else. I pretended I didn’t see it, and quickly walked away; you know, like a normal person... a normal person who’s a jerk. I’ll own that.

As a married man, I need to be trying to treat my partner better than our cat. For instance, I have a friend who, when her cat is in a snit, just says, “Looks like someone’s being a moody wude-y kitty cat,” and carries on with her day. If you’re a guy reading this, when your partner is in a bad

mood, please don't say, "Looks like someone's being a moody wude-y kitty cat." I don't want to end up in the police report... again, but when your partner is in a bad mood, let them. Don't take it personally, don't try to fix them, and above all, don't get angry at your partner for being angry... ladies. I remember years ago being angry at something a co-worker did, and the girl I was dating at the time got angry at me for being upset. That didn't help me feel better – strange, I know. I essentially got punished for being angry – perfect. Since I didn't want to fight, I essentially took all my emotion and stuffed it down, which was the start of a collection of bottled-up emotion that later turned to resentment. That was before I knew how to be emotionally healthy. Experiences like these taught me to try to hide any negative feelings from her and be "fine" to prevent her from getting angry at me, but then she was angry at me for not sharing my emotions. How does that make sense? I get in trouble for having negative feelings and I also get in trouble for not sharing my feelings? Am I just destined to be in trouble? And no, I didn't ask her that because she would've gotten angry at me. Looking back, I wish I had simply said, "Please treat me like a cat. Let me be hissy on my own for a few minutes, and then I'll be fine."

One of the things I respect about cat owners is how they put up with all kinds of rejection from their cat like when the cat slinks away from your touch or randomly bites your hand after you've been petting her for awhile, and what's the reward? You get to clean the litter box – that's fun. All this is for the hope the cat will show you affection... eventually. Not many married people have this kind of devotion and hope. If you're constantly cleaning up after your partner, you're not normally thinking, "I hope we can cuddle later; that will make this all worth it." Instead, we're likely thinking, "Someone's not getting any loving tonight." Please know I'm not saying we should be a pushover, but we do need to consider what it means to be as patient and understanding to our partner as to our cat.

Finally, one of the things I've noticed is a lot of cat owners are like my wife who love to say compliments and loving things to our cat to show she cares. The most common thing she says is "I love your big, fat,

fuzzy bum.” Ladies reading this, you might be able to get away with saying this to your guy, but there’s a chance he’ll reciprocate with something similarly dumb: (dumb guy trying to be funny) “And I love your veiny, cottage cheesy, thunder thighs.” (Woman with dead body to clean up). Thus, don’t say things to your partner you don’t want mirrored back, which is also great advice when it comes to when we’re in a fight. Remember what you say and how you say it will likely be mirrored back at you.

The bottom line is... get it? I was talking about a fuzzy bum then said bottom line? Ehn? Sorry, weird thought moment. I’m a guy, so I can have these times. The bottom line is we need to treat our partner better than a cat. We need to be ready to show better patience and understanding while also trying to be complimentary and playful... although we’ll likely need more than string or a laser light for being playful with our partner.

Please Note: I didn’t say you should treat your partner better than your dog because... well, that’s not happening. Who can compete with a dog?

A Second Note: One of the most important things we can do is help our partner feel like a priority. When someone feels like everything else is more important, they either get distant or on edge ready to attack at the smallest things.

This week may you consider whether you treat your cat better than your partner.

What Happened to our Relationship?

A married couple once said to me, “We used to be so happy together. What happened to us?” After 20 years together, they realized their relationship wasn’t what it used to be. Can you believe that? Hopefully. From my experience, pretty much everyone in a relationship ends up asking this question at some point unless they’re too busy people pleasing to have time to question it. This can seem strange because movies make relationships look like the greatest thing in the world. When I officiate a wedding, it’s hard to believe this excited couple will one day hit a wall and ask, “Why aren’t we as connected to each other as we used to be?” But it happens. In Aziz Ansari’s book, *Modern Romance: An investigation*, a book I really enjoyed, he mentions a study that found the wedding day is the happiest a couple will be together and marks the start of a downhill slope for passion and excitement. This follows what I heard as a kid: When you get married, put a penny in a jar every time you have sex. After that first year, take a penny out for every time you have it, and you’ll find you never run out of pennies. Of course, this was a teaching for people who save sex to marriage, but it still helps demonstrate how passion dwindles after marriage. The couple I was talking to pointed out that when they were first married, they struggled financially while also dealing with crying babies, yet somehow, they remember being happier. Now, it’s all flipped around. They have money and they’re kids are teenagers, so they’re waking up to crying babies (they’re Generation Z, so they just constantly whine... no offence to Gen Z-ers. I shouldn’t tease them because I know they’re sensitive from being so coddled... I mean spoiled... I mean loved), yet somehow, they were less happy now. If they were honest, they were miserable. Since life is technically better, shouldn’t they be happier? Shouldn’t their relationship be better? The good news for this couple is they’re pretty normal. The bad news for this couple is... they’re pretty normal. All

relationships have ups and downs, and like a lot of couples together a long time, this one was stuck in a pretty big down and not sure how to get back to an up.

As I often do when a great question like “What happened to us?” is asked, I had the couple start brainstorming with me to come up with reasons why *any* relationship would have worse connection in a financially successful long-term marriage like theirs. After the list looked pretty good, I had them go through it and choose the top five likely reasons they were in this spot. By seeing the options, it’s easier to make an informed guess to answer their question. The following list is inspired by their answers. Go through the list and try to pick the top five struggles you think you’ll face in your future and consider how you can reduce the risks of them happening.

- 1) We became selfish and stopped putting the same effort into the relationship.
- 2) We take our partner for granted and miss the little things they do for us on a regular basis.
- 3) Things we didn’t mind before are now they are like nails on a chalkboard.
- 4) Other things became a priority like kids or work and we forgot to maintain a healthy relationship.
- 5) We’re worn out and lack the energy to be nice at home.
- 6) We’ve built up resentment since we haven’t properly addressed things that bother us.
- 7) Our partner is never happy with life and constantly wants more whether stuff or projects done around the house.
- 8) We look at others and think they have it so much better than we do.
- 9) We constantly nitpick our partner (or they nitpick us)
- 10) We assume the worst of our partner (e.g. we assume jokes are attacks).
- 11) We shut down because everything we say, do, or feel is criticized, so what’s the point?
- 12) We bottle things up and explode later.

- 13) We've become isolated as we lost friend connections or activities that helped us be happier when we were younger.
- 14) We've lost those who helped encourage us (e.g. parents, best friend, etc.).
- 15) We became rigid and stopped compromising; it's all about what we want.
- 16) We treat them the way we treat ourselves – nasty.
- 17) We obsess over our own wounds and refuse to apologize and acknowledge how the other person was hurt.
- 18) We see the other person as the villain.
- 19) Addictions developed and/or worsened.
- 20) One or both people became incredibly negative.
- 21) Things are actually fine, but it doesn't "feel" the way we want, so we're bothered by it.
- 22) We stopped doing things together whether projects, game nights, double date/date nights, etc.
- 23) We have nothing in common even TV shows.
- 24) We stopped taking care of ourselves.
- 25) We neglect our partner's needs because we're busy helping everyone else.
- 26) We get hung up on what the other person is NOT doing: (person) "They didn't put their dirty cup in the dishwasher again? Ugh they suck!"
- 27) We got overly involved in something else like a job, hobby, charity, or seeing friends at the expense of our partner.
- 28) We use our partner as our hypothetical punching bag.
- 29) We walk on eggshells afraid of our partner or conflict.
- 30) We forget men and women are different like how we communicate.
- 31) The person with higher standards thinks they're better than their partner because of that.
- 32) We emotionally shut out our partner.
- 33) We accuse our partner of something that we are guilty of doing ourselves.
- 34) We only criticize instead of making requests (e.g. "Why do you do that?" vs. "Can you please...")

- 35) We make lists of what the other person does to us and either unload it all at once in an emotional outburst or use it as evidence for why they suck and they owe us in some way.
- 36) One of us has secrets (e.g. we hide our phone, our money situation, etc.).
- 37) We make our partner the scapegoat for why we're not happy when happiness is the result of many factors.
- 38) We haven't dealt with childhood issues, which are now being transferred to this relationship.
- 39) We're addicted to perfection and nothing is ever good enough.
- 40) We forget to celebrate the victories and/or don't reminisce about accomplishments as a person and as a couple, which leads to feeling like we don't do enough.
- 41) We've been lazy and need to do more, but we're not sure how to get our butt in gear.
- 42) Aging can scare us and cause us or our partner to do really weird things.
- 43) One of us got sick or injured and it changed who we are.
- 44) We resent not being in the passionate/honeymoon phase anymore rather than appreciate being in a safe and comfortable relationship (i.e. we're "in love" and not "falling" in love).
- 45) We always need something to complain about because we're whiners (i.e. addicted to drama).
- 46) We like bonding with friends over how much our partner sucks.
- 47) We have family or friends who put unfair thoughts in our head.
- 48) We achieved goals like have kids and now we're left wondering, "Now what?"
- 49) Our goals are different like one person wants to redecorate and the other wants to watch sports.
- 50) We use threats to scare the other person into giving us what we want.
- 51) We get so worried about winning a fight that we forget the bigger picture like having a healthy relationship.
- 52) The one person is tired of feeling bossed around and/or controlled like a child.

- 53) The one person is tired of feeling like a parent or having to make all the decisions.
- 54) One person always gives in, which leads to one or both people becoming resentful.
- 55) We assume we're better or worse than our partner because of what we've achieved.
- 56) We say things like "I deserve this," and "I deserve to be happy."
- 57) We actually think the other person is incompetent in some way.
- 58) We use how much we make as a form of control over the other person and forget in marriage it's BOTH our income.
- 59) We forget to follow the rules we teach our children like saying please and thank you.
- 60) We don't greet and/or say good night in a friendly way.
- 61) We are too heavily in debt.
- 62) We struggle to balance our spending and saving (most relationships have a spender and a saver).
- 63) We put our kids before our relationship.
- 64) We start to share our hearts and troubles with someone else thereby losing the connection we had with our partner who used to be the person we went to in order to share.
- 65) We need to work on our listening skills.
- 66) We treat our cat (or anything) better than our partner.
- 67) Losing a loved one wrecks our foundation and changes who we are (e.g. when my mom dies, I am going to be hit hard).
- 68) We assume everything is our fault or the other person's.
- 69) We're bored.
- 70) We forget that love means patience, kindness, and self control (i.e. being nice).
- 71) We excuse our bad behavior like yelling, but hold it against our partner.
- 72) We roll our eyes or use a tone or look that says "You're so stupid."
- 73) We are too arrogant or stubborn to see a therapist or look up communication tips to help stay connected when things start to get rough.

- 74) We think not talking about our problems will magically erase them. (Sorry, guys.)
- 75) We think talking about our problems will make it better when it almost always makes it worse (Sorry, ladies; it's true. We'll discuss this later)
- 76) The one person is really long winded and doesn't know when to shut up; they even reach 76 reasons for something.

This week may you start to consider what you can do to help prevent becoming another couple who hits a really low point that makes you consider divorce. Low points are natural in a relationship, but they won't be as low or as long if we have healthy habits in place to reduce their impact and length.

Lesson 6

The Stereotypical Dynamic of an Unhappy Relationship

Picture this: A confident and happy looking statue of a person is in the middle of an art studio. For some reason, the owner takes out a hammer and chisel to start randomly hacking away at the statue. This damages it and puts it at risk of falling over. The hacking away can be a metaphor for digs, eye rolling, criticism, constantly correcting, bad mouthing, or always asking for more without appreciation. For this statue person, it

would feel like their soul is being slowly chipped away. This ultimately puts the statue person at risk of shutting down and/or exploding in some way whether at the partner, a random person, or themselves.

For a second analogy, picture a person pulling a chain that's attached to a giant boulder they're dragging to a finish line that keeps moving further away no matter how fast they go. As the person struggles pulling the one weight, there's a good chance they're going to pick up chains to other boulders to help others, which adds to the burden they're already trying to carry. This analogy represents the problem of people who carry too much weight, and do too much, which often includes taking on other peoples' burdens or trying to fix the world in some way. These people are stuck on the idea that going above and beyond what's expected is the norm, and this includes everyone having to be happy all the time. The constant struggle to reach impossible expectations wears them down and can potentially lead to a breakdown.

These two analogies are great ways to describe how people feel in an unhappy relationship. Whenever I've shown this to a couple, they immediately connect with one of the analogies and see their partner as being the other. Sometimes a person will connect with one analogy for home and another for work, but there's always a connection for each person in a struggling relationship. What typically happens in this dynamic is the person who carries all the weight gets tired and naturally starts making snippy comments, which chip away at the other person who feels like the statue. As the chipping grows, the statue person starts to distance themselves from the weight carrying person, which in turn, increases the weight carrier's snippiness. This cycle continues until it's somehow stopped or it destroys the relationship because both people feel hurt – the weight carrier feels abandoned and rejected while the statue person becomes a shell of a person.

The first analogy of someone chipping away at your soul is a great way to describe what a lot of women feel with their mother and/or their mother-in-law as nothing seems good enough. Whether it's a jab, a certain look, a slight, an underhanded comment, or some type of

putdown, it's like the relative is chipping away at the woman's soul. At some point, the woman being chipped away at is going to snap because you can only chip away at a statue for so long before it wobbles and falls. I'd like to believe that most mothers and mothers-in-law who are guilty of being the chipper don't want to wreck the statue, but in their own desire to help someone or maintain their own power, they cause more harm than good. What they say comes across as passive aggressive: "Is that really the career you want?" "That outfit is an interesting choice," "Why don't you call more?" "Should you really let your kids do that?" Other times the mothers aren't actually being passive aggressive; they are being nice, but the daughter assumes the worst. This is especially a risk when the daughter is overly self critical and/or passive aggressive herself and known for giving jabs and underhanded comments to others. ***This is the classic case of we assume others do what we do.*** I've seen both situations as a therapist, but the daughter making false accusations against the mom is the more common problem, especially when the mom is willing to go to therapy with the daughter to work things out or she's quick to apologize when told there's been hurt.

When it comes to marriage, I find most women connect better with the analogy of carrying the weight as women tend to try to make everyone happy. With good intentions, the wives try to be helpful, but end up being weighed down by the physical and emotional demands that end up being put on them while they ignore their own needs. On top of a job, many wives have a tendency to carry the weight of making sure the house runs smoothly and making sure their kids and husband dress and behave appropriately. Many women carry a ridiculous amount of weight as they try to make it look like they have the perfect life and/or try to avoid judgement – there's a reason there's mom shaming and not dad shaming. The unfortunate reality is a person can only carry so much weight for so long before they wear down and start to get resentful, snappy, and/or mean. This, in turn, will likely lead them to be someone who chips away at someone else's soul. It's a terrible cycle to get stuck in, and I know this because I've been there. For instance, I did this in my first real relationship that lasted five years. I was more like the

stereotypical female (I'll admit it). I was a huge people pleaser and was trying to do too much like a lot of young men trying to prove themselves. In that relationship, I started to feel more like a parent than a partner and I had some pretty snippy moments until my-girlfriend-at-the-time left me... for a woman. Oddly enough, this woman had a similar haircut and dressed a lot like me. She was like me in a lot of ways... only manlier. That makes a guy feel good. Regardless, my ex was a wonderful person and put up with me trying to do too much for five years – personally, I would've left me sooner... especially for a woman. Guys are gross. (Although I'm glad my wife disagrees with me on that.)

The normal relationship dynamic between a man and woman is where the guy feels like his wife is chipping away at his soul. Did you notice I've delayed making this claim as long as I could? I was trying to limit the women under heavy weight snapping at me. From my experience, a lot of women wear themselves out carrying so much weight and then they're too worn out to be nice at home and this problem is exacerbated if the woman is being chipped away at by her mom or mother-in-law (or teenage daughter, co-worker, boss, etc.). Unfortunately, people who are worn out can't help but take out their frustrations and hurt on their family with the biggest target likely being the husband, which follows the idea that ***we treat our long time partner the way we treat ourselves.*** It's amazing how often this is the case.

Now, please be aware I'm not saying the guy is innocent. In fact, he's likely making it worse on himself, especially when the number one complaint against men is we're thoughtless while women tend to be overly thoughtful, which adds to their stress. In a normal relationship, a woman has a standard that's too high and a guy has a standard that's too low, which creates a natural conflict that often includes the woman doing more work herself because no one else can do it "right" (aka her way). Meanwhile, the guy starts to avoid doing things because he doesn't want to be told he did it "wrong" again (i.e. he didn't do it her way), especially if what he did worked. There's also a chance he's just lazy.

Ultimately, there are two ways to help combat these cycles. First, the weight bearers need to learn how to be fair to themselves and carry less weight. This will allow them to enjoy life more and having less stress will help them not be so critical of the partner. This is what I've done since my first relationship, and it's made a huge difference in my life. At the same time, the statue person needs to help the weight carrying person, which can mean helping reduce their expectations in a kind way or helping reduce the workload.

The good news for weight bearers is they make the best therapy clients and they can find incredible growth with the right guidance. The good news for the statues being chipped away at is there are things that will be taught in later lessons to help them know how to better communicate and reduce the hurt.

This week may you consider how you can help yourself and your partner.

Lesson 7

A Great Tip to End Nagging

I have never met anyone who has said, “One of my favorite things to do is nag.” I've met people who *seemed* to love it and practiced every day, but when I asked, they claimed they hated it – shocking. I've also never met anyone who has said, “I need to break up because you don't nag enough. Nagging is my favorite quality in a partner and you're terrible at

it.” I’m not sure who hates nagging more, the nagger or the naggee, yet it’s a common household problem. Unfortunately, when someone is nagging, it often feels like they’re trying to be controlling or they’re acting like they’re superior. Nagging, however, is actually a sign of desperation. When someone is stressed, feels helpless, and/or not feeling cared about (i.e. a weight carrier), they will start to repeat themselves as a way to relieve some of these feelings and as a sign they have hope for change. Essentially, nagging is someone saying, “If you loved and understood me, you’d do what I’ve asked without me having to repeat myself.” Unfortunately, nagging is usually reciprocated with resistance, and the more someone nags, the more the other person resists. The person being nagged is essentially responding, “If you loved me, you wouldn’t act like you’re better than me and try to control me,” which is often said by emotional distance and/or shutting down. In this dynamic, neither person is happy, which leads to more conflict.

So how do we end nagging? The obvious solution is for the person being asked to do something to do it the first time they’re asked (I think I hear naggers cheering right now). The less obvious solution is for the nagger to relax and not be so uptight (I think the cheering has turned into threats). This is because people who nag tend to be really hard on themselves as they seek some type of perfection and/or approval from others (or the naggee is just a disgusting slob). Ideally both people will try to find the happy middle because they’re a partnership and change is never one person’s responsibility – it’s both.

Fortunately, I have a very practical and simple tip that works well for both sides to reduce nagging: ***Use a paper calendar.*** Paper calendars are amazing, but they tend to be ignored because people think their phone calendars are all they need. Phone calendars have their benefits, but there’s something about the tangibility of a paper calendar placed in an obvious spot like on a fridge as a constant in-your-face reminder while giving broader perspective – here’s the day, week, and month in one shot. You can use both, but don’t neglect a paper calendar if you want to make life more pleasant for you and your family.

There are five main ways a paper calendar can be used to help reduce nagging as well as help uptight people relax while bringing more order to our lives:

1) At the beginning of every month, write out your month goals. Last year, I started doing this and it was great because it kept me on track for accomplishing enough each month and not going overboard or feeling like I didn't do enough when I was actually overworking. At the beginning of every month, I'd write five goals to achieve over the next four weeks. Sometimes I'd even add a job part way through the month if something big came up as a record I did it, but mostly because checking it off is the best – I love doing that! These jobs were typically ones that took more effort (e.g. silicone the tub) or I really didn't want to do them (e.g. silicone the tub), which is a nice way of saying they're jobs my wife gave me to do while I didn't really care (e.g. silicone the tub).

To reduce nagging, both partners should agree on the goals for the month. This way both people have a say and neither feels controlled. It also means the person who gets nagged at gets to choose when they do the jobs and not be constantly reminded. At the same time, the naggers can relax and let these things go from their minds because the goals are chosen, accepted, and given a timeline. The great thing is if the partner doesn't do what was agreed upon, unless there were special circumstances preventing it, the nagger now has physical proof that their partner didn't fulfill their promise. They don't need to even get angry at the partner; they can just point to the calendar and say, "Now you know why I don't trust that you'll follow through with what needs to be done." If this doesn't kick the partner's butt into gear to do the task then something must be going on to prevent it that needs to be addressed... or the person's a jerk. Fortunately, most people are good enough to recognize they screwed up. Sometimes jobs have to carry over to the next month because they were bigger than expected or something else came up, and that's okay because it's now the next month's goal. We need to be fair to ourselves and our partners.

2) Looking at the overall year, mark on the calendar when you will do certain things like family dinners, friend nights, sex nights, girls'/guys' nights, date nights (I prefer double dates because conversation is easier and people are on nicer behavior), day trips, weekend and/or week vacations, when to put up Christmas decorations, and when to focus on certain jobs that need to be done around the house. By dividing the jobs up over the year, it can free your brain to focus on what needs to be done now while reducing feeling overwhelmed. For instance, if the plan is to paint a room in March, you can write it down and not worry about it until that month arrives. This is big picture thinking that increases the chances of you doing what you want to do without letting the little things and people pleasing getting in the way. This is also a great way to set it up so each person is involved. For instance, many wives complain their husbands don't plan a date night, but this encourages that: "Looking at the year, we've agreed it's fair for you to be responsible for planning three date nights: one in February, May and August." Looking at it from this bigger perspective, the guy will more likely be able to realize how little it is to plan three nights over a year, especially when he now has time to ask others for help, whereas telling him to pick some day in the future will lead to procrastinating and hoping it's forgotten. A calendar essentially gives "due dates" and pushes people to do what needs to be done. Of course, if the guy picks the date, the woman has to be willing to do something she may not have picked. Whoever picks the date, picks the activity, which is why I prefer to plan all the date nights; I want the control.

3) When something important comes up, looking at the paper calendar can be helpful for seeing how you can adjust schedules and arrange rain checks. For instance, this summer I had a flood in the basement that required I pull up the flooring and re-lay it. I had to postpone something my wife wanted to do, but the calendar helped both of us see when it could happen. After the second and third flood (it was a bad summer), I had to accept I only had time to pull up the floor and it'd be a month before I could re-lay it again after a couple more important things were done, which helped reduce some of the stress I felt by having the

basement in shambles. I knew when I'd be able to do it, so I could put it out of my mind and not feel so overwhelmed.

4) A paper calendar is also a great way to reduce bad behavior and the need to nag about it. For instance, if someone has a drinking problem, plays too many video games, is never home, or looks at their phone too much, you simply keep track of the behavior on the calendar. This is preferably done in agreement by both people, but sometimes it's just the observer writing it down and after a month or so, they have physical evidence of what's been going on. For instance, my wife and I did this for how often I looked at my phone while she was talking. I did it once in three months, so I had proof I wasn't that bad... of course, knowing it was being recorded meant I was being careful, but my wife still got what she wanted – me less rude.

This is also helpful for partners worried about having enough quality time or sex. As a workaholic, I know it's easy to brush my partner's needs aside in order to finish something (I'm aware I'm not a normal guy), but the calendar can help keep valuable things from being continually pushed off.

5) My wife and I use a calendar everyday to record 10 specific things that happened that day we're thankful took place (we started with five and it grew), which is a great way to see the good that's happening in our lives on a daily basis. We include things like family dinner, finding cheap gas, watching a favorite show, and seeing someone we don't normally get to see. We'll occasionally ask what's on each others' lists, which is a nice conversation. You can also tweak this to simply say or write one thing you're thankful the other person did that day. After a month, you can look back and be encouraged or see something needs to change. For instance, if every day the only thing a partner can be thankful for is we went to work, we should start to see how little we're doing around the house or this can be a sign our partner doesn't realize all we are doing and we can now clear that up.

May a calendar help your relationship as it's helped mine.

Lesson 8

We Hear What We Feel

What leads to divorce isn't one particular issue or event. For instance, as bad as an affair is, it doesn't mean the relationship is over. I've seen countless relationships recover and thrive after someone has an affair. It's like that event is a wakeup call. What causes the end of a relationship is when one or both people assume they are the innocent victim while the partner is the evil "villain." This leads to growing resentment and constantly accusing the other person of being mean when they themselves are likely the one giving nasty looks, jab comments, and holding contempt while the partner is walking on eggshells (aka as scared). If this pattern continues to grow, the couple is on the path toward divorce unless something big changes.

This brings me to a situation I faced last week. In the morning I often listen to a local news-talk radio station (yea for being old), and every morning a host who does a call-in show later in the day does a short promotional rant. I often enjoy his thoughts, but this particular day he talked about an issue I disagreed with him on, and for the first time ever, I felt compelled to email him a couple thoughts – bad idea. Whenever we approach a situation like this, it's good to know our goal. I had no intention of changing his mind, but simply wanted to send a couple new ideas his way in order to add to his conversation. I basically wanted to be helpful. The following is from my email:

My opening: Hi (name), I generally line up with your views, which of course means I'm a fan... the best book is one we agree with isn't it? That being said, I also enjoy your presentation and your boldness.

My intro to my two points: I have two new arguments against the LRT [light rail transit] that I thought you might appreciate and might

even be able to use as a way to further your own argument (because that's what discussion is supposed to do). Hope you like them ☺

(Two quick points I thought were fresh and clever – because they were. In fact, a year later, my one point came true, so I'm like a fortune teller.)

My conclusion: Thanks for having an opinion and making people think ☺

Notice the smiley faces? I was trying to be as non-confrontational as possible. The following was his response copied and pasted exactly as he wrote it including a lack of greeting and poor grammar.

Because 'trains' are not LRT.

Do the research in places like Calgary. (I've lived there)

Sorry, None of these points are valid and as I said.

Only Hamilton celebrates when its gets 'less'!

Let the new generation have its say.

This sharp and conflict provoking response was not what I expected. In fact, I wasn't expecting any reply minus a generic, "Thanks for listening and taking the time to send a couple thoughts. Have a great day," or "Thanks for your ideas. Always glad to know I have fans who listen and aren't afraid to have a different opinion." That's what should've been sent back to me even if it was a copy-paste response he sent to everyone. Instead, this guy decided to be rude with an air of disrespect and superiority. There were no smiley faces or witty banter – he was a jerk. And as a reminder, he said, "none of these points are valid," yet my one point came true and the other might still come true, which I guess means he's not only a jerk, he can also be an idiot.

Now here's the problem: People hear what they feel, and what I *felt* he said was, "You're stupid and your points are stupid. Stop being so old and let the smarter, younger generation make the decisions, stupid." I guess he assumed I was old since I listen to talk radio – not an unwarranted assumption. You'll notice this is NOT what he said, but it

is what I “felt” I heard. This is why so many fights blow up. We “hear” something that wasn’t said and then we attack. To make things worse, we later use what we “felt” we heard against the person when we tell our friends about the fight, which makes them hate the other person because what we “felt” was so much worse than what actually happened.

Because I felt attacked, this is what I wanted to write back: “Wow, your response was surprisingly mean (and juvenile). I hope I caught you on a bad day because otherwise, if that’s how you normally respond to people, you’re a bad person. When I offered smiley faces, you replied with an attack. When I offered encouragement, you retaliated like a schoolyard bully. Thank you for teaching me that trying to offer kindness can lead to having it thrown back in your face. If your goal was to make the world feel a little more terrible, you’ve done it well; congratulations. Hopefully one day you’ll learn how to be a decent person instead of a jerk.”

Granted, I’m not good at being very mean (I haven’t worked on that skill for quite some time), but guess what sending my letter would’ve accomplished – more anger. Fortunately, I did NOT send it. I wanted to (and I had a much nastier version at first), but I didn’t (it still felt good to write as a way to vent). This is, however, a great example of how something starting off with a good intention like my first email can be blown up to a massive fight where, if we lived together, we wouldn’t talk to each other for a week except maybe to start another fight.

I’ve been working on my communication skills and properly handling my anger for the last 15 years, but I was ready to unload on his rudeness. It felt like he took something simple and then turned it around and smashed me in the face with it. But again, that’s because I heard what I felt. I took a relatively small rudeness and amped it up, which is what we all do in a fight: ***We minimize what we do and maximize how terrible the other person is.*** This is why it is often best to not respond to a message right away until you have processed what you’ve just been given. This radio guy was probably responding to a string of attacks and hitting copy paste without really reading the messages (either that or he

really is an idiot). It's also important to work at our own self awareness and self acceptance in order to limit negative feelings affecting what we hear. Ultimately, we need to remember that people don't typically want to hurt us, and if they do, they're being a jerk, and engaging in a conversation isn't worth our time and energy.

This week may you learn how to better reduce the chance of an unnecessary fight by double checking what you "felt" you heard versus what was actually said.

Lesson 9

The Five Love Languages?

Almost thirty years ago, the book *The Five Love Languages* was written. It quickly became, and continues to be, a therapist favorite with good reason. The concept of the book is fantastic, but to be honest, it really doesn't need to be a book since it can be easily summarized: (reader) "Acts of Service, what is that? There better be a full chapter to explain what this confusing thing is because how else will I know?" You also don't need to do the online tests – just think (a concept that seems ludicrous for some people). Just thinking is advice that can be applied to many situations: Should I try driving in reverse on the highway, so I can wave at people better? No. Should I dip my partner's toothbrush in the toilet when I'm angry? No... as tempting as it may be... for other people. I've never even thought about doing that... never.

This book maintains there are five basic ways we can give and receive love, and everyone has their own preference for what's the most to least important. I like to picture this as a pyramid divided into a level for each love language like "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs." (I add this reference to sound educated). The bottom level, the foundation, is the language we need the most in order to feel loved while the top is the language we need the least, but still need in a small way. If all the levels are met at the proper amount, we will feel fully loved, which means we'll have increased confidence and laugh more. It really is a great concept, but the author's wrong about one very important thing. Sure, he's made millions of dollars off this idea, which includes many follow up books and speaking engagements, but he's wrong. I should know because I'm a ... well, I'm a nobody, but that doesn't mean I can't see the truth, which is there are eight love languages. The writer missed this because I'm way smarter (is that how you spell that?) or I'm bitter because they didn't respond when I contacted them about my add ons – one of those is definitely true. I originally figured out he was missing two love languages because he was missing my top two, and then a third category emerged as I was doing my "seven" love languages with clients and it was pointed out that something was missing for them.

The good news is just by looking at the love languages list we should be able to figure out what our most to least important languages are. Plus, if we do them with a spouse or friend, it can be a fun conversation.

Another consideration is I've found my list of most to least important changes depending on the person and the time in my life I do it. For instance, how you experience love with your sister can be different than how you experience love with your wife (hopefully there's some difference). There can also be variations in the order depending on where you are in your own life and relationship. For instance, when my wife and I were dating, she was obsessed with quality time as best experienced through cuddling (not my thing), but after getting married and having a baby that changed: (me) "Do you want me to cuddle you or get up with the baby in the morning?" (wife) "It's cute that you need to

ask.” Turns out cuddling is more my thing than I thought... at least when compared to getting up in the middle of the night.

This exercise isn't the be-all-and-end-all of relationship exercises, but it can give us a better idea of how to help ourselves and others feel loved. It teaches us how to better focus our energy on helping others feel loved and what to ask from the other person. For instance, why buy a gift if time together is more meaningful? This is particularly important for parents to realize as buying stuff for their kids is rarely as important as being engaged in their lives. This exercise also teaches us how we can really hurt someone... not that anyone reading this would want to do that, but it is good to know what will hurt others, so we can avoid doing it – emphasis on avoid.

Tip: What we do for others is often a sign of what we want done for us.

The following are the languages divided into the original five and then my add ons:

1. **Words:** Whether it's something like praise, appreciation, or “I love you,” words mean a lot to this person. This also means criticism is particularly hurtful. A more thorough list will be addressed in a later lesson.
2. **Actions:** As the saying goes: Actions speak louder than words. Don't just say you love me – show me by doing something that takes effort. For instance, my dad never said “I love you,” (words I don't like anyway), but he was always there to proofread essays and drive me to work until I could drive myself as his way to show his love. A lot of busy moms like this category because a partner doing something extra without having to be asked is often the best thing we can do to help.
3. **Gifts:** Gifts are symbols to show someone is remembered (e.g. I thought of you when I was out, so I got this for you) and understood (e.g. I knew you'd love this because I listen to you).
4. **Touch:** Things like hugs, cuddling, and hand holding brings the feeling you're loved. This is my wife's number one love language,

which is best demonstrated when she's shopping because she has to touch everything in the store... minus the sales people.

5. **Quality Time:** This is essentially 15 minutes uninterrupted by TV, phones, or kids where the attention is completely on each other.

(My additions)

6. **Physical Presence:** Just being around someone can make this person feel better. This can also mean people showing up to something you're hosting means more to you than someone saying, "You host the best parties," and then not show up. I know physical presence is big for me because I'm happy doing dishes while everyone else is in the dining room chatting (I can get socially burnt out as a therapist, so the space is nice), and when I was a teenager, I liked doing my homework on the dining room table in order to be around the rest of the family.
7. **Fun:** This is the middle ground between quality time and physical presence as it's about doing things together. This can be anything from watching a movie or going to a concert together; it can even be doing chores together. This is my number one category and a popular choice for most men as we typically like to laugh and avoid conflict. This means getting accused of being mean when we try to joke is really hurtful and conflict in general sucks. Let's just laugh and get along.
8. **Independence:** This is the category I added because a handful of clients found their main thing was not feeling controlled or trapped. They likely grew up with parents who were either micromanaging or never there. These people need space to feel trusted and to accept that they're considered competent.

If you want a fun activity with your partner:

- a) By yourself, write your own list.
- b) By yourself, guess what you think the other person's list looks like.
- c) Get together with the other person and compare lists.

d) Discuss what helps you feel more of the important categories. For instance, since one of my main love languages is Physical Presence, it explains why growing up I was doing homework in the dining room to be near people while my brother was hiding in a room doing work alone – we have different love languages... we were both geeks, but still different. It also explains why I want my partner to joke and laugh more; Fun is my main love language. This means when she perceives a joke as an insult, I feel a strong sense of rejection. Knowing this and following it can help prevent unnecessary hurt in the future. See how it's helpful, but not the be-all-and-end-all?

