

# Relationships: Overcoming the Power of Difference

## The Essential Relationship Booklet Series

*Overcoming the Power of Difference*

*Overcoming the Power of Shame*

*Overcoming Anger*

*Overcoming Anxiety*

*Communication and Real Listening*

*Conflict Resolution and Distorted Thinking*

*Assertiveness Skills*

RELATIONSHIPS:  
Overcoming the  
Power of Difference

Booklet

*The Essential Relationship Booklet Series*

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RELATIONSHIPS:  
Overcoming the Power of Difference  
Booklet

*The Essential Relationships Booklet Series*

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# Introduction and Self-Assessments

*I have often thought that the best way to define a man's character would be to seek out the particular mental or moral attitude in which, when it came upon him, he felt himself most deeply and intensely active and alive. At such a moment there is a voice inside which speaks and says: "This is the real me!"*

- William James ... letter to his wife, 1878

Human relationships are a reservoir of great joy on one hand and deepest pain on the other. Love begins with both dreams and fantasy: the hope of being understood, known, and truly accepted; the hope of being safe and making another safe, of belonging; the hope of deep passion; the hope of a lasting and transforming bond. But hope collides with the realities of love. Because any two partners are going to have different needs, anger eventually results. Judgments erode the once flowing acceptance, and loneliness seeps into increasingly distant lives.

Partners who make a *relationship* work have certain skills. Couples who know and practice core interpersonal skills form relationships that endure, deepen,

and grow. That's the good news, because you can decide to learn new skills by learning and practicing.

This booklet will help you develop and hone the skills you need to create and maintain a relationship and to keep love alive. The focus is on action and change by using skills and concepts for overcoming the underlying dynamics of *difference* and *shame*. This means that you can't just passively sit and read. You'll need to get involved by risking new behaviors and trying new responses. It will take patience and persistence, and sometimes courage. But your hopes and dreams are worth the effort. A relationship will not happen by chance or because you understand more, or your partner undergoes some surprise change, but because you and your partner have worked to become more skillful at being a couple.

More good news is that you do not need to read all the Relationship booklets. Partners need to concentrate on different skills. Each booklet contains the essentials of what you will need to learn for a particular skill. You may choose the specific skills you want to learn and skip the rest. The result is that you can start right now to relate differently to your partner.



The most unique feature of the Relationship booklets is its focus on the dynamics of difference and shame underlying what goes wrong—or what can go very right—with relationships. The dynamics of difference and shame have the power to set up the development of a *false self*. The false self defensively refuses to assert the *real self*. A dominant false self is a prescription for chronic *low self-esteem*, with a belief that the self is too impaired, weak or ineffective to merit esteem. This “essential phoniness” leads to a hollowness of life where blame of other or of life in general may ensue. Overcoming the power of these dynamics is the source of transforming unhealthy wounded relationships into healthy and healing relationships.

*Who Is Relationships: Self Assessments For?*

*Relationships: Self Assessments* is for partners: married or unmarried, heterosexual, lesbian, or gay. It is for new lovers in the initial phases of a relationship. It is for people who have been together for some time and need to improve specific skills in their relationship. It is for those somewhere in the middle who find themselves unsatisfied with their relationship.

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The Relationship booklets are for people who continue to be committed to each other and who still are willing to work toward a more satisfying life together. You will need the patience and persistence to keep working on a relationship over time, because the skills and concepts required will not always result in instant gratification. It is more like a hard-work miracle. It won't happen by itself, or overnight—you and preferably your partner will have to work hard for it—but false, destructive relationships *can* be transformed into ones that heal and nurture both partners, and in which love can thrive.

The new responses and behaviors you are about to try each require a number of weeks, sometimes months, to take hold. Significant change will require you to make several shifts in your response behaviors, and this will also take some time. You may try something new and it will seem like a disaster. It may not fit your style of being in the world or your particular needs. Taking risks means opening yourself up to possible failure. You will need to risk failure in order to reap fulfillment. If something doesn't work, pick yourself up and move to the next skill.

The Relationship booklets are not for partners who are *now* experiencing the threat of violence within their

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relationship. Physical threats or abuse requires specialized professional help, and it is recommended that you seek assistance at once. The breach of trust that domestic violence causes to individuals is deeper than what will be dealt with in the Relationship booklets.

The Relationship booklets also are *not* for people who are dealing with *active* drug or alcohol abuse. Substance abuse also requires specialized professional help, and it is recommended that you seek assistance at once.

However, the Relationship booklets will be significantly helpful to people *recovering* from both domestic violence and substance abuse, as well as to those in their families.

