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# THREE MISTAKES THAT KILL GOOD RELATIONSHIPS

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## Conquer These Three Moves for a Great Relationship



**We've had a pretty good relationship over the 30 years we've been together.** Yes, some years were better than others. But we had the kind of relationship that outsiders see as pretty perfect. They wondered how we did it: healthy kids, a great career for him and “mommy track” jobs for me.

**The truth is we looked good on the outside and we were struggling on the inside.** We weren't even sure we knew anything was wrong. We were so much like other couples we knew (those that had not yet divorced, anyway). But we were both dissatisfied: Tim's career was all-consuming and Meg's

The Key Move is **Willingness**. Are you willing to explore a different relationship paradigm? Yes? Then Read on!

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jobs were unfulfilling (the kids were still great!). And it was beginning to show, in trouble at work and disengagement at home. We were emotionally distant. Intimacy and fun were in a downward spiral. Blame, criticism, and even contempt were becoming our normal.

**By the time we noticed we were really unhappy, we were already planning our exits from the relationship.** But we were too distant to reveal our plans to each other. Then the universe whacked us on the head, we got our wake up call or what ever you want to call it. Tim had a life-threatening accident and a year later, he was laid off from his job. It became clear that our “working on it” relationship adjustments were not enough and that if we were to have the lives we wanted – TOGETHER or APART – radical changes were required.

**We made a commitment to be WILLING to change** (though we didn’t know that’s what we were doing). And then we re-committed to our selves AND to our relationship, over and over. Choice by choice, we continue to create our relationship and experience more love and happiness than we thought possible. As we’ve done it, we’ve expanded our own potential to make a difference in the world.

**“You create your relationship choice by choice. It’s a journey of inches.”**

understand the power of the emotional intelligence we’ve modeled for them. (FYI, emotional intelligence is a key factor of great leaders.)

**Is it easy? Not always, but we are learning to recommit without judgment. Were we scared? Yes, often. We even scared our friends, some of whom told us we’d “done enough” improvement.**

**Is it worth it, YES!** Our relationship as a couple is warm, intimate and energizing. And yes, the sex – which was getting better before Tim’s accident – is now amazing! Our children are launching as young adults, and



The essential first step is noticing where you really want to be in the relationship: in or out?



Changing your relationship takes sustained practice — like you'd work out in the gym to get those six pack abs you want so much.

create great relationships because if you are in a close relationship, we want you to be happy. Not just because we love happy people around us. We do, but our experience is that people who are happy at home, are also likely to be contributing their very best self to the world, too.

**Practicing these *Three Key Moves* transforms your relationship with your spouse or lover from good to great.** And they aren't just to juice up your relationship with your special someone. Mastering them also works wonders with everyone else you want to be close to.

**We do mean practice.** Just like going to the gym or changing your diet. Just because you had a cranky day or got triggered and yelled at your husband doesn't mean it's over. Recommit – again and again. Make it a practice.

**How many of us actually learn great relationship practices before we get paired up?** Most of us learn as we go. Sometimes we just drop the blueprint of our family experience onto our new relationship. Other times, we run the other way from previous relationship experiences.

**Forget about “hoping” your marriage will just get better.** Hope is the booby prize when it comes to creating great relationships. And it isn't all “work,” either. Great relationships just don't happen without clear and authentic communication, appreciation and mutual support of the partners.

**We've had the experience of turning a 28-year marriage from good (mostly) to great and reinvented almost every aspect of it.** Now that we've done that, we freely feel the love that's always been there.

And we want to help you

**“Great relationships don't happen without clear & authentic communication, appreciation and mutual support”**

**Start without your partner.** Don't stop yourself just because your partner doesn't jump right on board. It's quite common for one person (our case was unusual in that Tim was the instigator; usually it's the woman) to want change before the other person is ready. Just start doing what you want to be doing to improve your relationship.

**Now is exactly the right moment to....**

## 1. Turn Toward Your Partner

**The more often you turn toward your partner when they invite connection determines the success of marriage after six years, researchers found.** (The average American marriage is about 8 years.) In the busyness of life, Turning Toward is a simple move. Yet at a time of when everyone seems to want a piece of you, it may feel like just one more thing on the list of things to do or another task of self-improvement. Let's

**“Turning toward your partner happens over the course of a day in many small ways.”**

face it, sometimes, you just don't want to be interrupted or you don't like the way your partner tries to get your attention.