This week may this exercise bring a better understanding of yourself and others.

Lesson 10

The Ultimate Communication Tool

I have had many women in therapy complaining that their husband is terrible at communicating. The reality is, however, if your partner is terrible at communicating, there's a good chance you're not much better. That's a fun idea, isn't it? The fact is if there's a problem in a relationship, both sides are contributing to it. For instance, if my wife talks too much (not that any wife has ever been guilty of that), I'm part of the problem because I haven't helped improve it. If I don't talk enough (not that any

husband has ever been guilty of that), my wife is part of the problem since I may not feel safe to share, she hasn't asked the right engaging question, or she married a jerk (a possibility). Fortunately, the tool I will be teaching in this lesson will help all of us be better at communicating.

Before I teach this tool, however, I want to first point out a common misconception: Good communication doesn't mean talking *a lot*. There's a reason the classic adage is "less is more." ***In communication, less is often best.*** We want to make sure we present our point in a clear and concise way in order to limit misunderstanding and upsetting others. At the same time, there's a point where "less is useless," so we need to make sure we are talking enough in order for the other person to have a chance to understand us. This is a common complaint about men. Apparently, when we grunt and mumble, that's not detailed enough. In the show *Brain Games*, the one episode has a game where one person needs to give a clue for a book title to their teammate with as few words as possible. The game was guys against girls and the guys dominated. Why? Because guys' brains are designed for talking less while girls' brains are better at sharing more. Most people seem to instinctively know this. For instance, if you heard there was a relationship problem, who do you assume wanted to talk about it? If you guessed male... you're probably joking. This is why, when I was younger and shy, at a social event I often gravitated toward women because I assumed they'd be better at talking, which took the pressure off of me to carry the conversation. People who talk more can be very helpful, especially as a parent. As a talk-less person, I can avoid giving wrong facts and I can keep things simple, but my wife is amazing at talking with our 17-month-old daughter about absolutely nothing, which is great for our daughter's verbal skills development. It also makes it more fun for her while I'm a bit boring. Is this a possible reason God wanted women raising the kids while men worked the fields and hunted? I don't know, but it makes sense. As a hunter, you need to shut up or you'll scare away the animals. I know some women who'd end up starving because they couldn't handle the silence. I'm not saying my wife, but... Talking less and more both have their advantages and disadvantages.

Fun Tip: If men naturally talk less, it's safe to assume our brains have less attention spans, which is why women can both talk and listen for a ridiculously long time... at least it's ridiculously long to me. Women may complain their husbands don't listen, but that may be a sign he knows he's not going to last the whole story, so why bother trying, or she's talked so much already his brain has shut off ... or maybe he's just a jerk.

Okay, so what is this amazing communication tool I was supposed to write about? (I can sometimes talk too much – you're welcome). Like most great things, this is incredibly simple. All it involves is saying two words: yes and. In improv, there is a game called *Yes And*. The game starts with a scene between two people and every sentence needs to start with "No, and...": (person1) "No, and we should go to the store." (person2) "No, and we should get a drink." (person1) "No, and we should go for a snack." (person2) "No, and we will have fun." Even though both people are ultimately agreeing, by saying "No, and..." you end up wanting to scream at each other. The second part of the game is to do a scene with saying "Yes, and...": (person1) "Yes, and we should go to the store." (person2) "Yes, and we should get a drink." (person1) "Yes, and we should get a snack." (person2) "Yes, and we will have fun." Can you feel the difference? When someone says no it makes you want to hit them while someone saying yes feels natural. This is what we want to do in our normal conversations. We want to say, "Yes, and..." although typically without saying, "Yes, and." For instance, if my wife came in the room and yelled, "You're such a thoughtless jerk!" I would ideally respond in a calm voice, "I'm guessing I've done something wrong." Notice there's no defensiveness? It's saying "yes" without the "yes." In this situation, a possible reply could be, "Ya think? I've told you not to leave dishes in the sink!" Again, I will want to say "yes" to her, "Yes, you have. I screwed up. I need to smarten up." How's she going to react? "Well... okay... you get it (leaves room a little confused there wasn't more of a fight)." By saying "yes," you help the other person feel heard and cared about. The same thing happens with bullies: (bully) "You're stupid." (me) "I'm the stupidest." (bully) "You're like

soooo stupid.” (me) “Yeah, that’s why I failed the math test.” (bully)
“Yeah... why aren’t you getting angry? This isn’t fun.” Saying yes, defuses the situation. There’s no argument or any sense of weakness. It maintains an equal balance between the two people.

Tip: “But” is a form of “no,” and should be avoided, especially in apologies or saying, “I love you...”

When you start watching for this in conversation, you’ll be amazed at how many times we say no to people without meaning to do it. I once worked with a family, and after explaining this idea it was realized that the one person started every response with “No.” Even if they agreed, they started talking by saying, “No.” It was like “no” was their “um.” Saying yes is important, however, because it affirms the other person. One of the most common problems for couples who are struggling is we forget to affirm the other person, and we go straight to our point. When we first start dating, we’re better at affirming, but then something changes and we get more selfish and guarded with a greater risk of attacking. Attacking is typically done to try to shut the other person down because subconsciously we believe if the other person isn’t talking, they’re fine and we’re safe/in control. This method, unfortunately, leads to hurt and resentment. Communication isn’t an “us versus them.” There is no opponent. When communicating, the stronger one doesn’t win because there is no “winner.” Communication isn’t like boxing. It’s not about trying to block the other person’s shots while trying to get in a couple good hits ourselves. Instead, when you help the other person feel understood, they are more likely going to be open to understanding you, and the best way to do this is by saying some type of “yes” to them.

So, what about correcting bad behavior? Sometimes we can “Yes and” our kids’ behavior. I have pretty good luck when my daughter whines to join her in the whining, and it makes her laugh. Sometimes, however, we need to create firm boundaries – No. Parents who say, “No thank-you,” to their kids make me cringe – say “No.” Let your no be no. Being a parent is different than a partner. In the hypothetical case of my wife saying I was a thoughtless jerk, I would agree in the moment and

approach her later when she was calm (anger makes us dumb, so don't engage with an angry person). We'll get more into how to respond to situations like this later. For now, the key is to remember we need to try to "Yes and."

This week may we focus on saying yes to help the other person feel understood.

Lesson 11

Tips to be a Great Listener

In previous lessons, I listed 10 mistakes people make when listening and the importance of saying "Yes and," but you may be wondering, are there any more practical tips to be a great listener? If you did, you're in luck. If you didn't, step it up! (Criticism like this is not on my list – strange, I know). ***A great listener is someone who helps the other person feel heard and affirms them in some way.*** Following the "Yes and," idea, we need to help people feel like we "get" them and they're not foolish for thinking the way they do. For instance, I'm a dedicated Christian (I'm an ordained pastor, so clearly, I'm into it), and when I talk with atheists, I ask them about their beliefs and let them share while I "Yes and" them in order to help them feel heard and respected. I'll say things like "Yeah, it's strange that a loving God allows so much suffering" and "Yeah, the Bible was written and passed down by people, which means there are risks to its authenticity. The one risk I find is..."

Ultimately, I shouldn't expect them to care about my beliefs if they don't feel I care about theirs. Fortunately, whenever I've done this, the other person has always been kind back. I let them speak, and when they feel safe and cared about, they're open to let me speak. If I shut someone down, they're not going to listen to me no matter how smart I sound.

The following are practical tips I try to use in order to help people feel heard and understood.

- 1) ***Affirm What's Said:*** Following the "Yes and" idea, there are different phrases that can work like "That's clever," "I see what you're saying," "I never thought of that before," and "That's a good point."
- 2) ***Know When to Leave it Alone:*** Awhile ago my wife came in the house because she had broken her nail gardening (perish the thought) and her hands dirty from the garden hose (oh, the humanity), and she lost her mind (she always finds it later). I wanted to say, "Calm down," or "What's the big deal?" but instead I said nothing (and avoided a hospital visit). I didn't check if she was okay because I was scared of poking the bear and instead let it pass. We have to be careful not to just bury our heads in the sand, but this was a moment my wife needed to have (better in the house than outside for the neighbors to hear) and I needed to let her vent without judgement or annoying questions. In the bigger picture, I needed to be happy she felt safe enough to express herself in front of me.
- 3) ***Ask for a Few Minutes to Finish What You're Doing:*** Sometimes we need a minute to finish something in order to pay better attention. This doesn't mean "Can this wait until after the game?" because that makes people feel less important, but if I'm writing and need to finish a thought, I should ask my wife for a minute because otherwise I won't be able to focus on her. Plus, if she interrupts me a lot and I never finish my thought, there's a risk I'll get annoyed with her because it can feel like what I'm doing is never as important as her thing.
- 4) ***To Clarify:*** (There are two ways to use this and they will be explained in future lessons because they are so important, they deserve more attention.

- 5) **Ask Engaging Questions:** Questions are always a good way to add to a conversation, but some questions are better than others. For instance, closed ended questions, those that can be answered with one word, are rarely helpful for engaging into conversation whereas open ended questions, questions that require more than one word, can. For instance, a question like “What was the best part of your day?” gets the person thinking unlike “How are you?” which typically gets an automatic answer of “Fine,” because it’s more of a greeting than question.
- 6) **Make a Guess:** For instance, “I’m guessing that really hurt,” and “Wow, that must have made you want to scream at that person,” can validate a person and help them feel safe enough to add more to their story.
- 7) **Ask Understanding Questions/Statements:** For example: “Are you trying to say...?” or “So what you’re saying is...” are good while asking, “What do you mean?” sounds snarky.
- 8) **Ask Them to Define Things:** This can help reduce wrong assumptions and help the other person be clear as to what they’re saying because sometimes they don’t even know: “When you say (thing), what do you mean by that?” and “What does [insert thing] mean to you?”
- 9) **Ask for More:** Like most of my suggestions, this one is as simple as it sounds: “Tell me more about...”
- 10) **Offer a Comparison:** Sometimes it can help if you offer a cliché or an analogy that summarizes the person’s point: “So is that like...?”
- 11) **Call Back:** In stand-up comedy, a call back is referencing a joke you made earlier. In normal conversations, this is similar because you reference something the person said earlier like “And this follows what you said earlier when you said...” or “Oh, and that’s why (thing) stood out to you.”
- 12) **Repeat:** Repeat back what people say whether paraphrased or with the same words they use. Be careful how often you do this or you can sound insane or you can sound insane or you can sound insane.
- 13) **Mirror the Speaker:** People feel more connection when we try to have a similar energy, facial expression, and posture as they do. Once,

while my youth group was helping in a nursing home, an elderly woman I'd never met before started talking to me. I simply followed her lead of smiling and laughing. One of the kids saw me and was amazed because the conversation lasted for about 20 minutes and she was speaking in a language I didn't know. You might be wondering, "Did she also have great conversations with walls?" but she was pretty with it. Either way, I got to see first hand how mirroring someone can help them feel heard.

- 14) ***Half Listen (Don't get lost in the details):*** Sometimes the worst thing we can do is fully listen. When people are upset, they're going to exaggerate and say things they don't mean. In times like these you can pretty much ignore everything they say and simply throw in something like "That sucks," "That's terrible," and "You must be really hurt," and they'll think you're a great listener. Don't get lost in the words; focus on validating the speaker.
- 15) ***Avoid Distractions:*** To avoid visual distractions, you can say you need to move over like at a restaurant when a screen will be a problem for you. You can also ask for a second to put your phone away and the person will likely appreciate the gesture.
- 16) ***Call a Time Out with a Time:*** Anger and fear make people dumb, so we need to take a break when things start to get ugly. Ask to go to the bathroom or to come back in an hour when you've had a chance to process what's been said. A lot of people walk away, but it's important to give a time, so the other person knows you're returning and not just running away.
- 17) ***One Sentence Summary:*** Every essay needs a thesis and every rant needs a point. After someone rambles for a long time, I'll sometimes respond, "Wow, sounds like you have a lot going on there. So I don't screw up, what is the most important thing for me to take from that?" It can seem therapy, but it can also be great for both you as the listener and them as the speaker to know what they're really looking for from you.
- 18) ***Ask Permission to Give a Solution:*** Trying to fix the person's problem often leads to the person feeling like you're somehow superior, but if you really want to offer an idea, ask: "Can I make a

suggestion?” or “Can I give you something to consider?” By asking permission, the other person has the option to say no, which helps reduce the risk of them feeling disrespected.

This week may you and your partner see how you can be better listeners.

Lesson 12

It's Always 50% Your Fault

In my therapy practice, I have found there are three main groups of people when it comes to conflict. The most common of these is the “it’s all *my* fault” people who are brilliant at making everything that goes wrong somehow their fault. I once had someone apologize for the weather and admitted they felt responsible for it not being nicer out. This type of person tends to be so overly nice to others, they end up being mean to themselves. The second type is the “it’s all *your* fault” people who can be impossible to deal with because they refuse to accept they did anything wrong. The third type are a variation of the “it’s all *your* fault.” These people are super confusing because they use the “it’s all my fault” as a way to underhandedly say “it’s all your fault,” so they’re actually more like the second kind of person, but they’re in disguise. This is the person who plays the victim as an attack: (example person) “Well fine! You’re right! It’s all my fault.” Notice the exclamation marks? It’s not a gentle: “I can’t believe I could do this to you; I’m so sorry.” Instead, it’s like “Fine! I’ll jump off this cliff, so you can be

happy!” This is a full-on attack that is either loud or really cold. This kind of behavior is confusing because it’s contradictory: I’m attacking you by attacking me. A physical example of this would be someone cutting themselves and then saying to the person, “This is your fault.” See how nasty that is? Yet this is similar to what we do when we coldly say, “Fine! Just leave me to suffer. You clearly don’t care.” This victim attacking style that uses a guilt trip to get their way is by far the worst type of person to deal with because it makes you torn between carrying unnecessary guilt and wanting to slap the so-called victim. These people are incredibly frustrating because there is no reasoning with them. It’s as if they just want you to feel like garbage when really that is collateral damage for them getting their way. Depending on the person doing it, this is either “I’m punishing you for not giving me my way because I am in some way more important,” or it’s “I’m suffering, so you’re going to suffer with me.” Here’s a logical tip: Avoid these people as best you can or if you can’t, keep them at an emotional distance because they are toxic. What really sucks about these people is if you try to tell them they’re hurting you, they will use it as a way to attack you and further make you feel like garbage as they are champions at twisting things to be your fault and you end up apologizing for the hurt they caused you.

Even though the basic person who is an “it’s all *my* fault” or an “it’s all *your* fault” is better than the third type, the attacking victim, they are still, how you say, annoying. If someone is an “it’s all *your* fault” person who is hurling all the blame at you, they’re annoying, but at least you can fight back and you can feel some sense of empowerment in your own anger. In this instance, your relationship is damaged because of the fight, but at least there’s a chance you can feel some vindication as you both get out emotion. If the other person is the “it’s all *my* fault” person, they take all the blame, which can make resolution difficult because they just beat themselves up. The “it’s all *my* fault” people aren’t trying to make others feel guilt like the attacking victim, after all it’s all about them not being good enough, but you can’t help but feel bad in some way when someone is beating themselves up. Even worse, if you share this hurts you, the “it’s all *my* fault” people will beat themselves up even more for

hurting you because hurting you is the last thing they'd want to do. Unfortunately, the "it's all *my* fault" person often ends up with the "it's all *your* fault" person because they can agree on who the problem is, but this creates a power imbalance. This relationship functions, but it's soul crushing without any resolution because nothing changes – one person takes all the blame while the other feels annoyed how the other person always causes the problems.

Ultimately, if there's a conflict, we have done something to contribute to it and need to see that we are 50% of the problem. If I were to do a scale for this (scales are my favorite), it'd be the following:

(-10) ----- (0) ----- (+10)
It's all your fault It's Both 50% It's all my fault

If you don't understand this scale, I apologize; I must be communicating it wrong... see what I did there? I blamed myself, which is dumb because clearly, if you don't get this scale, it's all your fault (yes, I have a sarcasm problem). Accepting that everything is 50% your fault and 50% my fault is important because it acknowledges that you are not weak; you have power in all situations, but you're also not fully in control and need to accept the other side also needs to change. This became apparent when I first started dating my wife. Back then when I went to her house to pick her up, she was always an hour late (that was fun). Even if I got to her house an hour late, she wouldn't start getting ready until I showed up (that was a really exciting discovery). What made it worse was her parents felt bad and would try talking to me while I waited (a level of fun a new boyfriend can usually only dream of experiencing). Adding to this amazing situation, I was a workaholic who had a list of other things I'd rather be doing. Her parents were nice, but I hate sitting to talk to people (a funny reality when I'm a therapist). When my then-girlfriend was finally ready, when we got to the car, I couldn't help but be snarky, which, in turn, hurt her and ruined the night. Who's to blame for the bad night? Both of us. Ultimately, I needed to accept that I was half the problem. One night, while driving home feeling sorry for myself, I was angrily praying and asked why we were dating. In that moment, it was

like a little voice whispered, “You don’t have to date her. You’re not that innocent.” (I may have listened to Britney Spears too much when I was younger... or maybe God was a fan and liked referencing her). It suddenly dawned on me: I chose to go out with her, so that’s on me. I wasn’t helpless, and I needed to take responsibility. I either needed to break up or do something different. The next time I went to her house, I went in the basement alone and did school work until she was ready. I quickly valued that hour and would be annoyed if she took less than the usual hour to be ready (she didn’t like that). By taking 50% ownership of the problem, I was able to make it work.

By accepting 50% responsibility, we don’t feel so helpless or weak. For instance, when I was cheated on, it was 50% my fault because I had chosen to be with her and allowed our relationship to be in that spot. Of course, that didn’t mean I had to stay; it just made healing easier because it gave me a sense of control. Even when I beat up my older brother as a kid (I had issues), it was 50% my fault. I shouldn’t have been so mean and he should’ve punched me in the face instead of taking my bullying.

By accepting that we are half the problem, we can realize that we have the power to make it better. We don’t have to be as scared because there’s always something we can do to change our situation. We are not helpless and weak. Instead, we can do something to change the situation.

Please note: This idea only works when there is equality in the relationship. For instance, when authority figures abuse their power, this rule no longer applies in the same way.

This week may you start to see that it’s never all *your* fault or the *other person’s* fault; it’s 50%.

Assuming: A Very Bad Choice

Don't assume is a pretty basic idea: Don't assume it's a new kind of cheese that has green spots. Don't assume it's smeared chocolate on something when you have little kids running around. Don't assume the toilet bubbling while the washing machine is on is fine. I learned that the hard way (me): "Why is there toilet paper bits coming out the shower drain? Oh, the bubbling warned me the house's waste line is largely blocked by tree roots and now I have a flood problem." For some reason, however, we assume all the time. We know it's dangerous, but sometimes it's easier to bury our heads in the sand. You know what you shouldn't procrastinate? Fixing your eavestrough downspout... that was another flood I had to fix. Assuming gets very dangerous. For instance, last night I was driving home on a one-way, four-lane road and the car beside me decided to change lanes. Fortunately, they didn't come into my lane because they would've hit me. Instead, they went into the lane on the other side where they hit another car. The driver suddenly realized there was a car there after hearing the bang that came from hitting them – not the best way to discover that. I'm guessing that the driver didn't check their blind spot before changing lanes as they assumed it was clear... or they were playing live action Mario Kart. We assume things all the time, especially when it comes to interacting with people like our spouses or grouchy teenagers. The worst part of this is we typically assume the worst of people. For instance, when people are rude to us, we often assume they're a jerk and use it to further feel sorry for ourselves and/or build resentment when there's a good chance their rudeness is a sign they're stressed, overwhelmed, and/or simply tired.

As we've previously discussed, not affirming people is the number one communication mistake couples make that lead to fights. The second is bad assumptions. When we start a relationship, we tend to give people

the benefit of the doubt, but that often changes over time and hurt is festering. The worst thing is most so-called hurtful things actually come out of good intentions that are misinterpreted or are presented poorly. For instance, how many older women try to be helpful, but end up being accused of being controlling? Or men who always say they don't care what's for dinner thinking that's helpful when it causes the wife more stress as she has to figure out what to serve.

I was recently talking to a friend who shared a great example of why we shouldn't assume. In order to better understand the hilarity of the story (it's hilarious to me, but not to the woman involved), you need to first know that the wife in this story has an old toothbrush she uses to clean things like her razor she'll use to dry shave areas when she's in a rush. Since she uses the razor on her armpits (among other areas), it will have things like leftover deodorant chunks on it that will be later brushed away by the old toothbrush. Yes, this toothbrush is as gross as you're imagining it to be, which is important to remember.

One night, when the wife went to brush her teeth, she found there were two toothbrushes in the spot where there should have been one. This didn't make sense, so she *assumed* the extra toothbrush must be her husband's. She couldn't have made a mistake; it must've been him (that part makes me smile because I know where this is going). The wife went to her husband and accused him of making the mistake. He assumed it must be true because his wife could never make a mistake (that part also makes me smile because it includes sarcasm). Even though he went along with it, it didn't make sense to him because when he checked, he had his toothbrush in his normal spot. He agreed, however, because it wasn't worth the fight. (Can you guess where this is going?) A week later, his wife came up to him half laughing and half upset because she realized why she had the extra toothbrush the week earlier, and it wasn't because it was her husband's. After a quick dry shave, the wife went to grab her old toothbrush to clean the razor only to discover it wasn't where it was supposed to be. Why wasn't it there? (I think you know where it ended up... a week earlier). The wife figured their toddler must have found the old, dirty toothbrush and left it on the floor where she

found it and automatically put it in her normal toothbrush spot assuming it was her normal teeth cleaning toothbrush. Why she didn't disinfect the mystery brush? Who knows? Later, when the wife needed to brush her teeth, there were now the two toothbrushes. She assumed the old one was hers and the new one was her husband's, so all week she'd been using the old dirty toothbrush as her own – hmm, deodorant bits. Meanwhile, the husband had started using the toothbrush he was given because it was time for a new one anyway. Because he hadn't been fully convinced it was his, however, he disinfecting it just to be safe. His wife did not disinfect the old toothbrush she'd been using. Why would she? She assumed she was right. The husband was thrilled to find he wasn't wrong and thought the situation was hilarious... until it was pointed out that he had kissed her so he got second-hand stubble deodorant residue in his mouth. Still, this was clearly not as bad as actually using the old toothbrush.

This story only happened because both people assumed. Personally, I'm thankful they both made bad assumptions because it gives me a great story, and the couple was reminded of the dangers of assuming, especially when we assume the husband must always be the screw up.

This week may you try to catch yourself before assuming the worst of others. ***The world is full of good people; let's start treating it that way.***

Even Darth Vader had a Good Side

An easy way to increase anxiety and to make life harder is to assume the worst in people. It's really effective. I used to be great at this. When I was younger, I had misunderstood a Bible verse: "Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves." (Phil 2:3b) I ended up with the mindset that everyone was better than me. It was a beautiful way to live... if you understand sarcasm. This led me to being scared of people and assuming the worst of them. (Sorry for assuming you were evil.) Since learning to assume the best in people, life has gotten a lot better for me. I don't get hurt as much and the hurt I do face disappears quicker because other people typically aren't trying to hurt me; they're trying to protect themselves. Plus, I'm not anxious about people being like evil villains trying to ruin my life like I once thought – crazy. After all, if Darth Vader had good in him (and he was a murderous villain... albeit from a galaxy far, far away), we can assume that our friends and loved ones have good in them as well... or we have picked some terrible people to be in our lives. ***If you want to have a better life, start with the foundational belief that people are good, and bad behavior has a reason.***

If I'm going to say we need to assume the best in people, I need to add a very important detail: *to a point*. We need to assume the best in people *to a point*. Tonight, I was doing my weekly jog that includes doing a set of about 250 stairs. Some people do these stairs 10 times – not me; five, tops. I'm a wuss and content being a little fat (one of the benefits of being married). Near the top of the stairs was a small landing where I found a very gruff looking guy in his 30s screaming into his phone and flailing his arms with a bicycle on the ground beside him. As I walked near him, I did the "I'm a guy so I'll nod to acknowledge you" thing. He stopped screaming on the phone, and in a raspy but friendly voice said,

“Hi.” Surprised by his politeness and seeing him end the call, I asked if he was okay, and he started with a very popular phrase: “F’ing women!” Ah yes, the familiar cry of the angry man. Women have a power over men, and whoever this woman was definitely had a power over Mr. Gruff. After a couple sentences that consisted mostly of f words, I found out he was having a hard time getting up the stairs because when he was a kid he was hit by a car – ouch. He obviously survived the hit (or you’d be hearing about the zombie invasion in the news), but in the accident he had a big piece of metal jammed into his calf muscle the doctors said would mean he’d never walk again. He clearly proved that wrong, but the stairs were too much for him with all of his stuff. I offered to carry his bike the rest of the way and as we started up the stairs, I said I was a marriage therapist who often hears guys angry about how a woman has treated them. In my role, I’ve heard a lot of stories, but he threw me a curve ball: (him) “I just found out my girlfriend is a prostitute.” Huhn? That’s a new one. I wasn’t sure what to say, but I didn’t have to figure it out because he continued, “She told me she was a massage therapist, and now I find out she’s sucking [male body part I find disgusting] for money.” I still didn’t know what to say, but again I didn’t have to as he added, “She sucks like 13-14 [male body parts] a night!” In my head I was flipping between two thoughts, neither one helpful. The first was... gross. My one goal in life is to never have one of those in my mouth, yet she’s doing double digits – in a night! That’s super gross. Plus, I’m guessing those guys aren’t the Ryan Gosling types. If you’re paying, there’s a reason. This is all the nastier because, let’s be honest, how many of those guys showered before seeing her? Sooooo Gross. Yeah, I don’t know why my mind went there... or why I’m sharing this. My other thought came from the money part of my brain: So, if she does 13-14 a night, and she charges say \$50 a shot, she’s doing pretty well for a night’s work. If she’s charging \$20, it’s still decent as the quantity helps the income. And then my brain went to how long per person? If it’s five minutes a shot that’s good time per money ratio. If it’s like twenty minutes per person that would be painful. Is she like a snake who can unhinge her jaw? Because ouch? I struggle to keep my mouth open for the dentist. Funny enough, when I later told a friend

this story, his first question was what I should've thought: "Was she really his girlfriend or did every date include a payment at the end?" I guess I didn't think of that because, apparently, my mind goes to weird places (but you already knew that).

What blew me away (double entendre not intended) is this guy said he found out she did this when he found her in a car with another guy and her response when he knocked on the window was to get out and smash him in the face with her phone. Apparently, she took her work very seriously. He added she walked away with a broken phone while he walked away with a black eye. That must have been a solid hit. This guy was quick to note that he'd never hit a girl, and then he told me why by sharing another crazy story. Before this current lovely lady, his ex from an eight-year relationship, and the mother of *one* of his children (classy), "broke up" with him by having the cops arrest him for domestic violence and assault. The kicker (pun intended) was he had just arrived home after being away for a month for work. After getting home and finding no one there, and while still in his travel clothes, a cop showed up to arrest him. After 10 and a half months in prison (brutal), he was proven innocent because he wasn't home to do what he was accused of doing like he had originally told the cop. Talk about terrible! What's even worse is he added that even after finding out his current girlfriend was a prostitute (he picks winners), he wanted to make things work with her. Yes, you read that right. He wanted to make it work with his physically abusive girlfriend who was a prostitute... to pay for her meth addiction. That's quality right there. On the plus side, he told me she wasn't at risk of getting pregnant at work (a feature 99% of all jobs can promise), and in my head I thought about how she could play STD bingo: "I got all five in my row this week – Bingo! Let's go to the pharmacy."

This conversation started because I assumed the best of this guy and greeted him, and he assumed the best in me, and we had one of the most unique conversations I've ever had. He, however, missed the important part of my rule with his girlfriend: Assume the best *to a point*. To a point! There is good in all people, but some people you really need to run away from because they are trouble like his first partner who lied to the cops

and his prostitute girlfriend. This guy mentioned he was interested in seeing me to make it work with her because he said he was loyal (I'm pretty sure that's not loyalty but insanity). Whenever someone I've met asks for my contact, I never hear from them and this was one of those cases, but regardless, I hope he learned this very important lesson: Assume the best *to a point* because some people are terrible human beings and you need to get away from them. And if you are that terrible human being people need to avoid... you're probably not reading this book because everyone reading this is part genius.

This week may you see the benefit of assuming the best to a point.

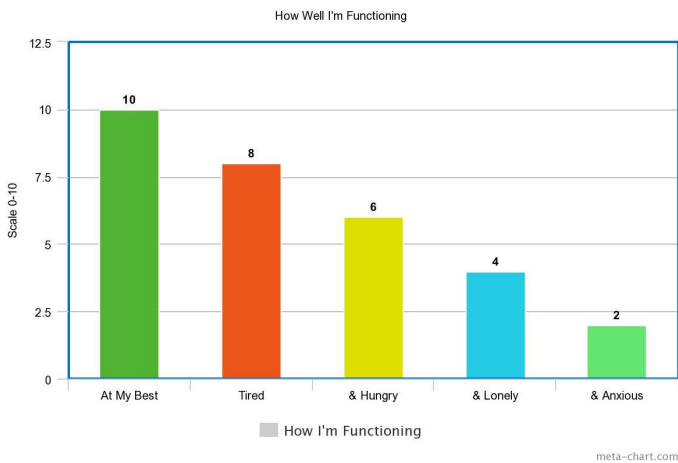
Lesson 15:

You Might Not Be as Crazy as You Think

(or your partner thinks)

The party anthem lyrics by Spirit of the West, “You’ll have to excuse me; I’m not at my best,” give a very important truth for us to remember: People are rarely at their best because there are simply too many variables that get in the way. This song is more about overdrinking, which, to me, is like a person choosing to be sick: (person) “What do you want to do

tonight?” (fan of overdrinking) “I feel good, so let’s ruin that by making myself have symptoms of the flu. My toilet’s the best cuddle buddy!” Beyond overdrinking, there are many things that can prevent us from being at our best. Quite often it’s the little things that affect us the most like being too hot or cold, tired, hungry, over-stimulated, a need to be burped, or maybe our diaper needs to be changed. Sorry, I’ve been around babies lately, but that’s a good representation of how people are affected in practical ways. Add bigger things like past hurts, grief, pressure to perform, wanting to feel good enough, or a desire for love that’s not met from a partner, family, or friend, and it’s easy to see why people can have crazy moments. The truth is being at our best is very difficult. Consider this bar graph:



If 10 is being at our best, there are many things that can prevent us from being at that level. For this list of why I’m not at my best, I could’ve added things like hormones, stress, exhaustion, brain chemistry issues, grief, hopelessness, lack of purpose, feeling unloved or disrespected, having back pain, fried brains from drug use, a cold, dealing with screaming kids all day, being around rude people, being stuck in traffic, too much guilt, and the list goes on and on. Lots of things can make us less than our best and lean more toward the crazy end. If 10 is us at our best, and 0 is at our worst/crazy:

1) In general, where are you from 0-10 right now?

- 2) What practical things would help you be higher on this list?
- 3) From that list, what one thing can you start doing now to make things better? What's another thing you can start doing in two weeks? In a month? (It's best to start with changing one thing at a time, so we don't get overwhelmed)

If there are so many potential reasons why we have crazy moments, what makes someone actually crazy? Someone who has too many crazy moments. What are too many crazy moments? That depends on the person categorizing it. What constitutes a crazy moment? Again, that depends on the person categorizing it. You're welcome for the help; I like to do what I can. Ask most husbands if their wife is crazy and he'll say no... if she's there. Otherwise, absolutely. Ask this so-called crazy person's female friends if she's crazy? Absolutely not... unless they just had a fight then yes. When it comes to crazy, there is rarely an easy answer because perspective plays such a huge part. In the end, if we think someone near us is crazy, especially a spouse, we need to be asking ourselves three things:

- 1) Am I doing anything to drive this person crazy (e.g. avoiding them, being three hours late and not giving a heads up and/or apology, not Yes and-ing, etc.)?
- 2) Am I acting with enough self control to not add to the craziness when this person has a bad moment (e.g. not doing the 10 listening mistakes like discussed earlier)?
- 3) Is there anything I can do to help me and those around me be less crazy (e.g. most men need a little space while most women want to be engaged in conversation)?

Are you annoyed by how many questions this post has? Do you want me to stop? Maybe I should? Yes, I know that last one's not a question, but some people say statements with an inflection like a question, which drives me nuts, and I figured this was a good way to point out we can all do things that drive people crazy and not even know it? Regardless of your answer to the three questions (the ones above this tangent), we need

to start looking at offering more patience for people around us (and ourselves) because we often have bad moments because we're not at our best. Am I saying be a pushover and accept however people treat us? Absolutely not, but we do need to start seeing beyond the crazy things some people do and consider what we can do differently to help. People don't want to be crazy (unless they really are crazy). We want to feel loved and accepted.

This week may you find ways to be more at your best and not drive each other crazy? Like not making statements as a question? Or carrying a joke too long?

Lesson 16

Eye Rolling Destroys Relationships

I assume you know what I mean when I write “eye rolling.” To be safe (I have warned about assuming), let me point out that I'm not referencing a new-age eye exercise where you move your eyes around in circles to improve your chakras or a strange zombie game where you roll eyeballs down a lane like bowling. (Did you just roll your eyes at me for that terrible suggestion?) Eye rolling is either a playful, potentially flirtatious act or it's a very condescending gesture that tells the other person they're an idiot. Not sure how it can be condescending? Try rolling your eyes the next time your boss speaks and see the response.

Before I continue, I want to be very clear about one thing: ***We fuel each other's behavior*** (remember it's 50% our fault). For instance, if your partner is eye rolling when you speak, you have done or are currently doing something that is fueling that reaction. Similarly, if you're the eye roller, you too have done or are doing something that is causing the behavior you can't stand. When there is eye rolling, neither side is innocent. BOTH sides need to take responsibility for their actions because only by changing *our* own actions can we hope to receive a different reaction from our partner.

