

The Art of

LOVING

in your GREEN ZONE

The Art of
LOVING
in your GREEN ZONE

Lifelong-happiness and Relationships

The second in the Lifelong Happiness Series by

DR. K. SOHAIL MBBS FRCP(C)

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DEDICATED TO ...

those men and women

who can transform

strangers into lovers

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INTRODUCTION

“Hell is other people.”
Sartre

“Liberty is other people.”
Daz

Dear Readers,

According to legend, God was walking in Paradise when he saw Adam sitting beneath a tree looking dejected. God asked, “Adam. You used to be lonely. To make you happy I created Eve so that both of you could love each other. Why are you looking so sad?”

Adam, who was in deep thought, raised his head, looked at God, breathed a deep sigh and said, “I can’t live with her and I can’t live without her.” And legend or not, that dilemma has persisted in the relationships of men and women, the children of Adam and Eve, down through the generations.

Intimate relationships bring out the best and the worst in all of us. It is not uncommon to see the same two people who:

- *fall madly in love*
- *walk hand in hand for hours along sandy beaches*
- *enjoy candle light dinners in cozy restaurants*
- *dance together until the early hours of the morning*
- *and then make plans for their future together*

after a few months or years of living together feel so frustrated, angry and resentful that they not only leave each other, but also are so bitter and disappointed that they have difficulties falling in love with somebody else.

While some struggling couples resolve conflicts on their own, others find support from their friends and families, and some consult therapists to acquire professional help. Anne Aguirre, my co-therapist and I have been working over the years to help couples to deal with their dilemmas. In our Creative Psychotherapy Clinic we use the Green, Yellow, Red Zone Model to assist couples to understand the dynamics that create the healthy and unhealthy aspects of their relationships. The model consists of not only a philosophy for living well but also a set of skills and techniques that help couples not only resolve or dissolve their conflicts but also to feel inspired to improve the quality of their lives. The method is simple but profound and has become the door to success that many individuals have passed through over the years.

When we receive a referral, Anne conducts a telephone interview, and if she feels that the individual or couple can be helped by our methods, they are placed on our waiting

list. Others are referred to clinicians or facilities who can better address their problems. After our first interview at the clinic, patients receive questionnaires to complete that will help us during our assessment. (Please see appendices 1 and 2). When the assessment has been completed, we tailor their therapy according to the needs of the person or couple. We practise combination therapy, a mixture of individual, marital, family and group therapy. The goal is to address the issues and help patients to dissolve or resolve them within the shortest time possible so that they can live constructively in their Green Zone in their personal and family lives, and also their work and social communities. Most patients receive short-term dynamic therapy that ranges from six to twelve months starting with weekly sessions. Once people start to recognize the progress they have made, we see them every second week. Those who attend group therapy on a weekly basis may also have individual sessions every three or four weeks. After thirty or forty sessions, most people have learned ways to properly deal with their problem(s) and are ready to be discharged.

Those who want to address long-standing personality problems may choose to become involved in long-term therapy, although such patients are in the minority. Since we have developed a special interest in relationship therapy, we have become quite effective in helping patients in that area. Couples may receive individual and marital therapy at the same time, which works well and reduces the length of time needed in care. Some spouses of patients are also involved in group therapy. Our first group has grown to become three held on different days of the week; thus we can invite both spouses for group therapy if we feel it is indicated. Since Anne and I are from different genders

and religious, professional and cultural backgrounds, it keeps a certain balance in therapy. I see us as surrogate parents and the group as a surrogate family. In the group, people have the opportunity to receive the nurturing and challenge they need to heal from the wounds of their family of origin or problematic relationships in the past.

Patients tell us that they feel as though they have been born again with a new attitude and a sustaining philosophy. In our clinic we have a statue of a mother giving birth to a baby, which I use as a metaphor for therapy. Our patients feel very connected with Anne and me and respond very well to our interventions. Many refer their friends, relatives and neighbors to us to obtain relief from their psychological problems that create such unhappiness. Anne and I have very different personalities, which is an asset in our work together. She is motherly and nurturing and I am fatherly and challenging. We complement each other like two parents of a healthy family and provide an atmosphere in which our patients discover their unique personalities, strengths and limitations for a lifestyle that best suits their life conditions and expectations. They learn to recover from the sadness and often anger of their Yellow and Red Zones and then grow to live in the joy of their Green Zone.

Even waiting to attend our clinic has its positive aspect. Alongside the frustration of waiting, people also look forward to being involved in the therapy that they want so much to change their lives. When the day arrives that a call comes from Anne, they are quite motivated. Because we work independently of a hospital, we can be quite flexible in our working hours and our method of assistance. We operate free of bureaucratic hospital restrictions and insti-

tutional appearances and limitations. In such a creative environment, working with people who are motivated to change is a rewarding experience. It presents such an opportunity for patients as well as therapists to grow personally and professionally, to the benefit of each.

As a part of ongoing therapy, we encourage people to complete the weekly chart, *Discovering Your Green Week*, (see page 145) and to keep a journal. We also ask that they write letters to us on a regular basis because we find the written exchange as meaningful and therapeutic as the verbal. I give my honest feedback in letters, which they can keep and re-read to support their therapy. Such an exchange helps them to contemplate their choices and take the next step, or seek answers at the next therapy session.

Having the flexibility to choose between individual, marital, family and group therapy alongside medications, should they be needed, helps our effectiveness. Many patients who had utilized other types of therapy without much benefit, responded very well with this combination therapy and the focus on the Green, Yellow, Red Zone model.

Although we have been involved in individual, family and group therapy, our work with couples has been the most challenging and most rewarding.

Over the years, many of our clients and colleagues have asked us to share our observations, concepts, experiences and insights. This book is our response and is the second book of the Green Zone Series. In the first book, *The Art of Living in Your Green Zone*, I shared the general principles of our philosophy and in this book I will open a discussion on improving the quality of intimate relation-

ships in a different way. I trust that our encounters with our clients who have so willingly contributed to this book become a catalyst for struggling couples to transform their breakdowns into breakthroughs and inspire healthy couples to bring out the best in each other. We hope they learn the art of loving in the Green Zone, and by doing so, attain the art of growing alone and growing together. We are optimistic that the experiences and interventions will also help other therapists to enrich their practices and grow with their clients as we have done.

May you enjoy reading this book as much as I have enjoyed creating it for you.

Sincerely,

Sohail

LOVING IN YELLOW AND RED ZONES

People who live in their Green Zone and lead a happy, healthy and rewarding lifestyle tend automatically to establish Green Zone Relationships in which they bring out the best in each other. On the other hand, people who try to exist in their Yellow and Red Zones with their unhappy and unhealthy lifestyles are vulnerable to developing Yellow and Red Zone relationships. They have difficulties:

- Initiating
- Maintaining
- Ending or
- Starting another intimate relationship.

They are people who have never experienced healthy and mature loving relationships or their relationships never get beyond the quick sands of being highly unsatisfactory and unstable. When I ponder over Yellow and Red Zones that I experienced in my social and professional lives, and review the literature on this subject, I feel that such people face certain psychological hurdles that become barriers to experiencing intimate relationships that work so well in a Green Zone.

Here is an outline of a number of difficulties that need to be overcome.

1. Difficulties In Developing A Healthy Sense Of Self

Before entering an intimate relationship, it is important for both partners to have developed a healthy sense of self while living in their Green Zone. People who do not feel secure within themselves, have not achieved a sense of independence and autonomy and cannot enjoy a stable identity in all relationships, have great difficulties in initiating or maintaining a Green Zone intimate relationship. Rather than enjoying their own company when alone, they feel isolated and lonely; and when they enter a close relationship, they are afraid of being engulfed by the other person and shrink from the openness that a Green Zone relationship requires.

This situation is quite common in shy, introverted and schizoid personalities. R. D. Laing, a well known British psychiatrist describes the existential dilemma of such an individual in these words, *“The term schizoid refers to an individual the totality of whose experience is split in two main ways: in the first place there is a dent in his relations with the world and in the second, there is a disruption of his relation with himself. Such a person is not able to experience himself together with others or [to feel] ‘at home in’ the world, but, on the contrary he experiences himself in despairing aloneness and isolation, moreover, he does not experience himself as a complete person but rather as ‘split’ in various ways, perhaps as a mind more or less tenuously linked to a body, as two or more selves, and so on”* (Ref. 1)

Such people not only have difficulties with intimate loving relationships, they struggle even with superficial and casual relationships. I once received a letter from such a person.

Dr. Sohail!

My uncle who is a schizophrenic is your patient. He has benefited a lot from receiving therapy from your clinic. He suggested I should see you for my problems. Maybe you can help me.

My name is Brian. I am a 22-year-old man living by myself in a one-bedroom apartment. I have no friends, no girlfriend, not even an acquaintance. I was always shy but when I started university, I got worse. I was too nervous to go to my classes and interact with other students. I felt everybody was looking at me. I was always scared the teacher would ask me a question and I would be embarrassed. I could not attend classes for more than a few weeks and then I quit.

I cannot talk to people. Even going to a grocery store is a big chore. I dread waiting in the line for the cashier. I cannot go to any social function. Whenever I talk to a woman, I blush and stammer. I cannot initiate a conversation as I get tongue-tied. At times when women approach me, I talk for a few minutes but then the conversation dies, leaving an awkward silence.

I applied for a number of jobs but cancelled many interviews because of this nervousness. I am physically healthy but feel like an emotional invalid. Sometimes I feel as if I have an under-developed

personality. Do you think you can help me? Do you think anybody can help me? I often feel hopeless. I could not even come to talk to you so I wrote a letter.

*Waiting for your reply.
Brian.*

People like Brian spend most of their lives as human islands isolated in the seas of their Yellow and Red Zones.

In my experience some of the people who had difficulties in developing a healthy sense of self had a history of physical, emotional and sexual abuse as children.

2. Difficulties In Experiencing Intimate Feelings For Another Person

Those who live in their Yellow and Red Zones usually experience only superficial relationships as they have difficulties experiencing the natural Green Zone feelings of tenderness, care and empathy for other people. Their relationships are usually guided by physical attraction with infrequent moments of excitement. They do not experience much depth in their intimate relationships and remain feeling hollow even after interpersonal, even sexual encounters. They say to themselves, “like a shopper in a department store, we try one relationship after another, skimming over intimacy and finding that nothing touches us deeply.” (Ref. 2)

They may express their “love” to other people but it is soon obvious that their actions do not go hand in hand with their words, which leads to very transient, shallow relationships. Such occurrences are quite common in people with narcissistic and psychopathic

personalities. They are very self-centered, selfish and egocentric. For them their own narrowly-defined happiness and excitement are more important. They just do not care for the feelings of the other person. For them “loving and leaving” people is the only relationship they understand. Other people in their lives often feel hurt and disappointed but no show of genuine guilt or remorse ever comes from the offender. They are unable to experience such feelings, because those feelings are associated with something they lack, genuine caring. Cleckley comments on the individual with such traits,

“The psychopath is always distinguished by egocentricity.... This can be best expressed by stating that it is an incapacity for object love.... True psychopaths are sometimes skilful in pretending love.... The psychopath seldom shows anything that, if the chief facts were known, would pass even in the eyes of lay observers as object love. His absolute indifference to the financial, social, emotional, physical and other hardships which he brings upon those for whom he professes to love confirms the appraisal during psychiatric studies of this true attitude.” (Ref. 3)

3. Difficulties In Sustaining Intimate Feelings For Another Person

People who live in Yellow and Red Zone intimate relationships, even if they experience feelings of tenderness, genuine affection and caring, are unable to sustain them. That is why their relationships are so shallow and lack endurance and permanency. Once they become intimate with another person, in a short

period of time the relationship stirs up a number of painful feelings like resentment, anger, hostility and guilt which lead to dissatisfaction or breakup of the relationship. It is often a repeat of a "lesson" learned in a prior relationship.

As there is no permanence to these intimate feelings, people engaged in such love relationships live in the present and find difficulty in looking into and planning their future. They are incapable of making genuine and honest commitments because nothing in their lives has much depth to it. Commitments are often important in sustaining intimate relationships; as the O'Neills said, *"... we desperately need commitment in our lives. Commitment is the very core of constructive change, of growth, and it is vital both to a sense of self and to a sustaining relationship."* (Ref. 2)

Nietzsche wrote,

"Man can be defined by his capacity to promise." (Ref. 4)

People who have difficulties in sustaining intimate feelings cannot make or keep promises and are often unfaithful to their lovers and spouses.

A number of studies in the last fifty years in North America have clearly shown that the frequency of extra-marital affairs is quite high. In 1948, Alfred Kinsey shocked the world when he reported that 50 percent of American husbands had been unfaithful. More recent surveys indicate that this number has increased. For example, Dr. Bernard Greene, drawing on 750 case histories of married men, stated that 60 percent of his subjects had been unfaithful. Shere Hite, in her study of the sexuality of 7239 males, claimed that

72 percent of men married more than two years had cheated. (Ref. 5). Some studies have shown that up to 33 percent of married women had been unfaithful.

There is a general consensus that the number of unfaithful men is far more than women. Carol Botwin describes the personalities of such men:

“Men who are compulsive about sex, who are trying to solve problems in their marriages, who depend on conquest to shore up shaky self-esteem, who are intensely afraid of intimacy, who can never remain satisfied with a woman because they are narcissists, or who are very macho....” (Ref.5)

People who live in Yellow and Red Zones in their private lives bring their unresolved conflicts to their relationships.

4. Difficulties In Experiencing Full Sexual Satisfaction With Another Person

Some who are involved in Yellow and Red relationships can experience emotional intimacy but cannot experience sexual intimacy. Some are so uncomfortable that they remain celibate throughout their lives. Others who are involved in sexually intimate relationships are so full of anxiety or insecurity or guilt that they cannot fully enjoy spontaneous, playful and meaningful sexual encounters. They may remain fully or partially impotent or never free themselves from being sexually frigid.

There is another group for whom one part of an adult sexual encounter becomes an end in itself. Rather than having a holistic sexual relationship, in which

physical, emotional, intellectual and sexual parts merge, these people engage in only partial sexual encounters sometimes known as “perversions”. There is a lot of psychoanalytic literature written on the dynamics of such behaviors. A. Brill comments,

“Freud states that some of the partial impulses or components of the sexual instinct ... like aggression, looking, tasting ... which normally participate in the sexual act, may for some reason become accentuated and become an end in themselves.” (Ref. 6)

I met a number of men and women in my clinical practice who had difficulties enjoying full sexual satisfaction in their intimate relationships, even after years of marriage. Most grew up in very traditional, conservative, moralistic and controlling families and even as adults felt inhibited about their sexuality. For many, sex and sin were synonymous.

I once met a couple who had been married for forty years and had children and grandchildren. The husband shared with me that he believed that his wife did not love him because she never approached him to make love and was reluctant even when he approached her. He asked me if I could help. After I interviewed his wife and discussed the issue of sexual intimacy with her, I wrote him a letter sharing my impressions. I am quoting part of the letter to highlight her condition.

Dear Fred,
Meeting Norma and discussing the sexual aspect of her life and marriage was an eye-opener for me. I was quite surprised to learn that even at the age of sixty,

after being married for nearly forty years and having grown up children, her knowledge about her body and sexual matters was quite limited. She shared with me that she had grown up in a family where nobody talked about sex. She was nineteen when she had her first period and was shocked and frightened at what was happening, as nobody had discussed it with her. Even in the classroom if one of the teachers or classmates mentioned the subjects of menses or sex, she had to pretend because she had no knowledge or experience about those subjects. Nobody had taught her how to wear make-up, no one discussed the subjects of masturbation and getting to know one's body, nowhere had she read about different ways of making love.

She said she met you when both of you were teenagers and you are the only man she has known intimately. Although she loves you dearly, she does not know how to express the love she feels for you. She is still so embarrassed that whenever you raise the issue, she changes the subject. She acknowledges that although she had a problem in sexual communication all your married life, it has been getting worse lately because she has been working shift-work and overtime and feels tired and exhausted most of the time because of irregular sleep patterns. Still, there are times she feels the desire to make love but she is too embarrassed to approach you. She shared with me that you would like her to wear make-up but whenever she does so she feels like a tramp. She remembers her days as a teenager when she wore makeup and her mother embarrassed her by telling

her she looked like a tramp. Her mother's voice remains in her head today. She told me that once you brought a sex video to watch together and she was extremely embarrassed watching a couple making love in the swimming pool. She believes sexual intimacy is a very private thing and should be expressed only in the bedroom. She said she was also disgusted to see couples having oral sex. That is something that completely turns her off. At the end of my meeting, I was quite convinced that it is not that she does not love you anymore or does not want to make love to you, it is just that she has been sexually inhibited all her life. She does not have an affectionate and intimate relationship even with her own body, and it will be difficult for her to change, to lighten up so as to be responsive.

