

# The Structure of Vital Relationships

Maintaining a passionate intimate relationship is an extraordinarily difficult challenge that most of us underestimate. If you look at it realistically you should really appreciate two things. First you should realize that you're really trying to do something that is not "normal." Although this statement sounds strange, consider that close to one out of two marriages today will end in divorce. This means that somewhat of a majority of us are either getting divorced or are on the edge of a divorce, hiding our quiet frustration and discomfort from view. That's normal. What you actually want is to have a better than normal relationship: a truly extraordinary relationship. If you merely want a normal relationship why set your sights so low? Try to appreciate that what you really want to have is a superior relationship that demands extraordinary skill to accomplish.

The second thing you should realize is that you're expecting more emotional perks than what was usually expected in previous generations. For most of history marriages have been more survival oriented. Even up through the 18<sup>th</sup> century, emotional fulfillment in a marriage was not paramount. If none your children died and you got your crops in before winter that was a pretty good year! You focused on helping each other survive. You went to church, feared God, and you expected the big pay off after you died. You didn't have the luxury of worrying about spiritual fulfillment from your marriage. This latter expectation is more of a recent historical development. Currently having much higher expectations can create additional obstacles. If your relationship is not going well you now feel more shame. You can develop a sense of failure that you haven't been able to maintain an intoxicating in-love state and where there's such shame there's always the temptation to blame.

If you want to try for the brass ring of an enduring passionate relationship you will need to learn how to cultivate and influence emotions over time. These are not emotions that you directly control with your intellect. Emotions are actually reflexes and obey a different set of rules than voluntary behavior. You will need to learn these rules with a full appreciation that mere intellect is insufficient. Anyone who has struggled with a diet has witnessed how emotion can defy intellectual control. You will need to learn the art of influence instead. Influence means that you must be patient and smart. Instead of taking a bull-headed approach, you need to repetitively do things that gradually shift your emotions in a certain direction. It's like growing a plant. You don't just grab it and yank the plant up to its desired height. You supply sunlight, fertilizer, water and protect the seedling from various dangers. Then you have to trust other processes to take over beyond your personal control. Growing love and affection is like this. You have to create the appropriate conditions and be patient while other processes take over. If you can't ease your grip on control then you're doomed. You will need to learn how to maintain a delicate balance. You will also need to know the fundamental components that need to be maintained.

## **Essential Components**

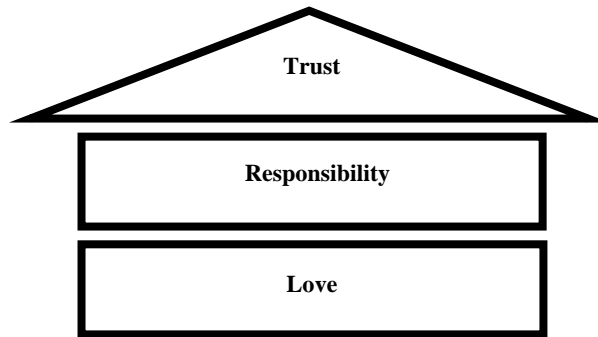
To grow a really great relationship, you need to jettison a very popular but destructive myth. Everyone will tell you that the very foundation of your relationship is love for each other. Are you ready to hear that it's not? Believing that this kind of love is your foundation can cause problems because it can lead to unrealistic expectations. There are things that are far more fundamental. Personal integrity and respect are more precious and elemental. To say that mutual love is the foundation is like saying that a

roof is a good foundation for a house. It's the end product and not the foundation. If you think it's your foundation then you'll expect it as your due. When your partner doesn't supply the love then you'll be righteously indignant. You'll perceive that they're betraying their responsibility to support the relationship with the "right" feelings. Then the blaming can start. Bad stuff! The truth is that love will repeatedly come and go over time.

I frequently see couples where the wife bitterly complains that her husband doesn't show affection. She shares her own frustration and indignation quite freely. Meanwhile, I can see the poor guy sulking in his chair as if his emotional impotence is revealed to the world. This angry focus on emotional production is actually counter-productive. One metaphor would be that the wife might as well berate the husband for "not getting it hard enough!" The anxiety in the husband that the wife is generating by her emphasis on control will make his emotional approach nearly impossible.

A number of years ago I experienced a humorous incident. I thought up what I thought was a clever metaphor to promote an "easy does it" attitude in some of my couples. I planned that at the end of a session I might give them a "gift" of a Chinese finger trap. These are the little straw tubes that are sometimes given as party favors. They trap your pinkies and winch down harder if you try to forcefully pull your hands apart. The trick is to relax and use minute movements to loosen its grip. I figured that this metaphor would amuse the couples about how some of them were trying to force affection. I felt just a little proud at this uniquely clever intervention. However, when I went down to the local magic shop to buy a few dozen, the store owner said they were all gone. "Yeah, some lady came down here yesterday and bought a couple hundred. She said she was a marriage counselor or something like that." Now it could be interpreted that this was a divine lesson for my humility. However, the more relevant interpretation is that other therapists recognize the same problem when couples try to directly control emotional production.

