

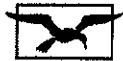
Emotional Intelligence

— IN —

Couples Therapy

*Advances from Neurobiology and
the Science of Intimate Relationships*

Brent J. Atkinson



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INTRODUCTION

New Answers to Old Questions

THIS BOOK INTRODUCES a new way of understanding and navigating relationships, and provides a guide for therapists to help distressed couples improve their lives together. The new approach results from advances in two independent fields of scientific inquiry: neuroscience and the science of intimate relationships. New studies in relationship science have identified with a high degree of precision what people who succeed in their relationships do differently than those who fail, taking much of the guesswork out of the question of what makes a relationship work. Meanwhile, ground-breaking discoveries in the field of affective neuroscience provide new answers to the age-old question of why people persist in outmoded ways of thinking or acting, even when they know it would be in their own best interest to change.

ADVANCES IN THE SCIENCE OF INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

Researchers in the mid-1980s set out to find what it is that people who succeed in their marriages do differently from those who fail. In the first year of these studies, such entities as attitudes, communication styles, expression of anger and tenderness were measured. Participants were installed in a lab apartment with videocameras in every room except the bathroom that recorded their daily lives. The couples were asked to discuss specific topics while their heart rates were monitored and their physical movements were measured. Blood samples were taken at various points in the conversations. After the study finished, the participating couples were tracked for several years to see how they were doing—which couples were divorced, which were unhappily married, and which had thriving marriages. Not only did the researchers succeed in pinpointing the interpersonal habits that distinguish people who succeed from people who fail in their

marriages, but they found that some interpersonal habits are so crucial that the absence of them virtually guarantees marital failure. By measuring the relative presence or absence of specific interpersonal habits, researchers found that they could predict the likelihood of a marriage's success or failure with 91% accuracy (Gottman & Silver, 1999)! People who have these crucial habits almost always end up in happy marriages, whereas people who don't almost always end up divorced or unhappily married.

These studies are revolutionizing our understanding of intimate relationships. Before them, marriage therapists had to proceed on the basis of what they thought couples needed, or what generally accepted theories in the field told them to do. Now, for the first time, we have scientific evidence about what it is that couples who succeed and those who fail actually do differently. This information has been filtering into public awareness through books such as John Gottman's *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail* (1994a), *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* (Gottman & Silver, 1999), and *The Relationship Cure* (Gottman & De Claire, 2001). These studies present compelling evidence that there are personal prerequisites for succeeding in intimate relationships. Those who want to succeed in love must have specific interpersonal abilities, and we now know exactly what these abilities are. If people have these abilities, the chances are very good that they will be treated with respect and admiration from their intimate partners. If they don't have them, the evidence suggests that the future of their relationships will be quite dim.

Some of the most important interpersonal habits involve things that people must be able to do *without the help of their partners*. In fact, they must be able to do these things precisely when their partners are making it most difficult to do them. Researchers have discovered that the way people respond when they feel misunderstood or mistreated by their partners dramatically influences the odds that their partners will treat them better or worse in the future. All people in lasting intimate relationships feel misunderstood or mistreated at one time or another. At these times, some people respond in ways that make it likely that their partners will treat them better in the future, and some people respond in ways that dramatically increase the odds that they will be even more misunderstood or mistreated. The way people respond to the worst in their partners plays a central role in determining whether or not they will experience something better from them in the future. These studies suggest that people can dramatically influence the way their partners treat them. This is because a person's level of motivation has so much to do with how a partner interacts with him or her. People are almost guaranteed love relationships in which they feel respected and valued if they have certain interpersonal abilities. The good news is that when people find themselves in relationships in which they feel consistently misunderstood or mistreated, they don't have to wait around, hoping that their partners will start treating them better. They can largely take the matter into their own hands. They cannot control their partners, but they can dramatically influence the odds that their partners will treat them better in the future. How? *By making*

sure that they are responding well to the things their partners do or say that are upsetting them right now.

In Chapter 3, we'll take a detailed look at what "responding well" means. Some of these habits that predict relationship success are obvious. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that people who tend to start out discussions with harsh criticisms won't be any more likely to succeed than those who are unwilling to accept influence from their partners when making decisions. Some of the important predictors have more to do with what a person is *thinking* than what she or he says or does. Two different husbands may each apologize and adjust their plans when their wives criticize them harshly for forgetting an important appointment. One husband will end up divorced, and the other will remain happily married. Why? While husband 1 apologizes and adjusts his plans, inside he's thinking "She shouldn't get so upset over such a little thing; If it's not one thing, it's another!; She's never satisfied!; I would never act like that if she forgot something!; She's just like her mother!" In contrast, husband 2 is thinking, "Why is she so upset?; There must be more going on here than meets the eye; My forgetting about this must mean something to her that I don't really understand; I've got to find out the emotional logic behind her reactions." Although the outward actions of the two husbands look the same (apologizing and accepting influence), clearly these husbands have vastly different attitudes. Attitudes are as potent as behaviors when predicting relationship success or failure.