*Sincerely,
Sohail*

5. Difficulties In Integrating Intimate Feelings With Sexual Satisfaction

Some who live in Yellow and Red Zones face an interesting dilemma in their loving relationships. On one hand they can experience feelings of caring, tenderness and empathy for another person, and can also enjoy sexual satisfaction with someone else, but these two waves of feelings do not come together in the same relationship. That leads to problems in developing strong, healthy and happy love relationships. They have friends and also lovers but don't have friends who become lovers or lovers who gradually transform into friends. A number of descriptions exist about such a

situation, one of them being the “Madonna / Whore Complex”. They have difficulties accepting that sex can be an innocent and respectable expression of love. They have difficulty respecting the opposite sex wholeheartedly. Alongside personal dynamics, the reasons for such a phenomenon can also be deeply instilled in the person’s upbringing. In communities in which male and female are segregated, and development of genuine friendship between the two sexes is not accepted and encouraged, people have difficulty in experimenting with their intimate feelings without feeling embarrassed and guilty. Such people have difficulties integrating different aspects of their loving relationships. Jacob Arlow commented, *“Cultural ambience influences not only how love is expressed but also how it is experienced”*. ^(Ref. 8)

6. Difficulties In Experiencing The Other Person And Relationship Realistically

It is not uncommon for men and women living in their Yellow and Red Zones to exist in their imaginary world and project their fantasies on their lovers. They see their partners as they want to see them, rather than for who they are. Their emotions and sentimental attitude distort the realities. A number of sayings in folklore highlight this phenomenon very nicely:

*“Try to reason about love and you will lose
your reason.”*

“Everyone is blind when maddened by love.”

Even Shakespeare stated, *“To say the truth, reason and love keep little company together now-a-days.”*

People who live in their Yellow and Red Zones have great difficulty experiencing a good life in the here and now and especially on realistic grounds. Because of their immature personalities, their every move is so emotionally charged that reasoning cannot find a place in their lives. When these people fall in love, they cannot face and embrace their loved ones for what they are. Here we see difficulties in establishing mature love relationships that can take many forms. Many deny some parts, characteristics, behaviours and attitudes of the other person, seeing them as black or white, all good or all bad, or they idealize their lovers unrealistically. Such people have great difficulty experiencing ambivalence. Otto Kernberg feels that such relationships can be seen in the life of people with Borderline Personalities. He writes,

“Perhaps the most frequent type of this pathological falling in love is displayed by women with infantile personalities and borderline personality organization who cling desperately to men idealized so primitively, so unrealistically that it is usually very difficult to get any real picture of these men from the patient’s description of them”. (Ref. 7)

7. Difficulties In Accepting The Other Person's Psychological Autonomy

People who live in Yellow and Red Zones and have intense feelings of insecurity and lack a sense of auton-

omy themselves also have difficulties in accepting the psychological autonomy of other people, so they are inclined towards developing immature and dependent relationships. They “love” people because they need them so desperately that they cannot exist satisfactorily without them. They also try their best to maintain that unhealthy dis-equilibrium.

Erich Fromm calls such immature relationships symbiotic relationships.

“Symbiotic union has its biological pattern in the relationship between the pregnant mother and the foetus. They are two, and yet one. They love togetherness (Symbiosis) because they need each other.”

Fromm states that some of those relationships can also become sado-masochistic.

“The passive form of the symbiotic union is that submission, or if we use a clinical term of masochism ...The active form of symbiotic union is domination or to use the psychological term corresponding to masochism, sadism.” (Ref. 4)

Such dependent relationships are very controlling and restrictive. Merle Shain has this to say:

“Being in a dependent relationship is like being in a canoe ... if one stretches his legs, the other is beset by vertigo.”

People involved in such immature relationships have great difficulty in ending them. In spite of the suffering they expe-

rience, for them a bad relationship is better than no relationship. Such people have a tendency to cling to stable but highly unsatisfactory intimate relationships.

It is obvious from this discussion that people have to cross certain hurdles in their personal lives and achieve a certain level of emotional maturity before they can initiate, maintain and cherish happy and healthy intimate relationships. Many such men, women and couples who have been living and loving in their Yellow and Red Zones come to see us for professional help. We try to help them understand the dynamics of their personalities and relationships and then take steps to resolve or dissolve their conflicts.

Going through such a process they improve the quality of their relationships and styles of their communication. On their therapeutic journey they not only grow as individuals but also become better friends, lovers, spouses and parents. It can be a painful process but at the end people realize that it was worth it.

We feel privileged to be part of such an exciting therapeutic journey. As our patients grow, we grow with them.

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ASSESSING COUPLES

To help couples live and love in their Green Zones, it is imperative to assess the dynamics of the Yellow and Red Zone relationships and plan a step by step strategy to break the destructive, unhealthy patterns and establish growth-promoting interactions that will help people to seek their Green Zone.

Intimate relationships are tied with invisible threads to the individuals on one hand and to their families and communities on the other hand. That is why in assessing couples, we focus not only on the relationship but also on their personalities and the family and social systems in which they live.

Most therapists that I meet are either individual therapists who never interview the spouses and family members of their patients or are marital therapists who rarely see the partners separately. Many work alone and have never had a co-therapist as an integral part of their therapeutic plan. When I opened the Creative Psychotherapy Clinic, I invited my respected colleague Anne Aguirre to join me as a co-therapist because I wanted her to be a significant part of the healing services we provide. Because we work together

and trust each other completely (a wonderful Green Zone relationship) and offer a wide range of services, we are able to tailor therapy according to the needs of the individuals and couples who seek our help. Assessing couples over the years has made me very sensitive and observant that intimate relations are very complex. It is difficult, and requires infinite patience and backtracking to break down the process of assessment into watertight compartments. Some areas of exploration are concrete, others abstract, some personal, others universal. I am constantly aware that a therapist needs to peer with one eye through a microscope and with the other through a telescope. Those clinicians who inspired me over the years had the mind of a devoted scientist and the heart of an outstanding artist.

In this chapter I will share some of the highlights of my clinical experiences and some of the guidelines that I share with those who want to learn the art and science of marital therapy, which I find far more challenging than individual therapy.

1. Communication

Couples are fortunate when they are in tune with each other and enjoy their relationships in the Green Zone. Others do not achieve that depth of harmony and continue to suffer in their Yellow Zone and more deeply in their Red Zone. The issue of communication, *forming the core of the relationship*, is quite complex and transcends any simple, rational and checklist analysis. In the beginning of the relationship, there is far more emphasis on the verbal and the conscious part of communication but as the relationship evolves couples start to understand the nonverbal parts as well. When they become intimately involved, they tune into

the unconscious selves of each other and can not only appreciate the desires, dreams and ambitions of their spouses but also become aware of their unresolved conflicts. If the couple lives in the openness of their Green Zone, because of their willingness to have an honest and healthy communication, it is easy for them to discuss and resolve their conflicts.

When couples love in the Yellow Zone, unfortunately for the level of openness required, their communication is poor and it is not uncommon for them to feel misunderstood.

When couples love in the Red Zone, the communication between them creates almost continual tension, anger and resentment. Gradually, the partners, who should be working and thinking as a team, become disillusioned with the relationship and contemplate ending it as a way of escape.

The need for honest and open communication increases as the relationship becomes more intimate because at that level the unconscious factors play a major role. Because of different personalities and communication styles, it is not uncommon to see in our clinical practice that one partner desires to communicate at a deeper, nonverbal, and more intimate level than the other. Many spouses react differently when their communication and emotional needs are not met in the troubled relationship. Finding a mutually acceptable and meaningful level of communication is difficult to achieve for many couples, and many take the easy route of giving up on the effort to improve it.

For many couples who live and love in their Yellow and Red Zones, it is not uncommon to experience serious

communication problems when they start living together. Similarly, we have met many common-law spouses who, after co-habiting comfortably for years, embarked on a formal marriage, only to separate after a few months. They did not realize that once they got married, their unconscious expectations of their spouse would come into play. For those couples who could not express their expectations properly so as to resolve the differences, the relationship fell apart.

Anais Nin in her lectures talks about “double responsibility.” She believes that in destructive relationships both partners play their roles, even if they are unconscious roles. She suggests that both partners should take responsibility for the outcome of the relationship as spouses live vicariously through their partners. Nin’s writing inspired me to write:

We Recreate Our Lovers

*Lovers are artists
the relationships blank canvases
and with each contact
each stroke
we make impressions
on the canvases and our lovers
and when the pictures become identifiable
either we feel euphoric
and rejoice with our lovers
or feel sad and angry
and blame our lovers
not realizing that
we have re-created our lovers*

*in the relationships
the lovers that
we sometimes resent*

In assessing Yellow and Red Zone relationships, it is very important to identify the communication styles. Once couples become aware of their strengths and weaknesses, it becomes easier for them to change and improve their communication styles. As they improve their communication styles and move into their Green Zones, they are able to resolve and dissolve many differences and conflicts.

2. Trust

Couples who love in the Green Zone find it quite natural to trust each other. They have no desire to keep secrets and are not worried or suspicious that their partners will hurt or betray them in the future. On the other hand couples who love in the Yellow Zone have difficulties trusting each other except at minor levels, while those who love in the Red Zone find it extremely difficult to open their hearts.

It is not uncommon to see one spouse in the Green Zone and the other in the Yellow. Once I met one such couple in our clinic. He had no difficulties trusting her but she could not trust him. In spite of her difficulties, he was confident that his love for her would help him find the secret key to open her heart.

After I got to know the couple, I found out that she had been in an abusive relationship before she met her present sweetheart. I was quite impressed by him because his patience and encouragement finally helped her to overcome past hurts to learn to trust and marry him.

Some couples start their relationship in the Yellow

Zone and have the patience to grow into the Green Zone, while there are others who start in the Green Zone but are not fully committed and gradually sink into the Yellow or Red Zone. One such couple started their relationship in the Green Zone but then it crashed into the Red Zone when she discovered that he was attracted to one of her colleagues with whom he had a brief sexual encounter. After the crisis, he apologized, broke up with the other woman and promised to be faithful. She had a hard time forgiving and trusting him.

For some couples trust is slowly gained, quickly lost and hard to regain in intimate relationships. Some will require intensive professional help to repair the damage and return to a firm footing where they can again subscribe to the trust needed.

3. Boundaries

People who love in the Green Zone have very well-defined boundaries inside and outside their intimate relationships. It comes naturally to make their emotional nest separate from others. It is easy for them to re-align themselves from other relationships, whether they are relatives, friends or colleagues. They are comfortable making independent choices and creating an exciting relationship with each other.

People who love in the Yellow Zone may still be enmeshed with their past relationships, whether with family members or past loving connections. Such unresolved issues can cause either ongoing or episodic stress in the present relationship. Couples loving in the Yellow Zone generally have difficulties arranging religious celebrations, anniversaries and birthday parties as they face difficulties dealing with their relatives and friends.

Couples loving in the Red Zone have so many difficulties dealing with the issue of boundaries that either they experience episodes of anxiety, tension and depression or their issues remain undiscussed, untouched and unresolved. I know a mixed couple, an Arab Muslim and a Christian Canadian, who have been dating for three years and for the last year have been planning their wedding. It is amazing to see that the couple is so influenced by their families that they have yet not decided the location of the ceremony (mosque or church, or both), the number of guests, the decorations, or even the menu of the dinner.

The issue of boundaries can become so serious that it may threaten the survival of the relationship. This becomes more critical if one of the families lives close to the couple. Boundary problems may be seen not only with the families but also with their friends and ex-lovers. It is most important for the couple to genuinely agree on their philosophy regarding this issue and give each other their blessing and trust to socialize with their friends and family members together and separately. It is important for couples to share their expectations and sort out their differences from the beginning of the relationship, rather than trying to resolve it later on when animosities have grown to the point of being unresolvable.

4. Control

The issue of control and power deals with the boundaries inside the relationship. Couples loving in the Green Zone are quite respectful to each other and easily negotiate tasks and make decisions about various aspects of their relationships. They are generally democratic and believe in an open and honest dialogue with their partners.

Couples loving in the Yellow Zone have minor problems in negotiating as one partner feels controlled or coerced by the other, or prefers to give in to prevent an argument. In such relationships one partner uses power to control the other person's behaviors, feelings, even thoughts. A woman who loved cheese did not buy it for thirteen years because her husband did not want her to do so. Why? There was no real answer. Sometimes such control is very subtle. While interviewing one couple I asked the wife, "How are you feeling?" and the husband answered, "She is depressed." Talking to another couple I asked the husband, "What would you like to do in the next few weeks?" and his wife responded, "He'd like to go on a trip to Jamaica."

Such responses are usually tips of the iceberg and reveal to me glimpses of their day-to-day lives. Interestingly enough, many spouses are unaware of their controlling behaviour until I point it out to them and even then they do little to change it until they see the damage it is doing.

Couples loving in the Red Zone face major problems. In such cases one or both parties feel restricted, imprisoned and sometimes very angry. Lovers feel as if their personalities are being dissolved in the relationship and they are losing their independence, identity, and most damaging of all, their integrity. Such a situation undermines the relationship, which in many cases ends in a bitter separation. One woman shared her painful situation in these words, "I lived with him for three years before I realized that I was going round and round in circles, getting nowhere. He had a bad temper. I walked on eggshells, never knowing when he would blow up. He got angry at silly things. He usually complained about things like too much sugar in the tea or

too little salt in the food, and would yell and push me around. He expected me to read his mind all the time. For a while I tried to justify his behaviour, thinking maybe he was tired or frustrated at work or pissed off with his family. I used to say to myself that I should try harder to please him. I should make sacrifices for the sake of love. But then I realized it was never going to end. I became aware he was not treating me with respect and love. Finally I left, but I had put up with him for three long years when every day felt like a decade and every weekend a century."

5. Intimacy

Couples who love in the Green Zone have an affectionate, tender and warm relationship. They feel physically, emotionally and romantically connected with each other.

Couples who love in the Yellow Zone become distressed from time to time. In many cases one's need for physical, emotional or romantic intimacy is more than the other's or they have difficulty expressing to each other their need for intimacy.

I met many couples in my clinical practice in which the woman says, "I love him and I tell him that. But he never shares his feelings with me. I never know how he feels towards me and that makes me apprehensive, not knowing."

The man responds, "I have been living with her for all these years. Does that not mean anything? I can't say I love you every time I kiss her. That's mushy and I'm not like that." It is not uncommon to see couples in which men want to have fun and enjoy the relationship while women must have ample evidence of commitment and recognition.

Couples who love in the Red Zone get very distressed when one or both partners feel ignored, rejected or taken

for granted. Sometimes they feel abandoned emotionally. When intimacy decreases couples stop communicating with each other. The emotional distance is also reflected in their love life. I have met many couples who sleep in separate bedrooms or choose not to make love or show any affection because of unsettled differences even when they share the same bed.

The issue of intimacy gets more complicated in mixed marriages as spouses are socialized in different family and cultural traditions. Many Eastern men are more comfortable socializing with other men than with women. In some cases this becomes an issue for Western wives as they cannot understand the strong bond of their Eastern husbands with other men, not realizing that many Eastern men have strong emotional bonds with their male friends. Such bonds are a reflection of male affection and not of a sexual attraction.

6. Personal Maturity

To assess couples, it is important to ascertain the maturity of each partner alongside that of the relationship.

People living in the Green Zone have a positive self-image. They are quite confident in their social, family and professional lives. They are usually involved in activities that give them a sense of meaning and purpose and they are following their lifelong dreams and ambitions. Generally they have a close circle of friends who provide them with unqualified support. They tend to cope with crises in a graceful way and they learn from their experiences, both positive and negative.

Those living in the Yellow Zone generally feel anxious, sad and even angry. Their immaturity shows in many ways

and they are unable to acquire the skills to deal with their problems successfully. Many remain chronically unhappy, which is manifested in their social and professional lives.

Inhabitants of the Red Zone are extremely dissatisfied with themselves and their lot in life. Many are emotionally drained and continually unhappy, leaving them also feeling physically exhausted. They have great difficulty dealing with stressful situations and have poor or irregular support systems. At times, they lean heavily on other people to survive. At other times they regress to a point that they can proceed no further without professional help.

7. Family System

To assess couples it is important to find out the kind of family into which each partner was born and raised. If the families were healthy and supportive, then the couple is fortunate, having had good role models; but if one or both families were unhappy and unhealthy, then the couple would have challenges to face to keep their relationship in the Green Zone. Like individuals and couples, families also live in Green, Yellow and Red Zones.

Green Zone Families are supportive and accepting of the intimate relationships of their offspring. They welcome the spouses of their grown children into their families. They also reassure the couple that should they ever face any emotional, social or financial crisis, the family would be there to help and support. Such cooperative and nurturing relationships ensure the satisfaction and stability of a couple's relationship. Families like this are usually non-interfering with the couple's life and when the couple has children, the grandparents, aunts and uncles offer their unconditional support.

Yellow Zone Families do not whole-heartedly accept the relationship but neither do they reject the couple altogether. They do not give their total blessings and love, but do not make it difficult for the couple either. They just tolerate the relationship and wish things were otherwise. They are not that welcoming to their child's spouse, but rarely sever ties with them. Such families are reluctant to offer support during any time of crisis and feel ambivalent about their grandchildren, especially those of a mixed race or religion. Even when they offer support it is usually conditional. It is not uncommon to see the gap between the couple and the Yellow Zone family widen over a period of time.

