

1. INTRODUCTION

For as long as I can remember I have always had a curious mind about the way things work. I would want to break apart a small toy to look at the inside to see what simple mechanisms made it operate. I was intrigued by mystery and the challenge of resolving what seems complex or irresolvable. When I see a good magic trick I am interested in how the illusion was created. When I watched my children learn I was intrigued at how their minds gathered and sorted information. It is this longing in me that has me writing this book, my desire to break down complexities.

If you are reading this, chances are that you are in an emotionally committed relationship and you want to understand why your relationship is the way it is. If you have been having difficulties you probably get confused as to why this is happening. At times you may feel you are to blame, at other times that your partner is to blame, and still other times you just feel that you just don't fit well together. Intimate relationships are extremely difficult to understand and the desire for this understanding is what brings many of us to read about relationships or to seek counseling. Most couples I see in the counseling situation ask simple but deeply meaningful questions – “Why are we the way we are? Why do we find things so difficult? Where has the love gone? Why can't we communicate?”

People continually want to understand what it is that breaks down. What causes disagreements to blow up into emotional arguments? What causes your partner to turn against you despite what you feel are your honest attempts to solve things? Why do you feel so hurt, betrayed, or demoralized? In seeking to answer these questions most of us come up with the wrong answers, for the very simple reason that it is so difficult to be objective about subjective experiences. We each have large blind-spots when it comes to understanding ourselves – me included. (I regularly find in my work that I can assess other people difficulties far more effectively than I can my own. This is human nature.)

In addition, you are probably not only interested in what causes problems or difficulties – you are equally interested in what makes relationships work, in what it is that good relationships have that not-so-good ones don't.

I am writing this book to help you to answer these essential questions and to reveal the hidden structure that underlies your day-to-day relationship 'failures' and 'successes'.

My ability and desire to share my experience and findings with you arises out of:

- My clinical work as a psychologist and couples therapist
- My work as a researcher
- My familiarity with the models and techniques of couples therapy
- My work as a workshop presenter interested in personal development, and
- Not least of all, my personal 'failures' and successes in intimate relationship

I have struggled with intimate relationships like many of you and know first hand the disappointments, frustrations, anger, guilt, and self-doubt that attend this process. So

when I write I am not writing with any pretense that I have all the answers but I do write with a conviction that I can offer you insights and understanding that has been of help to thousands of couples we have worked with at our center. It is my intention to ensure that this book offers you the means to achieve this.

I hope that you will find this book to be both wise and practical and to be one that helps you to understand your relationships in a way that promotes self-challenge and self-compassion.

My goal in working with couples is always to help them to inhabit their relationship in such a way that they take responsibility for their own limitations, show compassion for their partner's, and make decisions based on tolerance and acceptance rather than agitation and frustration. When we create a climate of acceptance we are better able to access the truth.

It never ceases to amaze me how we all have very similar, and often child-like needs and concerns. Yet our essential needs and responsibilities get hidden beneath a complex of daily frustrations, disappointments, stresses, and obligations that make it almost impossible to understand why we feel and do as we do. It is as if our most basic human needs get draped with garments and disguises that make it almost impossible to recognize the basic shape of our needs and difficulties. We deceive both ourselves and our partner. But when we strip away our fears, disguises, and secondary complaints we find a hidden structure that is profound in its depth yet simple in form.

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Over the past 20 years of my work as a clinical psychologist I must have sat in front of almost 5,000 couples that came to me for marriage or relationship counselling. As the years have gone by I have begun to realise that all couples struggle with very similar issues. Though each of the 5,000 couples I have seen has been unique and different at one level, at another level they have been concerned with the same issues. Over and over again I have seen the same dances, sequences, and pre-occupations emerge before me. The challenge for me as a clinician is to learn to see these hidden structures and patterns because it is often very difficult. Like some of the optical illusions where you find hidden images embedded in a complex picture, you have to look at something for some time before the hidden image emerges with clarity. When you do see it, then everything changes. I have learned that there is a common internal structure and shape and movement to most relationship problems. It is always exciting to find these universally human shapes and dynamics because once they are found a couple can see with a new clarity. They may not always like what they find, but they know it reveals a truth that enables them to move forward.

In the 1998 I conducted clinical research that searched for this hidden structure and movement by asking, "What is really at stake for couples that are in conflict?" In seeking to answer that question I examined hundreds of cases of couples in distress. I spend hundreds of hours leafing through case-studies, looking at video-tapes, and challenging myself to find the hidden structure. Like a poor-man's Egyptian scholar, I spent hours locked in my study as if trying to decipher some ancient hieroglyphic. In examining each couple I kept asking myself the basic question – what is really at issue

here? What is really at stake? I eventually found what I was looking for and this book will reveal these things to you as they have evolved and crystallised over the past 8 years. Some of the findings were startling and dovetailed with other theory and research in the field.

In the book I will present a different piece of the jigsaw in each chapter. In part two we will begin to put it all together, however each piece is discreet and compelling in and of itself, which should allow you to read each chapter as a separate entity. I also include questions, exercises, and cartoons in each chapter in order to encourage you to keep complexity simple! At the end of the day my hope is that what you find in the book are truths that when you read them your inner voice says, “yes” in recognition.

At the end of each chapter I will give you the opportunity to assess your relationship using a series of carefully designed questionnaires. As you move through the book you will be building an assessment and profile of your relationship, your partner, and yourself.