In all of my years working with couples, I have rarely encountered a couple in which one partner was meeting the prerequisites when the other partner wasn't. Granted, the shortcomings of one partner are often more public or provocative than the shortcomings of the other (i.e., one partner flies into rages and throws things while the other tries to placate and calm down the raging partner), but when all of the prerequisites are considered, we find that partners in distressed relationships are generally a match for each other. But partners entering therapy rarely see things this way. Inwardly, if not outwardly, people generally think that the shortcomings of their partners are more serious than their own. Usually, this is because there are certain "dysfunctional" things that their partners do that they know they don't do themselves. What they don't realize is that there are many different interpersonal habits that are predictive of relationship success or failure. They tend to focus on the particular dysfunctional habits of their partners, not realizing that some of their own habits are just as powerfully corrosive to the relationship. Fortunately, people who are able to see and modify their own dysfunctional habits will most often find that their partners follow. This is due to the powerful combination of abilities that people destined for relationship success have. They require that they be treated with respect, but they make it easy for their partners to treat them with respect at the same time.

The bottom line is this: If people want their partners to treat them better, they need to think and act like people who usually get treated well by their partners. Researchers have studied people who naturally elicit respect and cooperation from their partners, and have identified exactly how they do it: There are spe-

cific skills and attitudes involved in knowing how to bring out the best in others, and there is evidence that people who know how to do this are more successful not only in their intimate relationships, but in most areas of their lives. Of course, we all have the ability to do this sometimes, but the people who succeed in getting respect and admiration from their partners can do it even when they feel really misunderstood or mistreated. These are the moments that separate the men from the boys, and the women from the girls, psychologically speaking. If people can't stay on track in these times, they are probably not going to be among those who end up with partners who understand, respect, and care about them. However, if they develop the ability to respond well during these times, they will find that their partner will begin treating them in a whole different way.

At our couples clinic, each week we encounter people who tell us stories about how poorly they have been treated by their partners. After spewing the details of their mate's most recent episode of incredibly selfish or disrespectful behavior, they usually look at us as if to say, "Now how am I supposed to respond to that?" Half of these people are already convinced that there is no good answer to this question. In fact, they resent even having to ask the question, believing that they shouldn't have to deal with this situation in the first place. But the evidence suggests that if they continue dismissing the question, they will kiss their relationships goodbye. Marital success has more to do with responding well when one's partner seems selfish or inconsiderate than it has to do with avoiding actually being selfish or inconsiderate in the first place. It is not that selfish or disrespectful behavior doesn't matter, it does: Repetitive, selfish behavior is destructive in relationships. The problem is that people are not very reliable judges of what truly selfish behavior is, the reason being that there are hundreds of yardsticks for measuring selfishness, and people tend to use their own, not their partners' yardsticks. Let's take a hypothetical example: A wife accepts an invitation to go out with her friends on Friday night without consulting her husband. The husband considers this to be really inconsiderate, and feels justified in criticizing her harshly for it. But the fact is, this wife wouldn't be upset at the husband if he made similar arrangements with his friends without consulting her. In fact, the wife has a quite different ideal for how a relationship should be. In her view, partners should each be free to make other arrangements unless plans between the two of them have been specifically made. She wouldn't dream of being so selfish as to try to restrict his freedom by asking him to consult her every time he wanted to plan something with his friends. Obviously, he doesn't see it that way, and he lets her have a piece of his mind! Well, if she wasn't behaving selfishly before he harshly criticized her, now she is! She slams the door in his face. Feeling perfectly entitled to his contempt, the next time he sees her he is sneering at her for her childish tantrum. Needless to say, her response to his contempt isn't exactly what he was hoping for.

And so the story goes. It began with the husband's *perception* that his wife was being inconsiderate. If he had been able to respond differently, she may have been willing to try to work out a more mutually satisfying plan. But he felt per-

fectly justified in his reaction. After all, hadn't she done the selfish thing first? But she doesn't see it that way. She believes that he is the one who was selfish, trying to control her by limiting her freedom to schedule time with her friends. Of course, his priority of collaboration isn't any more selfish than her priority of mutual freedom. As the discussion unfolded, she didn't respond any better to the perception that he was being selfish than he did to the perception that she was being inconsiderate, and so the whole thing blew up. But it all would have been avoided if both of them had been able to stand up for themselves without putting the other person down. We will take a close look at how people who succeed in their relationships do this in Chapter 10.

