

A W O R K B O O K

# Developing Habits for Relationship Success

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*I have a male partner*



BY BRENT J. ATKINSON

# Developing Habits for Relationship Success

A Norton Professional Book

# Developing Habits for Relationship Success

*My partner is male*

Third Edition

Brent J. Atkinson



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# Why Do Intimate Relationships Succeed or Fail?

IN THE EARLY 1980s, marriage researchers set out to find exactly how people who succeed in their relationships differ from those who fail. In the first year of these studies, researchers carefully observed and measured everything that could possibly be related to success or failure (e.g., attitudes, communication styles, amount of anger, amount of tenderness). They put couples in apartments equipped with video cameras in every room (except the bathroom) and recorded the behavior of each member of each couple. They also asked the participants to have conversations about specific topics while the researchers monitored their heart rates and measured their physical movements. When the researchers were satisfied that they had measured everything that might be related to the couples' eventual success, they simply turned them loose and then tracked them down up to 15 years later to see how they were doing. Which couples were divorced, which were unhappily married, and which had thriving marriages? Not only did they succeed in pinpointing the interpersonal habits that distinguish people who succeed from those who fail, 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 with over 90% accuracy which marriages would eventually succeed or fail! 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 have revolutionized our understanding of intimate relationships. Previously, couples 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 couples who succeed and fail actually do. This information has been filtering into public awareness through books such as John Gottman's *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, and *The Relationship Cure*. These studies present compelling evidence that there are personal prerequisites for succeeding in an intimate relationship. If

you want to succeed in love, you simply must have specific interpersonal abilities, and we now know exactly what these abilities are. If you have these abilities, the chances are excellent that you will be treated with respect and admiration by your intimate partner. If you don't have them, the evidence suggests that your relationship future is quite dim.

Some of the most important of these successful interpersonal habits involve actions and ideas that you must be able to carry out *without* the help of your partner. In fact, you must carry out these activities precisely when your partner is making it most difficult for you to do so. 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 less likely that their partners will mistreat or misunderstand them 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 you respond to the worst in Alberto plays a central role in determining whether or not you'll experience something better from him in the future. These studies suggest that most of us vastly underestimate the potential for the positive influence that we can have on our partners. Evidence suggests that you can dramatically influence the way that your partner treats you, regardless of whether he is deliberately trying to be nicer to you or not. This is because his level of motivation has so much to do with how you interact with him. We are almost guaranteed love relationships in which we feel respected and valued if we have certain interpersonal abilities. If you find yourself in a relationship in which you feel consistently misunderstood or mistreated, you don't have to wait around, hoping that your partner will start treating you better. You can largely take the matter into your own hands. You can't control your partner, but you can dramatically influence the odds that he will treat you better in the future. You can do this *by making sure that you are responding well to any unfair or disrespectful treatment you may be receiving from him right now.*

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 will be unlikely to succeed, or that those who are unwilling to accept influence from their partners when making decisions will be similarly unsuccessful. But some of the important predictors are not so obvious, nor easily observed, because they have more to do with what a person is *thinking* than what she or he says or does. Two different wives may each apologize and adjust their plans to accommodate when their husbands criticize them harshly for forgetting that they had previously agreed to go out to dinner with friends. Wife 1 will end up divorced, and wife 2 will remain happily married. Why? While wife 1 apologizes and adjusts her plans, inside she's

thinking thoughts like, “He shouldn’t get so upset over such a little thing. If it’s not one thing, it’s another. He’s never satisfied. I would never act like that if he forgot something. He’s just like his father!” In contrast, wife 2 is thinking things like, “Why is he so upset? There must be more going on here than meets the eye. My forgetting about this must mean something to him that I don’t really understand. I’ve got to find out the emotional logic behind his reactions.” Although the outward actions of the two wives look the same (apologizing and accepting influence), clearly these wives have vastly different attitudes, and attitudes are as potent as behaviors when predicting relationship success or failure.