Red Zone Families nearly always disapprove of the relationship, which leads to the rejection of the spouse of their child. They are usually angry and hostile. They may refuse to attend the wedding ceremony, and they talk against and undermine the stability and health of the new union. In many cases they put pressure on their child to leave the spouse and can be the chief cause of the break-up of the relationship. The couple walks on eggs trying to obtain the blessing of such a family. Since the couple counters constant difficulty with the family, it becomes awkward for their children to have a healthy relationship with their grandparents.

Red Zone Families have strong prejudices based on class, ethnicity, language and religion which are hard to cope with if the new spouse is from outside of their zone of approval.

8. Social System

After assessing the families, it is important to look into the health of the community to which each spouse belongs.

Like families, communities also live in the Green, Yellow or Red Zones. Green Zone Communities are accepting and supportive of love marriages, Yellow Zone Communities are neutral, while Red Zone communities are angry and hostile especially if there is a mixed racial or religious marriage. They do not want their members to marry outside their race or religion; for some communities, an “out” marriage is a source of extreme discomfort, and for others, a grave sin. Often the community of one spouse will be more liberal than the other about issues such as social customs, food, entertainment, and the role of women. In many cases mixed couples have to leave the Red Zone Community and re-establish themselves in a Green Zone Community where people manifest liberal attitudes and a humanistic philosophy and are accepting of people from different beliefs, races and cultures.

9. Coping With Differences and Conflicts

One of the more significant characteristics of couples is their capacity to deal with their differences. In Green Zone couples the differences are welcome and provide an opportunity to learn from each other and grow together. In Yellow Zone couples the differences cause tension and chronic dissatisfaction and appear irresolvable. In Red Zone couples the differences create serious conflicts. Spouses become angry and hostile and finally verbally or physically abusive. Sometimes one spouse may develop serious physical or emotional health problems.

In my practice I have observed that people with idealistic and perfectionistic personalities have the most difficulties in resolving and dissolving conflicts. Such people have high expectations not only of themselves but

also of their partners and become easily disappointed. Their partners usually perceive them as rigid and controlling which rarely leads to happiness. If the partner has a flexible and democratic personality, the differences can be resolved, but if both partners are inflexible, it leads to very heated, angry and bitter exchanges, which escalate over the years.

10. Sharing Dreams and Aspirations

It is important to meet the spouses separately to explore their dreams and aspirations. If the spouses share their dreams then it is likely they would find ways to solve minor and even major differences. But if their dreams and aspirations are drastically different and there are few points of agreement, then it is not uncommon for them to fight and argue over minor differences. Discussion of personal and mutual dreams for their relationship and family is a crucial factor to understand and assess the dynamics of the relationship.

This assessment provides guidelines for the couple as well as the therapists to decide whether they need professional help, and if they embark on therapy, the nature and time frame for that work. At the end of the assessment I have an open and honest discussion with the couple in which I share my analysis and recommendations. I ask them to think seriously about my recommendations and suggestions before we begin the therapeutic journey together.

HELPING COUPLES

1. Communication

Being a psychotherapist for more than two decades, I have become increasingly aware that couples with relationship problems, who live and love in Yellow and Red Zones, have either lost or never developed the art of communicating constructively.

Such couples:

- do not listen to what the other is saying
- do not know how to share their feelings and thoughts properly and
- do not provide constructive feedback.

Therefore one of the basic principles of healthy and fruitful communication is never undertaken or understood:

The message given should be the message received.

When there is unhealthy communication and the couple feels a need to discuss a serious problem or painful issue, the verbal and non-verbal interactions gradually

deteriorate and after minutes, hours or even days of discussion, they have made no headway in their problem resolution. During that process they emotionally bruise each other either verbally or in silence and spend a lot of time licking their wounds, both real and imaginary. Every attempt to make things better seems to make the situation worse.

I emphasize to struggling couples that healthy and constructive communication is possible only when both parties are in their Green Zone. Trying to reason when you are in your Green Zone with someone in the Red Zone is like talking to a drunk. I emphasize that therapy will help them improve their communication first with me and then later with each other. I work to rectify some of their faulty patterns at two levels.

Experiential:

One spouse talks to me...the other listens
The other spouse talks to me...the first one listens
They both discuss an issue...I listen
I talk...they both listen

Conceptual:

If the couple has difficulty picking up subtle hints, then I try to explain things to them in a simple logical manner, highlighting their communication style and circular interaction. This part is best described as being educational.

Example:

A couple wanted to paint a room together. The wife was conscientious but quite the perfectionist, the

husband responsible but carefree and far less exacting. They had the following dialogue in my office:

H: "You are too rigid!"

W: "No, I am not."

H: "Yes, you are. I had no problems painting the room with my brother."

W: "The credit goes to him. You are so lazy. You drive me crazy."

H: "No, I'm not lazy. You're just too rigid."

And so the discussion can go round and round in circles, taking any joy out of their accomplishment and leaving each feeling defensive.

The aim of professional intervention would be to make them aware of their faulty communication pattern and then help them learn constructive approaches, so that at the end of the discussion:

- they have not emotionally bruised each other
- some decisions have been made
- they feel their discussion was fruitful
- they are interested in retaining what they now know and in learning more

Green Zone communication has a positive cognitive as well as emotional component.

If the communication in my office shows that a couple cannot discuss very many things without emotionally bruising each other I will suggest:

- at home they discuss only “neutral” issues and
- bring their emotionally-charged issues to therapy sessions.

In therapy I hope that even if the couples have to “fight” as their way of communicating, they learn how to fight properly and constructively, much like a sparring match with padded gloves where no hurt is intended.

2. Circular Thinking

One of the subjects I discuss with couples is the concept of circular thinking. I share with them that in intimate relationships the communication is circular rather than linear. In linear thinking A causes B to happen, and B causes C to happen, and C causes D to occur. In circular thinking, A affects B and then B affects A, and a circular pattern develops in the relationship.

I share with couples a clinical example to highlight my point of view. I once met a couple where the husband had an alcohol problem and his wife was depressed. The husband had been getting help from a psychologist for years with minimum benefit and his wife had been being treated by a psychiatrist for years and principally taking different medications with little improvement. I found it strange that the psychologist had never invited the man's wife for a joint meeting and her psychiatrist had never met the husband. Both were being treated in isolation. After I worked with both spouses together for a few sessions, they realized how her depression and his alcohol problem were emotionally connected. After being introduced to the dynamics of circular thinking they soon realized:

- the more he drank, the more she withdrew.
- the more she withdrew, the more reason he found to go out with his drinking buddies.
- the more he came home drunk, the more justified she felt in holding back her love and affection.
- the more he felt rejected and neglected, the more he went out and got drunk.
- the more he got drunk, the more she withdrew into her depression.

The negative cycle continued for years until it was addressed in joint therapy. What a rewarding experience it was to see how hard they worked to break the negative cycle with their newly-learned Green Zone Philosophy and how significant the improvement that was accomplished in just a few months.

When spouses blame each other and each expects the other to change, they feel helpless when it hasn't happened. I urge them to become part of the solution rather than remaining part of the problem. I have observed that as each spouse becomes aware of the process, which they often do at a different pace, they feel more in control and more optimistic. One spouse feeds on the other's spontaneous reaction to getting into the Green Zone.

3. Green Yellow Red Zones

According to Green Zone philosophy, all of us are in one of the emotional Zones at a particular time and when two people interact, the outcome of the communication depends upon the Zone each person is occupying. Healthy communication takes place when both parties are in the Green Zone. When there, they are cooperative, pleasant

and cheerful. Their rational discussions and positive communication helps in further developing an affectionate bond. Being in the Green Zone makes it easy to share one's feelings and give honest feedback. Such a sustaining bond makes it possible to have a healthy dialogue and more easily iron out the differences.

When people are in the Yellow Zone they are irritable, often snappy and their communication is poor. In such a state of mind they cannot deal with stressful situations and it does not take long for them to fall into the Red Zone. When they are there, the communication breaks down and almost anything can happen to keep it there.

When in the Red Zone they are angry and frustrated and they either walk away or lose control and say things that they regret later on. I again stress that people in the Red Zone are no different than people who have had too much alcohol to drink. One finds it very difficult to reason with them and has to wait until they sober up and come back to their Green Zone (if they have one) for a healthy dialogue to take place. It is not uncommon to see that at the beginning of the dialogue one person is in the Green Zone and the other in the Red; eventually the person in the Green Zone can be dragged into the Red Zone and then both are miserable. Sometimes it takes hours, days or weeks to return to the Green Zone to resume a healthy relationship and a constructive dialogue.

To use this construct constructively and to benefit from it in day-to-day life, I suggest the following three steps.

Recognizing

I ask people to become aware of their own moods and take a sound look at how they think and act, then take respon-

sibility for their actions and behaviour. I ask them to note how often they slide into Yellow and Red Zones and once they identify what Zone they're in, I ask them to recognize the Zone their spouse, parents, children, colleagues, neighbours and close friends are in before they enter into a dialogue or a debate. By becoming aware of this most important step of observing before talking, they are able to pick up a pattern of how both parties slide into or are pushed into Yellow and Red Zones.

Recovering

After they recognize the patterns I ask them to discover how they can recover from the Red Zone and return to the Green Zone. I show them that when they are in the Red Zone they have been harbouring a lot of anger, frustration and resentment and will always have difficulty processing their pain and hurt feelings. I offer the analogy of the river where the water is clean as long as it is moving, but if the water ceases to flow, then the algae start growing and it becomes stagnant. In the same way, once they are in the Red Zone the relationship starts to stagnate into an emotional swamp, causing a build-up of anxiety, tension and frustration. I ask them to find a way to process those feelings. To recover from their individual Red Zone, they may

- take time off from their usual routine
- go for a walk, listen to soothing music, read or work on the computer
- find diversion and relaxation by visiting a friend or spending time with their children
- or find a personally effective way to get back to the comfort of their Green Zone.

Restraining

After they have learned to recover from a damaging Red Zone encounter, I ask them to restrain themselves from walking, sliding or being pushed into Yellow and Red Zones by another person or by their own lack of control in the future. Becoming aware of the pattern also helps them to take control of the situation rather than being dragged into a nasty debate or pushed into a fight and afterwards resenting being provoked unnecessarily. The more people become aware of the dynamics and changes in their moods and the moods of others, the more they can prevent the frequency and intensity of their lives being corrupted by a Red Zone interaction.

The more people take responsibility for being and staying in the Green Zone the less they are affected by other people's moods and behaviours. Such a change in attitude produces significant relief because they start to realize they have been carrying the burden of the bad feelings of others and have mistakenly felt responsible for their immature behaviour.

They also come to understand how they have been blaming others for dictating their own moods. In therapy I encourage them to have an open and honest discussion where both parties promise to take responsibility for staying in the Green Zone and not hold the other person responsible for pushing them into the Red Zone. They might feel provoked and encouraged to jump into the Red Zone but they cannot excuse themselves and blame others if they land there without trying to stop the fall. I encourage them to take responsibility whenever and in whatever circumstances they find themselves in the Red Zone.

When couples become aware of each other's sensitive

areas they become quite respectful of each other's feelings. The following letter from one patient to another highlights that sensitivity.

Dearest

I was quite pleased with our discussion last week in which we realized that unintentionally we both have been saying things to each other that were quite hurtful (unfortunately we both had rationalized that to ourselves by saying that we wanted to be fully honest with each other) and I felt good about our promise that in the future we will try to be respectful of each other's feelings. We both became aware that Love without Respect is a painful proposition.

With love

The more couples genuinely respect each other, the more their intimate relationship will improve. Although this concept of Green, Yellow and Red Zones is simple (or maybe that's why) most people I worked with found it useful and effective and within a few weeks started seeing a positive change in their mood and relationships with loved ones and others.

4. Mobilizing Healthy Resources of Relationships

One of the unfortunate things about people involved in Yellow and Red relationships is that they get so trapped in their unhealthy patterns of life that they cannot mobilize their healthy resources. They have well-established non-productive repetitive patterns that they cannot or do not know how to break. One of the goals of relationship therapy is to have patients understand and break old patterns

and to set new ones in their place. How different therapists do that depends upon their professional background, experience and personality. I would like to share with you how I work to achieve that goal with the couples I see.

If in my assessment, I note that the couple has an ingrained pattern of complaining about each other, I need to break that pattern early in therapy by giving them something positive and constructive to do. I introduce the subject by saying, "It is quite clear to all of us that the way both of you are interacting is not to your satisfaction. To make a change for the better, we have to do something different. Why don't you each think of one favour that you can ask the other person to do for you that will make you feel better and improve the relationship. It should be something positive and specific and not worded in a negative way like, 'Don't fight with me' or 'stop ignoring me' or in a non-specific way, 'Be nice to me' or 'Care about me'. I tell them to be more specific."

The whole exercise is an opportunity for them to explore the positive aspects of their relationship and verbalize their needs and desires more concretely. It is quite amazing to see that although most couples have dozens of complaints about each other, when requested to think in a positive way and verbalize their desires and needs, they become silent.

I have to help many to articulate even simple desires. "I want you to greet me with a kiss when I come home from work." "Can you look after the kids once a week when I go visit my friends?" I find this exercise very helpful as it puts the onus on them, makes them think differently, gives them homework and moves us on from just talking about the problem to doing something to help solve it. Most couples

leave the session hopeful of receiving the requested favour.

At the next session, I review the week with them. If they succeeded in their homework, they feel pleased and productive; and if they did not succeed then it highlights their problems and gives useful information for discussion of their difficulties in completing their tasks.

After they have done a favour for each other I make a personal request, "Would both of you now do me a favour?"

"What is it?" they ask, often hesitantly.

"Can you give each other a pleasant surprise during the week, by doing something that the other person likes?"

This is one way of tapping into their positive selves and the healthy resources of their relationship. Experience has shown me that the decision to do something pleasant for the other person changes the negative mental set to one that is positive. Couples have done some interesting things: one woman cooked a special dinner for her partner, while he brought home her favourite flowers; a husband got tickets for a dinner theatre, and the wife hid in his briefcase a new book by his favourite author, to read on the train to work. It was living proof for them that they still cared about each other and below the surface of pain, tension, resentment and anger there was still a substantial reservoir generating feelings of affection and caring. In most cases their actions spoke louder than promises.

5. Temporary Separation

If after working with a couple for a few months I feel that we have not been able to break the negative patterns of communication, thus leaving one or both partners still unhappy, I suggest a temporary separation. This time-out from living together might be for a few weeks, or in some

cases, extended to as much as a few months. Such an arrangement might be inconvenient financially and socially, but it forces the couple to create new patterns in the ways that they relate to each other. It allows them time for soul-searching. After a few weeks, most start missing their partner and begin to appreciate those aspects of the relationship that they had taken for granted while living under the same roof.

While separated, both parties continue with their individual, relationship and group therapy sessions with me. I encourage them to date on a weekly basis and meet for coffee, lunch or dinner, to experience the changes in each other. In this way they can create a new relationship at their own pace and to their own liking. Being in therapy helps them iron out their differences and when both partners are ready to return to live under the same roof, they get back together with a much greater appreciation for each other. Many couples who were initially reluctant to try this approach found it very useful in the end because of the greater depth of understanding they had achieved. They had never imagined that a few weeks or months of temporary separation could do so much for their relationship. Many felt as if the relationship was re-born and that their soul-searching had been a most worthwhile experience.

6. Combination Therapy

People who alongside having relationship conflicts also have personality problems need more help than just relationship therapy. I invite them to individual and group therapy so that they can develop some insight into their problems and improve the quality of their lives. With such a combination, one aspect of therapy helps the other and improvement in one aspect of their lives supports the others.

For those couples where both partners need extra help, we suggest group therapy. Because we have three groups on different days of the week, we are able to invite each partner to a separate group.

One such example was Cliff, who grew up in a dysfunctional family and experienced a number of traumatic situations in that abusive environment. When he got married and had children, his own aggressive tendencies created a stressful environment for his wife and children. Before joining our clinic Cliff had seen many therapists and had been involved in several group experiences but any changes he made to control his behaviour were superficial and short lived. He learned to control his behaviour but did not change his attitude. After being involved in combination therapy for a few months he wrote me a letter sharing his experiences.

A Therapeutic Journey

Dear Sohail:

When first meeting you, I was a confused, lost person who spent most of his energy in his personal and family life reacting to moods and opinions of others. I feel that I defined myself through others and based my own personal self-esteem on the praise or criticism of the people close to me. My life was dangerous. Dangerous to myself and to my family. My family controlled how I perceived my own worth, and without them even knowing it they became a perceived threat to my self-esteem and self-worth because of the position in which I placed them in my

mind. It was in response to this perceived threat that I lashed out in violence and abusive behaviour.

It seems significant that I trapped myself in this type of dysfunction only in my family relationship. I did not seem to feel any threat to my self-esteem in my relationships with peers or co-workers. I seemed to receive praise appropriately and did not take it out of perspective. I also seemed to receive criticism from others constructively and did not construe it as a threat to my being.

