

***Winning Your Relationship Game***

Create a Relationship You Love

*by*

**Allison Velez**

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*This book is dedicated to Wil and Stefanie.*

*Thank goodness you’ve put up with me.*

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 **Winning Your Relationship Game**

**Foreword**

Why a book about improving relationships? As a 20 year veteran of individual, marriage and family counseling, I am often dumbfounded at how a previously loving couple will be cruel to each other. Often they will intentionally insult, disrespect, and belittle each other. Although we assume most relationships begin with levels of love and hope convincing the couple they want to be together for the foreseeable future, several years later they cannot carry on a civil conversation.

Often by the time a couple seeks counseling the relationship is doomed to fail. For this reason counseling couples is often frustrating and tedious work. I have often said I wish I could be with my patients all day to help them through their interactions. Many of the things I coach people on are repetitive and need to be applied on a daily basis rather than one hour a week in my office. Publishing this book is a way of being more present in helping couples navigate that time on their own.

The *Winning Your Relationship Game* book consists of lessons I give almost all the couples I work with. If you have barriers to working with a counselor on your own, my hope is this will give you a starting place to make some winning plays in your relationship. I’d like to be as helpful as I possibly can so I encourage you to email me with your questions and comments at allison@allisonvelez.com.

If you’re interested in connecting with others who are in the game with you, head over to the forum at [www.WinningYourRelationshipGame.com](http://www.WinningYourRelationshipGame.com) and chat with others who are there. I’ll be there as well, helping you develop strategies for *Winning Your Relationship Game*.

**Introduction**

 What does *Winning Your Relationship Game* mean?

My definition is reaching a level of happiness you’ve only dreamed of before. Or maybe you once had it but haven’t felt for a long time.

How does *Winning Your Relationship Game* work?

Relationships rest on 3 foundational pillars of Compassion, Communication and Commitment. You must have all 3 pillars in place and strong for your relationship to remain stable. Development in all 3 areas will grow the closeness and happiness of a winning relationship.

To develop the foundational pillars, you must address 3 areas of reality. These are areas of thoughts, feelings and behaviors. While thoughts and feelings are important, behaviors are what wins or loses in relationships. Sometimes, changing behaviors depends on addressing thoughts and feelings behind them. Don’t be afraid, you’ll find this simple, but not easy. Developing consistent good habits in your relationship will improve all these areas. This program helps identify areas you need to develop and helps you consistently practice them.

Traditional therapy utilizes infrequent contact with a couple, teaching skills that a couple isn’t good at and sending them into the world for the next week to blunder and fumble. When a relationship is in crisis, this isn’t helpful. I consider *Winning Your Relationship Game* an “untherapy”. You do the work every day on your own and check in to work out glitches as you go. Periodically, you may want to debrief with someone to gain perspective.

Who will benefit from *Winning Your Relationship Game*?

Anyone who is in a committed relationship can benefit from *Winning Your Relationship Game*. It can help a relationship in real trouble or one that’s just lost its zest.

 Why should I put efforts into *Winning Your Relationship Game*?

There are a slew of statistics out there informing us of the benefits of staying in a stable relationship. Here’s a few:

***1. Your children will suffer****.* According to Judith Wallerstein’s work in: The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25 Year Landmark Study, most children are harmed by divorce. A study in The American Sociological Review reports that children of divorce lag behind in math scores and social skills for years.

**2. *Your financial life will suffer.*** According to Linda Waite, research published in 1995 showed that married couples are better off financially.

**3. *Your health and longevity will suffer.*** A study in The Journal of Health and Social Behavior indicates that married people who become divorced or lose a spouse to death, suffer a decline in physical health which may never be recovered. These men and women had 20 percent more chronic health issues.

**4. *Your emotional health will suffer.*** A review of several studies by the Department of Health and Human Services concludes that people who are transitioning into marriage are less depressed and those who transition out of marriage are more depressed. This factor lingers for years after a divorce.

 These are some of the more measureable effects of being in a committed relationship. There are a multitude of other benefits such as feelings of safety and support which are reported to be more likely in marriages specifically. It stands to reason that any committed relationship would yield at least some of these benefits! Being emotionally connected with another person can be one of the most rewarding activities you will ever be involved in. All this makes it worth trying in every way possible to keep a relationship together.

 When is *Winning Your Relationship Game* not enough?

There are limitations. Winning Your Relationship Game will not help you convince your partner they’re wrong and you’re right. It will not allow excuses for your behavior based on what your partner is or isn’t doing. If you’re looking for a way to change others, good luck! Chances are very good there area few things you still can change. After all, if it makes a positive difference wouldn’t it be worthwhile? And if you give up, don’t you want to say you tried everything you could?

No book can be broad enough to handle every issue. Issues of addictions, domestic violence, or infidelity are special cases**.** *Winning Your Relationship Game* might help a little, but these issues need specialized intervention. If you’re in an unsafe situation, get outside help immediately.

Dedicated practice of the exercises included here will make a positive difference in your relationship, I promise. I’m here to help if you get stuck or don’t understand, please reach out to me at allison@allisonvelez.com or come over to the forum at [www.WinningYourRelationshipGame.com](http://www.WinningYourRelationshipGame.com). If you’ve given an honest effort to this program and it’s not helped, you may want to seek professional help.

 *Winning Your Relationship Game* Rules:

Every game has some rules and I’ll try to keep it simple.

1. This is about you. Let go of the notion you can change anyone else. All these lessons are for you. You can play *Winning Your Relationship Game* even if your partner is reluctant to join. One person changing can impact a relationship system. It HAS to. It can be a lot more fun if both you and your partner are playing, but don’t let that stop you. Recognize that you are the only person you can change, so agree to look at yourself.

2. Thirty minutes most days must be spent doing lessons and exercises for at least ninety days. Truthfully, there is no way to improve anything without effort and attention. Even if you believe the fault in your relationship is all your partners, you have to commit to dedicate this minimum amount of time. This habit is essential. Remember that building new skills and habits is difficult. If you aren’t willing to commit to this rule, *Winning Your Relationship Game* is probably not right for you. Change only comes with time and attention. Without that, there may be no program that is right for you.

3. All exercises must be completed. Have you proclaimed, “I’m trying so hard to make this work?” Or, “I’ll try anything to make this relationship better.” Then I don’t care if you think it’s silly or hard. You’ll do anything, right? Do the exercises faithfully. Let’s assume that I’ve talked intimately with more couples than you. The insight about typical patterns of behavior in couples has contributed to these exercises. While a book won’t allow an individualized intervention, there are many commonalities in relationships. These exercises are designed to address some of the most problematic issues I see.

**Chapter 1-Do you care where you’re going?**

There’s a saying that goes if you don’t care where you’re going any road will take you there. You want to be deliberate about the road you’re traveling. In order to make lasting change, you have to set a goal. Setting a goal will help you in *Winning Your Relationship Game*, but there’s some planning to do first.

 *Winning Your Relationship Game* has a lot to do with habits and behavior change. Many of the lessons are based in research that’s proven to support positive relationships and behavior change. You aren’t going to rely on will power. Anyone who’s had to try to diet knows that will power is very unreliable. You’re going to set goals that allow you to capitalize on motivation.

Your initial goal, I like to call a Personal Motivation Statement. This is where you’d ultimately like to end up. Take just a minute and focus on what prompted you to buy this book. Write a sentence or two about what you were hoping to improve in your relationship.

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 This is the beginning of your Personal Motivation Statement. Now, go back and look at it again. Does it focus on changing something about your partner? If it does, refer back to the Rules. You can’t change anyone’s behavior except your own, so if your statement is focused on your partner, change it up here:

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 Right now it can be fairly broad. As you go on, it will change, you’ll gain insight and tweak it to fit. Remember, this is the foundation for everything else you’re going to do, so take the time to really do this exercise.

Having a Personal Motivation Statement is good, but to really ramp up your motivation, you have to know why that Personal Motivation Statement is important. You might be able to tell that I like to play games whenever I can. It makes life more fun.

To clarify a Personal Motivation Statement I like to use a game called *“The Five Whys”.* The five whys are actually business concepts used to do what’s called root cause analysis. It’s also a really useful tool to help you dig deeper into your thoughts and feelings.

Refer back to your beginning Personal Motivation Statement. You’re going to ask yourself WHY it’s important to you. You’ll get your answer and then you’ll ask again WHY that is important to you. Then you’ll have another answer and you’ll ask WHY that is important? You’ll continue to do this for five cycles. Don’t rush through this. If you are persistent, it will lead to a very clear idea of the value of your Personal Motivation Statement.

 To give an example, my Personal Motivation Statement might be: I want to feel closer to my partner.

1. Why is it important to feel closer to my partner? Because closeness feels good.

2. Why is it important to have the good feeling of being close? Because I feel more secure when I’m feeling close.

3. Why is it important to feel more secure? Because feeling more secure reduces my anxiety about belonging in my relationship.

4. Why is it important to have reduced anxiety about belonging? Because then I can be relaxed and really be myself.

5. Why is it important to feel more relaxed and be myself? Because then I feel have a stable foundation for all the other areas of my life.

 Just walking through this exercise reveals something deeper about what is important to me. I know exactly why it’s important for me to be closer to my partner. It’s going to put me on the road of changing the right behaviors creating more closeness with my partner.

That’s the basics of setting a Personal Motivation Statement about your relationship. Having a Personal Motivation Statement to focus on is a habit you’re starting today. It can be revised as needed, but every day, you want that statement front and center in your awareness. I want you to find such value in focusing on that statement so that by this by the time this program is over, you’ll continue to use it to motivate you to your goals.

 The recap:

1. Develop your Personal Motivation Statement about your relationship.

2. Focus on your Personal Motivation Statement for this work you’re doing. It’s your foundation, so it’s important.

3. Go deeper and know the WHY of your Personal Motivation Statement. Knowing what you’re working on and why you’re working on it will help pull you through.

 Practice time:

Create a Personal Motivation Statement. Take all the time you need. It should take you a while and it might be frustrating. Don’t rush it.

 If you have an answer that just doesn’t seem right, sit with it. Trust yourself. We all have a deep inner knowing, so when it’s your truth, you’ll know.

If you’d like a worksheet, there’s one included in your self-coaching package. If you get stuck, send me an email at allison@allisonvelez.com. If you’re a member, come over to the forum and let’s talk.

Good luck and get ready for the next chapter.

**Chapter 2-Bid For Attention- Power Play**

How much attention do you really give your partner? I’m willing to bet, it’s not as much as you think. Attention to others communicates interest and respect. Both are key elements to *Winning Your Relationship Game*.

 The Power Plays sprinkled throughout this book are intended as easy techniques to inject quick connection between you and your partner. You can use this even if your partner is not playing along with you. Your partner doesn’t even have to know you’re doing it!

Bids for Attention are attempts to engage or connect with your partner. It’s any type of communication, verbal or not, where you expect a response. Most couples do this very casually all the time.

Why is it important to recognize and acknowledge Bids for Attention? Unmet Bids for Attention develop into a source of discontent. According to research by Dr. John Gottman, successful couples appropriately respond to Bids for Attention 86% of the time. I know you want to be in that number, so you’re going to want to know how to do this.

Bids for Attention look like this:

 Your partner sends you an email or a text.

 Your partner tells you what their plans for the day are.

 Your partner comments on what a nice day it is.

 Your partner mentions something they’d like to do this weekend.

Your response communicates interest or lack of interest to your partner. For example: My husband and I have a nontraditional living situation. We’ve been married for many years, but he’s lived and worked overseas a large part of that time. Recently, he started a new job and was extremely busy getting things in place. I would send emails with information; a story I thought he’d like or something funny. He wouldn’t respond. I started to think he didn’t care about what I had to say. My feelings were hurt. Now I don’t know about you, but when I get hurt, I sometimes get a little angry.

Luckily, I’m smarter than I used to be and instead of acting on my anger, I checked it out with myself. I realized that my emailing was a Bid for Attention and his lack of response left me feeling unimportant. So I explained it to him and now, even if it’s just a word or two, he will respond.

How can you respond to Bids for Attention? Dr. Gottman notes three methods of response.

 Turning towards

 Turning away

 Turning against

Turning towards is a positive, or at least a neutral response. Turning away is an absence of response. Turning against is a negative response.

To clarify with an example: You’re watching TV in the evening, your favorite show. Your partner comes in the room and says, “I think I’m going to go take a walk.” (Bid for Attention) You can respond in the three ways listed above:

 Turning towards -You look up and say, “OK, See you later.”

 Turning away -You remain fixated on the TV and don’t respond.

 Turning against -You roll your eyes and say, “Can’t you see I’m watching TV!?”

Bids for Attention come in many varieties. It can be asking how do I look? Or will you get me a drink? It can be a simple comment like I’m going to take a walk. Responses can come in just as many varieties. It can be: unh huh, ok, or it can spark a full on conversation.

You might be thinking-this is going to be freaking exhausting! It doesn’t have to be. And building this habit is going to be worth it.

 The Recap:

1. Bids for Attention are how you try to engage or connect with your partner.

2. A consistent turning towards response to your partner’s Bids for Attention conveys interest and respect.

Practice Time:

Starting today, make your commitment to use this power play every day. Use the worksheet included if you like.

Notice the Bids for Attention that your partner makes. Do they walk by and put their hand on your shoulder? Do they tell you about a news story you could care less about?

Now your challenge is to RESPOND with a consistent turning towards approach. Simply acknowledging the Bid in a positive or neutral way will suffice. Turn and smile when they touch your shoulder. Say “Oh, cool!” when they tell you about the news story.