A good metaphor is that your relationship is like a house. The foundation is the basic material that is laid down first. Figure 1 illustrates the commonly held view that the foundation of this relationship house should be passionate love. Many people hold a view similar to the lyric from an old disco song: "I want a love that's hot enough to last!" This hot passion is expected to motivate the other partner to remain responsible. Then trust is supposedly guaranteed. The conclusion from this belief is that you can trust passion. What a prescription for disaster! One reason why this belief is dangerous is because the "hottest" passion derives very easily from a process called "projective identification." Projective identification is produced mostly by your unconscious magical expectations about being personally completed rather than any sober assessment of reality. There are some 12 step programs full of people trying to "kick the habit" of pursuing projective identification. They have well established histories of repeatedly falling in love and producing dysfunctional relationships.



**Figure 1. A love-based relationship model**

Instead of a love-based relationship, consider an integrity-based relationship. When we base our relationship on integrity, it doesn't mean we give up love. It just means that passionate love is not the constant basis for keeping a relationship stable. It's the final prize but not the foundation. Picture the foundation of a healthy relationship as being like two strong pillars (See Figure 2). Each pillar represents each partner's identity. You want each pillar to be strong and resilient. You certainly don't want any cracks. You want each pillar to have its own integrity. Each has to be able to stand on its own if necessary and have its own autonomous strength. If a sailing ship were to be constructed with strong cross-members, good caulking, good righting moment, and has other features that ensure she won't break apart and sink, one could say she has good integrity. In the present case we're not referring to high moral standards. We're referring to a strength of character that allows a person to adaptively use their own wisdom instead of raging, freezing, or avoiding the issues altogether.

The integrity we're discussing is actually based on love but it's a different kind of love than you would ordinarily think. Instead of love for each other, it's a more sophisticated form of loving. Some people call it spiritual love while some researchers refer to it as "allocentric" love. It requires a higher level of consciousness than merely wanting to connect to another. High integrity is based on loving spiritual principles such as truth, responsibility, contribution, and creation among many others. This framework of meaning is woven into a person's implicit world view even on an unconscious level. When facing an emotional challenge such as when our partner is becoming furious, it's our attachment to this allocentric integrity that allows us to be psychologically autonomous and reasonable. Some people might refer to it as "maturity". Others might use the term "character." If we don't have it then we'll lose our autonomy and be knocked off balance into rage or emotional paralysis.

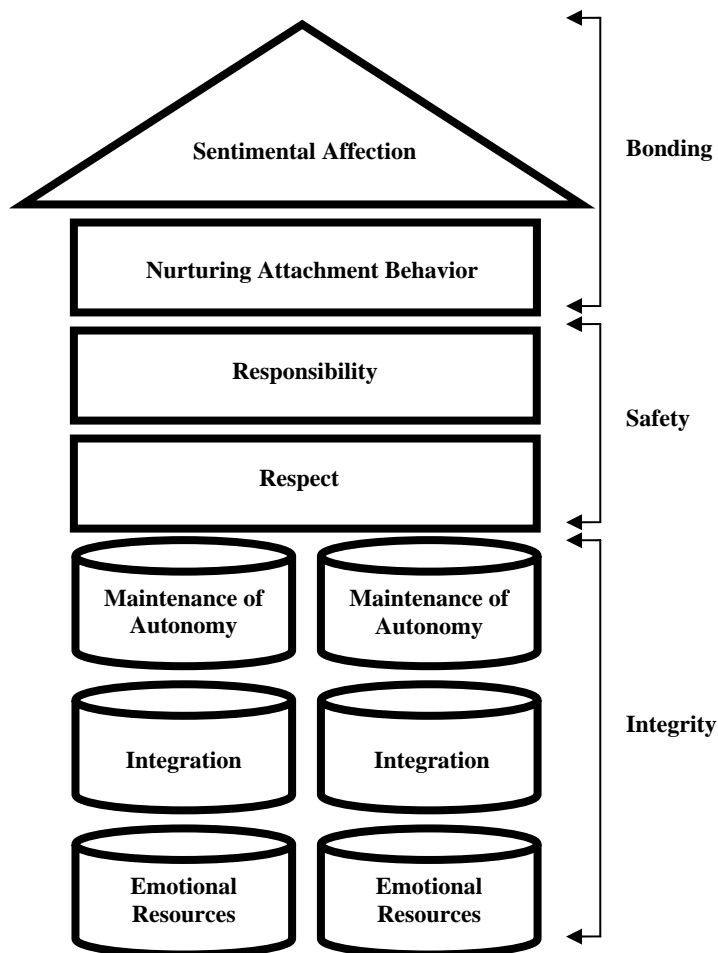


Figure 2. An integrity-based relationship model

We'll be discussing all of the elements in Figure 2 in much more detail throughout this book. For now, here are some brief definitions.