### *What Is the Self?*

The *self* is the sum total of one's inner experience. The self is the individual personality structure sometimes called the self system. It has affective (feeling) and cognitive (thought) elements, which function at both a conscious (aware) and unconscious (unaware) level. The self system attempts to evolve toward wholeness and maturity. However, it requires support in order to do so. If essential emotional needs are not adequately met or there

is trauma, growth and development of the self will be impeded around the particular trauma or emotional-need deficit.

*Basic Assumptions about Human Development*

The skills and concepts in these booklets make certain basic assumptions about human development:

- The development of the self system proceeds in an orderly and rather predictable pattern. The rates of development may vary from individual to individual.
- The development of the self system passes through a series of hierarchically ordered and sequenced phases.
- These phases each contain developmental skills and dynamics that must be resolved if the individual is to proceed successfully to the next level of development. (The developmental skills and dynamics are included sequentially in the chapters of this booklet.)
- The developmental skills and dynamics occur within the context of the individuals' early interpersonal relationships.
- The developmental skills and dynamics also occur within the individuals' process of separation and individuation.

*What Is a Healthy Relationship?*

A *healthy relationship* supports, encourages, and nurtures both partners' self system. It is composed of two emotionally fit partners who seriously and mutually consider each other's basic needs. Each partner is aware of his or her needs and is able to express these to the other freely. The couple has the capacity to understand and accept these needs and to negotiate and resolve conflicts of needs as they arise. Specifically, both individuals in a healthy relationship have the capacity to:

1. Experience a wide range of feelings deeply. Accept a wide range of feelings in proportion to the situation, without fearing the expression of feelings. (However, not let guilt and disappointment run wild.) Not block appropriate expression of feelings or erect barriers against them.
2. Expect appropriate need satisfaction. Expect that life can be mastered and good things can be achieved. Discover the physical and emotional conditions that contribute to pleasurable living, and act accordingly.
3. Be assertive and self-activate. Identify the things that make up their individuality. Be responsible for planning and taking action that will improve situations. Pursue their

own goals autonomously without prodding from other people.

4. Acknowledge self-esteem. Have confidence in one's own judgment, ability, power, and decisions. Maintain respect for, or a favorable impression of, oneself. Know when a problem or crisis has been resolved, and recognize one's self-reliance. Maintain a sense of self-worth through healthy ways of thinking.

5. Soothe painful feelings. Not to wallow in misery, but to find a means to experience comfort and hope. Confront distortions in thinking that lead to extreme feelings. Know that pain is not necessarily deserved, but simply *is* at times and can lead them somewhere they would not have gone otherwise.

6. Make and stick to commitments. Make personal commitments to relationships and career goals. Persist in the face of obstacles, utilizing the support of others to assist them when needed.

7. Express creativity. Develop the ability to replace old, familiar patterns of living and problem solving with new, more successful ones. Devising ways to cope with loss or misfortune and improvise ways to achieve security. Find and express passions and interests.

8. Experience intimacy. Express the self fully in a close relationship. Not allow fear of abandonment to prevent intimacy from emerging at the beginning of a new relationship. Sustain intimacy through difficult times or when other goals must be pursued. Keeping healthy boundaries in relationships.

9. Accommodate and enjoy being alone. Be alone without feeling abandoned. Sense that the ability to find meaning in life comes from within, even if it ultimately involves others. When alone, enjoy being preoccupied with worthwhile pursuits. Not confuse feeling alone with the loneliness and despair that leads to depression. When feeling despair, confront it rather than filling time with meaningless or ineffective activity.

10. Find the unified self that is you in the midst of all of your conflicting parts. Recognize and sustain an awareness of the inner core of feelings, perceptions, values, and beliefs that persists and is the same as a person grows and develops, in good times and in bad times.

Relationships are more or less healthy. There are varying degrees of realness, and the degree of realness may fluctuate over time even within the same relationship. Couples who want a healthy relationship continually strive

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for the optimal in mutual respect, honesty, and emotional authenticity while at the same time seeking to resolve differences. A healthy relationship is a maturing relationship that accepts, encourages, and nurtures the growth of the partners. A healthy relationship supports the movement from false self to real self. Look at the false self versus real self comparison table on the next page.