The track record for professional marriage counseling is not particularly impressive (Gottman, 1999). A massive *Consumer Reports* survey in 1995 (Seligman, 1995) revealed that, among consumers of various kinds of psychotherapy, consumers of marital therapy were the least satisfied. I believe that marital therapies have been relatively unsuccessful at least in part because therapists often inadvertently reinforce the notion that intimate partners can succeed in their relationships without meeting the prerequisites. Therapists support this notion each time they attempt to help partners get more of what they want from each other even though they are going about trying to get it in ways that are clearly predictive of marital failure. For example, to help her get her point across, a therapist might reframe a wife's harsh criticism as a desperate cry for connection. Or, a therapist might help a wife view her husband's stony silence as his decision to confine himself to a life of loneliness rather than attack his wife. Often, therapists make progress with couples by going back and forth, softening one partner a little bit, then softening the other, then back to the first partner, and so on. As each partner experiences the other as a bit more willing to give, they become more willing themselves, and things gradually get better. If a therapist is sufficiently skilled in this softening process, couples can make remarkable progress in a relatively short period of time. However, each partner may leave therapy thinking that the progress happened because their partner finally became more reasonable. It is possible for marriage therapy to "succeed" without either partner developing any more ability to respond well when feeling misunderstood or mistreated. Beneath the tenuous progress, they might still have the same attitude that they entered therapy with: "I'll change my reactions to my partner if my partner changes his reactions to me." People who have this quid pro quo attitude generally don't get treated very well for very long (Gottman & Silver, 1999; Murstein, Correto, & MacDonald, 1977), and this may be why there is such a huge relapse problem among couples who improve during marital therapy. While therapists are busily helping partners capitalize on small increases in the reasonableness of their mates, they are reinforcing assumptions that will eventually undo the progress. Those who believe that things improved because the therapist got their partners to change often leave couples therapy with an uneasy feeling about their progress. They feel relieved that their partners finally got a clue, but also feel just as unable to influence the state of their relationship

as they did before therapy. Each of them is haunted by the unspoken question: "What's to keep my partner from starting to treat me poorly again?"

On the other hand, partners who use therapy to increase their abilities to respond to each other in ways that are predictive of success leave therapy with an entirely different feeling. Such partners have confidence that the relationship changed in large part because they became better at meeting the prerequisites for a happy relationship. They have seen the powerful, positive impact that the hard-earned changes in their attitudes and actions have had on their mates. They have come to realize that, to a large extent, the future of their relationship is in their own hands.

The approach to couples therapy described in this book begins with the assumption that, if people want to succeed in their intimate relationships over the long haul, they must meet the prerequisites for relationship success. They must accept the assumption that the single most powerful thing they can do to get more respect and caring from their partners is to more fully develop the ability to think and act like people who stand a chance of getting respect and caring. They must become more concerned about how they respond to the upsetting things that their partners say or do than they are about the upsetting things their partners are saying or doing.

The new information about the prerequisites for relationship success should be of great interest to all therapists, regardless of theoretical orientation. Narrative therapists will be pleased to learn that new studies confirm that the beliefs and stories that people have about their relationships exert a powerful influence on their success or failure. Cognitive-behavioral therapists will not be surprised to learn that people destined for relationship success think and act differently from those destined to fail. Emotionally focused therapists will find support for their assumption that successful partners own and express attachment-related bids for connection more often than unsuccessful partners, and Bowenian therapists will find support for the idea that relationship success is related to the ability to stand up for one's own viewpoint without putting the other person down. But the studies on factors that predict relationship success will also help therapists of various orientations refine the focus of their interventions. For example, there are *particular types* of relationship narratives, attributions, and differentiating moves that almost always destroy relationships and other types that ensure relationship success. These studies have identified the specific moves that people in successful relationships make when they need to stand up for themselves, and they have identified how successful partners make and respond to bids for connection.

ADVANCES IN AFFECTIVE NEUROSCIENCE

Developing the habits that support relationship success is probably the single most important task a person can accomplish in his or her lifetime. Evidence

suggests that those who succeed in their marriages will live an average of four years longer than those who don't (Gottman & Silver, 1999). They will have an average of 35% less illness, have healthier immune systems, will be substantially less likely to become violent, homicidal, or suicidal, and less likely to experience an emotional or mental disorder. They will even have a lower risk of being involved in automobile accidents. The children of those who succeed in their marriages will have fewer health problems, better academic performance, more social competence, less depression, fewer problems with social contact, more ability to regulate their emotions, lower heart rate physiological reactivity when experiencing negative emotions, and lower quantities of stress-related hormones circulating in their bodies (Gottman, 1994b). Many people assume that the cost of improving their marriage will be too great for them in personal terms. They assume that, in order to keep their partners happy, they will have to "give in" most of the time. But the evidence simply doesn't support this notion. People who meet the prerequisites get more cooperation from their partners, not less. Given the huge benefits and minimal costs, why do so many people go through life failing to develop the habits that would virtually guarantee their success in one of life's most important endeavors?