**Emotional Resources:** These are personal memories or memory-held templates of other people that we find positive and empowering. There is evidence that that such memories, when activated, can trigger dopamine release in such a way that we think and behave more maturely.

**Integration:** This refers to the different parts of the brain and memory system working together with good coordination. Merely having good emotional resources doesn't mean that they will be activated when needed. Integration refers to the brain's ability to activate whatever useful parts of the memory system that are needed for a particular situation.

**Maintenance of Autonomy:** This refers to certain actions a person must perform in order to keep their own separate identity alive and robust in a relationship.

**Respect:** This refers to appreciating that someone has a right to be different from us. Even though they're different, respect means they are accorded deference without the assumption of their being inferior or invalid.

**Responsibility:** This refers to our ability to keep agreements, keep the relationship safe from internal and outside dangers, and carry out tasks that help the relationship survive and thrive.

**Nurturing Attachment Behavior:** This refers to things we do in order to help our partner feel loved and connected.

**Sentimental Affection:** This is the accumulated positive feelings in each other that build up over time as a result of our diligence with all the other elements. It's a more stable and enduring type of love than "in-love" infatuation.

In the integrity-based relationship model shown in Figure 2, notice how the first 3 levels of emotional resources, integration, and autonomy maintenance all make up a person's integrity. The model assumes that the most basic foundation of a good relationship relies first on personal stability. This stability depends on each person having their own emotional resources in terms of having their own framework of values and knowing what they want.

I sometimes give couples a personal example of when my own emotional resources once protected me from becoming emotionally overwhelmed. There have been other times when my integrity has failed but this one example is when it came through like a champ. It occurred during an incident involving my father while my wife and I were in the process of adopting a second child. My father was undoubtedly the most nurturing influence in my life. During my childhood he had been very loving. He played with me, taught me to dance, and shared wonder with me to such an extent that I believe he gave me my greatest gifts in life. Yet everyone sometimes reaches their limitations. When I phoned him to tell him that we wouldn't be having our own biological child, it must have come as quite a shock. He had no doubt been hoping for a biological grandchild. I explained to him that my wife and I had gone through a number of medical procedures but our own biological child was just not going to be in the cards. He may have absorbed this OK but he obviously wasn't prepared for what came next. I explained that we were adopting a 4 month old little girl from Korea and that her name was Soh In Kim. At that point, he was facing the additional shock that not only would his grandchild be biologically unrelated, she wouldn't even be his same race. What I heard over the phone sounded like an angry snarl: "Why don't you just go ahead and adopt a black child!" This racial slur came from a man who had never before seemed preoccupied with racial issues. However, it was my own reaction that surprised me the most. Instead of becoming defensive or enraged, I felt sad. It wasn't so much a conscious deliberation but rather an implicit understanding that my father could not immediately appreciate what was most important.

If my internal frame of meaning could have talked at that moment it would have said the following: 1) The most important thing is to be creative with my life and to contribute the best way I can. 2) This promotion of another life (my new daughter) is a truly beautiful creation. 3) My father is overwhelmed about his own mortality and finiteness. 4) He just doesn't have the emotional resources to extend his loving this far beyond his own struggle. 5) It's sad that I have to grow beyond him here. It's important to note that these were not explicit thoughts at the time but were all a part of an intuitive view of what was going on. This view allowed me to feel compassion for him, a sadness that he could not

share our current joy, and a calm appreciation that I was connected to what was most important. If the same incident had occurred earlier in my development I'm sure that I would have become enraged.

Although this example doesn't involve warring spouses, it's a clear example of how one's psychological connection to one's own emotional resources can stabilize a person to avoid over-reaction. More evidence for this dynamic comes from the results of doing therapy. There's a type of therapy I perform that I call conflict inoculation training (CIT). In CIT, clients are taught to practice accessing their emotional resources when threatened with shame. As a result of their practice, these clients have often been able to stop raging toward their spouses. Others have been able to stop freezing with emotional paralysis when facing disapproval.