It is exceedingly rare to find a situation in which one partner is meeting the prerequisites when the other partner isn’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 the raging partner), but when each of the prerequisites is weighted equally, partners in distressed relationships are generally a match for each other. Partners entering therapy rarely see things this way. Inwardly, if not outwardly, each partner generally thinks that the partner’s shortcomings are more serious than his or her 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 are focused on the particular dysfunctional habits of the partner, not realizing that some of their own habits are just as powerfully corrosive to the relationship. The good news is that partners who are able to see and modify their own dysfunctional habits will most often find that their partner follows. This is due to the powerful combination of abilities possessed by people destined for relationship success. They require that they be treated with respect, but at the same time they also make it easy for their partners to treat them with respect.

The bottom line is this: If you want Alberto to treat you better, you need to think and act like people who naturally elicit respect and cooperation from their partners. Researchers have studied such people, and have identified exactly how they do it. There are specific 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 you can’t stay on track in these times, you’re probably not going to be one of those who ends up with a partner who understands, respects, and cares about them.

Your therapist will be able to see exactly where you are getting off track in your relationship with your partner, and help you get back on track. When you do, you'll find that Alberto will begin treating you differently. Don't get the wrong idea: Alberto probably isn't any more on track than you are. He isn't doing himself any favors, either. The way he is treating you only makes it more difficult for you to respond to him the way he wants you to, right? The hope is that he will be willing to work with your couples therapist on these things too—your therapist will certainly try to convince him that it would be in his own best interest to do so, but please realize that you yourself can dramatically influence the odds that he will become motivated to work on changing the way he treats you.

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 on earth 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 crap in the first place. But the evidence suggests that if they continue dismissing the question, they will kiss their relationships goodbye. Why? Because marital success has more to do with responding well when your partner seems selfish or inconsiderate than it has to do with avoiding actually being selfish or inconsiderate in the first place. It's not that selfish or disrespectful behavior doesn't matter, it does. Repetitive selfish behavior is destructive in relationships. The problem is that you are not a very reliable judge about what truly selfish behavior is. The reason why none of us is a reliable judge in this respect is because there are hundreds of yardsticks for measuring selfishness, and we tend to use our own, not our partner's yardstick. Let's take a hypothetical example: A wife accepts an invitation to go out with her friends on Friday night without asking her husband if that would be OK with him. The husband considers that 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 whole 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 didn't see it that way, and he let 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 feeling of contempt about her response, 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 might have been willing to try to work out a more mutually satisfying plan. But he felt perfectly justified in his reaction. After all, hadn't she done the selfish thing first? 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. She wouldn't dream of selfishly restricting him like that! Of course, his priority on collaboration isn't any more selfish than her priority on 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 either of them had been able to stand up for themselves without putting the other person down. If you expect to get more respect from Alberto, you simply must be able to do this.

In the coming weeks, your therapist will help you develop 10 specific abilities that are highly predictive of relationship success (summarized on pp. 6–16). If you develop and maintain these habits, you are nearly guaranteed a relationship in which you feel valued, respected, and loved. Six of these 10 interpersonal habits are used to negotiate upsets, the other four have to do with how you think about and act toward your partner when you're *not* upset with each other. Research studies show that successful resolution of conflict is not enough to predict happy and stable marriages. Only 40% of those who divorce report severe fighting as the cause. The other 60% cite a gradual drifting apart, or the absence of fondness and admiration as the cause. In the second half of your therapy, you'll focus on developing or enhancing four habits that strengthen your friendship with Alberto and create a sense of emotional closeness in your relationship. Studies suggest that finding and maintaining emotional closeness is the key to lasting happiness. However, if you are feeling disrespected, criticized, or dismissed, you're unlikely to feel able to implement the four abilities that create emotional closeness, and you probably don't even *want to*. That's why therapists often begin therapy by helping partners change their habits of reacting when they feel mistreated or misunderstood. Intimacy building comes later, when there is a foundation of respect.

