

# *Coming Together for Life-* *From Conflict to Caring*



## **STOP ARGUING** *Start* *Understanding* *Each Other*

**Couples Communication  
Skills Seminar Manual**

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The following is the only full exercise provided in this free sample. The other exercises are presented in brief to give you a chance to see a little more of the manual.

## I PLAY A ROLE IN OUR CONFLICTS

A concerned husband goes to see the family doctor and says, "I think my wife is deaf because she never hears me the first time I say something, in fact, I often have to repeat things over and over again." "Well, the doctor replies, "go home tonight and stand about 15 feet from her and say something. If she doesn't reply, move about five feet closer and say it again. Keep doing this so we can get an idea about the severity of her deafness. "Sure enough, the husband goes home and does exactly as instructed. He starts off about 15 feet from his wife in the kitchen and as she is chopping some vegetables, he says, "Honey, what's for dinner?" He gets no response. He moves about five feet closer and asks again. No reply. He moves five feet closer. Still no reply. He gets fed up and moves right behind her, about an inch away, and asks again, "Honey, what's for dinner?" She replies, "For the fourth time, vegetable stew!!!

Blaming, and avoiding being blamed by the other, is one of the most constant sources of bickering and escalating, angry arguments. This exercise is designed to help you identify how YOU contribute to each argument. Even when you feel the problem is 99.9 % the other person's responsibility, it is extremely important that you still be able to say how you are aware that you contributed to the problem. **TO SAY IT BEFORE YOU START LISTING HOW IT'S THE OTHER PERSON'S FAULT GETS YOU BONUS POINTS!**

Do any of the following statements apply to you? Check the ones that apply to you. Then turn to your partner and say it in your own words, taking turns saying what you've checked?

I am aware that you have rarely heard me say, "I made a mistake." I will try to tell you when I know I've made a mistake.

I can be very judgmental and act like a parent with you sometimes. That's not right, and I want to change that, without blaming you.

I have difficulty saying that I might have made a mistake that hurt you. Or saying that I'm aware that what I did, or did not do, has hurt you. I will be more sensitive to how I may have hurt you in the future.

I have difficulty getting away from the idea that one of us is right, and that the other therefore is wrong. I can see how my attitude makes our conflicts worse. I want to improve my ability to simply empathize with you, without judging what is right and wrong.

I have trouble seeing that your feelings are legitimate and that they make sense to you. When I cannot understand then I sometimes make you justify them, which I know makes you feel a lack of respect in my part. I want to get better at accepting how you experience problems, without trying to invalidate your feelings by making you defensive.

In a conflict I am not good at showing you that I feel bad for how I've affected you. It is hard to show you that I care about your experience of a problem or your point of view. I'll make an effort to show you that I do feel badly for how I've affected you in the future.

I am aware that I often get caught up in the argument of 'whose fault is this'. This means I'm unable to tune into you, trying to understand what you're feeling. I'm going to stop the blaming.

\_\_\_ I sometimes justify my behavior, when I'm really just feeling guilty or defensive. I want to stop justifying my bad behavior with you. I want to stop justifying my rudeness.

\_\_\_ I am aware that sometimes the tone of my voice sounds harsh and rejecting. I can see that it would be hard for you not to defend yourself when I speak that way. I want to work on speaking more respectfully to you.

\_\_\_ I become fearful and don't talk about that feeling with you. I end up showing that I am angry, hurt or I withdraw from you. I am going to try to get better at talking with you about what I'm anxious about.

\_\_\_ I can be insensitive to your feelings sometimes, and I've rarely admitted that I'm aware of how hurtful that can be for you. I want to see myself being more sensitive to how things affect you. I want to see myself being able to listen to you and I want to be able to accept it if you tell me that I have been insensitive to you.

\_\_\_ Sometimes I know I can be very selfish, and I rarely admit that I'm aware of how hurtful that can be for you. I want to make it safe for you to talk to me about this when it happens.

\_\_\_ I have been dishonest with you in the past. I can understand how hard it is for you to trust what I say to you. I need to face this problem of being deceptive. I hope you can eventually forgive me. I'm aware that I need to demonstrate that I have changed before you can trust me more fully again.

