

Making Relationships Work for You

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There is more to each of us than we ever expected—we are richer and far more complex than we ever imagined—and our relationships can help us to see this. They can teach us about who we really are; they can help us to expand our choices and to live our lives more fully and with more excitement than we'd ever dreamed possible.

But this requires that we look at ourselves and at our relationships in a new way. It means that we no longer think of ourselves as unitary beings, but as being made up of many selves—like diamonds, we have many facets, each different, each brilliant and beautiful once we understand its meaning in our lives. When looked at in this new way, life becomes full of possibilities and relationship becomes a path to the realization of these possibilities.

Let us see how this works.

Our Selves

When we are born we are a mass of possible selves. But as we grow up in a certain family and in a certain place, some of these selves begin to dominate our personalities—we call them the primary selves—and others are pushed aside—we call them the disowned selves. Which selves become primary and which get disowned varies from person to person and depends upon a combination of their basic genetic makeup and the effects of the environment in which they grow up.

So some of us grow up more responsible and others are less responsible, some are perfectionistic and others are more relaxed, some care a great deal about what others think and others couldn't care less, some work hard all the time and can't seem to stop and others really know how to relax,

some are self-critical and others criticize the rest of the world, some rely primarily on their thinking for gathering information and others on their feelings. The differences go on and on.

What is similar about all of these is that each of us has a set of these primary selves and—equal and opposite—a set of disowned selves. The primary selves are our current assets or who we are in the world, the disowned selves represent our untapped potential.

Our Relationships

Just as we have narrowed down the possibilities of who we are by developing a group of primary selves and disowning the rest, in relationship we narrow down our possibilities of interacting with others. When just a few selves take over and control the relationship—as they do for everyone from time to time—we have little choice in the way we relate and we behave automatically. We think of this as the “default setting” in relationship.

So the first change in the way you look at your relationships is to realize that relationships are between two groups of selves—not two people. When this default setting takes over, most people eventually feel trapped, and the trap feels unpleasantly familiar.

The nature of this trap varies from person to person. For example: (1) Mary feels as though she can't use her brains, but John feels as though his brains are working just fine but he is emotionally paralyzed and he can't feel any feelings or (2) Susie feels very competent and responsible for everybody, while Andy just feels more and more incompetent and not able to care for himself, much less anyone else.

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But there is a basic pattern for this default setting and we call it a “bonding pattern.”

Bonding Patterns—The Default Setting in Relationship

The default setting in relationship is a natural one that is programmed into us at birth. We call this template a “bonding pattern”. It is the normal and natural way that the baby relates to its mother and the mother relates to the baby; it’s the way in which we give and receive nurturance. If the baby didn’t relate by taking nourishment from the mother and the mother didn’t feel good about giving nourishment to the baby—if there is no bonding—there is trouble. Without this parent/child bonding, the baby doesn’t thrive.

But, when we are no longer infants this default position for relationship remains and is no longer so useful. If we look carefully, we find that we are relating to others in the same parent/child fashion. The mother or father in us relates to the child self in another and, conversely, the child self in us relates to the mother or father in the other. This is still natural and normal—but for most people it is no longer rewarding. There are many ways in which this can show itself and we can’t look at them all here, but we can give you an example of this default setting—a classic bonding pattern.

Mary is a feeling person and has a tendency to become a caretaker. This caretaking self in her would “bond in” with John’s unspoken needs and take care of him. When her “default setting” takes over, she must take care of John and his unspoken feelings even if this means she does not take care of herself—she has no choice in the matter—a role she invariably assumes with men. As this happens, his default setting takes over and he becomes more and more rational in his behavior and distances more and more from his own feelings. He has no choice in the matter

either—he becomes the thinker and planner in the relationship—and he is the responsible, stoic, well-organized father, a role he invariably assumes with women.

When we look at this bonding pattern, we can see that the mother part of Mary is taking care of the son part of John while the father part of John is taking care of the daughter part of Mary. Neither has any real choice in the matter, and neither can bring the fullness of themselves to the other. John can’t feel his feelings and Mary can’t use her brains.

Beyond the Bonding Patterns

Think of it as setting the preferences on your computer. You can still use the default settings, but you now have choice. You can change the details of the relationship—just the way you can change the preferences on your computer -so they suit you.

So if we go back to Mary, once she moves beyond the bonding pattern she has choice. She may still take care of John’s emotional needs, but she now can take her own emotional needs into consideration. She can also see that John carries a very important disowned self for her—the mind that she had totally forgotten about, the mind that she had disowned when she was a little girl. She can use her relationship to John to help her reclaim her mind rather than depending upon him to carry the thinking for both of them for the rest of their lives. She then has access to both her feelings and her thinking.