<b>False Self</b>	<b>Real Self</b>
Extreme anxiety and/or no anxiety	Healthy level of anxiety
Extremely passive and/or rigidly aggressive	Assertive
Critical, judgmental, self-righteous, envious	Accepting and encouraging of self/others
Masked, camouflaged	Authentic, genuine
Distrusting and/or overly trusting	Healthy level of trust
Plans according to rigid schedules	Spontaneous while maintaining a schedule
Withholding	Giving
Withdraws from communication	Communicative
Fearful, contracting	Expansive, loving
Always a responsible parent	Ability to be childlike
Pretense of invulnerability	Vulnerable when appropriate
Suspicious of people	Accepts people at face value
Desires isolation and shelter	Desires freedom and growth
Repeats old patterns	Can learn, adapt, and change
Denial of the unconscious	Open to the unconscious
“All or nothing” thinking	Balanced thinking
Split-off body, mind, emotions	Integration of body, mind, emotions

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The movement from false self to real self is a process that takes time, but it can be significantly speeded up in the context and support of a healthy relationship. The goal of the Relationships booklets is to help develop this context and support.

### *Working Individually or Together*

Many of the Relationship booklets are designed for making one-sided changes in your relationship. These booklets will show you how to alter your patterns of interaction. This is of value because of the nature of relationship dynamics. When you change, your partner must change in response. If you take a new action or response, your partner will likely respond in kind. Even the simplest shift in the pattern can cause a major change in the dynamics.

Given human nature, however, your partner may resist your new actions or responses. Many people find change, even when it is good for them personally and/or for the relationship, a bit unnerving. This is when you need courage and persistence. If you keep trying and hang in there with the new action or response, your partner can shift in a more effective direction as well. Individual work can be quite effective, but working together as a

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partnership will be more efficient and satisfying. Both of you will be concentrating on the same objectives, and you will be able to encourage each other with your efforts.

*Assessing Your Emotional Needs*

Take some time for each partner to fill out the Emotional Needs Assessment individually. Complete the following and determine on a scale between 1 to 10, with 1 being “completely” (fulfilled), 10 being “not at all” (deficit).

**Emotional Needs Assessment**

**As a preschool-age child:**

I felt admired	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
I felt loved	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
I felt protected	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
I felt safe	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
I felt trusting	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

**As a school-age child:**

I felt secure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
I felt competent	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
I felt needed	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
I felt treated fairly	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
I felt valued	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

**As an adolescent:**

I felt accepted	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
I experienced privacy	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
I felt supported	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
I felt heard	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
I felt understood	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

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**As an adult:**

I feel appreciated	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
I feel confident	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
I feel fulfilled	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
I feel important	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
I feel independent	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
I feel optimistic	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
I feel productive	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
I feel recognized	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
I feel respected	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
I feel worthy	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Record your respective Emotional Needs Assessment scores in the table below.

<b>EMOTIONAL NEEDS</b>	<b>PARTNER A</b>	<b>PARTNER B</b>
I felt admired		
I felt loved		
I felt protected		
I felt safe		
I felt trusting		
I felt secure		
I felt competent		
I felt needed		
I felt treated fairly		
I felt valued		
I felt accepted		
I experienced privacy		
I felt supported		
I felt heard		
I felt understood		
I felt appreciated		

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<b>EMOTIONAL NEEDS</b>	<b>PARTNER A</b>	<b>PARTNER B</b>
I felt confident		
I felt fulfilled		
I felt important		
I felt independent		
I felt optimistic		
I felt productive		
I felt recognized		
I felt respected		
I felt worthy		

Circle all scores above a 5. These are the emotional need deficits that will considerably affect your relationship. Discuss them with your partner, because the emotional need deficits that each partner brings to the relationship will require attention. Often the problems that develop in a relationship are directly connected to these deficits. Let's now take an assessment of any problems you can identify in your relationship.

*Assessing Your Relationship Problems*

Each partner is to individually fill out the Relationship Problems Assessment. Complete the

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following and determine on a scale between 1 to 10 (1 being no problem, 10 being a major problem).

Relationship Problems Assessment										
1. Arguing	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
2. Anger	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
3. Anxiety/panic	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
4. Conflicting needs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
5. Depression	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
6. Disenchantment	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
7. Emotional distance	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
8. False assumptions	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
9. Feeling deprived	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
10. Feeling hurt	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11. Feelings of inequity	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
12. Guilt	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
13. Lack of time together	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
14. Misunderstanding	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
15. Name calling, blaming	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
16. Negativity	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
17. Not feeling heard	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
18. Problems with in-laws	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
19. Unexpressed feelings	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
20. Unexpressed needs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
21. Unmet expectations	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

On the next page record your relationship problems by placing any scores above 5 in the appropriate box. If either partner identifies a problem above 5, it becomes a relationship problem.