\_\_\_ Another type of deception is not talking about how I feel. I may be hurt, disappointed or angry and I often do not tell you how I feel as I feel it. I need to improve my ability to share my feelings more with you. I want to improve generally in my willingness to communicate more about what's going on in my life, particularly how I'm feeling.

\_\_\_ I tend to blame you in a blanket fashion for my troubles when I know that you are not the sole cause of my frustrations. I am going to work on seeing my responsibility in problems I'm having.

The free sample above is designed to give you one full exercise to use as a couple. The rest of the pages of this sample contains fragments of the many exercises and self tests that may convince you that the manual is a great bargain for what it offers. Please remember that the samples in this document are very brief and incomplete. The purchased manual contains the full exercise, worksheets and instructions for use. Some people feel that they get so much information in our free sample that they figure, "Why buy the manual?"

- A. There is 10 times the information, writing, and direction given in the full workbook.
- B. There's a full money back guarantee if you don't think it's helpful.

Enjoy! Please read on....

Congratulations on taking the first step toward making your relationship the best that it can be! One of the main points of the workbook is to get people to look at what can be changed on their 'side of the fence.' When you look over to your partner and see that he or she is making changes by expressing and listening differently, it can motivate you to follow suit. So be your

partner's motivator by modeling the way that you want him or her to speak and listen to you.

Remember, you can't get the benefit of the written exercises without spending the time it takes to do the writing. The skills may appear simplistic, but they are very powerful. It's hard to master them without the repetition. Tiger Woods still practices his golf swing to improve. You'll see that it's worth it when the changes start showing in your relationship. A good motto to follow is "*Let the changes begin with me.*" You and your partner will begin to trust each other more, with every passing day.

Practice using the structured listening exercises 10 times. After that, you may not even need the full structure of all the rules because each partner will begin to trust that his, or her, point of view will be heard without arguing. Some will say that the methods are mechanical, or that it's not a natural way of speaking. I agree. I don't talk like what's shown in the techniques in my normal dialogue. But arguments are not normal dialogue. Use your own words. Whether you use our exact sentences or not, as long as the spirit of the phrase is present your relationship will improve. The spirit of our phrases can be summed up by the phrase, "I see how I may be involved in this problem, and I care about how that affects you." Or, "I understand how it makes sense that you could end up thinking and feeling that way."

Use your 20 minutes of weekly Couples Time to talk about the relationship and then add on any necessary time to do the exercises suggested in the suggested 10 week schedule on the next page. Use the 'Couples Time' as much as you can for discussing thoughts and feelings about the prior week. Try to do the exercises in addition to the time set aside for 'Couples Time.' The schedule is only suggested. You may find that, as a couple, you want to make certain agreements sooner, rather than later. Please stay in touch.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Marc Sadoff".

Marc Sadoff, MSW, BCD

## A Schedule For Action Between Meetings

**Week 1** Read the manual up to page 23 to finish the section on listening. Agree upon the regular day and time that you will set aside as safe time for talking together. Make the 'Couples Time' agreement on page 16. Read about the 'Listening Exchange' and make the agreement out loud with each other on page 23. Do the practice exercises on page 21 together. Then, role play the practice angry statements on page 22 with your partner. If your conflicts are highly escalated or become intimidating, adversarial, blaming, violent or abandoning then take some time to do the Week 3 section which covers 'Time Outs' and make the time out agreement in this first meeting also.

**Week 2** Read and do the exercise from page 24- 25 as a couple about 'I Play A Role In Our Conflicts.' Review page 17 on General Communication Guidelines and talk to your partner about the page using the Listening Exchange. Speak only about what you want to **change about yourself** that this page makes you think about. Do not talk yet about personal relationship issues with your partner unless it feels safe. Do the 'Identifying Thoughts and Feelings' exercise pg 81. Do the Expressing Anger vs. Hostility exercise on page 44.

**Week 3** Read about Safety, Understanding and Expression and do the writing. Read about 'Taking Time Outs' pages 30- 39. Do the exercises and make the agreement on page 37 with your partner out loud. Give positive feedback for progress to partner.

**Week 4** Fill out the section called 'Personal Inventories' starting on page 92 before you meet at your regular time. At the minimum do the section on page 102 & 103. You will be writing about anything you discovered about your life history that could be related to problems you and your partner have. Each partner can share something positive about noticing a positive quality or change in the other during the 'Couples Time'.