Much of my confusion when I first met you was due to my disillusionment with the previous therapy I had received. Therapy which seemed to help me progress in controlling my abusive behaviour went only so far. The previous therapy could only help me get better to a certain point, and then it did not seem to progress any further. As is the case with a change in behaviour, when the progress stopped before the complete change took place, the old habitual behaviour started to return. The net result was that I seemed to be getting better but the progress was very slow and the behavioural change was very small.

I feel that the ability you have displayed in helping me progress much further than any of my previous therapists is due to the flexibility of your approach to my therapy. My therapy seems to be in four distinct parts but the four parts are all related and prove to be supportive of their partners.

The primary part of my therapy is the one-on-one sessions I have with you. I find them helpful in allowing me to express myself without any criticism. I have always felt that these sessions were based on me as a

person and not as an abusive animal as I have felt in past therapies. I feel free to express myself without the fear of disapproval if my thoughts or feelings are inappropriate. I feel the ability to express myself freely is manifesting itself in my family relationship and I am better able to talk with my wife and children. I also feel that as I learn to talk freely about how I feel, I can better understand myself and my feelings. I feel now that I recognize feelings better and do not simply react to unknown urges and feelings.

The second part of my therapy is relative feedback from therapy with my wife. This independent perspective on my problems and reactions helps me be honest with myself and my progress. The independence ensures that I cannot be in denial about my problem or my progress in dealing with my problem. This feedback also serves to define my progress as the very family whom I threaten with my abusive behaviour can very quickly determine if my behavioural changes have any substance.

The third part of my therapy is joint sessions with myself and my wife. These sessions help to establish an arena by which we both can express our thoughts and feelings and we are very secure that these feelings will be validated and not condemned. It serves as a forum where feelings and reactions can be expressed and we are confident that the reactions will be appropriate. These sessions also serve to establish short-term goals and expectations for the coming days/weeks ahead.

The fourth part of my therapy is group therapy sessions. These sessions are much different from the

past group sessions which I attended. In the past I was involved in groups which consisted of only abusive men. These groups were mainly support groups dealing with the shame and embarrassment of being an abusive man. The sessions which I attend now are not necessarily supportive. These sessions can be supportive if support is warranted. They can also be very challenging and confrontative if group members feel strongly on an issue. I feel I get a lot of help from these sessions due to the bond that develops between group members. These sessions form a sort of stepping stone in learning how to express and receive feelings from people close to me. The group members have become close to me and I find their praise is very valuable to me. I also find their criticism is more biting than it would be from a total stranger. I feel my acceptance of their criticism helps me to not let other people's opinions affect my self-esteem. This acceptance also helps me to realize that differing opinions can exist together and that there is nothing wrong with this, in fact there can be something very healthy about it.

I feel, due to the flexibility and diversity of these four parts and their relationship to each other, that I have made significant progress in dealing not only with my abusive behaviour, but also with the insecurities which my abusiveness is partly based on. There is still a lot of progress to be made, but I am very confident that my therapy with you is such that it can continue to assist with my progress. I am confident that this therapy can easily adjust to my behavioural changes and can continue to provide support and

direction as I progress.

*Sincerely yours,
Cliff*

7. Creative Interventions

As a psychotherapist working with individuals, couples, families and groups, I have discovered certain creative interventions which I found quite helpful in therapy, especially in cases where the traditional interventions did not produce the desired change. The more I used those interventions, the more confident I felt in exploring new ways to bring about the expected change in therapy. I will share a couple with you to highlight their effectiveness in therapy.

Sharing A Movie

I used to see a nineteen-year-old woman a few years ago whose many former therapists had given up on her. She was an angry person and whenever she was frustrated at home, in school or with the therapist, she acted out, took overdoses, cut her arm or engaged in other self-destructive behaviours.

At her weekly sessions, she talked at length and made many plans but never followed through on them. The sessions would end in mutual frustration. After a few weeks I felt lost. I did not know which way to turn. I wanted to confront her but I was apprehensive of what that might provoke her to do. I thought she might leave therapy or act out in some malevolent way, and I did not want that to happen. Finally, one evening when I was thinking about her, I remembered the movie, "Ordinary People" in which Mary Taylor Moore and Timothy Hutton had played a troubled

mother and son. Timothy saw a psychiatrist. There was a candid portrayal of a genuine patient-psychiatrist relationship. Timothy was very angry and the psychiatrist was initially very supportive, but eventually became confronting. Finally the psychiatrist was able to achieve a breakthrough in the relationship. I saw a parallel between my client and Timothy and wanted to achieve a similar breakthrough. So I reserved the audiovisual room of our hospital and requested my patient to see the movie.

I was most impressed at how it changed the entire course of her therapy.

Creating Metaphors/Sharing Stories

People who have a keen interest in poetry, fiction and folk tales are aware that metaphors play an important role in producing an impact on the listener's mind. It seems that words, images and characters acquire a second layer of meaning and become charged with extra energy when they become parts of the metaphor. Metaphors attempt to encapsulate the whole struggle in a few words.

If metaphors are to be used successfully in therapy, they must evolve from inside the therapy and not be imposed from outside. Metaphors are successful only when patients can relate to them. The more we know about our patients, the easier it becomes to create a metaphor that they will accept. Once patients accept the metaphors, they not only extend them but also add different dimensions to them. It is one way of their owning the metaphor.

I have found that it is best to start with simple metaphors and then let them become more complex and sophisticated with the evolution of therapy.

A couple that came to the clinic was facing a crisis in their relationship. They had been married for ten years but their relationship was on a downhill journey. They had seen a couple of therapists in the past but therapy had made only temporary improvements. When I asked them what they considered to be their goal in therapy, the husband said that he wanted to improve the relationship, but the wife wanted to separate. I felt that the husband wanted marriage counselling while the wife was looking for separation counselling. At the end of the session I said, "I think before we start our journey we have to know which highway we are going to take. If we are going towards Newfoundland then we will take the 401 East and if we want to go to British Columbia then we will travel on the 401 West. Once we have decided on our destination, we can plan how to get there."

In the next two sessions they added their own colour to the metaphor. Since both of them had grown up on the East coast, for them taking the 401 East meant reconstructing the marriage and taking the 401 West meant separation. Their discussion clearly showed that they had accepted the metaphor. When the husband convinced his wife to give marriage counselling one last chance, we started to travel in therapy on the 401 East.

As the work progressed, the husband felt that his wife was travelling too fast, while he wanted to proceed slowly. In one session he said, "Although we both want to go to Newfoundland, it seems as if you want to fly while I want to drive."

"But what is wrong with flying?" she asked.

"There's nothing wrong with flying, but if we drive we will have more control over our journey. We would be able

to stop at different places and enjoy the journey.”

“But you will be always in the driver’s seat.”

“I am quite willing to share the driving.”

It was interesting to see how the couple extended that simple metaphor in therapy. Even a year after the successful termination of therapy, when I met the couple in a shopping mall holding hands, and I asked, “How are things?” they both smiled. The husband said, “We are still living on the East coast” and his wife added, “and happily too.” I was quite pleased to hear that.

I worked with a bright young woman who was confused and unsure which direction she wanted to follow in her life. She was working as a secretary, living with her parents and dating a young man. She wanted to go back to school but felt very nervous because her boyfriend approved of that, but her parents disliked her boyfriend as they felt that he was trying to steer her away from them. She wanted to move out of her parents’ home and live independently in an apartment so that she could meet with her boyfriend more freely. She was worried that if she did go back to school, she would not be able to afford the rent for the apartment. After listening to her dilemmas I said, “I feel as if you are in a jungle and want to get out so that you can find a highway. Maybe I can help you in that search. I have helped other people to discover their highways.”

In the next session she said, “I feel scared in that jungle. I feel it is haunted by the memories of my past. I don’t want to be eaten up alive. I want to live in a safe and secure place.”

After listening to that I was sure that she had accepted the metaphor. Accepting a metaphor is also symbolic of accepting the therapist and the direction of therapy. In

some cases the metaphor extends to a point where it becomes a story, a story that is shared by the therapist and the patient and absorbed into the fabric of the therapy.

I used to see a woman who was originally referred for anxiety and phobic problems, but as I got to know her I realized that she had serious relationship problems. She told me that she had been in an abusive marital relationship for years in the past. Her husband used to insult her and at times beat her up. She was left bruised on a number of occasions. After she left her husband, she lived on her own but felt very lonely. When I met her she was living with another man who was nearly ten years older than she. He worked hard and had a number of friends but never included her in his social activities. She felt ignored and rejected by him. She was terribly unhappy in the relationship but rationalized her stay by saying, "Although he does not give me enough attention and I am not the first priority in his life, at least he does not abuse me like my ex-husband. If I leave him I will be lonely and miserable again."

She came for individual and group therapy sessions. One day I shared a story with her. "There was a healthy, strong young elephant in the zoo that was always tethered by a slender chain around his leg. He was never seen to make any attempt to break the chain and run away. When people asked the keeper about it, he said, "When he was a baby, he used to wander away. So we put this little chain on his leg. As a baby, he could not break it, and he still believes that, and so he never makes any attempt to run away."

But one day there was a fire in the zoo and everybody started running in a panic. When the elephant saw that fire he also ran and broke the chain. And his life was never the same again."

The patient listened to that story carefully, turning it over in her mind, gradually realizing that a crisis can often be a liberating experience.

As she attended therapy sessions she felt stronger and one day she disappeared. We did not see or hear from her for a few weeks. We tried to contact her but there was no answer. One day she reappeared, looking very happy. She started the interview by saying, "I broke the chain."

"What do you mean?" I inquired.

"There was a fire, a fire of passion and I ran and it was never the same again."

I was surprised to see her taking ownership of the story. Then she explained, "One evening I went to a bar by myself and met my common-law husband's best friend. He is nearly ten years younger than I. We always liked each other but never expressed our feelings to each other. But I don't know what happened that night. We talked for hours. Maybe it was alcohol. I never felt so relaxed in my life. The next morning I found myself next to him in his bed. Obviously I could not go back. That was the end of one chapter of my life and the beginning of a new one. So I broke the chain."

I went back once to pick up my clothes. That's why I did not come back to therapy sessions. I have been living with my new lover for a few weeks now. I don't remember the last time I was so happy. I am a strong elephant but I did not realize it before."

It has been more than a year since she broke free of her unhappy situation, and she is still involved with the same man.

It is interesting to see how metaphors and stories can become a part of a patient's vocabulary and life script.

LETTER WRITING



Over the years I have discovered how the written word generally, and letter writing specifically, can be used in emotional healing and improving the quality of communication. I have become very aware that writing can complement the spoken words in psychotherapy. Historically psychotherapy focused on verbal exchange, which is why it was called talk therapy. Since there was a gradual evolution of the use of letter writing in my psychotherapy practice, I would like to share some of the milestones of this professional and creative journey.

The idea of using the written word in psychotherapy first came to me when I heard patients saying that they had something important to tell me in their sessions but they had forgotten it. I asked them to start a journal in which to record significant thoughts and experiences that they wanted to discuss with me. I remembered that when I was a little boy, I had seen my mother writing notes before going to see her family physician and upon my inquiry she told me that she could not remember to tell the doctor all the important things in a short time that the doctor had available. As a child it did not make any sense to me but

when I became a psychotherapist, I could see the benefits of that practice.

I found the journals written by my patients very useful in therapy. It gave me the opportunity to focus on issues that I might have otherwise missed. I also felt that my reading those journals in the presence of my patients improved my relationship with them because they felt that I took their problems seriously and discussed their concerns with them empathically.

As journal writing increased in my practice, I discovered that those journals were also progress notes for patients. Since many patients' progress was irregular and uneven as they would go two steps forward and one step back, I asked them to read to me from their journal when they were regressing temporarily or going through a crisis. Most patients felt reassured when reading their journals. It helped to restore their faith in therapy and in themselves. They could see that their slipping back was short-lived and soon they would bounce back and continue with their progress and not worry in the future if they regressed for a short period of time.

The real introduction of letter writing came to my practice when I wanted my patients to review their therapy. I asked them to write me a letter sharing their accomplishments and also any changes they wanted to see occur in therapy. That request forced them to take the process seriously. I reassured them that it was not an exam, as they were not writing an essay for some English literature course, and that they need not worry about grammar and spelling. I was more interested in their honest feelings than the language. Writing such letters also helped patients to define their goals and direction in therapy and that process

encouraged them to get in touch and remain in touch with their feelings and take responsibility for their lives.

While asking patients to share their thoughts and feelings in writing, I also felt that although I kept a record of the significant aspects of the sessions in the chart, I never gave them any written feedback. Many patients shared that they wondered what I wrote in the chart and what I was thinking about their problems. So I started writing to my patients, reviewing therapy with them and sharing my impressions and suggestions (Letter 1). I found those letters extremely helpful in building rapport. Having a written dialogue with patients opened new doors to deeper sharing and communication. How different from the distant and aloof stance most traditional therapists take in therapy! As I wrote letters, I felt comfortable sharing some of my life experiences and stories that I thought would benefit the evolution of therapy. Most patients felt flattered. They said my letters made them feel special, as they also provided them with an opportunity to reflect upon my concerns and later discuss them openly with me during therapy sessions. I was pleasantly surprised to find that most patients took written words more seriously than those that were spoken. Written words gave them an opportunity to read, re-read and reflect. Many patients responded to my letters and I found the written exchange a great enrichment to our therapy sessions. It helped us when we were reviewing the therapy and eventually deciding the time of termination. In this way, not only I as the therapist but also the patient had a written record of significant encounters in therapy.

As I became more comfortable in using letter writing between patients and myself, I also discovered that it could

be used to resolve or dissolve Yellow and Red Zone relationships. When I met women who were married to dominating, controlling and autocratic husbands and were too afraid to express their concerns openly, I asked them to write letters to their husbands. For many it became a very courageous act to be confident about in his presence. Such an exercise not only helped patients to gain self-confidence but also enabled them to negotiate the outcome of the marriage as equal partners. Many husbands were openly surprised to receive such a letter. If the wife was nervous, I wrote a letter to accompany hers. Many wives were surprised that their husbands took their letter seriously when accompanied by my letter. One such example was a woman who was married to a man with a serious alcohol problem. She was extremely unhappy and the children suffered seeing their father drink so much that he staggered all over the house. The marital and family life had deteriorated to the point that the wife could no longer tolerate it. Ironically, the husband did not take his alcohol problem seriously and if his wife complained, he blamed it on an affair that she had had a few years before. I asked the wife to write him a letter (Letter 2). I wrote a letter to both of them (Letter 3).

On another occasion, I asked a wife to write a letter to her husband because she wanted to leave him and be with her lover who she had met during her recent trip to Europe. In spite of repeated discussions her husband was not willing to accept that unpleasant reality of life. He had difficulties coming to terms with the fact that his wife whom he loved dearly and faithfully could choose somebody else and leave him to suffer in loneliness in his old age. Her letter to him opened the door for him to receive

therapy and to find ways to live a satisfying life without his wife (Letter 4 and 5). Alongside spouses, letter writing to relatives, friends and colleagues living in Yellow and Red Zones also proved to be an effective way to address unresolved problems.

As letter writing was proving effective in dealing with peoples' current interpersonal conflicts, I wondered if it could be used to deal with past hurts, especially with those adults who had difficult and unresolved relationships with their parents. That inspiration came to me when I read Franz Kafka's famous letter to his father from his book *Fathers and Sons*. It was interesting that even Kafka never shared that fifty-page letter with his father in which, in part he wrote:

"Dearest Father!

You asked me recently why I maintain that I am afraid of you. As usual, I was unable to think of any answer to your question, partly for the very reason that I am afraid of you, and partly because an explanation of the grounds for this fear would mean going into far more detail than I could ever approximately keep in mind while talking. And if I now try to give you an answer in writing, it will still be very incomplete, because, even in writing, this fear and its consequences hamper me in relation to you and because the magnitude of the subject goes far beyond the scope of my memory and power of reasoning."

Even with my own patients I discovered that letter writing was cathartic and therapeutic even if it was not shared with the parent. Some patients were not ready to share the letter with the intended recipient, as they were afraid of the

family's reaction. They thought their siblings might not believe them or their parents might disown them. Some felt comfortable sharing the letter after a few months of therapy when they had gathered more strength emotionally.

One such example was an Asian woman who was very bitter about her past and angry with her father. She wrote a letter stating that she wanted to dissolve the relationship. The letter was never delivered. It took her two years in therapy to give me her blessing to invite her father for a joint session. By that time she was dating a Western man and was planning to marry him. When I invited her father, she wrote a second letter and gave it to him. They both talked openly and honestly and finally found a peaceful solution. It was a major breakthrough in their family life. It was interesting that as she dealt with her conflicts with her parents by writing letters, her relationship with her boyfriend also improved. Now they are married and have two children and enjoy a happy family life.

Over the years I have discovered that resolving and dissolving conflicts with parents helps relationships with one's spouse and children.