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<b>RELATIONSHIP PROBLEM</b>	<b>PARTNER A</b>	<b>PARTNER B</b>
Arguing		
Anger		
Anxiety/panic		
Conflicting needs from relationship		
Depression, discouragement		
Disenchantment		
Emotional distance, low intimacy		
False assumptions about partner		
Feeling deprived		
Feeling hurt		
Feelings of inequity, unfairness		
Guilt		
Lack of time together		
Misunderstanding		
Name calling, blaming, threats		
Negativity		
Not feeling listened to		
Problems with in-laws		
Unexpressed feelings		
Unexpressed needs		
Unmet expectations		

Circle the Relationship Problems and discuss them with your partner.

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*Getting Started Building Your Skills*

Having completed the Assessments, you can determine which *skill you* want to work on first. If you can see that work on several skills will be needed, it is best to work on one at a time. You have a lot to cover in these booklets. You're going to have some fun, but you're also going to have to work pretty hard. You will learn about several things:

- New strategies and skills for being in a healthy relationship.
- Concepts that will enhance your self-esteem.
- The role of difference and shame in your life, and how to overcome it.
- The role of anger in your relationship, and how to overcome it.
- The role of anxiety in your relationship, and how to overcome it.
- The role of distorted beliefs in your relationship, and how to overcome it.
- How to improve your assertiveness and conflict resolution skills.

There will be some exercises to do, and you will begin practicing what you've learned in real time situations. Most of your time will be spent learning new skills and then practicing them. So roll up your sleeves and let's get started.

*Clarifying Expectations*

Take a little time here at the beginning of your work to think about some of the things you're hoping to get out of these booklets. There are no right or wrong answers to this. Please try not to leave out anything, even if you think it might be unreasonable. If they're your ideas, they are of value.

It's natural to come to the Relationships booklets feeling either hopeful or hopeless. Relationship issues develop over a long period of time, and you may have been disappointed for many years. Your problems are unlikely to disappear overnight. What you will do in later chapters is work to develop realistic and manageable short-term goals that may or may not be symptom-related. For example, you may have a goal of "feeling less anxious alone at home when Charlie has to work late." Or you might have a broader goal like "learning to control my



temper and not snap at people—including Charlie and also my colleagues at work.”

You may frequently find yourself setting unrealistic goals and standards, and then being hard on yourself when you cannot meet them quickly. For example, “blowing up at Cindy only if several attempts at rational discussion of the problem don’t work” is a much more realistic goal than “never raising my voice to anyone again, no matter how much the other person provokes me.” Also, “learning ways to feel less anxious and enjoy myself when Peter is away on a business trip” is more realistic than “always feeling totally relaxed no matter what is going on in my life.” Certainly willingness to tackle ambitious goals is a positive, promising quality, but change and growth are *not* about “all or nothing.” The reality of life reflects *some* change and *some* growth taking place over a period of *some* time. It is important to remind yourself frequently to be patient with yourself. You are doing something challenging that takes persistence and courage!

### *Conclusion*

Relationships are important. They are highly prized by those people who have learned how to build and

maintain them. They are built, not fallen into by accident or happy fate as suggested by most musical comedies. People who grew up in nurturing families have a head start in learning how to build relationships, but the good news is that *anyone* can learn these skills and bring about a hard-work miracle, as mentioned at the beginning of this booklet.

A healthy relationship brings together individuals who value their own and their partners' needs. The healthy self system knows and expresses authentic thoughts, feelings, and needs rather than hiding behind a false self or playing games. Partners in a healthy relationship seek to nurture, encourage, and support each other in ways that mutually respect individual growth and the healing of past emotional deficits. They are aware of their own individual emotional deficits and those of their partner. They learn and practice core interpersonal skills, which lead to a resolution of different needs, thoughts, and feelings.

Being in a healthy relationships is work that lasts a lifetime which may well be the most challenging and potentially rewarding of all human endeavors.

# Overcoming the Power of Difference

*The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug.*

- Mark Twain

## *Fantasy and Disenchantment*

The earliest stages of a relationship are filled with fantasy. It is a romantic, mostly unconscious image of two partners becoming as one, of merger in a love where there is no *difference*. The primitive fantasy also includes the belief that the new unit will provide fulfillment of all human needs. Before long the fantasy fades and the dream of an encircling unity without dispute or discomfort dissipates. The loss of the fantasy leads to disenchantment, which follows the discovery that partners have different, sometimes conflicting needs. Some disenchantment is predictable.