**Week 5** Read pages 39 through 53 about how to deal with disrespect and what each of you will commit to doing if you find that you cannot follow through with these agreements. Make the agreement out loud on page 49 Begin your journal on page 50 and make the agreement on page 52 about getting more help if needed. Give positive feedback for progress to partner.

**Week 6** Read about 'First Pants...Then Shoes' from page 54 to page 63. Do all the exercises beginning on page 57 and use some of your 'Couples Time' to talk about your answers to these practice examples. Each partner to share something positive about noticing a positive quality or change in the other during the 'Couples Time'.

**Week 7** Read about the 'Empathic Request' from page 64 through page 75. Do the Empathic Request exercise using the templates on page 70. Remember the exercise uses the practice examples which begin on page 76. If you have a real personal empathic request to make of your partner, then use the 'Couples Time' to make it and have it heard. Do the exercise called 'Times With You When I Found That I Could Express Frustration Safely' on page 90.

**Week 8** Do the exercise on page 81 called 'Intent vs. Effect' before your weekly meeting. Do the Drawbridge and other exercises from pages 85 through 87. Do the 'Things You Can Do That Make Me Feel Cared About' exercise pg 88.

**Week 9** Do the 'Name That Fear' exercise on page 84 before your next weekly meeting. Talk openly about sexual needs, desires and frustrations. In some cases, it is helpful to schedule times to be intimate. The person who is more passive generally should be the one to take the lead more often initiating intimate times.

**Week 10** Read the Glossary of terms and phrases and talk about any of the concepts that you think may apply to your relationship. Use the 'Listening Exchange' to talk about hot topics. This manual is primarily designed to control high conflict which gets in the way of intimacy. There are many books on intimacy which can enhance intimacy and affection. The premise of this workbook is that a couple needs to find a structure to control high conflict first. If you've practiced the Listening Exchange for at least 20 minutes each week then try having a discussion about forgiveness on page 79.

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## Introduction

I saw a special on a cable channel about the training of Secret Service agents who protect the President. The director of training the agents said that when most people hear a gunshot, they have a natural reflex to move away from the sound of the shot. He saw one of his more difficult tasks as retraining his agents to MOVE TOWARD the sound so the agent could quickly disarm the assassin to protect the president.

At Pacific Skills Training Co. we have a similar difficult task. When a person feels attacked by her partner the most natural human response is to defend oneself. This can be done by arguing defensively, withdrawing emotionally, or attacking back. After completing the exercises in this book you will find that when someone you care about is angry with you, you will 'move toward the anger'. One method you will learn here is called 'First Pants..Then Shoes.' The goal of the First Pants...then Shoes method is to respond to the anger of another without making things worse by defending. You can always defend yourself later. But once you've begun defending, the other person legitimately feels you are not listening or that you don't care. We call that 'Putting on your shoes before your pants.' Your excuses or point of view may be very understandable. It's just the sequence is wrong when the defending occurs first. If you speak first about your point of view, it's harder to convince your partner that you care.

The natural instinct is to defend yourself. But instead we urge you to respond in a way that shows that you are responsible and you care about how your partner was affected. This means that when you hear your partner's angry or offended tone of voice, you first MOVE TOWARD THE ANGER in a way that shows you're interested in addressing it. Yes, relationships are tough.

Without accepting all the blame, can you see where maybe you made a small mistake? Are you even 2% responsible for the problem and how that affects your partner? Is it possible that you were insensitive, fearful, dishonest, mean or selfish? Are you capable of saying any of these things about yourself out loud to your partner? Are you capable of saying these things *before* you get the other to understand your point of view?

There are few school courses devoted to solving interpersonal high conflict situations productively. There was no instructor who supervised and watched while I demonstrated that I had mastered the basics of listening, problem solving and taking Time Outs. Yet it's these very simple techniques that can make the difference between success and failure in marriage and relationships. The research shows that while issues like money, sex, in-laws and children may be divisive, the destructiveness really is a product of 'HOW COUPLES TALK TO EACH OTHER'. Are they showing respect for each other? Is there a sense of mutual responsibility and empathy that each partner can feel in the spirit of the other?

.....