Gradually letter writing became an integral part of the practice in our *Creative Psychotherapy Clinic* as it is one of the creative interventions we use in therapy. My patients and I exchange letters on a regular basis. It is also interesting that sometimes patients who leave town for personal, family or professional reasons send us a surprise by writing us a letter and sharing their feedback (Letter 6 and 7). Such letters are very rewarding and inspire us to help other people. It also confirms my faith that therapy plays a significant role in changing people's lives and relationships for the better.

After such a positive experience with letter writing in psychotherapy, I have encouraged other therapists to use it in their practice. I believe it is an area that is worth exploring as it has a lot of promise. I can see its positive role especially with people who have difficulties expressing themselves verbally. It is a creative intervention that taps into the unexplored territories of people's minds and personalities. For me, exploring the art of letter writing in psychotherapy has been an adventurous, exciting and rewarding experience.

I am quite encouraged to discover that other therapists in different parts of the world are exploring the role of journal and letter writing in their clinical practice. They are also discovering that writing can be part of the healing process and letter writing can play a significant role in improving the quality of life and relationships.

LETTER 1 ... *Losing Something to Find Something*

Dear Linda

You have been in pain. You have been suffering. You were in conflict even the first day I met you. I think you are a hostage of Jonathan's love, and moreover, I don't think you are free or at peace with yourself. I always felt that we have to be free to find peace with ourselves and we have to be peaceful with ourselves before we can enjoy closeness and intimacy with other people. You are at peace with yourself as a mother, so you enjoy your children. You are at peace with yourself as a friend, so you enjoy your friends. But you are not at peace with yourself as a lover, so you can't enjoy Jonathan.

Maybe you have to lose him to find yourself as a lover and once you are at peace with yourself as a lover, then you can be close with another man without pain and suffering and guilt, whether it be with Jonathan or someone else.

When you are in pain and in conflict with yourself, all you bring to the relationship is pain and conflict and suffering.

Sometimes we have to lose something to find something. The more precious the thing we want to get, the more sacrifice life asks us to give.

I was hoping you could find something without losing anything. I tried my best but it did not work. Maybe you have to take the first step towards freedom. I know it will hurt Jonathan as he loves you dearly, but his love will set you free from itself. He has grown enough to see that your happiness with or without him is more important than his desire and need to have you in his life as a lover. He can still enjoy your friendship and parenting two beautiful children. But by letting you go so that you can discover yourself, he might grow as well.

It might be a painful process but it might all be worth it in the end; you may discover a peaceful existence separately or together. I am still willing to work with you separately or together for a peaceful co-existence.

I wanted to give you my honest feedback at this crucial point in your life. I have great respect and admiration for you and Jonathan.

*Sincerely,
Sohail*

LETTER 2 ...

Choosing Between Family and Alcohol

Jim

In order to have the family life we all want, I'd want you without the drinking.

For what we have been through I have come to a point in my life where I want to be part of a normal happy family again with you in it. But it has to be without the alcohol.

If you can't handle this I am fully aware of what I have to do to be happy myself and the boys. I want you to chose between the family and the alcohol and the attitude that goes along with it.

Can it be possible to have an answer on what I have asked of you in the next fewweeks?

I want to start as soon as possible to have a happy family again.

Jennifer

LETTER 3 ...

Cooperation Rather Than Confrontation

Dear Jennifer and Jim,

When I met you more than a year ago, I realized that the following problems were having a major impact on your lives:

- 1. Jennifer's relationship with another man.*
- 2. Jim's relationship with alcohol.*
- 3. Tension in the family which also affects the children.*

In the last year we have offered you encouragement

and support and have tried to sort out your problems. We have been partly successful but we still have a long way to go.

I still feel we need a cooperative rather than a confrontative attitude, as I would like us to work together. I feel that we can be helpful only if both of you promise:

- 1. Jennifer will stay away from the other man*
- 2. Jim will stay away from alcohol*
- 3. A positive and affectionate attitude will be kept towards each other and the children.*

You spent twenty years together. We would like to change your life for the better but we can't do it without your cooperation.

It is time for both of you to do some soul-searching and decide whether family life is a priority in your lives. If that is not the case then I would be concerned about your children who might be sitting in another psychiatrist's office twenty years from now.

*Sincerely,
Sohail*

NOTE: After a couple of weeks of exchanging letters, we had a serious discussion and both parties promised to follow my suggestions. Jim stopped drinking and became very affectionate with Jennifer and children. Jennifer stated she could not believe the change in him. Life became very peaceful for Jim who stated that my letter had been a wake-up call.

LETTER 4 ...

Losing Each Other Somewhere Along the Way

Dear Walter,

This is a terribly difficult task, writing to say goodbye to my friend of 31 years. It makes me sad and scared for all four of us.

We have a lot of good memories to share and wonderful children. We have been a good team for many years and you have been very noble in the way you have handled yourself through this crisis and I really respect you for it.

However, I have to be honest and tell you that I have given my heart to someone else and I think you know it. I can't love you anymore the way you deserve to be loved under that circumstance. For a long time we have been going through the motions of a marriage but not really loving one another and we both deserve better than that.

I have not been fair because I haven't really loved you the way I should for a long time.

You are a fine, handsome, smart, loving man and you deserve to be loved for yourself. By me staying, you cannot find your own happiness and so I feel I must say farewell to this marriage.

I would hope that we could always be friends — maybe not the best friends as we were but at least close friends who know each other well and who have shared a long history.

I am sorry for hurting you so much. We took each other for granted, worked so hard and lost each other somewhere along the way.

So, I wish you the very best, my friend, and hope you do the same for me.

Yvonne

LETTER 5...

Lover or Husband

Dear Dr. Sohail,

I came into therapy after a lengthy period of struggling with an indecision in my life — whether to stay in a relatively comfortable boring marriage or to start a totally new life/job etc. in Denmark with a man with whom I believed I was in love.

I had met this man at a period in my life when I was tired of living with my husband. He was irritating me with his lack of confidence in a lot of decisions, his lack of emotion and I found him boring and depressing. I couldn't wait for him to go back to Canada (we were on an eight month sabbatical) so I could be free of him.

When he finally went home I had two months in which I could finally do what I wanted and it felt great. I no longer had to build him up or translate for him or dream up activities. In this frame of mind, I met a man of my natural heritage after one month of travel.

Initially I ignored him but as we were both traveling alone, we ate dinner together and he became like a bodyguard for me. There were very strong physical feelings, which I denied for a long time but eventually I was unfaithful to my husband for the first time and I liked it. It became like a drug and I couldn't stop seeing this man.

I returned twice to Denmark and lived with him first for one month secretly and then a second time. After two months of terrible unhappiness at home, my husband said I had to make an attempt to see if this was the life for me so I went to Denmark.

Initially the plan was to stay six months but somehow after four months my extended family in Denmark got my address and strongly suggested that I go home, forget this man and repair my marriage. And so I thought I could do this.

However in the next two months I went through the motions of living but I was obsessed with phoning Denmark and I slept in another bedroom.

Most days I would start the day after a poor sleep, with a resolve to stay and appreciate all the things I had: two fine, successful sons, my husband who was faithful, a lovely home with a swimming pool and all the bells and whistles in a good neighborhood, a job which I liked, and friends and hobbies of thirty years.

By midday I was starting to have doubts and by evening I wanted to throw it all away and talk to my lover.

I only confided in two people and by the second month this pattern of indecisiveness became so bad that I was headed for a huge depression. I really didn't feel like getting out of bed or socializing much. I cried more than usual and basically was just existing.

My feelings were very flat. Whatever I was doing I was not enjoying no matter how pleasant it was.

Everything was coming to a head as I had to return to work after one and a half years off and I panicked. I couldn't imagine how I could go to work when I hardly felt like getting out of bed.

My one confidante confided that after a personal tragedy she had gone to a counselor and it had given her a lot of support. She strongly recommended that I try this person and so I contacted your clinic. After the initial assessment you suggested I move out of my home, which I did.

This was very traumatic and I had difficulty sleeping at first but the less contact I had with my home the more calm and comfortable I became.

I was back at work and really enjoyed coming to my rented place all by myself. I did a lot of power walking, reading and got back into my work routine.

I looked forward to seeing you as a sort of sounding board and a couple of times felt exhilarated and free after a visit. However, this was not a “real” life and I was living a sort of twilight zone ... things had to move forward; and so I was encouraged to come to a decision.

I suppose what I really like is the package I have here with the lover in Denmark but I can’t have that and so I said goodbye to my husband in a letter which we read together first and you thought it was suitable.

My husband and his therapist met, together with you and me and I read the letter at that time.

All was not perfect after that. I felt a lot of guilt about the hurt and was reassured that my husband would get help but I know that he is a very closed person and will not reveal himself in therapy.

I am looking forward to my future but I still have some doubts ... will I be happy in Denmark after the novelty wears off? I know I can make a success there but I am so scared. I think I have to be patient for the

next couple of months and then start to build a life there.

I thought that everything would feel better soon but I think I need support to get through the bad parts of dividing property and of packing to really leave. The scary part is that I have always had someone to run home to and now, if this doesn't work out I am really on my own.

*Sincerely,
Yvonne*

NOTE: Yvonne has been happily living with her lover in Denmark for several years.

LETTER 6 ...

From the Bottom Of My Heart, Thank-you

*Dear Dr. Sohail and Anne,
I am writing to thank you for the help you offered me over the past year and a half.*

*Never in my life (that I remember) have I felt so good, so in touch and so right. Finally, I feel free to be me. Free to seek out new things and give help to others with real feelings. I am no longer just surviving. I am **LIVING LIFE**. It feels **GREAT!***

You both helped me realize that I am not a bad person. For so long I had this noose around my neck. Your counseling and words of wisdom helped me learn to cope with the noose. Sometimes, I'm scared that I might revert to some old tendencies of coping, like overeating and bulimia but I feel stronger and wiser now. I believe I will be able to identify what

triggers my feeling vulnerable and alone. Just knowing how far along I have come in healing helps me feel powerful and strong. Also, Eric is in my life now and he provides me with a lot of support. He helps me by making me feel special. I feel very fortunate with the way my life has turned (for the better).

I remember when you (Dr. Sohail) said in group, "When you look at Jackie she appears to have everything going for her, why does she have such low self-esteem?" I never thought I was worth anything. Now, I realize all the good I can do and all the good I have to offer. I finally feel like a real person who can laugh, cry, make jokes and be happy. Anne, you were right... I deserve to be happy too. Thank you both. You helped change my life.

From the bottom of my heart, thank you.

Jackie

LETTER 7 ...

I Am Amazed by the Transformation

Dear Dr. Sohail,

I am writing this letter because I said I would and now I somehow feel ready. There are a few things that I would like to share with you.

I needed time to process my decision to do this letter. I guess my journey is not yet over because I just ate until I started to feel a little ill. I am a little anxious about sharing with you, however, I know that it will be good for me.

As you know, when I started coming to the clinic, I had been seeing Anne at the hospital. [Christine had

sought counseling from Anne to help her deal with her father's paranoid behaviour. It quickly became apparent in the sessions that she herself was suffering greatly from the effects of years of living with him]. *Prior to that I had seen a therapist and at some point along the way a psychiatrist. The medication prescribed to me was Prozac. I had been preoccupied with my weight...the psychiatrist felt that Prozac would help me lose some weight, as the side effects would make me feel too ill to eat. Anyhow I was quite intent on finding a therapist who understood mental illness and its effects on family members. As you know my father suffers from Paranoid Schizophrenia and he raised my two brothers and myself. In many ways he was a good provider, despite his abusive childhood and the damages and scars of the war. I am sure he tried to be the best father he could be.*

As a kid I knew no different — that is just the way life was, at times living the paranoia and being on the receiving end of his fears and thoughts. I put so much energy into thinking: What does he think now? What should I do to avoid being accused? I remember the Bible verses hand-picked especially for me because I had performed some act of torture on my Dad. That was life. As a kid I did well in school. As a woman I have had many struggles. As a teen I found comfort in food, swallowing all my hurt. I was self-destructive in some bulimic behaviors. My marriage triggered some stuff and after I was married I was suicidal, although I never made any attempts. I never told anyone. I must have been difficult to live with. Although I got

some good feedback from work, I am certain my performance was poor.

My path in finding a therapist brought me to Anne. I think now of how much pain I was in — I couldn't stop crying through our sessions. This must be three years ago now. What was striking for me was Anne's genuine caring about me. There was no rush to move too quickly through anything. She grasped every word I said. It really mattered from the very beginning. Anne was so patient — I would go on and on and on — she was so very patient. Her agenda was clearly to allow me to have my agenda. This was especially helpful because in my family my agenda was not important. As you know, I was punished for speaking up. I often think about how difficult I must be as a patient, but neither you nor Anne have thrown in the towel. I've taken the slow scenic route. I think now that I've been quite deserving of it just because I've already been to hell — so why not enjoy a bit of scenery?

When it came time to move on to the clinic, I was sure that I wanted to continue therapy with Anne. [At that time Anne and I left the hospital to open our own Creative Psychotherapy Clinic and work as a team]. When it came time to meet you, I was very suspicious of your intent. As much as Anne was reassuring in her gentle nurturing way, I was sure she was off her rocker when she felt you could be useful to me.

With all my experience with men — having been suppressed mentally and emotionally and being sexually abused — I couldn't imagine you would possibly

want to help me. I needed to test the waters.

It was very helpful to ask questions and have you answer directly. I really appreciate you not messing around with my head.

I am very much aware of the position that you might have taken “If you want help, get on with it — enough with all the questions.”

You patiently sat through session after session, allowing a balance to occur. I became less afraid of you.

To me you had a great deal of power — you being a man and saying my name the way my Dad does. I had initiated therapy with a woman and now I had to tolerate a man with an agenda. A man who says he wants to help! What’s in it for him. I wondered! What does he want and will he be cruel just like the others and could I protect myself? At that time, no.

During our sessions Anne’s gentle yet powerful presence remained. At times she didn’t say much but she helped to create a safety net, always encouraging me, reassuring me that a healthy process was in the works.

Eventually I could see and believe what Anne was saying. (I trusted Anne and I believed and always will, that she is wise. But I thought she was way off about you). I began to see that your patience was truly sincere. You weren’t going to kick me out of therapy. You meant what you said.

Thanks for letting me ask questions. You’ve taught me that being assertive is a good thing, that I won’t be punished for it. You’ve taught me that challenging is quite acceptable.

Thanks for taking the time to know me. I was afraid you would push me too far — so far that I might break. Thanks for listening to what I did and did not say.

In the clinic setting, you let me heal and grow in my time. You allowed me to bring my agenda, to focus on what was important to me. Thanks for giving me control.

Thanks for giving me permission to say, “Okay, that’s enough of that subject,” and you stuck to your word. Always.

By allowing both you and Anne into my life I have grown up and healed a lot of wounds. I believe my life’s journey brought me to you.

I’ve come so far because of your approach, your way with people, the way the clinic views people’s healing and growth. There is simply no rush and the message is that you both sincerely care about people.

I’m beginning to understand what it means to love living, love myself and love others.

I’m not afraid of people or myself.

I better trust people.

My relationship with my husband is more equal now. He wouldn’t come to therapy with me, however, things have become more trusting, less controlling both ways, more understanding, more loving.

Because of therapy, I can say that I love life.

Oh yeah, there’s lots of times when I think I’d rather be in the Caribbean on a sunny beach away from reality, but I’m beginning to accept that’s life.

My concentration is far better. My memory is still not great for things I’m not too interested in, like

money matters and politics. That's frustrating because I feel dumb at times but I can live with it.

I'm amazed with the transformation from being deathly afraid of you to not being able to thank you enough for your patience, your wisdom and the way you see therapy.

For me, Anne was my stepping-stone to you. She was my rock. I can't tell you in words how much I admire Anne. She really understood my pain. She really wanted to understand me! With nobody else in my life have I shared so much of myself. Week after week, through my tears, over and over you heard my story and caringly listened and walked with me through it all. Well that's it for now.

Thank you.

Christine.

CYCLE OF LOVE

When we assess couples from the natural evolution point of view we realize that people living in the Yellow and Red Zones have difficulties at different stages of the life cycle of loving relationships. Many of them need professional help to learn to live and love in the Green Zone. Psychotherapy can play a significant role in dealing with the developmental crises and helping individuals involved to progress to the next stage of their personal and romantic life.

1. Helping People Initiate an Intimate Relationship

It is interesting that in North American culture men have been expected to ask women for a date or a dance and to call regularly to invite their sweethearts for a get together. So the onus of initiating a relationship has been on the man. Although there have been a number of social changes in the last few decades and more and more women are enjoying calling men and asking them out, there still are many who feel more comfortable waiting for the invitation, especially in the early stages of the intimate relationship. For women, being on the receiving end is also a mixed blessing. They may not need the courage to

initiate but they still have to decide whether or not they want to pursue the relationship. There has also been a proliferation of dating services that help bring shy and introverted people together so that they have an opportunity to socialize and get to know one another. Internet dating services have also paved the way for lonely people to connect with each other all over the world.

Initiating an intimate relationship becomes difficult for men and women who grow up in very traditional and conservative families and social environments. Many such young adults feel restricted and inhibited. For such people, giving and receiving affection from a member of the opposite sex does not come naturally.