Integration is the second essential component of personal integrity. Many people don't realize that all of our wisdom and information is not "on-line" at any given time. Physicians will sometimes claim they forget medication dosage levels when they're vacationing at the beach. Once they arrive at the hospital, see the white uniforms and smell the hospital antiseptic odors, their memory of dosages is much easier to recall. In a troubled relationship, a partner may agonize with the knowledge that their raging behavior is sinking their marriage. It may grieve them terribly. However, in the heat of an argument they may no longer remember or care. Once the fight is over, they may grieve again. In more extreme cases, the person may have little or no memory of what happened while they were enraged. I had occasion to see this dynamic in a surprising way with one of my patients. She was a petite middle-aged lady who was very polite and demure. One day I said something that very much riled her up. "You fucking son of a bitch!" was just one of a string of expletives she railed at me. I was surprised when she showed up at the following session. In this next session we talked for awhile and it became apparent she wasn't going to bring up her rage episode the session before. I asked her "By the way, what do you remember about our previous session?" She casually replied "Oh, nothing unusual...just one of our usual sessions, really." She had no recall of her previous rage. Further discussion did nothing to trigger more recall. It was apparent that the memory of what happened was locked in a part of memory that wasn't integrated with her usually polite personality.

This is an example of dissociation which is the opposite of integration. Dissociation means that we can't activate the parts of our memory that would otherwise help us out with the challenge at hand. We may have the resources but we just can't get to them. When dissociation occurs the brain is not working efficiently. In extreme cases new personal identities may be associated with different emotional states. This was once called multiple personality disorder but has now been renamed Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID). While DID is infrequent, we all have some degree of dissociation. Integration helps us to act more rationally in a relationship. If we have the knowledge about how to behave constructively then integration lets us retain the knowledge in awareness when we need it.

The third component of personal integrity is the maintenance of autonomy. We're really referring to psychological autonomy here. It doesn't mean adolescent defiance or proving that you can be physically apart from another. Psychological autonomy means the ability to have your own views about what's important. It also means that the ability to initiate your own behavior is based upon your own true desires and not how you will be evaluated by another. When a person loses their autonomy in a relationship they mostly conform their behavior to what they think their partner expects and they lose touch with what they want themselves. If they carry this to the extreme they may even claim that "they don't know who they are any more." It's as if they start to feel like a footnote on somebody else's life.

This is a kind of slow numbing of the soul that frequently kills relationships. It's the result of our natural inhibitory system that unconsciously inhibits us from violating social norms. This system operates "under the radar" and has a known reflex in the brain that turns off other dopaminergic reflexes. However, when our inhibitory system repeatedly turns off our expression of positive desire for too long, we then lose a sense of who we are. This is the painful sense of losing ourselves that we call "depersonalization." Over 30 years of counseling couples has convinced me that this kind of subtle depersonalization is the number one reason why many people have affairs. It's an easy way to escape feeling so numb by bringing back the sense of being alive. Clients will talk about how dreary they felt before they started their affairs. When I ask them about their conflict style, the majority give a picture that they are the more passive partner. It's rare when I find a person having an affair who has been assertively negotiating for what they want.

A person may start a relationship with insufficient autonomy from the beginning. For example, they may leap into a marriage directly from their dysfunctional family of origin. These marriages that involve rescuing an insecure person will often develop serious problems down the road. Even if the relationship start-up is more equal, a partner's autonomy can be gradually lost over time if they don't take precautions. The gradual accumulation of shame and inhibition can do this. If a person doesn't service their autonomy to prevent this corrosion, then they will probably experience the suffocating or drowning feeling of depersonalization.

Maintaining autonomy requires at least 3 critical operations. The most important is the expression of hedonic desire. "Hedonic" refers to pleasure, so expressing hedonic desire really means expressing desires for pleasant experiences. An example would be your voicing that you would like to eat at your favorite Italian restaurant instead of pretending you have no preference. Another example would be if you negotiate to go out with some friends or negotiate to explore a new vacation spot. On a smaller scale, it may be expressing your desire to hear a certain station on the radio while you drive with your partner. Hedonic expression is a critically important operation in a relationship even though it mostly involves small moment-to-moment decisions.

The other two operations involve confronting boundary intrusions and confronting broken agreements. These operations are defensive but necessary. They help keep a relationship balanced and prevent the build up of corrosive shame. Confronting boundary intrusions means not letting your partner violate what you might think of as your personal "rights." Here's a non-exclusive list of some of your private and personal prerogatives that are best not violated by any directives coming from your partner:

- 1) Your right to choose your own religion
- 2) Your right to decline sex when you don't want it
- 3) Your right to finish your sentences without interruption
- 4) Your right to be the final authority on what you actually feel
- 5) Your right to leave an interpersonal exchange when you don't feel safe
- 6) Your right to choose your friends and hobbies
- 7) Your right to choose your personal hygiene products
- 8) Your right to choose your style of grooming, clothing, appearance, etc.
- 9) Your right to choose when you want to have privacy
- 10) Your right to read and learn what you want
- 11) Your right to be given requests instead of commands

These are just a few of many personal prerogatives that need to be protected. If your partner attacks or in some way acts as if they don't respect your authority in these domains then you need to recognize it as boundary intrusion. If you try to "keep the peace" and repeatedly ignore these intrusions then you'll be building up unconscious shame to a dangerous level.