**Turning Toward Your Partner – what social scientists call a “bid for connection” – happens over the course of a day in many small ways.** One person may simply look up from a book they are reading to smile as their mate touches their shoulder. Or share a noticing of a bird at the feeder. Or maybe closing the computer or phone and looking at your partner when they come near.

**HOW these bids for connection are received strongly influence intimate relationships.** That's what marriage researcher John Gottman found when he invited 130 newlyweds to a bed and breakfast lab and watched them do what



Turn toward your partner and increase your chances of staying married.



people do on the weekend: read, chat, cook, and relax.

**Couples who respond to each other's bid for attention most of the time are more likely to stay married.** In the B&B study, Gottman saw that the choice partners made to bids for connection – turning toward their partner, ignoring them or turning away – was a factor in whether the marriage lasted six years. Gottman found that the divorced couples were the ones who had responded to only three of 10 requests for attention; the ones who were still married had responded to bids for connection almost every time: they had “turn-toward bids” of almost 90 percent. That means nine times out of 10, they were meeting their partner's emotional needs.

**I had already noticed that Turning Toward Tim was absent in many of our interactions.** We often communicated in passing in and out of rooms or while brushing our teeth. Many of those conversations ended with miscommunication that required time to rework issues we thought we had already settled. More important, we created disconnection and resentment. And we complained and blamed each other for not listening or paying attention. (Skip to step three if blaming and criticizing is a biggie in your relationship.)



A bid for attention is the opening you need to deepen connection.

**“Notice how you feel when you are fully available to communicate with your partner.”**

**Sound familiar?**

**We coach couples on how to create ways to connect with each other. [Click here for your Good To Great Breakthrough session](#) . In 30**

**minutes, we'll help you come up your next simple step in creating a Good to Great Relationship.**



Ask your partner how they most like to connect – and then start doing it.

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## Here's how we turned it around:

- **Make Turning Toward a physical practice like going to the gym and lifting weights.** It's something you need to get a body feel for by doing it over and over again. Notice how you feel when you are fully available to communicate with your partner and all of your attention is focused on the interaction. This is called being present. You are available without distraction, if only for the brief interaction. (This means no attention is paid to TV, phones, other people, including children.)
- **Make Turning Toward an every-day, every-interaction practice, with everyone you meet.** For your close relationships, that means turning toward even when you don't want to. I made a point of Turning Toward Tim in every communication, including Hello and Goodbye. Sometimes this meant walking across the room to stand in front of him. With this physical act of turning toward – and pausing – I was teaching myself to be fully present with my husband.
- **Try different bids for connection.** Notice how you like to connect and see how your partner responds. If you are both willing to play, ask your partner how they like you to seek attention. Our experience is the more you notice your partner's bids for attention and turn toward them, the more skilled you'll get at seeing their bids – even if they are poorly delivered.
- **Some bids are subtle,** like walking close to and gently brushing up against your partner.
- **Other bids are bolder: taking off your clothes in the middle of the living room** (not recommended with children in the house!). Walking around naked is not necessarily a bid for sex; think of it as an invitation for connection.

**“Ask your partner how they like you to seek their attention and connection.”**

## Master Step:

**Consider the anything, anytime, anywhere practice of our mentors, Kathlyn and Gay Hendricks.** They found that making themselves available to each other for anything, anywhere, anytime allowed them to address small issues before they became big, be totally transparent with their thoughts, and reinforce their commitment to their relationship as more important than any other.

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## 2. Go on a Blame and Criticism Diet

**Blame and Criticism: The No. 1 Relationship Killer.**

**If you think you have good relationship that's solid, but you bicker a bit now and then, you may think that's as good as it gets.** You may even think that "fighting" is healthy (yes, you can express emotion and get what you

**"In any relationship, you can choose to be right or you can choose to be happy."**

want without fighting). Watch any sitcom and you'll likely feel that your relationship is pretty good (though maybe not as funny) as your TV heroes. Our culture is saturated with examples of couples complaining, blaming, criticizing and whining about each other – creating drama – and the laugh track tells us it's funny.

**It is funny. And it isn't. Blame and criticism become our language and we don't even know that we are doing it.** But we may find ourselves drifting away from our primary relationship, to work, affairs,



Blame and criticism have become the norm for couples in our culture.