If your partner’s playing along, you can keep each other accountable. If you’re on your own, can you share this chapter with your partner to see if they will take the challenge with you? If not, practice being the very best at noticing and turning towards your partner's Bids for Attention. That's a winner’s habit.

If you get stuck, send me an email at allison@allisonvelez.com. If you’re a member, we can discuss it one on one in the forum!

 Good Luck and on to the next chapter!

**Chapter 3-Where is the Love?**

Ah, romance! That blissful state of mind. Have you wondered why we can’t stay there? Or what happened to it? Often, you look back at that time in your relationship and feel like it was perfect. In a lot of ways you believe it was. But, everything that grows in nature occurs in a cycle, relationships included. Healthy relationships have periods of closeness and distance, conflict and negotiation.

One of the great things about Western culture is the privilege of finding and choosing your own partner. That’s not the case in many parts of our planet. In fact, in 3/5 of the world, marriages are still arranged. In most societies, having a choice in relationship is a “new” concept. Historically, convenience, wealth, or status drove commitment decisions.

 Because you CHOSE your partner, you may tend to think your relationship should be lovely all the time. When unhappy feelings intrude, you panic. Unhappiness in your relationship doesn’t mean it’s over. You must remember feelings are just that, feelings. So unhappiness just means you’re having some feelings about what’s happening right now. Famous quote attributed to me: “Feelings are important, but it’s your behavior that wins the game.”

Let’s dig into this. Everyone has a desire to feel belonging. You rely, rightfully so, on your significant relationship to help fill that need. That sense of belonging has some science behind it. When you fall in love, it can be a euphoric, ecstatic experience. Well, you don’t know the half of it. In fact, falling in love creates a hormonal cascade that affects you the same way drugs do. It leaves you literally impaired. So, if you feel things aren’t what they used to be, it’s because the drugs have worn off. Congratulations you’re sober!

Those falling in love hormones create an obsessive, trancelike state. Do you recall: Thinking about each other all the time. Daydreaming about when you’d be together next. Not wanting to think of anything other than that oh so perfect person. You wanted to jump on the couch like Tom Cruise over Katie Holmes. Last I heard that hadn’t ended well either. I think they needed this course.

While you’re falling in love, subconsciously, you’re attempting to prove you’re worth being attached to. You do things for each other. You open up to each other. You share a vision of the future. You delight in all the firsts of everything. All of that collides to create a peak experience. Usually you remain under the influence of the falling in love for about 6 to 8 months.

Once there is a symbolic commitment, whether it’s marriage or other commitment, you subconsciously check that box. You feel secure in your belonging, and you start to focus on other areas of your life. You may focus more on work or raising a family. You feel relieved of that drive to find belonging believing you’ve achieved it.

When you’re falling in love, you think the attentiveness your partner shows you will be the norm. You think that you’ll always want to clear your schedule to be together. You think you’ll always be delighted to pick up their dirty clothes. They think you sleeping in till 9:00 is cute. BUT after the commitment, you start to be annoyed by those little things your partner does or doesn’t do. You feel downright betrayed by the person you thought would never betray you. You didn’t sign on for this! Actually, it’s your hormone induced fog clearing.

There’s a classic relationship book called The Mirages of Marriage. In this book, one woman told this story. "Marriage is not what I assumed it would be. One assumption after another has crashed down on my head….. Marriage is like taking an airplane to Florida for a relaxing vacation in January and when you get off the plane you find you’re in the Swiss Alps in the cold and snow instead of swimming and sunshine. After you buy new clothes and learn a little of the language, you can have a great vacation there too. But getting off that airplane is quite a surprise and adjustment."

Her story is about the relationship life cycle:



The cycle starts with attraction and moves to love; then to commitment and into inevitable conflict. Then comes negotiation and on to either acceptance or separation. If acceptance occurs, it comes back around to love and on and on.

Each cycle that you move through takes you to a deeper stage of love and commitment. Commitment, you’ll remember is one of the three foundational pillars in *Winning Your Relationship Game*.

Commitment is also a goal you have to focus on as you come through the low spots of conflict and negotiation. Use the worksheet from Chapter 1-Personal Motivation Statements and identify why commitment is important to you. Can you find some motivation to keep you going?

 In every relationship, there are continuous negotiations going on. Some are conscious, a lot are totally subconscious. Every negotiation translates to change. All change is accompanied by chaos. That can feel really uncomfortable. These periods of discontent are sometimes interpreted as the end of the relationship. In fact, it’s just change and comfort is regained after a period of settling in. Winners move through the chaos and discomfort to get to the good stuff on the other side.

Sometimes, reading this uncomfortable period as the end of the relationship, you go looking for that falling in love feeling again. It was so great after all, you want to re-experience it. These periods of instability are when you consider divorce or an extramarital affair. But pay attention and you’ll see that you’re on the way to a deepening relationship. The key is behaving in winning ways.

 The fact that you freely select your love partner is significant for other reasons as well. The qualities that subconsciously attract us to a partner is a mixture of both positive and negative traits. These traits represent both the best and the worst of your past experience. Your partner is tasked to call you to wholeness, just as you are tasked to call them. That means the things you draw out of each other are underdeveloped qualities and, therefore, not comfortable.

 And so with all these bumps in the road, the cycle moves on and on. Achieving that movement through means identifying, articulating and negotiating these differences and discomfort. Conflict is a symptom of a HEALTHY relationship. Handling conflict badly is not healthy. The skills to navigate conflict in a positive and supportive way will help you move on through the low points of the cycle to ever deepening love and commitment.

No matter where you are in this cycle, this program can help.

The recap:

1. Relationships don’t fail because you fall out of love.

2. Relationships are a cycle that continuously moves through conflict and negotiation and into deeper and deeper love and commitment.

3. The struggles you have with your partner are telling you something about yourself. That something is an underdeveloped quality.

Practice Time:

Review your Personal Motivation Statement. Does it need refining? Do the “whys” still excite you? Try identifying more of your “whys”.

Did you do your Bid for Attention practice sheet from the previous chapter? Remember, you will only get out as much as you put into the program.

If you get stuck, send me an email at allison@allisonvelez.com. Have you thought about joining the membership over at [www.WinningYourRelationshipGame.com](http://www.WinningYourRelationshipGame.com) ? You get access to me on a weekly basis and the wealth of information that’s been amassed in the forum.

**Chapter 4-What were you thinking?**

Have you ever been astounded by your thinking at times? Do you react and respond at times without seeming to think at all? Well there’s a reason for that. It helps to understand some of the science of how your brain works. Knowing will help you change some of those fixed behavior tracks that aren’t helpful.

Again, what you think and feel is important, but it’s your behavior that helps in *Winning Your Relationship Game.* You’ll need to understand how your thoughts and feelings lead to behaviors. The root of the word ‘emotion’ means ‘cause to move’. You have emotions or feelings for a reason. They’re intended to protect us, but can be both a gift and a curse.

A lot of your responses to feelings are based on well learned patterns of behavior. Before age 5, your brain is like a sponge. Soaking up so much learning, it’s just amazing. Research now shows our brains continue to develop until around age 25. A lot of what your brain learns is how to respond to situations around you. Your brain loves to solve problems and it acts to establish patterns to ‘help you out’.

Some behavior patterns are fixed so deeply, it’s often hard to find them. It’s also why when you have a strong emotional response to a situation, we can often find the underlying issue in your childhood.

 There are a lot of models to talk about how the brain works. The one I like to use describes the brain being two parts. I call them the primal brain and the logic brain. The primal brain controls the apparatus of life, breathing, circulation, etc. Its job is to keep you alive and safe.

 Have you had the experience of touching something hot and reflexively pulling your hand away before you even realized that it’s hot? That’s the work of your primal brain! You can be thankful it works like it should. It doesn’t wait around for the logic brain to figure it out. It says, “Hey! That’s not safe! I’m pulling our hand away now!” In that moment of perceived danger, it takes over. And so it does anytime it perceives you're not safe.

 The logic brain works quite differently. It makes a plan, weighs the pros and the cons, and then carefully, methodically carries it out. Now this might take just a few moments, but when there’s imminent risk, those moments are too high a cost. Imagine facing a man eating tiger. The primal brain takes over and you run or fight. If the logic brain was in charge, you’d start to weigh your options, calculate the best move and then get ready to respond. In the meantime, you’re lunch.

 As an adult, you still carry those behavior tracks established long ago. When your primal brain notices something reminiscent of a past unsafe or painful situation, it gets triggered and responds automatically. Without consulting the logic brain, it ‘helps you out’. This response usually looks like anxiety, fear, or anger.

Unfortunately, the primal brain has no discernment. To it, danger is danger is danger and all similar risk is dealt with the same. The primal brain detects risk and tells your body how to react. This results in heart rate increases and changes in your breathing. Your stomach may get fluttery or tight. Your primal brain is getting your body ready to run or fight. When you get to this state, the logic brain is overridden and won’t operate. This state is called flooding. When you’re flooded, your primal brain is in charge, it’s going to take measures to protect you. The logic brain is shut down so as not to get in the way of survival.

In current day situations, the ghost of past events is present. The primal brain assumes it knows what to do. Remember, it doesn’t have the capacity to discern time or even person. It just acts on a trigger or an activating event. An activating event today will start off an old embedded behavior track. Because of the lack of discernment in the primal brain, your response to activating events usually falls into the 90/10 principle. Meaning 90% of what you feel today is attributed to past events and only 10% is due to what’s really going on today.

To illustrate, I’ll share this story. I had a young man, about 9 or 10 that I was working with. He came in for his session and told me he’d gotten sunburnt. It was pretty severe, he had to be seen medically and everything. We continued our session, talked and laughed as usual. Now our practice was to give a little sideways hug when we were done. Well that day, our session ended and I put my arm across his shoulders and he cringed away from me. Why? Because my action was an activating event. His extreme response to me was more about the wound of the sunburn than to my touch which activated it.

 In that same way, your deep wounds get activated today and you respond with all the force of the old wound. The activating event will only be the cause of 10% of that. Learning to modulate that reaction, explain and explore fully what’s going on and taking measures to heal your own wounds will take a commitment.

 You have to first recognize your strong emotional reactions and be willing to explore them. It isn’t necessarily easy, but it’s a requirement for self-growth. Remember growth is painful and chaotic at times. Next you have to be able to articulate and share what’s going on. This requires a level of emotional intimacy that some people aren’t comfortable with. Gaining communication skills will increase your comfort level.

Lastly, you need to ask your partner to support your healing. Remember it’s your own responsibility to take care of and heal yourself. BUT you can ask others for help if they are willing to give it!

The recap:

1. You have a primal brain and a logic brain. Your primal brain keeps you safe.

2. The primal brain only knows response tracks that were laid down long ago.

3. When old wounds are activated, 90% of your pain comes from the old wound and only 10% comes from what is actually happening today.

4. When old wounds are activated, the primal brain responds as if to danger. It floods you with emotions intended to keep us safe

5. This flooding causes your logic brain to shut down. To reduce this destructive process, you must:

 Recognize when you’re activated

 Explore the old wound

 Express your pain

 Ask for what you need for healing

Simple, right?

Practice time:

Looking back over the past week, identify any situations in your life where you had a strong emotional reaction. Record those on the worksheet included in your package.

 You’ll have an opportunity to explore those in the days to come. Are you excited?

If you get stuck, send me an email at allison@allisonvelez.com. Members get direct access to me in the membership area. Come to the website at [www.WinningYourRelationshipGame.com](http://www.WinningYourRelationshipGame.com) and look around.

Take a deep breath and move on to the next chapter.

**Chapter 5-The Magic Formula-Power Play**

 Did you know there is a scientific formula for a happy relationship? Studies of successful relationships reveal a significant finding regarding the ratio of positive to negative interactions. It’s almost like magic! This Power Play is a bit challenging, are you up for it? You can still do this one even if your partner isn’t playing along with you.

According to research by Dr. John Gottman, the ‘magic’ ratio of positive to negative interactions is 5:1. That means for every negative interaction you have with your partner, you have to counter that with five positive interactions.

Take just a moment to absorb this. Imagine for every snarky comment you make, you have to balance this with giving your partner five positive interactions. You make a rude comment and to balance that out, you do the following:

 Make them a cup of coffee

 Tell them they look nice today

 Give them a hug

 Take out the trash when it’s their turn

 Make the kid’s lunch when they usually do it

 Phew! Almost makes that rude comment not worth it, right? You’re human so negative interactions are going to happen. Remember feelings show up and you can’t really control them, but you are definitely in charge of your behavior.

These balancing positive interactions are above and beyond all your normal habits. For instance, cooking dinner doesn’t count if you always do that. A positive action would be making your partner’s favorite dish.

To further illustrate this, imagine that you have a beautiful, prize winning rose bush. For whatever careless reason, you decide you’re going to put a teaspoon of salt on it. If you counter that salt with five gallons of water, it’s probably going to be ok. What happens if you continue to put the teaspoon of salt on it, but decide to cut back on the water? Or maybe you give it three teaspoons before you give it the water? Well, you get the idea. The bush is not going to stay healthy for much longer. It’s the same with your relationship. If you fall behind on the ‘magic’ ratio of five positive to every negative interactions, your relationship won’t be very healthy either.

Your reality consists of your thoughts, feelings and behaviors. I’m skeptical about anyone controlling feelings. Thoughts are a little more amenable to being changed. You can choose to think certain thoughts if you wish. What happens if you apply the ‘magic’ formula to your thoughts?