# Ten Habits of Successful Intimate Partners

SINCE THE EARLY 1980s, marriage researchers have conducted a series of long-term studies in which they have examined the question: What do people who are destined to succeed in their relationships actually do differently from those who are destined to fail? Researchers have identified specific interpersonal habits or abilities that distinguish people who are destined to succeed. By assessing the presence or absence of these interpersonal habits, researchers have been able to predict with over 90% accuracy which people will eventually divorce. If you want to succeed in your relationship with Alberto, you'll need to have interpersonal habits like the ones described below. Some of them have to do with how you react when you feel misunderstood or mistreated by Alberto, and others are related to how much you think and act in ways that are likely to promote fondness and admiration between you and Alberto.

## **WHEN YOU FEEL MISUNDERSTOOD OR MISTREATED**

### *1. Avoiding a Judgmental Attitude*

Research suggests that without meaning to, intimate partners often trigger defensiveness in each other before they even open their mouths. The attitude you have when you're upset will tend to breed cooperativeness or defensiveness in Alberto. A *judgmental* attitude is the most damaging to a relationship. You know you have a judgmental attitude when you find yourself thinking things like this:

- He shouldn't have done that.
- That was really inconsiderate!
- He's never satisfied.
- How could anybody think that way?

Marriage researchers have discovered that, the vast majority of the time, when partners are upset with each other, neither partner has done anything that is intrinsically wrong. For example, 69% of marital upsets arise from conflicting

values, priorities, beliefs, or personal tendencies for which there is no generally accepted standard. Marriages start to slide when partners assume there is a “correct” standard to which they are entitled to hold their partners accountable. For example, consider the following questions:

- How much arguing is acceptable in marriage?
- How much money should be spent on what type of things?
- How much of life should be planned out versus “make it up as we go?”
- Should we work first, then play, or play along the way?
- To what extent is it OK to socialize with members of the opposite sex?
- To what extent is it appropriate for a married person to wear sexy or revealing clothing in public?
- Who should do what chores around the house, how often?
- How neat and organized should our life be?
- How much time should you put into your career versus family?
- How important is it to talk about our feelings?
- How much discipline should be used with the kids?
- How much time should married people spend together versus time with friends?
- How much time should we spend with our extended families?
- How much should we keep each other informed as to where we’ve been, and whom we’ve been with?
- What kind of sexual activities are acceptable (or expected)?
- How much financial risk should we take?

Studies suggest that there are a wide variety of legitimate opinions that partners can have on such questions. There are happily married and unhappily married risk takers, and both happily and unhappily married conservatives. Some couples who place high value on personal freedom are happily married and some are not. Some happily married couples argue a lot and some couples who argue a lot end up divorced. Happily married partners differ on scores of important values and priorities, but they have one thing in common: They avoid assuming that their partner’s values, priorities, or opinions are *wrong*, and instead assume that there are many potentially legitimate ways to live life. People destined to succeed understand that if you assume the worst of your partner, you’ll get the worst from your partner. Instead, they give their partners the benefit of the doubt; that is, they assume that there is a legitimate reason for their partner’s words or actions, even if they don’t know what it is yet. Beneath even seemingly provocative behavior on the part of their partners, they assume that their partners are pursuing legitimate dreams or priorities. In contrast, when people who are destined to fail in their relationships are faced with words or actions from their partners that are upsetting to them, they assume that their partners are acting this way because they have misguided reasoning, priorities,

motivations, or intentions, or that their partners have faulty personality characteristics (e.g., “my partner is just lazy, controlling, irresponsible, insensitive”).

Many of us grow up feeling that we don’t have the right to be upset with someone unless that person did something wrong. So, when we find ourselves upset, we tend to automatically assume that the other person did something wrong. Otherwise, we wouldn’t feel entitled to be upset! Successful people find a way out of this dilemma, realizing that it’s normal for people to get upset with each other when their expectations are at cross-purposes. Nobody has to be wrong.