I met an Asian woman in her early thirties a few years ago. She was quite bright and professionally successful but it was very difficult for her to date because of her shy personality and also because she lived with conservative parents. Her family wanted her to have an arranged marriage but she refused. She even met one candidate to please her parents but found the whole experience embarrassing and disgusting. She wanted to find her own mate but did not know how.

After a few months of therapy she realized that to lead an independent life she had to leave home. So, in spite of her parents' resistance she found an apartment and moved out. While living on her own she felt free to get involved in social and recreational activities, which she could not have imagined while living with her parents. As she became more at ease socializing with people, she also became comfortable with the idea of dating. One day she came across an invitation from a social organization for a New Year's party for young men and women who were single

and wanted to meet other single and available people. She attended the party and was pleasantly surprised to meet a charming young man. They talked during the dinner and later on danced. Both of them were quite thrilled to have met each other. They exchanged phone numbers at the end of the evening. She shared her story with the members of her therapy group who had encouraged her to go out and meet people.

In the beginning of the relationship both parties felt uncomfortable calling each other and expressing their feelings. The group members offered her a lot of support and encouragement. I invited her friend to a joint session and shared the idea of getting involved in therapy. He readily agreed. As pre-marital therapy progressed the relationship evolved and they decided to get married. They were fortunate that both families liked their choices. Her parents were pleased and surprised to see their daughter choosing a groom that they also liked. I met with them a few times and offered them support. They finally thanked me for helping their daughter discover a happy intimate relationship. Now the young couple has two children and lead a healthy and happy family life.

2. Helping People to Maintain an Intimate Relationship

Some people who live in the Yellow and Red Zones do not have problems initiating a relationship but they cannot maintain its long-term intimacy. Sooner or later they develop communication problems and either the satisfaction or the stability of the relationship is undermined. Psychotherapy helps couples to resolve their conflicts and improve the quality of their relationship.

When I met Sharon, she had been teaching for more than twenty years, but found her job very stressful. She was so drained and exhausted that she could not function anymore. I asked her to take time off work and focus on her mental health. As therapy progressed and she felt stronger it also became obvious that she was not happy in her marriage. She felt that her husband did not pay attention to her needs. Finally she decided to leave him. When I invited her husband Jason for an interview he told me that he had not realized that his wife was so unhappy in the relationship. When I offered him individual, marital and group therapy to make changes in his personality, he readily agreed. Sharon was quite surprised to know that Jason was willing to get actively involved in therapy. The following letters highlight the dynamics of therapy and their relationship.

Reconciliation

Dear Sharon,

In our first meeting you shared with me that you had been feeling depressed for a long time but it had become worse in the last few months. You were extremely unhappy with your job. After teaching for more than two decades, you had realized that you were incompatible with classroom teaching. You were literally burnt out. When you stopped teaching and started exploring other professional opportunities you felt relieved. When we explored your unhappiness further, you also became aware of how unhappy you were in your marriage. When I came back from my two weeks' vacation, I was surprised to find out that

you had packed your bags and moved in with your mother. I was also surprised to learn that you felt scared of your husband, Jason, and were nervous to go to your family home to pick up some of your belongings.

When I met Jason he told me that he not only loved and cared for you but that he was also unaware how unhappy you were in the relationship. He was quite willing to get involved in individual, marital and group therapy to have you back in his life. He had also realized that his drinking pattern, his anger especially when drinking and his irresponsible attitude towards finances have been some of the unhealthy patterns that had been creating conflicts for him in his relationships inside and outside the family. When I shared with you that he was willing to change, you seemed skeptical. You did not believe that people could change at his stage of life. So I had to reassure you that if you lived separately but met on a regular basis socially and in our clinic then you could see the changes both of you were making in therapy. I was quite optimistic that with professional help you could create a new relationship that would be acceptable and enjoyable for both of you. I did not want you to leave a union in which you had invested so much of your life if it could change and provide you with the security and satisfaction you needed in an intimate relationship. I did not want you to leave in anger with a lot of unresolved feelings, to either lead a celibate and single life or start a new relationship that would be undermined by your past traumatic experiences.

During therapy I encouraged you to become

aware of your own boundaries and when you are not comfortable to let Jason know. I encouraged him to respect your limits. I gave him the analogy of a three-legged race — I wanted for both of you to go slower and together rather than faster which would lead to you falling.

Today when I met with you and Jason, I was quite pleased to hear that both of you were happy with the progress in your personal life and also in the relationship. You were open to the idea of your social dates becoming romantic and sexual and you could foresee that if both of you kept progressing you would be together under the same roof in a few months.

Dear Sharon, I shared with you before that your husband is a very strong person emotionally. He is one of those I call an emotional heavy weight. During the relationship over the years, you started losing yourself and your feelings of self-worth in the relationship and that made you, like many other women I know, very unhappy. Now, being away from him and living on your own, you are re-establishing your personal boundaries and I am quite pleased with your progress. What I hope is that as you become closer to him again and become emotionally and romantically intimate, you will stay strong — that you won't lose yourself again. As much as I am making him aware of your boundaries and asking him to respect them, you also have to take responsibility to define yourself and your position more clearly. If you can set clear emotional, romantic, social or existential boundaries and he gets clear messages from you, you will be able to have a healthy dialogue with each other about your

differences in philosophies and lifestyles. I always believed that differences between people are a blessing because they bring a lot of excitement and newness to the relationship. The differences become a curse only when they turn into conflicts and produce a lot of tension, anger, resentment and bitterness. I am hoping that with professional help in therapy both of you will be able to negotiate your differences in a healthy and mature way and resolve your conflicts constructively. Once you are able to do that, then you can enjoy your lives and your differences will provide you with opportunities to grow separately and together. I feel quite optimistic about therapy and your relationship and I wanted to share these feelings with you.

I am finding working with both of you quite an exciting and rewarding experience.

*Sincerely,
Sohail*

Cautious Optimism

SHARON'S RESPONSE

Dear Dr. Sohail,

When I came into therapy last year, I was emotionally and physically exhausted. Twenty-eight years of teaching with unclear boundaries caught up to me. I said yes to a lot of students when I should have said a firm no. This added to my work load and stress level. The more trouble I had with my classes, the harder I worked. I thought that if I could just produce interesting lessons, the students would behave and

my problems would be over. Wrong ! I needed help and I didn't know it until there was a crisis in my classroom. I did ask other teachers for help — but nobody really knew how low and desperate I was. Not even my husband.

My husband is a pilot and he is away a lot. We are partners in a sheep farm which is forty minutes from work. We have a lot of livestock and huge gardens. I carried the same thin boundaries into my work with animals and plants. For example, I would stay up all night in the dead of winter to rescue a donkey whose mother rejected it or lug sick lambs into the intensive care unit in the house. I grew lots of plants from seed and kept expanding the gardens. I thought I was pretty virtuous then, but looking back, I can see how the isolation of too much work and not talking about my problems got me into trouble.

Shortly after I went on stress leave, my husband was also placed on medical leave. After we separated, he came to one of my counseling sessions at your request and we agreed to date once a week. You asked us to talk over the events of past and upcoming weeks. But the dates turned into a movie night rather than an opportunity to talk about issues in each of our lives. As we left the first counseling session, he suggested that I tricked him into going.

My husband is an action-oriented guy. He starts a big project that would daunt lesser mortals and usually sees it through. Negotiation is not his strong point; forceful arguing and action are. My strength/weakness is my ability to tune into the feelings of others, know what is going on with them and to try to

build smooth, loving relationships. You say my idealistic picture of the way I would like marriage to be is a big part of the problem. I know love and limits are necessary, but I want to skip the skirmishes over who gets what and get to the love. This is where I relinquish my power. It is difficult for me to set firm limits on people and here I was, as you describe it, coming from the welterweight division and needing to go the full fifteen rounds with Mohammad Ali. In the past, my husband used to resort to physical violence, rage and leaving home to get what he wanted. He learned that threatening to leave was an even more potent weapon to use on a person who is afraid of being abandoned. I gave up all my power and then I was angry and resentful about the situation. Without the considerable demands of teaching, I had a chance to feel my feelings rather than simply survive. I got really angry when he would disappear without saying anything and stay out in the pub until 2 a.m. I was further infuriated that he was threatening to buy farm equipment that I felt we did not need and could ill afford. Money is always a contentious issue with us because I'm a saver and my husband is a big spender. I finally got angry and left home and went to stay with my mother. I told my daughter where I was but did not feel that I needed to say a word to my husband. That was it as far as I was concerned! I saw a lawyer and closed bank accounts and went about terminating twenty-eight years of marriage. When you returned from holidays, you were somewhat surprised that I had taken this drastic step. We had not been concentrating on marital issues in our

weekly talks. In any case, you convinced me that I should at least write a letter to let him know what was happening. You also encouraged my daughter and my husband to come to you for help.

A miracle took place when they both took you up on your offer in different ways.

My daughter came to one of my sessions with you and talked about how angry she was with me. She agreed to go for counseling and got a list of possible therapists from the university. She didn't feel comfortable sharing her secrets with my doctor. Even though she has not followed through on this, I am glad she knows help is available should she wish it. Mercifully she is past the stage of hissing conversation at me, walking slightly ahead of me and letting her anger out indirectly.

My husband also decided that he would take you up on your offer. He agreed to join one of your groups and learn to deal with his anger, get his financial house in order and learn to listen to women. He also agreed to attend counseling sessions with me every three months or so and to negotiate the terms of our dating. I was surprised that he followed through on all this. Seeing us both in groups gave you a chance to see how our different styles get us into trouble with life and each other. You have also been building Jason up in my eyes by pointing out his positive qualities. Over the years, his intelligence and sense of humor and enjoyment of people became lost on me. I just allowed myself to be wounded by his fantastic memory and his unwillingness to let a single discrepancy go by without pointing it out. I have also

appreciated your support in going slowly to re-establish an intimate relationship. I have been quite fearful about entering and leaving his force field and learning to trust him.

Although things are going well in our dating, I am still really concerned that he wants me around like the other things he wears with pride—his Jaguar, his farm, his flying job. But he does not really want a monogamous relationship with me. If I am not really vigilant, I get really upset about his imagined indiscretions. His history leaves me suspicious. In the past, he kept a big secret from me about being married before and having two grown children. I found this out when he went for counseling about eight years ago. At that time, he was on stress leave from work and I found out he was deeply involved with another woman. I also left him twice before when his spending, drinking and staying out all night convinced me we had no relationship. He always came back and insisted things would be different. Now, although the counseling is really helping, I am nervous about getting back into the isolation of farm life. I still think he wants a wife and he wants to have casual sex relationships too. This is not acceptable to me.

Thanks for your help, support and patience.

Regards,

Sharon

After Several Weeks of Heavy Drinking And Much Soul-Searching

Dear Dr. Sohail,

I wish to share with you the events that came to pass which were instrumental in my seeking your help, and to describe how you have helped me.

My wife Sharon abruptly left me in April 1997. This was a traumatic experience for me, a complete shock, as I did not see it coming. After several weeks of heavy drinking and much soul searching, I began to realize that I could not continue like this. At this time I was off work as a pilot due to a medical problem, and even though I had a farm which occupied some of my time, I found myself quite depressed. About a month or so later Sharon and I had a talk where she suggested that I see you and that in her opinion if I had any chance of a reconciliation I would have to stop drinking, stop being argumentative, be more loving, listen to her concerns, be more equitable with our money and go out together more often.

Strangely I was not aware of most of these concerns of hers, and told her that if I had known that these concerned her enough that she would leave, then I would have tried to do something about them. As you know, at this time Sharon was going through her own particular hell, and was struggling with her own personal and professional problems. None of this was any help to our 29 years of marriage.

I knew that I needed some help. For many years I noticed that I had become impatient with people, often having trouble with the way they thought, and I

had difficulty understanding why people were so stupid when to me the solution was obvious. I used to speak up, argue, try and convince them to my way of thinking, and even argue loud enough to bother others around me. This was always much worse when I had been drinking hard liquor (scotch whisky). It did not seem to be a problem if I was just drinking beer. I decided that I had to do something about improving my relationship with others and in particular, with my wife.

Your placing me in group therapy is helping. I am learning to think a little before I speak, although I have a long way to go. However, since joining the group, I am now back at work as a B747 pilot, and am having weekly dates with Sharon including conjugal visits. I have curtailed my drinking almost completely, am a little better at controlling my anger, and most importantly I feel much happier with myself.

My goal now is to learn to control my anger, develop a good relationship with Sharon, learn to tolerate Sharon's family, especially since I will only be required to visit with them 3-4 times a year, and to get along with others by not dwelling on their shortcomings but rather seeing their strengths.

Sincerely,

Jason

[Sharon and Jason have been living happily in a monogamous marriage for the last five years.]

3. Helping People End an Intimate Relationship

I once saw on television a Catholic priest being interviewed who believed in divorce. The interviewer asked him why his philosophy was different than that of other priests who believed that spouses should live together till death do them part. The priest said that other priests were very concrete. For them death meant physical death while for him death meant death of love. It is unfortunate that in many intimate relationships, spouses stay together even after love has long been dead. Psychotherapy helps them to separate and find partners that would cherish the relationship.

It is ironic that the healthier the relationship the easier it is to end it, and the more unhealthy, neurotic and immature the Red Zone relationship, the more difficult and dragged out the separation. My letter highlights the role of therapy in helping people to have a better perspective on the relationship.

Seeing The Bigger Picture

Dear Susan,

I have been listening to your story quite attentively for the last few weeks and all I have heard is complaints about your husband, complaints about the most insignificant, inconsequential, peripheral and unimportant things. You have been telling me that when he:

- *uses the toothpaste he presses it in the middle rather than at the bottom.*
- *takes a shower he does not clean the bathtub.*
- *reads the newspaper, he leaves it on the kitchen table.*

- *comes home from work he does not put his shoes in the closet.*
- *goes to bed at night he does not turn off all the lights.*

I am wondering whether you consider these the most important things in your marriage. For me the important questions for anyone in an intimate relationship are:

- *Does my partner love me?*
- *Does my partner care about me?*
- *Does my partner respect me?*
- *Is my partner honest and sincere?*
- *Is my partner committed to the future of the relationship?*
- *Do I love my partner?*
- *Do I want to spend the rest of my life with this person?*

If the answers to these questions are in the affirmative, then everything else is peripheral and needs to be overlooked. But if the answers are mostly “No”, then the question is “Why are you still living with him? Why haven’t you already seen a lawyer and arranged for a separation?”

Susan, I believe it is very important for us to differentiate between the central and peripheral issues in a relationship. Let me share with you a personal example. I used to date a charming woman who I loved and adored. We had our first exciting date in Cullen Gardens Restaurant and it became one of her

favourite places to dine.

After dating each other for a couple of years we went back to the same restaurant for sentimental reasons. She asked me during the meal, "Now that you have known me for a couple of years, can you tell me what your complaints are about me?"

"I don't have any."

Rather than accepting my answer as a compliment she said, "Does that mean I am perfect?"

"No, you are not perfect. Nobody is. But I don't have any complaints."

"How is that possible?" she asked, looking puzzled.

"I think you missed the point. Let me express it in a different way. Let's talk about this restaurant for a couple of minutes. Do you like the food here?"

"Yes, it's delicious."

"Do you like the service?"

"Yes, I do."

"Do you like the piano music in the background?"

"Yes, it is wonderful."

"Now look around. Do you like the curtains and the lamps in the windows?"

"They look awful."

"Should I go and complain to the manager?"

"No, there is no need for that."

"Does that mean this restaurant is perfect?"

Finally I saw a smile spreading across her face. She had got my point.

I think it is crucial in a relationship to differentiate between the central, important, significant and peripheral, unimportant and insignificant issues;

otherwise we can ruin a relationship worrying about minor things. Nobody is perfect. We accept people in our lives as package deals, the bad with the good and the good with the bad.

As far as your husband is concerned, I have met him a few times. I believe he is a caring and loving man. He has a few idiosyncrasies like all of us. Last time he mentioned some of your eccentricities. I shared with him the same philosophy as I am sharing with you. At the end of the discussion he told me that he loves you dearly and for him the good in the relationship is far more than the bad, so he is going to ignore the minor things from now on. I hope you feel the same. I can't tell you with whom you should live. All I can say is that the husband you have chosen is a great guy. I told him the same thing, that he is married to a wonderful woman. If you accept each other wholeheartedly, then you will have a great future. Otherwise you will be dissatisfied and unhappy all your lives. I wish you all the best in your marriage.

*Sincerely,
Sohail*

When I met Carolyn, she was in her twenties. She had just moved back from British Columbia to be with her parents in Ontario and return to university. She felt she lacked confidence and needed therapy to learn to lead a healthy and independent life. As Carolyn progressed in therapy I asked her to focus on her relationship with Stan. She wrote the following letter expressing her mixed feelings.