What difference would it make if you began to counter each negative thought about your partner with five positive ones? It’s difficult to sustain a negative attitude towards someone when you are thinking positive thoughts about them.

Recap:

1. The Magic Formula for a healthy relationship is five positive interactions for every negative one.

2. Include your thoughts in the ratio.

Practice:

Think about the past 24 hours. Recall every time you behaved negatively to your partner. Were you short of patience with them? Did you speak sharply to them? Did you call them a name? Did you do any of that in your head? It counts too.

List these on the worksheet for this chapter. It’s included in your self-coaching package. For every item on your list, identify five positive ways to counter each negative action.

Starting today, track your negative interactions. When you notice yourself being negative to your partner, right then, before you move on, direct five positive interactions to your partner.

This one is challenging. Is the pain of having to perform five positive acts for your partner for every negative one enough to help you remember to monitor your negative behaviors? You'll be working on behavior change in other lessons.

I promise you this will be game changing if you dedicate yourself to it.

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**Chapter 6-Activating Events**

What does first aid have to do with relationships? The truth is everyone has some healing to do. Usually those areas of healing can be identified by a strong emotional reaction by you or your partner.

In this chapter, we’re going to dig into the source of these reactions and look for ways to heal. This can go a long way in deepening the understanding of yourself as well as building intimacy between you and your partner.

Getting to the source of problems can make life a lot easier. Take this story. Once upon a time, there was a curious congressman who worked in Washington, DC. He lived in the suburbs and every day took the train into the city to work. During his ride, he enjoyed looking out the windows and watching the changing scenery around Washington.

Every year, he noticed scaffolding would be set up around the Lincoln Memorial. Because he was curious, he wondered why the workers went through so much pain every year to do this exercise. He decided to make a few calls.

What he found was every year; the statue had to be cleaned. Over the year, birds would come into the Memorial and leave their droppings all over the marble. Over time, the droppings would degrade the statue if it wasn’t cleaned up.

That seemed a satisfactory answer, but remember our guy is curious. He started to explore why there were birds around the Memorial in the first place. The answer was they come to eat the spiders. Well that made sense, but he wasn’t satisfied. He asked, “Why are there so many spiders here?” The answer was, “Because they come to eat the moths.” Of course he questioned further to find out why the moths were there. Well, moths were drawn to the lights that burned inside the Lincoln Memorial.

So, how can you solve the problem of moths? If you take the time to study moth behavior, you will learn that moths swarm at dusk every night, but once they’ve swarmed where they swarm; they will stay there. Our curious congressman suggested that the lights be left off for one hour following dusk allowing the moths to complete their swarming….somewhere else. Voila, all the problems were resolved by adequately getting to the source of the problem which seemed unrelated. You need to have the same sense of unrelenting curiosity when it comes to self-discovery and getting to the source of issues in your relationship.

Most of you are free to choose your partners and you have a subconscious tendency to select someone who ‘fits’ you. You often feel your selected partner is a perfect match….and they are. But not necessarily in the way you think. You may have a lot in common with your partner and feel that’s where the attraction lies. But your partner is also perfectly suited to heal you.

Everyone comes through childhood carrying some wounds. During childhood and as a young adult, your brain is forming and absorbing massive amounts of information. Your primal brain is busily recording behavior tracks for use in response to events later in your life.

Problem is, sometimes your learning is right for one event, but inappropriate for others. Take Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as an extreme example. A soldier in a war ‘learns’ a loud noise means danger and responds by hitting the ground to protect himself. That’s appropriate learning as long as he’s in an active war situation. When he returns home and hears a loud noise, responding in the same way is automatic but inappropriate in a peaceful hometown.

Like this example, when you experience an activating event, your response is intended to keep you safe. Remember, your primal brain’s job is to keep you safe. It takes over when danger of any kind is detected. It says, “Hey, I know what to do, don’t bother thinking about this. I have an automatic and subconscious response all ready to go.” You have millions of these behavior tracks that tell you how to respond to the world.

 I did mention first aid. Part of the responsibility of being in a relationship is to help heal each other’s wounds. That means you’re going to have to touch each other’s wounded places. Just like having a physical wound cleaned and dressed, it’s not very comfortable. In truth though, the activation today creates only 10% of our pain. Ninety percent is tied to our old wound. The result is you have a strong emotional reaction. Your partner activates those wounded places in you and you respond in a way that reflects all the depth of the pain you carry. Likewise, their response to you is connected to a wound they carry. If you want to heal the source, any situation evoking a strong reaction is worth examining.

All of these powerful influences act on you and your relationship. It happens with little or no awareness. It’s our primal brain keeping us safe. Your growth requires knowing where those wounded places are and taking responsibility for healing your own wounds. Ideally your partner is willing to help with the healing, but it’s not necessary.

To identify those wounded places, you have to travel back in time. Go to the worksheet for this chapter. You have two columns, one labeled mother and one labeled father. Think about your parents or parent figures. In the first section, identify five positive qualities for each your mother and your father. If you feel there weren’t many positives, then look for the least offensive qualities. These might be things like provided for my needs, hardworking, always there, listened to me, helped me make things, etc.

Once you have that list of ten (five for mom, five for dad), go back and circle the three qualities that seem the most important to you. These are likely the positive qualities you’ve looked for in a partner whether you realized it or not.

Now move to the second section on the worksheet. This time, list the negative traits you recall about your mother and father. Get five negative traits for each of them also. These might be things like left home when I was 10, negated my feelings, spent too much money, hit my mom, etc.

When you’ve got ten, go through those and circle the three worst qualities to you. These will be the ones you feel impacted you the most. Unbeknownst to you, you have also selected a partner that in some ways represents these negative traits. You can’t avoid it. Someone with that combination of traits just feels like “home” to you. Are you horrified? Stay with me.

 Take those three worst traits you selected and put them into the chart in section 3 on your worksheet. As a child, what experiences do you remember where those negative traits were demonstrated? List those in the example column.

 For each of those examples, what, as a child, do you remember feeling? Did you feel alone, scared, angry? List that in the ‘What I felt’ column.

When you felt those things, what did you do, how did you behave? Did you go hide in your bedroom, try harder to be perfect, shut down, get enraged and scream? List those behaviors in the ‘What I did’ column.

 This is how your inexperienced brain decided to handle these types of situations. Your primal brain, remember it’s in charge of safety, adopted what it saw as the safest, most effective way to manage things. It recorded a behavior track to help you out so when you had an activating event later on, it could automatically kick in.

It’s nice to know that your brain works just like it’s supposed to!

Now, look back at your childhood protective behaviors. That’s the last column in section 3. Do you see yourself using those same defenses now? At those moments, you can be sure one of your wounds is being activated. While these behaviors protected you in the past, they are usually ineffective in your adult relationships. You intend to get your needs met with these behaviors, but are actually sabotaging those efforts.

Let’s illustrate. One of the negative qualities from my father was fiscal irresponsibility. He spent money frivolously, often putting the family in financial jeopardy. It created major upset at home. When those arguments happened I’d feel afraid. I got angry and felt powerless. How I behaved was clamming up and giving him the silent treatment.

 As an adult, when my partner spent large sums of money, even on worthwhile things, it was an activating event for me. I responded by feeling scared and at risk. What I did was shut down and stew silently. What I really wanted from my partner was agreement that we needed to maintain a certain level of savings for me to feel

secure. My behavior ensured that wasn’t going to happen. How can my partner agree to anything when I’m shutting down, avoiding and being powerless?

Realizing your wound is the first step in self-growth. Once you know this, you can’t unknow. When you’ve been activated, take some time to go through Section C of the worksheet. Find where you imagine that wound originated. Don’t let yourself get by with saying, “I don’t know”. When I work with people, I say, “You might not know, but what do you think?” Chances are, if you allow something to come up you’ll get close to the source. Spend some time with it.

 The recap:

1. You have to get to the source of problems to heal.

2. You chose your partner because they were ideally suited to help you heal.

3. Everyone has subconscious behavior tracks that are established in childhood.

4. The learning from childhood is sometimes inappropriate for adult relationships.

5. The first step in addressing this is looking into childhood behavior patterns that continue.

Practice:

You’ve got a worksheet for this chapter included in your self-coaching package.

Try to identify current day situations where your protective behaviors parallel those childhood behaviors.

Warning: This may be very uncomfortable to you. Walk away from the exercise if you need to, but come back later. Share what you learn with someone you can trust.

If you get stuck, send me an email at allison@allisonvelez.com and the website is [www.WinningYourRelationshipGame.com](http://www.WinningYourRelationshipGame.com). My membership area is a place you can get help from me. I’d love to talk to you there!

**Chapter 7- Deeper Understanding Script**

In the same way your partner touches your wounded places, you also activate your partner’s wounds. When does your partner have a strong emotional reaction? Now that you know, you can’t unknow. Your partner’s reaction means they are experiencing an activating event. Healing requires opening up to each other about those wounds. That means communicating about them and going deeper.

Remember that communication is one of the pillars of a great relationship. It is our responsibility to heal ourselves, but it sure is fun if our partner is willing to help us heal too. Finding a great way to communicate can facilitate the process.

This calls for the Deeper Understanding Script. You and your partner can use this whenever you need to express yourself. It gives you the structure of a script to be completed. That helps you find the words to say, stay on track, and get to the source. If you use this when emotion is high, it will ensure your message has the best chance to get thru.

The rules for this script:

1. Keep it brief

2. Exclude the word you

3. Use nonviolent language

Follow along with your worksheet and let’s try an example.

1. When\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

For this section, you describe the activating event. Use words that describe the facts of the event without emotional charge. Don’t insert your thoughts, feelings or judgments. This takes practice so take your time. So you might say:

When the lights were left on all night…..

When the TV was purchased……..

When the dirty laundry was on the floor this morning…..

The second phrase is (I start imagining):

2. I start imagining \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

 This phrase helps apply meaning to the event. It helps you explore your thoughts about the event. Building on the previous statements and adding the second phrase might sound like this:

When the lights were left on all night, I start imagining the power bill is going to be insane…….

When the TV was purchased, I start imagining money will run out before the bills are paid….

When the dirty laundry was on the floor this morning, I start imagining spending the weekend doing nothing but cleaning house…..

The third phrase is and (I start to feel):

3. And I start to feel \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

 This phrase helps you identify and name your feelings. That is what you want to do here, name a feeling. It’s harder than it seems. Let’s keep going with those examples:

 When the lights were left on all night, I start imagining that the power bill is going to be insane and I start to feel angry…….

 When the TV was purchased, I start imagining money will run out before the bills are paid and I start to feel scared….

 When the dirty laundry was on the floor this morning, I start imagining having to spend the weekend doing nothing but cleaning house and I start to feel resentful…..

The fourth phrase is (and then I find myself):

4. And then I find myself \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

You've looked at your thoughts and feelings; this phrase examines your behavior. It could be something you DO immediately or something you DO later. Let’s tack that on:

 When the lights were left on all night, I start imagining the power bill is going to be insane and I start to feel angry and then I find myself blowing up and later crying in the bedroom…….

 When the TV was purchased, I start imagining money will run out before the bills are paid and I start to feel scared and then I find myself being snarky to you….

 When the dirty laundry was on the floor this morning, I start imagining having to spend the weekend doing nothing but cleaning house and I start to feel resentful and then I find myself buying stuff….

The fifth phrase is (what I am really afraid of):

5. What I am really afraid of is\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

This phrase helps identify your need more closely. You’ll be delving further into that wounded place here, so you might feel some resistance. Soothe yourself and keep trying. Let’s continue on with the examples.

 When the lights were left on all night, I start imagining that the power bill is going to be insane and I start to feel angry and then I find myself blowing up and later crying in the bedroom. What I’m really afraid of is never getting ahead financially…….

When the TV was purchased, I start imagining money will run out before the bills are paid and I start to feel scared and then I find myself being snarky to you. What I’m really afraid of is always having to be super careful with money….

 When the dirty laundry was on the floor this morning, I start imagining having to spend the weekend doing nothing but cleaning house and I start to feel resentful and then I find myself buying stuff. What I’m really afraid of is not having time to enjoy myself and recharge….

You made it. This is the last phrase! (In the future would you be willing to):

6. In the future would you be willing to\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

This phrase represents a request to support your healing. The request can be for your partner or for yourself. Remember your healing is your responsibility. Request implies a decline of the request will be met with no repercussions. If you’re going to be angry should your request be refused, then you’re making a demand, not a request.

In general requests are for one of four things:

 Understanding

 Empathy

 Agreement

 Behavior change

Considering what you need allows you to make the most appropriate request.

Let’s finish up with this last step:

 When the lights were left on all night, I start imagining that the power bill is going to be insane and I start to feel angry and then I find myself blowing up and later crying in the bedroom. What I’m really afraid of is never getting ahead financially. In the future would you be willing to work together to keep our utility costs down?

When the TV was purchased, I start imagining money will run out before the bills are paid and I start to feel scared and then I find myself being snarky to you. What I’m really afraid of is always having to be super careful with money. In the future would you be willing to delay a major purchase until after our obligations are met?

 When the dirty laundry was on the floor this morning, I start imagining having to spend the weekend doing nothing but cleaning house and I start to feel resentful and then I find myself buying stuff. What I’m really afraid of is not having time to enjoy myself and recharge. In the future, can we work together to get the house work done so that we both have relaxation time?