Fun question: Which gender is more likely to be guilty of eye rolling? If you said women... wow, you're brave. I wouldn't. Instead, what I will point out is that guys love to get reactions like "Ew, that's disgusting!" and "Oh, you (playful eye roll with arm touch)." It's like we never stop having that little boy pulling a girl-we-likes-pigtails mentality of flirting. Of course, a guy only likes these reactions when it's done in acceptance and not anger. For instance, when a guy is able to show an injury that freaks his friends out, that feels like an accomplishment. When a guy can make his buddy gag from the smell of his rancid hockey bag, he feels like a champion. The same good feelings happen for a guy when he does something that gets a girl he likes to give a playful eye roll. It's this teasing, "you make me happy when you do something silly" kind of reaction that makes a guy feel special. Guys bond through playfulness and teasing, which is something that often backfires on us in long-term relationships. It's like in *Mrs. Doubtfire* (a classic movie) when the wife says of her ex-husband played by Robin Williams: "But after a few years, everything just stopped being funny." Unfortunately, a lot of women in committed relationships are too busy or tired to have the energy to find our silliness funny anymore... or we become annoying by trying too hard to be funny.

A guy loving playfulness is really important to understand because a girl giving a serious eye roll is a guy's kryptonite. When I've asked eye rollers, they'll claim what they're doing is innocent, but it's actually incredibly damaging to the relationship. From my experience as a therapist and from readings I've done, yelling is actually less damaging to

the overall relationship because fights happen, but **eye rolling is a sign of growing resentment and contempt** as it is a gesture that says, “Why am I with you? I’m so much better than you.” Contempt is a form of disgust and one of the four telltale signs that a relationship is heading to its end according to Dr. John A. Gottman, a leading psychologist on relationships, since you see the other person as somehow beneath you. Eye rolling is very passive aggressive; it cuts to the heart of the receiver and slowly erodes their soul. This leads to the receiver shutting down or becoming more desperate and looking crazy. Meanwhile, the eye roller feels innocent of any harm and uses any of this new behavior as further reason to look down on them. The worst part is the eye roller will likely gather others to be on their side and use their support against the other person whose soul is being chipped away. I refer to this as army building, and as common as it is, it’s a useless argument: “So your friends agree with you when they only heard your side of the story? Yeah, that seems very unbiased and fair.”

What’s unfortunate for the eye roller is their behavior fuels two main responses; both of which will add to their frustration. The most common response is for the guy to get defensive and justify what he did like a child to a parent. Unfortunately, defending ourselves always makes us seem weak to the other side who want to roll their eyes again: “Of course, you have to justify yourself. You’re so pathetic.” This perpetuates the cycle and increases the contempt of the eye roller and fear of the receiver – Good times.

Someone defending themselves is easily recognized by the center of their eyebrows being raised and a higher pitch to the voice, which are signs of fear. If the insides of the eyebrows are pointed down, this is anger, and it follows the classic “the best defence is a good offence” idea. This is the second main response to an eye roller. These are the guys who defend themselves by yelling and attacking the eye roller who will either eye roll again or attack back and then see themselves as the innocent victim. Meanwhile, the eye-roll-receiver (the one defending himself) is thinking his partner is a serious jerk (or a more derogatory name). This pattern will get increasingly worse until the eye roller wants to break up because

she can't handle how mean the other person is while she sees herself as the innocent victim. As a therapist, I find this latter situation worse for healing since both sides carry incredible amounts of hurt.

In either response to an eye roller, the only chance for the relationship to heal is for BOTH sides to see how BOTH sides are screwing up.

Unfortunately, eye rollers (i.e. passive aggressive people) are incredibly hard to convince they're doing anything wrong because part of being passive aggressive is only seeing how they themselves are hurt. But again, BOTH sides need to accept that they are BOTH fueling the other's behavior and only by BOTH being nicer does the relationship have a chance.

Two of the most important qualities people look for in a partner is someone who is patient and kind. If you ever yell at your partner, if you ever eye roll in a non-playful way, or if you ever defend yourself, you are not acting in a patient and kind way and, therefore, need to accept that you are just as much the problem as your partner.

This week, may you address any eye rolling going on in your life in order to prevent future damage.

The 5 Most Important Apologizing Rules

I've recently figured out the five most important rules to apologizing... not that I ever have to apologize. (I'm sorry if sarcasm bothers you.) It came out of the fact that apologizing is a major complaint for most couples I see as a marriage therapist. The complaints almost always come in twos. The first comes from the one partner who says the apology doesn't "feel" genuine – I hate that complaint. It bothers me because it has a passive aggressive tone to it: *I deserve* better. That being said, this person who is apologizing likely apologizes all the time even when they have no idea if they did anything wrong, which takes away from the heart of it. They just know the other person is upset, so they assume they must have done something wrong, which leads to the automatic response of "I'm sorry." An apology not feeling genuine can also be the result of someone saying, "I'm sorry, but..." because the "but" removes all sense of apology.

One of the worst things people can do in an apology is defend themselves even though it can feel natural. Whenever someone is upset with something we did, we naturally want to explain ourselves because we don't want to feel stupid or upset anyone. Unfortunately, this is a form of defending ourselves and makes us look weak. It also causes the other person to feel brushed off as we make the situation about us rather than them, and typically makes a simple situation bigger than it needs to be. That being said, if we really want to explain ourselves, we can ask something like "Can I explain my side?" Ideally, this question should be asked later because if someone (e.g. my wife) says she has a problem with me (aka an event that never happens because I'm so perfect), she doesn't care why I did it; she just wants to be affirmed and shown that I understand and care about *her* feelings. If I try to defend myself, I make

it all about *me* and leave my wife not feeling heard or cared about, which will add to her hurt (i.e. at least I assume it will because I've never done this since I'm so perfect... yes, perfect). Defending ourselves can even feel insulting because it's like I'm saying, "The problem is you're upset because you're too dumb to understand what really happened. I'm innocent, so you're an idiot for thinking otherwise." This is very opposite to what a defender is doing, but it is how it can feel.

The second major complaint about others I hear regarding apologizing is "They've never apologized! I'm the only one who says I'm sorry." I'm guessing you have an idea which gender makes which complaint. There are exceptions, but women complain the apology doesn't "feel" real while the guy complains that they're the only one who apologizes, which lines up with the idea of the weight carrier and statue being chipped away at analogy we looked at earlier.

These two complaints suggest there is a power imbalance in the relationship, which is very dangerous. This connects to the previous lesson discussing the dangers of eye rolling and how it's a sign of contempt. The person defending themselves is the opposite of the eye roller because they are trying to prove themselves in some way, and it's like a desperate salesman begging for a sale – it's annoying. The worst part is both behaviors, being annoyed and defending ourselves, will fuel the other person's bad behaviors thereby creating a terrible cycle: I'm annoyed with you, so you defend yourself; this makes me more annoyed, which makes you defend yourself more, and so on.

What needs to be understood is that ***"I'm sorry," is not the same as "I'm wrong."*** Instead, it's saying, "I understand you were hurt and I'm acknowledging that." That's why at funerals we say, "I'm sorry." It's not because we killed the person (hopefully). Thus, apologizing is something we should all be doing when someone is hurt whether we think we did anything wrong or not because it's saying I care.

So here are the five most important rules to apologizing:

1. There should always be two apologies: If there's a conflict between two people, two people have been hurt, so there should be two apologies. Unless it's a situation where the one person really screwed up like when I was a kid and broke my mom's favorite vase (that was before I was perfect), both people should be apologizing.
2. Don't defend yourself (you probably guessed that after the earlier paragraph): let your "I'm sorry" simply be "I'm sorry" unless you want to add in how you'll prevent it from happening again: "I'm sorry, and it won't happen again because I will now..."
3. Never say "but" in an apology because it erases everything good you said before it (this will be discussed in a future lesson).
4. Only explain yourself if you've asked permission and the other person says it's okay to tell them. Otherwise, let it go or ask again later when things are calm.
5. Don't question the genuineness of the apology. It's very humbling to apologize, and if you criticize someone for it, you're reducing the chances of them wanting to apologize again in the future. Plus, we want to "Yes and" them because that makes us good communicators.

The following is an example of the perfect apology sharing:

1. Two people are starting to get overly heated, so the one person is wise and says, "I need [insert time]." This can be five minutes or an hour; whatever time the two people need to calm down. It's like when the bell rings in a boxing match and the two opponents return to their corners and regroup. This is incredibly helpful for reducing actual fights because it prevents things from escalating too far and things being said out of anger that would otherwise never be said.
2. While separated, the two people vent out their emotions in a safe way (e.g. journal, punch their bed, scream alone in the car, etc.).
3. Both people fill in the following statement: I felt (feeling) because (reason). For instance, "I felt hurt because of how aggressive you were speaking to me," or "I felt talked down to because your tone seemed condescending."

4. At the agreed time, both people come together and have one person share their one sentence: ***I felt (e.g. unloved, frustrated, disrespected, brushed off, etc.) because (reason).***
5. Person two responds: ***I'm sorry you felt (sentence from person 1).***
6. Person two then shares their one sentence: ***And I felt (feeling they felt) because (reason).***
7. Person one then does their apology: ***I'm sorry you felt (sentence from person 2).***
8. If it's still wanted, ask if it's acceptable to share any explanations.
9. Together define what they thought the conflict was ultimately about.
10. Decide when to address the original issue whether at that moment or later.

This is the perfect conflict handling set up because it forces both sides to know what they felt in a clear one sentence and have it acknowledged by the other person. Notice, it's BOTH people apologizing and there's NO defending or buts. Of course, the original issue still hasn't been resolved, but at least the couple is returning with an equal footing. If explanations are wanting to be shared, the two people can now ask if they can do this. Before the couple returns to the original reason for the conflict, both people need to figure out what the actual problem is in ONE sentence (I'm always pushing for one clear sentence because it's easier to understand than a paragraph). They will then need to pick a time to address it whether at that moment or at another time because sometimes it's best to drop an issue until later.

This week may you consider how you can improve how you apologize.

Beware of the BUT

I've always been a "but" guy and never really knew it until recently. And yes, I meant it to be with one "t" because I'm talking about the "but" and not the "butt." I've never been a "butt" guy. Even when I was young and single, I wasn't a "butt" guy; I was more of a "hot girl" guy. I didn't like being too specific. I was still superficial, but in a general way because it made me feel better about myself... and it gave me more options. (I needed as many as I could get.)

When I was a teenager, my youth pastor told me to always watch for the "but" (again, one "t"; he wasn't a perv) because that was an indication that something important was about to be said. Jesus regularly said things like "You've heard it said, *but*..." and then he'd say something important. I am not Jesus. I am not as smart as Jesus or have the ability to tick people off so much they actually kill me like Jesus (although I can still make people pretty angry). When I say "but," in this lesson, it's not in the way Jesus did; I say it in a way that ruins anything good I might have just said. For instance, "That was really good, but..." or "You're such a good person, but..." I fortunately can't remember saying those exact statements, but I've definitely heard them. See? I can't help but say "but." The butts are everywhere with me, but I'm not even meaning to... ah crap, there's another one.

Have you ever met someone with the case of the butts? Maybe you're like me and struggle with it yourself. It's really terrible. The worst is when you say "but" with an apology. The problem is it's so tempting, especially as a guy: "I'm sorry you felt (thing), *but* (unwanted excuse)." The "but" makes the first part that was an apology be thrown out the window. "I'm sorry you felt angry at me, *but* it wasn't my fault" – apology erased. "I'm sorry you feel fat, *but* at least your feeling is accurate in this case; that doesn't happen very often." All sense of care is

nullified and the receiver is left feeling upset. The “but” destroys any sense of kindness as it makes the apology a justification for the behavior rather than a display of love. It also makes the sentence all about us and not the other person who wants to feel affirmed and understood. Using a “but” is actually a form of defending ourselves (as discussed in the previous lesson). It is a very damaging action to a relationship because it makes the other person feel like they don’t matter.

The other day I screwed up and my wife called me out on it. She was really hurt and she presented it in a fair way (I’ll give her that credit). The problem was I really didn’t think I did anything that bad. She wanted me to be at an appointment with her the next day, and I had forgotten about it. I was still able to go, but I needed to bring my own car in order to leave early if it went late. (I don’t trust doctors to be on time.) In my mind, I was still going to be there, so no problem. Of course, I say there wasn’t a problem because I was fine with how it worked out, but to my wife there was a problem because she was hurt. When I was in the shower, she came into the bathroom and reiterated her hurt and then left. She handled it quite well. She spoke to me in a very concise way that helped get her point across. The only thing she didn’t do was say the proper “I feel... because...” like I taught in the previous lesson. She didn’t follow it, however, because she didn’t read it – I know! She doesn’t read *my* lessons! She’s missing out on my brilliance. Apparently, living with me, she has to listen to me enough already... I guess that’s fair. Even though she didn’t have the “I feel” statement, in my annoyed state – I hate being told I’m wrong, especially when I was – I made one for her, so after my shower I found her an I apologized... and yes, it was a real apology without a “but”: “I’m sorry I didn’t remember the appointment tomorrow because that would have made you feel like you weren’t a priority and that I didn’t care about you.” When I said this, I saw her whole body relax like “Ahhhh,” because in that moment she felt understood and loved (yea me). Now, if I just said I gave her the apology I could sound like a really great husband, but (yes, here’s the “but” moment) I was seriously unhappy about it. I said those words while half out of the bedroom about to leave

and I almost choked saying them (I'm not that good a person) and just as I got to the end of my apology where I wanted to say "but," I quickly left the room and ran down the stairs where I then very quietly said, "... but you made a big deal out of nothing and you do this to me all the time!" Just like my wife went "Ahhh" because she felt better when I apologized, after whispering this to myself, I went "Ahhh." I didn't want to apologize, and like a kid forcing vegetables down his throat, I did it, but then I needed a moment for me. I had to leave the room because I knew I'd explode if I didn't finish my sentence with my "but" statement – my terrible "but" statement that would've been unfair for my wife to hear. Fortunately, I can be honest because she won't read this (the one benefit of her not reading my lessons).

This experience points out five very important things:

1. A good apology acknowledges why the other person was hurt.
2. The apologizer doesn't want to feel like a screw up and will desperately want to say "but" in order to justify their action, but this is never wanted by the other person.
3. Sometimes we need to say a "but" statement, which is fine if we say it alone after. Too many fights are exacerbated by people not recognizing that the thing we really want to say can feel just as good saying it alone away from the other person it can hurt.
4. By saying my "but" statement, I was kind to me. By not saying my "but" statement to my wife, I was kind to her. Saying it alone was incredibly difficult to do at the time, but it was worth it because by being kind to my wife, it was easier for her to be kind to me.
5. By not saying the "but" statement to the person, I can feel proud of myself, and later, when I'm out of the moment, I can realize what I wanted to say wasn't that important even though at the time it felt like the most important thing in the world.

This week may you watch out for the "but."

A Tip to Help the Stressed People in our Lives

When I was a youth pastor, I used to run weekend retreats, which were a ton of fun... at least afterward. After getting some rest, I would look back on them as being fun because in the moment there was a lot of stress (I think a lot of parents can feel the same about family trips). When I first started doing them, it was pretty overwhelming. Any event planner understands this feeling. There was convincing people to go (and making sure they show up), buying groceries, booking drivers, packing, and creating a schedule of activities; while on the trip, there's making meals, rounding up distracted teenagers to do the planned activities, doing random in the moment things, on top of presenting three half hour campfire talks. The worst thing was when I first started doing these trips, I put pressure on myself to make sure everyone was having fun (I soon gave up that useless goal). Fortunately, ***I eventually realized if someone is bored***, that's their own issue (that's a bonus tip to parents who feel constant pressure to make their kids have fun). But then add to the list of challenges the fact that I'd have minimal sleep before the trip trying to get last minute things in place and then even less sleep on the trip, and I had a pretty strong recipe for being an emotional mess (something many parents can understand). I remember getting home after the first couple retreats, I'd quickly unpack and then go into my room to bawl my eyes out in private... I mean I'd feel nothing like a man is supposed to feel. After the first four years' worth of trips, I was more confident and had loosened up as I trusted myself more, which helped me enjoy the trips in the moment, and by the end of my eight-year period as a youth pastor and 18 trips later, running these retreats was a breeze and I had as much fun as anyone else – I'm a slow learner (parents can be encouraged that it can take awhile to get used to running a family trip, but it gets better. The unfortunate thing is you'll get the

hang of it just as the kids are too old to want to go with you – life’s fun that way).

Here is one of the most important lessons I took from running events, which is a great way to reduce anxiety for your partner, parent, boss, etc. If you try to be nice to someone who is overwhelmed and ask, “Is there anything I can do for you?” there’s a good chance the stressed person (e.g. me) is going to snap at you or have a meltdown: “I don’t know! My head is going to explode... so I guess you can clean that up!” It seems like such a strange reaction to someone being nice, but when you’re overwhelmed, the simplest question is just one more thing to figure out and can put you over the edge. I remember being so close to exploding several times on a couple really thoughtful teens (yes, they still do exist... just maybe not at home). Sooooo here’s the simple solution to help the ready-to-be-crazy person not lose it while letting you help. ***Instead of asking, “What can I do?” put some thought into it and offer three options: “Do you want me to do A, B, or C?”***

Examples:

1. Do you want me to dust, vacuum, or give you space?
2. Do you want me to put away the laundry, do an errand for you, or keep the kids out of your way?
3. Do you want me to get the tranquilizer, the straitjacket, or hit you on the head with my oversized mallet?

Changing up your question to a simple A, B, or C option makes the decision easier for the stressed person: “C!” When someone is overwhelmed, you need to offer help in the least anxiety causing way possible or your thoughtfulness can lead to you getting yelled at. This simple change of having a specific question can help you look like the greatest person in the world (you’re welcome) and indirectly encourage the stressed person: “Uhhhh B. Wow, I made a decision. I feel more confident now.”

This week may you be a blessing to someone stressed.

Stop Saying “I Don’t Care”

Last week my family came home late after the weekly in-laws’ movie night, and as my wife and I were getting things put away, I asked her if she wanted to have her shower first or if I should. Her response was, “I don’t care.” It was said in the “I’m in the middle of something and not really paying attention kind of way,” which is a clear sign that I should go first. Because she replied, “I don’t care,” however, the little voice in my head said, “You should yell at her!” Fortunately, I learned a long time ago that this voice is pretty stupid, so what I said to my wife was, “Okay,” in the weakest way possible (I’m a true man). This little voice I have might be stupid, but it still is the voice in my head and it means something. In this case, as I reflected in the shower (picture Ryan Reynolds... it may not be accurate, but it’s a nicer visual), I remembered a lesson I once started to write but never finished: Stop saying, “I don’t care.”

When some people say “I don’t care,” they really mean *they don’t care*. Some people are just that easygoing and fine with whatever as long as they don’t make the decision. I’m not saying these people are men, but... you know. Other people say “I don’t care,” because they’re too busy dealing with other things. I’m not saying these people are women, but... you know. The third main reason people say “I don’t care,” is because they’ve been taught to think that having an opinion only leads to unwanted conflict, so don’t bother. I’m not saying these people are like me, but... you know.

There are three main problems with saying “I don’t care.” First, people want to make those they care about happy, and it’s easier to make someone happy who cares about things. For instance, I love weird stuff and last Christmas my mom gave me the most ridiculous bobbling deer that even the teller asked my mom, “Are you sure you want this?” And

this crazy deer made me happy, which, in turn, made my mom happy, and that only happened because I cared about something.

The second problem when someone never gives an opinion is all of the decision-making lands on the other person. In marriage, this person will eventually feel overwhelmed, which will likely lead them to snapping: “Why can’t you ever choose anything!” Even people who like making the decisions can get overwhelmed because everyone has a limit. This is particularly a problem when the person being forced to make all the decisions doesn’t even like making decisions in the first place.

The biggest problem with saying “I don’t care” connects with how we hear things that aren’t said. It’s like our brain has a little voice that will sometimes add things: “Don’t forget to pick up milk... idiot.” This last part was never said, but sometimes our brain inserts a tagline, especially if we’re feeling particularly insecure or guarded: “Can you please vacuum... you disgusting, lazy pig.” We can even make things up when nothing is said: “They didn’t say hi; they must hate me!” Our brains can be really mean. Similarly, when someone says, “I don’t care,” it can feel like they’re saying, “I don’t care... because I don’t care about you.”

The good news is the couple tips I offer people in the “I don’t care” situation are pretty simple. The first option only works if the partner is okay with having to make the decision. Instead of saying “I don’t care,” the other person needs to say, “I’m happy either way.” This response is more positive and shows some care. The second option is the asker can change their question to something like “Do you have a preference for what we have for dinner or should I just pick?” This way the asker is empowered and less likely to feel brushed off by the other person’s response. The best option follows the previous lesson where one person gives two to three options, and the other has to choose an answer even if they don’t care. For instance, we should never ask a question like “What do you want for dinner?” because that’s too open ended. Instead, one person should ask something specific like “For dinner, do you want burgers, eggs, or whatever’s leftover in the fridge?” Notice how specific it is? If you ask someone what they want for dinner, they likely have no

idea what's even an option. There's a reason restaurants have menus: (waiter) "What would you like for dinner?" (customer) "Can I please see a menu?" (waiter) "Just pick something!" This list of options helps prevent the mystery and gives more of a multiple-choice question, which is easier to answer. If this list of options is given, the other person *has* to choose. Logically, if the asker is giving something as an option, they don't have a preference either, so if they do the work to ask the question, the other person has the responsibility to choose. The chooser can even go with the standard C answer like in many multiple-choice tests. The only rule is they have to choose because that will make life easier for the other person and keep the responsibility of decision making feel fair.

This week may you start to avoid saying, "I don't care," and know how to help someone who does.

Lesson 21

Are You TOO Kind?

Before my first daughter was born, my wife and I went on a weekend getaway to New York City with my wife's mom, uncle, sister, and her sister's husband – every married man's dream. Because I'm cheap, I suggested and planned the trip – like a crazy person. We all drove in one vehicle for the ten-hour drive and then shared one room – how jealous are you right now? It's amazing what you can learn on a trip like this. I learned that sharing living space with people is very different than visiting

them for a couple hours – probably should’ve known that already. It’s different because you have to share things like a bathroom, time, and flailing fists of furry (we’re family, so it’s okay... I think that’s how that works).

Oddly enough, the conflict we faced wasn’t what you’d expect. The main problem we had was people being TOO kind...and it was sooooo frustrating! Unless you’ve experienced it, you have no idea how maddening kindness can be, especially when you can’t help but feel dumb for it: (me) “Stop being so kind!” (other person) “I’m glad you think I’m kind.” (me) “Ahhhhh! You make everything so positive!” (other person) “Good for you for letting out your anger. I feel honored that you feel safe enough to show your true emotions with me.” (me on the ground twitching.) Have you ever met someone so kind you want to scream at them? It messes with your head. Consider this: Have you ever held a door for someone and they said “You go,” so you said, “No, you go,” and then they said, “No, you go,” so you said, “No, you go,” and this continues until you snap and storm through the door? It’ll drive you crazy: (me) “Your kindness is killing me!” (other person) “My plan is working perfectly... can I have your house?” This door fight became the ritual every time we came to a door, and there are a lot of doors in New York City, so there was plenty of time to go insane.

The first night in the hotel there was a fight over using the shower, but it was “You go first, and I’ll wait,” and “No, you go first, and I’ll wait,” and “No, you go first...” over and over. It’s probably the lamest fight possible that still ended up with yelling between certain family members. Even in all my cheapness, I was second guessing sharing a room. This fight was all about people being TOO kind. Here’s a scale to help explain this:

(-10) ----- (0) ----- (10)
No Kindness Kind to a Point Overly Kind

For this chart, No Kindness is essentially being self absorbed, Kind to a Point means there’s a healthy limit, and Overly Kind is when we get

stuck in a battle over who gets to be the giver. The biggest problem with being Overly Kind is being TOO kind to others means you are being neglectful of yourself. It also means you refuse to let people do things for you, which is actually unkind to them. Putting others first can be helpful, but at a certain point we need to make sure our needs are being met like on a plane in an emergency when we're supposed to put our own masks on first, so we're in a better spot for helping others. Ultimately, ***I need to be at my best in order to help more people as best as possible.*** If I'm not at my best, I'm actually limited with how well I help.

As far as problems go, having a group of people being Overly Kind is the preferred problem, but it can still drive you crazy. Besides the useless battling, when someone is Overly Kind, they won't let you do anything nice for them, so it feels completely one-sided. ***We need to balance doing kind things for others and letting others do kind things for us.*** If we don't let others do things for us, it's actually damaging for both parties as one gets used up and the other feels guilty for not giving anything in return. The other option is the receiver will get a tainted idea of how relationships work.

To prevent future shower-fights, my wife and I made sure we were first to get back to the hotel and were in and out of the shower before the others got back. That was how we were kind to them – by going first. Fortunately, it was a simple fix. For the rest of the weekend, however, I found myself always having to go first like every time we came to a door, my wife and I went first and we let the others have their ritual “You go first,” battle. This leads to another scale that came out of that situation:

(-10)----- (0) ----- (10)
 Uptight Relaxed to a point TOO Relaxed

As thoughtful as the group was, because of things like fighting over who goes through the door first, the other four were constantly late to things. My wife and I quickly learned we needed to do what we wanted and not wait for the others because they would eventually catch up. What was

interesting was my in-laws being Too Relaxed about punctuality led to its own problems. For instance, being TOO Relaxed flipped them into the No Kindness category because being late affects others. The worst moment was we were supposed to leave at 4:30 a.m. (the cost of being cheap), and two people didn't show up until 6 a.m. because the one person couldn't get their stuff packed. Not being ready was being TOO Relaxed and that type of No Kindness makes others struggle not to be angry. What's also interesting is the person who was often Too Relaxed usually ended up with extreme panic when they realized how late they were. This person would be upset for being late and would then flip to being on the other end of both scales, Unkind and Uptight. It's like someone procrastinating studying for a test; they're fine... fine... fine... NOT FINE! Being Relaxed to a Point makes life easier for everyone and needs to be our goal because being late upsets a lot of people and can make people like me become Uptight because I'm trying to keep some order (and I hate being uptight... even though I'm good at it).

This week may you begin to understand what it means to be Kind and Relaxed to a Point. And if you can't decide what you are, ask your real friends; they'll be honest because a real friend is Honest to a Point. (I think you're getting this "to a point" idea – not too much, not too little, just right.)

12 Types of Words that Help Us Feel Loved

Near the beginning of this book, we looked at the eight love languages. This lesson takes the category of “Words” and breaks it down into twelve categories. Similar to the love languages, the end goal is for you to make a list of your most to least important types of words. Also like the love languages, what we need can change depending on the person we’re interacting with and the stage we are in relationship wise. Since there are so many types of words, even if you can figure out what the top three are, that can make a huge difference in how you can better connect with each other. For instance, I knew a couple where her most important words to feel loved were Engaging Words while he hated being asked questions, which meant he didn’t ask any. By simply realizing both of their needs, she slowed down on her questions while he stepped it up, and that made a huge difference in their communication.

Like the Love Languages, a fun way to do this is:

- a) Write your own list.
- b) Guess what you think the other person’s list looks like.
- c) Compare lists and explain why you have differences.
- d) Discuss what helps you feel more of the important categories.

The 12 Types of Words to Help You Feel Loved

- 1) ***Appreciation:*** There are different ways to show appreciation and some ways mean more than others. For instance, a follow up thank you text or letter can mean more than simply saying thank you in the moment because the latter can feel more like an obligation than

genuine appreciation. A follow up shows that what was done mattered enough to be remembered.

- 2) **Apology:** Apologizing is recognizing the other person was hurt and *not* necessarily that you did anything wrong. How it's done can vary from "I'm sorry, and this is how it won't happen again," to "I'm sorry, and this is what I should've done," to "I'm sorry, and yes, as punishment, I'll watch that terrible *Notebook* movie." Meanwhile, some people want to be asked, "Can you forgive me?" because it's more of an olive branch the person can choose to accept or not.
- 3) **Dreaming/Planning Words:** This is all about imagining a different kind of world like "If we could afford it, what job would you want to do around the house?" "If we could afford to go anywhere in the world, where would it be?" and "What would you do if I used your pillow as toilet paper?" (This last one is probably a bad option.)
- 4) **Encouraging Words:** These are words that offer (as you can guess) encouragement.
- 5) **Engaging Words:** These are words that start and continue a conversation that goes beyond surface level topics and facts. These can be good questions, observations, helpful statements, and sharing a little to encourage others to feel safe to share in return.
- 6) **Fact Sharing:** These are things that show what's been learned or have happened. They're things that are safe to share since they can't be argued against: "This was in the news today..."
- 7) **Joking & Story Sharing:** This is about laughter and building connection. It can include being silly, clever, or sharing fun stories.
- 8) **Greeting/Goodbye/Good night:** How we leave and return can make a big difference for how the rest of the day goes.
- 9) **I Love You:** Some people need this like a goodbye or saved for more special occasions. I hate these words because I've been hurt by people who threw these words around too casually.
- 10) **Praise & Compliments:** These are words that affirm our strengths and accomplishments.
- 11) **Reminiscing:** There's something powerful about remembering stories and laughing together whether from looking at old photos or

simply talking about things that happened like when you first met. This is one of the reasons double dates are better than just the couple having date night because there's a new audience who helps the couple reminisce together as they share.

- 12) **Positivity:** Sometimes we just need to be near someone who is positive and sounds cheerful to feel better. Occasionally, being near a negative person can make it easier to be positive if their behavior it reminds us to do the opposite: "Ew, I don't want to be like that." In general, however, a smile and warmth can go a long way.

May understanding the types of words you and your loved ones prefer be the start of sharing love in a stronger way.

Lesson 23

How to Carry a Conversation

I was recently asked how to carry on a conversation – a question that is itself a good way to carry on a conversation. I had previously discussed how to start a conversation with this person and taught them JAOCAOSH, a brilliant word... that's not a word; it's an acronym (as you probably guessed; it's either an acronym or I was angry using all caps: "JAOCAOSH!!!!!!"). As someone who was taught to be silent unless spoken to as a child, I was terrible at starting conversations for most of my young life, but I'm pretty good now as I like to keep these eight options in mind.

J – Joke: By joke I don't mean joke-jokes. Don't be like "Knock, knock..." Look for something in the environment to joke about such as "You have a Maple Leafs jersey... you must have great perseverance," or "If awkwardness is a gift, this place is really generous." I used to help people be able to make fun of me in a good-hearted way by wearing joke shirts. It worked really well for breaking the ice in the right settings because it showed I wasn't worried about being cool or tough (or fashionable).

A – Appreciate: Sometimes saying thank you for something helps the other person feel safe with you. For instance, "Thank you for volunteering here," "Thank you for being so cheerful," or "Thank you for not drooling over me like everyone else."

O – Observation: Acknowledging what's going on can be very helpful like "A Star Wars shirt? Good choice," or "I like when things start late because I need to work on my patience."

C – Compliment: Avoid anything too personal like "I could stare at your collarbone all day, hmmm," and stick to safer things such as "Your hair looks fantastic," (a better compliment to girls than bald men) "You're really good at that" (best if they are), and "You help me feel better because you suck as a person." (Arguably, this one's a bad choice.)

A – Apologize: I once purposely timed grabbing the door to the library at the same time as a hot girl in my class and then said, "Oh, sorry... hey, aren't you in my class?" which combines an apology and observation. It was the perfect conversation starter and the first (and only) time I had game.

O – Open Ended Questions: These are questions that can't be answered with one word (i.e. a closed question), and they can be very helpful for starting a conversation. For instance, "What was the best part of your day?" is more likely to start a conversation than "S'up?"

S – Share Something: Sharing an insight or story can give the other person a sense of trust to give something back.

H – Help: Helping someone or asking for help are very useful for starting a conversation and building connection.

As this person I was talking to found, the next challenge after starting the conversation is to know how to continue it. Below are some suggestions. Sorry, I don't have an awesome acronym for this.

- 1) ***Remember You're Not Alone:*** A conversation takes more than one person (unless you're crazy). All parties are responsible for carrying the conversation, so don't put all the pressure on yourself.
- 2) ***Seek talkative people:*** If you're nervous about starting a conversation, look for people who love to talk. At parties, I often end up talking to women or older men because by "talking" I mean I listen while they talk. These two groups are generally better at random conversations than most (i.e. a normal guy who'd rather not be at that event).
- 3) ***Watch for Fringe People:*** These are the people off to the sides of the room who are typically socially uncomfortable. The odds are they'd love to have someone care enough to talk to them because they're too afraid to do that themselves. By noticing and going to them, you can feel like you're in a leader role, which can empower you thereby helping you be more confident and ready to talk. Plus, from my own experience, knowing they're fringe people helps me feel less fear of being judged because... well, they're fringe people, so who cares? This is helpful because me saying something dumb is 99% likely to happen. I say a lot of dumb things like how I basically wrote, "they're fringe people, so who cares what they think?" which I'm pretty sure is considered very inappropriate.
- 4) ***Believe You're Interesting:*** No one else knows your life like you do. Even the most basic life can be interesting to others because it's fresh to them. For instance, you can even amaze people with how simple your life is, especially if they're the opposite.

- 5) ***Control the Conversation:*** Act like the parent with a child in the conversation where you ask questions and steer the conversation to topics you care about. Being in control can help you feel empowered and confident.
- 6) ***Redirect It Back:*** This involves sending a question back to the other person: “That’s a good question; what do you think?” This is especially helpful if you don’t want to share.
- 7) ***Use a Mix of Closed & Open-Ended Questions:*** A closed ended question can be answered with one word whereas an open-ended question can’t. Mixing it up keeps things flowing.
- 8) ***React to What People Say:*** Smile, nod, laugh, show concern, ask questions, and share thoughts because it will encourage others to keep sharing. If you don’t react, they’ll assume you don’t care and will stop talking.
- 9) ***Share something:*** Many people tend to be more open to sharing when you offer something to them. It’s like a subconscious level of trust: You won’t use what I say against me because I have something on you. Sharing also prevents the conversation feeling like an interview. At the same time, be careful not to over-share because that can scare people away, too: (over-sharer) “My bowel movements are hilarious when given in great detail.” (bystander) “You just flushed away my interest in this conversation.”
- 10) ***Have a Story and/or Topic on Hand:*** When we’re put on the spot, it can be impossible to think, which is why it’s good to have a story on hand. If you don’t have anything interesting in your own life, you can check out the news for recent events, look up interesting stories online, or listen to an audio biography you picked up for free from the library like a genius once recommended.
- 11) ***Observation vs. Judgement:*** Some people are afraid to hear or share because they don’t want to sound judgemental. Be aware of the difference between making an observation (e.g. facts and

categorizing) versus judgement, which is more about looking down on others or beating ourselves up for being less than them.