And John can have choice as well. He may still want to carry most of the responsibility for thinking things through, but he can begin to ask Mary to figure things out and to take some responsibility for the planning in their lives. He can learn about his feelings and begin to pay attention to them. He can use the relationship to Mary as a way to reclaim the feelings that he

never knew he had, the feelings he disowned when he was a boy and he developed his mind as a primary self. Thus it is that relationship can become a powerful teacher for both of them.

The Possibilities

You can begin to see the amazing possibilities for growth (and healing) that open up for you when you look at your relationships in this way. We explore these bonding patterns in depth in our DVDs, [The Voice Dialogue Series](#), our CDs, particularly [Making Relationships Work for You](#), and in our books, particularly [Partnering](#) and [Embracing Each Other](#).

Positive Bonding Patterns

When the selves involved in the bonding pattern are protective, nurturing parents and children who need care or who truly appreciate a caring parent, this can feel comfortable and quite safe. Then we call it a positive bonding pattern.

This doesn't mean it is good, it just means it feels pretty good. This default position—like the default setting on your computer—works. But it severely limits your choices in life and it just doesn't give you, or the other person, the chance to be all that you can be! But the worst of all is that this positive bonding pattern almost invariably leads to a negative bonding pattern. Everyone knows what that is like; it feels terrible, and when you try to do to fix it, either nothing changes or you find you have made matters worse. We will talk more about negative bonding patterns next time.

As a matter of fact, the selves you like best in others and want to keep around (like the responsible ones, the caretakers, or the indulgent ones) might actually not be very good for you—just like too many sweets. These selves in the other person can become like parents to you. And, when they do, you are likely to lose the ability to

care for yourself. This creates real vulnerability in you and an unstable situation of deep dependence. At the same time, it usually creates a feeling of being responsible for the other person.

What Happens in the Positive Bonding Pattern?

You are severely limited. There are only parental and child selves available to you in this positive bonding pattern. Think of it as though you have taken your partner's (or friend's or co-worker's) Inner Child onto your lap and have promised to care for it. Conversely, your partner (or friend or co-worker) has taken your Inner Child into his/her lap and is taking care of it. Neither of you has access to your own child, only to the others'. This has a good side and a bad side. The good side is that you protect, love, and care for one another. The bad side is that you forget how to take care of yourself and become totally dependent upon—and, at some level, responsible for—the other person.

There are other difficulties. You cannot risk disrupting the delicate balance, so you don't do or say anything that might upset the other person. There is less and less to talk about. More and more of your emotional reactions go underground and begin to become silent judgments. And—perhaps worst of all—you forget who you are and what is important to you.

How Can You Recognize a Positive Bonding Pattern?

The relationship feels “airless”—not necessarily suffocating—but airless as though you were in a room in which all the windows have been closed for some time.

The relationship becomes less spontaneous. Everything seems predictable.

The sexuality has disappeared, diminished, or lost its passion and become just a part of the daily duties.

You usually feel strong, more able to take care of the really important matters, quite competent and—with understanding and affection—you see the more childish qualities and the needs of your partner.

There is less and less to talk about and there are more and more topics to avoid.

You find that you are arranging your life to accommodate the other person.

You can't remember your own preferences; you have trouble remembering what gives you pleasure—what it is you really like to do.

You have forgotten what it is that your partner does—or did—that upsets you.

You don't share your reactions or feelings—if you do feel them—because you fear that they will hurt the other person, or that they might disrupt a perfectly good relationship.

You don't feel entitled to want something or feel a feeling if it might disrupt the relationship.

You find yourself being attracted to—or having fantasies of romance with—people outside of your relationship.

How Can You Disengage From a Positive Bonding Pattern?

You can disengage from these bonding patterns and develop a truly intimate relationship that includes more of who you are. This takes time and evolves gradually. The following steps will really help you to move ahead:

Take back the responsibility for yourself, for your own sensitivities, needs, feelings, and boundaries. Learn to take care of yourself.

Ask yourself the following questions to discover where you've lost boundaries:

“What am I doing that I don't want to do?”

“What am I not doing that I do want to do?”

Learn to share your reactions (feelings and thoughts) with the other person.

And learn to set proper boundaries by saying Yes and No appropriately.

Negative Bonding Patterns

Everyone knows about “negative bonding patterns”. You may not know what they're called, but you know what they feel like. They feel absolutely dreadful! It's the way that you feel when things are just not working in a relationship.

In contrast to the positive bonding pattern, you are caught in an uncomfortable child/parent set of interactions. The selves involved in the negative bonding pattern are usually angry, rejecting, judgmental, or withdrawn parental selves and hurt, stubborn, fearful, or abandoned child selves.

There's nothing subtle about these—they just feel bad. In fact, it is when you are in one of these negative bonding patterns that you might well feel that relationships are just not worth the trouble. It is in these negative bonding patterns that you find yourself thinking things like: “I knew it! All men (or women) are like that!” or “I'm just no good at relationship.” or “Relationships are impossible—I give up!”