 Even if your partner isn’t on board, you’ll use this script to understand yourself more. Make the request of yourself instead of your partner. Doing these exercises alone can be healing as well. If you’re not in the habit of recognizing your deep feelings, do this every time you find yourself upset. Your insight will grow. The best relationship you can build is the one with yourself. If you like, afterwards you can share your experience and insight with your partner.

An example of using the Deeper Understanding Script with yourself would sound like this:

When we argue, I start imagining that I’m unsafe,

And I start to feel frightened,

And then I find myself shutting down and avoiding,

What I’m really afraid of is the anticipation of a big blow up,

In the future, I could ask myself for:

Understanding-Remind myself that my young, inexperienced self was smart enough to use this same defense to keep me safe;

Empathy-Tell myself that it stunk that I had to learn that;

Agreement-Tell myself that it was the best way possible to handle those situations in the past, that most anyone would have done the same thing;

Behavior change-Stay focused on what’s happening now instead of allowing my old wound to influence me

How did you do with that? This is powerful with couples, but also for individuals who are trying to grow. There is great value in identifying those wounds that still influence you today. Changing your response can alter your perspective on the world around you.

 This may feel cumbersome, but the goal here is to grow. That means some pain. When you’re not skilled at something it's helpful to have a plan. This script will serve as your plan. It will push you to reveal more of yourself. It will lead to more understanding of yourself. If you choose to share your insight with your partner, they will understand you more too.

If you’re both doing this program, fantastic! This will be like steroids for your happiness.

So now the recap:

1. You will pick a partner that feels familiar, both in positive and negative traits.

2. You will pick a partner that is perfectly suited to help you grow into wholeness.

3. You can recognize your wounds and take steps to understand and heal with or without your partner’s help.

4. You can use the Deeper Understanding Script to gain insight and grow.

5. You can specifically ask for what you need to support your healing.

Practice:

Remember that worksheet you did a couple of chapters ago? The one where you identified times of strong emotional reactions?

Use this Deeper Understanding Script to work through some of those situations and determine what’s going on at a deeper level. Rely on your own inner knowing to guide you.

Use the script to help you compose your thoughts in a way that allows your message to get through.

Work through them to practice. If you feel safe, use the method to share what you learned with your partner.

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**Chapter 8- Motivation**

How do you see your relationship in the future? You have to have a little future vision, do a little time travel. A future vision is important because it’ll help solidify your Personal Motivation Statement you developed in the beginning. This Personal Motivation Statement will remind you to keep your focus on your relationship. The more clear and meaningful your Personal Motivation Statement, the greater your chance of remaining motivated by it.

You know that will power is not reliable, so you’ll maximize motivation to help you. Motivation works in two ways. You’re motivated when you have something to move towards and you’re motivated when you have something to move away from. For example, I have a goal of losing weight. My away from motivation is wanting to move away from my pants being too tight. My towards motivation is wanting to move towards wearing a bikini.

Both towards and away from motivation are necessary if you want the best possible chance to win in your relationship. However, research shows an away from motivation is the most powerful at first. Think of your Personal Motivation Statement, as something you’re moving towards. That can be powerful, but you can intensify that by finding an away from motivation. To do this, you can find a Negative Future Vision.

Imagine your relationship in five years. What will it look like if you aren’t successful in improving it now? How happy will it be? Will you be alone? Will you be better off financially? If you’ve started seeing a future that’s a bit frightening, then you’ve got a good start on an away from motivation.

What does your relationship look like in ten years if you keep going the way you’re going? Consider the worst case scenario. Will your children be growing up without the benefit of two full time parents? Will someone else be raising your kids? Often your actions today don’t yield immediate negative results. For example, yelling at my partner today won’t cause an immediate break up. But continued verbal abuse over time will cause serious damage to my relationship. When I’m about to yell, I can say, “No big deal, yelling isn’t going to break us up today, and it’s going to make me feel a lot better.”

We’ll lie to ourselves and say our actions aren't that important. We may imagine we’ll make up for it in the long run. Over time, left unchecked, in five years, my partner would be sick and tired of it. I'd probably be pretty miserable since I wouldn’t be feeling that closeness that I crave. In ten years, my partner might have checked out or left me altogether. That’s a Negative Future Vision I really want to avoid. It’s something I want to move away from. I can use this to motivate myself, but that’s five or ten years down the road!

What I need to do is blow that vision up in my imagination and bring it up close, as if it’s happening right now. I’m going to create an absolute certain Negative Future Vision. Linking that Negative Future Vision to my current behavior makes the consequence more significant. For example: I’ll say to myself, “Yelling at my partner equates to us splitting up.” Now that I know that, I can’t unknow it. When I’m about to yell at my partner, I call that Negative Future Vision to mind. Then my story becomes: Yelling at my partner is going to absolutely cause us to break up. Am I willing to end this relationship just so I can yell this one time? It gives such importance to my actions I have to reconsider yelling. When you attach that much weight to your actions, it will make you pause.

Hopefully you see away from motivation in the way of a Negative Future Vision is pretty powerful if you use it. Developing this type of motivation will go a long way helping you in *Winning Your Relationship Game*. If the Negative Future Vision works only a percentage of the time, wouldn’t it be an improvement?

 The Recap:

1. Motivation can be both towards something and away from something.

2. You want to use both to help meet your goals.

3. A Negative Future Vision gives you a powerful away from motivation.

4. Apply the Negative Future Vision to behaviors you want to change. Increasing the impact of those behaviors makes it easier to manage them.

Practice:

Use the questions in this chapter to develop a Negative Future Vision. Make it terrible, the worst case scenario. There’s a worksheet in your package to guide you.

Try it out with any behaviors you want to change.

If you get stuck, consider joining the membership at [www.WinningYourRelationshipGame.com](http://www.WinningYourRelationshipGame.com) or send me an email at allison@allisonvelez.com.

**Chapter 9-Personalities in Relationships**

Have you ever questioned if your partner came from the same planet as you? You and your partner HAVE to be different in order to call each other to wholeness. Imago therapy teaches us that each person comes to a relationship with a responsibility to complete each other, like two halves of a whole.

Where you have weaknesses, your partner calls you to wholeness by highlighting those weaknesses. The struggles you have with your partner are intended to help you grow past those areas of weakness. Because of this your partner causes you pain in many ways. Likewise, you cause your partner a lot of pain as well. Our reactions to activating events are what truly cause conflict in a relationship.

Personality is a broad concept, but it’s useful to avoid getting bogged down. There are many different personality types and descriptions. There are tons of tests readily available if you want to go deeper into it. They can be fun and enlightening so if you’ve never tried one, go for it. For our purposes, I like to use just two, a hedgehog and a puffer fish.

Have you ever seen a hedgehog? I hadn’t until my daughter wanted one. We went to pick him up and what an interesting creature! He’s a quiet little thing in general when all is calm around him, he lays his quills down, and, although they’re stiff, you can pet him. He’s got this great armor on his back, but his belly is soft and mushy. If he’s startled, his primal brain kicks in and he balls himself up, extends his quills and prevents you from touching him. If you try to touch him while he’s in that stance, he’ll hiss and jump at you to keep you away. Does that sound at all familiar to you?

 The other personality type is a puffer fish. You’ve seen these I’m sure. My daughter also had one of these for a while. Yes, she’s a little strange. A puffer fish looks quite normal swimming around. When it’s startled however, it blows itself up in a big show like an explosion. It will stay in that position until it feels safe again. Gradually it returns to its serene fishlike appearance.

Does that sound familiar?

Under relationship stress, a hedgehog will respond by shutting down, containing themselves. They will hide out until it’s safe. They aren’t going to come after you, but if you come close they may prick you sharply. On the other hand a puffer fish responds to stress in an explosion of emotions. They stay amped up until they feel safe again.

While everyone behaves as a hedgehog or a puffer fish at times, you may relate more to one personality than the other. You may also recognize your partner’s behavior in one of these. You may be opposites or you may be the same. Whichever response you have, it’s a choice made because it feels safe to you.

Hedgehogs use all their energy to freeze in a stressful situation. They feel they don’t start fights. They perceive themselves as rational and compared to a puffer fish they look it. Hedgehogs think their response is best because they’re trying to keep calm. Their response isn't intended to hurt their partner. They constrict on emotions and feelings.

On the other hand, a puffer fish uses all of its energy to explode. They perceive themselves as emotional or passionate. They think they’re the ones that care about the relationship. They believe they keep the relationship together. They may explode and expend so much energy they can’t manage to actually work out issues. They will boldly express themselves in dramatic fashion.

 As in so many things, neither of these is right or wrong, they are just different. A hedgehog doesn’t understand the puffer fish. They think they’re a little too dramatic. A puffer fish doesn’t understand a hedgehog. They think they’re emotionally checked out. Each confuses the other with their responses.

In certain situations two hedgehogs get together. The risk is both of them may close up and never work anything out. They’ll hold onto issues forever and end up resenting each other. On the other hand, when two puffer fish get together it can be dangerous with so much impulsiveness and aggression. Now again, neither of these are bad, but being too much one way or another allows you to avoid resolving conflicts. It can reinforce the way your partner responds to you, and you to them.

It may surprise you, but in my practice, it’s much easier to convince a puffer fish to calm down than to convince the hedgehog to open up that soft underbelly. Puffer fish usually recognize their reactions cause problems in the relationship. Hedgehogs think that freezing and closing up is the best way to deescalate the situation. That’s not the case at all. That’s called stonewalling and it’s a sign of a relationship at high risk.

As is often the case, balance is essential. If a puffer fish will behave more calmly, then the hedgehog responds by opening up. Because relationships are a system, each and every action impacts the rest of the system. If one person makes adjustments, slowly the system will change to accommodate.

An important take away from this discussion is that you and your partner respond to stressful situations in a way that makes you feel safe. The primal part of your brain has a program it runs when danger is perceived. When you revert to fixed behavior patterns, that’s what’s going on. Recognize that and work together to soothe that part of each other.

The recap:

1. You have a personality style of reacting to a stressful situation.

2. Your response makes you feel safe.

3. You can be a hedgehog that turns inward or a puffer fish that turns outward.

4. Neither is good or bad. They’re just different and each style is as valid as the others.

Practice:

Respect that as tied as you are to your style, your partner is just as tied to their own. Identify yourself as a hedgehog or a puffer fish. Identify your partner as a hedgehog or a puffer fish.

How have these personality styles impacted your relationship? How can you use some of what you’ve learned already to change your personality style?

If you get stuck, send me an email at allison@allisonvelez.com or come to the website and join the membership.

**Chapter 10-Communication Styles**

 Like your personality style, you have a basic communication style. Recall that communication is one of the three pillars of a winning relationship so it deserves far more than one chapter in this book. Again I want you to have enough to relate to, not get bogged down in too many details.

Your communication style has great impact on your relationship. Gender differences may be one of the most influential factors in your communication. Men and women have different ways of communicating and underestimating this can be detrimental.

There are cultural effects on your communication and you usually won’t even recognize it. In general, men are often taught to be competitive, tough, and independent. Women are usually taught to be self-depreciating, to serve and be supportive to others. Often women subconsciously struggle with this and will strike up a covert competitiveness.

 As an example, I’ll share my own story. During my time in junior high school, feminism was a huge topic of debate. I remember thinking, “I don’t need a man to do things for me. I want to be strong and self-reliant.” That belief travelled with me in ways I probably still don’t recognize.

But I did notice I always felt slightly irritated when a man opened a door for me. More than that, I would always quickly open the door first if I could. When I studied gender communication, it became clear to me opening the door for another person places you in a “one up” position. It communicates to the other person, “I’m allowing you to pass first.” From that day, I began welcoming others opening the door for me.

Men are usually groomed to be competitive. They care about the game. Girls care more about the relationship between the players. Boys play team sports in order to compete. Girls compete in order to be on a team. Boys yell, scream, even fight, then pick up and continue as if nothing happened. They don’t’ let bad feelings get in the way. They enjoy the game for the competition itself. When girls engage in competition, they focus more on collaboration. If there are bad feelings, they’ll halt the interaction. If there’s conflict, they take it personally. They only enjoy the competition if they’re in partnership with the team members. Have you ever known girls that fight and get over it? They hold the grudge forever. If boys fight, they’re friends the next day.

Because of these differences, men will tend to compete to resolve conflicts. This results in missing out on building skills to help recover from being upset. Girls want partnership with others and so allow themselves to work through feelings hence better developing those emotion management skills. Because of that, when a man is flooded with emotion, he’ll be more intensely affected. His emotions will probably take longer to subside than a woman’s. He’ll probably avoid bringing up issues because he feels ill equipped to manage the accompanying emotions. Women are going to bring up issues more frequently because they’re less awkward about resolving things. This means the woman is most likely to be the emotional caretaker of the relationship. She will readily raise issues with hopes of resolving them and feel confident about emotion management.

Relating to others is another area of difference. Women have a need to talk about things. Sharing is a way they connect. Men often relate to others in an information exchange, purely operational. For example, ask a man how was your day; he'll say “Fine, nothing outstanding.” Ask a woman how her day was she’ll tell you who she went to lunch with, something funny the boss said and the project she worked on.

Women enjoy knowing others understand what they’re going through. I tell another woman a problem I’m having and she’ll tell me when she had the same problem. We’ll go back and forth offering support to each other. Men often don’t have that need for support from each other. Their exchanges may be more an attempt to be competitive. They maneuver to put themselves in a “one up” position. A man might say, “My car is acting up”. In response another man will say, “I know how to fix that.”