New answers to this question have recently emerged from the study of the human brain. There is a mounting body of evidence suggesting that people keep doing things that they know they shouldn't do, and they fail to do things they know they should do because their brains are programmed to make decisions for them. New studies reveal how the brain becomes conditioned to respond automatically to certain cues by activating neural response programs that propel people into specific patterns of thinking and action. The human brain is equipped with seven such neural response programs, each set up to produce powerful internal states that dictate how people respond in any given situation. For the most part, people don't volunteer for these internal states, they simply find themselves under their influence. When any one of them is activated, a person may lose the freedom to choose her thoughts and actions freely. It is as if, at that moment, someone else is in charge. She cannot act differently because she's in the grips of a neural state that is preprogrammed for a specific purpose. In order to respond differently, she must first experience a shift in brain states.

In Chapters 1 and 2, we will take a close look at the ground-breaking neuroscience studies that have identified the brain's neural response circuits. There is a good deal of evidence suggesting that the brain gets wired for specific kinds of neural activations very early in life, and that once the activation patterns are set, they can persist throughout a person's life. These automatically activated neural operating systems can be the greatest advantage a person has in navigating the demands of everyday life, but they can also be the source of a person's distress. When things go well, people automatically experience the motivation to love, to care, to seek comfort, and to defend themselves precisely when they need to. But sometimes the required neural operating system doesn't kick in when needed. For example, people don't miss loved ones when apart from them, they

don't feel empathy when others are upset, or they just don't enjoy opening up to others. When the appropriate internal states don't show up on cue, the best they can do is fake it. A husband might not exactly be lying when he says, "I miss you, honey," but the "missing" may be more theoretical than heartfelt, and at some level his wife will know this. He is saying the right words, but they are hollow. Other times, neural states that produce defensiveness or withdrawal kick in precisely when people need to be open-minded or engaged with their partners.

When intimate relationships become distressed, there are nearly always problems with the conditioned activation or suppression of each partner's neural operating systems. Research on internal response circuits suggests that problems come in three varieties: (1) When a person gets caught in the "pull" of an internal response circuit, and is unable to do what is needed (e.g., when the "anger program" kicks in, and a person just can't listen to his partner when it would ultimately be to his or her benefit to do so); (2) when a person avoids doing or saying requisite things because to do so would likely trigger an uncomfortable internal response circuit in him or her (e.g., when a person is unable to admit when he's wrong, because doing so triggers an anxious or vulnerable state in him); (3) when a requisite response state simply doesn't show up (e.g., when a person needs to respond to his partner with tenderness or caring, but he finds himself preoccupied with other things).

The discovery of the brain's neural operating systems is of huge importance for those of us who are trying to make sense of why partners often persist in self-defeating interactions, even when they know that it would be in their best interest to change. People fail to think and act in ways that promote relationship success because they repeatedly find themselves in the wrong frame of mind when certain types of thinking or action are needed. They cannot sustain requisite attitudes or actions because the juice that fuels these attitudes and actions isn't there. The wrong brain state shows up, and they find themselves with attitudes and urges that take them in the wrong direction. To get better at meeting the habits that enable relationship success, our clients must first develop more ability to influence their own internal states. Many times, the problem isn't knowledge (they often know very well what they need to do), or ability (they've done it many times before), the problem is *motivation*. Precisely at the moments when they need to think or act differently, they don't feel like it. They're not in the mood, because something that has happened has activated a brain state that simply doesn't support the kind of thinking and action needed to promote relationship success. They can try to override the internal state and act in ways that aren't supported by it, but this is a bit like trying to accelerate from zero to 60 miles per hour while driving in fourth gear. A person might be doing all the right things (letting the clutch out slowly while giving it some gas), but he won't be able to get where he wants to go unless he shifts into first gear before accelerating. All of the effort in the world won't keep the car from stalling out unless this person shifts first. Most of the time, relationship problems stem from gear-shifting problems, or more precisely, state-shifting problems. Anyone who wants more coop-

eration, respect, or caring from his or her partner must get better at the ability to shift internal states when the requisite states don't automatically show up.