- 12) ***Venting vs. Gossip:*** Some people are afraid of hearing or sharing information about other people to avoid being gossips, but sometimes we need to get out our frustrations. If this is the case, that's not gossip; it's venting. Venting bonds people through sharing and empathy. Gossip is more about being judgemental as it's used to put others down and/or make ourselves look better. That being said, gossip can be inadvertently created when we vent to the wrong person, which means we should be careful who we trust.
- 13) ***Embrace Silence:*** Sometimes silence can allow others a chance to say something. Silence isn't failure; it's opportunity. Make it your friend.
- 14) ***Be Okay to Flop:*** Sometimes a joke will fall flat or you'll ask a dumb question (and yes there are dumb questions). Sometimes what you say will go nowhere or even make you look dumb, but a good conversationalist will know how to bail you out and turn it into a great moment (aka "Yes and"). If they don't bail you out, remember they are 50% responsible. After all, sometimes the best thought will fall flat because the other person(s) is socially terrible. Just like in football, no matter how good the quarterback is, the receiver still has to know how to catch the throw to complete the pass.
- 15) ***Have an Excuse to Leave:*** Sometimes you just need to end a conversation. Have an escape plan like "I better go to the bathroom," or "I'm going to get some food."
- 16) ***Repeat What the Other Person Says:*** When done right, this can help the other person feel understood. For instance, "That's interesting; I didn't know (repeat what they said)." Of course, use this sparingly or you'll look insane.

- 17) ***Reword and Repeat What the Person Says:*** Instead of directly quoting the other person, you can reword what they say to show you understand what they're saying: "So what you're saying is..."
- 18) ***Consider having a Partner:*** Sometimes it's just safer having a trusted person beside you to laugh and bail you out as needed. It can take the pressure off, so don't be afraid to partner up at an event.
- 19) ***Find a Task:*** At Christmas I like to clean up because I prefer working and talking than sitting at a table talking. Having a task means I don't "have" to talk, which helps me feel safer. A lot of guys are like this unless they're old and retired (aka bored). We hate sitting in a coffee shop talking; we'd rather be doing an activity and letting conversation happen rather than be forced.
- 20) ***Pick a Safe Place to Be:*** Cats like to have a wall behind them because it helps them feel safer. That's a good instinct. People can do the same. Find somewhere you feel safer to be, so you're more confident to talk to others.
- 21) ***Timing of the Party:*** The beginning, middle, and end of a party have a different feel. I find the start more awkward, so I prefer arriving later into the event because people are settled. My favorite time is at the end when others start to leave and I can help clean up, which gives me a project to do.
- 22) ***Know Why You're Trying to Talk:*** I try to talk to people because I like to gather good stories (like biographies). I used to talk to people because I wanted to look caring, but now I'm old and don't really care. (I'm nicer than that makes me sound.) Knowing my goal is to gather stories, it helps me have more fun when I talk. Sometimes a little selfishness is good because it motivates us to be better.

May this post give you some suggestions for being better at conversations.

How to Start a Sensitive Conversation

Do you enjoy being yelled at or listening to people give long rants without much of a point? Do you like someone hurling insults at you because you just enjoy hearing their voice? Great, you're all set. All you need to do is say something dumb and then sit back and enjoy the show. You can say something like "No wonder your parents got divorced; you ruin everything," or "I think your butt's new impersonation of Jell-O is fantastic." If you don't like people screaming at you, you know, like a normal person, this post will offer some tips for preventing others from attacking you with harsh and/or long-winded blabbering even when you need to have a sensitive conversation. This is essentially a post about protecting yourself and your relationship.

Before we get into the list of tips for starting a sensitive conversation, the most important thing to understand is venting. If there was a boiling kettle that didn't have any holes to vent out the steam, bad things happen (as in boom). Similarly, people need to get out their emotions or bad things happen (as in boom). This can be an explosion out of nowhere or shutting down emotionally (e.g. depression and anxiety) or being physically affected (e.g. sleep problems, immune system issues, heart failure, etc.). Venting is healthy and necessary in order to get the junk out and prevent bottling up, but it needs to be done in a safe way that doesn't hurt other people or make us look crazy: "I vent by screaming on the bus... while rubbing strangers' heads." Venting can be more verbal like talking to a trusted third party, journaling, and writing an angry letter we don't send (emphasis on *don't* send) or more physical like fast push ups, screaming alone in the car, breaking stuff (things you're allowed to break), and punching a bed; whatever explodes out the energy. The problem is people naturally want to vent in the moment when we're angry, which is when we're with the person who has upset us – that's a

bad choice... unless you want to give them a reason to think you're insane. That's why we need to vent when we're alone. Anger makes us dumb, which is obviously the time we want to keep our thoughts to ourselves. It makes us say what "feels right" in the moment (uh oh) in ways that are less than encouraging: "I'm screaming because I'm so kind!" Things said in anger fall under the venting category, which includes raised voices, exaggerations, insults, and rambling (you know, what you don't want to use when trying to get your point across). The biggest problem is anger often causes us to say things we'd never say if we were calm because they're so hurtful, and this is made even worse because those are the things that stick with people. This means, despite anger making us dumb, we need to be smart enough to know to pause the conversation in order for us to go off alone and vent to calm down.

Understanding when someone is venting can protect us as we'll know the difference between an attack and someone letting off steam. Other times fights are started because one person is venting and the other person thinks they should try to fix the problem being vented out, which upsets the venter because they venter just wants to vent. Another problem is the listener takes what's vented personally and they criticize someone who is already angry – bad choice. Even more important, when we understand what venting is, even if the venter feels like they're attacking, the listener will be better at brushing off what's said because they'll know it's just an emotional outburst and not truth.

Bonus: If someone is venting to you about someone else, this is a sign of trust and a great way to bond. As a listener, however, make sure you only half listen because the speaker is having an outburst of emotion, so they're going to say things they don't really mean. Don't focus on the details; look for the theme of what they're saying and affirm it: (1/2 listening listener) "Yeah, that person sounds mean. I'd be angry, too." (venter) "You get it. Thank you."

When starting a sensitive conversation and/or protecting yourself, here is a helpful list to consider:

1. ***Vent Alone Before:*** Before you start the sensitive conversation, make sure you've released any potential energy that will make you want to explode at the person.
2. ***Don't Vent at Each Other:*** If you or the other person starts to get heated, cut off the conversation by saying something like "I need a moment. I'll be back in an hour to continue talking about this," or "I need to go to the bathroom." Even if you don't have to go, this is a good breather moment. The hope is when you come back, you'll both be in a better spot to talk calmly.
3. ***One Sentence:*** It's best if you can summarize your problem in one sentence. Remember, rambling means you're throwing too much information out there for the other person to hear, and it'll likely lead to them picking apart your speech and/or attacking you. A good one sentence looks like "I feel disrespected when you give me that look because it seems like you think I'm an idiot," "I feel talked down to when you use that particular tone." and "I feel unimportant because you appear to prioritize work over me."
4. ***Timing is "Everything":*** Timing isn't literally everything or it'd be the only thing on this list, but it is important. In AA, they teach HALT because we are at our most vulnerable when we are hungry, anxious/angry, lonely, and/or tired. I use HHALTS with the extra H for horny/hormonal (that makes some people crazy) and the S being for "substance fueled" because things like liquid courage is not a good choice for starting a sensitive conversation. HHALTS means don't start a sensitive conversation right before bed or when you or the other person is at their worst in the day. Help set yourselves up for success.
5. ***Ask Permission to Start the Conversation:*** When there is something sensitive to bring up and you think it's good timing, before jumping into the conversation, ask permission: "Can we talk about something sensitive right now or is there a better time for you?" This question gives your partner a sense of equality and not just being dumped on.

6. **Consider the Drop-And-Go with a Time:** Some people need time to process the issue being presented, especially guys, so it can be helpful to drop the topic you want to talk about with the person and say when you'll return. The drop-and-go helps people feel respected and not ambushed.
7. **Consider How You Drop-And-Go:** Some people are better at hearing you say what the issue is you want to discuss while others are better with being given a note or a one sentence text describing what you want to discuss because they're more visual.
8. **Consider a Family Meeting Time:** If picking a time to talk about an issue is too hard to do, some families benefit from regular check-ins like a business meeting where there is a designated time and place for these types of discussions like Sunday lunch when people are in a good mood. These can be. This can help limit sensitive issues to only be discussed at this time allowing the rest of the week to feel safer because it prevents everyday and every conversation being at risk of being sensitive. For instance, some couples in therapy agree to only discuss the sensitive topic in session in order to relax and/or reflect during the week.
9. **NO Texting Arguments:** Never have sensitive conversations over text. Besides a heads up like a Drop-And-Go text such as "Tonight after the kids go to bed, I need to talk to you about (thing)," texting should be limited. If you do send a heads up, avoid saying general sentences like "I need to talk to you about something," because that sounds like you've cheated. You also need to be careful how many messages like this you send because it will make your partner person dread receiving messages from you because they'll assume it's another conflict.
10. **Choose Your Words & Tone Carefully:** People don't like to feel like they're being told they're wrong, a failure, dumb, inadequate, etc. so be careful how you speak.
11. **Limit How Much You Prepare:** Being overly prepared for a conversation can cause you to become rigid in your presentation and

freeze when you're given something for which you're not prepared. Plus, if you share too much at once, the other person can be overwhelmed by the tidal wave of information they're given.

12. ***Consider the Best, Worst, & Likely Case:*** It's sometimes helpful to consider what the best, worst, and likely case scenarios are for the discussion and what can help you get the best case.
13. ***Know the Goal:*** Make sure going into the conversation you know what you want to get out of it and communicate that with the other person in one sentence. You may also want to know what their goal is, so you're on the same page. Sometimes writing it down and having it in front of you can help keep the focus and prevent the bunny trails we tend to go down.

This week may you discover a way to have better conversations

Lesson 25

The Four Kinds of Joking

I love laughing, and even more, I love helping people laugh... although you may not get that from my teaching style; I'm a little dull for my liking, but I've never been good at multitasking. Ever since I can remember, I was drawn to laughter. It first started with a live album by a Christian singer named Sandi Patty; yes, it's as dorky as it sounds. I was about six years old and my eleven-year-old sister had a tape of this singer

who was loved by old people (I blame my sister for making me dorky). The tape was played at a safe and reasonable level. (Okay, I'll admit it; my whole family was dorky, so it wasn't completely my sister's fault; it was partly genetic.) It was playing on our car's tape deck, a feature my family was very proud to have because it was the '80s, and having a tape deck in the car was a big deal. I don't remember anything music wise, and I wouldn't even recognise any of her songs if I heard them today, but it was a live album and she said this one line between songs that has stuck with me for over 35 years: "My dentist's name growing up... ready?... Dr. Molar." As a six-year-old I had no idea what a molar was, but the audience roared, you know, the way old people do at jokes that aren't so funny, but when you've grown up in a sheltered, uptight church mindset, that line is gold. This was the first time I really heard an audience laugh and it was amazing. I re-listened to that moment a bunch of times, and later I went to the church library and asked to borrow the tape for myself where Sandi Patty made the molar joke. The church librarian just blankly stared at me and I left confused: "How doesn't she know? It's like the best thing ever!" Fortunately, I started branching out to actual comedians. Of course, I was still a Christian kid in the '80s who was only allowed to watch Disney movies and anything family oriented, so I got into the Three Stooges, Martin and Lewis, and Abbott and Costello. Later, I tried to get into Monty Python... but I still don't get their popularity. In the '90s, Mr Bean and Rowan Atkinson's live material blew me away, and eventually in my 20s I finally got into real stand-up comedians like John Mulaney, Mike Birbiglia, T.J. Miller, Kyle Kinnane, Daniel Tosh, John Heffron, and Dan Cummins. Watching these pros has helped teach me timing, performance, and how to write and say a joke better, which I now use to help make people laugh whenever I can. Laughing to me, is one of the greatest gifts we've been given while to others it's like a curse. Unfortunately, like any God-given-gift (e.g. sight, taste, sex, emotions, etc.), it can be a blessing or it can get us into trouble.

One of my favorite moments growing up follows this idea. Being a "good" Christian, my dad was very "proper" with his kids, but he was

apparently very funny teaching adults in Sunday school. (Think Sandi Patty funny.) I almost never saw this side, but when I was 15, I was on a family trip to the science center in Sudbury, Ontario (once a dork, always a dork), and while we waited to be let into the Omnimax theater, two women overly voluptuous in all the wrong places walked in like penguins (I thought writing “waddled” would’ve been too rude... I’m so nice) both carrying a large pop in one hand and a large popcorn in the other. At that moment, my dad whispered to my brother and I, “You can tell those women love popcorn... because they’re popping out all over.” My mom did the typical mom thing and scolded him while my brother and I laughed hysterically. It’s one of my favorite moments growing up, yet it’s a joke that’ll be offensive to some people; it certainly would’ve been mean if my dad said it loud enough for those ladies to hear it. So, what do you do with comedy when it can be offensive to some and funny to others?

Joking can be put into four main camps:

1. **Aggressive:** This is a type of humor that’s laughing *at* and not *with*. It can be a way to show dominance or bond with friends at someone else’s expense. Either way, it has a bully feel to it.
2. **Passive Aggressive:** This so-called joking gives a hidden message and/or is used to cut someone down like a jab. There’s a meanness that’s not as blatant as aggressive joking, but there’s still an air of dominance. Saying “Just kidding,” or “Can’t you take a joke?” are the calling cards of a passive aggressive joke.
3. **Passive:** This is when the joking is a distraction to hide an underlying hurt. It can be self deprecating in a beat yourself up kind of way.
4. **Assertive:** This is joking used to heal and bond. It can be self deprecating in a fun way and/or teasing other people in a way that says, “I’m teasing you because I trust you, and I’m trying to connect,” or “I know you’re sad and I want to help you smile.” The downside of assertive joking is it can be misinterpreted, especially by someone who is uptight or passive aggressive and not used to joking to bond.

Guys typically love joking, especially with their friends. It's how we connect and build trust. My dad joking with my brother and I was one such moment. When he said that joke there was no intention to be hurtful. Instead, he was essentially treating us like a friend, which was huge for me. I had never felt closer. If you're a woman reading this, you're probably thinking there's something wrong with me, but that's how guys work. Women, on the other hand, tend to be better at being vulnerable and sharing feelings while they tend to be weaker at joking to tease unless they've grown up with brothers. When a lot of women "joke," there's a hidden message, which makes joking feel unsafe, and a guy's joking is assumed to be done in the same way. The one exception is most women know how to joke to flirt, but that soon disappears.

What's interesting is I've found ***where men are more likely to joke, women are more likely to laugh***. As a speaker, you want women in the audience because they're a lot quicker to laugh, and when they get with their friends, it's crazy how much they can laugh (or to be more accurate – cackle). I know when I've been in a group of women who are in hysterics, I'm typically left wondering what's so funny? But women can make other women laugh in a way that no man can achieve. It's not an insult to men; it's just how it is. Ultimately, women need to feel safe to be vulnerable enough to laugh, and when they do, they can keep laughing over and over and over and over (sound like something else?). It's like they can they can have multiple laughings. Meanwhile, guys joke to test the waters and to build a sense of safety. We prefer to be able to laugh with someone first before we feel safe enough to be vulnerable and share.

Ultimately, when it comes to joking, men need to know our audience and be careful how we joke. (I've learned this the hard way over and over and...), and women need to remember that when it feels too serious, a typical guy is going to want to joke to ease the tension. He *is* taking the issue seriously and joking is his way to feel safer in order to face it. Criticizing him for not taking it seriously is actually a quick way to hurt him and/or start a fight. At the same time, guys need to be careful when they joke because women typically want to feel safe first. Both sides

need to try to read their audience properly while at the same time being open to helping the other person feel safe. If this sounds tricky, it is.

What's confusing to men is a lot of women are great at joking at the beginning of the relationship when the flirting is high, but they seem to forget as the relationship becomes serious and joking is traded in for increased expectations (aka weight carriers). This means two things: Women need to try to stay fun and men need to try to help reduce the stress women put on themselves and the relationship. At the same time, a lot of guys need to learn that joking with your buddies is different than joking with your wife while women need to remember your husband is not your girlfriend and connects differently.

My most important rule for joking, besides knowing your audience, is we should strive to only joke as a way to heal and bond in order to help those around us to better assume our intention is positive. If we ever joke in a passive aggressive way, it will break the trust people need to assume our positive intentions later. Joking is something we need to respect and use carefully because it can be an incredible way to connect or a very damaging weapon.

Bonus: If you're not sure if someone is actually joking or not, simply ask, "To clarify, was that a joke or a jab?" or "To clarify, are you trying to give a hidden message or am I misreading this?" Remember, don't assume. Joking is a wonderful gift, but it's up to us to help it be used for good.

This week may you find some great joking moments.

Is Someone You Know Passive Aggressive?

Passive aggressive behavior seems to be on the rise, especially among young people – this sucks. It’s scary because this is the most damaging of the four anger styles (i.e. aggressive, passive aggressive, passive, and assertive). To make matters worse, most people don’t really know how to define passive aggressive behavior; they know the term and can sometimes recognize it when they see it being done, but based on the clients I’ve worked with, barely anyone really knows what passive aggressive behavior is. Going over this is very important since most passive aggressive people don’t realize they’re doing anything wrong. How do I know this? Because I used to be passive aggressive and didn’t know I was doing anything wrong. What’s crazy is passive aggressive behavior often feels right when you do it. Fortunately, in my theology Masters I took a class that pointed out that the silent treatment, my go-to at the time, was passive aggressive and very unhealthy. I just knew I wasn’t yelling at people, so I wasn’t angry... or so I thought. My Nana was the queen of the silent treatment. In her younger years, when she was angry, she’d go a week without talking to my grandpa until he bought her a present to apologize for something that he did wrong even though he had no idea what that was. What’s funny is my Nana often didn’t know what he did either; she just knew she had been angry, which is such a princess move (aka passive aggressive... and yes, I’m aware I indirectly called myself a princess).

When I see a couple in therapy, the odds are one of them has passive aggressive tendencies. The most obvious sign is if someone thinks they are the innocent victim and the other person is 100% to blame or they point out how the other person needs to change without any hint of their own failings. As I’ve previously taught, it’s always 50% my fault when

I'm in a conflict, which means the statement "It's all your fault" is wrong – suckers (an add on that makes me more of a jerk than passive aggressive).

I once had a woman come in to see me for therapy and after a few sessions she blurted, "I just want you to tell me I'm right!" That was a great example of a passive aggressive moment. She had no interest in growing or accepting responsibility for the conflict in her house. She just wanted me to affirm her, so she could go home and say, "The professional says I'm right!" This is what I call army building, and a typical passive aggressive move. I used to do this, but I would go to all my friends and have them tell me I was right, so I could go back to my girlfriend and tell her, "Everyone says I'm right," thus proving... absolutely nothing except maybe when my friends hear a biased story, they agree with me – shocker.

The reason passive aggressive behavior is so dangerous is because it's wrapped in pride and makes the person impossible to reason with because they're "right" and the other side is 100% wrong. They make you feel like you're crazy and when you're hurt that it's somehow your own fault and you should be apologizing. With a passive aggressive person in a conflict, both parties usually end up hurt because passive aggressive people are upset even after "winning" as they want to feel sorry for themselves while the other person usually feels belittled, confused, and/or emotionally beaten – it's a lose-lose.

The following is a list of possible passive aggressive behaviors:

1. You eye roll or sigh when someone says something you don't like.
2. You accuse everyone else as being passive aggressive.
3. You play the victim and think "poor me" while ignoring what others go through.
4. You seek sympathy to gain a sense of importance.
5. You have a list of what the other person did wrong as evidence for why they owe you or why they need to apologize (i.e. emotional blackmail).

6. You make attacks on the computer or behind people's back and never in person.
7. What you say is shrouded in mystery as you hint at what you want or you try to get people to read between the lines.
8. You assume the other person will know what you mean if they truly loved you.
9. What you say is demeaning (e.g. "You're not going to wear that are you?")
10. There can be degrading sarcasm (e.g. "I like your outfit; I'd wear that too if I was poor.")
11. You get other people to do your dirty work.
12. You think aggression is the worst thing in the world, and have no problem stabbing them in the back or slandering them online.
13. You're drawn to feeling power in the relationship.
14. You give an excuse for bad behavior like "I have depression, so I don't have to change."
15. You're overly controlling.
16. You use mind games and manipulation to get your way.
17. You use guilt trips, blackmail, or gaslight.
18. You like drama.
19. You refuse to talk to someone until they apologize.
20. You use silence to punish or prove a point.
21. You assume others do passive aggressive things like what's on this list because that's what you do.
22. You expect other people to say hi first, and resent them if they don't while not saying hi to them.
23. You believe you're not loved if you don't get your way all the time.
24. Your relationships always end horribly with lots of hurt feelings.
25. You don't accept any responsibility and demand the other side owe you in some way.
26. You don't have long-term relationships because they all end terribly and you refuse to apologize and reconcile even if the other person wants to try again.
27. After a fight where you both yelled, you complain how the other person yelled at you as if you're innocent.

28. You say the other person needs to change or is the only one who needs therapy.
29. You'll pin a parent against a parent or friend against a friend.
30. You say the other person needs to help *you* feel loved or happy in some way while you don't have to do anything differently.
31. You're guilty of mom-shaming.
32. You're very judgemental and/or assume others do that to you.
33. You care too much about what others think.
34. You say things like "I don't care what other people think," which means you care a lot about what others think. If you didn't care, it wouldn't be on your mind to say.
35. You're a perfectionist and expect others to have your standards or you'll look down on them, especially if it's your partner.
36. You use punishing behaviors and are very tit for tat.
37. You hurt others and justify it in order to not feel guilt.
38. You can feel guilt, but then use it to justify hurting someone else (i.e. misery loves company).
39. You backstab and/or gossip
40. Your joking has a hidden message behind it and/or you assume other people always have a hidden message in their joking.
41. You won't talk to the person that upset you directly, but you go to their boss to complain.
42. You have an air of superiority and look down on others saying things like "I'd never do that," or "I wouldn't do it that way."
43. People complain you talk down to them.
44. You think everyone should know and accept your opinion.
45. You're always correcting little things people say or do.
46. You twist what people say to make them sound evil and/or to feel sorry for yourself.
47. You complain everyone is against you.
48. Helping others is to get something back like control or so they owe you later.
49. You work hard and do things that give you a sense of power over others.

50. You regularly slam people on social media and/or regularly give terrible reviews.
51. You need everyone to think you're great.
52. People have lovingly suggested you are narcissistic or you regularly accuse others of being narcissistic (i.e. we accuse others of what we are guilty of being).
53. Getting your way is a priority and justifies the means.
54. It's never your fault or you use it being your fault as a way to gain sympathy.
55. You blame others for things unlike a passive person who blames themselves.
56. You're very quick to accuse someone else of doing this without considering your own behavior.

Tip: As one mom told me, “When boys cry, they’re told to suck it up while when girls cry, they get what they want.” If this is true, it’s no wonder girls are more drawn to being passive aggressive.

The good news is most people who are passive aggressive will react like me when I learned I was passive aggressive: “That’s bad? Oh shoot!” As soon as I learned that the silent treatment and building an army were bad, I quickly stopped doing them because I was just trying to find a way to get my point across without yelling, which I saw as the real evil. ***The trick is learning how to stand up for yourself in a loving way where both parties feel like they are cared about (i.e. assertive behavior),*** which is what this book is teaching.

Bonus Thought: One of the reasons passive aggressive behaviors are on the rise in Canadian culture is we’re so afraid of aggressiveness. Aggression, however, comes from passion and we need that. When I was in Washington D.C. on a mission trip, a small political rally took place. I say small because that’s how the Americans I talked to described it, but there were 100,000 people there. What? In Canada a small rally includes the organizer and his mom. 100,000 people is... our population. Americans are passionate, which is great... and terrible. I’m sure there are a few people from the Middle East who’d

agree with that. This fear of aggression is best seen with children whom we're afraid to discipline or let roughhouse. When I was a kid, my friends and I lived for recess and gym. We played sports and bounced each other around. It was great. While we had games with winners and losers, the girls spent recess talking, skipping, and playing games that are more socially driven where no one wins or loses – blah. Nowadays, it seems that children are only encouraged to do things where no one wins. Talk about missing out on the needs of a gender. We shouldn't be afraid of aggression, especially when squashing it causes people to adapt and become sneakier. Roughhousing and bouncing around in sports and play is important for boys. It toughens us up, bonds us with our friends, and helps us push ourselves to be better. By not letting boys be aggressive, they have to resort to being passive aggressive.

I used to be scared of aggressive people, but now I love them because I never have to second guess what they're thinking; they're straight up. It's refreshing not having to second guess whether you've offended them or hurt them because if you did, they'll tell you. Passive aggressive behavior is much more damaging because that person is going to stab you in the back if you say anything. Physical bruises heal. Ruining someone's reputation or self worth is creates lifelong emotional scars.

This week may you start to recognize passive aggressive behavior and protect yourself from it.

Half Way There



Dealing with Victim Mentalities (which sucks)

Lately it seems that everyone is claiming to be a victim. In my book *Emotional Sex: Making good relationships great*, I point out that we want to be the *victor* and not the *victim*, we want to do what we can to help ourselves and not just act like we're helpless. Lately, however, it seems like being the victor has been forgotten as an option and it's more about people *being* a victim or *playing* a victim. Using the four anger styles, here is the breakdown of how this looks:

Aggressive: These people can be straightforward, blunt, and pushy. They can use intimidation, threats, and insults, which means they don't usually feel like a victim while those around them can.

Passive Aggressive: These people will *play* the victim in order to have power over others and get what they want. This is a lot of feeling sorry for themselves when they are, in fact, NOT weak or the real victim. Playing the victim is a great manipulation tool in order to get sympathy and have bad behavior enabled. These people always find a way to blame others and have excuses for their own actions.

Passive: These people end up *being* the victim as they always give in and let the other person have their way, which leads to them feeling weak and vulnerable. These are often very nice people who get taken advantage of and just accept it as they shut down and/or have the potential for exploding and looking like they're aggressive. Unlike passive aggressive people, the passive will blame themselves and/or find excuses for others' behaviors, but not their own.

Assertive: These people are the victors; they will stand up for themselves in a loving way. They don't accept feeling helpless. They do what they can to make the situation as good as possible for themselves

and the other party. This is a tricky category to be in as you need to read your audience and adjust accordingly. Everyone has a natural tendency to be in the first three and it takes work to be assertive. I've heard people say they're assertive, but causes their family to laugh. They were either aggressive and thought they were assertive because others just gave in or they were very passive aggressive and saw themselves way better than they were.

Guess which category I recommend.

I like to refer to victimhood as "The Cinderella Syndrome" as we want to feel like the beautiful and wonderful person who is being abused by a cruel and evil person. The problem is, however, it's rarely that situation, especially when we are 50% responsible. The problem with this title is Cinderella was a victor. She *was* the victim insofar as she was being abused by her stepfamily, but she didn't wallow in her pain like a passive aggressive person would. Instead of feeling sorry for herself, she tried to make life better. She was willing to do what she could to not *be* a victim anymore, which is assertive. On the other hand, passive people, those *being* the victim, carry on being the victim when they need to stand up for themselves. Cinderella appeared so strong and confident that the Prince fell in love with her. A prince wouldn't fall for a mopey, weak peasant woman. He would only go for someone strong and confident that suited the title of princess. Arguably, if Cinderella didn't marry the Prince, when she was old enough to leave home, she would have left to forge a new life away from her abusive family – she wasn't going to be stuck.

Cinderella also didn't *play* a victim. She didn't say to her fairy godmother, "I've had it so rough. If you loved me you would've been here sooner," or "If you loved me, you wouldn't give me all this free stuff for an evening with a curfew. I could have it forever." Ironically, the evil stepmother plays the victim as she wallows in her plight of having lost her husband and uses this as an excuse to be cruel to Cinderella and take advantage of her. In my practice, I find teenagers like to play this card as they take advantage of their parents and then complain how hard it is

being expected to do chores and have rules to follow at home – they have no idea what’s ahead of them.

I find people *being* the victim and *playing* the victim very frustrating; why? Because I struggle not being them myself. When I was really young, I was good at playing the victim. I remember being angry at my parents for something and thinking, “If I ran away, that’d show them.” I also remember once sitting at the breakfast table waiting for my mom to bring me my cereal, but she was busy, so I’d sulk, “I guess Mom doesn’t love me enough to bring me my cereal.” Yeah, I totally sounded like a millennial there... but I was five, so it was more acceptable. Being from a family of people pleasers, however, I had strong passive tendencies as I was more likely to just accept whatever was given me and suffer what I needed in order to avoid conflict. Fortunately, I now know what being healthy looks like, and I do my best to go that route, but sometimes it’s tempting to have a pity party, which is the worst of all parties.

So how do you handle these people?

For people *being* the victim, I like to use leading questions and observations to help them see they’re not helpless: “Didn’t you get through a similar situation when...” or “I remember when you faced an even bigger challenge...” Another option is to try to get the person to vent and get out the bottled-up emotions: “I’d be angry if I were you.” Other times, the best thing for someone is to give them a metaphoric kick in the pants: “At what point are you settling for less?” I might also do a comparison question: “What’s the difference between accepting your fate and letting others take advantage of you?” ***See how this kick in the pants isn’t a slap in the face?*** It’s about getting the person to think about what they’re doing because telling people what to do just makes them angry at you. The last option to consider is to let the person crash and burn because sometimes people need to fall on their face in order to snap out of their perceived weakness and have survival mode kick in like with lazy teens: (person) “Wait, you’re going to make me get a job or get out of the house? I can’t just mooch off you and play video games the rest of my life? That’s so unfair! I’m only twenty-five!”

Dealing with people who *play* the victim are more of a challenge because they're high risk for being vindictive. Ideally, you won't get involved with these people because they're dangerous. If you're forced to deal with them, however, I find the best thing is to shoot them... a good question (I hope that didn't get your hopes up: "But they have such great life insurance!"). This question should give two options where one option is safer like "To clarify, do you think you're weak and helpless or do you just need to complain for a bit?" or "To clarify, are you trying to make me feel bad so I'll do the work for you or is it something else?" or "To clarify, are you trying to get me to feel bad or do you want me to give you a hug?" The hope is you're misreading the situation and they're not playing the victim, but if they are, it's good to help them see what they're doing. Sometimes people need a good question to keep them accountable. Giving a negative statement to anyone is never helpful.

Always use a question in tough situations like these, especially with a passive aggressive person because a statement will end terribly for you: "What's that stabbing pain in my back? Oh, a knife you just jammed in there when I wasn't paying attention."

A friend sent me the following article on victim mentalities I thought was great. It's addressed to teenagers, but it's good for all of us to hear.

Words for Teenagers

Northland College principal offered the following from a judge who regularly deals with youth. "Always we hear the cry from teenagers, 'what can we do, where can we go?'

"My answer is this: Go home, mow the lawn, wash the windows, learn to cook, build a raft, get a job, visit the sick, study your lessons, and after you've finished, read a book. Your town does not owe you recreational facilities and your parents do not owe you fun.

"The world does not owe you a living, you owe the world something. You owe it your time, energy, and talent so that no one will be at war, in sickness, and lonely again. In other words, grow up, stop being a cry baby, get out of your dream world and develop a backbone not a wishbone. Start behaving like a responsible person. You

are important, and you are needed. It's too late to sit around and wait for somebody to do something someday. Someday is now and that somebody is you!"

This week may you take responsibility and do something to make your life better.

Lesson 28

How to Deal with Criticism Better

Being told, "You need to embrace criticism," is great advice... that makes you want to slap the person giving it: (receiver) "To show you gratitude, I shall warm thy cheek with my moist hand." It's amazing how advice can feel like criticism, and since criticism feels like a putdown, so can advice. Unsolicited advice can even make the advice giver come across as arrogant since it can feel like they think the other person is too dumb to have figured it out themselves. For this lesson, I want to give you the gift of knowing how to take advice and criticism better. If you're thinking, "But Chad, didn't you just say that unsolicited advice can feel like a put down?" Yes, but I can share my advice because I'm amazing... I mean, reading this is your choice, and no one is forcing you to read it... and if they are, that's a very strange form of torture and not complimentary to me at all: (torturer) "I can either waterboard you or make you read this lesson by Chad." (victim) "Waterboard me, I beg you!" Fortunately, I can take this criticism because I'm following my own advice (and I can cry in private later).

One of my favorite exercises to understand why someone does something is to brainstorm all of the possible reasons for it. You get to be like a detective looking for the motive in the crime. This is a great exercise to start with here in order to consider why someone would give us advice/criticism. Options include:

- 1) ***They think you're stupid:*** Sometimes advice is given because they think you're too dumb to figure out what they can in two seconds. Whether this is true or not, this is likely how it feels.
- 2) ***It's an automatic response.***
- 3) ***They feel obligated to help.***
- 4) ***They like to talk:*** Sometimes advice comes from a talker wanting to talk or a lonely person who wants an excuse to speak.
- 5) ***To feel value by contributing something:*** This is particularly big for older people and should be remembered in order to help them feel respected.
- 6) ***They want to feel smart:*** Another title for this is know-it-all.
- 7) ***To have their experience validated:*** Sometimes giving advice gives people's own experience meaning like when they have lost a loved one or gone through divorce.
- 8) ***To prove themselves or impress someone.***
- 9) ***They're desperate for you to like them:*** It's amazing how many people just want to be liked and will do whatever they think will help that happen.
- 10) ***To prevent guilt:*** Giving advice can help prevent feeling bad about someone's suffering.
- 11) ***Because of sympathy:*** Feeling sorry for someone who seems to be unnecessarily struggling can be a strong motivator.
- 12) ***They're bored:*** Boredom makes people do things they wouldn't normally do.
- 13) ***They're meddlers:*** Some people can't help but put their nose where it doesn't belong.
- 14) ***To show they care.***
- 15) ***To help & guide:*** Some people genuinely want to serve others and/or encourage improvement.