Often a woman will complain that her male partner doesn’t tell her things. She'll assume he doesn’t care. More likely, he just does not have that same drive to share things. He doesn’t attach the same importance to sharing. If a woman says she wants to talk, a man will cringe. He feels he’s stepping into unchartered waters.

Now if all that hasn’t convinced you of gender biases, consider this: How many times have you heard the word bossy used to describe a man? It’s not really used to describe males. Girls are bossy and it has a negative connotation.

Although these are generalities and not absolutes, don’t underestimate the gender influences on your communication. Again, you may find yourself needing to move towards the middle. Men may need to be more comfortable sharing. Women may need to share less! Raising your awareness of your communication style will help develop understanding of each other.

The recap:

1. You have cultural and gender influences on your communication style.

2. You’re either collaborative or competitive.

3. Neither of these is good or bad. They’re just different.

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4. Respect that as tied as you are to your style, your partner is just as tied to their own.

Practice:

Looking at gender differences, is there conflict in your relationship because of collaboration or competitiveness?

What’s one thing you can do to be more neutral in your communication style?

If you get stuck, send me an email at allison@allisonvelez.com and the website is [www.WinningYourRelationshipGame.com](http://www.WinningYourRelationshipGame.com). On the site, you can join the membership there and get personal access to me.

**Chapter 11-Personal Resources**

What’s the one magic trick to handling everything? The answer may surprise you. Taking care of yourself is the key. If you’re committed to change, you have to maintain your personal resources. Your personal resources are what you internally possess which allows you to manage life, to make behavior changes or cope with stressors.

Visualize a container that you always carry. It contains your personal resources. They’re available to draw on as needed. Like sleep though, you have to replenish regularly. Remember, your life performance depends on these resources. At times when they’re low, you won’t handle things as well as you might when they’re adequate. Your best performance is when your personal resources are at maximum capacity.

To manage these resources well, you have to be aware of the level, how to replenish and what drains them. To illustrate: Mom leaves work, picks up the kids, and goes home to get dinner on the table.

Scenario #1-Mom had a crappy day. There was an accident on the way home. When she walks in, she realizes she’s forgotten to take something out to cook for dinner. She’s tired, upset, running late and trying to decide between takeout pizza and grilled cheese sandwiches. One of the children comes into the kitchen and says, “Mom, come see what I made at school!” Mom responds in a frustrated tone, “Not now, I’m busy. Go get started on your homework.”

Scenario #2-Mom had a great day at work. She got off early and picks up the kids. Walking in the door at home, she smells the lovely scent of pot roast. She remembers putting it in the crock pot this morning. Now all she has to do is heat a

veggie and dinner will be served. One of the children comes into the kitchen and says, “Mom, come see what I made at school!” Mom responds with a smile, “Sure! Do you need some help with your homework too?”

The difference in those two scenarios is the level of mom’s personal resources. In scenario #1, she is depleted. She’s scraping the bottom of her resource container. She hasn't realized her capacity for managing herself is diminished. She has nothing left for those around her. In scenario #2, her container is overflowing. She has enough to pour herself out generously on those around her.

Your first challenge is greater self-awareness. Take a moment to look back over your week. Identify a time when you reacted poorly in a situation. Were your personal resources low? Do you know what drained them? Now that you know, you can’t unknow it. So being aware of your level of personal resources, you have to take charge of them. How do you keep them as high as possible?

 Learn to keep balance between doing things for yourself and doing things for others. If you have a program of excellent self-care, you’ll keep your resources high.

 Is that selfish? Taking good care of your personal resources is the most unselfish thing you can do. When you are full, you can’t help but spill over on everyone else. You’ve encountered these people. Someone with good levels of personal resources is happy and joyful, open and giving. Someone whose resources are depleted is resentful and bitter, doing things grudgingly.

So what fills you up? Keeping your resources high requires awareness, replenishment and eliminating drains to your resources. You need these resources to fuel making behavior changes and sticking to a plan. It’s hard to resist impulsive or habitual behavior when resources are low.

In my work with addictions, there’s an acronym to stress times of high risk for relapse potential. It’s helpful to keep you on track with monitoring your personal resources too. The acronym is HALT-Hungry, Angry, Lonely and Tired. I like to add Rushing, Distracted or in Pain. Any of these conditions deplete your personal resources.

Additionally, any unresolved issues make a hole in your bucket. Childhood trauma or other huge stressors will continuously siphon your resources. Once you know what’s draining it, take steps to eliminate the drains as quickly as possible. To be effective in maintaining behavior changes and dealing effectively with others, you must be responsible to maintain your own personal resources.

Now let’s twist this up a bit: Your partner has a container that holds their personal resources. Their container has to be replenished regularly. Their life performance depends on these resources. At times when they’re low, your partner won’t handle things as well as they might otherwise.

Go back to the mom story. The child in the story behaved the same in both scenarios. The child was in no way responsible for mom’s response. The only difference was the level of mom’s personal resources. Mom’s response had absolutely nothing to do with the child.

Look back over your week. Was there a time your partner acted poorly? If you were involved, did you take it personally? Is it possible that their personal resources were low? What was draining them? What fills your partner up? What drains your partner’s container? What holes does your partner have in their container? If you began to have empathy for your partner how much difference would that make in your interactions?

Being attentive to your own personal resources will help support your good in the world. Being aware of low resource, high risk times can help you and your

partner avoid taking reactions personally. Recognizing times of high risk can help raise your awareness and move you to action.

The recap:

1. Increase your awareness of your personal resource level.

2. Work on continuous replenishment of your personal resources.

3. Recognize what drains you and address those things as soon as you can.

4. Identify what fills you up. Incorporate these things in your life.

5. Your partner’s actions are related to their level of resources as well.

Practice:

Make a list of 50 things that you can do just for you. I know it won’t be easy, but 50 makes it a stretch for you. See how many of these you can incorporate into your day.

**Chapter 12-Four Magic Moments**

What is the best time of the day to focus on your partner? Believe it or not, there are times that are more important than others. They’re called The Four Magic Moments. Even if you’re on this journey alone, you can use this to improve your relationship.

There are four times during the day when it’s important for couples to be focused on each other. It creates a consistent connection between you and your partner. It communicates respect, concern and interest, all important ingredients in a relationship.

 The four magic moments are:

a. The first four minutes you’re both awake in the morning

b. When you say goodbye

c. The first four minutes you’re both home in the evening

d. Saying good night

I know that some of you work different schedules, don’t go to bed at the same time, one of you leaves before the other one is up, etc. If you have any situation which prevents you from these exact Magic Four Moments, you’ll have to substitute another consistent time that seems to fit.

Now notice the maximum requirement is four minutes. There’s not a huge amount of time to dedicate to this. Even if you’re busy doing laundry when your partner gets up, stop and give your attention to your partner. Ask them what their day looks like. You could cuddle in bed or on the couch.

Why do you think these are Magic Moments? They signify transition times in the day. Remember when you were first falling in love? Your partner was on your mind the minute you woke up. You hated to see them leave you. You were excited to see them come back. You wanted them to dream about you when you fell asleep. While it might be too much to ask for all that back again, The Four Magic Moments demonstrate giving priority to your partner.

If you’re doing this program with your partner, then you can keep each other accountable. If you’re doing this alone, your partner may be skeptical about your interest all of a sudden. Soon they’ll look forward to it as well.

The Recap:

1. Devote a consistent pattern of attention to your partner. It conveys interest, respect and trust.

2. The Four Magic Moments are the most effective times of the day to give that attention.

Practice:

Decide which Four Magic Moments will work for you. Challenge yourself to devote these moments to your partner. There’s a worksheet in your package to help you with this step.

 Start today using these moments to grow your relationship. If you’re comfortable share this information with your partner and see if they are willing to take the challenge with you.

I am confident that you’ll have a positive change as a result.

If you get stuck, send me an email at allison@allisonvelez.com and the website is [www.WinningYourRelationshipGame.com](http://www.WinningYourRelationshipGame.com). The membership area is the best place to get help now and on an ongoing basis.

**Chapter 13- Reaction Management**

Did you ever start an innocent conversation with your partner and it blew up into a huge fight? What behaviors help us manage conflicts better? In any conflict your goal is to have your message heard and understood.

You’ve learned there’s lots of feelings and buried wounds to navigate. You’re bound to stumble upon some of them. When you do, it’s best to have a plan for handling them. Recall from previous chapters, when you experience an activating event, it triggers the primal part of your brain. Whether you blow up or shut down, your primal brain calls the shots. It’s designed for survival, so feeling anxious, scared or mad tells it to take over.

What happens in your body when you get anxious or upset? Usually, your heart rate quickens, your pulse races, your breathing become shallow, and your stomach tightens up. That’s your primal brain sending signals to your body saying, “Get ready! Time to fight or run to keep safe.” This state is called being flooded. It’s a challenge to interrupt that signal and often exhaustion is what finally stops it.

Recall while you’re in the primal part of your brain, you can’t logically think or act. You won’t be able to process information at this time. Someone in their primal brain can’t think logically. That’s true for you and for your partner. Information shared while one of you is in your primal brain will not hit its mark.

What do you notice about your partner when they get upset? Do you see any outward signs? You may not notice anything, especially if your partner is a hedgehog. The quiet exterior may not tell the story you’d see on the inside.

One of the best ways to gauge this is by using an oximeter clipped to your finger. It checks your heart rate and the oxygen level in your blood. Of course, most of us don’t own oximeters. You can learn to notice your own physiological responses and serve as your own biofeedback tool. Sometimes, I’ll ask couples to give a physiological update during a discussion. Often, it’s a surprise when people say they are flooded. You would never know it by looking at them. When people get flooded during an uncomfortable discussion it’s time to take a break.

Dr. John Gottman’s research shows that it takes an average of 20 minutes for someone to recover from feeling flooded. A flooded state halts any communication. It takes 20 minutes for the heart rate to come down and for oxygen levels to stabilize. You can infer it takes 20 minutes to get out of your primal brain and be ready to think logically. During a discussion, when you or your partner becomes flooded, optimally, you would take 20 minutes to calm down. That doesn’t mean going in the other room and plotting how to “win” the argument or ruminating over the injustice you perceive. That means going in the other room and practicing a self-soothing activity.

If you actually had an oximeter, you could clip it on and monitor your state of calmness by looking at it. In my practice, I’ve found just imagining you have an oximeter can give you the biofeedback you need. When you’ve reached that state of calm, then come back to the discussion and maybe try a different approach. According to Dr. Gottman, 94% of the success of a conversation is dependent on the approach. Use The Deeper Understanding Script to craft an approach that will help your message get through.

When disagreements or tense topics come up, and someone’s primal brain gets activated, it’s not the most productive time to have a conversation. Take a break and calm down. Lots of people say they try to take a break and their partner won’t let them. Most of the time, this is because your partner believes that if you leave the situation, the issue won’t be revisited. In fairness some of us do that—think hedgehog. When they get flooded around an issue, they’ll stonewall rather than continue to work on it.

Coming back to continue a difficult discussion isn’t much fun most of the time. You have to be committed to return and finish the discussion. You may have to convince your partner that you’ll be back. Once you’ve exited the situation, go make yourself calm. Use a relaxation exercise that works for you. Use one of the methods on the worksheet or come up with your own.

Go back and try again to continue the conversation. If you get flooded again, then stop again. It might take all day at first, but you’ll be more successful if you allow your logic brain to kick it. Learning to soothe you is invaluable in breaking the negative communication cycle.

The Recap:

1. Learn to notice when you’re activated. Take note of how your body feels when you’re activated. Take note of your thoughts and feelings when you’re activated.

2. For your message to get through, neither you nor your partner can be in your primal brain. Take a break and calm down.

3. Use relaxation methods that work for you to consistently soothe yourself.

Practice:

Make a list of 25 things that help you relax. Try to use one or more when you find yourself upset.

**Chapter 14-Building Habits**

How does behavior change happen? What you think and feel is important, but winning or losing comes down to what we do. If you want to win your relationship game, you’ve got to get better at some things and stop doing some others altogether.

Things you DO are called behaviors. Behaviors that you get really good at become habits. These habits can help you win or set you up to lose. It’s useful to understand some science behind developing winning habits and changing losing ones. Everyone has behavior tracks that you perform every day. Think about your getting up routine. Mine goes like this: get up, brush my teeth, make coffee, run my bath, get my clothes ready for the day. I’ve gotten really good at this behavior track. It’s my habit. If I get something out of sequence, it throws my whole process off.

You don’t have to think about these tracks, it just comes like second nature. Why? Because, it’s been over learned. You’ve learned it really well. There’s not much variation in the routine and you end up with a subtle reward. That reward is getting completely ready, not forgetting things, getting out the door on time.

Humans are built to form behavior tracks. If you had to make all those decisions about all the steps in that getting up process each and every day it would be a huge drain. The over learning strategy can help you develop your winning relationship skills. You should know these skills so well that they’re second nature. Ideally, you won’t even think about them. They need to be that comfortable so you can easily use them in a stressful time to come.

 You want to be deliberate about setting up new habits. You can use research proven methods to establish habits that stick. To build new habits, you have some things set in place. For starters, refer to your personal motivation statement and the goal represented. If it’s a goal then you haven't achieved it yet. It stands to reason that something has to change.

Focus on your motivation statement, what’s the first behavior you recognize that needs to be developed? Remember--yours, not your partners. Using my example from the Personal Motivation Statement chapter: I want to be closer to my partner……. I first recognize that to feel closer, I have to spend more time with my partner. Now I probably have a lot of other behaviors to work on as well, but to keep it manageable, I’m just going to look at that one.