No matter how attached or bonded two partners may be, each will eventually require very divergent physical and emotional needs to be met. In fact, a symbiotic partnership may be headed for an even harder fall from the partners' fantasized expectations. Partners are

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more or less symbiotic or psychologically merged together. If there are very few boundaries between the partners, they are highly symbiotic—for example, when partners frequently finish each other's sentences. If partners have healthy boundaries that respect each other's difference and individuality, they are less symbiotic.

The most compatible partners are not exempt from the loss of fantasy and will experience conflicts of needs. Discovery of this inevitable disenchantment ushers in a significant challenge to *any* relationship. How the partners deal with the disenchantment of difference will determine the destiny of the relationship. Some areas of potential partner difference include the following.

Ethnic. If the partners come from different ethnic backgrounds, this can affect their value judgments of each other's behavior, especially if the ethnic differences are never openly discussed.

Language. Communication problems are especially apparent if the two partners speak different languages, such as English and Spanish. However, even within the English language, different regional dialects use the same term with different meanings, and people have different

vocabularies for expressing themselves depending on their personal, socioeconomic and educational backgrounds.

Gender. Though there certainly are exceptions to every rule, it is more common for men to be avid football fans and women to prefer romantic movies. As a generalization, more men in our society are uncomfortable discussing feelings openly perhaps because of the different ways men and women are socialized. These male/female differences are evolving, however they can cause differences in approach to solving relationship problems.

Political. When partners have strong but divergent political opinions, this typically creates friction between them, unless they can agree to disagree.

Values. Partners may have different values about many issues: religions, the importance of work, whether the house must always be kept clean, and so on.

Parenting. Many couples disagree about parenting styles, such as leniency versus strictness of discipline.

Spending. If one partner is much thriftier than the other, there will be tension. Also, if the partners spend equal amounts of money but have very different opinions about what it should be spent on—entertainment and clothing

versus home improvement, for example—there may be some conflict over that also.

Family. Friction with one's in-laws is so common that it has become a cliché, though certainly this is not the case in all partnerships. Relating to a different kind of family from one's own can help a person grow.

Education and Consciousness. If a high-school drop-out enters a relationship with a college professor, there will be issues for them to resolve about education and consciousness levels. One classic fictional example of educational disparity is Sam and Diane on the old TV series *Cheers*.

Interpersonal skill level. One partner may be well hidden behind a wall of defenses, finding it very difficult to discuss feelings or resolve relationship problems. The other partner may be more skillful at talking things out openly.

Decision making. Some people mull over decisions for a long time before deciding what to do; others act more impulsively.

Physical. Partners may have different levels of sex drive. One may love to be held, while the other enjoys intercourse far more. One partner may want large meals

served with clockwork regularity while the other prefers to nibble and snack throughout the day.

Psychological. Partners may have different levels of dependency needs. For example, Denise may feel as though she needs Jim more than he needs her.

*The “No Difference” Fantasy*

We know that all individuals are different. However, as partners begin an intimate relationship, a fantasy that difference will disappear and something of a “twinship” will emerge frequently develops. As mentioned earlier, “falling in love” partly includes the denial of troublesome differences. The denial lasts only so long, and partners soon become vividly aware of their differences. When faced with this awareness, some partners believe that the other will change and that the difference will then no longer be a problem. Some partners adopt the attitude that the other partner’s difference is wrong or bad. With this belief comes a rejection of and/or resentment of the other partner’s difference. This in turn results in an invalidation of the other partner’s real self, and a consequent reinforcement of the false self or retaliatory response, leading to a destructive relationship pattern. The emotional needs of both partners are destined to remain

unmet, often a repeat of their early family life. Love has discovered its debris.

Creating a healthy relationship requires fully recognizing the ultimate truth that all people are different, with different emotional need deficits and different levels of relationship skills. Real love does not require psychological and skill-level sameness but affirms and values difference. In fact, acceptance of difference and uniqueness is an important aspect of maturity and character.

It is helpful to understand the significance of difference in terms of human development. Research with infants has shown that infants cannot distinguish themselves from their mothers during the earliest months of life. It is as if they are one and the same. The infant is hungry, and the mother intuitively senses this and feeds the child. Thus the earliest experience of love is highly devoid of difference. The baby grows and develops in this dependent environment until he or she is ready to begin to separate. The “terrible twos” usher in the word “No” as the child is saying, “I’m not you anymore, I’m me” (a unique self). The young child has begun the long process of separation and individuation, with goals of becoming a



healthy and unique real self. Love's debris is fostered by the *distorted belief* that our partner should always think, feel, and behave (do things) the same way we do. It is vital to realize that others must be unique, and that we ourselves must be different in order to be healthy, maturing human beings. Then and only then will love's debris begin to melt away.