Of the 3 operations to maintain autonomy (expressing hedonic desire, confronting broken agreements and confronting boundary intrusions), expressing hedonic desire is by far the most important. In fact, the other two types of confrontation are really in service of hedonic expression. They're defensive operations to prevent hedonic expression from getting shut down by shame. We'll be going into the much more depth about autonomy maintenance later on in this book.

To recap this part of our discussion, the foundation of an integrity-based relationship is comprised of two individuals having their own solid integrity. This integrity is best defined as having emotional resources, the integration to activate those resources when needed, and the autonomy to keep exercising and protecting their emotional system from debilitating shame. There is a parallel between my emphasis on integrity as a foundation for relationships and the structure of 12-step programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous. The 12 steps were developed as a spiritual program that strengthens moral and ethical resources within a person. As a result of doing "step work", participants in AA find increased ability to operate out of the higher functioning non-addictive parts of their personalities. In other words, they become more able to act autonomously from their drug. The spiritual integrity helps them to better "down-regulate" their emotional compulsion to drink. Similarly, a strong connection to one's own integrity can inoculate against the emotional challenges inherent in a long term relationship. If we can connect to our higher consciousness, then we're less likely to fracture in the face of our partner's disapproval. If we can maintain this type of autonomy, then we don't have to react aggressively. We can behave respectfully.

Respect is the next foundational level of an integrity/autonomy-based relationship. It's dependent upon the person having sufficient integrity and autonomy within their own self. If a person is desperate to avoid shame but fails at their own autonomy, then respect will be an early casualty. Blaming starts at this level. Couples get into shame fights like tossing a hot potato back and forth. When this happens, both parties have failed the autonomy test. Each is unconsciously trying to avoid the shame of blame by putting the other down. It's like 2 cats in a swimming pool, each trying to avoid drowning by clawing for purchase on the other.

Respect is a fundamental resource that is most undervalued in relationships. It's much more valuable than passion. Passion is relatively cheap and can come without much work. Many people can form passion on a first date. There are others who are addicted infatuation junkies and hook up with new lovers every several weeks. In contrast to easy passion, respect is like platinum. In our metaphorical house of an integrity-based relationship, respect forms an important part of the relationship's safety. It doesn't mean submission or putting someone up on a pedestal. It really means that you're willing to value someone's differences even though they're not exactly like you. It's this fundamental appreciation of differences, the healthy humility of losing egocentrism that is the precious respect that stabilizes good relationships. It also requires a lot of maturity of character that many of us have failed to achieve. A partner who bullies or intentionally inflicts pain is depriving the relationship of a safety foundation. Affection will be nearly impossible.

Responsibility is the next part of the safety platform for a good relationship. It means we demonstrate to our partner that we keep commitments, tell the truth, and generally protect the relationship from outside dangers. In actuality, respect is a fundamental type of responsibility to the relationship. Because it involves providing safety from each other's aggression it's even more basic than other forms of responsibility. It makes sense that you need to first guarantee that your partner is safe from you before you guarantee to protect the relationship from other outside dangers. However, there's a very good reason to view the responsibility dimension somewhat separately from respect. There are many respectful and "nice" people who repeatedly and passively expose their partners to dangers. Instead of being personally aggressive, they are loving and deferential. Meanwhile, they're failing to make mortgage payments, failing to get a job, and failing to ward off other dangers that can eviscerate a family's financial safety. They may also have affairs. What's tragic is that these people are hard to spot. People initially see that this kind of partner has respect and passion. They don't see the danger from incapacity until it's too late. They don't see it coming because they're looking for more aggressive disrespect. For this reason, we're going to stipulate that personal respect should be considered first but that responsibility needs to be separately considered.

When safety can be maintained, then our relationship is ready for the fun stuff. When we engage in nurturing attachment behavior, we're satisfying each other's need to feel connected and close. This involves many different ways to help our partner feel that they're important to us: from saying "I love you", to offering touch, to asking about the meaning of their experiences, to delighting them with symbols of affectionate thoughtfulness. We'll be discussing the many creative things that couples can do to build affection. However, these behaviors should not be confused with the actual feelings of affection. Affection may not be immediate and may lag behind attachment behavior for a variety of reasons, especially when a couple is overcoming a painful history. The danger of lumping affection with attachment behavior is that it can lead to damaging expectations. When a partner starts expecting their partner to have a certain amount of affection it can backfire and cause anxiety.