- 16) ***For safety reasons:*** Sometimes the advice is for someone's safety whether yours or someone else's.
- 17) ***To motivate & encourage:*** Sometimes we need a kick in the pants to get moving.
- 18) ***To create harmony and unity:*** Sometimes advice is meant to direct people to fall in line and follow what others are doing.
- 19) ***They're fixers by nature:*** Men and moms tend to be bad for this.
- 20) ***It gives them purpose or value.***
- 21) ***To feel in control:*** Anxiety has a way of making people very controlling of others and/or the situation.
- 22) ***To insult:*** Sometimes advice is actually meant to put others down and/or to make them remember their "place."
- 23) ***To feel superior:*** Some people just want to feel smarter or better in some way.

When someone gives advice or criticism, it helps to consider if the intention is positive or negative. We should also remember that if we're insecure, we normally assume the worst, which makes even the nicest person's advice seem like an attack. ***From my experience, however, advice is typically on the positive side and the giver is simply trying to help – it's not you; it's them.*** This is important to remember because we look bad if we are suddenly rude to someone trying to be helpful. If the advice feels like an attack, you need to clarify it. Similar to dealing with passive aggressive people, we should ask a "to clarify" question with two options. For instance, "To clarify, are you trying to be helpful or is it meant to be a putdown?" "To clarify, are you giving advice to be critical or am I misreading this?" or "To clarify, to thank you for your advice should I slap you or just stick to yelling insults?" Notice there is always one positive option in order to give the person an out (the third option is clearly a joke), and this prevents any wrong assumptions. By giving the two options, the other person has a starting point for thinking and it softens the question as you're offering them the positive option. If you just ask, "What do you mean by that?" or "Are you trying to call me dumb?" the other person will have a little panic moment and either lash out or shut down.

The one important rule to this questioning is we need to accept the answer we're given and not accuse them of lying even if we think they are. Fortunately, by asking this "to clarify" question with two options, the other person knows we're now going to call them out on their behavior, so they have to watch what they say.

This tool is great any time there's a risk of assuming. If we ask something like "To clarify, are you trying to be helpful or control me?" and that person says they're trying to help, we are now welcome to say something like "Thank you for trying to help; what would really be helpful is if you...", or "Thank you for your help, but I just want to complain and have someone tell me my situation sucks." We should never be rude. If we don't want advice, we should communicate this in a clear and caring way. Personally, I just thank them and let it go because saying anything more risks dragging out a conversation in which I don't want to be.

Finally, if we ask to clarify and the other person is actually being rude or insulting (that'd be surprising), then we should simply say something like "Thank you for your honesty," and leave. Even if people are mean, we should avoid being rude back because this prevents a possible fight and ultimately makes us look better than them. Love is more powerful than being mean and sometimes doing something to look good is a good back up reason to do something.

By understanding the person's intention, it can be easier for us to accept what they have to say, and if we have the option of saying thanks but no thanks, we can feel empowered and be in a better spot to either accept or throw out the advice.

Tip: If you ever want to give advice, ask: "Can I give you a suggestion?" You can also offer it in the form of a question like "Have you thought about...?" This can help reduce the insult feel. This can even be helpful in disciplining older people: "When you (action), did you consider how it would affect (someone)?" Of course, this doesn't always work like if you're a hockey coach: "Have you thought about

skating faster and not sucking?” “Have you considered what it’d be like if you took your head out of your backside?” In situations like these, being straightforward is necessary. Other times, being straightforward with anyone who isn’t a pushover will lead to a fight, being quietly resented, and/or being backstabbed, so we need to be careful.

This week may you start to see how to better handle advice and how to better give it to others.

Lesson 29

Three Valuable Phrases for a Happy Marriage

Here’s one of the most important phrases we can learn in marriage: ***That’s a good point.*** If you’re wondering how to respond to this claim, might I suggest, “That’s a good point”? See how easy it is? You don’t have to like what’s said; you just need to acknowledge it as having good to it, which is easy when there is good in all things. This phrase is so simple and powerful, yet it’s a phrase that doesn’t get a lot of attention. How many fights could be avoided if we simply said, “That’s a good point”? ***Instead, when someone brings up an idea that’s different than ours or we’re accused of something, we get defensive.*** Defensive behavior can be lashing out (i.e. the best defence is a good

offence), shutting down and basically going into an emotional fetal position, or we feel the need to explain our side to someone who is not in the mood to listen. Another bad option is to say “Fine,” or “Okay,” because this isn’t said like “I’m fine and dandy,” but more “I’m going to drop your toothbrush in the toilet later.” This has a more passive aggressive tone, which never leaves the other person feeling good; it’s more, “Watch your back.”

Sometimes, “That’s a good point” isn’t the best option. For instance, if a wife keeps repeating the same statement over and over like “Keep the bathroom door closed,” because your one-year-old loves to play in the toilet, you shouldn’t keep saying, “That’s a good point.” (I can’t imagine where I got this example from.) After using the response once, you need to change it up. I personally go with gritting my teeth and saying nothing because anything I say isn’t going to be nice: “I’m so glad you can remind me over and over like I’m a child. When you left the door open yesterday, I didn’t remind you because I knew you simply made a mistake. I love that you think I’m too dumb to know this and have to remind me.” When people repeat the rule over and over (aka nagging), they’re likely saying it because it makes them feel better, so it’s best to gently accept it, especially because they’re likely annoyed with you and any comment could trigger a worse emotion.

Saying, “That’s a good point,” is normally a great phrase because it’s like when you ask a question and the other person responds, ***“That’s a good question.”*** I know some people will say “That’s a good question,” because it can sometimes be a stall tactic as they try to figure out the answer, but it still feels like a compliment: (me) “Take as long as you want to answer. I feel good about myself after asking such a good question.” Both of these are great phrases to have in our back pocket for conversations because they’re positive and help the other person feel good. Both “That’s a good point,” and “That’s a good question,” follow the lesson I taught earlier, “Yes and,” which is why they’re so helpful.

Maybe you’re like me and it’s difficult finding a time to use this because your partner will say something like “It feels...” followed by a crazy

statement that doesn't make any sense, and potentially dangerous. For instance, the other week my wife accidentally bought food we already had lots of in the pantry, so she decided to pass it on to a friend. After dropping it off, she started beating herself up. She did something nice, but it felt like she did something wrong. In this situation, I didn't say, "That's a good point," because that was a blatant lie she was listening to, and it was a very dangerous one at that. In this case, I gently corrected her with questions (e.g. "To clarify, if they're mad at you for being kind, are they being good friends or jerks?") and kind logic (emphasis on kind). After helping my wife see her brain was lying to her, she thanked me for helping her. (That's a rare and special moment.)

Another time she said, "It feels like I'll never be comfortable inviting people to our house because the neighborhood is so bad." In my opinion this statement is in that dangerous category, but my wife saw it differently – oops. To her, I should've said, "That's a good point." To me, her thinking is based on a lie as we've lived in our house for six years without anything dangerous happening as the average age of our neighbors is one foot in the grave. I'm yet to hear of the Denture Devils or Hells Grandparents unless paramedics being called to your house is their calling card. Our neighbors' houses might not be brand new or fancied up, but they're loved and we are very safe... except from maybe crooked salesmen canvassing our area looking for a gullible senior.

In a situation like this, I would've been better off saying, "***I've never thought of that before,***" because "That's a good point," wasn't appropriate for me. "I've never thought of that before," also follows the "Yes and" rule. Instead, when I tried correcting her with leading questions, she was still upset with me; thus proving, even this therapist has some room to improve.

This week may you consider the phrases "That's a good point," "That's a good question," and "I've never thought of that before," as a way to encourage others to feel understood and loved.

You Might Suck at Communicating & Not Know It

A lot of people think they're good at communicating (aka women), but the truth is they're terrible (did I just write that?). That's an opening line that proves I can also be terrible at communicating. I want to think I'm great, but my wife is good at reminding me that I have "room to grow." My fun-est habit is my wife will say she doesn't understand something I said, so I repeat myself a bit slower and louder than the first time like English is her second language – I'm so thoughtful. To me, I make sense, so if she doesn't get it, it must be her fault, isn't it? Unfortunately, it takes two people to communicate: a giver and receiver. If the receiver isn't getting it, the giver needs to change the approach. For instance, if you're playing catch with someone who keeps dropping the ball, change things up like move closer, throw lighter, or give a bigger glove in order to try something to make it easier to catch. It's the same in communicating, and we've already looked at some options. If it's not getting the response we want, we need to change our approach and not just blame the receiver.

Pretty much every couple who comes into see me for therapy says one of their goals is to improve communication. We've already looked at helpful tools (e.g. "Yes and"), but the following is a great foundation for testing how good you actually are at communicating and will give you an idea of the areas you need the most work. On a scale of 0-10, 10 being the best and 0 the worst, grade yourself for how well you do the following (you might need to divide home-you versus work-you, or friend-you versus spouse-you because we can be different in different situations):

1. How well do you ***Listen***? Listening means eye contact, showing you're engaged with a nod or saying something like "That makes sense," and asking questions to help the person share and show you care.
2. How well do you ***Hear***? Hearing means you actually understand what's being said without being offended or letting defensiveness, bias, and insecurities cloud what's being heard. This means you avoid assuming and will ask proper questions (e.g. "to clarify" questions). It means you focus on understanding the point of what's being said and not necessarily the specific words.
3. How well do you ***Respond Appropriately***? Responding appropriately means the other person will feel safe to share again in the future because they didn't feel attacked in any way. It means you don't get angry, criticize, or demean the person for sharing. It should also be void of bold accusations like "You always..." and blame-throwing like "This is all your fault."
4. How well do you ***Share Appropriately***? Sharing appropriately is a challenge because there's a line that separates sharing too little and too much that's just right. Men tend to be more on the share too little side (shocker) while women tend to be on the share too much side (what?), which makes sense since their brains are typically more detail oriented and feeling driven. Ultimately, people need to realize sharing too little or too much is a problem; neither is better than the other. We need to aim to share enough, which is determined by both the speaker and listener.
5. How well do you ***Prevent Giving a Reason to Attack***? Some people have a knack for saying something in a way that gets them attacked because how they speak feels weak, condescending, bossy, or insensitive. If people attack us, there's a good chance we did something to provoke it even if that means we caused a lot of hurt in the past, we aren't understanding that they're in a bad spot, or we chose to be in a relationship with someone so volatile.

6. How good are you at ***Being the Victor and Not Playing or Being the Victim?*** If you're the listener, it's *not* about you, so don't start a self pity party or jump to defend yourself. Whatever the emotion is, don't just blame yourself or make it about you somehow. Listen to the person sharing and help *that* person feel cared about with engaging questions and comments. That's all the person sharing really wants. They want to feel validated and loved.
7. How well do you ***Protect the Other Person from Saying Something They'll Regret?*** As partners, it's our job to help each other from saying things we'll regret by calling a "time out with a time" and prevent the current discussion going to a bad place. I recommend a "time out with a time," so both parties know when they'll be returning to the discussion.

Answering these questions honestly and with the guidance of those close to you will be valuable for knowing how well others interpret how you communicate. Remember, we can think we're great at communicating, but if the other person doesn't agree, we're not as great as we think. Communicating involves both the talker and listener.

This week may you find ways to grow at communicating.

Men are the Head of the House?

I believe that we shouldn't be quick to dismiss older things (something you start to think when you're getting old like me). The idea that "men are the head of the house" has been around at least two thousand years as it has connections to the New Testament in the Bible (e.g. Eph 5:23). If it's been around that long, there must be something we can learn from it and not just assume they were chauvinistic.

I used to joke that men are the head of the house because, when you're in a fight, the head is a great target. When I was a kid, after seeing a wrestler do a headbutt and thinking it looked cool, I tried it – bad idea. That hurt... a lot. The head is not a good weapon; it's surprisingly delicate. You can stab or shoot many places on the body and it'll keep going – it's tough. The head? Not so tough. If you just get a tiny nick while shaving, it's bleeding everywhere. If you get a tiny bump, you can get knocked out and the whole body goes to sleep. Talk about weak. Unlike other body parts like an arm or leg, you can't cut off it off and be fine – you're dead. Is that why men are said to be the head because we're delicate and weak? Maybe we're called the head because we can't survive on our own. If my wife died, I'm calling my mommy for help. If I died, my wife would be fine, especially with our life insurance. (I'm not sure if that thought gives me comfort or not.)

Here's an idea: What if "men are the head of the house" is really just the first part of a longer statement: ***Men are the head of the house while women are the heart.*** This makes sense to me. The heart is the part of the body that's about passion and emotion, which is important to help balance out the logic of the head. As far as a body goes, both the head and the heart are equally valuable. You can't live without either. In *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, the one guy getting sacrificed had his

heart removed and stayed alive, but I'm pretty sure that wasn't real. I'm like 80% sure that wasn't a movie based on true events.

This idea that men are the head while women are the heart is a nice way to point out that men and women are equally valuable but we play different roles in the relationship. Even if the roles are reversed, and the woman is more logical and the guy is more emotional (I've met couples like this), we play different roles. I know when I work with homosexual couples, they each take on a different role where one is the head and the other is the heart. It's as if a relationship needs both sides for the balance.

What I find interesting is who we are around can cause us to change how we act. For instance, when I'm around my one very logical friend, I'm more emotional, and when I'm around my more emotional wife, I'm more logical (and often confused by her "feelings"). Put them together and I have to nap because I'm too confused. Similarly, when my wife is with her sister who is very emotional, my wife becomes more logical (I like those moments). It can be surprising to see people play different roles, but this balance makes for healthier relationship dynamics... if we can appreciate what the other brings. Whoever plays the head or heart in your relationship, both sides are equally important. We need both logic and emotion. This isn't to say a single parent can't raise good children, but it does suggest it's a lot harder because the parent is stuck trying to balance both the head and heart on their own or trying to fill the other spot with someone else like a best friend or parent.

The main reason I like this idea so much is it reminds me that when I have a conflict with my wife who approaches things with a more passionate and emotional angle, it's my role to use my logic. Of course, I believe it's ultimately both people's job to prevent a fight from escalating, but because I'm the more logical partner, it's more my responsibility to call a "time out and time" or use a "to clarify" question if we are getting too heated. It's not to say my wife isn't capable of doing these; I just know she never has and likely never will because she's so passionate and in-the-moment. Ultimately, I'm okay with that because I need her

passion in my life. Without it, I'd be really boring. As the head, I need her heart to be her wonderful, thoughtful self and to be the first to think to send a thank you card or a meal to a friend in need. I may be "steady as she goes" but she is my balance. We both play our roles, and we need to appreciate what the other brings to the relationship. It's not always easy, but it is necessary to prevent resentment from growing and maintaining a healthy relationship.

Saying men are the head of the house and women are the heart may not be how you want to define your own relationship, but it can be a great start for figuring out how you want your relationship to look and the balance you'll have. Tradition and cliché sayings always have something to teach, but they aren't necessarily always right. It's up to us to glean what we can and find the best way to maintain a healthy relationship as every relationship is a little unique.

This week may you consider what roles you and your partner play and how you can be better at them.

Lesson 32

You Either have ADD or You're a Guy

I look at ADD as taking certain traits of a guy like being easily distracted or hyper focused and amplifying them. Similarly, I see bipolar as taking certain traits of a woman like having more emotion with the ups and

downs and amplifying them. This helps me humanize these different labels and give a better understanding of how they work. This isn't to say that if you're a woman with ADD you're a guy. I hope that isn't the case because my wife has it, and yes, in some ways she acts more like a guy than I do, and no, I don't have bipolar; I'm just a little girly. As a teenager I could've been tested for bipolar, but so could most teenagers as hormones, lack of brain development, and needing to prove yourself adds a heightened level of emotion and explosiveness with moments of screaming excitement and the next minute wondering what's the point? Having either ADD or bipolar doesn't mean you're crazy... not doing anything to help your situation does, especially when having no self control and being mean is still our responsibility no matter what's going on physiologically. Mean behavior is mean behavior no matter if it's caused by being hungry, tired, mental health, hormones, or being beautiful (this last group just seems to get away with it more).

ADD can be put on a scale where 0 is not having any ADD symptoms and 10 means being as ADD symptomatic as possible. Most guys generally fall around a 4 while those with diagnosed ADD are higher up. For instance, I don't have ADD, but I'm a guy, so I have moments. Meanwhile, my wife is like a 6, so she has more moments. What's really interesting is you can be diagnosed with bad ADD but not actually have it because we can have ADD symptoms if we're not having enough sleep, eating properly, and/or getting enough exercise. For instance, if you want to see a class of kids to look like they all have ADD, eliminate all physical activity and force them to sit still all day long. Those kids are going to be increasingly squirrely as the day goes on. Throw in some sugar and you'll have some serious nuttiness happening. The same can happen to adults because not having enough quality sleep, eating properly, and/or getting enough exercise will exacerbate existing symptoms. Thus, these three things are a good place to start for improving our behavior. For instance, a rested me is a lot better version of me.

At this point, you might be wondering what are these symptoms? If you're not wondering this, you might be daydreaming about random

uselessness because you have ADD. Regardless of whether you have ADD or not, it's good to remember that there's good in all things and having ADD can be a blessing if you learn how to use it properly. For instance, many great performers have either ADD or bipolar because symptoms like being very in the moment or being very emotional can help your artistic expression. In Carrey Fisher's biography she mentions doctors thought she had ADD until she was 48, which is when her diagnosis switched to bipolar. Either way, her symptoms helped her in her arts career.

- 1) ***Trouble Focusing:*** People with ADD tend to struggle at being good listeners unless the speaker is really interesting. If you want to know if you're a good communicator, see how you do with people with ADD. These same sentences could read "Guys tend to struggle at being good listeners..." See how they're similar?
- 2) ***Impulsive:*** People with ADD tend to be a lot of fun, especially if you enjoy spontaneity, but the downside is there is a high risk of them making unhealthy, impulsive choices because it seemed like a good idea at the time, which is a slogan that can be used by most guys. I think you get the pattern here, which means I will stop blatantly pointing out the similarities and let you read the following symptoms as both.
- 3) ***Lack of Understanding Repercussions:*** People with ADD struggle to remember there are repercussions because they get so in the moment.
- 4) ***Fearlessness:*** When you're impulsive, you can end up giving a fearless vibe because you don't think about your actions or consequences or you might just be drawn to adventure and adrenaline. This can be both a blessing and a curse. Teenage guys are much more likely to be fearless (and stupid), but guys, in general, tend to be drawn to adrenaline causing experiences for a reason. This is also a major reason a lot of stage performers have ADD.
- 5) ***Risk of Addictions:*** Between the impulsivity and the body's natural desire to be less antsy, people with ADD can be drawn to substances

like drinking, drugs, video games, and TV. This can also be caused by the individual trying to cope with emotions and hurt.

- 6) **No Sense of Time:** Being in the moment means five hours can feel like five minutes to someone with ADD. My wife with her ADD needs constant reminders of the time because she has no internal clock, but fortunately, this can be helped (and it's helped me work on my own patience). Having ADD can also mean five minutes can feel like five hours if it's boring.
- 7) **Easily Distracted:** Following the ideas of having trouble focusing and being impulsive, people with ADD tend to be easily distracted by something seemingly more interesting than what is in front of them if they're not hyper focused on something.
- 8) **Hyper Focused:** As easily distracted as someone with ADD can be, they can also be hyper focused when they're interested, which is the trick. Having ADD is like having a speed bump in the way of getting started. The more ADD symptomatic you are, the bigger the speed bump because it's like your body knows how hyper focused you'll be once you start and how exhausting that can be, so it makes it harder to start something whereas most women can just start a task without thinking.
- 9) **Stuck on Thoughts:** Being hyper focused means people with ADD can get an idea in their head and have a particularly hard time of getting it out or being able to distract themselves, which adds to their risk of anxiety and addiction.
- 10) **Have to Say or Do What's on Their Mind:** When you're impulsive and don't really think about repercussions, it's hard not to just say whatever crosses your mind something even if it's a little too blunt or unkind. This means a person with ADD can hurt people without having any intention of being hurtful; they just lack the filter that most women have.
- 11) **Selective Hearing:** What makes saying what's on their mind worse is people with ADD rarely hear the whole story and can easily miss important details because of limited focus.
- 12) **Struggle to Finish Thing:** Being easily distracted means people with ADD can hop from one job to another without fully finishing

anything. They are so in the moment they don't even notice they've started six different jobs instead of finishing the original job they set out to do. Knowing this and what happens when someone is hyper focused driven, it makes sense people with ADD need reminders to get to things and/or finish tasks around the house, especially when chores aren't as fun and engaging. That being said, some people with ADD will go hardcore until a job is done and completely exhaust themselves because they're so engaged.

- 13) ***Needing a Kick in the Pants:*** It's normal to have a challenge starting something; as physics teaches "an object at rest wants to stay at rest." People with ADD tend to have a harder time, which can be very wearing for partners who are constantly pushing them to do something. Sometimes this lack of motivation is laziness and sometimes it's knowing once they start a task, they're going full out until it's done.
- 14) ***Anxiety Risk:*** If you are always late and/or getting in trouble for not finishing tasks, it makes sense that you're in a higher risk category for anxiety. A friend went to the doctor after I said they likely had ADD, and instead of addressing this problem because they were afraid to admit they might have it (I'm not sure why), they took an anxiety med. This had a very limited benefit because they didn't address the real issues of time management and finishing tasks.
- 15) ***Using their Hands:*** A great way to keep someone with ADD paying attention is to get their hands working. Sitting in a class can be a challenge, but get them moving and they can thrive, which is why they can be great at sports. Years ago, I had a woman in a Masters class with ADD who would knit instead of taking notes because it helped her focus.
- 16) ***Play:*** Following the idea of using their hands, people with ADD are often drawn to play and fidgeting because it helps them focus.
- 17) ***Drama:*** If people with ADD can't use their hands, sometimes a dramatic conversation is sought as a way to keep attention. Add their impulsive responses and anxiety, and there's a good chance a normal conversation becomes unnecessarily bigger (also like

teenagers). The plus side is they'll be engaged, but the downside is you're having a useless fight.

- 18) **Smart:** People with ADD tend to be very clever and creative, which can help compensate for the lack of attention or it can lead to useless daydreaming if they're not careful.
- 19) **Frustration:** People with ADD can get really frustrated that they can't do something they know they should be doing like being on time. The unfortunate reality is they will have to work harder at having self control than the average person, but it can be done with practice.
- 20) **Suck at Details & Paperwork:** Paperwork has to be one of the most boring things you can do (for a non-geek), so you can imagine how hard it can be to do this stuff for someone with ADD. This is why many contractors are great at hands-on work but struggle with paperwork. They're drawn to the field because they're clever and get to use their hands, but time management and paperwork can kill them.
- 21) **Importance of Routine:** Routine is a person with ADD's best friend and biggest challenge. They need to develop routines to keep them from getting overly impulsive and to help get things done, but these can be hard to establish.

This week may you consider how ADD and being a guy can be both a blessing and a curse.

Ladies, Please Stop Doing This

There is one thing a lot of women do that drives husbands crazy (and there's only one thing because otherwise women are perfect): ***A lot of women have this ability to make everything that goes wrong somehow their fault as it "feels" like they did something wrong.*** This comes out of being overly nice (yes, you can be too nice), but it becomes like a twisted narcissism as it essentially says, "It's all about me... if it's something I can feel guilty about." This is a statement I'm sure will cause very nice people guilt: "Oh no, I'm a narcissist! I feel even more guilt now." The other option is they'll be angry because women can be so self critical, any hint of a potential criticism from someone else can cause them to snap.

The following script is based on real events. It's not 100% accurate, especially since it's coming from my biased memory. I should also point out it led to a good result like we want to happen with all rough starts. Like many women, my wife is very nice to other people sometimes to her own detriment; to me? Let's just say I'm in a class all to myself like most husbands. My wife works as a hygienist at a dental office that has always been given rave reviews and has even won awards for their quality of service until the other day (duhn duhn duuuuhhhhhnnnnnn):

Wife: One of our clients posted a really negative review about our office today. She said she waited 45 minutes and the hygienist didn't apologize. She also named the dentist who served her claiming she didn't have a good bedside manner. It's really upsetting because I must have been the hygienist.

Me: Were you 45 minutes late with any of your patients today?

Wife: No, but I got up to 30 minutes late.

Me: So it wasn't you.

Wife: But it could've been me.

Me: Did you have anyone who was really rude when you saw them because they were upset from waiting?

Wife: Everyone was very nice, but they could have faked it.

Me: If they were so angry they made a post, I'd be surprised if they could fake it that well. How many other hygienists worked today?

Wife: It was likely before today.

Me: On the three days a week you don't work there?

Wife: It could've been last week when I did work. The complainer also said it's her second time having to wait 45 minutes at the office.

Me: You just got back from an 18-month maternity leave, so it can't be you.

Wife: It could've been before I left. It just feels like it must have been me. I feel terrible.

Me (getting frustrated): On the plus side, at least you're not the dentist; she upset the person so much she was named.

Wife: The dentist is a really lovely person. I don't know how the woman could complain about her. The real problem was me.

Me (fed up): Well then go ahead and punish yourself for something you likely didn't do.

From this conversation, I made two main mistakes. The obvious one is by the end of the conversation I was rude. I'll own it. I should have been nicer. I could've even said something similar but in a nicer way like "Well, I guess you have two choices: You can either move forward making sure you always say thank you for the person's patience when you're late (appreciation is a better tool than apologizing in instances like being late) or you can beat yourself up for something that likely wasn't about you." Even simpler, at any point in the conversation I could have just said, "I'm sorry that happened," instead of trying to figure out what the problem was – my second mistake. In this situation, all I should've done was let my wife vent and eventually said something like "That's too bad," to affirm her feeling and then offer a guiding question like "What are the odds it was you when you work two days a week in an office with

five other hygienists who work more than you?” or “When you’re late, do you apologize for it or do you simply carry on like nothing’s wrong?”

My wife’s mistake in this conversation was doing the thing that drives husbands crazy: Being sad after making something about her that likely wasn’t about her. Ladies, please, stop beating yourselves up for things that either aren’t about you or aren’t that big a deal! ***There is nothing worse for a husband than an upset wife. We want you to be happy and laughing.*** We want fun. We want you to be the happy and flirty person you were when we met and fell for you. In marriage, the wife often becomes this overwhelmed “I’m carrying the weight of the world” type person desperately trying not to be judged by some imaginary tyrant. She creates a standard that is impossible to achieve and then feels bad for not attaining it. My heart goes out to these women, and I want them to be free from this unnecessary burden. No one needs to be “perfect.” No one should take on burdens that aren’t theirs to carry. ***All a good husband wants is for his wife to be happy, which means she needs to accept that she’s good enough and help him feel like he’s good enough, too.*** If a wife is sad (minus after a death or tragedy), the husband will take this as a sign that he’s on some level not being a good husband like he must not be providing or protecting in some way. If his wife is sad, he’s also likely thinking “I need to fix it.” If his wife is always sad, he’s eventually going to give up trying to make her happy and accept the feeling that he sucks, which only perpetuates the problem.

There is truth to the saying “Happy wife, happy life.” A happy wife means the husband can feel like he’s doing his job, which makes him happy. A happy couple increases the chances of a happy marriage. A happy marriage helps for a happier life. Happiness is infectious. Thus, we should all be seeking to find how to be happy and at peace, which means not taking on unnecessary or exaggerated blame.

This week may you find a way to be happier. (Tip: It starts with a grateful heart.)

What Men Like Better than Porn

Back in my twenties, I was in a bookstore... a legitimate bookstore, which I want to point out because of the title of this lesson. On a random shelf I noticed a book called *Porn for Women*. I know I'm not a woman, but I was intrigued. I know what guys think is sexy: (lame guy) "I like a girl's eyes." (me) "Yes, of course, but you probably also really like one of her other physical features that are further south. If you were that obsessed with eyes, you'd become an optometrist," (and suddenly I'm not so thrilled about my wife getting her eyes checked). Ultimately, guys are pretty simple. There's never a lot of mystery for how to get a guy's attention. I remember when I first started dating my wife, we were in the middle of a fight and for some reason she leaned over and I saw cleavage: "Uhhhhh... what were we talking about?" Guys are simple. I should point out that we've been together 15 years now, so to distract me it'll take more than leaning over... unless it's to get a slice of chocolate cake for me; priorities change in long-term relationships. If guys and girls are different, and guys like to keep things simple, that must mean girls are... pretty.

Making girls happy used to seem complicated to me, so I wanted to see what this book, *Porn for Women*, would show. Before opening it, I made sure no one was around, and I was... except the other guy trying to hide that he was looking at a copy. The book was pretty amusing since it was pictures of good-looking guys doing chores around the house. There was a guy vacuuming and another changing the cat litter. Is this what women really want?

After working as a therapist, I now realize that this book is actually a lie. What does a woman really want? The truth is, a lot of women want whatever it is the guy's *not* doing. I've seen many couples in therapy where the guy says things like "I do more chores and keep the house

cleaner than she does and she's still not happy with me." How is that possible when this book says a guy doing chores is sexy? The truth is guys doing chores is super sexy for women when their guy doesn't do them. When he is, there's a good chance his partner is still able to find something else to complain about like he doesn't clean well enough or he's too busy cleaning to show her affection. I've found most women are incredible at finding new ways to grow and improve things... which also means they're good at seeing what's bad. This is connected to women having a tendency to create impossible standards to achieve because they tend to be perfectionists.

This leads to my answer to what men like better than porn: ***More than anything else, a man wants the woman he loves to be happy, which is best shown by her having fun with him and appreciating what he does.*** Men love hearing things like "Wow, you work so hard," "I can't believe how amazing you are at that," and "I'm so lucky to have a man like you." What a lot of modern men (men who don't expect their wives to do all the housework) want is simply to be appreciated. That's one of the reasons so many men love their moms so much; their moms are typically great at making their sons feel valued. I know women will argue, "But no one appreciates what I do." You know who appreciates all the work women do? Women. Women notice things like haircuts and new outfits – men suck (mostly because we don't care enough to notice unless we're a teenager who thinks the girl is hot). Women do things to make themselves and/or other women happy. When there's an outing, do married women dress up and get all fancy for their husbands? Nope. It's to impress other women (or avoid judgement and criticism from other women). Why do men do anything like dress up and go out to parties (parties they typically don't want to go to)? For their woman. And women want their man to dress up because otherwise *she'll* get judged for *him* not being dressed properly (by other women) – it's a crazy world. Men and women are motivated for different reasons. Neither is better nor worse; we're just different, and together we can help a relationship be stronger: ***Guys are easy to please and women are good at keeping the relationship growing.*** Women are good at

keeping the couple being social and having proper standards like having furniture that doesn't include milk crates and mattresses on the floor. Of course, there are always exceptions, but I'm yet to meet a real man (and not someone being a turd of a human being – they definitely exist) who doesn't long to make his woman happy. A happy wife is not necessarily “sexy,” but it is better than porn because it helps a guy feel good enough, which is ultimately more important than a moment that porn can offer.

Tip: Guys may want to make their woman happy, but sometimes he might still need a good kick in the pants to do something if he doesn't care about it. And some guys need a lot of kicks in the pants because they're not a real man and terrible at fulfilling they're responsibilities.

Aside: I've met some women who absolutely hate porn because the thought of their partner looking at someone else is incredibly insulting. I'm not saying porn's good or bad, and whatever your stance, I feel sorry for women who take their man looking at a screen personally because it's not about being insulting. On one hand, guys like seeing a woman who is “happy,” and on the other, it's about seeing something new. Even the most beautiful woman in the world will have a husband who will like seeing something different. It's like people in Switzerland traveling to see other places when Switzerland is arguably one of the most beautiful places in the world. They don't travel because they hate their country; they just want to see something new. Again, I'm not endorsing porn (and if someone uses it, they need some strong boundaries in place to prevent the addictive nature of it), but I am endorsing women not being unnecessarily hurt by it or bragging that their husband doesn't look at it because they're somehow a better wife – that's so not the reason.

This week may you both appreciate your partner (husband or wife) for all they do by acknowledging something they do well everyday this week.

Why Girls Marry Losers

Being married to a serious loser isn't something I'd wish on... well, even a moderate loser. I define a loser as someone who is *very* selfish and *incredibly* inconsiderate. We're all a little selfish and inconsiderate from time to time, but losers are particularly good at it. Fun fact that you'll probably respond with "Yeah, that makes sense," is that as a gender, guys tend to be very poor at being thoughtful while women tend to be overly thoughtful. This is why when we go to a friend's house, my wife wants to stop and get flowers or something to bring while I'm like "Why? They're already our friend. Why are we sucking up?" This isn't me being a loser – cheap and lacking consideration, yes, but not a loser. A loser is the kind of person who plays hockey three times a week leaving his wife to take care of the kids and he does nothing to compensate for being away so much; he just does what he wants. It can also be the guy whose wife works as much as he does, but then he expects her to do all the cooking and cleaning while he plays video games (video game addiction is one of the most prevalent and accepted addictions in our culture). Meanwhile, ***a loving partner (what we should all strive to be) is someone who is patient, kind, and self controlled.*** As I say in every wedding I perform: ***Saying I love you is a lot like saying I'll be nice to you.***

I should point out that a woman starting to date a loser makes sense because even a loser can put on a good show at the beginning of the relationship. At the beginning, we are at our best and even super cheap guys like me buy things to show they care like flowers and crap (I sound so romantic). The big difference between a normal guy and a loser is the normal guy will still be a decent person after the honeymoon phase is over. It's normal for a person to be their best self when they first start dating, but a person's real character comes out over time when they

become comfortable with each other like family. At this point, when people are upset, the question becomes will they act with resentment or will they do their best to have restraint? Guess what a loser does. To know what a person is like, true demonstrations of self control and love are shown with how they treat the people they live with, especially the opposite gender parent (i.e. how a guy treats his mom is a good indicator of how he'll treat his wife). Most people are nice to acquaintances and strangers, but it's how we treat those closest to us like family that best indicates what kind of person we are.