Difference is usually associated with the judgment of being good or bad. The categorizing or labeling of difference is often destructive to human relationships. For example, to say that a partner is emotional rather than intellectual can carry value judgment with it. Experience tells us that the world generally places a more positive value on intellectual expression than emotional expression. If Partner A tells Partner B, "You are being emotional," Partner B may interpret this message as "You are being less than acceptable." Thus it is heard as a negative, nonconstructive criticism regardless of the intention of the message sender. If, however, Partner A and Partner B understood difference as not only good but also vital, then the message of being "emotional" loses its sting and becomes an affirmation of uniqueness and acceptability.

Difference moves from negative judgment to affirmation and esteem in the process of healthy relationships.

*Attraction and Difference*

Why are two partners attracted to each other? Is it physical, intellectual, emotional, biological, psychological, spiritual, or is it some combination of these? Human attraction can defy rationality. We are often surprised when certain persons partner up and become a couple.

Freud points the way for us to unravel this mystery. His notion that all loves are new editions of experiences with the earliest caretaker is relevant. New lovers have a psychic connection with the earliest lovers: parents and/or caretakers. The earliest experiences of attraction make a lasting imprint on the future of romantic love. Thus the love that has been lost will have a major impact on the love that is found, and we are often not aware of the imprinting effect of our earliest experience of relationship.

Both boys and girls normally experience the earliest love bond with their mothers. This earliest experience is usually not conscious; we are unable to recall more than a brief image of our first 12 to 18 months of life. Yet in those early months, significant love and attraction are experienced.

When the toddler begins to individuate during the “terrible twos,” the dawning of separation/individuation does not begin without a preceding internal psychic process. There have been an increasing number of moments during the first two years of life when the child has experienced the absence of immediate gratification of his or her needs. The mother or other caretaker has not always been attuned to the child’s needs; the needs of the child and the needs of the caretaker have been experienced as different. By the time they begin separation/individuation; all children have uniquely experienced difference within the context of their first relationship. If a transforming bond accompanies the experience of difference in the first relationship, the separation/individuation process proceeds in a healthy way. A transforming bond is an emotional and physical connection, as well as a communicative process, that fosters a sense of trust and respect.

*Emotional Need Deficits*

The very young child has a need to receive from his or her primary caretaker(s) an *attunement* of both physical and emotional needs. The infant requires a bonding with the primary caretaker(s) that includes a sense

of knowing and gratification of what the child needs and experiences. This type of bonding is called attunement. If enough attunement is experienced, the child moves ahead along the path of healthy development. However, if *not* enough attunement is experienced, woundedness occurs, and the child feels prematurely different or excluded. The woundedness becomes an emotional need deficit within the character of the child. The child no longer feels merged with the powerful, loved, and protective mother/caretaker, and as a result of this growing awareness experiences anxiety, rage, a sense of helplessness, and intense ambivalence. To the extent that particular individuals have had difficulty negotiating such an early developmental process, the experience of difference reawakens many of these early, negative emotions. The desire to eliminate difference may simply be a preference for what is less stressful, more comfortable, and more familiar.

If this emotional need deficit is not worked through in childhood or adolescence, it is carried through to adulthood and into adult relationships. This is a similar psychological dynamic to shame, which is discussed further in the *Overcoming the Power of Shame* Booklet. The feeling of exclusion or difference is too unpleasant, so

the child develops psychological defenses to protect against further woundedness. The fantasy of “no difference” is also developing at this time.

*Projective Identification*

An adult child of an alcoholic (ACOA) walks into a crowded room of strangers and is immediately attracted to a person across the room who is later discovered to be an alcoholic. How does this powerful attraction occur? The answer lies partly in the unconscious mental process known as projective identification.

Two of the most useful psychoanalytic contributions are the notions that human beings have the capacity to perform complex communication on an unconscious level, and the unconscious mechanism of projective identification. Projective identification was first formulated by Melanie Klein and has been extensively written about by both Kleinians and non-Kleinians. Without plunging into the complexities and nuances of both the intrapsychic and interpersonal aspects of projective identification, seekers of healthy relationships should have some understanding of this significant relational process.