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Try cutting out the blame and criticism from your relationship for just one day and see how tough it can be.

extreme sports. That was our story (well, minus the affairs). We fell into a pattern of blaming and criticizing each other for a litany of mostly small problems. Who was pulling more weight around the house, taking on more kid duty, spending too much money or supporting the household financially?

**Blame and criticism fueled resentment and became an undercurrent of every interaction.**

Though we didn't recognize it until we stopped, we also lived in a state of tension, waiting for criticism. Sound familiar? It took a while for us to understand that we could be "right" or we could be close – our choice. The blame and criticism cycle wreaks havoc on relationships because the blamer

gets a gleeful hit of adrenaline, the "Ha-ha, I'm right!" feeling that becomes addictive and is heaped on children, colleagues, the

**"We put ourselves on a strict blame and criticism diet: none allowed."**

train conductor and the slow cashier.

**We finally put ourselves on a Blame and Criticism Diet.** Yes, we went cold turkey and forgot about who did a lousy job of loading the dishwasher, coming home late without calling, or bouncing a check. It was hard. Someone screwed up, right? And they should be told they are wrong or they'll keep doing it, right?

**We agreed that when something happened, we would simply acknowledge it.** Yes, that's what happened. No finger pointing and no accusations. No looking sideways or cocking a head at the other. We agreed to wonder about our own role in creating a situation that we didn't like.

For instance, if something resulted from a miscommunication, we'd wonder how to communicate better. We added the phrase, "Hummmmm, I wonder..." (and truly wondering), creating a pause allowing us to stop the knee-jerk adrenaline reaction. We practiced shifting our blame statements like "You never listen to me" to "I wonder how I can communicate more clearly."



Like swearing off ice cream, dropping blame and criticism is a hard diet to stick with, but in the end so worth it.

## Here's what we learned:

- **Blaming and criticizing can go really, really deep.** We thought we had it licked. Then we realized while we weren't blaming each other or someone or something outside ourselves, we were still blaming or criticizing ourselves. And making ourselves feel bad. That's how ingrained blame can be for some of us.
- **Blame and criticism had simply become how we spoke.** This communication style was influenced by our own family experience. We had also believed that the only way people "improve" is through criticism, a popular theme in corporate culture. Aren't we always told to find out "who's to blame?"
- **Embrace the power of changing your language.** For us, giving up blaming means fewer adrenaline-driven and distancing moments in our relationship. And we can't say that every day is Blame-free. Sometimes we find ourselves blaming each other just to bring ourselves down after really good stuff happens.



Loose, non-specific or uncommitted agreements are relationship trouble waiting to happen.

**So what can you do when things go wrong with your partner, child or colleague?**

**"Make good agreements to avoid conflict and increase trust."**

## Try these moves:

- **Get calm and present with a few deep breaths.** Open up to exploring the feeling you have when you are criticizing someone.
- **Commit to learning from every interaction.** That means getting really curious about what just happened to provoke criticizing or being criticized.

## “Turning toward your partner happens over the course of a day in many small ways.”

- **Make good agreements.** Good agreements are specific. Everyone is involved and there’s a deadline. We suggest you write them down. So if you want an agreement about taking the trash out: Define trash (just the kitchen trash); where the trash goes (the blue can in the garage) and by when (Tuesday and Thursday nights).
- **Use humor.** If you can make a joke about it, you can step outside it and see it for what it really is – a speed bump in your road to happiness.

### MASTER STEP:

**Commit and recommit to noticing and eliminating blame and criticism for at least six weeks,** then six months, then a year. Start taking 100 percent responsibility for the issue – even if it looks like it has nothing to do with you. That doesn’t mean you take more than your share, but wonder how you created the situation.

**So, for example, let’s say you want that trash taken out every day and it’s not happening.** Before even broaching the subject with the trash-taker-outer, ask yourself “Hmmm... I wonder how I am responsible for creating this situation?”

At first you might not see anything – the only problem is that the other person messed up. But as you think more and get openly curious, you might find things like: “I didn’t give my partner the opportunity to say no without me getting angry,” or “I didn’t live up to my agreement to handle the recycling bins,” or “Actually, we never looked at whether we even need to take out the trash twice a week – there’s just not that much trash.”

Then, starting your conversation by owning your part in the issue will put your partner more at ease and in the mindset of everyone taking their fair share of responsibility.”



Good agreements are specific about the action, who’s doing it and by when.

Want help recognizing the blame and criticism signature that's making you both miserable?