 Now I have a Personal Motivation Statement and a target behavior. Now I need a plan. I have to develop a plan that incorporates that target behavior. Research shows that people who are successful in behavior change, have a clear, doable plan. My plan to spend more time with my partner might be to buy season tickets for the local college baseball team and attend them with my partner. That’s a pretty good specific plan. It gives me a definite time to spend with my partner on a regular basis.

 When you’re selecting a target behavior, you’re going to come up with dozens of ways to meet this behavior change. You can select as many or few as you need to, but just start with one. The last thing you want is to get overwhelmed.

The second part of building successful habits is to trouble shoot the potential barriers. I have to identify times when I might be tempted to not follow through with my plan. I might recognize that if I’m angry I might want to cancel the outing. Anticipating this in advance, helps me develop my plan some more. I can think through what my response will be if that happens. I can decide that I’ll set aside my anger and enjoy the game anyway. I could write down my feelings to share later. I have to know how to handle the issue and still carry out my plan. You have to know for yourself as well.

Now there’s no way I could anticipate everything that might derail me, but I’m going to be aware of anything that threatens my success. As those things come up, I will figure out how to get around them also. Remember you’re either learning or succeeding. Any problems I run into will give me data to make my plan better. Continual planning for potential failure is the second step of habit building.

The third step is to give yourself a reward. Rewards can look like lots of different things. It might be internal congratulations. You could gift yourself a mini Reese’s every time you implement your chosen behavior. You could put a red star on your calendar as a symbol of success. Think about how we like to check things off our to do lists! It gives us a great sense of satisfaction.

It sounds pretty easy doesn’t it?

The recap:

1. Identify a behavior you want to change that will take you closer to your Personal Motivation Statement.

2. Write a concrete plan to change it.

3. Identify things that might derail your behavior change plan. Remember challenges are going to happen, so we need to plan for them. Keep developing your plan to manage problems as they come up.

4. Set up a reward for yourself. Even a cheesy star on a calendar might be enough!

Practice:

Develop a plan for behavior change using the information in this chapter. You’ve got a worksheet in your package.

Get started on your selected behavior change.

If you get stuck, send me an email at allison@allisonvelez.com. Have you thought about joining the membership over at [www.WinningYourRelationshipGame.com](http://www.WinningYourRelationshipGame.com) ? You get access to me on a weekly basis and the wealth of information that’s been amassed in the forum.

**Chapter 15-Quantity Time**

Are you holding out for quality time with your partner? I tend to believe quality time is bunk. Too often it’s an excuse used to soothe guilt over not investing enough time in our relationship. Couples put off time together, and feel its ok because they’re holding out for “quality time”.

Time is a hot commodity amid the demands of everyday life. A relationship requires dedicated time to remain healthy. Like every growing thing it has to be cared for on an ongoing basis. Quality time is a trap that gives you permission to put off the investment of time your relationship needs. You have to build the habit of time in your relationship. If you don’t take time to practice the things you’ve learned here, nothing will change. It takes time to exhaust the topics of daily life and connect at a deeper level.

If you’re still not convinced, consider this. If you’ve waited all week to have that quality time with your partner, what happens if the babysitter cancels, the kids get sick or one of you gets called into work. What if you have a huge spat early in day? The one time you reserved is ruined, when is the next batch of quality time coming? You’ve put all your eggs in one basket. If this happens a few times, you’ll start to feel it’s pointless. You can see why this is not a safe strategy.

Couples sometimes want me to tell them where to find the time. At this point in my career, I’ve heard many excuses why couples can’t spend time daily with each other. I suggest getting up 15 minutes early and having coffee with your partner before the day gets kicked off. Or spend 15 minutes before bed and have a cup of tea together. One of my favorite suggestions is to get a book and take turns reading to each other at bedtime. You can be creative with you own ideas, but frankly, you have to make this effort. These 15 minutes are not the time for hot button issues. It’s the time to practice new skills.

If you’re still convinced you need to wait for “quality time”, I say quantity beats quality when your relationship is starving for time. Short regular and frequent bursts of time win over so called quality time. This is time when paying attention to your partner is your priority. Is your partner worth 15 minutes a day? This time allows you to catch up and get more deeply connected. It gives you time to talk about and practice your skills. And that truly is quality time.

The recap:

1. Your relationship requires a commitment of time

2. Waiting for quality time is risky business.

3. It’s better to have short, frequent and regular bursts of time.

Practice:

Where can you create 15 minutes a day? Find that time and devote it to your partner?

 Have you been devoting at least 15 minutes a day to the exercises in this book? Time is a measure of your priorities.

If you get stuck, send me an email at allison@allisonvelez.com. If you’re a member, we can discuss it one on one in the forum!

**Chapter 16-A Six Second Kiss-Power Play**

How does a kiss communicate? Very well! You don’t just want any kiss though; it has to be a special one. The secret of a kiss that communicates the kind of juicy goodness you want is to make it last for 6 seconds.

 How do you kiss your partner? Is it the same way you kiss your grandma? A little dry peck on the cheek? That’s not going to work for you.

 A six second kiss is long enough to feel romantic, but not too long for you to argue you don’t have time! I prescribe a daily six second kiss for all the couples I work with. On the days I have them in my office, right before they leave, I have them practice their six second kiss in front of me. While they lock lips, I count: one, one thousand, two, one thousand, three, one thousand, four, one thousand, five, one thousand, six, one thousand. Six seconds can feel like a long time.

 If you object to this saying you don’t feel comfortable kissing like that, you may need to get over it. The more you do it, the easier it gets. You may feel your partner will take that as a green light to have sex. And? Seriously if you’re worried about that, give your kiss in the morning when you part for the day.

 If you have issues that make physical closeness difficult for you, then please get help to deal with them. These types of issues will continue to be a barrier throughout your life if you don’t work them out. A six second kiss is a winning relationship habit.

 The recap:

 At least one 6 second kiss every day will energize your relationship.

Practice:

Every day, give your partner a 6 second kiss. You can kiss them goodbye or hello or both, or at any other time of the day. You can take their face in your hands and lay one on them or only touch them with your lips.

If you’re playing with your partner, then each of you initiates a 6 second kiss with the other daily.

No matter how you do this, your partner is going to be happily surprised.

If you get stuck, send me an email at allison@allisonvelez.com. I have a membership area on my website at [www.WinningYourRelationshipGame.com](http://www.WinningYourRelationshipGame.com). In the membership area, there’s a forum with lots of good information. I’m there answering questions regularly as well as having a member’s call every week.

**Chapter 17-Non-violent Communication**

What if your words carried weight? What if they literally had an impact? What if words carelessly thrown out into the world did damage? Like rocks thrown into a window? The practice of non-violent communication suggests thinking of your words in just that way. Our words are endowed with an energy they carry into the world.

Best you speak your words with intention and mindfulness. Words spoken in this way cause no harm in the world. However, cruel or negative words carry a destructive energy with them. It’s unfortunate that very few of us carefully craft what we say envisioning the damage our words could cause.

Good communication is one of the foundational elements of a positive relationship and practicing non-violent communication is a habit worth building. When you speak, measure the impact your words are going to have. Will they bring you closer to winning or losing? You are responsible to positivly impact your relationship. That requires monitoring and practice.

How can you build the habit of non-violent communication? Think about you last exchange with your partner. Did it exemplify non-violent communication? (Don’t think about your partner’s words. Let that go, think of your own part.) Were your words ones of peace and positivity? Did your words cause harm in any way?

Think about the last complaint you made in your relationship. Your goal is getting your message through. Did you express your complaint in a nonviolent way? If your objective is to be heard, defensiveness has to be minimized. Did your partner respond defensively? People get defensive when they feel attacked. Imagine a boxer defending himself. The purpose of being defended is nothing gets in or out. That means your message isn’t getting in and your partner’s feelings aren’t getting out.

Examine your approach. Can you voice your complaint in a non-violent manner? Expressing yourself nonviolently means no demands, criticism or contempt. It means expressing your thoughts or feelings about a situation and, more importantly, your partner feeling safe to hear you.

Attachment of feelings to complaints is the beginning of a communication problem. The stronger your feelings about an issue, the more you have to work to keep it neutralized. Don’t ever think feelings aren’t OK. Humans are born with feelings for a reason. At times, it’s easier to express that feeling rather than the message. Your partner may only hear the feeling and not the message. Practice communicating the facts especially when there’s a lot of emotional charge.

Use the Deeper Understanding Script. The script is going to help you express yourself more effectively. Just like anything new, it’ll seem clunky and cumbersome at first. Try practicing by writing it out and editing over and over before attempting to use it with your partner. This is the second time the Deeper Understanding Script has appeared, so hopefully, you’ve tried to use it already. Maybe you ran into some difficulty and this review can help.

Walking through the different parts of this script again, the first phrase is: When\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

This statement is a description of facts made without judgment or emotion infusing it. Don’t use the word you. Relate the situation or complaint as facts, like watching a movie.

From my Personal Motivation Statement I’ll create an example for you. When we haven’t had time to spend together………..

The second phrase is: I start imagining\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

This is where you begin to apply meaning and assumptions to your complaint. If you get stuck on this section, you can play the 5 whys to help you. Again, don’t use the word you.

So my example would be: When we haven’t had time to spend together, I start imagining it’s not a priority for us…….

The third phrase is: and I start to feel\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

Here’s where you name the feeling and own it! This is you letting your partner peek at your pain.

 With the example: When we haven’t had time to spend together, I start imagining it’s not a priority for us. And I start to feel sad and alone…...

On to the fourth phrase: And then I find myself\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

This will be an actual behavior. This helps you identify the prerecorded behavior tracks that are attached to your thoughts and feelings. What do you DO when you think and feel the things you’ve described? Behaviors are sometimes immediate and then sometimes a different one happens later. It’s ok if you only identify one, but be aware that both can be present.

Back to the example: When we haven’t had time to spend together, I start to imagine it’s not a priority for us. And I start to feel sad and alone. And then I find myself avoiding the topic and then I’ll refuse when activities are suggested……

Phrase five is: What I’m really afraid of is\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

This is where you’re going to dig deeper and further identify the hidden feelings. This is where you’ll find the most opportunity for self-growth.

On with the example: When we haven’t had time to spend together, I start imagining it’s not a priority for us. And I start to feel sad and alone. And then I find myself avoiding the topic and then I’ll refuse when activities are suggested. What I’m really afraid of is we’ll wake up one day and not enjoy being together……

The sixth and last phrase: In the future, would you be willing to

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

This is you asking for your needs to be met. Remember that self-care stuff? This is one way you take care of yourself, by asking for what you want and need.

Now to be nonviolent communication, this cannot be a demand.

It’s a request. A request implies the person being asked has a choice. A demand means there will be retribution if your partner doesn’t comply. If you’re going to be angry at a refusal, you’re making a demand, not a request.

The example continues: When we haven’t had time to spend together, I start imagining it’s not a priority for us. And I start to feel sad and alone. And then I find myself avoiding the topic and then I’ll refuse when activities are suggested. What I’m really afraid of is we’ll wake up one day and not enjoy being together. In the future would you be willing to get season tickets for the local college baseball team and go with me?

Would anyone say no to that?

With practice, you can consistently apply these principles to your communications. Become more mindful of your words. Test them out by writing out your complaint using the Deeper Understanding Script. Writing something out gives you a chance to be deliberate about the energy your words carry.

You can test in other ways as well. Ask yourself, would you say it just like that to your best friend? If not, don’t say it that way to your partner. Or say it aloud with a totally flat tone. Does it make sense without inflection? Emotionally charged talk needs inflection. If your words need inflection, then it probably isn’t nonviolent, or say it to yourself looking in your eyes in a mirror. You'll know if it’s violent.

 This might be painful but so is all growth! Having your partner really hear you will make this worth the pain.

If you’re working on this with your partner, both of you can use this script and practice together. If you’re working on your own, then it’s still just as useful. You can use it to have your message heard. Don’t be discouraged if your partner is skeptical when you start this. They will soon appreciate the new approach.

 The Recap:

1. Non-violent communication gives you the best chance of having your complaints heard.

2. Make complaints without emotion and judgment.

3. Clearly own and share your thoughts, feelings and behaviors.

4. Request your wants and needs.

Practice:

Think of the last complaint you made to your partner. Use the Deeper Understanding Script and use it to relate this complaint. Work on it until it’s without emotion, judgment or other offense. Try sharing it again and see if it’s received differently.

If you get stuck, send me an email at allison@allisonvelez.com. Members get direct access to me in the membership area. Come to the website at [www.WinningYourRelationshipGame.com](http://www.WinningYourRelationshipGame.com) and look around.

**Chapter 18-Love Languages**

Do you sometimes think you and your partner speak different languages? What if you did? Think of the challenges and miscommunications that would occur. You want your messages to be understood by your partner. Speaking in different languages would make it very likely to be misunderstood.

Dr. Gary Chapman is the author of a book called The Five Love Languages. It’s a book that I recommend for nearly every couple I work with. It’s a wonderful resource. In the book, Dr. Chapman talks about each of us having what he calls a “love tank”. We fill each other’s love tank by showing love to each other. The ways we show love is by speaking a ‘love language’. There’s a quote: “Just because somebody doesn't love you the way you want them to doesn't mean they don't love you with everything they’ve got.”