For our purposes in creating healthy relationships, projective identification involves taking an aspect (thought, feeling, impulse) within the self system and projecting it out onto the other person. An integral element of this psychic process, known as “splitting,” involves keeping the self good. For example, Partner A tells Partner B that she looks depressed, when he himself actually feels down in the dumps. Partner A then projects an aspect of his mental functioning (thoughts, feelings, impulses) onto Partner B without being aware of what is really happening. This unconscious mental process allows Partner A to feel both “good” and identified with Partner B. Partner B responds by stating that she feels just fine and is not aware of any depressed feelings. Partner B has tested reality for Partner A, who now has the opportunity to learn something more about his real self by becoming aware of the projection.

A similar process known as “introjective identification” refers to the unconscious introjection (taking in) of an aspect of another person’s mental functioning (thoughts, feelings, and impulses) and identifying with it. For example, Partner A says to Partner B, “I feel depressed,”

when she has unconsciously noticed that Partner B looks down in the dumps.

These unconscious identification processes are a significant combination, which play out unknown to either partner, creating either a powerful bond or a sense of difference between them. It becomes a powerful bond when the aspect of the self projected out to the other or introjected from the other is acceptable (good) to the partner. It becomes a powerful difference when the aspect of the self projected or introjected is unacceptable (bad). For example, imagine a woman saying to her lover, “Oh, sweetie, you’re so irresistibly cute and cuddly!” because that’s how she wants *him* to perceive *her*. But he’s disgusted because he wants to be thought of as tough man.

Another example of a powerful difference dynamic is an ex-smoker who has strong feelings of contempt toward a partner who lights up a cigarette. The unacceptable or rejected aspect of the ex-smoker partner is projected onto the partner who acts out the impulse to light up. The felt difference of an ex-smoker and a smoker can be filled with strong feelings. If it is not worked through by talking about all the thoughts, feelings and impulses involved—those the two partners are aware of and those

they may be unaware of—the difference can become destructive to the healthy relationship.

*Complementarity*

One of the hopes of healthy relationships comes from the interpersonal dynamic of *complementarity*. Complementarity is a relationship process in which each partner's missing qualities or deficits find wholeness through the contribution of the other's different personality traits. Complementarity provides the promise of mutual completeness through relationship. The principle of complementarity assumes that even the healthiest human beings have deemed some aspects of their real selves unacceptable. To grow up and mature requires that a child be told “no,” “you can't do that,” or “you are not acceptable for that.” Experiences of unacceptability and shame are inevitable. Without these experiences children would be forever dependent on their caretakers and not become healthy, unique, mature individuals. How these necessary experiences are mentally worked through determine the cohesiveness and wholeness of the self. Essentially, life includes emotional need deficit. We cannot escape at least some woundedness.



When two people each search for the lost half of the self and find it in each other, complementarity is at work. Complementarity involves the possibility of both partners working out their emotional need deficits rather than rewounding their earlier scars. It is with good reason that partners sometimes call each other their other or better half. Through the discovery of difference in healthy relationships, partners also find the aspects of their self that require healing—and then are healed partly by each other, partly by themselves.

Complementarity allows for reality testing of your real self and your partner. From the initial attraction, you unconsciously began to merge the image of your partner with your primary caretaker(s). Then you began to project the unacceptable aspects of your self out to your partner, obscuring both the images of your partner and your self. However, the dynamic of complementarity enables you to gradually let go of your disenchantment and begin to see the truth that will set you free.

Here is an example of how complementarity might work in a relationship:

- John's parents are cold and strict with him during his childhood and youth. He is discouraged from showing

outbursts of temper or emotion of any kind. John learns to hide his feelings. He studies hard and becomes a successful accountant.

- John meets Alice, a singer, and is charmed by her warmth and spontaneity. He unconsciously senses in her some of the qualities he wishes his mother had had. Alice, in turn, has led a rather chaotic, disorganized life and welcomes John's stability.
- John projects onto Alice the emotional temperament for which his mother used to scold him. He sometimes gets annoyed with Alice—for exactly the qualities that drew him to her in the first place. She sometimes finds him exacting and dull because he is not more like her. During this stage, projective identification is distorting both partners' views of each other and of their true selves.
- However, as they both learn to respect and cherish each other's differences, they also learn to see and heal their own emotional need deficits from the past. John needs to relax and become more expressive and spontaneous. Alice needs to plan her time better and be more responsible about money.

Complementarity provides partners seeking a healthy relationship with a hidden purpose. Rather than

simply focusing just on a facade of thoughts, feelings, and needs, partners learn to identify their emotional need deficits and the childhood issues that caused them. When complementarity is functioning creatively within a relationship, that relationship takes on more meaning, and partners have a greater sense of control and satisfaction. The relationship isn't just a goal in itself, but a means for self-discovery, healing, and personal growth.