## 2. *Standing Up for Yourself without Putting Your Partner Down*

Dropping the idea that Alberto is wrong doesn’t mean that you have to give in. People who are destined to succeed believe that their own opinions and expectations are just as important as those of their partners. Rather than criticizing or trying to prove their partners wrong, people who are destined to succeed in their relationships simply ask their partners to “move over and make room for me.” They ask their partners to meet them half way. *Standing up for yourself involves asking (and requiring, if necessary) that your partner give your priorities, viewpoints, or preferences equal regard with his own.* Successful partners both require that their feelings be respected, and at the same time make it easy for the other person to be respectful. They make it easy for their partners to be respectful by refraining from making the assumption that their partners are wrong. They require that their feelings be respected by avoiding criticizing their partners and instead asking their partners to work toward solutions that take both of their preferences into account.

When couples are distressed, it is generally the case that neither partner has the ability to stand up for him- or herself without putting down the other person. Instead, partners criticize and never state exactly what they want, try to present their own point of view as the only reasonable option, or give in to their partners while secretly thinking bad things about them. People who swear that their partners are control freaks are often amazed to learn that their partners are actually willing to compromise when they are asked to “move over and make room for me” rather than judged or criticized. Of course, this doesn’t *always* happen. Sometimes, even in situations where one partner avoids judging the other, and instead simply asks the other to “move over,” the other won’t move over! This is the real test. It’s often at this point where the first partner loses focus and slides back into judging the other, or giving in. The result is a predictably negative slide. People who are destined for success refrain from making a big deal of it when their partners don’t seem willing to meet them

half way. They simply hold their ground and continue to insist that their opinions or priorities be given equal consideration.

There are at least three kinds of situations in which people who succeed in relationships stand up firmly for themselves: (1) when they are feeling criticized; (2) when they are feeling dismissed; and (3) when their partners put them down.

*A. When Your Partner Criticizes You.* When feeling criticized, people destined for relationship success readily stand up for themselves. For example, when Alberto implies you did something wrong by failing to stop at the grocery store on the way home from work when you knew in the morning that he would need groceries to make dinner, you might say something like this:

I think maybe I know what the problem is. It sounds like you're upset because you think that I did something that is just wrong, but I don't see it that way. I think you just have a different idea from mine about how you'd like things to be. I'd like to have a relationship where nobody has to worry about forgetting the details. I'd like it if we could both just go with the flow more. You want us to be more organized and think in advance. I don't think there's anything wrong with that, but I hardly think it's the only way to live. I'm willing to keep trying to work with you on that, but it's pretty hard when I feel you are implying that there's something wrong with me for being different from you! I have just as much right to an easygoing life as you do to a planned and efficient one.

Notice that the above statement didn't include anything like, "You shouldn't be so upset!" or "You're overreacting!" People who are destined to succeed in their relationships stand up for themselves without putting their partners down.

*B. When Your Partner Dismisses Your Feelings or Opinions.* People destined to succeed in their relationships don't expect to have their own way, but neither will they allow their opinions or expectations to be dismissed or ignored. When feeling dismissed, they say things like this:

Listen to me. I'm not saying that your way is wrong, or that we have to do things my way, but I am saying that my feelings are as important as yours and I need for you to be willing to work with me here.

Again, notice what *wasn't* said: "How could you think like that? You're missing the boat. You've got your priorities mixed up. You're being selfish."

*C. When Your Partner Puts You Down.* Sometimes Alberto may be so upset that he acts disgusted with you or says degrading things to you. When this happens to people who are destined to succeed in their relationships, they stand up for themselves firmly, but they do it without making a federal case out of