Gabe and Shirley were a middle-aged couple who had been married 20 years. They had been very sexually active in the early years of their marriage. Prior to marrying, Shirley had also been very promiscuous with many men. She had a long history of prescription drug abuse that continued on into the marriage for many years. The couple began developing marital problems shortly after Shirley attained sobriety, started attending a 12-step group, and started individual therapy with another therapist. Her individual therapy had surfaced that Shirley had suffered traumatic sexual abuse as a child. She had been clean from drugs and working on that trauma for about a year when I first saw them. What was initially presented by both of them was that Gabe was preoccupied with sex. I initially thought that the problem might be that Gabe had a sexual addiction. However, a number of exploratory sessions revealed a different picture. It was true that Gabe wanted sex with Shirley. He had been angrily complaining to Shirley that her sexual interest had shut down. But it was also true that he was not pervasively interested in porn or sex with other partners as with many sex addicts. What seemed to be happening was that Shirley had allowed herself to be sexually used for many years even before marriage. She had been using sex to barter for attention and using alcohol to sedate away any anxiety. In other words, her sexual activity was actually pre-sexual. It had not involved her own sensual enjoyment. It had been more of a tool to meet a pre-sexual need for approval.

To her credit, Shirley was struggling to graduate to a higher level of consciousness. She had attained sobriety. She was addressing her sexual trauma but she had not yet developed the ownership of her own sensual sexuality. Gabe had unfortunately bought into her polarized view of him that he was depraved for wanting “too much sex.” In actuality, his problem was that he was just a bit concrete in the manner in which he wanted affection. He lamented to me not just about the absence of sex but about the absence of affection in general. What made problems worse was that every now and then, he would erupt in frustration to Shirley about her lack of affection. Shirley then took these eruptions as confirmation that Gabe merely wanted to use her like all the previous men in her life. This dynamic became a recursive dance in their relationship. She polarized further and further into a defensive posture providing no real attachment. He polarized into angry frustration with occasional outbursts that confirmed she wasn’t safe. The more he tugged at affection the more she backed away and labeled him as abusive. This is an all too common dynamic in many relationships. I call it the “pursuer – evader syndrome.” It’s a dance that takes two but it starts when one partner expects that the other can voluntarily produce affection.

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**The pursuer – evader syndrome starts  
when one partner expects that the other  
can voluntarily produce affection**

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Affection, like sexual desire, does not thrive well under command. Affectionate feelings are not voluntary. You can’t consciously choose to feel affection any more than you can choose to produce erotic arousal. You need to create enough safety and the conducive conditions so that they both can naturally emerge at their own pace.

The final product of an integrity-based relationship is the affection itself. Like flame from a fire, it will wax and wane depending on the care shown for its basic requirements. It should be noted that this sentimental affection is not the same as in-love infatuation that is alternatively based on unconscious projection. Unlike in-love infatuation, sentimental affection can be rekindled and maintained over many decades if handled with skill.

The integrity-based relationship model is hierarchical. In some ways it parallels Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. It makes sense that your oxygen supply over the next 5 minutes is a more basic and demanding need than getting food and shelter. Similarly, it makes intuitive sense that maintaining one’s individual identity (through integrity operations) is more fundamental than enjoying affection. It also makes sense that experiencing safety (through mutual respect and responsibility) is a more fundamental need than affection. You can also see the hierarchical nature of this model by observing what happens when more basic levels are disrupted. For example, poor integration due to dissociating childhood trauma will often lead to disruption of respectful behavior in relationships. Similarly, poor emotional resources due to under-socialization will frequently lead to poor responsibility in adulthood. The safety operations in a relationship are naturally dependent upon an individual’s integrity. Nurturing attachment behaviors will **not** build sentimental affection when safety operations are inadequate and leave a partner frightened and resentful. So, the rule of thumb needs to be: First things first!

Now that we’ve reviewed the integrity-based relationship model, please take a few minutes to complete the following quiz about your own intuitive model of relationships. The results of the quiz will

help you to examine some of your own expectations. It might even help you pinpoint where you may want to make some revisions.

## **Your Own Relationship Beliefs: A Short Quiz**

Answer True or False to each of the following. It's best if you give your initial quick response because that will more accurately reflect your behavior in your relationship.

