

Introduction

The Connections program of marriage retreats and intensive couples therapy was created by accident. Or, more accurately, it was a process of evolution. Like most therapists, when I first started to do couples therapy, I had no idea what I was doing. When I attended graduate school in the 1970s, there were no courses in marriage counseling or couples therapy. Fortunately, the fields of family therapy and couples counseling evolved over time—and my skills evolved through trial and error. The Connections *Workbook for Couples* is a culmination of this process—and a collection of exercises and articles designed to help couples in their pursuit of a more secure, satisfying, and successful relationship.

I remember working with my first couple in the 1980s. They wanted help deciding if and how they should move their relationship forward after his divorce and her recent marital separation. I didn't know where to begin or how to help them. I read books and attended training programs, but I continued to struggle with the complicated dynamics and emotional intensity many couples brought to me.

Meanwhile, my own marriage was adrift and rudderless. We were young, and we were both influenced by the destructive relationships we witnessed growing up. We tried a little marriage counseling, but we came out of those sessions feeling no better than the married clients I tried to help. At least our divorce was peaceful and amicable.

Modern advances in the fields of interpersonal relationships, marriage, and couples therapy began to explode in the last part of the twentieth century. In his best-selling book *The Road Less Traveled*, M. Scott Peck, MD, had the audacity to define love from a psycho-spiritual perspective: “The will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth.” In my family of origin, the concepts of unselfish caring and spiritual growth were quite alien (with the exception of my sister, who was old enough to provide invaluable nurturance, but too young to be the parent I needed).

I was very fortunate in the 1990s to work with an exceptional group of clinicians in a private practice near Washington, D.C. These colleagues, supervisors, and mentors were often at the forefront of innovative and creative work with individuals, groups, and couples. Other influences included Harriet Lerner's groundbreaking books *The Dance of Anger* and *The Dance of Intimacy*. Dr. Lerner taught us about circular dances, boundaries, over- and under-functioning in a relationship, and other essential ideas. Pia Mellody and John Bradshaw taught us about codependency, the inner child and the effects of traumatic abuse, shame, and our internal parts. And Harville Hendrix developed Imago therapy, based on the theory that unconscious forces result in our choosing a mate with those parental traits that originally wounded us, so that we can “work through” a process of healing and growth.

Through the 1990s, and early into the twenty-first century, my work with couples became more effective and more fulfilling. There was an explosion of new research findings, and

new, more effective methods for helping couples and improving relationships. For example, we learned that our brains are actually hardwired for love and for deep emotional connections to others.

Two of the most important recent influences in the field of marriage counseling and intimate relationships are Susan Johnson and John Gottman. Susan Johnson developed Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (EFT). EFT helps couples to identify and understand their relationship dance (cycles and patterns of emotional reactivity). Couples then work on a deeper understanding of underlying feelings and unmet relationship needs that drive the dance. Dr. Gottman compiled over forty years of research, studying over 8,000 married couples. The Gottman Method teaches and guides couples using years of research that reveals the secrets of successful relationships.

When I moved to South Florida in 2000, I stumbled across The Living Course (TLC), which has been quite influential in my work with couples as well as individuals. TLC is a weekend personal growth and development workshop based on Adlerian and humanistic psychology, the human potential movement, and psychodrama. TLC shows us how adult beliefs and behavior are based on childhood influences and how to heal childhood wounds and create loving, adult partnership. Our “Circle of Re-Creation” in Section 3 is informed by the TLC workshop.

For those couples who are using the Connections workbook independently, without the guidance provided by our Connections program and staff, we sincerely appreciate your interest and commitment to improving your relationship. **Please note that this workbook is not intended to be a replacement for marriage counseling and retreats, or couples therapy.** For couples who are experiencing significant distress, conflict, and disconnection, we encourage professional couples therapy, and we hope you will consider our Connections marriage retreats and intensives.

This workbook is organized into five major sections, with descriptive information and exercises. When you do the exercises with a spouse or partner, you will want to make a copy of each exercise for each of you to work on separately.

- 1. The Science of Love, Marriage, and Relationship:** Current research, theory, and a general understanding of marriage and relationships. We will discuss the science of love and attachment, the role of emotion in relationships, and the specific requirements for successful, loving connection and partnership.
- 2. The Nature of Relationship Distress:** What happens when there is relationship distress, and how do we devolve from loving connection to anger, blaming, and distance? We'll talk about true nature of conflict and the problem of unrealistic expectations. We'll examine how negative patterns develop and how men and women do relationships differently. We will also discuss the important role of trauma in relationship distress.

- 3. The Individual in the Relationship:** Before the relationship there are two individuals. When we become a couple, we bring the past with us. We marry, or couple with, another person's childhood, family or origin, personality, coping skills, and their entire life experience. This section contains one of our most important exercises: The Circle of Re-Creation, or how we actually recreate negative childhood experiences in our relationships today.
- 4. The Relationship Dance:** These distressing patterns result from emotional reactions and unmet relationship needs. The Relationship Dance exercise will result in a single clear picture of your relationship patterns and distress. This picture will explain most of what you need to know about the stuck, negative cycle in your relationship.
- 5. Relationship Repair and Creative Solutions:** In this final section we will describe the Three Magic Steps to relationship repair, loving intimacy, and partnership. We'll also discuss emotionally corrective conversations, communication tools, keys to connection and partnership, self-care, mindfulness, and forgiveness.

Included in this workbook are several articles and exercises, some reprinted in part or in their entirety, from the original source. In all cases, the original author and source is identified and credited. The opinions or theories advanced by the original author may be somewhat controversial—and not necessarily representative of my personal opinions or beliefs. Indeed, while our knowledge and understanding of love and relationships has grown immensely in recent years, there is reason to believe that the future will reveal new information and theories that will advance our understanding and ability to create better connections. It also seems likely that many mysteries of love will remain for centuries to come.

The information and exercises in the Connections workbook have been tested, modified, and improved over many years, with hundreds of couples. We hope you find this information and guidance to be helpful—a new beginning in your search for true love and partnership. We welcome your feedback and suggestions; please let us know how the Connections approach works for you and your partner.

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