Much of the initial work with the men in our anger management groups is in helping them redefine what the word responsibility means. Most of them confuse the word with meaning 'to blame' or 'who caused the problem.' Sometimes it takes 6-8 months before a man in our group can see that we are asking him to see is how his thoughts, feelings or behaviors are *involved or contribute to* the conflict. Can he ask himself how he is involved in why it is that his wife is feeling so angry or acting so distant. He starts talking about how he can see that his behavior is a PART of the problem. Now that he's including himself as a part of the problem, he can see himself as part of the solution. Now he has some power. Perhaps more importantly, his wife no

longer feels identified as the crazy, emotional one in the relationship who is the only source of the problem.

I think the driving force of much of a woman's emotional intensity of feeling rejected, non-existent or insignificant comes from trying to overcome a man's unwillingness to-

- a) **Listen seriously** to her thoughts and feelings.
- or b) **Accept** that he did something that disturbed her.

=====  
*"I see you're having trouble accepting that you did something that hurt me. I trust you want to make it better. Let's take turns talking."*  
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And, it's my belief that the man's defensive reaction to the hurt/disappointed/angry feelings his woman has comes from feeling overwhelmed by the emotional intensity of her expression. This perceived total rejection triggers his defensiveness which comes out as avoiding justifying, rationalizing, denying and blaming. His response is understandable, but if this is the tone of his first words of reply to her expression, it is simply unproductive.

**Men have more power to change their relationships than they know!**

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*"I'll listen to how you say I've affected you."*  
=====

Men often need to tolerate the negative feelings expressed by women, to communicate more and to be response-ible. during conflicts. Dr. John Gottman, author of "Why Marriages Succeed...or Fail", uses the phrase "To accept being influenced by the woman." Does this mean to simply say "Yes dear" and to do whatever she wants? NO! It means that she can see that your decisions and behavior are influenced by her needs and feelings. There are some men who would feel that this is being controlled by a woman. I plead with such men not to see these things as all or none. Being influenced by your partner *does not* mean being controlled by her!

Not everything is about who is in control. Most women would be happy enough to feel understanding and empathy for their feelings. For some men, to show their partners that they can understand their point of view means that they also agree with their position. I can judge the shrew who constantly criticizes her husband as bad and unpleasant. At the same time I can seek to understand how perhaps this husband's lack of physical and emotional attention has probably produced the situation with his wife. So let's stop blaming and defending. The purpose of this manual is to help men and women in relationships develop and demonstrate a sense of mutual responsibility as well as respect and empathy for their partners' experience of a problem.

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***Understanding how the other came to feel hurt or angry does not mean that you approve or agree with their conclusions.***  
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Dr. Gottman has clear advice for women, which comes from his extensive research on what makes marriages succeed or fail. It resonates well with my personal and professional experience.

rience. He says to women, "Be gentler in approaching men with your complaints or criticisms." I have a section in this book about the Respect Agreement. My phrase for it is "It's not what you said. It was *how you said it* that bothered me." I also use the phrase "I am interested in how you feel. But, could you just not emotionally accelerate from zero to 90 miles per hour when you're first expressing yourself? I would listen to you better and maybe I wouldn't be so defensive if I didn't feel so overwhelmed with the emotional intensity of your delivery."

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*Men can learn to show that they can be influenced by their partners.  
Women need to learn to be more gentle in the  
way that they express their feelings.*  
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### **What is the Goal? What is it worth to solve the problem?**

A large industrial manufacturer of electronic components uses an automated computerized assembly line system that is tremendously complex. This assembly line accomplished 73 separate tasks and integrated 26 machines connected by conveyer belts. There were thousands of circuits and switches. The assembly line started to have problems in operation on Monday morning and by the evening the whole manufacturing division was shut down costing the company over \$100,000 a day in lost production.

The general manager gathered four in-house experts together that night. They studied blueprints and experimented with one plan after another. After all had failed to bring the line into operation they admitted defeat. It was 2:30 am and the desperate manager promised the experts a \$500 bonus for a referral to anyone that could fix it. All four agreed on the name of John Turner. The manager called John at home at 3:00 am and told him of the problem. John yawned and said he'd fix it for \$10,000. The manager agreed and John showed up 20 minutes later. John listened to the way the problem developed and asked three more questions. He said "Uh-huh" to the manager and then walked directly over to the #36 circuit board, readjusted a fuse and flipped one switch. The whole assembly line started humming and producing again.