Ambivalence

Dear Dr. Sohail:

I am writing to you today to try to put my feelings about Stan into perspective. The idea of writing down my thoughts may help to organize in some way what is happening and allow me to view the situation as an onlooker from the sidelines. I don't really know how I feel. I am confused. I think I love him but it seems as though there are some factors that are making it hard to have faith in him. One side of me wants to stay with him and just accept some things that have been going on (for example him lying to me about another girl sleeping in his bed, and his flirtatious side, and always going out with more females than males). If I trust him and believe in him and try not to let these things bother me, then we may be able to carry on our relationship and I could make things work. Part of me feels safe with that and wants to just stay with him.

The other part of me is thinking that maybe he is just keeping me hanging on and doesn't feel as serious about me as he claims to. Maybe there are things going on with other women that I don't know about. I don't like thinking that way or maybe I don't want to accept that because if I am his girlfriend I am supposed to trust him and that it is not fair to him that I question him.

I think maybe that he does not realize what he is doing and how he has made me feel when he lied to me. He says he knows that he wants me and only me, but I don't know if he really knows what he wants. Maybe he is clinging on for some other reason.

The last few times we have spoken on the phone, we were distant and things felt different. There is a barrier between us now and I don't know if I created that barrier by being over-jealous that he has friends that are women or if he created the barrier. I don't know if I am being too sensitive and overreacting or if he is giving me just cause and it is only natural for me to feel betrayed. Stan could be taking me for a ride or he could really love me and be innocent. I could be too hard on him. I said to him on the phone that if he really knew what he wanted (me) and where he wanted to be, then he wouldn't be thinking of other alternatives (like moving to Winnipeg or Atlanta). He got upset and said he was trying as hard as he could to be with me but that he feels torn about maybe moving to other places for other people and other job opportunities. But overall, if I were in his shoes, there would be no question, I would move to be with him as soon as I could. This shows how we are different. Obviously, I think more of our relationship.

But then when I bring these issues up he makes me feel guilty and sorry I even brought anything up. He feels I am pressuring him to be here and that's not what I'm trying to do. I told him he should go wherever he thinks is best for him. I told him to "go for it" when he was thinking of moving to Winnipeg because I care about him and want him to do what he wants. I don't want to hinder him in any way from following his dreams. I am confused and I know he is confused. I don't understand how he can still tell me that we are meant to be together and that he loves me more than anything.

I would feel bad if he moved back here for me and then things didn't work out, therefore he should go where he really wants to be for himself. If he came back for me, he might resent me for limiting his choices. I don't want to trap him and for him to always wonder and wish what could have been different.

It feels as though we are getting further apart, the phone calls and letters are lessening. He may feel as confused as I do. If I trust him, then I should be able to make everything alright and we could focus on being together and making it work and go from there. But maybe that would be me being oblivious to what may be happening (his losing interest and moving on). Sometimes I think that I would feel guilty if I broke up with him because he says that is not what he wants. I always seem to go along with things he wants even if I don't really agree. I don't seem to place as much emphasis on how I feel.

I seem to always question how he feels and I need a lot of reassurance. I think I need to make a decision and stick to it. He has pointed out to me that I always need reassurance and need him to tell me how he feels about me when I'm just supposed to know that he loves me and not question him. This stems back to how I feel about myself.

This is not a good sign. I have already written three pages and still feel as though I could go on and on. This is not a major issue but I cannot get off it. I am indecisive and question my own abilities. The "monkey is dead" already! I feel like a complainer and must appear to be weak and naive because I can't see the situation and just get on with it. Big deal, I don't know

where I go or how to feel in my relationship, life goes on and things will happen. But I think the relationship is bringing up issues about myself that I don't like.
Carolyn

As Carolyn dealt with her feelings in therapy, she gradually realized that she did not want to pursue the relationship. I encouraged her to write Stan a letter expressing her feelings openly and honestly. She wrote the following letter, the timing of which was crucial, as Stan wanted to come to see her during the Christmas holidays.

A Definite No

Stan,
I am writing this letter to let you know how I am feeling. I will admit that I was glad to hear that you were coming home, this is what we had been waiting for for some time. But I must say that we are on our own now and that does not entail becoming a couple again on your return. Although the distance was a problem in our relationship, there are other issues that still exist between us. We have a major difference in how we view relationships with the opposite sex. It seems as though you are a bit more liberal and more open to being close with other women. I believe that if you felt serious and happy in our relationship than you would feel no desire to be close to other women. It makes me feel as though our commitment meant nothing. And it means nothing whether I am in the same city or not.

What I am trying to say is that I want to be honest

with you. I don't want you to come home under the false impression that when you come home we are back together. Who knows if we will ever get back together? Time has come between us and has given us each the opportunity to evolve at difference rates. Our goals, self, and priorities have changed.

I do not want to be unfair to you. I am confused about what I want right now and it would be unjust to allow you to believe that we have a lot of hope.

Carolyn

4. Helping People Recovering From An Intimate Relationship

There are people who after ending a traumatic, long term, intimate relationship have difficulties recovering from the hurt and the pain of the separation. They are usually so exhausted and drained that they need a lot of support and encouragement to rediscover their emotional balance. Such a process is especially difficult for people who suffer from low self-confidence and poor self-esteem. Many invest so much of their emotional energy and self-worth in the intimate relationship that when it dissolves, they feel lost and confused. Some of them also feel so angry with their lovers that they carry a lot of unresolved feelings within themselves. Psychotherapy helps such people to recover from their loss and to start liking themselves. The following letter expresses the feelings of a fifty-year-old professional woman who was devastated after the break-up of her intimate relationship and took nearly two years of therapy to find peace within herself

I Have Made Peace With Myself

Dear Dr. Sohail,

I first realized that I desperately needed help when I became really angry over the break-up of a relationship. History was repeating itself in that I felt used and abused. This has been a pattern in my relationships throughout my life. I knew I needed help to deal with my feelings in order to overcome or deal with this problem. I phoned your office during the fall of 1995 and was informed that there was a four-month waiting period. I said "Okay, I would like to go on the waiting list."

I was referred to the clinic by two women I knew casually. They had no connection with one another but both spoke highly of the clinic's work. I felt I had nothing to lose by getting help.

My problems at the time I first met you and Anne at the clinic were depression, anger and an inability to function in my personal life. I was also unable to follow through with my volunteer work. I also felt I was not functioning properly at work. I realize now that these were the problems on the surface but I really was struggling with self-esteem and my drive for perfection. Deep down I knew I was a fraud and I lived in terror of being found out.

The dominant feelings I had about psychotherapy were desperation, sadness and the hopeless feeling that I would never be normal. I was not sure that psychotherapy would help me but I hoped it would help me feel that life was bearable. I have always had a wide circle of friends, both male and female. Very

few of these people realized that I was in trouble for I was very good at hiding my feelings. Most of my problems were within and between me and myself.

When I first started therapy I experienced a great sense of relief that finally I was getting some badly needed help. I was also somewhat detached even if I did not realize it at the time. I was completely out of sync with myself both mentally and physically. I was not listening to either my mind or my body. I totally ignored the frantic messages from both as I could not deal with the reality of myself.

I have been in therapy for almost two years. Initially the therapy was individual until after my father's death and funeral. I did not wish to join group but ended up going to please you. I felt group participation was going to be a waste of time.

The advantage of individual therapy is that it can be a lifeline when one is desperate. I was unable to open up and truly speak about myself when first in group. I would not have survived this time if it were not for individual counselling. Looking back, I can see that I was very detached from the group. I was the fly on the wall watching others interact. Now and then I would enter the circle and give my two pennies' worth of advice. I knew that I would not allow myself to be part of the group. I felt emotionally detached from everyone. I have only begun to feel part of the group in an emotional sense since September of this year. I now feel I am not separate but part of a living entity. I can be a brat but still be accepted while also being chastised. I have learned not to be destroyed by criticism. I somehow realize that people can criticize my

behaviour without attacking me. This has been a wonderful liberating feeling. I feel comfortable in my skin though I may not always like the way the skin looks.

Individual therapy has also helped me greatly. I was able to express my pain without being dismissed out of hand. At times this process was rocky and difficult for I fought against it, but I slowly learned to trust a little. Group and individual therapy work hand in hand. I cannot explain in a rational way how the process works. I do know that the pain gradually eases. The pain does not go away completely, yet it also does not dominate my life. A sense of tranquillity has developed gradually and I am no longer at war with myself. It is no longer necessary to “man the barricades”. I have made peace with myself. Most of the people in group were experiencing problems with others in their daily lives. Most of my problems were with me. I did not share my home with another person. I fought all of my wars alone, within and by myself. It was very lonely. Group has helped me feel less isolated and alone with my problems. I feel as if I am a member of a somewhat rambunctious family that cares for me despite myself.

When I first went into therapy I was put on Zoloft during the month of March 1996, plus tranquillisers to help me calm down and sleep. I found that the Zoloft really bothered me so I halved the dosage. When I went home for my father's funeral I had my family doctor give me a month's supply of the Zoloft. This dosage did not have the strong negative impact. During the summer of 1996 you gradually increased the dosage. By Christmas I had slipped into a deeper

depression. The Zoloft also bothered me as I felt it created a psychedelic, shrieking ache within my head. It was very difficult. The medication was changed from Zoloft to Prozac. The shrieking pains in my head stopped. Meantime I had been gradually weaned from the tranquillizers. I am still on the Prozac. I have come to look upon this “chemical lobotomy” as a friend whose hand has helped me through some turbulent times.

My life is very different now from two years ago. I feel as if I have clawed my way out of a very dark and deep hole. I am now clinging to the edge of this hole. There is a sense of relief but I am not secure yet. I have managed to sort out many of my problems. Although I still procrastinate about important issues in the management of my personal life, I no longer despise the person I am and have stopped most of the beating up on myself. I feel that there is a gentleness in my life that was not there before. I accept myself as I am more, and I no longer constantly see a great fat blimp when I look in the mirror. I now have moments when I see myself and I see an attractive middle-aged woman, but there are also moments when the “fat and ugly me with enormous thighs” confronts me and laughs at my discomfort.

I would recommend therapy to anyone who is experiencing problems. I consider therapy a lifeline as I continue to become more comfortable with the person I am.

*Sincerely,
Natasha*

5. Helping People Start All Over Again

After recovering from the loss of a Red Zone intimate relationship, some people have difficulties in starting a new relationship in the Green Zone. After one failure they feel insecure and ambivalent about their needs for freedom and intimacy. On one hand, they want to enjoy their freedom and date different people to make up for lost time, especially if they married young; but on the other hand, they feel alone and lonely outside the security of a reliable and dependable, loving, long-term relationship. Some also have difficulties integrating the emotional intimacy of a friendship with the sexual passion of an intimate relationship. Psychotherapy helps people to discover their true selves, to find a balance in their needs and to integrate different and sometimes contradictory sides of their personalities.

The following letters explore the dynamics of a woman trying to discover a new intimate life for herself.

Looking For The Right Man (Letter To Debbie)

Dear Debbie,

After being married for twenty years you discovered that the man you had always trusted and loved was having an affair. You felt cheated and betrayed, and fell apart. After finding some support from your friends and therapist, you have recovered from the crisis and for the last two years you have been living on your own and dating different men. But you are still feeling extremely lonely and vulnerable. You have asked me if I could accept you in therapy and help you find a healthy and happy lifestyle.

When I listened to your story I felt that you have put yourself in a double bind. When you are alone you feel lonely and when you are on a date you feel used because you know that even after spending the night with the person you don't receive the special affection and love and respect that you are looking for. When you are disappointed in one man you look for the second one and then the third one and then the fourth one. And after being disappointed in a number of them you call the first one again and the cycle starts all over again. You ask yourself why these men don't call you the next day and thank you for the special date they had with you and set up the next date. Although you feel disappointed you also enjoy the freedom of dating many men at the same time and feel relieved that these men don't try to control your life. The irony is that rather than enjoying the experimentation phase in intimate relationships that many people go through in their adolescence you feel bad going through it at your stage in life. You feel disappointed in yourself as well as the men you date. You feel you should be emotionally independent and not need a man for your happy life and also when you are in a relationship it should be a long-term committed intimate relationship. I think physically and intellectually you are a grown up woman but romantically you are still a teenager. You are also an offspring of a moralistic, traditional and conventional family and environment in which masturbation was considered self-abuse rather than self-pleasuring and sex was sin and was allowed only in the confines of the institution of marriage and only for reproductive

reasons. There was no discussion about relational and recreational sex inside or outside marriage. Many men and women who were married for more than two decades, then divorced or widowed and back in the dating scene, find themselves confused and lost because the intimate relationships between men and women have changed significantly. The expectations between partners in the 90s are not the same as they were in the 70s. I feel you are standing at a cross-roads. You are free-spirited and non-traditional in many ways but you also keep some traditional values about intimate relationships close to your heart and you are finding it hard to find a balance and harmony in these different and sometimes contradictory values and lifestyles. You want to be single and married at the same time.

Listening to your story I did not get a clear idea whether any of the men you are dating is a potential candidate for a long-term full-time relationship or they are all offering you part-time unsatisfactory relationships. I am not even sure whether you are yourself ready to commit to a full-time long-term relationship. I wonder whether you are still grieving your marriage and angry with your husband and yourself. I also wonder about your self-image and self-confidence and why you put yourself in situations that undermine your self worth.

I am quite willing to work with you in therapy but I would like you to stop dating all those men that are just sex-partners and don't have a promise of the type of committed long-term relationship that you so desire in your life. To find the right man you should be

willing to sacrifice some exciting but disastrous evenings and wait for the person that is compatible with you and enriches your life. While you are waiting and doing some soul-searching in therapy you might also grow at a personal level and feel content to be alone. I hope you get to the stage where you can enjoy your life with or without a man. I am quite willing to join you in your therapeutic and existential journey.

Sincerely,

Sohail

One Or Many Relationships (Letter From Debbie)

Dear Dr. Sohail!

How can I tell you where I am in my life when I really don't know? I am not totally unhappy; I just know that I am searching for more contentment, peace and happiness within myself.

I have spent the last four and a half years trying so hard to do the things that were necessary—just holding my life together and meeting new people (both male and female). Some have remained friends, others have fallen by the wayside. Some were lovers and others just friends. I needed people in my life to comfort and listen to me as being alone gave me too much time to think. I'm not sure why I am afraid to think— maybe because when you think you are forced to face issues and make decisions. I am so tired of making decisions on my own—I'm exhausted. I was in a relationship for so long I didn't need to be totally responsible for everything and feel insecure

emotionally and financially on top of everything else. I have always thought of myself as responsible and able to make decisions but now I sometimes feel like I am on overload.

I bring men into my life because I enjoy being with men. I enjoy the attention they give me—that makes me happy. But when they are removed, I feel unhappy and neglected. Without men I feel rejected so as a result when I don't get attention from one person I need many to fill that void. I hate rejection, and when I do get rejection I keep going back for more—to get rejected again and again and of course feel pain over and over. I have done some rejecting also—I feel very bad about it—I have a difficult time doing it but somehow manage when I get to point that I know it's not right.

*I hate the fact that my ex-husband has a better life than I do. I have a hard time saying **ex**. He has the lifestyle I feel that I deserve and I really do not know what my feelings for my husband are anymore. But I do believe that I am now capable of giving and receiving love with someone else. I feel like I need love so badly and have so much to give. When I am with someone that makes me feel so good, so happy.*

My goal is to become a whole, happy and contented woman. I think that in order to achieve the feeling within myself that I want, I would like to be with one person in a relationship. That doesn't necessarily mean I need to be married or live with someone. I just want someone that I can count on and they can count on me. I feel that I am more now a warmer, more sexual and a more compassionate person than

I was in my marriage. I want to share this new me with someone.

I don't entirely hate seeing many men but I cannot come to terms with that for whatever reason. Upbringing? Religion? I wish I could accept that because there are advantages to that kind of freedom as you can have things on your own terms.

I guess my main goal is to accept and be content with many relationships or have one relationship only.

I need to become stronger and not get so emotionally attached and dependent that I hang on to things even if I know they are wrong for me. I need to learn to let go.

Sincerely,

Debbie

Being a psychotherapist, I strongly believe that whatever the issue or relationship individuals or couples are struggling with, therapy helps them not only to dissolve or resolve the conflicts but also to improve their quality of life. We frequently ask couples to give us written feedback through a letter or our questionnaire so that we can appreciate their therapeutic experiences from their point of view. The following response is an example of such feedback.