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We'll help you come up with your next simple step for a Great Relationship.

### 3. Lead Your Conversations with Appreciation

Research shows that it takes a ratio of five appreciations to each critical comment to maintain a close relationship. You may wonder if you'll have anything to say once you eliminate blame and criticism from your relationship. Appreciation! Set a challenge for yourself of offering your mate heartfelt and genuine appreciation.



Appreciation tells your partner that you really see and value them.

#### What is Appreciation and How Does it Work?

**“Research shows it takes five positive interactions to make up for one negative.”**

**There are two sides to appreciation: giving and receiving.** Most of us are better at offering appreciation than receiving it.

**We all have friends who can't seem to take a compliment, no matter what you say.** You could appreciate the great dinner they served or the beautiful bouquet they brought for your birthday and they deflect the compliment, with something like: “It was nothing, really.”



**Giving and receiving appreciation is a reliable way to feel good about yourself and other people.**

**Fine-tune your appreciation with specific detail:** “Your eyes look lovely with the color of that dress, and I love your curves!” beats a generic “You look great” every day. This shows you are really paying attention to the other person – really seeing them. Attention is one of the finest gifts you can offer.

**Ask your partner how he or she wants to be appreciated:** privately, in public, with gifts or words, etc. Then let them know how you like to be appreciated.

**Start with appreciation.** It’s simple and potentially transformative. At the end of a couples’ retreat Tim and I attended, our assignment was to offer our partners 10-20 appreciations every day. Sheesh! What you’re likely to find is that appreciation gets easier as you focus on what you truly like and appreciate about your partner.

**And again, practicing it makes it easier.** As you direct your loving attention toward them, you are actually building new pathways in your brain so that noticing and appreciating

Find out exactly how your partner most likes to be appreciated. And then deliver!

just gets easier!

## How To Give Appreciations That Land With Your Partner

**“Our culture is geared toward tearing people down, not building them up. Buck the trend.”**

**Let’s start with giving appreciation.** It’s not hard to pay a compliment about a new haircut, but the gift of your attention is multiplied how you deliver the compliment. We like to appreciate each other as we’d appreciate a piece of fine art or sculpture. It’s about beyond the “Like” button to really enjoying the nuances of another person.

**Offer the appreciation as a gift, something you notice and treasure in that person without needing anything back.** You might consider noticing something that they do really well, but may not be something the larger world

Example: I appreciate your generosity and thoughtfulness in picking out gifts for me. You seem to really “get” what I like and I’ve seen you do the same with other people.



You really do a great job with this!

**Honestly, I felt a bit squirmy when Tim and I started really appreciating each other.** Our culture is geared toward tearing down, not building up, people.

And we have so much conditioning about bragging and pumping people up with non-specific phrases like: You're so great!

**For both Tim and me (and most humans), receiving appreciation has been more difficult than offering it.** I must pay attention to absorb a sincere appreciation. To really savor it, I inhale deeply, exhale, and say thank you while smiling and looking at the giver. Sounds simple, but I sometimes must not crack a joke to deflect the appreciation. And sometime I hear a voice in my head that receiving appreciation is taking myself "too seriously."

## The Secret to Generating Appreciation for Others

**Creating a healthy relationship culture of appreciation requires you to appreciate yourself, which may be the hardest of all, but essential for appreciating others.**

Action Step: Take the Self-Appreciation Challenge for one month. Every day, write down one thing that you appreciate about yourself – your body, your work, how you live your life. It goes like this: Day One, look in the mirror and say: "I appreciate you." Day Two: "One unique quality that I have that I appreciate is: (warmth, quality of my laugh, my commitment to learning)."

### MASTER STEP:

**Lead with appreciation.** By that, we mean lead all interactions with appreciation – before you make any requests or offer feedback on anything. For this to work, you must truly appreciate what you are speaking about (listen for blame or criticism!) Open your posture, add breath and a smile and see what happens!



Create a cycle of appreciation in your relationship one appreciation at a time.

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Example: I'm appreciating your efforts to clear up this miscommunication between us. I request that we do the dishes in the evening, rather than let them soak overnight.

**For 25 years, Meg Dennison and Tim Peek had a good marriage. Now it's great.**

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**(partner not required) and discover your next simple step for a Good to Great relationship!**

Meg Dennison and Tim Peek believe that relationships of all kinds are created choice by choice. They advise couples, individuals and businesses in creating connections of all kinds.