John put out his hand for the money and the manager started grumbling about paying such a high price for so little time spent fixing the problem. As John put the check into his pocket, he said, "You're not paying me for my time. You're paying me for my lifetime of experience which allows me to know exactly which switch to flip to solve your problem."

From my experience facilitating domestic violence groups, time spent with individuals and couples in counseling and especially my personal experience in passionate conflicted relationships, I know which 'switches to flip.' Intimate relationships between human beings are more complex than any assembly line. That's why there are thousands of books about how to solve various problems that result from miscommunication and misunderstanding between people.



*Just the right skills needed to defuse escalating angry arguments!*

This manual may be small, but it is precisely targeted at the skills needed to negotiate conflict and to restore trust within relationships. It provides practical structured exercises and commitments to get to the heart of problems of intimate communication. I welcome feedback and comments about the methods. I only ask that you've actually made all the agreements with your partner out loud to each other. And that you've practiced some of the written exercises before you submit comments.

The most common question is "What if my partner doesn't want to follow these guidelines?" Try using the methods for your own communications with your partner for 3 months and see whether there isn't some shift in the quality of your relationship. What if you've tried this, or if your partner refuses to honor these basic agreements about respect? Well then, now you know for sure that your partner is not interested in showing you a minimum level of caring or consideration. That's painful information! But it's important information to have, don't you think? It's information you may need to make the important decisions later, such as whether to stay in the relationship.

So judge the worth of this program not by its volume, but by its effectiveness in solving the problem. And judge its effectiveness not by how much your partner changes, but by how you feel about yourself as you grow to become more of the person you want to be!



*Coming Together for Life-  
From Conflict to Caring*

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*The origin of all my conflict with others is that I do not  
say what I mean and do not do as I say. -Martin Buber*  
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The success of this program depends upon how seriously each of you treats agreements that you make with your partner. Heeding the words of Martin Buber above, the question to ask yourself is "Do I really say what I mean and do as I say? A temptation for many people who find themselves not following their commitments is to blame the other person or other circumstances for their behavior. While these factors may be important, what matters to someone with integrity is to 'own up' to having broken their agreement first. Later, he can explain or offer reasons!

There will be people complaining about how this book does not work for them who have not tried to improve their *own* skills. They were only looking at the other person's behavior and whether the other person has changed. The results to look for here are in whether **YOU** can become more responsible and empathic in your communication, and also whether you can demonstrate control over your behavior when it threatens or disturbs your partner.

The commitment is made to oneself. "I want to see myself acting differently in the future in the following way....." Whenever commitments are made to another as a promise to the other as in "I promise to you that I will be different in the future" it is at least a beginning. Many

spouses would feel successful if at least this was said by their partner. On the other hand, many spouses are tired of hearing promises made and then forgotten, broken and rationalized. The main reason for making a commitment to oneself in the form I described above is that it shows that it is important to YOU as a value. Remember the saying "Let it begin with me!"



**It is your first words that will show what is most important to you.**

Are you more interested in defending your 'good name' than in hearing how you have affected your partner?

***Do my first words convey that:***

- A) My highest priority is defending myself. Or do they show that-*
- B) I care about how my partner feels and how I affected her/him.*

I do a demonstration of the 'First words' principle in the workshop. I pretend as if I'm having lunch with friends and tell them that I'm expecting a call from my cousin who's with my seriously ill uncle Joe at the hospital. Then, I pretend to receive a call in which I say, "I'm so sorry, John.. I'll see you tonight." I close my cell phone and say to my friends, "My uncle just died... he's worth millions... and I feel so bad for for his family." I ask the group if they have made any assumptions about my values. Then I ask how they came to their assessment of my values. The group always focuses on the fact that because I mentioned the 'millions **FIRST**, they assumed that my priority was his money. The same holds true for what your **FIRST WORDS** are when your partner is upset with you. If I had mentioned his money last they agree that they would not judge me so much as the money grubber that they do when I mention it first. Your first words in response to your hurt/angy partner will communicate either that your priority is to 'defend & protect' or to 'mend & connect.'

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*Clarify what your values are. What kind of a person do you want to be? How do you want to see yourself behaving when there is conflict between you and your partner?*  
=====

*I want to see myself acting from love more than from fear.*



**What are your values? Who do you want to see yourself becoming?**