their partner's "offense." They usually begin by letting their partners know that they are willing to listen if their partner can stop putting them down. (e.g., "Obviously you're really upset, and there must be a good reason. I'm willing to try to understand, but I don't think I can because I'm feeling attacked. Would you try to slow down and just tell me why you're upset?") If their partners keep putting them down, they simply withdraw their cooperation or participation for as long as their partners continue acting in ways that seem disrespectful. There's no formula for the best thing to say when you reach this point. Sometimes, a simple, "I don't want to talk to you right now" works as well as more complicated statements. More important than what you say is your *attitude*. Whether angry, frustrated, or irritated, these attitudes all work just fine. However, self-righteous, disgusted, or contemptuous attitudes are quite another matter. Studies show that partners destined to succeed get angry but not disgusted, or if they do momentarily, they don't stay there. Instead, people who are destined to be treated better by their partners have thoughts like these: "It's not a crime that my partner was losing it. He wouldn't have acted that way unless he was really feeling threatened. I did what I needed to do to stand up for myself, and I'll do it again, if needed. If I can stand up for myself (like I just did) without making a big deal of how wrong my partner was, he won't do it as much in the future."

### 3. *Finding the Understandable Part*

When disagreements arise, most of us tend to think of our own position as reasonable and our partner's position as unreasonable. However, at some point in the argument, those who succeed manage to find something understandable about what their partner is saying or wanting, even if they can't agree overall. They seem to understand an important principle: If you want to receive understanding, first *give* understanding. Many partners are hesitant to acknowledge anything understandable about their partner's point of view, thinking that if they give an inch, their partners will take a mile. People destined to succeed in their relationships don't worry about this, because they know that they can always stand up for their own point of view later. There is no rush. They know that just because they acknowledge something legitimate about their partner's point of view doesn't mean that their own point of view isn't legitimate, too. They are able to do two things in succession: Acknowledge the understandable part of their partner's opinions and then stand up for their own opinions, if needed. If you have difficulty acknowledging the understandable part of Alberto's feelings often, it may be because you don't feel confident that you can stand up for your own feelings in an effective manner. In couples therapy, your therapist will help you both stand up better for yourself and become more able to acknowledge understandable aspects of Alberto's feelings or actions.

Because the understandable reasons for Alberto's feelings, intentions, or motivations will not always be obvious, it's to your advantage to become good at finding the reasons that are sometimes difficult to see at first. Here's a list of possible reasons that might make his thinking or actions more understandable to you:

- Maybe Alberto didn't realize how important this was to you.
- Maybe Alberto was having a bad day.
- Maybe Alberto didn't have all the facts.
- Maybe Alberto was reading something between the lines that you didn't intend to say.
- Maybe this issue was more important to Alberto than you previously understood.
- Maybe Alberto wasn't upset so much about this particular situation as he was about where he feared things might be headed.
- Maybe Alberto felt threatened by you in a way that you didn't understand.
- Maybe Alberto was afraid he was going to lose something very important to him if he did things the way you wanted.
- Maybe Alberto was acting this way because he felt (or had recently felt) criticized or dismissed by you, and he felt resentful and uncooperative because of this.
- Maybe Alberto has really different priorities or expectations from yours. Maybe he was acting in a way that was perfectly consistent with his priorities. You just don't like it because his priorities are different from yours, but that doesn't make them *wrong*.

Remember, just because you can find understandable or legitimate reasons for Alberto's actions or viewpoints doesn't mean you have to give in. Your feelings are probably understandable, too. Things work out best when you give Alberto the benefit of the doubt, find the understandable part of his feelings or opinions, and also ask him, and if necessary require him to give equal consideration to yours. But you can't skip the first step! As long as Alberto feels criticized or misunderstood, he'll be less able to be respectful of your feelings and opinions.

#### 4. *Giving Equal Regard*

The best relationships operate like democracies: one person, one vote. When people go to cast their votes in a democratic society, nobody stands at the polling place deciding if their reasoning is good enough to allow their votes to count. Their opinions count equally, regardless of what anyone thinks of their

reasoning. The same is true in successful intimate relationships. Successful partners give equal regard, regardless of whether they agree with each other or not. They may argue tooth and nail for their own points of view, but in the end, they are willing to work toward finding mutually satisfying solutions. Either explicitly or implicitly, people destined for relationship success deliver the following message to their partners: “You don’t really have to explain yourself. If that’s how you feel, then I’m going to make room for your feelings, too. You’re my partner, and your feelings should count as much as mine, even if I don’t agree with them.” In contrast, people who are destined to fail in their relationships are often only willing to give equal regard if they feel that their partners’ points of view are compelling enough to merit concessions. Of course, the problem is that most of us rarely find our partners’ points of view as compelling as our own.