The skills that are required for a healthy relationship are the same needed to work through the emotional deficits of the past. The path toward healthy relationships and healing the wounded self requires a great deal of support, nurture, and encouragement. Let's turn our attention to one resource for help.

### *Spirituality*

There is truth to the paradox that accepting difference opens us up to realize a oneness that underlies all relationships. The spirituality of difference finds a oneness in midst of difference and diversity. Although we are all different and unique, we are also very much the same, needing the basic physical and emotional elements of life for our aliveness. We seek a partner who has enough sameness to be compatible, but it is the differences

of the other that cause the mystical “chemical attraction.” The following are some helpful spiritual aspects for the journey of healthy relationships:

Spiritual aspect of humanity. Humanity is to be celebrated as a miraculous part of creation. Everyone belongs to the human race, without exceptions. There are no tests to take, no duties to perform, no possible way to be eliminated. All people are human. No amount of shame can take away our innate grace.

Spiritual aspect of humility. Humility is the full knowledge of our limitations. All human beings are equal, with no person better or worse than another. Humility allows for difference by acknowledging that we are limited and different. Each of us has the right and responsibility to decide how to live our lives. Every person is good enough to contribute some value to the world.

Spiritual aspect of gratitude. Gratitude is the realization of the goodness you possess. It means letting go of the fear and anxiety of deprivation long enough to experience the joy of what you authentically are and do have. Gratitude

transcends the angst of life and is an antidote for greed and envy.

*Spiritual aspect of grace.* Grace is the profound realization that you are acceptable, you belong, and you are good enough just the way you are. All partners need to be assured that they are human, normal, and competent. These reasonable human needs are especially not met in shaming relationships. Shaming relationships are formed when two shamed partners come together as a couple. The spiritual aspect of grace will be particularly significant for shamed partners.

*Spiritual aspect of realness.* Realness involves being in touch with what you think, feel, and need. There are many forces that can pull you away from experientially knowing these things at any given moment. For various reasons you may have learned to focus on what others might think, feel, or need in order to please them. However, this doesn't work in the long run because it is ultimately inauthentic. Realness is a spiritual path of finding truth within your self and being free from the fears associated with the consequences of being real.

*Spiritual aspect of meditation.* Meditation comes in many forms, numerous methods, and various techniques. It can look like prayer or silence, and it can be practiced formally or informally. Meditation is an invitation to notice when you reach your personal human limits or when your life is out of balance. The practice of meditation is helpful in finding clarity, moving toward flexibility and openness, and discovering and developing your real self.

*A New Beginning*

You have completed the Relationships: Overcoming the Power of Difference Booklet. Your thoughts and feelings have been aroused and you have learned some skills and concepts that will serve you well if you continue to work at them. The endeavor to grow and evolve is not an easy one and you can take some time right now to congratulate yourself for a job well done. You are encouraged to review this booklet frequently because it will have new value and meaning each time you do.

We hope you have found yourself with more capacity to tolerate difference... your own and that of others, as well as, an increased sense of hope and greater satisfaction. Even more, we hope that you will use it to

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help create a world in which all human beings are accepted without fear. Most of all, we wish you a life that is centered on appreciation and mutual respect. Your process of personal evolution is a new beginning.

## About the Author

**Rich Pfeiffer, M.Div., Ph.D.,** is Director/Founder of Growth Central, a pioneering mental health provider of issue-focused, short-term individual psychotherapy programs and The Real Solution Workbooks. He is a Nationally Certified Anger Management Specialist-V (NAMA), an Integral Psychotherapist, and a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist. His psychological and theological training provides the foundation for his expertise in helping people work through their core conflicts. He is a Certified Pastoral Psychotherapist having graduated from the Blanton-Peale Graduate Institute (NYC). Rich is a Distinguished Diplomate of the National Anger Management Association (NAMA), Fellow of the American Association of Pastoral Counselors (AAPC), and Clinical Member of the American Group Psychological Association (AGPA). He teaches, supervises and consults with professionals in curriculum development, workshops/seminars, and supervision for Anger Management, Assertiveness, Anxiety/Panic, Stress Management, Self Esteem, Relationships. He is the author of eight *Real Solution Workbooks*. Dr. Pfeiffer has provided psychotherapeutic services to individuals, couples and groups for twenty years. He has great enthusiasm for clinical issues seen through the various disciplines of psychoanalysis, integral psychotherapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy and systems analysis.

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