You may feel misunderstood, taken-advantage-of, desperate, lonely, and powerless, or you may feel righteously judgmental and angry with your partner. Or you may feel both ways simultaneously. No matter, the relationship just feels bad—very, very bad. You are trapped in an impossible situation; trying to make things work with someone who doesn't hear you, who misunderstands you, who responds in all the wrong ways, who hurts you, and—unfortunately—seems to have all the power in the relationship. And most surprising of all, your partner usually feels the same way about you.

The harder you try to fix it, the worse things get—because it is the selves that are stuck in the bonding pattern that are trying to get you out of

it and they are part of the problem.

But worst of all, this negative bonding pattern very often follows a positive bonding pattern. You have gone from the trust, comfort, and apparent safety of the positive bonding pattern to this—and you feel deeply betrayed. It's as though you were sitting in a nice warm bath and someone came in and threw ice water all over you.

The Gift of the Negative Bonding Pattern

Believe it or not, there is truly a gift in all of this! The negative bonding pattern is a great teacher.

There are three big lessons to learn from it:

Where am I not taking care of myself?

You learn to care for yourself.

This covers your entire life—everywhere you have overlooked your own vulnerability, feelings, and needs. You may need to set a schedule and balance your checkbook, to take time to do things that give you real pleasure, to set boundaries, to react to others, to ask for (and be able to receive) what you need, to take better care of your own physical needs, to develop a spiritual life, etc., etc.

What selves have I disowned that I need to claim in order to be more complete?

You reclaim the selves you've lost over a lifetime.

Everyone has lost something—the selves that think, that are self-nurturing, that play, that feel, that have power, that have creativity, that are sexual, that are spiritual, that can be perfect, that can be imperfect—and on and on. The selves you judge (or overvalue) in others are those you need to reclaim.

What happens to me—who do I become when my life and my relationships stop working smoothly?

You learn to “reprogram your relationship software.”

Until you begin to change your automatic patterns of relationship, your default self takes over when you are not taking care of yourself properly (see step 1). It takes care of matters for you—and not very well, we might add. The negative bonding pattern wakes you up—it gives you the opportunity to learn about this self and reprogram your way of dealing with life.

What Can You Learn From a Negative Bonding Pattern?

The self you judge in the other person—the one you like least—is the one that has something important to teach you. It is your “disowned” self. It is a part of you that was lost when you developed your “primary” self—who you are in the world. If you use this as a chance to reclaim that self—not to become it—you have just added a new, useful, and exciting dimension to your personality!

How this works: For instance, your primary self is a Perfectionist or a High Achiever. Your partner never seems to do things perfectly but is quite content with a performance that seems good enough to satisfy others even if it doesn't satisfy you. Granted, it's great to do things really well, to be impeccable and to enjoy the sense of superiority that this brings, but wouldn't it be wonderful to have a bit of choice about this? To be able to set priorities and decide that some things need to be done perfectly, but others can be just “good enough”?

That's where your partner's more relaxed self comes in. If you could just take a bit of this into yourself (think of a drop of the essence of it)—you don't have to become a total slob—you could have some choice. You wouldn't always have to be tops in the class and life would be a good deal easier.

How Can You Disengage from a Negative Bonding Pattern and “Reprogram Your Computer”?

Stop trying to fix the situation or the other person.

Know you are in a bonding pattern and—as we have shown earlier—use the bonding pattern as a learning situation. Look at the pattern rather than at the other person. See how the “dance of the selves” is operating.

Figure out where you have not been caring for yourself adequately—and take care of yourself.

Negative bonding patterns occur when you’re not taking care of your “inner child”. This may be as simple as eating a meal, phoning a good friend who makes you feel better, getting some sleep, finishing a task that has been waiting to be finished (or conversely—stopping your work and doing something that’s fun).

Learn to set boundaries. Think carefully—just as you look both ways before you cross the street, look at both sides—before you say either yes or no to someone else.

Learn to react to your partner. It is important to know how to talk with the other person—not at him or her.

If you want real intimacy, keep connected to your partner. Learn when you’re connected with one another and when you’re not. We call it the “energetics of relationship” and talk about it in the article [“Some Thoughts on Energetic Connection”](#). This is something we deal with in detail on the videos and our CDs—particularly the CDs on [The Pleaser](#), [The Rational Mind](#), and [The Psychological Knower](#). It helps to see—or hear—about this as well as to read about it.

We believe that all relationships (not just

romantic ones)—and the challenges they present—are the most exciting roads to self-knowledge, personal growth, and real empowerment. Check out our bookstore for books, DVDs, and CDs and enjoy your trip!

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