In successful relationships, the willingness to give equal regard doesn’t necessarily come at the front end of an argument. In fact, sometimes when researchers looked at the arguing style of partners destined to succeed, they couldn’t distinguish them from partners destined to fail. The differences only became clear later, after each partner had exhausted efforts to convince the other. Both successful and unsuccessful partners often argue vigorously for their own points of view, and often show little regard for their partners’ viewpoints during the argument. However, in the end, successful partners are willing to give equal regard. Once people are confident that, when the dust settles, their partners are going to be willing to give them equal regard, they can each argue persuasively along the way with less risk that the other person will take offense.

### 5. *Offering Assurance*

Whenever an argument seems to be stuck or unproductive, one of the most effective things you can do is to stop and ask yourself, “Does Alberto think I’m saying that he’s *wrong*, or *out-of-line* in some way?” or “Does Alberto think I’m saying ‘It’s my way or the highway?’” When arguments are unproductive, the answer to these questions is almost always “yes.” The most powerful thing you can do at this point is to simply offer an assurance, by saying something like, “Look, I was pretty worked up back then, and I’m sure you felt criticized by me, but I don’t really think there’s anything wrong with what you did. It’s just different from what I wanted.” Another example of an assurance might be, “I know we have a difference of opinion about how to prioritize things here, and I don’t want you to get the idea that I’m saying that things have to be entirely *my way*. I’m willing to work with you on this.” Of course, you can’t offer assurances if you are thinking judgmental thoughts about Alberto. If you say one thing, but don’t have a matching attitude, Alberto won’t believe you. The offering of an assurance is completely dependent upon your ability to shift

from a judgmental to nonjudgmental attitude. However, if you are able to avoid a judgmental attitude and also offer assurances, you'll be successful in influencing Alberto a high percentage of the time.

### 6. *Identifying and Explaining What Is at Stake*

People who are destined to succeed in their relationships realize that the reasons they are upset or have trouble doing what their partners want sometimes run deeper than the present situation. Often, there is something bigger at stake. Your ability to explain the underlying reasons for being upset will help your partner become more cooperative and understanding. At some point during an argument people destined for success pause and take the conversation to a different level, saying something like, "OK, I think I just figured out why this bothers me so much . . . I'm worried that. . . ." Consider the following common "bigger" reasons why you may be upset or unable to consider Alberto's opinion or request:

- You're worried that he is sending a "bigger message" that applies to more than just the present situation. (Example: "Your opinion doesn't count," "You are not as important to me as my work," "I don't think you're intelligent enough to make good decisions.")
- You're worried that if you do what Alberto wants (or if he keeps thinking or acting this way), you'll lose a dream or how you want things to be or a basic need or desire that is important to you. (Example: You find yourself calling Alberto selfish for joining a golf league on weekends, but what you're really upset about is that his golf precludes trips to visit your parents, and conflicts with a dream or priority you have of wanting your children to grow up close to their grandparents.)
- You're worried about where this is going. The present situation bothers you because it may be a step toward something much worse. (Example: It's not Alberto staying out late with his friends last night that bothers you so much as your fear that he may make a habit of it—like your best friend's husband did before their divorce.)
- It's not what Alberto wants that bothers you so much. It's that you feel criticized or dismissed, as if he is saying you're wrong just because your wants, needs, or opinions are different. (Example: Although you find yourself arguing about the fact that Alberto wants to go into the office on Saturdays, what you're really upset about is his implication that you should be working on Saturdays, too, rather than relaxing.)
- Beneath it all, you're worried that what's happening now is similar to something bad that happened earlier in your life. (Example: It's upsetting that Alberto has stopped going with you to church, not so

much because of the example he's setting for the kids, as you have argued, but because when your father stopped going to church he was also having an affair.)