- 1) \_\_\_\_\_ When my partner and I are in conflict, we're both obligated to work it out there and then.
- 2) \_\_\_\_\_ If my partner insults me, then they're to blame if I attack them in retaliation.
- 3) \_\_\_\_\_ My own needs are minimal and it's more important to meet my partner's needs.
- 4) \_\_\_\_\_ It's a duty in my relationship to avoid conflict whenever I can.
- 5) \_\_\_\_\_ It's a responsibility to love my partner.
- 6) \_\_\_\_\_ We should have arguments resolved before going to bed.
- 7) \_\_\_\_\_ It's OK to lie to keep the peace if I know my partner will otherwise get very angry.
- 8) \_\_\_\_\_ I should be generous by deferring to my partner whenever we have conflicting needs.
- 9) \_\_\_\_\_ I feel selfish if I ask for what I want in a relationship.
- 10) \_\_\_\_\_ If my partner yells at me first then it's good to yell back to show that they're not the boss.
- 11) \_\_\_\_\_ I'm more comfortable doing chores and responsibilities for my relationship than indulging in "fun."
- 12) \_\_\_\_\_ It's my partner's obligation to not leave me alone when I'm upset.
- 13) \_\_\_\_\_ One should provide sex to their partner because it's a marital responsibility.
- 14) \_\_\_\_\_ If we're doing all the right things, then we should remain in-love forever.
- 15) \_\_\_\_\_ It's my obligation to not leave my partner alone if he/she's upset.
- 16) \_\_\_\_\_ All my sacrifices for my partner build up my entitlement to be loved.
- 17) \_\_\_\_\_ Working together through all of life's problems is a great way to build love and affection.

Now total up all the items for which you answered "True." This total score indicates the degree to which your intuitive beliefs deviate from an integrity-based relationship model. Let's revisit each of the questions along with a brief explanation about what each question actually reveals.

- 1) **When my partner and I are in conflict, we're both obligated to work it out then and there.** There's no such obligation and this belief actually will prevent you from postponing a conflict for when you both are more stable. When emotions are running too high it's important to temporarily stop the argument. That way each of you can self-stabilize from your own integrity. In many situations it's better to reschedule the conflict when both of you are rested and more emotionally stable. Perseverating in an unproductive conflict can cause a lot of damage.
- 2) **If my partner insults me, then they're to blame if I attack them in retaliation.** If you attack in retaliation, then you're starting to fight in order to avoid shame. This probably isn't a conscious thought but a well-worn habitual defense. The problem is that your partner will then probably feel the same defensive need to counter-attack your attack. Then you both are locked into a rigid blaming dance much like a spiraling out-of-control arms race. Once you truly accept that your retaliatory attack is about your own avoidance of shame, then you will have to face your responsibility to act more constructively.

- 3) **My own needs are minimal and it's more important to meet my partner's needs.** One responsibility in a relationship is to keep a good equitable balance of meeting both of your needs. Habitual self-sacrificing is not responsible to either yourself or the relationship. Your partner doesn't need you to be covertly resentful of inequity. He/she also doesn't need you to depersonalize and lose your identity. Your ability to love and feel sexual will be connected to how well you express your hedonic needs. If you sacrifice them then you'll lose autonomy and integrity. Your partner will get mush. We'll be discussing this dynamic later on.
- 4) **It's a duty in my relationship to avoid conflict whenever I can.** It's your responsibility to avoid unnecessary and unproductive conflict such as fighting to establish dominance. It is a responsibility to initiate corrective conflicts that might be productive for rebalancing a relationship. There are several types of conflicts that are essential for running a vital relationship. These will be covered later in this book.
- 5) **It's a responsibility to love my partner.** It's your responsibility to constructively contribute to the conditions that will grow loving affection. It's not your responsibility to try to "squeeze" out emotions as if they can be directly controlled. If you try to make love a responsibility, you'll be contaminating your ability to love with guilt. It's a bad mix that can lead to a kind of emotional impotence. Don't do it.
- 6) **We should have arguments resolved before going to bed.** What a popular and destructive myth. (See the explanation for #1.)
- 7) **It's OK to lie to keep the peace if I know my partner will otherwise get very angry.** If you make this play, there will be red flags all over the place. First, you'll be impacting shame and hurting your own integrity. This will destabilize you over time and you'll withdraw more and more. Second, you'll be irresponsible by destroying your partner's trust. Third, you'll be irresponsible by managing your partner's emotions instead of insisting that they take that responsibility. Enmeshment is a great way to kill a relationship because it robs partners of their autonomy.
- 8) **I should be generous by deferring to my partner whenever we have conflicting needs.** You need to sometimes be generous and deferring to your partner. At other times, you need to hang tough for a need that's too important to you. It's your responsibility to weigh both your partner's need and your own from an allocentric view. If it's very important to your partner and not so much to you then you would logically defer. However, you have a responsibility to negotiate strongly for your own need if something's too important to you. An allocentric view will consider relative balance. The problem is that many people are either too shame-bound or conflict-phobic to honestly tell themselves that their need is worthy of conflicted negotiation. These people will rationalize away their autonomy to avoid conflict...and thereby lose their affection.
- 9) **I feel selfish if I ask for what I want in a relationship.** This gets right to the essence of core shame. If you feel selfish when you advocate for your own desires then you have a serious threat to your relationship. Your relationship will fall out of balance from your gradually losing your

sense of autonomy and identity. Your expression of hedonic desire is essential if you want to maintain attraction to your mate. This idea will be discussed in much detail later on.