In committed relationships, each partner has a responsibility to help fill the other’s love tank. It’s amazing when your partner feels truly loved; suddenly you find your needs also being met.

According to Dr. Chapman there are five love languages. They are quality time, acts of service, words of affirmation, physical touch, and gift giving. (I know I said bad things about quality time in another session, but bear in mind, this is Dr. Chapman’s verbiage, not mine.)

In general, you will prefer one of these languages. You may have a couple that you especially like, and maybe there’s one that you don’t get at all. It’s likely all the love languages speak to you at some level. Just like the spoken language, you probably understand one over another.

This may be the love language you use to speak love to your partner. If they don’t speak the same language, they may not understand you. Likewise, your partner speaks their love to you in their own love language. You may not understand because that’s not your language. This can create quite a communication gap. Both of you saying, “I love you" and neither of you understanding.

I’ll summarize each of the languages and while you’re reading, tune into that deep inner knowing you have and see which language fits you best.

The first language is quality time. Dr. Chapman’s definition of quality time is giving someone your undivided attention. There is no requirement for duration of time or activity in his example. The only requirement is attentive time=quality time.

Some tips to make the most of quality time:

1. Maintain eye contact. It’s an important sign of respect. It shows attention and interest and helps keep you focused.

2. Don’t do anything else. Remember quality time is giving someone your undivided attention. You can’t divide your attention and give someone your undivided attention at the same time. If you have something you have to do, then postpone your quality time.

3. Practice nonviolent communication during your quality time conversations. Talking about yourself and your feelings may not come easily, but you can learn to articulate feelings with a little practice.

4. Quality activities are another way to share quality time with each other. Chapman describes quality activities as ones that at least one of you wants to do and the other is willing to do.

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If your partner’s love language is quality time, go for a walk or bike ride, take turns picking activities to do. Remember the guidelines, one of you wants to and the other is willing. My favorite quality time recommendation is to find that little time to share every day. Those 15 minutes over coffee can keep the love tank full for someone who speaks the language of quality time.

The second language is acts of service. Simply put, this love language is doing things for others. If your partner speaks the language of acts of service, you say ‘I love you’ when you do things for them. If you speak the language of acts of service, you hear them say I love you too when they do things for you.

Often women especially feel that doing for others is a measure of love. Sometimes you may feel acts of service are a measure of how much a person loves us. More likely, what they don’t do for you tells you they don’t love you. Often this leads you down the road to criticism.

When you do things for others (or have them done for you) it has to come from a place of love rather than a feeling of being manipulated or bullied. Demanding that your partner perform acts of service for us may be successful in the short term, but won’t take you the distance to winning your relationship game.

Doing things for others when your love tank is low can leave you feeling resentful. When you speak the language of acts of service, you get angry when that same language is not spoken to you.

 Some suggestions if your partner speaks the language of acts of service:

1. Do a chore that your partner always has to ask you to do.

2. Do a chore that your partner usually does.

3. Make cookies for your partner.

 If you speak the language of acts of service and your partner doesn’t, make a list of what you want your partner to do. Before you start resisting: People who speak acts of service think if they have to make a list, it means their partner doesn’t care. Making a list is you taking responsibility for getting your needs met. Someone who doesn’t speak acts of service does not place the same importance on providing or receiving acts of service. And that's ok.

The third language is words of affirmation. Words of affirmation are verbal compliments or words of encouragement. When your partner points out that they took the trash out despite the fact that you’ve taken it out ninety times to their one, they are looking for words of affirmation. Your tendency might be to get defensive when your partner seeks words of affirmation like that. You might say, “I take the trash out all the time and never get acknowledged.” I know, I know, you don’t need affirmation; your language isn’t words of affirmation. Does that make your partner’s need for affirmation invalid?

Words of affirmation don’t cost a thing and they’re a winning habit. Use them liberally! If you have difficulty paying compliments, get over it. Recognizing positive qualities about your partner helps you focus on gratitude. If your partner speaks the language of words of affirmation, it’ll be game changing for you.

I want you to be fluent in the language of words of affirmation. Make a list, a long one, at least 25 things that you like or appreciate about your partner.

It might look like this:

1. I like that you make coffee every morning.

2. I like that you keep up on the laundry.

3. I’m proud of your success at work.

4. I enjoyed that movie you picked out to watch.

5. That restaurant you chose was great; I really want us to go back.

6. Thank you for turning the TV down while I was on the phone.

Etc.

That list of 25 compliments is over 3 weeks of daily affirmations. Give your partner one every day. As small as it might be, you can find at least one thing to appreciate about your partner every day.

Tips for speaking the language of words of affirmation:

1. Notice when your partner bids for attention and respond kindly and affirmatively. Your partner can’t be more of what you need if they feel unappreciated.

2. If you have a hard time paying compliments, practice in a mirror!

3. Write your partner a note affirming something about them.

4. Say something nice about your partner to others. Even if your partner isn’t around, you’ll be focusing on something positive about them.

5. Notice something about your partner randomly when you’re with them and tell them right then.

 Don’t’ discount the value of these actions to your partner. I’ve had couples say, “I told them I love them once, if it changes, I’ll let them know.” That’s like planting a seed in the cold hard ground, watering it once and then expecting it to flourish. It’s not going to happen.

The next language is the language of physical touch. Physical touch may include sex, but it’s much more than that. We have long known that physical touch is important to us as a human species. Studies have been done documenting the serious emotional and physical damage that can be done when babies don’t have enough touch. This need continues into adulthood, but some of us enjoy it more than others. Physical touch encompasses any touching of the body. It may be holding hands, kissing, hugging, or sitting next to your partner on the couch.

In relationships, touch needs to communicate safety. If your partner’s touch isn’t safe, you need to reach out for help. If you have a history of experiencing touch as unsafe, it may be a challenge for you to find touch pleasurable. I urge you to get help to reduce the impact that is having on you. If you have a challenge about physical touch, does your partner like touching a lot? Remember, your partner is perfectly chosen to call you to wholeness.

Tips for expressing love in the language of physical touch:

1. Rub your partner’s shoulders.

2. Put your arm around your partner or hold their hand, even if it’s brief.

3. Give your partner a hug when you come back together at the end of the day.

4. Give your partner a 6 second kiss every day.

5. Have sex.

If you feel that touch is your primary love language, remember that we’re not just talking about sex here. Sex can be described as a biological function. Interestingly, sex or rather ejaculation, is a required biological function for men, but not so for women. That’s not an excuse for men to demand sex or go outside the relationship, but just to help understand each other more.

I often have couples who experience differing levels of desire for sex. Understand that because of our biological differences, men often need much less foreplay than women. Any act of physical touch that your partner enjoys may be an act of foreplay. It’s been said that every positive thing you do in your relationship can be considered foreplay. So, if you want more sex, give your partner more of what they need!

The last love language to discuss is the language of gift giving. People who are very sentimental sometimes speak this language. They treasure physical symbols of love. If your partner calls everyone and tells them about the flowers you brought them, your partner may speak the language of gift giving. Gifts don’t always have to cost anything. Dr. Chapman cites gift of self as a facet of gift giving as well.

Tips for speaking this language:

1. Pick up their favorite candy bar at the checkout.

2. Bring in a flower from the garden.

3. Make something that you think your partner will like.

 My husband is very sentimental. He used to give me a gift every Friday. (He called it my Friday Gift). It was usually a little trinket he thought I’d like. While it was sweet, I had to find places to put all this stuff. I actually started to feel annoyed about him bringing me all this junk. You might guess here that my love language is NOT gift giving. He was speaking in that language to me and not only did I not understand, but it kinda ticked me off. I did not hear him saying "I love you".

 When you’re speaking to your partner in a language they don’t understand they don’t hear I love you; they’re confused about why you think it’s so great!

Another thing to be aware of is the damage you can do based on love languages. You have a super sensitivity to your primary love language. Any action directly contradictory to your love language will be like a knife in the heart.

For example:

If my love language is quality time, cancelling a date with me will hurt me deeply.

If my love language is acts of service, it’ll be extremely hurtful if you don’t do something I asked you to do.

If my love language is words of affirmation, calling me names is going to wound me.

If my love language is physical touch, then avoiding touching me or violent touch is going to crush me.

If my love language is gift giving, refusing me things is about the worst thing you can do.

Did you recognize your own love language from this discussion? Did you recognize your partner’s? Here are some tips to help identify them if you had trouble.

1. What do you complain about? What does your partner complain about? If you complain that your partner spends all their time at work, you may be speaking the

language of quality time and your love tank is feeling a little depleted. If your partner complains that you never tell them you love them, they may be speaking the language of words of affirmation.

2. Another trick to finding out your partner’s love language is to focus on one each day. Your partner may be skeptical of your new behaviors, but keep at it. No defensiveness from you.

On Monday, give your partner the gift of quality time. Three times today give your partner at least 10 minutes of your undivided attention and see how they respond.

On Tuesday, do three acts of service for your partner throughout the day. Expect nothing in return.

On Wednesday, give your partner affirmation or encouragement at least three times during the day. See how they respond.

On Thursday, express your affection in loving physical touch at least three times during the day.

On Friday, bring your partner a gift.

It’s likely that your partner’s responses to these actions will help solve the mystery of what language they speak. If not, then repeat this process every week until you find the answer.

3. If you’re still not sure what your language is, when you heard the assignment for the week, was there one day you said, “Oh, that’ll be easy for me.” Usually you understand love in the same language you speak, so the suggestion that felt the easiest is probably your own love language. The one that seemed hardest is probably not a language you are fluent in.

4. If you’re still a little stuck on this you can go to Dr. Chapman’s website and take an online quiz. He’ll send you an email with your love language identified.

The recap:

1. Helping another person feel loved is one of the winningest habits we can learn in our relationship game.

2. We all speak and understand in Love Languages.

3. We may not understand the language that our partner is speaking. That doesn’t mean they don’t love us.

4. Learn to speak to your partner in their Love Language.

5. Learn to hear your partner speaking love to you in their language.

Practice:

If you haven’t already, figure out what your love language is. Ask your partner to meet your need for love spoken in this way.

Try to figure out your partner’s love language. Speak to your partner in the love language that speaks loudest to them.

If you’re interested in learning more about the five love languages, I highly recommend Dr. Chapman’s book, (*The Five Love Languages*).

If you get stuck, send me an email at allison@allisonvelez.com and the website is [www.WinningYourRelationshipGame.com](http://www.WinningYourRelationshipGame.com). The membership area is the best place to get help now and on an ongoing basis.

**Chapter 19-Self Compassion**

You can’t give others what you don’t have. Taking care of yourself is priority number one. If you take care of yourself well enough, you can do anything. Someone who has plenty of personal resources pours them out on others making the world a beautiful place.

One pillar of successful relationships is compassion. There’s been a lot of talk about having compassion for your partner, but do you have compassion for yourself? Martin Luther made the statement, “…..I have so much to do that I shall have to spend the first three hours of my day in prayer.” One of the meanings of this quote is when you’re the busiest; you have to balance that with stillness and care for yourself. It means that at times when you think you can’t possibly spare any of that precious time, that’s when you need good self-care the most.

Have you felt completely drained? Felt angry, resentful, like the blood was being sucked out of you? Good sign you are out of balance. I’ve been in that place and am now honored to practice balance. My life’s work requires me to give to others, not to mention family and other interests. When I feel overwhelmed I look at what I’m doing for self-care. I incorporate self-caring activities daily. If you’re going to be all you can be for others, there’s no room for resentment or burnout.

Self-care and compassion doesn’t have to be expensive or completely time consuming. One of my self-care rituals is to take a bathroom break in between patients. I wash my hands as a cleansing gesture. I don’t want to carry the last patient’s energy into my next session. Then I have a little jar of organic hand cream that is really thick and luxurious feeling. I rub it on my hands before I bring in my next patient. It’s just a little act of service for myself. It makes me feel pretty special. It’s me taking care of myself in one small way.

You already practiced noticing when your resources are low. Are you identifying when you’re hungry, angry, lonely tired, rushed or distracted? Taking time to acknowledge and address what’s draining you is an act of self-compassion.

This book has stressed letting your partner know what your needs are. How can you do this without acknowledging them yourself? If you feel your partner doesn’t take your needs seriously, I guarantee you’re not taking your needs seriously.

Having compassion for yourself means loving you. What was your love language? How do you speak that language to yourself? How can you fill your love tank more? If your language is quality time, when have you spent time quietly with yourself? If your language is acts of service, what was the last thing you did for yourself? If your language is gift giving, have you given yourself anything lately? If your language is words of affirmation, are you calling yourself names in your head? If your language is physical touch, do you get massages and pedicures regularly? Speaking to yourself in your own love language will be an act of self-compassion.

Everyone’s different so we’ll have different ways to nurture ourselves. What comes up for you, as a means of self-nurture? Some of the answers I’ve had: Pedicure, have a movie night with myself, buy and read a new book over a weekend, play golf, go to the beach, take a long shower. All are good. You think of something that sounds nice or fun to you even if it’s something that seems impossible like taking a trip to Vegas.

You’re going to make a list of things that spark your interest, seem interesting or calming. Even if you feel it’s impossible like that trip to Vegas. I don’t want you to focus on how it’s going to happen. Just focus on the nurturing objective. Don’t eliminate anything because you don’t know how it’s going to happen. You’re just dreaming here.

If an impossible Vegas trip is on your list, what’s something you can do to bring it closer? Maybe you could look at reviews of hotels. You could check for any interesting seasonal activities planned there. You could research plane tickets for cheapest time of the year to fly there. Pick something around that large nurturing objective that is doable for you right now. The idea is to have a little fun! With yourself!