Unless you are able to identify what the bigger issues are that lie beneath your reactions in the present situation, you may end up arguing over superficial things and leave the real issues unaddressed. People who are destined to succeed in their relationships look for the bigger needs, dreams, and fears at stake in any given situation.

## **BUILDING THE EMOTIONAL BOND**

### *7. Being Curious about Your Partner's World*

Studies suggest that a significant difference between people destined to succeed in marriage versus those destined for failure is how much they know about their partners' worlds, and how much they share with their partners about their own worlds. Researchers have known for some time that 67% of couples experience a drop in marital satisfaction after the birth of the first child, but 33% don't. What separates these two groups? One of the strongest predictors is the extent to which partners keep in touch with each other's worlds as they go through this transition. The worlds of new mothers change dramatically when a baby arrives. Husbands who enter into the new world of their wives end up in happier, more stable marriages. On the other hand, new mothers who avoid becoming so absorbed with the new baby that they lose interest in their husband's world end up in happier marriages as well.

Curiosity about one's partner's world isn't necessary only during the transition to parenthood. People who succeed in their relationships maintain curiosity about their partners throughout the course of their relationship. Studies suggest that partners who are destined to succeed are much more able to answer questions like these:

- What is Alberto looking forward to the most in the next week?
- What has Alberto done that he is most proud of lately?
- What has been most disappointing to Alberto lately?
- What compliment has Alberto received from a person other than myself recently?
- If Alberto could follow his heart right now and do one thing he otherwise wouldn't do, what would it be?

People who succeed in their relationships make it their business to know these kinds of things about their partners. Researchers say that people who succeed devote more "cognitive room" to their partners. As they go through

their separate days, they spend more time thinking about what their partners might be doing, and they remember to ask about what their partners' days have been like when they are reunited.

### 8. *Keeping Sight of the Positive*

People destined to succeed in their relationships are more aware of the positive things that happen in their relationships, and they acknowledge them more often. For example, they acknowledge and express appreciation for the small, but often taken for granted things that their partners do each day. Taking care of the children might be just part of the agreed upon division of duties in a marriage, but when a wife has had a particularly challenging day with the kids, a husband destined to succeed will let her know that he appreciates the effort she put into the day. Similarly, even though a husband has agreed that he will accept responsibility for reading to the children each night before bed, a wife destined to succeed lets her husband know how much she appreciates his willingness to do this.

When marriages become distressed, studies show that partners underestimate the positive things that happen between them by about 50% compared to objective observers who rate the positive things that happen. Many positive things happen each day that escape the attention of those who are destined to fail in their relationships. On the other hand, people who succeed take advantage of opportunities to express appreciation. For example, a wife who is destined to succeed will notice her husband laughing on the phone, and later remember to tell him that she thinks he is a good buddy to his friends. People destined to succeed are also more likely to remember positive memories that have happened in the recent or distant past, and bring them up to enjoy again. People headed for relationship failure don't do this nearly as much.

### 9. *Making and Responding to Bids for Connection*

Throughout daily life, in both small and large ways, people who are destined to succeed in their relationships both make and respond to bids for connection. When their partners make observations or share information with them, they engage, showing their interest in what the other person is saying. Bids for connection are embedded in seemingly insignificant communications. For example, a wife remarks to her husband that she's going shopping for some summer clothes. This is a small bid for the husband's attention. The husband, busy reading the paper, can respond in one of two ways. He can either engage, say by putting down the paper momentarily and asking her what kind of clothes she's looking for, or not engage, keeping his nose in the newspaper.