I once read a book that said girls marry someone like their dad in order to try to fix what she wanted with that relationship. Back then I thought that made sense (I was naive), but now that I have more experience (and not so naive) I know this is far from the truth. People are simpler than that. For some reason, however, some people love to complicate things. Instead, here are the simpler patterns I've found:

Why a girl with a great dad can marry a jerk: The sad reality is girls with amazing dads sometimes end up marrying the biggest jerks. The main reason for this is having an amazing dad can make the girl grow up thinking that all men are amazing. When her friends or family tell her the guy she's dating is actually a jerk, she shrugs it off as "You don't understand him the way I do." What this translates to is "I'm blind to how much of a jerk he is because of hormones and my assumption that all men are great." This situation means the guy puts on a good enough show to get the girl hooked and then his true jerkiness starts to be revealed later when he more obviously shirks off responsibility and has no sense of self control like she was warned would happen. This is very disillusioning for the woman who thought all men are great, and it will likely leave her feeling a bit crazy and stupid for not realizing this sooner.

Why a girl with a terrible dad can marry a jerk: If girls with a great dad are blind to how terrible men can be then it would make sense that girls with terrible dads would recognize the jerks. Unfortunately, this isn't always the case. Sometimes the girl with the terrible dad puts up with the terrible partner because that's all she's known or there's a

twisted comfort in the familiarity of the situation. This is a very sad situation because there's even a chance she dumped the nice guy because his niceness made her feel uncomfortable. Instead, she feels more natural with the drama and pain at least for awhile.

A potential missed truth: Sometimes the woman thinks her husband is terrible, but the truth is she isn't the innocent victim she thinks she is. It could be that her impossible standards are causing her to think she has it worse than she does. Other times a guy can seem terrible because he's terrified of her and acting in fear whether lashing out or shutting down. I have even met women who have been very adamant that their husbands were very controlling and mean when the controlling and mean person was them and they were projecting their own feelings onto the guy. That's a fun situation... for no one. He's getting blamed for what she's doing. Unfortunately, ***people who are quick to blame themselves for the problems in a relationship are more likely to marry a person who will give them all the blame.***

The most common case: Fortunately, it's rare that a good person marries a really terrible person. The most common problem in relationships I find is both parties fuel each other's problems (i.e. it's 50% their fault). In most cases, both people are acting poorly and their behaviors equally fuel the relationship problems like the analogies we looked at earlier with the weight carrier and the person getting chipped away at.

Reasons why anyone might stay with a terrible partner: Sometimes people stay with a terrible partner because they feel like they don't deserve anything better, they assume they can fix it if *they* work harder, or they figure they can put up with it (i.e. they made their bed and lying in it). When my back went on me and I was stuck on the floor, my wife asked when I was going to see a chiropractor and I responded, "I can do that?" Not my smartest moment, but I needed to be told I could address it rather than just put up with it. Many people put up with a bad situation because they don't realize or feel like they can do something about it. Telling people to break up is never helpful because it makes the

person feel like they need to defend themselves and/or the other person. Asking guiding questions is a much better route to go like “If this was me, what would you suggest?” “At one point is someone just not the right fit?” “Do you think this person will somehow change or will this be the way it will always be?” “To clarify, what’s scarier for you: being single or going through a breakup?” “Out of curiosity, does a break up mean you failed or is it simply a step to finding the right person?” “What does the line look like that needs to be crossed for breaking up?” or “To clarify, if nothing changes, will you be able to handle this for as long as you both shall live or is this going to end in a bigger fight?”

This week may you consider what you need to do to help your relationship.

Lesson 36

Why Women Struggle with the Trades

This post could have easily been called “Why Men Don’t Knit.” Choosing this title, however, I followed the shock value marketing strategy of people like Gene Simmons and Eminem (so I’m basically a rock star... obviously). Please know this title is not to claim women “can’t” be in the trades. I’ve met some women who are fantastic at various construction jobs, but the average woman will struggle with the trades just like most men won’t want to knit because of how our brains work. Women definitely don’t avoid the trades because they’re afraid of

getting dirty. If that were the case, they wouldn't dominate positions like PSWs, nurses, and early childhood educators who regularly change dirty diapers and get splattered in poop. If anything, men aren't tough enough for those jobs – at least I'm not. When my PSW friend who used to live at my house came home with poop in her hair and wasn't phased by it, I thought that was absolutely disgusting... and hilarious because it wasn't me; and yes, I'm aware that makes me a jerk, and I'm okay with that. After all, I'm a rock star.

Here's a fun situation. The other night I was folding the laundry (like a man... so I was grunting and scratching myself while doing it). I enjoy this task, but my wife doesn't normally "let" me do it because I don't do it the "right" way. Married men likely recognize this problem. There's a "right" way? When my wife and I were first married and folding laundry together, she got upset with me because I was doing it wrong. How do you screw up such a menial task? Great question. With my socks (emphasis on "my" socks), I folded them over once and stacked them neatly, but that was wrong. I was supposed to roll them into balls like a crazy person (don't tell her I wrote that). Apparently, *I* don't fold *my* socks the way *I* should. It's a good thing I got married in order for her to fix that terrible flaw. Here I was thinking that being able to put my socks in perfectly organized rows in my drawer was smart when it was actually stupid; I was supposed to have them as a giant messy pile of balls because that's sooooo much smarter (yes, I enjoy sarcasm). Let's be honest, balled up socks are the worst! (And yes, I also like to exaggerate).

To avoid future fighting, my wife and I simply agreed that she was in charge of the laundry (aka she designated herself in charge of the laundry). Did I argue with this? No, I get out of doing the laundry and logically, I'm happy having balled up socks if that means I'm not doing the laundry. Logically, I'd be a total idiot to fight that fight, and I'm not a total idiot; I'm just too dumb to know how to fold the laundry (and know when to stop using sarcasm).

The other night, however, I was trying to be helpful (always wise when you have a tired, pregnant wife). I folded the laundry her way minus my socks, which I hid and did my way (aka the better way). I don't know what came over me – maybe I was excited to be rebellious with my socks (I'm truly a rock star), but I did the towels a new way. Can you believe I tried something new? Our towels go into a square cupboard, and without thinking, I folded them into squares and not the usual rectangles. My wife was not happy (and neither was any woman I told this to: "There is a right way!") I then put them in the cupboard and showed her that they were the perfect fit, which also saved room allowing all of the towels to fit nicely in the one spot and not spill over to another row. Despite these bonuses, she complained that my towels wouldn't match the other towels in the cupboard and when I offered to change them to all match, she said no because why? There is a "right" way of doing things. It needs to be like a spa even though no one sees our towels hidden in a cupboard. Fortunately, my wife has since converted to putting the towels into squares because sometimes a new idea needs time to germinate.

This idea that there's a "right" way to do things can cause a lot of fights. This is particularly a problem when a man (or child) is tired of being corrected or told what he's doing is not the "right" way. Eventually, he'll just stop doing anything because if he's going to get in trouble for doing it or not, not doing it is a lot easier. If one person is more there's a right way and the other is more relaxed, the couple needs to find a healthy middle ground where they can both feel equal and not like one is better because this leads to resentment. (This connects back to the previous lessons on the dangers of eye rolling and defensiveness.)

This "right" way to do things is one of the reasons why women struggle with the trades. In construction, there is constant problem solving, making do with what you have, and adapting to fit different situations. It's more big-picture stuff, which is why knitting sucks for men. With knitting, there is a "right" way to do it and you keep doing the same basic thing. In World War 1, a lot of men would knit because it gave them something to do, the repetition was calming, and it gave them a sense of control in a chaotic time. Normally, men aren't worried about this while

women tend to be more interested. They are also typically much better than men at the finer details. Women can sometimes be accused of “missing the forest for the trees,” but that’s because they tend to be superior with details. To men, there are the basic colors like blue, green, and red. Meanwhile, to women there’s a whole spectrum of colors within the colors: “That’s cerulean; that’s teal; that’s aquamarine; and that’s I-just-bored-you-to-tears blue.” When my wife and I renovated our house, I enjoyed learning and doing the construction. It involved trying different approaches to solve unique problems and doing big scale stuff. When it came to picking the frames for the pictures and all the other decorative stuff – no thank you; I sucked! My wife, on the other hand, was amazing at the details and made our house look fantastic. How was she during the construction? Let’s just say, “I want to burn it down!” was said on a regular basis. She hated the construction phase, but with the big stuff done, it was her time to shine and she flourished with the details.

Neither one of us is better than the other; we are just different. And this is the most important thing we can remember: ***Men and women are equal, but we are different***, which is amazing because that means we can balance each other out... or we can drive each other crazy. In my marriage therapy practice, I regularly find a lot of the fighting is the result of not understanding that men and women are different, and learning this simple idea can make a world of difference in accepting the other person. Turns out thinking someone is stupid (men) or crazy (women) doesn’t help reduce conflict – strange. Fortunately, understanding how we are different can help us have more patience with each other.

This week may you consider how you and your partner are equal but different.

Men are Becoming Weak

Being a man in our culture can be hard. Yeah, I said it, and I'm not being sarcastic (it's a rare occasion). I'll even go further to say that being a straight, white, non-handicapped male has its challenges in our culture because it feels like certain people want to hate us (look at me sounding passionate). It's like our gift to the world is to unite certain people together as they blame us for everything wrong. I first learned this in my university sociology class, which was majority female (like most classes in university minus engineering). At one point in a tutorial I asked, "Why do white males seem to get blamed for everything?" The female TA answered, "Because you have privileges the rest of us don't have." (Again, said at a university that's majority female.) I'm still not sure what those privileges are, but this idea suggests if I'm not further ahead of those who don't have the same privileges, on some level, I must be a failure – awesome. Add in the fact I'm a workaholic, so if I'm at the same level, I must really suck – it warms the heart. The one moment that opened my eyes was 15 years ago I applied to be on a certain police force, and when I asked why I didn't get accepted into the second round, the person on the phone said, "It must have been your written test results." When I said my marks were in the mid nineties, the person said, "Then it must have been the physical test." When I said I scored even higher on that, the person said, "It must be your volunteer hours." When I said I had over three hundred hours of community service, the person said, "Well, then... uh... I can't tell you." Later I was told I was overlooked because the police wanted more females and ethnically diverse males. Talking to a friend I suggested this was sexism and racism. The female I was talking with said I'm not allowed to claim that because I haven't suffered the way others have. What? How does that make sense? I'm allowed to be treated worse because of my gender and ethnicity? Would it be different if I brought up that my ancestors were

poor people from Scotland forced by the English to leave their homes and live in Ireland where the Irish naturally hated them (being Protestant didn't help), and eventually they moved to Canada to avoid starvation where they continued to struggle financially? And do you know the better question here? Who cares? Answer: No one. And what will I do about this? Absolutely nothing because sometimes it's easier just to shut up and take it. This is what men typically do because it's too much work to keep complaining. Just stuff those feelings down and move along.

The kind of weakness I just demonstrated is a growing phenomenon in our culture. Sure, there are still some very ignorant sounding men who believe their being male and/or white means something special (those guys are idiots), but ***there's this other growing group of men like me who struggle with being weak and just staying silent.*** Yes, there are the guys who send "dick pics" to potential dates, but they're a special kind of stupid: "Here's a close-up picture of the ugliest part of my body that you can now use as evidence of my sexual harassment." The bigger problem I find, however, is women complaining that men lack backbone (or something that rhymes with dolls) because we do. We are becoming weak as a gender because of our fear and complacency. The scary thing is, if this problem isn't addressed, we are at risk of facing the same crisis that's currently taking place in Japan.

Earlier this year I listened to Aziz Ansari's book, *Modern Romance*. As someone who is not a fan of his stand-up or his arrogant persona on *Parks and Recreation*, I have to say, he does an excellent job in this book where he teamed up with a sociologist to explain what the dating world is currently like. In the one chapter he discusses his study of Japan's dating scene, which he points out has been deemed a crisis situation by the Japanese government. For instance, many young Japanese people are NOT interested in sex. What? In 2013, 45% of women and more than 25% of men between 16 and 24 "were not interested in or despised sexual contact." They also found that only 39% of 18 to 34-year-old men were involved in romantic relationships while 1/3 of Japanese men have never dated, and 25% of men ages 35-39 have never had sex. Add to this, in 2005, almost 50% of Japanese men in their early 30s were

single. Based on their studies and birth rate, the population in 2060 will drop from 127 million to 87 million with 40% being 65 or older. Thus, the Japanese government has started dating services and paying couples to marry and have kids in hopes of changing this trend, but it doesn't seem to be helping very much because the men are weak.

To give a more specific case, Aziz interviewed a 20-year-old male whose daily routine involved going to work and then home to play video games while his parents took care of him. How could a woman not be turned on? On the weekend, he would hang out with a buddy, but he would never think of asking out a girl for fear of rejection. What's crazy is, at the same time, he didn't care. He was comfortable and wasn't worried about finding a girlfriend. From his study, Aziz found this guy was more the norm rather than the exception, which is why Japan has cuddling cafes for lonely men to hire women to snuggle and clubs where you can pay women to listen to you talk and pretend to be interested – ouch. This pathetic male has been deemed *the herbivore male*. Meanwhile, the women in Japan are often referred to as *the carnivorous female* because they are driven and strong. As the women have become increasingly successful, the men have become increasingly delicate. The women Aziz talked to said they wished the men would take more initiative and be stronger because even if they asked out a guy, many of them are too intimidated to handle it. ***As one gender has been raised up, it appears to be at the expense of the other.*** From my experience, in western culture, we are heading down the same path. For instance, I saw a family with a young girl with a shirt that said, "I can do anything," while her brother had a shirt with a video game character on it. Here are other reasons I see why we're at risk:

- 1) Women are being pushed to be stronger and stronger through movie and TV characters and marketing. Walking through the mall (something I rarely do) I kept seeing young girl t-shirts celebrating female power and strength. The boys? Comics and video games.
- 2) Video game obsessions are becoming more of a problem and taking over many male lives. Boys are even watching videos of other people playing video games – brutal.

- 3) Groups like Me Too scare good guys from taking risks to talk to a woman for fear of an accusation or upsetting them. According to one article, male doctors are now more frequently refusing to work with female students because of the fear Me Too has caused. I'm not saying this movement is bad, but there is good and bad in all things, and this is part of the bad.
- 4) As a grown man, I'm afraid to talk to women and children of both genders in case someone misinterprets my friendliness with flirting. My wife has none of these concerns, especially with girls.
- 5) Daycares and the school system have forgotten that boys need sports with winners and losers and controlled rough housing. Most of my favorite moments at school as a child revolved around recess time sports while my favorite memories with my dad are him roughhousing with my brother and I. There is a bond in this kind of play that many professionals are afraid of allowing today, which has a damaging side to it for boys. Education has become very female dominant, which has led to rules and teaching styles being more female focused, which is causing a lot of boys to be confused and to struggle.

We need to encourage both males and females to be their best and acknowledge that we are equal but different because that's what makes life more balanced and interesting.

This week may you see the balanced perspective; we are all equal but different.

Men Aren't as Dumb as their Wives Think... Sometimes

My underlying fear, that under-the-surface-pops-his-head-up-every-once-in-awhile-to-throw-me-off fear, is that I'm stupid. At least I've had this fear for the past 14 years since being with my wife. Before that, I can't remember if that was as much of a problem. Is that a sign of my stupidity? Is that even a word? Oh no, I must be stupid! What I do know is I have three Masters Degrees, which means I have been evaluated by many professionals as intelligent enough, but it took being with my wife for her to point out the truth: I am an idiot. I was living life just fine and then one day I was in a committed relationship and "Oh no, I'm one step above eating my boogers!" My wife will occasionally give me this look or use this tone that makes me feel like the biggest idiot in the world. Does my wife actually think I'm an idiot? Ummm, hard to say. I believe in some ways she thinks I'm very smart and I even have moments where she thinks I'm wise. In many other ways, however, she wonders if I have the intelligence of a fattened, bite-sized fish, tanning on a dock full of hungry seagulls looking for a snack.

Please know, I'm not complaining about my wife... or am I? I'm not sure, but that's to be expected when I'm such a dumb-dumb. Either way, I'm trying to point out a common problem in many marriages: The woman makes her husband feel like she thinks he's an idiot... or she actually thinks her husband is an idiot; it can go either way. I've asked many guys about this and every one of them agreed that their partner has this ability to make them feel like the biggest idiot in the world and it only came out later in the relationship. It's like women are taught how to do this. Maybe in elementary school when they say they're separating the boys and girls to talk about sex-ed, they're really teaching the girls how to give this male crushing look and tone. I'm guessing the teaching is something

like “You know how a boy’s mom makes him feel special and he loves her for it. Yeah, you’re going to want to do the total opposite. That’s how you have a healthy marriage.”

So why do women give this look and tone? She either thinks her man is, in fact, really dumb (there’s a chance), she could be frustrated with him and the frustration is manifested as condescending (it’s possible), or the guy is completely misinterpreting the situation (not likely): (girl with tone) “I’m not being condescending, you moron. This is my ‘I love you’ tone; gosh! Stop being so stupid!” Whatever the reason, there is likely one or more of the following going on:

1. The husband is in fact dumb.
2. The husband’s perceived laziness is seen as dumbness.
3. The husband’s standards are less than the woman’s, so she sees this as a sign of him not being as smart as her.
4. The wife is frustrated because her husband hides in the background thereby leaving her to run the household and to make the majority of the decisions like what’s for dinner (i.e. the “I don’t care” guy).
5. The wife is worn out trying to make everyone else happy, and now she doesn’t have the patience and kindness left to talk to her husband in a nice way.
6. We tend to treat our partner the way we treat ourselves, which suggests she’s just as mean, if not meaner, to herself.
7. She has a mean streak (whether she realizes it or not)

All of these options are possible. The reality is some guys are dumb. That being said, if a woman chose to be with a guy who’s dumb, she doesn’t really have the right to resent him for what he is, dumb. In regards to laziness, some guys can be lazy or inconsiderate in long-term relationships especially those who are tired from work. Relationships are a partnership, however, and we need to be doing our best to share the load. Of course, even if someone does the majority of the work, they don’t have a right to be condescending about it, but this issue does need

to be addressed because nothing good comes out of one person being worn out.

The third category is where I land (but I'm an idiot, so I could be wrong – written in a playful way without any passive aggressiveness). My wife has a very different standard than I do. There's been numerous times I was told I was doing something wrong like folding the laundry, but just because I do something different doesn't mean I'm an idiot. If there's a more efficient way of doing something, great, I'm open to it. Making a simple job take longer because you think there's a "right" way? No thanks; that seems counterproductive to me. Of course, for many women like my wife, there is a "right" way to do something (typically what they were taught) and they only accept that way being used even if another way leads to the same result faster.

Overall, I would say my wife does 60% of the work around the house while I do 40%, which is the result of us agreeing she should do certain chores because they have to be done her way. She also cares more about certain tasks like steaming the floors I couldn't care less about, so she does them. The exception to this 60-40 is when there needs to be a repair or bigger project done around that house because then it lands about 90% on me, so overall it balances out to 50-50.

Tip: Considering your workload distribution by breaking down 100 to the two sides can be helpful for knowing if you need to change anything to make the workload more equal.

Perhaps you're reading this and thinking you have a reverse situation as your husband makes you feel stupid. It is possible. I have met guys who are a princess... those are the guys I don't ask if their wife has a tone because I'm not hanging out with them. I'm afraid they'll use their tone on me. Those guys suck more than drivers who don't wave a thank you when you let them in – and those people suck.

This week may you consider if you have a look or tone that needs to be addressed, especially if it's a sign that there's an imbalance of work sharing. It takes two people to make a relationship work and any

frustrations are things that need to be addressed to prevent bigger problems later.

*For the record, this post was meant to be playful. My wife and I addressed this topic a long time ago; I try to follow my own advice – I’m not that dumb... sometimes.

Lesson 39

Why Someone will Choose Work Over their Family

Hi, my name is Chad, and I am a recovering workaholic: (workaholic anonymous audience) “Did you say something? Sorry, I was doing something.” As a workaholic, trying to relax is generally more stressful for me than working – that makes total sense, doesn’t it? But I’m a doer. I come from a family of doers, which is fantastic... and terrible... so I’m told. In the book *Dealing with People You Can't Stand*, the authors use a scale that puts *Task Oriented* people at one end (-10) and *Social Oriented* people at the other (+10). The middle between these two extremes is the healthy choice (0). My family background is like a -8, which means we hate the beach: (beach person) “Have fun!” (me) “But there aren’t any chores for me to do.” Meanwhile my wife’s family background is more of a +8 for being social – they love the beach. Are you thinking that sounds like a fun mix? You guessed it. Our getting to understand each

other phase was a delightful walk in a beautiful garden... in a hail storm with people trying to mug us while we were covered in mosquitoes. The difference between our families is mine would put off social time in order to get jobs done (we're uptight) while my wife's family would put off doing jobs around the house in order to have social time (they were definitely not uptight, but jobs rarely got done). Fortunately, my wife and I have both grown to a healthier middle otherwise one of us would've needed a good lawyer... not for divorce. We're good Christians, so we'd never do that. We would've needed a good lawyer because the other person would've "disappeared"... I think that's how being a "good Christian" works. I may have watched too many mobster movies. Interestingly, both extremes, task oriented and social oriented, are at risk of putting something before family.

In the Task Oriented category, I should point out that there is a difference between a workaholic and a jobaholic. For instance, I'm a recovering workaholic, so I'm more likely to be around my family physically, but not be as engaged as I should be as I'm busy working on something (like a book). A jobaholic, on the other hand, is more likely to neglect their family both physically and emotionally as they spend ridiculously long hours doing job stuff. For instance, a lot of pastors are jobaholics as they ignore their own families as the church becomes their priority. The differences between a workaholic and jobaholic are important; they both suck, but they're different. I like to think I suck less... but I will likely make less money than a jobaholic, so I'm sure my kids will disagree: "If you're going to be too busy for us, at least give us a sweet inheritance."

Side Thought: Very similar to workaholics are busyaholics. The main difference is busyaholics aren't necessarily task oriented, but they stay busy even if it's playing sports or driving people around in order to prevent having time to think about their bottled-up feelings.

Understanding Task Oriented and Social Oriented people is a good start for understanding why people neglect their families, but there are many possible underlying reasons why they could be this way. This leads to my

tool of looking at a list of possible intentions for an action. As always, I suggest picking the top 3-5 reasons in this list as a starting point for addressing the problem. If you're not neglectful of your family, consider what could cause you to be one day if you're not careful. I will point out that even as a recovering workaholic, when my first daughter was born, she was so beautiful I couldn't help but want to be around her. If a parent puts work or job first, there is definitely something going on that needs to be addressed, especially because of the hurt that can grow in the children and the resentment that can grow in the partner.

Reasons People Neglect Their Families for Work/Job

1. They feel the need to save/help people.
2. They want to feel "good enough," or they're a perfectionist.
3. They're trying to earn love.
4. They're trying to please, impress, or prove something to someone.
5. They think if others like them they can like themselves.
6. They think that's what a provider or successful person does.
7. That's what they grew up seeing and they're following in the same footsteps.
8. Their role model was super lazy and they're trying to do the opposite.
9. They're worried about the business failing or losing their job.
10. It's all about the money.
11. They love work and/or the challenge.
12. It's for a sense of power, purpose, value, respect, appreciation, or significance.
13. They feel better about themselves at work like it's where they belong.
14. They feel safer at work because home is a challenge in some way.
15. Work is a distraction or a way to cope with pain.
16. They love the praise they receive at work.
17. Work is what gets them excited.
18. Their job has become an addiction.
19. Work expects too much and they're trying to keep up.
20. Work expects too much and they won't stand up for themselves.
21. They feel inferior and trying to hide it.

22. They suffer from imposter syndrome and trying to fight those feelings.
23. They're working hard now to make it better later.
24. They've become like a servant to their boss.
25. It's just a busy season at work, but it'll get better soon.
26. They're scared of the boss, management, or client.
27. They feel trapped in their job or at home.
28. They can't say no when they're asked to do something.
29. They're not actually at work; that's a lie to cover something else up like an affair.
30. They're obsessed with making money and/or buying stuff.
31. They're trying to have an affair.
32. They're planning on leaving the family and distancing themselves.
33. They think they'll make it up to the family later.
34. They hate household chores and avoiding them.
35. They hate who they are at home.
36. They're hiding from someone.
37. They're scared of the conflict at home.
38. They're too hard on themselves.
39. They don't have hobbies or anything else to do.
40. They're just trying to survive and get through life, which is sign of possible depression issues.

This week may you begin to see there are always many contributing factors to a situation and behavior.

A Tip for Enjoying Life More

I had the privilege of spending this past weekend in Chicago, which is pretty much a smaller and cleaner version of New York City; it even had all the stereotypical NYC local rudeness – good times. One of the reasons I love to travel is every trip I go on teaches me a lesson. On this trip, I realized the value of *perfect moments*. I've had many of these moments in the past, but I've never really categorized them as such; they just happened, and I never gave them much thought when I should have. A perfect moment is when you feel completely at peace. It's like nothing else matters and everything seems calm and good. It's not about excitement or having a wow factor. It's simply a moment of pure bliss. We need to be careful not to be addicted to these times, but enjoying them for what they are can make life that much more enjoyable. Below is a list of when I felt these perfect moments on my trip, which is followed by a list of times I've experienced these perfect moments in my life as a guide for you to consider what fits this description for you:

Bonus: You also get to see a couple ideas you can use if you go to Chicago.

Enjoying a 700 Calorie Milkshake: Ignoring how my milkshake was about half my required daily caloric intake, sitting and enjoying a shake from Shake Shack with my friends who were in a relaxed state was perfect. Once a year doing this is great; too often... chairs will get angry at you.

Navy Pier: Sitting at the end of the pier on a calm night looking out over the water after walking for a couple hours was a moment where my whole body went “awwwwww” like I was a snowman melting in the sun... if they enjoyed melting.

Navy Pier at the Outdoor Patio: Shortly after that perfect moment, I had another perfect moment where I was sitting on a bench watching a local band. The night air was calm and the band played a bunch of cover songs from my younger years, which definitely makes me sound old, but at least the music was good back then (another statement that makes me sound old).

At the Anti-Cruelty Center: The one day we randomly came across this animal shelter downtown where we were able to pet the cats and dogs. There's something peaceful about petting the right animal.

Lincoln Park Zoo: At this free zoo (a price tag that puts me in a good mood), watching the gorillas eat was oddly peaceful. It was very different than watching humans eating in a food court... especially when I tried to take pictures of them while saying, "Wow, look how much they can eat." People don't tend to respond well to that.

At the Aquarium: Watching the swimming beluga whales made everything feel right in the world.

Sitting on the Balcony at an Okay Restaurant: After an okay meal at a restaurant that scored way higher on their reviews than I would've guessed, the mood at our table was perfect. The sun and breeze were just right, our balcony overlooked a pleasant road, and there was no rush to be anywhere – it was perfect.

Outside of this trip, perfect moments include:

A Long Hug with the Right Person: The right hug from the right person at the right time can be heaven.

Petting the Right Animal: Can you tell I'm an animal person?

After Work (or Exam): There's something magical about the moment you're done work for the day or finished a scary task like writing an exam.

After a Work Out or Challenging Moment: There can be a peace found when we feel relief. I once heard a guy complain he couldn't relax. When I asked him what he did in the day, he said, "Watch TV or play video games." Impressive, right? Thus, he couldn't relax because there was nothing from which to relax; his body was never put under stress.

Standing in the Sunshine: Sometimes when I go outside after being indoors for awhile, the warmth of the sun feels perfect; I close my eyes and just lap up the moment. It's typically best to avoid being in the middle of the street if you try this.

The Last Few Minutes of a Shower: After the 5 minutes cleaning spree (that's right 5 minutes because I shower like a man), I take a few minutes to simply enjoy the water falling on me. Showers are the best!

In Movies: In certain movies where justice is found or a hero is born like in *Secretariat* (I love that movie, and I don't care that I'm not a 14-year-old girl), everything just feels right for a moment.

In Church: I've felt these perfect moments while in church listening to the music or a particular sermon. Of course, being at the wrong church or listening to the wrong speaker, I've felt the complete opposite.

The End of the Day: There is something special being somewhere at the end of the day when most people have gone home and things are closing up whether a mall or Disney World (yes, I'm a Disney geek. Main Street is my happy place).

(Bonus Tip) How to Plan a Trip like this: Like all my trips before kids (before kids is the key), my wife and I travelled to a major city with another couple who shared a room with us. We found a hotel just outside of the city that had free parking, free breakfast, and was about a 1/3 of the cost of the hotels downtown. Going with friends is amazing because you share costs, and in my case, it saves me from getting angry at my wife who is a terrible navigator... I mean I don't listen well. Having another couple there is amazing for creating fresh

conversation and expands our interests and ideas. For these kinds of trips, I plan an activity or two for each day like in Chicago I booked a ghost tour, gangster tour, architecture tour, and aquarium visit (I like learning), as well as leaving time to explore and do things I find in flyers at the hotel like when we went to see the Blue Man Group last minute. This trip was made even easier money wise because I booked a different tour each month over four months, which means my total bill didn't feel as harsh as if I paid for it all at once.

This week may you recall and/or experience a perfect moment (and maybe plan a great cheap trip).

Lesson 41

Another Tip to Enjoy Life More

For the last lesson I wrote about “perfect moments,” which led me to realize there are other types of specific moments that we need to understand and respect in order to enjoy life more and prevent problems like boredom and addiction (or to simply create conversation). These are moments that we can use to make life better or worse – it's up to us. If you recall, one of the first lessons was about using a calendar. Using that idea, it might be helpful to plan events and outings that can help these moments be more likely to happen.

“Oh Yeah, that’s Good” Moments: These moments are called “Oh yeah, that’s good” moments because that’s exactly what they are such as the first bite of a good dessert, the first moment you step into a hot tub, the first smell of Cinnabon, and waking up and seeing you still have time to sleep – oh yeah, that’s good. These moments feel soooo good at first and then slowly lose their goodness as we adjust to them. Abusing these moments leads to addictions whether unhealthy eating, over drinking, and over sleeping.

Woo Moments: These are the moments where we want to scream for joy. It can be winning a championship, finishing a major task, meeting a love interest, walking down the aisle at your wedding, finding out you’re pregnant (when you’re trying), graduating, getting a job you’ve been hoping to get, skydiving, riding a rollercoaster, and other moments that make you go “Woo!” Abusing these moments usually leads to dangerous stunts to get a thrill, using extreme drugs, becoming addicted to sports, or getting into things like stealing because you want the high.

“In the Moment” Moments: These are the times when you get into a task and time disappears. You’re not bored, stressed, and or really thinking – yeah, these moments are pretty great. This can be as simple as watching TV, doing a hobby, or talking with a good friend. This is also the state you want to reach when you’re doing things you don’t necessarily want to do whether exercise, a homework assignment, or chores because you’re getting lost in what you’re doing thereby removing the struggle. Of course, this is the state we don’t want to be in while eating things we like because we miss out on the flavor; we’re just eating for eating sake. The downside is these times can make us late for something because we lose track of time or it can be hard stopping in order to start a new task.

Challenging Moments: These involve doing the things we don’t want to do, and it takes great self discipline to push ourselves to do them. When I think of a challenging moment, I think of school, particularly math class where I wished it’d be over. This is the time I’d feel restless,

bored, and wishing I was doing something else. My only hope was to have some work I could get lost in and have the “in the moment” moment.

Scary Moments: These moments make us move. For instance, I know someone whose doctor told her that if she didn’t lose weight, she’d die. This big scare pushed her to go on an extreme diet and lose over 120 pounds and increase her chances of living longer in order to see her grandkids grow up. Scary moments can be great motivators. Some people enjoy being scared like with scary movies because it helps them feel emotion when they’re generally void of it. Other people are so anxious, one big scare can help them feel a temporary calmness after.

Emotional Moments: These are those “wonderful” moments when we become overwhelmed by sadness, anger, jealousy, guilt, or fear to the extent where we can’t think clearly. These are the moments that make us say things we don’t really mean and do things we wouldn’t normally do whether punching a wall or getting a tattoo we later regret. They can also be the times that inspire great art or new ideas. For some people, emotional moments help them feel alive while, for many guys, we think we need to keep them to ourselves. These moments, however, aren’t evil or mean we’re crazy; they just need to be treated carefully to prevent unnecessary hurt. Typically, the best remedy for these times is venting in a healthy way to get out all the emotion safely like screaming in a pillow, hitting a punching bag, and writing angry letters we throw away. Emotions are healthy; we just need to use them for connecting to ourselves and others.

This week may you discuss when you’ve had moments like these and consider how to include more of the special moments and less of the unwanted.

12 Reasons the Amount of Sex Might be Lacking in Your Relationship

In my therapy practice, it is not uncommon for me to meet a couple that isn't satisfied with the amount of sex they're having, or more accurately, one person in the relationship isn't satisfied with the amount of sex they're having. Magazine racks used to be full of magazines (back when people cared about them) with articles like "25 Ways to Wow Him in Bed," but here's the thing: it's all crap. There is no one move or toy that will miraculously make someone want more sex for the rest of their life just like Cialis isn't going to be the answer to them having more sex if the desire isn't there. Sex is more than what "naughty" things you do in the bedroom or how long a guy can keep it up. Emotional needs are foundational to a committed couple having sex. Simply put: ***If you don't like each other, who cares what toy or move you use.*** In a new relationship, people are at their horniest for each other. Falling for someone gives a chemical stimulant that gives the false idea that everything is perfect, and since there's no baggage between the new couple, it feels easier. This is why people will think their new affair partner is the answer to their unhappiness – they suddenly feel better. The truth, however, is an affair is just an inappropriate use of brain chemicals. Give it some time and that relationship will be just as dullsville as the marriage was because the real problem hasn't been addressed – the person's emotional health.

I should point out that it's not always the guy who complains that there isn't enough sex. What's interesting is when a guy complains, it's more just a sad and sulky feel whereas when a woman complains about it, it's taken more personally. It's important for women to know that men in long-term relationships don't crave sex as much as guys who are single. It's like the difference between dreaming of owning a sports car and

owning one – we’re happy, but not as excited anymore. His lack of desire is rarely the woman’s fault unless she’s somehow crushed his soul through passive aggressiveness. It also might not be a sign that he’s watching porn. In fact, I’ve heard some guys have more sex drive with their partner when they’re regularly watching porn because it kept their brains in the game whereas when they stopped, their drive toward their partner also dried up because it wasn’t forefront in their brain anymore. In other situations, I’ve heard some men benefited from watching a few minutes of porn to get in the mood to want to put effort into wooing their partner. Some women will find this hurtful, but the question begs: Is it better the guy watches a visual stimulant for a few minutes to get in the mood or not look at anything and not be in the mood? This, of course, is a question the couple needs to decide for themselves, but the point is for some people, porn can be considered medicinal. Ultimately, we need to be careful not to assume everyone works the same or take our partner’s lack of interest personally.