The recap:

1. Be continually mindful of balance in your life

2. Find things that make you feel nurtured and loved

3. Do something for yourself every day.

4. Do more for yourself when your container is running dry.

 Practice:

 List out 50 things that are self-nurturing for you. There’s a worksheet in your package to help you with this.

 Getting to 50 is usually a challenge, but it’s enough to get you to think about it. Once you get that long list done, look at ones you think are impossible. Take those and put them on the second page of the worksheet. Break them down into pieces that are possible. Take the list of possible things and work towards doing something from that list every day. Give yourself a star beside each self-care item you complete.

If you get stuck, send me an email at allison@allisonvelez.com and the website is [www.WinningYourRelationshipGame.com](http://www.WinningYourRelationshipGame.com). My membership area is a place you can get help from me. I’d love to talk to you there!

**Chapter 20-The Four Horsemen**

Do you want to know what behaviors mean the kiss of death to your relationship? Dr. John Gottman’s done a ton of research and he’s come up with behaviors which he calls the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. They have such a dramatic name because they herald the demise of a relationship. The Four Horsemen are warning signs, but they can be dealt with. It comes down to changing those four behavior patterns.

Even a couple that seems happy can slip into the patterns represented by the Four Horsemen. Just like anything else that grows, a relationship requires nurturance on an ongoing basis. Couples have to be on guard for any appearance of the Four Horsemen and consistently weed those behaviors out. The Four Horsemen are criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling.

In relationships, there are always things to negotiate about. Research shows that over 60% of all conflicts are unresolvable. That’s a pretty significant amount of letting go. Conflict is not a death knell for a relationship. Dr. Gottman has actually found that conflict is a sign of a healthy relationship. If both parties in a relationship are freely sharing their opinions, there is bound to be conflict.

You might say that conflict arises when you try to make differences into non-differences. To bring differences forward, you make a complaint. A complaint may be a request such as, “Would you turn the light out when you come to bed?” A complaint does not have a blaming tone, it’s a negotiation.

Escalation happens when one partner feels it’s imperative to prove their “rightness”. When one person has to be right that means one person has to be wrong. If one person wins, you both lose. Negotiation is the key to getting out of this mindset of needing to be right.

 How do the Four Horseman move in your relationship? If you make a complaint that goes unmet, rather than accept it, you may feel the need to be right. You will insist. You fall into criticism. Criticism is a complaint with a zinger, like throwing barbs. Criticism usually feels like an accusation, a personality attack and it entails blame. With the earlier example, a criticism might sound like this: “You never turn that light off when you come to bed. People are supposed to turn the lights off when they go to bed.”

Here we go with that “you” word. Make it a rule to exclude the phrases, “you never”, “you always”, or any other that might be insulting. Being critical sometimes becomes automatic and you have to do some inner work and behavior change to weed them out. Having a respectful attitude towards your partner will help you avoid falling into the Four Horsemen behaviors.

The second Horseman is contempt. Contempt is different from criticism in that there is intent to wound your partner. It is patently insulting and actually emotionally abusive. When contempt arrives on the scene, there may be insults and name calling. Partners may make fun of each other. This might be disguised as sarcasm. There may be nonverbal signs such as eye rolling or sneering. Contempt pushes respect out of the relationship.

Using the previous example, contempt might sound like this: “Are you that much of an idiot that you can’t turn the light off when you come to bed?”

And then comes defensiveness. Defensiveness is the Third Horseman. Because criticism and contempt could both be classified as attacks, they usher in defensiveness. It’s really hard not to be defensive when you’re being attacked. If you trigger defensiveness in your partner you must look at your approach. Defensiveness is an attempt to protect yourself and stop the attack. There are many varieties of defensiveness, but efforts to make an excuse, deflect, or throw the barbs back at your partner is defensive behavior.

Again back to the earlier example, a defensive response might be: “You know I have a problem with my memory.” Or, “If I hadn’t had to go let the dogs out because you’re too lazy to get up, I might have remembered to turn the light out.” Or, “Yes but you didn’t do the laundry yesterday.” This is a conversation that‘s going nowhere fast.

You may turn to the Fourth Horseman for salvation. The Fourth Horseman is stonewalling. Stonewalling refers to disengaging from a situation. It’s a nonverbal “Screw you.” It’s one partner’s way of saying, “I disagree with you and you’re not even worth discussing it.” Stonewalling is a huge red flag regarding the ill health of a relationship. Often stonewallers don’t believe their behavior is destructive. These are the hedgehogs. They think exiting the argument is a healthy response. They think they’re keeping things neutral. Stonewalling sends a very loud and clear message to your partner. (I already told you what that message was.)

Stonewalling isn’t the same as taking a break. Stonewalling is leaving and slamming the door with no negotiation about continuing the discussion. Stonewalling is the silent treatment. Stonewalling is the final death knell for a relationship.

How do you get around these Four Horsemen?

These are all simply behaviors and you’ve learned a bit about behavior change. If you notice these behaviors in yourself, start to work on them immediately. Go back to the habit building sessions. Make a plan to work on any Horseman that have shown up in your relationship.

Your relationship is a system and as one partner changes, the other partner responds. You can practice with the Deeper Understanding Script. Write out your complaints in ways that don’t include criticism or contempt. If you encounter defensiveness, modify your approach.

Think of a highway where you’re looking down the middle line of that road. The middle line represents the tipping point for failure of your relationship. Good relationship on the right, toxic relationship on the left. If you cross that middle line, your relationship fails. Your goal is to stay as far away from that middle line as you can. Curiously, once you get close to that middle line, it's like a magnet exerts a force on you pulling you closer, making it harder to pull away. Staying close to the shoulder of the road is the safest place to be.

Each of the Four Horseman takes you closer to the middle line. The closer you get, the harder it is to pull back. (Remember there's a magnet by that center line). Keeping yourself in complaint mode vs. criticism is much easier than pulling yourself back from stonewalling.

The antidotes:

If you notice yourself criticizing, use a self-soothing method to calm down. Rephrase your criticism into a complaint that welcomes negotiation. Modify your approach to maximize the potential for success, your message being well received.

If you notice yourself in contempt, focus on your partner’s positive qualities. When you get into contempt, you often focus solely on the negative. Spend some time listing out your partner’s positive qualities. It’s very difficult to stay in a place of hostile intent if you’re thinking good thoughts about your partner.

If you find yourself entertaining defensiveness, use a calming method. Focus on the information in your partner’s perceived attack. Do you need to take responsibility for something? Often agreement diffuses anger. Anger is an emotional highlighter. The level of anger in a communication tells you how important the issue is to your partner. Anger is an expression of hurt or fear. If your partner was telling you about the hurt or fear under their anger what would that be? Attempt to understand and empathize.

If you have a hard time with this then try to relate to the level of emotion. You might say, “This seems really important to you, can you tell me more about why?” This sounds a lot like interest and your partner may respond very positively to that.

If you find yourself in stonewalling behavior, recall that it’s very close to the center line of the highway, very dangerous territory. Usually stonewalling is a response to intense internal emotions. Use the Deeper Understanding Game Script to see what’s going on for you. Practice calming techniques to bring yourself to a place where you can continue to engage. Tell your partner you’re trying to correct this and ask for their support.

When you notice your partner heading into the spiral of the Four Horsemen, take responsibility to bring it back from that center line. Don’t do it by bullying or pointing out your partner’s wrongness. One partner right and one partner wrong is a lose-lose situation. Use the antidotes mentioned here.

Lastly, watch for the Four Horsemen in your relationship with yourself. Don’t beat yourself up. Don’t talk to yourself in critical, contemptuous ways either. It’s not good for your relationship with yourself. If you notice that the Four Horsemen have been present in your relationship, you can’t change the past. Now that you know, you can’t unknow. Starting today, make a commitment to change.

The recap:

1. Successful conflict and negotiation around complaints is the healthy lifeblood of a relationship.

2. The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse herald the demise of the relationship.

3. The Four Horsemen are criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling.

4. Correct behaviors when they’re closer to the shoulder of the road. It’s much easier then.

Practice:

 Identify where you see the Four Horsemen in your relationship. Review the antidotes and change these behaviors. If you need to, go back to the Habit Building Chapter and make a plan to correct them.

If you get stuck, send me an email at allison@allisonvelez.com. Members get direct access to me in the membership area. Come to the website at [www.WinningYourRelationshipGame.com](http://www.WinningYourRelationshipGame.com) and look around.

**Chapter 21-The Lover’s Embrace-Power Play**

What’s the best way to get closer to my partner? How do you get to know someone? You have to spend time with them and learn about them. The first two years of a relationship are often heavy on deep conversation. You spend a lot of time having “firsts” and getting to know each other. It’s one of the things that makes that time so exciting.

Usually after a time of getting to know each other, you start letting life happen. You begin to think you know your partner. You tell yourself stories about them. “Oh, she knows that I love her.” “He knows that I want him to compliment me.” “He should know that by now.” “She won’t mind if I go to work and let her mother take care of the new baby.” There’s a word for all this: Assume. And you know what they say about that!

 Keeping the learning about each other alive in your relationship is one way to keep things interesting. All the things taught in this book are geared to help you learn more about yourself and your partner. Another game to help with this is the Open Ended Question Game.

This game builds emotional intimacy between you and your partner. The best way to play is a little odd maybe. It makes it a little difficult to play this one alone. If your partner is willing though, this can be a very healing exercise. What you do is have one person (the receiver or listener) sit at one end of a couch or loveseat. The sender or speaker then lies facing the receiver chest to chest. The speaker’s head will be on the receiver’s shoulder. Your arms will very naturally fall in an embrace. Some call this the Lover’s Embrace.

It’s difficult to be this physically intimate and be hurtful to each other. In this position, the receiver will ask an open ended question from the list provided or you can come up with your own. The sender will tell the receiver their answer in as much detail as they like. The receiver may ask clarifying questions, but remember that it’s the sender’s turn to talk. Listening to our partner conveys respect and interest.

After the sender has shared, switch places with your partner and repeat the process in the opposite role. This is especially helpful when you have a partner who isn’t good about talking.

What if you or your partner doesn’t enjoy physical intimacy like this? Get over it. New things are uncomfortable. Unless you have a traumatic event in your past, you can handle this. If you do have a traumatic issue from the past, please get help for that. If not, then this program is about growing past discomfort. I used to be uncomfortable driving a car and riding a bike. I got over it.

The recap:

1. Continuous learning in a relationship keeps it healthy.

2. Spending time intimately with your partner in a lover’s embrace can facilitate learning and emotional intimacy.

Practice:

Do the Open Ended Question Game with your partner every day.

Ask and answer one question each while in a lover’s embrace.

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Hold your partner in a lover’s embrace and take turns asking and answering these questions.

Tell me about the main thing you remember about growing up.

Tell me about your pets when you were a child.

Tell me about your favorite holiday and why it is.

If you could meet anyone in history, who would it be?

Tell me your favorite story from when you were a child.

Tell me about your first memory as a child.

Tell me about what you miss about being a kid.

What jobs did you want to do when you were a kid?

Tell me about your favorite and your least favorite subjects in school.

What would be your dream job?

What would you do if you had $10 million, would you still be working?

Tell me about your least favorite job that you've ever had.

If you could live anywhere in the world, where would it be and why?

Tell me about the worst vacation you ever took

What is your favorite movie of all time and why?

What was the worst movie you've ever seen and why?

Where do you see yourself 5 years from now?

Tell me about something you’re scared of.

What is the best piece of advice you've received and from whom?

What is your biggest regret?

What was your most embarrassing moment?

What is the craziest thing you've ever done?

Tell me about your first car.

If you could have any super power, what would it be and why?

Tell me about the best thing that happened to you during the past week.

Tell me about the worst thing that happened to you during the past week.

What is your funniest memory of our early dating days?

What is the most scared you have ever been?

What is the happiest you have ever been?

What did you always wish you could do?

What did you always want to learn?

If we could spend 24 hours doing anything in the world together, what would it be?

What do I do that makes you feel the most loved?

What is one of the most romantic times we have had?

What things produce the most stress in our lives?

What would be an ideal day for you?

What in the future do you look forward to the most?

How much time would you live to spend together each day?

What is the silliest fight we've ever had?

What is your favorite all-time cartoon character?

Do you have any scars?

What’s one thing that very few people know about you?

What’s the worst lie you ever told?

What is the worst thing you ever forgot to do?

Do you remember the first thing we said to one another?

What is something you did as a teen that you parents never learned about?

Who was the first person you kissed?

What’s the craziest dream you’ve ever had?

What’s the most recent dream you can remember?

Who has been the most influential person in your life?

What is the yuckiest thing you've ever had to do?

Who are the friends from childhood that you wish you still had?

Which one of the world's cultures do you find the most interesting and fascinating?

Who do you need to forgive?

What adventures would you like to have before you die?

What is one way you would like to change?

What is something you’re very concerned about at this time?

What is something you’re very sad about at this time?

Who is your least favorite relative?

Afterward

 I sincerely hope that you’ve found some useful information in this book. In my practice, I’ve found these techniques successful time after time. I truly want to hear how it’s going for you. If you’re winning like crazy or finding things challenging, please feel free to share. My email is Allison@allisonvelez.com. The website [www.WinningYourRelationshipGame.com](http://www.WinningYourRelationshipGame.com) includes a membership area where you can share, get help or help others. You are cordially invited.

Allison