**10) If my partner yells at me first then it's good to yell back to show that they're not the boss.**

If you do this, then you're not focusing on managing your own emotions. You've lost your autonomy by trying to prove that you're not the victim. You're trying to avoid shame and you'll only provoke damaging escalation in the fight.

**11) I'm more comfortable doing chores and responsibilities for my relationship than indulging in "fun."**

Keeping your "fun" self alive in the relationship is a responsibility of keeping the relationship balanced. If you turn into a depressive drone, that won't be attractive to your partner and it won't keep your own passion alive. Many people who are uncomfortable with fun are unconsciously inhibited with core shame left over from their families of origin. Therapy is a viable consideration for them if this is the case.

**12) It's my partner's obligation to not leave me alone when I'm upset.**

No, no, no! It's your own responsibility to self-stabilize. It's one of the basic ingredients of autonomy. It's nice if your partner can soothe you but all too often they're too angry or hurt to be constructive. Therefore it's elective for them to stick around to nurture you if they can do it. However, it's their responsibility to remove themselves for awhile if they need to calm down.

**13) One should provide sex to their partner because it's a marital responsibility.**

The operative words here are "provide" and "responsibility." The implication is that it's not really for us. Providing sex as a responsibility means that we've lost our sense of autonomy in sex. We're now doing it as a chore and using it as a tool to achieve another goal. All too often, people "provide" sex to avoid the shame of otherwise being an inadequate spouse or incurring the wrath of their partner. In this way, the provision of sex as a responsibility is actually motivated by fear. It's a contamination of emotional reflexes that's damaging over time. It's true that many partners will be dissatisfied in a sexless relationship, particularly when the relationship started with the vision of endless sexual passion. However, it's not a responsibility to provide sex when you don't feel like it. It's your responsibility instead to figure out how to get emotionally free.....if possible. If your sexual passion is stuck, you need to figure out how to get it unstuck so you can enjoy sex for yourself. In the majority of cases, sexual interest is suppressed by either a history of sacrificed autonomy or a history of inadequate attachment.

**14) If we're doing all the right things, then we should remain in-love forever.**

It's well known that the titanic "in-love" feelings originate more with expectation and projection than reality. Within 2 to 3 years of living with each other, frustrating each other, stepping on each others toes and bruising each other up, almost everyone is through with the in-love phase. It's a nice condiment and it's to be enjoyed while it lasts. However, the main fare is sentimental loving and has to be earned through mutual respect and skilled relationship craft. If you can't make the shift to sentimental loving then your relationship will run downhill. If both you and your partner can master relationship skills, then your relationship can build up hot passion over the decades.

**15) It's my obligation to not leave my partner alone if he/she's upset.** (See # 12)

**16) All my sacrifices for my partner build up my entitlement to be loved.** You are deserving of love but you are not “entitled” to be demanding of love from anyone. Love is not a bartered commodity. It’s a feeling that needs to be freed from fear and shame. All your work in a relationship is to set the conducive conditions for love to blossom on its own. If you miss one of the necessary conditions (e.g. respect for your partner’s autonomy) the bloom may not take place. Even if you meet all of the conditions, your partner may still have their own limitations and be incapable of love. Ironically, a sense of entitlement will help set the conditions for you to be later enraged. The relationship will suffer as a result.

**17) Working together through all of life’s problems is a great way to build love and affection.** Actually, it’s a terrible way to build love and affection. Slaving away together is often necessary for survival. However, the emotional state of work is not conducive for building much affection. Affection is more built up in the free states of wonder, curiosity, and play.

I hope that this short self-examination has helped you to examine some of your intuitively based assumptions about how relationships “should” run. Unfortunately, many people have impaired relationships because they expect constant love. They are not integrity-based. In the next chapter, we’ll be examining a relationship truth that is counter-intuitive.

In conclusion, a vital relationship is one in which we take responsibility for keeping ourselves emotionally stable and do not look to our partner to guarantee totally constant unconditional love. We accept that human nature is variable and that our partner is limited and imperfect. They will not be constantly loving us. We are therefore prepared to “run off our own battery” when our partner shows disapproval and doesn’t have the feelings we want. When we “run off the battery” of our integrity we rely on these internal resources to help us behave respectfully and responsibly. This provides safety in the relationship. Because our resources are internal, we can behave this way even when our partner is not. In essence, we behave respectfully and responsibly because we love these values, and not because we love our partner. We also assume responsibility for nurturing mutual affection by initiating shared attachment experiences. We strive to gradually “grow” affection by positively influencing our relationship, not by exerting coercive control.