A lack of bedroom romping can be affected by a number of issues, which we will look at below. Please note, I’m pointing out reasons people want less sex in order to give a starting point for what can be done to help. Addressing the source of the problem is always important.

Random fact: From my questioning people in my therapy practice, most women have a harder time recovering from a guy having an emotional affair (i.e. “How can you open your heart to her and not me?”) whereas most men have a harder time getting over their partner having a physical affair (i.e. “Why aren’t I man enough to satisfy you?”). It’s interesting how both take it personally, but it’s still different.

Top 17 Reasons People Aren’t having Enough Sex in their Relationship

- 1) ***Health Issues:*** Our bodies are great for giving us signs that something is off and needs to be addressed. Not being into sex is a big one whether something physically or emotionally needs help.

- 2) **Age:** Whether it's the age of the person or the relationship, both can have an effect on how people feel sexually.
- 3) **Difference in Desire:** From my experience of asking couples in my office, most men and women in long-term relationships consider sex twice a week the ideal number since most answers were 1-2 or 2-3. A few couples said everyday – no thank you (says the workaholic). Interestingly, the majority of the couples were on the same page for the ideal number, but there were a few strong exceptions.
- 4) **Someone's a Slob:** Having to clean up after someone is a huge turn off.
- 5) **Nagging & Controlling:** Here's a description rarely sought after in a dating profile: (person) "My favorite thing about you is how you're so good at making me feel inadequate."
- 6) **Superiority Issues:** When someone is passive aggressive (stone walls, condescending, punishing, etc.), or acts weak and mopey, it is a huge mojo killer.
- 7) **Overwhelmed:** Stress and anxiety can have a crippling effect on hormone interest.
- 8) **Lack of Emotional Connection:** When distance has set in for awhile, getting someone interested can be very challenging.
- 9) **Lack of Trust, Respect, or Sense of Safety:** If you can't share your heart with someone and tell them something personal without fear of being attacked, it can be difficult to share your body. Feeling safe emotionally and physically is important.
- 10) **Style Clash:** How and when you like having sex can cause a problem. For instance, if one person is more of a morning person while the other is more at night, this can cause a natural disconnect just like what you enjoy during sex can cause issues. Some people just don't like *50 Shades of Grey*.
- 11) **Beggar:** If your partner says no to sex, the worst thing you can do is keep bugging them for it. Even if you can annoy them into it now, it will mean even less interest later. It's best to back off and do things that help the other person feel loved and safe with you, especially women. That being said, if someone says no, ***they should offer a rain check to reduce feelings of rejection.***

- 12) **No Routine:** Some people can get in the routine of not having sex.
- 13) **No Schedule:** If you don't schedule time for sex in your week, good luck having two busy people both ready, able, and in the mood for it. A set day means you save energy for it and have something to look forward to, plan for, and to make sure you're on good behavior (mostly men). A schedule can help keep sex as the day's priority because there's always another job that can be done or a TV show to watch. If you have to postpone the scheduled night, which will happen, simply arrange a rain check. Life is so much easier with a schedule because it's easier to prevent feelings of rejection and hurt.
- 14) **Stuck on Feeling:** Some people are stuck on their needing to be a "feeling" for sex when sometimes we need to start in order to get into the mood.
- 15) **Addiction Issues:** Addictions can cause our brains to be stuck on wanting something else instead of sex with our partner.
- 16) **Self Punishing:** Some people get stuck on the idea they're too fat or ugly to have sex when this ends up hurting them and their partner as the implied message is "You must be stupid to want to have sex with me."
- 17) **Their Heart is Somewhere Else:** Sometimes people let their heart look toward someone else and other times they let their hearts turn to *something* else like a job or project.

Sex isn't the be all and end all, but it's tied to so many things in a relationship that it is an important area to address and maintain. This is why I highly recommend picking a weekly sex night in order to get both people on the same page and making it a priority at least once that week. If you are never intimate, it's hard to feel connection – double entendre intended.

This week may you consider what you need to do to have a healthy sex life.

Sex, Open Relationships, & Being Happy

Open relationships are amazing... if you're a divorce lawyer. The truth is open relationships are stupid unless you want to break up because they are a ticking time bomb. You don't heal a relationship by making it open; you essentially delay the inevitable break up: (dumb spouse) "I think we should have an open relationship." (smart spouse) "By open, I agree if you mean breaking up; that will be very open." ***In a culture where time with your partner is already in short supply, it's pretty stupid to think that less time for each other because you're with someone else is going to help the situation.***

Open relationships stem from one major problem: Someone isn't happy with the relationship. If we're not happy, however, it's never just one thing that's causing it. ***Being a happy person is a way of life.*** It's the accumulation of wise choices and a healthy mindset, which takes time and dedication. It requires finding balance of being content and having drive to grow. It's having a thankful heart and seeing the good in all things even loss and hurt. Sex can add to being happy, but you can lead a very happy life without it. When an open relationship is put on the table, it's likely because someone is taking all of their emotional problems and pegging it as one thing – lack of sex. ***Unfortunately, when people are unhappy, they become like a sniper; they lift up their gun, look down the scope, and try to pick the one thing that is making them unhappy like a partner, child, lack of child, job, or mean person.*** Unfortunately, it's never that simple. There is no easy fix to make you happy.

There are two sides to sex. On one hand, sex is a gift from God that is meant to bond two people together (two people actually become

connected as one). On the other hand, it's just sex, and not that special. It's pleasurable, but you won't die without it, and you shouldn't be willing to die to get it—we're not a praying mantis. I'm yet to hear of anyone on their deathbed saying: "My life was good. The only problem with it is I didn't have enough sex or enough partners." If anything, you're more likely to hear people say they wish they *hadn't* had sex with certain people, especially if it ruined a friendship, a marriage, or it led to getting a disease, emotional hurt, or caused intergalactic space travel for your son. (Sorry, Guardians of the Galaxy moment.)

In my experience, open relationships are initiated by someone wanting something exciting to do and they're stuck on sex stuff being the answer and can include things their partner doesn't want to do like having a threesome, a backdoor greeting, or something in the kink category like hitting each other with pool noodles (or whatever they do). Some people will say an open relationship will "spice things up," but it's not spicing things up if you're not doing it together. A team only bonds when the team plays together in the same game. An open relationship is making sex more important than the connection with the partner.

Personally, I believe if a guy nags for sex he's not a real man. A real man will try to woo his wife, do more chores to ease her load, and be willing to go to therapy to help address whatever issues are getting in the way of them connecting even if it's the wife's self-imposed anxiety. ***A real man will care more about his partner's needs than getting sex.*** I'll also add that if an exhausted/anxious woman gives in to a guy's nagging and the guy has sex with his tired, non-engaged wife, that's a sign his empathy side is broken and he's not being a safe person for her. It also teaches him that nagging will get him his way, which only leads to future problems. Similarly, if a woman is worn out and the guy proposes sex with others, his empathy is broken and he's incredibly selfish because his first concern should be her and not sex. On the flipside to all of this, if a woman feels overwhelmed, she should address this because life is meant to be enjoyed and not stressed about. ***Sex is a great gauge for married couples; if we're not having enough, something is wrong and we need to address it before it becomes a bigger problem*** like squealing

brakes on a car; eventually you won't have any brakes if you don't address it.

Sometimes, it's the woman who wants more sex, especially as the couple gets older and she feels freedom from the guilt and shame she once associated to it while the guy gets a little lazy. This can be natural. If the woman wants an open relationship, however, the guy needs to run or he'll basically be a maid doing a bunch of work around the house until she finds a better option and moves on.

Sex Differences: Getting sex is unfair between the genders. If a woman wants sex, she can just walk into a bar and say, "Anyone want to have sex?" and most of the bar will put up their hands. If a guy did that? He'd be arrested (unless maybe he was in a gay bar). That's unfair, but so is a guy's territorial nature. Men are wired to not want their wives to have sex with others no matter how big a philanderer they are themselves. Legendary comedian, Johnny Carson, divorced his second wife when he found out that she had a boy toy on the side when he regularly had sex with other women in the stereotypical rock star kind of way with a new girl or two almost every day. Men may be okay hooking up with another woman, but we don't want to share our wives, and if we do, there is something wrong in our brain because that's not how a guy is supposed to think (or any person of integrity).

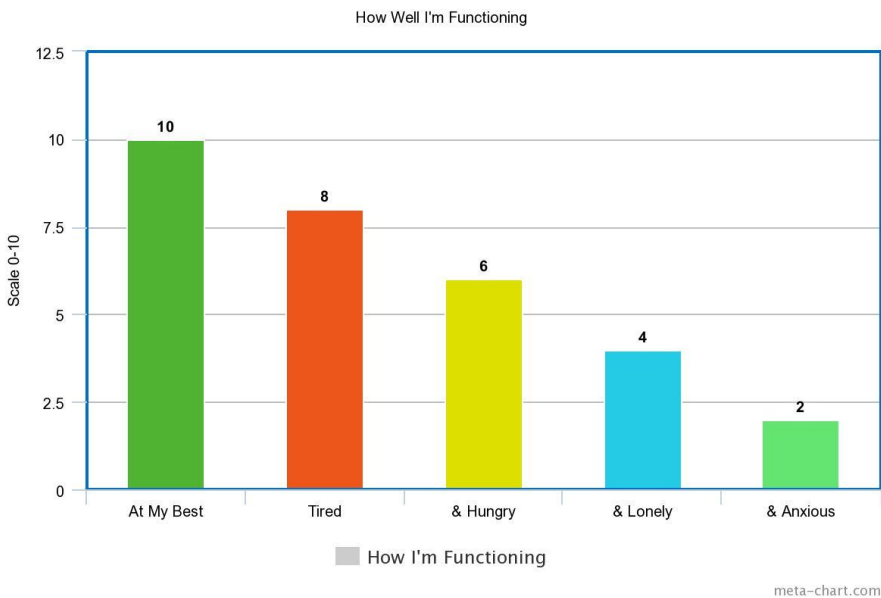
This week may you find ways to help your relationship that doesn't increase the likelihood of divorce, and may you realize happiness isn't caused or ruined by one thing – it's a way of life.

Why People are Drawn to Affairs

In lesson twelve, *You Might Not be as Crazy as You Think (Or your partner thinks)*, we looked at the following bar graph to explain that we need to be more patient with people who are not at their best including ourselves. For instance, after a long week I can be a bit grumpy (I hope the fact I'm not perfect doesn't upset you) or like when my wife can be downright mean when she's hungry (she always carries snacks now). When we're not feeling our best, we are not likely going to be treating others as best we can because our social filters aren't our body's priorities – the thing we need is. Similarly, if you write an exam, no matter how much you study, if you don't sleep the night before, you're not going to do as well as you could have if you were rested. I'm sure you're reading this and thinking, "Yeah, this is pretty basic stuff," but I'm yet to meet someone who has mastered this kind of understanding when dealing with others. When we get in the heat of the moment, our in-the-moment, self focused side tends to take over and we forget where the other person is coming from even if they're obviously in a bad spot. Instead of focusing on how to help the other person be better, we get defensive. As the following graph points out, different things add up to bring us down. It's also helpful for pointing out a few other key factors when dealing with people:

- 1) We need to do our best to be at our best. For instance, we need proper eating, sleeping, exercise, alone time, and social interaction, and having enough accomplishments in order to be better at handling life.
- 2) When people are rude, angry, or mean, it's not about us. They're in a bad spot (or they just suck as a human being).

- 3) Timing for conversations is very important. For instance, you shouldn't engage in a sensitive conversation right before bed or when someone is about to leave for work.
- 4) This points out why addictions and things like depression are so hard to break because when we're in a low spot, we have less personal strength to combat temptation and negative feelings that will help us get back up higher. That's why external help is typically best.
- 5) This explains why affairs are so common and why people who swear they'd never have one end up falling into the affair trap.



Recently when I was explaining this graph to help someone see why their spouse had been acting so differently lately, it hit me that this is why affairs (emotional or physical) are so popular among people who would've sworn they'd have one and why people in an affair will think they can't leave it – it helps them feel they're not as low as they are. Unless someone has an affair out of passive aggressiveness where they think they deserve it, the odds are they're doing it because they're low on this scale. When someone is low on this scale for an extended period of time, they're going to be desperate for relief. If you're really down,

“falling in love” can temporarily spark life back into you. I’m not saying this is a good thing (hopefully you know I’m not that dumb), but when you’re desperate to feel better, “falling in love” is a high that clouds us from the fact that our life still sucks. When people have an affair, it’s often said they’re in the “affair fog.” This is the phase where you’re blind from reality because you “feel” great, but... you’re not; ***you’re just distracted from your pain.*** Even guilt has a hard time finding a foothold when the person is in the high of “falling in love.” And if someone feels great because of an affair, which means they feel good for the first time in awhile, how are they going to give that up? Talk about a trap. This high is what a struggling person feels talking to a potential someone secretly through messages. They get the taste of feeling good with each message and they soon crave it more and more. It’s like having a chip. Who has one chip and is like “I’m satisfied”? The problem is once you start, it gets harder and harder to stop eating chips until you feel bloated and disgusting, which is like the affair relationship crashing in on you. It feels so good in the moment, it can feel impossible to stop even if you get caught. Ultimately, this points out the importance of doing our best to have our lives as healthy as possible with the right amount of sleep and such in order to be at our best to combat temptation before it gets a firm hold of us. It also points out the importance of saying no to temptation as soon as possible. Toying with temptation only makes life harder in the long run to say no. This is also a good reminder that happiness isn’t solved with one thing. If one thing makes you feel better like an affair or drinking, it’s an illusion; you’re not actually better. The underlying issues are still there, and they will return with a bang because now you’ve made things worse.

This graph can also be used for grading a relationship. If a relationship is not at its best, it’s at risk. If a relationship is less than a five, it is definitely in a danger zone, and needs to be addressed. What is not surprising is if someone is personally not doing very well, it’s unlikely the relationship is doing very well. From my experience, growth benefits from working on both ourselves and the relationship, and growing them

isn't independent of the other; when we're married, we need to be working a little of both at the same time.

This week may you find ways to help yourself make wise choices to protect yourself and your relationship.

Lesson 45

Emotional Affairs: Here's a fun topic

Please Note: This post was included to safeguard your relationship, for better understanding why others get themselves into trouble, and bring healing to any past hurts.

As a therapist, I love emotional affairs like a body shop loves car accidents – it keeps me in business. It's a sucky way to exist, but I'm happy to give tips to prevent them because I know no matter how many people I help not have an emotional affair, there are plenty of others who will do it because it's so easy to do when we allow ourselves to be selfish and not work on our relationships.

The truth is it's incredibly rare to find a grownup who has *not* had or tried to have some type of emotional affair at some point in their lives unless they're a basement troll. Realizing this is helpful because we need to put bumpers up to protect our marriages (I'm not sure why I just used a bowling reference unless I subconsciously think affairs are dumb like

bowling – my apologies if you like bowling, but ew). It’s also helpful because someone having an emotional affair doesn’t make them the worst person in the world. It really just means they forgot to put their relationship first... or they’re looking for a reason to end it.

I claim that most people have had or will try to have an emotional affair because most of us as teens had a “friend” we tried to talk to as much as we could even though they were dating someone else. We convinced ourselves it was okay because “we’re just friends” when in reality we had feelings for this person and were ready to swoop in if the opportunity arose. Ultimately, this was us trying to initiate an emotional affair. It can even be argued that we are having an emotional affair whenever we put someone or something before our partner whether work, a hobby (e.g. video games, fitness, the Macarena), a ridiculously close best friend, our own selfish pursuits, or even kids when they become more of an obsession (these parents are attached to their children like dog owners who wear the same outfits as their dog). Essentially, whatever leaves our partner feeling replaced or rejected is the thing with which we are emotionally cheating. In the end, no matter what we enjoy doing or who we enjoy talking to, our partner needs to feel like a priority in order to prevent unnecessary hurt.

Tip: If the thing that is replacing your partner is something like being in school on top of working full time, it’s helpful to make sure there is a known timeline for when things will calm down to give hope. On top of this, even in the busyness, it’s important to have a few minutes with each other every day. If you’re too busy for this, you’re too busy and putting unfair expectations on yourself. In the end, your partner (in a serious relationship) is more important than a faster climb up the corporate ladder.

Emotional affairs involving another person rather than a thing or activity tend to be more damaging to a relationship because of the sense of betrayal and rejection. Being second to work is hurtful, but it’s not as bad as being second to the secretary. Ultimately, if your partner is uncomfortable with the dynamic between you and another person, it

needs to be addressed because even if this relationship doesn't bloom into a full-on affair, the loneliness and rejection it causes your partner can become a major motivator and justification for them to develop a life without you including the potential for their own affair. The other option is your partner will become so resentful and mean toward you, you feel hopeless and do something to cope with the pain, which could include an affair. Thus, when anyone feels like they're being replaced, it needs to be addressed because it will likely lead to the end of the relationship in one way or another.

The scary thing is many people start down the path of an emotional affair without even being aware of it. Soon it's too late and they're hooked. Even worse, directly asking if someone is cheating will most likely lead to a lot defensiveness whether they're guilty or not because innocent people will be really hurt by it. I always suggest a good question like "At what point should I be concerned about (person) being attracted to you?" "At what point will (person)'s partner be angry at you for how much time you two spend together at work?" or "I find you very attractive, so is it fair for me to think someone else could be, too?" You can also try a more indirect question like "Someone I know (made up person) is worried their partner is having an affair. What signs do you think they should be looking for?" An indirect "to clarify" question can also work like "I heard a therapist say that we are all capable of cheating if certain things line up. Do you agree with that or do you have a different idea?" If you're really brave, you can ask if your partner agrees with the following list (possibly because you're thinking of showing it to a friend in a bad spot) as a discussion rather than a direct accusation:

Tip: Protesting makes us look guilty, and saying, "How could you think that?" makes us look like we're hiding something even when we're not. Instead, when we're asked if we're doing something we shouldn't, we should respond with gentleness and kindness, which can be hard if we're hurt.

Signs of Having or Being on the Path toward an Emotional Affair:

1. You act and/or talk differently to this new person (i.e. like when you were a teen and liked someone).
2. You find excuses to message, talk, and/or see this person even at the expense of your own family.
3. You hide or downplay how much you message, talk, and/or see this person.
4. You'd message or talk differently to this person if your partner was there.
5. You give this person a different contact name in case your partner looks at your phone.
6. You delete this person's messages.
7. You get surprisingly angry or worried if your partner tries to look at your phone.
8. Everything keeps reminding you of this other person.
9. When you talk to people, you only want to talk about this other person.
10. Messages from this person always make you feel better.
11. This person is your happy thought.
12. Every time your phone goes off, you hope it's them messaging you.
13. You vent your frustrations to this person, especially frustrations about your partner.
14. You let thoughts of what life would be like with this other person enter your mind.
15. Your partner mentions that lately you seem distant or distracted.
16. Everything your partner does annoys you.
17. If your partner questions your faithfulness you get surprisingly defensive.
18. Messages get shared at weird times like late at night and early morning.
19. You're feeling motivated to take better care of yourself.

This is not an exhaustive list and there is no set number of the above that need to be felt in order for it to be classified as an emotional affair. What's important to remember is if someone in the relationship is feeling replaced, there's a high risk of resentment growing even if there isn't

anything going on. Remember, *we will all be happier when we help those important to us feel important to us* as it leads to less conflict and increases the likelihood of laughter and intimacy. Someone feeling jealousy isn't just the one person's problem. It's like conflict, it's 50% each person's fault.

Important Point: If you have kids and you have an affair, there's a good chance the opposite gender kids will take it as a betrayal against them. This means girls feel betrayed by their dads and boys by their moms. The same gender kids will likely feel abandoned and rejected, but it'll likely feel more personal to the opposite gender. Regardless, when you have kids, you're essentially cheating on the family and not just your partner.

Another Important Point: If you are cheated on, you need to remember it's not about you; it's about the other person. Most people cheat as a way to cope with pain (i.e. people who bottle up their feelings) while others cheat to find a replacement. The worst people do it because they think they deserve it – ouch. If your partner thinks you're doing something wrong, cheating is not the way to address it: "You never do the dishes, so I had sex with the neighbor. You learned your lesson, right?" This sounds stupid because it is, but it happens. If people want to leave a relationship, they should leave because they think it's the right thing to do. Leaving a relationship for another person is called selfish with a side of weakness. Saying you're leaving because it's the right thing to do while you're seeing someone else, makes you blind to your selfishness. If you leave your partner while holding someone else's hand, you're leaving because of that new person regardless of what you tell yourself. Fun fact, most men who leave their wives for someone else find themselves with an aggressive woman (i.e. pushy), and the question becomes did he find her because he wanted to trade in his old partner or was he coping with pain and then she pushed him to leave when he didn't really want to, but he felt trapped. Either way, it's terrible. If you go for someone in a committed relationship, you are a homewrecker. You can tell yourself you rescued them, but you prevented the couple from seeking the

proper help to decide on their own accord whether they should stay or leave. If someone claims to be leaving their partner when you meet and you want to date, the best thing to do is say, “Make an official break, and in six months after that when you’ve gotten things worked out, give me a call. If I haven’t met someone else, we can go out, but this is between you and them.”

This week may you consider how you can protect yourself and your relationship from the risk of any type of affair.

Bonus: A List of Reasons Why People Cheat

The following list contains potential reasons someone can have an affair whether physical or emotional. Similar to previous sessions, I find when we ask people why they did something they have better answers when options are given. Going through this list can be helpful for healing past experiences and/or give you discussion for how you can prevent yourselves from falling into the affair trap down the road.

Summary of the following points: People who have an affair either feel like they’re superior (i.e. I deserve this) or they feel like the biggest loser and trying to feel better. Neither is a good reason.

- 1) A way out of the current relationship (aka I don’t have the courage to break up).
- 2) I am feeling old and unattractive.
- 3) I am feeling desperately lonely.
- 4) It gives me a false sense of value by having someone pursue me.
- 5) To feel something for once (i.e. I’ve been emotionally numb for awhile).
- 6) The thrill of the chase.
- 7) It distracts me from how much I hate myself or the shame I carry.
- 8) It’s a coping tool for being with an unappreciative or domineering person.
- 9) It’s a coping tool or distraction for the life I hate.

- 10) I suspect the other person is going to end our relationship, so this is my backup.
- 11) I'm looking for the bigger-better deal.
- 12) For the "fun."
- 13) Sex feels good.
- 14) It was available.
- 15) To feel naughty.
- 16) Having a secret can be a thrill.
- 17) Part of me loves drama.
- 18) Friends encouraged it whether directly or by their amusement through the stories.
- 19) It makes me feel special in some way.
- 20) It's part of the successful person's lifestyle.
- 21) For a sense of power.
- 22) For a sense of control in my own life.
- 23) I tried to help someone and got too close.
- 24) I am addicted to the feeling of "falling" in love.
- 25) Others do it, so what's the big deal?
- 26) It was a fantasy or fantasy world.
- 27) I've developed resentment to my partner.
- 28) I lie to myself about it being innocent.
- 29) We're just "friends" who slip up once in awhile.
- 30) I see myself as above the social norms and expectations.
- 31) I don't respect boundaries.
- 32) I have a double standard because I'd be furious if my partner was doing this, but for me it's fine.
- 33) The other person in the affair is a predator and manipulating me because I am too insecure and/or blind (i.e. the victim)
- 34) I'm a predator.
- 35) To advance my career.
- 36) To feel like I'm moving ahead in life.
- 37) I want to manipulate someone like a boss or person in a power position.

- 38) I enjoyed the original connection with this new person and allowed myself to take the tiny steps toward the affair zone when I didn't originally intend to let it go this far.
- 39) I take my partner and relationship for granted.
- 40) I feel overwhelmed with everything and this is something I do for myself to feel better.
- 41) Self sabotage
- 42) Culturally or family wise, this behavior is acceptable.
- 43) I am a polygamist at heart.
- 44) Fear of commitment
- 45) I lied to myself and/or others when I said I wanted to be in a committed relationship.
- 46) To boost my ego.
- 47) It makes it easier to tolerate the marriage (e.g. only sticking around for the kids).
- 48) It was an innocent social media connection at first.
- 49) The other person is just so nice to me and I confuse respect for them with attraction.
- 50) I convinced myself this new person is my "soul mate."
- 51) I need someone to vent to about my partner and chose an inappropriate person.
- 52) For revenge or punishment.
- 53) It was just a really dumb moment and/or period in my life.
- 54) I convinced myself that I deserve this.
- 55) I wanted to feel loved and it was easier than reconnecting with my partner.
- 56) I lack integrity.
- 57) I lack the self discipline to say no to temptation.
- 58) I'm already living a bad lifestyle, so what does it matter?
- 59) Pure denial
- 60) I feel a lot of guilt, shame, and/or regret and cheating helps me feel better for a moment.
- 61) I am rebelling against something or someone.
- 62) I don't respect sex as being something special.

- 63) I tell myself my partner won't care and might even be glad I'm getting my emotional and/or physical needs met elsewhere.
- 64) My partner cheated, so I'm just making it fair.
- 65) I only do it when I drink.
- 66) I'm not having enough sex at home.

Lesson 46

How Do I (Re)Build Trust?

One of the biggest reasons people see me for therapy is because of trust issues... not with me; they see me for help trusting someone else. Saying you don't trust someone is actually a really broad statement. What does that mean? Do you not trust them to love you more than the dog? Good luck with that – canines are better than people; it's like how reindeer are better than people. (If you've seen *Frozen*, you'll get that reference). Do you not trust them to wear pants in public? Donald Duck gets away with it. Do you not trust them to leave your food alone no matter how good it looks? "Joey doesn't share food!" (If you don't know that reference, I feel sorry for you). On top of this, is the trust problem because of something they did or is it transferred from another relationship? Is this something they can help you with or is it just your own brain messing with you? Some people try to force trust when the only thing you can trust is that the person will screw up. It's like putting a cookie in a child's hand and telling them not to eat it while you leave the room for an hour;

the child's going to eat it because you've set them up to fail. (We need fair expectations of people.) For this reason, I've stopped talking to a couple former friends because the one thing I could "trust" is they'd hurt me. Instead, I will love them enough to not set them up to add to their list. Sometimes we reconcile to keep the relationship going and other times we reconcile by moving on to find safer people.

When dealing with trust issues, we need to be specific with what we don't trust. For instance, saying, "I don't trust you," is too general. We need to be more specific like "I don't trust you when it comes to leaving my Mini Eggs on the counter." To help figure out what it is you want to rebuild, here are some options:

- 1) Trust to have a serious conversation without you putting me down or attacking.
- 2) Trust the person will share an honest opinion in a kind way (i.e. not overly blunt).
- 3) Trust I won't get in trouble for being honest about my opinion or have it used against me later.
- 4) Trust I won't get in trouble for sharing my emotions and feelings honestly (i.e. I won't hide or lie because I'm afraid of what you will say or do if I'm honest).
- 5) Trust you will do what I request you to do if it's reasonable.
- 6) Trust you won't expect too much of me and I can actually make you happy.
- 7) Trust you won't gawk at someone else.
- 8) Trust you won't flirt with someone else.
- 9) Trust you won't physically cheat on me.
- 10) Trust you won't emotionally cheat on me (this includes texting someone you shouldn't).
- 11) Trust you will be open and responsible with money.
- 12) Trust to have a serious conversation where I'm allowed to joke to make it feel more comfortable for me.
- 13) Trust you will listen to me and be encouraging when I share my heart and dreams.
- 14) Trust you will share your heart and dreams with me.

- 15) Trust to share my sex fantasies and for you to share yours.
- 16) Trust you won't tell personal things to people who will hold it against me.
- 17) Trust you will do your best at things.
- 18) Trust you will put the relationship first in an appropriate way.
- 19) Trust you won't share intimate details with people you shouldn't (i.e. create gossip).
- 20) Trust you will act in both of our best interests and not just your own.
- 21) Trust you won't purposely try to make me look dumb.
- 22) Trust you will be fine when I make a mistake or maybe even laugh to make me feel better.
- 23) Trust you will bail me out when I say or do something socially awkward.
- 24) Trust you will tell me when I'm wrong privately and in a kind way.
- 25) Trust you will tell me if I have a booger or something else that's embarrassing going on.
- 26) Trust you won't leave me if I get a permanent injury.
- 27) Trust you will treat me as well (if not better) than strangers.
- 28) Trust you will help me feel like a priority.
- 29) Trust you will try to keep things fair like sharing chores and responsibilities.

As this points out, saying you don't trust someone can mean a whole lot of things, and finding specifically what it is you don't trust gives you a better starting point to know how to address it. It also suggests that we are often too "trusting" with people, which can lead to unnecessary hurt.

How much trust we offer should match the person and situation.

We need to be careful not to be too trusting too quickly and set ourselves up for failure. Trust should never be like jumping in a pool where we go all in. We need to test the waters and take things slowly as trust should be earned and not thrown around like confetti.

After defining what it is you don't trust, it's good to consider on a scale of 0-10 with 10 being the most:

- 1) How much *should* I trust this person based on our relationship (e.g. a dad, a partner, a stranger)?
- 2) How much *should* I trust this person based on them as a person (i.e. based on what I know of them)?
- 3) How much *do* I currently trust this person? Is this the proper amount or do I need to make changes? What will help?
- 4) Realistically, how much *can* I trust this person in the future if certain boundaries are created and healing happens?
- 5) Consider a fair timeline for how long it should take to grow the trust like a week, a month, or a year?

These questions are helpful because rebuilding trust follows a simple equation:

$$\text{Trust} = \text{Good boundaries} + \text{Good Behavior} + \text{Time}$$

Like most things, it's not as simple as it looks on paper, especially when you have to rebuild trust for something someone else has done like an ex. Fortunately, there is always hope.

This week may you consider what it means to trust.

Lesson 47

It's Hard to Trust When...

I was recently feeling that particular kind of awful when you've eaten too much (the typical Thanksgiving trap) and, on top of it, I was stuck in

my head. I decided to help my mood by doing the escarpment stairs for exercise (I try to follow my own advice since being a hypocrite isn't on my to-do list). Whenever I do the stairs and someone else is there, I say hi to break the awkward "I know you're there but pretending you're not" feel. This time when I was jogging up the stairs, I passed a couple on their way down who were a little bit younger than I was and a different culture. As always, I said hi, but the guy looked through me like I was a ghost in a Charles Dickens' novel while the woman didn't even look up to acknowledge my existence in a very cold kind of way. They weren't winded or too tired to speak and it was clear I was talking to them since they were the only ones there. This could've been a cultural thing, but I'm pretty sure it was a jerk thing. I passed them three more times and each time I looked at them ready to say hi (I was clearly too optimistic), and they just awkwardly pretended I didn't exist (they were clearly rude). The last time I passed them, I was jogging up the stairs and thinking about trust when I saw the guy coming toward me, and for some reason he was in my lane. As I got closer, he moved to his proper side (he's not a total jerk). I, of course, said thank you and he, of course, ignored me. That time I was like "Screw you and your rudeness!" but in my head. I was angry, but I still didn't want to be a jerk. Thus, this lesson took shape.

Side Note: Later that evening, I passed a guy in his late teens dressed like someone who didn't make school his priority. (Is that a nice way to say he was dressed like a thug?) Because of my previous rejections, I looked at him wondering if I should bother greeting him when he said hi first. This reminded me of my lesson, "always assume the best of people," and pointed out how I screwed up my own lesson. Ultimately, everyone wants to feel loved and accepted, and some people make it easier to do that like this guy who was friendly – thank you to that guy.

There are three main reasons we can struggle to trust others:

1. ***It's hard to trust others when they can suck:*** I know what it's like to be screwed over as I have been screwed over by all four church-ministry positions I've had. Hurts and feelings of betrayal, however, can

happen in any personal relationship. These experiences can teach us how to forgive and prove our strength to heal or they can lead us to not trust anyone and limit how much we connect with others, which ultimately makes life harder for us.

There are two unnecessary but common hurts I really hate. The first is super simple to avoid, but somehow a lot of people suck at this. ***We need to ask questions like we care about the other person.*** For the record, “How are you?” is not a question; it’s a greeting. A real conversation needs to include both questions and sharing. Just talking isn’t a conversation; it’s a speech. This is a sensitive spot for me largely because my job means I ask a lot of questions and focus on the other person all day for work. In my own life, I want to be asked some questions. I want to know that others care. We all do. Being asked a question shows we matter to the other person, but unfortunately, most people miss this important concept and reduce trust. I once spent an entire weekend with a group of people and the only question I was asked was “How’s it going?” when I arrived and that was said without turning from the TV. Meanwhile, I asked too many questions to count from simple ones like “How was your sleep?” and “Do you want to go to the market with us?” to more engaging ones like “Since you grew up coming here, what’s your favorite memory?”

The second common hurt I hate is ***people twisting things said out of innocence and used to make the speaker look mean.*** I have worked very hard to only joke in a way that’s not a dig or subtly telling someone to change. When I joke, I joke. When I speak, I’m not trying to hurt anyone, but some people assume I am. Of course, the people most guilty of this are the ones guilty of saying digs and subtly telling someone to change in a so-called joke or they’re super insecure and assume people will be mean to them like they’re mean to others and/or themselves. Either way, ***this twisting of words really kills your trust for people because you become afraid to say anything even if they ask a good question.***

2. ***It's hard to trust others when you can't trust yourself:*** I've been working hard at rejecting my negative voice that tells me I'm not good enough, but it's hard to trust others when you have to fight your own negative feelings. If I have these thoughts, why wouldn't others have similar thoughts toward me? If I'm not always honest with people, how can I trust other people to be honest with me? This means if someone stops talking to me, I can't fully know if it's because they're too busy/distracted or I somehow upset them. Again, this affects trust.

3. ***How can you trust others when you can't trust God?*** This is a major reason people struggle with God and whether He exists or not. I may be a believer, but I get it. It's hard to trust God when you feel alone. It's hard to trust God when there is so much hurt in the world. As a Christian, I trust that God loves me and will welcome me into heaven. I also trust He'll do some great things for me like He has with all the cars I've owned (I have some cool stories), but I don't trust that He will stop people from hurting me or to prevent death of loved ones because those are inevitable parts of life. I can trust that there is hope for a better forever after I die, but right now it still sucks being hurt and that reduces my trust for God as a protector, which ultimately reduces my trust in others.