The discovery of the brain's neural operating programs helps explain why psychotherapies sometimes fail to promote lasting change. New narratives, attributions, and behaviors learned in therapy will only persist to the extent that they become woven into the fabric of neural response programs that automatically swing into gear during the course of daily living. Further, because the brain operates in state-specific ways, new ways of thinking or acting while in one brain state will not necessarily persist when another neural state becomes active. Regardless of the type of change a therapist is trying to promote, it will only last when the change becomes integrated into the brain's conditioned response patterns.

In his book *The Emotional Brain* (1996), neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux suggested that successful psychotherapy literally rewires the brain for more flexibility by forging new neural networks that were not previously associated. Psychotherapy can create new levels of neural integration in the brain by promoting the growth of new neurons, the expansion of existing neurons, and changes in the connections between existing neurons (Cozolino, 2002). Problems arise when various parts of the brain aren't communicating well with each other. Daniel Siegel noted:

Mental functioning emanates from anatomically distinct and fairly autonomous circuits, each of which can be dis-associated from the function of others. . . . Various mental processes may thus be functionally isolated from one another with the blockage of integrative circuits. (1999, pp. 319–320)

Siegel provided an example of how psychotherapy promoted new levels of neural integration within the brain of an attorney whose career was threatened by her angry outbursts with clients:

Within these states in the therapeutic session, her experience of being "out of control" was joined by the reflective and supportive dialogue with her therapist. She was able to listen in her agitation but remained hyperaroused. However, she now had two objects for her attention—her internal state and the external dialogue. As time went on, she was able to begin to reflect on the nature of her own mental processes. She could picture her circuits with an excessive flooding of activity; she could notice her tense muscles contributing to the feedback to her mind that she was furious. . . . Therapy allowed her to experience emotionally flooded states, and within that state of mind, she could use relation and imagery to "lower the energy of her circuits" and the tension in her body. Her metacognitive cortical capacities were strengthened and made more accessible during her rages in ways that were not possible before. Such capacities allowed her to use previously inhibited pathways during this state of mind to alter the way she processed information. What had been a blockage in information processing and an inhibition in the flow of energy now became more adaptive states of mind. Her capacity for emotional regulation, and thus for self-regulation, became more flexible and more effective. (1999, 261–262)

The kind of neural integration experienced by Siegel's client is similar to that

experienced by distressed partners who participate in the clinical approach described in this book.

As I have worked with couples over the years, I have often been struck by how predictable and rigid their reactions to each other are as they struggle to influence each other. To any outside observer their reactions are clearly counterproductive. When they are calm, clients often readily acknowledge that these reactions need to change, but when they get upset, it is as if the part of their brain that knows this gets shut off. They get caught up in internal states that dictate their reactions to each other. In couples therapy, we help clients develop the ability to use their brains more fully during stressful situations. We do this by helping them use previously neglected parts of their brains precisely at the moments when their old, emotionally driven neural response programs are "up and running." As we help them do this over and over again, new neural connections are formed, enabling their brains to respond in a different way. They become more able to use their whole brains as they navigate difficult circumstances in their relationships.

THE BOOK

This book is divided into two parts. Part I provides a detailed exploration of the exciting discoveries we have touched on here. In Chapters 1 and 2, groundbreaking studies in the field of affective neuroscience are explored that provide new clues about why people persist in self-defeating ways of thinking or acting, even when they want to change. Studies described in Chapter 1 challenge the long-held assumption that cognition is the primary organizer of human experience. A host of studies suggest that our brains are set up to favor the influence of emotion. Chapter 1 invites the reader into the world of Susan and James, a couple whose relationship was hijacked by the activation of overly self-protective neural states that dictated their interactions. We will review what brain scientists have learned about how the brain's self-protective states operate, and take a look at how this information can be used to short-circuit the activation of these states.

In Chapter 2, we move on to explore the lives of Loretta and Jack. Unlike James and Susan, Jack and Loretta weren't fighters. Rather, they suffered from a lack of emotional connectedness in their marriage, and had drifted apart. In Chapter 2, we will review findings that suggest partners fail to connect because they have limited access to the brain's intimacy-producing states. Researchers have discovered that our brains are equipped with four special-purpose internal response systems which, when activated, naturally draw people closer, and produce strong emotional bonds. The text will demonstrate via Loretta and Jack how I used this information to jump-start dormant intimacy-producing neural states in the couple. This helped Loretta and Jack to experience genuine desire for emotional and sexual connectedness.

Chapters 1 and 2 explore the question of *how* people change, but in Chapter 3, we move on to explore *what* people in distressed relationships need to change,