People who are really good at making and responding to bids initiate small connecting moves many times throughout each day. A skilled “connector” might think of something she can do to make her partner’s load a little lighter, take time to initiate a plan for the both of them to do something fun, spend time thinking or learning about something important to his partner, notice an event in her day that she knows her partner would be interested in—then remember to tell him about it later, remember to ask her partner about something specific she knows will be happening in his day, ask him to do something with her (a bike ride, walk, etc.), take responsibility for making (ordering) food for him, or leave a voicemail message or an e-mail to let him know she is thinking about him. Connection making is an art, and those who are destined to succeed in their relationships learn to master it.

### *10. Pursuing Shared Meaning*

Having a successful intimate relationship involves more than just “getting along.” Roommates can get along just fine, but intimate partners who are emotionally connected have a sense that they are on a journey together. They have a shared sense of purpose, a common mission. There is a sense of loyalty and agreement to uphold their mutually agreed upon goals and values. People destined to succeed talk freely about their hopes and dreams, and encourage their partners to do the same. In small, everyday ways, they communicate to their partners, “I want to be on your team, because I think you’re pretty darn cool, and I think that together, we can have a better life than I could by myself.”

People who are destined to succeed look for ways to work with their partners to build a unique culture, complete with its own rituals. They don’t sacrifice their own individual identities for the sake of the group, but rather try to find a way to mesh what’s important to them with what’s important to their partners. If their own dreams come into conflict with those of their partners, they work hard to find solutions that incorporate both of their dreams. They realize that if they squash their partners’ dreams in pursuit of their own, they’ll lose perhaps the most important dimension of their relationship: a sense of mutual loyalty and adventure.

# The Master Aptitude

## *Influencing Your Moods and Attitudes*

THE 10 ATTITUDES and behaviors necessary to succeed in relationships are described above. They are easy to understand and learn, but can be very difficult to do, because, at key moments, you may find yourself in a state of mind that isn't compatible with the needed behavior or attitude. In order to change your thinking or behaviors, you must learn how to get into the right frame of mind for the task. For example, marriage researchers have noticed that, when a marriage is distressed, each partner generally reacts to the other during arguments in highly predictable and patterned ways.

Thanks to some very helpful brain research since the early 1990s, we now know that this is because, across our lives, each of our brains gets conditioned to produce highly specific *response programs*. These are conditioned brain circuits that are preprogrammed so that, once triggered, they unfold as if they had a mind of their own, producing a predictable pattern of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Brain researchers call these brain states “executive operating systems” or “intrinsic motivational circuits”; in other words, “states of mind” or “moods.” The important thing is not what they are called, but to recognize that these internal response programs can dramatically dictate how you interact with Alberto.

Most of the time, it's an advantage to have these automatic, prepackaged response circuits in our brains, because when they are activated, we automatically experience motivation to learn, to love, to be close to others, to be playful, to defend and protect ourselves when needed. But when relationships are distressed, researchers have found that these automatic response circuits are often to blame. The wrong circuits get activated at critical moments, and the needed circuits remain dormant. Research on internal response circuits suggests that problems come in three varieties: (1) when you get caught in the “pull” of an internal response circuit, and are unable to do what is needed (e.g., when the “anger program” kicks in, and you just can't listen to your partner when it would ultimately be to your benefit to do so); (2) when you avoid doing or saying needed things because to do so would likely trigger an uncomfortable internal response circuit in you (e.g., when you are unable to

admit when you're wrong, because doing so triggers an anxious or vulnerable state in you); (3) when a needed response state simply doesn't show up (e.g., when you need to respond to Alberto with tenderness or caring, but you find yourself preoccupied with other things).

To improve your relationship, you will need to become familiar with the specific mood state patterns that happen inside of you during key intimate situations. Your best shot at acting differently comes when you develop the ability to shift internal states when needed. If this sounds complicated to you, don't worry. Your therapist will help you identify and learn to influence your internal states when you need to do so.

You can read more about the brain's executive operating systems and how they impact relationships in Brent Atkinson's articles, "The Emotional Imperative," "Brain to Brain," "Altered States," and "The Love Breakthrough," available at <http://www.thecouplesclinic.com> (click on "publications").