I should point out that people who say, "It's part of God's plan," are dumb. God doesn't control people and according to Genesis, He didn't want this world to have pain and death the way we know it. He didn't wipe people out with a flood or plagues because that's what He really wanted – those were last resorts: (Baby God who is even cuter than Baby Yoda) "I'm going to create you, so I can kill you when you're 10 by starvation, and I'm going to kill you when you're old and can't remember anything because that's its own form of torture. I love my plans!" God either loves us and gives us freedom to live or He makes us follow His scripted life for us because He's a sadistic puppet master. You can't be a loving God and create people You love who are destined to go to hell. You can only create people with the hope they'll choose to join You in heaven, and You'll love people enough to let them fall on their faces

because it can help them in the long run even though in the moment it can hurt. What can help is knowing it hurts God to see us in pain like any parent who loves their kids. He doesn't stop every bad thing from happening to us because He hopes it'll help us grow.

Conclusion: So what is the positive message that can be taken from this post? ***Life is hard and it's up to us to develop a thick skin and get better at brushing things off.*** When people backstab us (and they will), when life sucks (and it will), when we lose a loved one (and we will), when friends disappear (and they do), we need to be ready to get back up again, which is a song I've been hearing over and over for the past couple weeks because my daughter loves it. Perhaps you've heard it, "Get Back Up Again," from the movie *Trolls*. It's a smart message... mezzage... messig... (in my head, "Get back up again") message. (I did it!)

This week may you start to work on having a thicker skin and keep getting back up again in a smarter way.

Lesson 48

Parenting Tips from Someone Who Shouldn't be Giving Them

Please Note: I've included this in a relationship book because a lot of couples will have kids or will one day have them, which means this

can be helpful. If nothing else, you have parents and this can simply be a way to create conversation about your own childhood with what could've been improved and what you're thankful for because it's helped you be who you are today. I should also note that this was originally written when my first daughter was very new.

What's an easy way to tick off a parent? Tell them how to parent, so... let the good times begin. In this lesson I'm going to give some parenting advice. After all, I am the parent of a six-weeks-old, so I clearly know what it takes to be a parent. Sarcasm aside (weird, right?), as a therapist who works with parents, I need to be able to guide them in knowing how to be better. As a professional (a term that simply means people are willing to pay me for help), I need to know what to say, but here's the thing: ***There is no clear-cut method that guarantees good children.*** Some kids thrive with gentle parents while others thrive with neglectful parents they rebel against. As someone who won't advise parents to be terrible to toughen up their kids (strange, I know), here's how I help. I use scales of -10 for Too Little, 0 for Enough, and +10 for Too Much in order to escape making any personal claims on what they should do because really, who am I? That, and a good therapist is supposed to avoid acting like a god who tells people what to do... that's what a mother-in-law is for. (Yes, the sarcasm has returned.)

Here are 5 things parents should consider when raising their kids:

1. ***Disciplining:*** Every child needs discipline. It helps establish the hierarchy of parent over child, which ultimately helps the child know their parents are in charge and will protect them if they need it. Finding the line of what's Discipline Enough versus Too Little or Too Much is a dance that changes with each child. For instance, I needed a lot more discipline than my brother who was very compliant. I essentially made my parents earn their title of parents. To add to the complication, depending on the age of the child, the line of Discipline Enough even changes. For instance, how you discipline a toddler should be different than how you discipline a 10-year-old, which is different than how you

discipline a teenager, which is different than how you discipline a twenty-year-old who can't afford to leave home because after a certain age you can say, "Here are the rules or there's the door." It's often best to do it in a more loving way, but sometimes you need to be that straightforward.

How would you grade the way you were raised and how you're raising your own kids (if you have them)?

(-10)------(0)-----(+10)
Too Little Discipline Enough Too Much

2. **Listening:** Every child needs their parents to listen to them in order to feel valued. My mom was the best "therapist" I could've asked for (she's a 0 on this scale) because she was an incredible listener as she knew how to ask engaging questions and letting me share uninterrupted, which helped me feel like I mattered.

How would you grade your parents and yourselves?

(-10)------(0)-----(+10)
Too Little Listen Enough Too Much

3. **Giving Stuff:** Children benefit from toys and things, but our culture is breeding a generation of kids who have been given way too much. This has long-term effects like ridiculously high expectations and being sad over nothing. My parents would've loved to have given us more, but fortunately they knew their financial limits, which meant sometimes saying no – a healthy albeit unwanted experience. This limit encouraged all three of their kids to get jobs by eleven years old and be more independent financially from a younger age, which has had huge benefits in the long run. Parents need to give their kids a hunger to be self-sufficient more than giving them everything they want.

How would you grade your parents then and now? What about yourselves?

(-10)------(0)-----(+10)

Too Little

Give Enough

Too Much

4. **Protecting:** As a retired teacher once told me, “Thirty years ago if the child was failing, the parent scolded the child whereas now if a child is failing, the parent scolds the teacher.” Children need to know their parents will protect them, but there is definitely a line that is protecting too much like scolding a teacher. At the same time, CAS deals with a lot of parents on the other extreme. As always, we need the middle ground.

How would you grade your parents at protecting? And you?

(-10)------(0)-----(+10)

Too Little Protect Enough Too Much

5. **Annoy & Frustrate:** Every parent should be annoying at some level because otherwise the child will never leave home. I lived with my mom until I was 35 (some might argue she wasn’t annoying enough), but she was an excellent balance because we had a very healthy relationship and my living at home was a mutually beneficial arrangement since my dad had passed away and she had a large property. Being annoying is inevitable on some level when you live with someone, but I got along so well with my mom because I knew she had the final say on the house rules and she did her best to make them fair. Ultimately, being annoying and frustrating your children enough helps them learn how to better handle living with others in the future and develop their conflict management skills. It ultimately teaches them how to respect authority and that not getting our way all the time is part of life.

How would you rate your parents at this? And you?

(-10)------(0)-----(+10)

Too Little Annoy & Frustrate Enough Too Much

This week may you consider if you are treating your kids properly and/or see where your parents went right and wrong in order to adjust what you are doing now.

How to Save Money (10 tools that helped me pay off my mortgage)

Last year my wife and I paid off our mortgage – Woo! It’s as amazing as it sounds. We are incredibly blessed, especially since I am a very late bloomer. Of course, we have what many people call a starter home, so we will continue saving and either do an addition or move to a bigger house in the next five or so years when we can pay cash for it. Yes, cash because I am done with being in debt – God willing... and wife willing (she’s harder to convince). The amazing thing is we achieved this when our combined annual salaries in that time *as a couple* averaged the annual salary of a *single* Ontario teacher, fire fighter, or a police officer. (They’re paid a lot more here than in the States.) And yes, this is my way of adding my opinion that government workers are overpaid because they are in the top 10% of wage earners in Canada. It bothers me because they’re paid by tax payers who mostly make less than them while they do jobs you’re supposed to want to do to help people and not for the money. Although, what really bugs me is, vice principals and principals, education consultants, police who work overtime, and firefighters who use their free time for side jobs are in the top 5% of wage earners in Canada... but I digress. It is interesting to note that even though my wife and I made as much together as *one* typical government worker, we have paid off our mortgage (and cars) while most of them are heavily in debt. As this proves, ***it’s not always how much you make, but what you do with it.***

For my wife and I to have paid off our house, it’s like someone winning an Oscar insofar that many factors had to fall into place for it to happen. It definitely wasn’t just us, but we played a major part. Arguably the biggest factor was the market being way better than it is now. If we tried buying our house today, we wouldn’t have qualified for the mortgage

because our house has quadrupled in value as the city we live in over the last six year has become one of the most expensive in North America. That being said, there are many practical factors that were also at play for my wife and I to be in our current position, which follows the lesson I've recently learned: ***Do your part, and God will do His***. Many people wonder why God allows bad things to happen to good people, but many times those bad things are caused by our own bad decisions. We also forget bad things happen to bad people. Because bad people are bad, there's a good chance they're having worse and more frequent bad things happening because they don't have the same loving people surrounding them that good people have; there are repercussions to being bad.

What "doing our part" looks like is described in the following list:

- 1) ***Who you talk to will influence your thinking:*** We had people encouraging us to pay off our mortgage as both my older brother and my workout partner paid off their houses by the time they were forty, and they talked about how great it was (it pays to have older friends). Plus, our families, in general, have been very encouraging about it. Oddly enough, my financial adviser told me *not* to pay off the house, but I'm glad I chose to follow the example of my brother and friend because being debt free is as amazing as they made it sound. We have since investigated taking out a mortgage to do investing, but at least it's in our control.
- 2) ***Buy your house under one person's salary:*** This gave us the security of knowing if something happened to one of us, we'd be financially okay. It also meant one person paid the mortgage and the other was able to add payments to the principle.
- 3) ***Be generous to a point:*** Both my wife and I believe in tithing, which means we give 10% of our income to church/charity (I'm guessing a few people just choked). On top of this, my wife is very generous with making meals for people (she's nicer than me). We both believe we need to be generous to a point if we want God to be generous with us, and our lives are proof that this works.
- 4) ***Have the right friends:*** A major factor for us being in this position is because of having some incredible friends. These are the kinds of

friends who show you how to fix something yourself or give you a hand when you can't do it yourself. One friend was particularly amazing at this and saved us thousands of dollars. This list of friends also includes having a contractor who saved us thousands of dollars because he was my old boss and he was trying to help me out by giving me breaks where he could. He even encouraged me to do certain jobs myself in order to save money... they may have been jobs he didn't want to do, but that's besides the point.

- 5) ***Live a “No Frills grocery store” style of life:*** (Where I live, No Frills is the cheaper grocery store chain and lives up to its name.) A No Frills lifestyle considers ***what is good enough?*** For instance, I have saved a ton of money because I don't drink alcohol or coffee (I'm that cool), and my wife always brings a to-go mug of tea wherever she goes in order to not spend unnecessary money. A \$2 drink a day is over \$700 a year, which is a lot of money that could be used for something that lasts longer or is more enjoyable. When we got our house, my wife became great at flyer shopping for groceries and she'll buy somethings second-hand and/or hold off on buying certain things that she wants until we can better afford them. I also wear clothes that are 10 years old while my wife is careful what she gets herself. On top of this, we only have one cat when we would rather two cats or a dog, but right now that's not an expense we want to carry.

One of the biggest things is we ***limit monthly payments plans.*** For instance, my wife and I both have cheaper phone plans and we don't have cable or Netflix. Instead, we borrow movies from the library, and occasionally treat ourselves to a \$2 rental from the local corner store. Good enough also means ***limiting entertainment.*** My wife and I love going on trips as much as anyone, but we've limited vacations to weekends away in cheaper hotels and shared rooms with friends. We also rarely go out for dinner and if we go to a show at my favorite comedy club in Buffalo or a theater show (I love Broadway), it's for special occasions like birthdays and anniversaries. Toronto is okay, but the best shows are in Buffalo, which is a lot nicer than

people give it credit for... unless they call it “The armpit of America” because Americans really love armpits.

- 6) ***Pay cash for your cars:*** Following the No Frills idea, both our cars were paid for in cash. They’re not the nicest, but they’re good enough. I bought my Civic for \$6,500 and my wife’s Rav4 for \$12,000. It took about a month each to find the right vehicles at the right price, but not having car payments or interest on a loan saves us a ton of money and unnecessary stress.
- 7) ***Be Willing to Sacrifice:*** Sacrificing isn’t pleasant in the moment, but it’s worth it in the end. For instance, when my wife and I were married, we lived at my mom’s while we waited for our house to be finished – not many wives would do that. We also wanted to redo our driveway, but waited until after the house was paid and we could pay cash for it – patience is key.
- 8) ***Embrace Contentment & Anticipation:*** When we were renovating our house, it was hard not to just pay extra to get it done. Our society promotes instant gratification, but there’s power in being content with where you are and looking forward to what can come. We were fortunately patient and didn’t go into greater debt paying an overpriced contractor to finish things quicker and slowly did it over a year and a half. It was hard in the moment, but now we get to enjoy the fruits of our labor and struggle.
- 9) ***Have generous parents:*** Our mom’s have been incredible between helping at the house and buying us things like a dishwasher and air conditioner. In addition, my wife and I go to our parents for dinner three times a week because our moms are amazing. Eating at their houses give us a reason to visit and it saves us a lot of money while building our connections with them.
- 10) ***Be ready to do work on your house:*** Life would’ve been easier if we got the house all done for us, but we bought a total gut job and still have some landscaping going on. My dad taught me the value of doing work yourself because it saves you a lot of money and gives a great sense of accomplishment and pride in your house.

Bonus: My wife and I buy everything with our credit cards that we pay off every month. This gives us points we can use later and we know exactly how much we're spending, which helps for budgeting and having trust that the other person isn't sneaking money. As a therapist, I've learned this happens a lot more than people think.

This week may you consider ways you can use your money as wisely as possible.

Lesson 50

The Almost Perfect Fight

After 11 years together, my wife and I had the near perfect fight. My apologies if you are hoping for a description of a fight with brilliant Hollywood witticisms being tossed back and forth culminating in one of us chucking the other's clothes out the window with Michael Jackson's *Heal the World* being sung in the background by a children's choir for juxtaposition. That would be pretty perfect... for a movie depicting emotionally damaged people with no self control and who don't care about making the problem worse. (Who'd have thought Hollywood wasn't a role model of health?) The truth is the best fight is filled with self control like a Caramilk bar is filled with caramel. The perfect fight essentially requires two people to be acting against their preferred reactionary behavior. You know how you feel like yelling? Don't. Being condescending? Never. Hit each other with empty wrapping paper

tubes? Um... probably save that for your kids (for playing). So, what does the perfect fight look like? Let me explain...

So, this situation begins with my wife and I at my mom's house. Everyone else had left the weekly family dinner. (I highly recommend weekly family dinners for families who want to be close... and if you're cheap like me.) My wife and I were talking with my mom, and at one point, I said something I thought was under the normal conversation category, but I could feel something change in my wife. It was like I had just turned on the anger switch. Guys know that moment. You're not sure why, but you can feel a cold front has arrived. After my mom finished adding her thoughts to my comment (my mom thought what I said was normal, too), my wife said it was time for her to go. She had her own car, so she left, and after a few minutes I followed. On my way home I tried to think of what I had said to change the mood and I had an idea, but it seemed pretty dumb to me. When I walked in the house, it was like Elsa from *Frozen* had been there. What did I want to say? I'm ready to listen and apologize? No freak'n chance! I sooo wanted to yell, "I know you're angry, but this is stupid. You're overreacting... like always." Guess how that would end? Not well... unless you're watching it from a distance and want to see a guy get his head ripped off like a human size praying mantis. Instead, I said, "I'm guessing you're angry for the thing I said." My wife's response was very good and controlled, "I'm so angry; I can't even talk to you." And what did I want to say to this, "Take as much time as you need to calm down, and I'll patiently wait for you"? Nope. I'm a chaser and want to fix things right away, so my natural reaction was to force her to talk. Guess how that would end. Not happily ever after. Fortunately, I bit my tongue, made a rude comment about her in my head like "You're too angry to talk to me? I should make you this angry more often," which made me giggle to myself. (I think I'm clever.) I then distracted myself with some paperwork while my wife got ready for bed and watched TV. After about two and half hours, my wife came in and calmly said, "I was hurt because you said something that I didn't want anyone to know, and I thought you knew that." My wife presented herself perfectly. She had

gotten rid of enough emotion in order to share why she was upset in one clear sentence and in a controlled voice. Too often, when we're hurt, we ramble trying to get our point across, but the point gets lost in all the blah, blah, blah. Instead, she made it easy for me to hear. My response? I wanted to say, "But I didn't actually give anything away. You always overreact because you're too sensitive like a typical woman." Guess where that would've gotten me. (Reading the thoughts in my head might make you want to punch me and you're not even the person I'm talking to in this situation, so you know how bad it would've been if I said these thoughts to my wife.) Instead, I used self control and said, "I know that's a sensitive thing for you, and I'm sorry; I should have been more careful." I may not have agreed with her feelings, but that doesn't mean I shouldn't validate her and what she felt. I'd be a huge jerk to disregard her like that... you know, like my old self would (aka a typical inconsiderate guy). ***When it comes to apologizing, I don't have to agree; I just have to help her feel cared about.*** As the old adage says, "You can be right or you can be married." We may naturally want to prove our point, but that doesn't help the situation. Instead, ***we need to help the other person feel cared about*** whether it's for us to be a good person or to simply reduce the risk of them attacking us.

After this short discussion, my wife and I did our devotional readings and went to bed feeling a bit better (emphasis on a bit). The next day I sent a follow up apology over text and we moved on. It was the almost perfect way to handle a disagreement because:

1. We used ***self control*** to not say whatever we felt like saying in the moment, which is never very nice.
2. We both offered the needed ***space*** to allow each other to calm down and be in a better spot for talking.
3. The hurt person shared the hurt in ***one clear sentence***.
4. The other person (i.e. me) didn't defend his behavior; he simply ***acknowledged*** what was said and apologized for hurting her feelings.
5. Do something to ***distract*** yourself from the fight because rehashing details will make it worse.

6. Send a **follow up** apology and/or note thanking the other person for how they handled the situation since it could've been worse. Unless you're dead, it could've been worse.
7. **Let it go.** There will always be another reason to fight later, so why hold onto an old situation?

Why it wasn't a Perfect Fight: If I was evaluating this situation, there are two important points I would give. First, there wasn't a time for when we would come back to talk. Fortunately, I gave my wife space and she returned without it, but a time could've helped. Second, in an earlier lesson I taught that both people should say what they felt with *both* people apologizing for what upset the other person. In this situation, I didn't share my side. In this I was a typical guy – just take it, so it's easier in the moment. Fortunately, I did vent on my own to prevent bottling up my feelings, and my wife showed she cared in other ways. Sometimes, depending on the person you're dealing with and the situation, this is the best option, but bottling is always a risk because it can explode out later. If it's not safe or worth it to share our side, we need to be venting our feelings in a healthy way on our own. The problem for many guys is we don't say anything because any hint of a criticism or correction can make a woman angry at us. Many women are so hard on themselves or feel overwhelmed there isn't any room for anymore negativity. In this situation, I would say I was a bit of a coward who was trying to avoid conflict – I'll own it. As much as I tell myself I'm trying to make it better, I need to be more forthcoming to help my wife know what hurts me to help us be better in the future.

This week may you not have to have a fight, but if you do, may it be the perfect fight where both sides feel heard and cared about.

Fun Questions to Ask Each Other

I recently saw a couple who stated a very common problem for those in long-term relationships: “We’ve been together for so long we don’t know what to talk about. We already know everything about each other.” I’m a therapist, someone trained to ask questions and spur on conversation, and I’ve had moments I’ve thought this. I’m even married to the perfect wife... yes, perfect... always perfect because that’s possible. The good news is there’s always something to learn about ourselves and our partner. We just need the right catalyst to help us figure out what that is. Fortunately, there are options to help with this like conversation starter books and websites, or my book, *Emotional Sex: Making Good Relationships Great* has lots of great questions and activities to help you know yourself and your partner better. For new things to talk about you can also do new things together or alone in order to talk about later. It can be as simple as learning something new reading a newspaper, magazine, blog, or an informational day calendar you keep in the bathroom; it can also be from a podcast or an audiobook you listen to on your way to work. It’s also helpful to have common interests (e.g. hobbies, pets, kids, etc.), a project to dream about or to do together, and to have something/someone you can both hate like a sports team. God gave us hate, so we don’t need to be scared of it; we just have to be careful with it. Other times, we really just need some good question ideas to get us thinking and sharing.

Awhile ago, I wrote a blog: “Questions to Ask when You’re Dating” and there were some good questions in there that would be helpful for married people to ask each other like:

1. How do you want to be similar to your mom? Dad? How do you want to be different from them?
2. What three words would your friends likely use to describe you?

3. What three words do you think people who don't really like you use to describe you?
4. Who are the three most influential people for making you who you are today?

After this married couple told me their problem, I took it as a challenge to make questions designed to help married couples. You can even write your own list. I found it fun... although I'm a geek that way, so that might just be me. Regardless, here are the questions I came up with for married people:

1. What was your favorite toy as a child? Most hated? A toy you wanted but never got?
2. What was your dream car as a child? Teen? Now?
3. What was your dream job as a child? Teen? Now?
4. If TV characters were real, which one would you want to be your good friend? If movie characters were real, who would you choose? If you had the option, what famous person would you like to meet and/or have as a friend?
5. If money wasn't an issue and you could own any store right now without need for profit, what would it be? If money was limited and you had to make a profit, what store would you want?
6. If money wasn't an issue, what's the one thing you'd want to do this year? At some point in your life?
7. If you could break one law this year, what would it be? If you could break a law everyday, what would it be?
8. If a magic genie offered you one wish for you to make for yourself, one for your partner, one for your family, and one for the world, what things would you wish for?
9. When you're really old, what is the one ailment you'd choose over others and the ailment you'd do anything to not have (e.g. wearing diapers, bad back, etc.)?
10. What would you do if you found out you and your partner were expecting right now?
11. What is your proudest moment as a child? As a teen? As an adult?

12. What lesson(s) do you wish you could go back and tell yourself as a young person? Why?
13. What is the best lesson a teacher or coach, directly or indirectly, taught you? Your mom? Your dad?
14. If your house was on fire, what three things would you want to save besides family and pets?
15. What are your top three favorite moments together?
16. What are your top three favorite moments outside of your relationship like as a child, at work, or with friends?
17. What is the one word you want people to think of when they think of you?
18. If you could relive any moment in your life and not change it, what would it be? If you could relive and change it, what would it be?
19. If you had a month to live, what three things would you want to do?
20. What is your favorite intimate moment together?

May this exercise lead to a closer connection with your partner.

Lesson 52

Going Deeper

Please Note: The following post was inspired after a year of being in the COVID pandemic during the third-wave lockdown, which is when I saw a spike in people looking for a therapist. This is the concluding lesson to this book because it might possibly be one of the most important lessons

I've ever written. The implications are pretty huge. It is a deeper lesson that is best appreciated by people who are ready to grow in wisdom. It is the kind of topic people who sought wisdom from the great sages about the meaning of life would be given. It's a different kind of topic for this book, but it will hopefully lead to good reflection.

I define COVID depression as everything from the grief of having lost things we enjoy doing to feeling cooped up, bored, lonely, and hopeless. It's pretty much what prisoners go through when they go to jail or are put under house arrest (in many ways this is house arrest). As a psychotherapist with a private practice that's been steadily growing for 10 years, this past year had a normal increase until this past March 2021 when it jumped up. COVID depression and another lockdown are definitely major contributors to this, but in my opinion, this has just accentuated the underlying issues already in people's lives. The difference now, however, is we don't have all the distractions we typically use to turn a blind eye to what's really going on under the surface.

Before COVID, western culture's pandemic was being busy. There was no time to think, which left many people and relationships with wounds they could ignore, but just because you don't think about your injury, doesn't mean it's not there; just because you can function, doesn't mean you're fine. Like any physical injury, emotional needs tend to worsen if we don't address them, and that's what's been quietly happening for many people until now. In this way, ***COVID is a gift for waking people up to their pain.*** Unfortunately, many people are waking up only to want to stuff those pesky feelings back down again, so they're turning to booze, pot, video games, and other unhealthy junk that helps them suppress their brokenness.

COVID depression is a lot like getting older (i.e. after we accomplish all the major tasks in life like establishing a career and getting family in place) because they can both leave people asking, "Now what?" There are some people who will never think about things like this because they're either that easygoing and/or positive (or blind) and they just ride the wave of life without much thought. For sensitive over-thinkers like

me, however, this kind of existential wonder has been off and on in my mind for awhile.

A good way to think of growing up is to think of climbing up an escarpment. To get to the top, some paths are easier than others and some have beautiful views while others, eh. Some paths can be a lot of fun depending on who you do it with or it can be awful if we make some bad choices along the way and/or have some bad luck. Some people give up the climb part way and never fully grow up as they mooch off their parents or some poor sucker who tells themselves it's love until they burn out and get divorced. ***For those who make it to the top, after all the years of dreaming and being filled with hope for what it'd be like after the climb, their accomplishment is rewarded with the reality of... that's it?*** Life at the top is a lot like at the bottom, but now there isn't the same hope and dreams to push you forward. People at the top can look back at the view and appreciate the memories and lessons they learned on their journey, but the rest of their days are spent without anything really amazing to look forward to compared to before when they could dream of what the top of the escarpment would be like. To add to this, the person who climbed the escarpment is now older, so their bodies aren't as youthful and pain-free as before. This means not only are the person's hopes and dreams gone, they're struggling physically, which really makes for a disillusioning experience – that's it? And ow, my back! Similarly in life, people dream of what job they'll have, what it'll be like falling in love, and announcing there's a baby, and then after that's all done, they'll likely think, "That's it? This is 'happily' ever after?" The dream is replaced by reality... and a few more white hairs, achy joints, and jiggly skin. (If you're still a young person reading this, enjoy your youth while you can.)

That being said, COVID depression and getting older are a gift because people are becoming aware of the reality that life is... meaningless. Do I sound gloomy? I might seem that way, but I'm not. I'm actually feeling really good while I write this (and not because I think it's funny I'm upsetting people – I'm weird, but I'm not mean). I'm simply stating a fact that I've accepted and embrace – ***life is meaningless***. We distract

ourselves with kids, jobs, helping others, accomplishments, sports, and entertainment, but in the end, it's all meaningless. When we die, that's it. Even if we can do something that's remembered like Albert Einstein; does he care that he's in textbooks and known by billions of people? No, he's dead, kaput. Even simpler, what moment lasts more than a moment? What memory is ever as good as when we experienced it? If you win a championship, does that really matter 10 years down the road? The past can be appreciated, but it's what's happening now that really matters to us... and then we die. (So far I think I might be adding to feelings of depression.) ***The truth is time is always hungry for more and what's young will one day be old. What's loved today will one day be forgotten.*** (I could definitely be adding to feelings of depression).

To take this further, ***Life is a gift, and we should enjoy it*** – that's a strange twist, isn't it? Life is both meaningless and a gift. We need to remember that life is a gift because it's important to have goals and projects to work on as that gives us purpose and enjoyment. We need to be careful, however, because goals can become our idols, and ultimately, they're just temporary. They can give us pleasure in the moment and a sense of pride afterward, but everything will pass away. When you're young, you have drive – or you should – because you have a lot of work to do in order to get your life in order, so you can better enjoy it, but at some point, this drive needs to be balanced out with the reality that everything that's normal today will be gone tomorrow, so enjoy it.

In the Jewish philosophy book, Ecclesiastes, this is the theme: ***Life is a gift and life is meaningless*** and that the best thing we can do is “eat, drink, and enjoy the fruits of [our] labor, for these are gifts of God.” (Ecc 3:13) This is the conclusion of wise people. What's great is knowing life is meaningless, it can be very liberating; why worry so much? Why be offended or worried about people's judgements and comments? ***We are free!*** Together, these two notions – life is a gift and life is meaningless – can keep us healthy and happy: ***One gives us drive and the other helps us not get stressed about the little things. Together they make life more enjoyable.***

This week may you consider the question: what is the point of all of this? Whether you believe in heaven or not, it is important that you consider what comes next and what it takes to get there.

A Personal Note (Not for people who hate religion)

Taking this idea that life is a balance of knowing it is both meaningless and a gift one step further, some people will say, “It’s not the destination; it’s the journey,” but those people are “special”: (worker) “So I just work my whole life and that’s the good part? This sucks!” The truth is the journey has value, but ***it is the destination that really matters***. We should make the journey as healthy and enjoyable as possible, but ultimately, it’s all about the destination. ***This life is temporary; what we really need to care about is the next because it lasts a lot longer,*** and for me, that destination is heaven.

As a therapist, I work with people who don’t see the point of life and what makes me angry is we live in a culture where I can’t blatantly say the truth: There are tools to reduce negative thinking, improving communication and conflict handling skills, and to feel more confident, but overall, some people are depressed because they realize life is just a bunch of distractions from the fact that it’s all meaningless. Some people are depressed because they see the bigger picture – we all die, so what’s the point? What they need to realize is the point of all of this is to prepare for what comes next, and you need God for that. Having God in your life doesn’t eliminate the potential for depression – a lot of Christians have depression – but it can give perspective and knowing there is a loving God can give strength and purpose. Together, we need both the practical tools for this life and dealing with things like conflict while also looking to God and the next life. Unfortunately, our culture is so anti-religion, I have to tiptoe from the truth and offer limited help to a lot of people. The problem is ***burying your head in the sand doesn’t change reality; it just makes you a target to get your butt kicked***.

Years ago, when they used urine as mouth wash (true fact), before there were dentists and chiropractors and all the wonderful things we take for granted for healing, people were constantly in pain and they looked forward to the next life where there are no tears or suffering. That's one of the problems with reincarnation – it doesn't give any hope for something better (worker) “We get stuck doing this again and again? This sucks!” Most westerners don't consider the bigger picture. We distract ourselves with so many meaningless things that are only enjoyable in the moment, but they don't lead to anything of eternal value. True meaning is found in connecting to what lasts forever; we need to connect with the Creator who loves us and wants us to care about Him in return. This won't erase all of our problems, but it can help us keep better perspective, inspire us to live better lives, and offer the valuable idea that we're loved and we matter.

Bonus: I'm yet to find anything in the Bible that supports the idea that good people can be good enough to be allowed in heaven. You're welcome to prove me wrong, but saying “It feels like being a good person should be good enough,” isn't following the evidence. ***Be like a detective and follow the evidence*** and not just a get feeling. The evidence I see in the Bible is the idea that God only invites people to heaven who want Him in their lives. He doesn't force Himself on people in this life, so He doesn't force Himself on people in the next. This basically means, if you don't want God in your life, He gives you what you want in this life and the next, which is a much nicer way of saying there is a heaven and hell. That being said, what either of those places look like is confusing and there are some people who argue hell isn't a place, but rather the absence of existence because why would a loving God want to torture people for eternity? I don't know how it all works, but I do know I'd rather go to heaven.

Conclusion

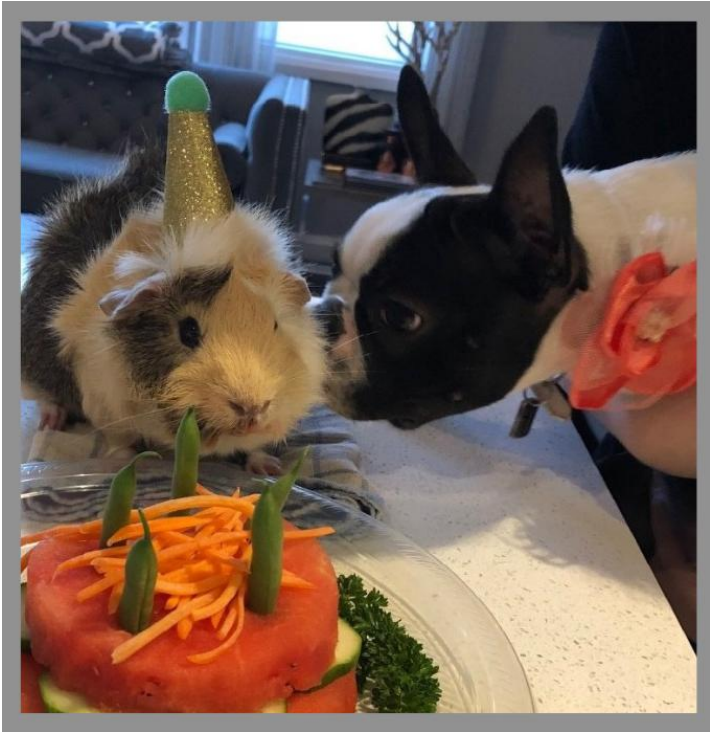
Congratulations, you've completed this book. You can now make a fake graduation ceremony (fun) and tell everyone that you have a better relationship than them because you went through this book together (not actually recommended). I hope this book has helped you grow and discover things about yourselves that have helped improve your relationship and your overall happiness. I wrote these lessons over three years and going through them again in order to put this book together, I was reminded of some important things I'd forgotten and it's helped me. If this book didn't help you, you must be way smarter than me (or you're a jerk who doesn't take responsibility for your own actions), but if you read the book, you're still a wonderful person; although I'm not sure why you would've read the whole thing if you hated it. On the plus side, that shows real dedication (that's me seeing the positive).

I would normally summarize everything here like a normal conclusion would do, but this book has 52+ lessons in it. If you want a full recap, you can look at the Table of Contents, but simply put, being emotionally healthy as a couple and not fighting as much isn't that complicated: Do your best to avoid eye rolling, defending yourself, and using "but," and instead, try to "Yes and" people, especially when conflict is 50% our fault. When you get heated, it's good to have "time outs with a time" and vent out your feelings alone until you can summarize your thoughts in one sentence, and apologize for the hurt the person felt even if you don't agree with it, and then move on. Remind yourself that people say things they don't mean when they're angry/venting in order to let go of the hurtful things that have been said in the heat of the moment. In all things, find the balance like being "Kind to a point" and remember that men and women are different but equal, which means we can't be angry at a man for acting like a man or a woman for being a woman. That being said, we want to do our best to be someone our partner will have an easier time loving because saying, "I love you," is a lot like saying, "I'll be nice to you."

I guess I just summarized a lot of the book... if you learned anything about my writing style, you won't be surprised; and if you learned anything about being emotionally healthy, you won't hold this against me. That being written, I will now say thank you for reading this book and may the lessons I presented help you find a greater joy and meaning to life.

Finished! Enjoy the sense of accomplishment you just earned.





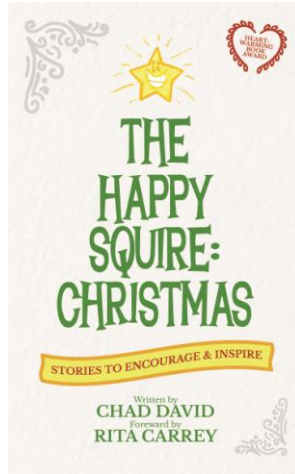
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