COUPLES QUESTIONNAIRE

1. When did you first see a therapist? For what reason?

Wife: *September 1995. Was at the point in my marriage where I was leaving. I didn't love him, I hated him. Physically I was there but mentally I'd left long ago. I didn't care and this marriage was held together for the kids. It was all his fault.*

Husband: *September 1995, wife insisted on it.*

2. Who referred you to our clinic?

Wife: *Another couple we knew were coming to this clinic. I got your phone number.*

Husband: *Another patient.*

3. What were the problems at that time?

Wife: *Family and friends didn't know our home life. Everything was masked and looked happy to everyone. I felt trapped because of the kids. I didn't have anyone to talk to. I began to get real angry and full of hate. I hated him for the way he belittled me, the coldness between us. We never kissed, never were intimate, never touched. I felt like a housekeeper raising his children. Kept thinking it won't be long till the kids are grown and I can get out of this nightmare. I was very lonely.*

Husband: *Lots of bickering, little communication, no signs of love.*

4. How did you feel about psychotherapy in the beginning?

- Wife: *Figured I'd give it a try just in case I was wrong about him. Didn't want to feel the kids could blame me for breaking the marriage. Might be a chance he'd see how rotten he really was to me.*
- Husband: *Having experienced therapy in the past, I knew it would be a good idea but was apprehensive for fear that it may lead to my wife realizing she didn't really want to be with me (as she so often said).*

5. What did you experience during the therapy sessions?

- Wife: *Extreme anxiety, sadness and a lot more anger. Shocked at what I'd hear from him. To me, he was such a liar. Said he loved me, always had. Then I thought, why is he so rotten to me? Several times I almost quit therapy. I thought he's so good at bullshit he's got them convinced he loves me.*
- Husband: *Basically, the sessions weren't "experiences" other than learning from experts on relationships. I did experience "listening" to what my wife had to say without interrupting to have my feelings heard. On a couple of occasions I was involved in a real argument with her in front of the therapists.*

6. Did they help? If they did, how?

If not, how could they have been more helpful?

Wife: *Yes. They took what I pictured our relationship to be and had me view things differently until I began to see a totally different picture of ourselves. I began to see my husband differently and vice versa.*

Husband: *I have learned to listen to my wife and try to understand what is really being said.*

7. What kind of therapy were you involved in? (Individual/Marital/Group, Combination)

Wife: *We were involved in marital counselling which occasionally included individual sessions.*

Husband: *Marital*

8. How is your life different now than when you started therapy?

Wife: *I no longer view things the same. I don't feel like a caged animal. I'm not full of hatred. We now have a more normal marriage. A lot hasn't changed except the way we handle it. We still have stupid fights, disagree constantly, but we don't suppress anger and let it control us. We've learned a better way to fight.*

Husband: *Much less bickering Because I now know my wife does love me I am more understanding, loving, tolerant and am more apt to show my feelings for her and my feelings if I am angry, etc. I have more insight into my wife's feelings. I have more insight into how problems can develop and how to avoid the pitfalls.*

9. Any suggestions for the therapist?

Wife: *None.*

Husband: *Follow up more on homework assignments to make sure they are done and to discuss their relevance with patients.*

Examples:

- *graphing mood Zones daily*
- *remembering Red Zone items and discussing them at session*
- *spend time together occasionally as a couple to discuss quietly some Red Zone items and to just spend some time together away from kids and daily problems.*

10. Any suggestions for other people having relationship problems?

Wife: *If you think your marriage is over, that the love is gone, that nothing can save it, look a little deeper. You're probably very lonely, sad, disappointed and feeling hopeless. This can lead to anger which causes depression, overeating, drugs or alcohol. Sometimes even affairs. Then you can't cope with life so you turn to your friends and family for advice. Don't. They are going to make matters worse and complicate things even when they have good intentions. Seek professional counselling. Someone who knows, studies and deals with your kind of problems all the time. You may be surprised at what you may learn about your relationship.*

Husband: *I always believed that relationships (with spouse and children) are complex and that everyone could benefit from counselling every couple of years even if there aren't any apparent problems. Reading about how to resolve or prevent problems is the same as actually partaking in therapy to resolve your own problems.*

COUPLES HELPING THEMSELVES

For every couple that lives and loves in the Red Zone and needs professional help, there are many others who live and love in the Yellow Zone and have the potential to deal with their problems on their own. By working together, they can improve the quality of their relationship. If you are one of those couples, you can read the following suggestions and discuss them with your partner. Although each couple is unique, there are certain principles that can help everyone. My suggestions are based on my personal, social and professional experiences over the years. They have helped many couples to return to their loving relationships.

1. Weekly Dates

When I talked to those cynics who believe marriage kills love, what I found was that they had realized that the energy, the romance and the affection that they felt when they were dating gradually started to decline as they started to live together and finally they experienced a romantic crisis when their first child was born.

It has been my observation that romance is nurtured during spontaneous and playful activities between lovers.

Unfortunately many spouses get so bogged down by their day-to-day responsibilities and obligations to their children that they stop nurturing their romantic relationship. The lover finally becomes the parent of the child. They even start calling each other Dad and Mom rather than Honey, Sweetheart and Darling as they did when they were dating.

I believe that every couple needs a weekly date that is special for them. During that date, the couple can go out for a long walk, enjoy a cup of coffee, lunch or dinner and stay in touch with each other's feelings, thoughts and dreams. Responsibilities for paying bills and looking after children can easily undermine the marital relationship.

Dating once a week for a couple is like vitamins in one's diet. If deprived for a long time, subtle changes start to happen and couples start to lose that vigor and enthusiasm that is very important to keep the relationship fresh, alive and vibrant. In the absence of such romance, couples reach a state of stalemate. If you are not in the habit of going out together on a regular basis, it might be a worthwhile exercise to share the idea with your partner.

2. Maintaining Hobbies Separately and Together

Along with having weekly dates with your partner, it is important for your mental health to have some fun and recreation after a hard day's work, which may include family responsibilities. Playfulness and ability to laugh is the best medicine. If you had a keen interest and a hobby as a teenager, it might be worthwhile re-visiting that activity. If not, it might be an idea to develop a new interest, a new hobby, a new passion. Children teach us a lot. They are never bored because they are always curious and inquisitive. They love to play and learn. As we grow older,

many of us stop playing and then stop enjoying and learning and growing. Playing is one of the best ways to learn about life and relationships. You can have a hobby that you can share with your partner and another hobby that you can do on your own or share with your friends.

3. Developing a Family of the Heart

Having a supportive circle of friends, that I call A Family of the Heart, is very important to enjoy life and also deal with difficult times. Those who are lucky to be born into Green Zone families are able to get support from their relatives as adults. There are others who either move away from family or never have a special connection with their relatives. If you are one of those people, your hobbies and interests can connect you with others who share the same interests and gradually you can pursue new relationships and make some friends. Most people are open to the idea of making a new friend. Friendships are wonderful. They help us enjoy life to the fullest. It is important to have friends as a couple but also separately. Sometimes you need to share your marital frustrations with a couple of close friends who are supportive and not judgmental. They realize you love your partner but sometimes feel frustrated. They do not turn against your partner just because you share your occasional frustrations with them. Sometimes friends can act as unpaid therapists and offer support.

4. Improving Quality of Communication

If you and your partner are living and loving in the Yellow Zone and experiencing tension in your communication, you might benefit from reviewing how you discuss your problems and resolve your conflicts. In healthy communication,

knowing what not to say is as important as what to say. Over the years I have observed that the following characteristics are very detrimental to the relationship. Being aware of those pitfalls helps couples to protect their relationship.

These are mechanisms by which the partner in the Yellow or Red Zone pulls the other, who may well be in the Green Zone, down into the Yellow or Red Zone.

One such mechanism is “talking the bait.” The person in the Yellow or Red Zone can become so frustrated or angry that they throw out a comment which becomes the bait that the other cannot resist. In no time, both are battling in the Red Zone either with loud, biting sarcasm or in complete silence. The following are the most common ways spouses throw out a bait that they know will provoke a reaction in the other person.

Accusations

Rather than sharing one’s feelings by saying “I feel sad” or “I feel hurt” or “I feel disappointed”, the person in the Yellow or Red Zone remarks, often not too gently, ‘You were so cruel yesterday” or “You offended me last night” or “You insulted me when we visited your parents”. When people properly share feelings from the Green Zone, it gives the other person the opportunity to offer support. But when accusations start to fill the air, others become defensive and in many cases start their slide down the slippery slope at the edge of the Green Zone that ends in the Red Zone. Accusations often become irresistible bait, containing a barbed hook that’s hard to remove, and which most people have trouble resisting.

Generalizations

I've met many spouses who, rather than saying to their significant other, "Last night when I was talking to you, you seemed lost in your own world", prefer to jump in with both feet and say accusingly, "You never listen to me" or "You always ignore me" or "You think all women are stupid." Such comments never help to solve problems; in fact they do just the opposite. Rather than focusing on a specific incident or behaviour for the purpose of problem solving, they launch such a broad attack on the person's character and attitudes that they can't help but battle back.

Bringing Up the Past

One sure way of pushing your communication into the Red Zone is to attempt to get the upper hand by raising past sins or omissions. If the aggrieved one feels they are not getting the type of attention they seek, they may be tempted to remind the other person of their failings in previous instances when the same problem arose. The issue that needs addressing gets lost in a general, usually worthless, rehashing of the problems from the past.

Exploiting Vulnerabilities

Almost everyone has unresolved issues. Inevitably, we become aware of these sensitive areas in the personalities of the people we are close to, and those sensitivities can potentially serve as weapons if we choose to exploit them. I call those areas "sore elbows" or "bruised knees." We can be respectful and not touch those areas so that they heal with time or we can push or jab at them, which will elicit a predictable angry response every time. Couples living in the Green Zone respect each other's bruised knees and

sore elbows while other couples, in their anger while in the Red Zone, are compelled to seek out and jab at these sensitivities through subtle hints or outright sarcasm. Those who are wounded will quickly realize what is happening and complain, “You certainly know how to push my buttons.”

Becoming aware of a partner’s sensitive areas and respecting them is an important step in keeping the relationship in the Green Zone.

5. Writing Letters to each Other

It has been my experience that most couples write love letters and send special cards in the beginning of the relationship but as the relationship evolves those cards and letters become limited to birthdays, holidays and anniversaries. I believe to keep the relationship alive it is important not to stop the tradition of sending written communications to each other. I have met many couples who discuss in letters serious issues that they could not talk about in person. It is amazing to me that the written communication with the person you live with is qualitatively different than the verbal exchange.

It might be an interesting exercise to initiate this process with an affectionate letter to your spouse. I ask many couples to read love letters of famous writers and artists for romantic inspiration. While writing love letters many people are moved to write original love poetry or share poems written by others. Poetry is one way of keeping the spark of love alive as poems tap into our subconscious and help us get in touch with deeper feelings.

Writing letters will help you to:

- get in touch with your deeper feelings

- articulate your feelings in a meaningful way
- share your intimate thoughts with your partner
- ask for favors in an affectionate way
- resolve conflicts in a respectful way.

All of these are important in the process of growing together in the Green Zone.

6. Living in the Green Zone in Your Personal Life

Loving in the Green Zone is very difficult if both partners are not living in their Green Zone in their personal, professional and social life. It is important for you to see how your intimate relationship affects other aspects of your life and vice versa. In the first book of this series, *"The Art Of Living In Your Green Zone"*, I discussed how creativity, spirituality and serving humanity are some of the roads that lead to your Green Zone. If you discover your Green Zone and learn to live within it, and include others, it becomes easier to also maintain your love in the Green Zone.

7. Helping Each Other Grow and Fulfill Dreams

In an intimate relationship one partner's happiness affects the other. So to live a happy life and enjoy a happy relationship, it might be worthwhile for you to keep on exploring your partner's dreams and ambitions and if possible to help in fulfilling them. If you are unable to be part of some of them, you can be honest about it. Helping each other to fulfill dreams helps couples to love and grow together. It is quite natural not to share all dreams with your partner. But being aware of each other's dreams is very meaningful.

8. Receiving Professional Help

If you are unhappy in your relationship, the foregoing steps might be an attempt to solve your problems and improve the quality of your relationship. But if after a few months of hard work, you are not able to resolve or dissolve your conflicts, then it might be time to consult a friend or therapist for mediation.

Agreeing to get professional help might be the last whole-hearted attempt before you separate and divorce. Even if this last attempt does not work, at least you would feel that you tried everything you could to save the relationship. At that time you would be able to separate respectfully and gracefully and would be able to say to yourself and others, “We tried our best but it did not work out.” But most likely you will be able to learn more about each other and start your journey back to your Green Zone together. You would thereby be able to learn from each other and grow together.

I hope these suggestions will help you review your relationship seriously and have an open and honest dialogue with your partner.

Loving relationships are special gifts and need to be cherished.

LOVING IN YOUR GREEN ZONE

Those couples who live and love in their Green Zones lead a happy and healthy life. They have learnt the art of growing alone and growing together. A few years ago I wrote a poem about Green Zone couples.

“What’s the secret
the secret of your stable relationship?”
I asked a middle aged woman
a woman
who was happy with her life
and
proud of her lover
the lover she had for thirty years.
“He is not only my lover
he is my best friend, too
I can share anything with him
I can praise him
question him
criticize him
adore him
all in one day.

We know how to
 iron out our differences
We see crises as
 opportunities to grow
Those crises
 don't cause breakdowns
 in our relationship
We experience
 breakthroughs instead
I feel secure in the relationship
I know he is with me
 in mind and soul
 even when he is not with me in body.
We are not only lovers
 and good friends
 we are soul-mates too. ^(Ref 1)

Green Zone couples are each others' lovers, friends and soul-mates. From a psychological point of view their intimate relationships have developed the following characteristics.

1. Green Zone Couples Are Growth-Oriented

Individuals involved in Green Zone relationships see such an involvement as an opportunity for both partners to grow. There is a Punjabi saying that my grandmother used to share with me, "One and one make eleven not two," which applies to Green Zone relationships. Such relationships are alive and flexible and both parties intuitively respond to life challenges and crises and share their triumphs and tribulations with each other. They find each other inspiring and

believe that the relationship provides an atmosphere for personal growth alongside their mutual growth.

Green Zone relationships provide an environment in which both partners can maintain their natural and true selves. They don't have the need to pretend wherein they become hypocrites. They can express their feelings, positive and negative, affection as well as anger, in an open and sincere way. That is why the relationships are generally free of anxiety and guilt. Both partners give each other the time and space to sort out their personal issues without feeling pressure from the other person. They share a special bond, a special connection, a special wavelength.

People involved in Green Zone relationships don't perceive each other as threats, rather they enjoy and cherish each other's individuality, achievements and accomplishments.

In Green Zone relationships couples discover a certain rhythm together. They are sensitive to each other's needs and dance together gracefully and peacefully to the music of life. They develop a natural peace in their hearts and a natural harmony in their relationship.

2. Green Zone Couples Respect Themselves and Each Other

In Green Zone relationships, the partners have developed a healthy self-identity and have acquired a sense of autonomy, because without those characteristics they would not have been able to initiate, maintain and cherish a Green Zone relationship.

Otto Kernberg wrote,

"I believe there can be no meaningful love relationship without the presence of self, without firm boundaries of the self that generate a sense of identity." (Ref 2)

Psychologically healthy people know the value of self-respect and the respect of the other person because in that way they can share and enjoy their best interplay. Such respect creates a democratic atmosphere in the relationship in which partners consult each other on significant aspects of life and even in minor matters. In Green Zone relationships both partners feel cherished and appreciated rather than exploited, abused or controlled by another.

3. Green Zone Couples Have Integrated Love and Sex

Individuals involved in Green Zone relationships are not only able to love another person intimately and have a satisfactory and enjoyable sexual relationship with them; they can enjoy both aspects in the same relationship. In their relationships the affection and caring and sexual closeness all merge into each other. On one hand their sexual experiences are far more profound than those of Yellow and Red Zone couples, and on the other hand they can accept prolonged celibacy without ill effects. In their lives sex and affection have found proper places in the bigger scheme of things.

Abraham Maslow, discussing the characteristics of self-actualized people writes,

“Clinical work with non-neurotic people gives the clear answer that sexual deprivation becomes pathogenic in a severe case only when it is felt by the individual to represent rejection by the opposite sex, inferiority, lack of worth, lack of respect, isolation or other thwarting of basic needs. Sexual deprivation can be borne with relative ease by individuals for whom it has no such implications.” ^(Ref 5)

In Green Zone relationships partners are lovers as well as friends and cherish each other's company in a unique way. There have been many people in every society who could not attain such integration. Rollo May once said,

"The Victorian person sought to have love without falling into sex; the modern person seeks to have sex without falling in love." (Ref 3)

Freud wrote,

"To ensure a fully normal attitude in love, two currents of feelings have to unite...we may describe them as the tender, affectionate feelings and sensual feelings..." (Ref 4)

Abraham Maslow observed,

"For one thing it can be reported that sex and love can be and most often are more perfectly fused with each other in healthy people." (Ref 5)

In Green Zone relationships there is free give and take of respect and affection and love between partners. Ability to give is as important as willingness to take. Erich Fromm highlights that process in these words,

"Love is an activity, not a passive affect; it is a 'standing in' not a 'falling for.' In the most general way the active character of love can be described by stating that love is primarily giving not receiving...giving is the highest expression of potency... the culmination of the male sexual function lies in the act of giving; the man gives himself, his sexual organ to the woman. At the moment of orgasm he gives his semen to her. He cannot help giving if he is potent. If he cannot give he

is impotent. For the woman the process is not different although somewhat more complex. She gives herself too; she opens the gates of her feminine center, in the act of receiving she gives. If she is incapable of this act of giving, if she can only receive, she is frigid."^(Ref 6)

4. Green Zone Couples Have a Balance Between Intimacy And Freedom

People in Yellow and Red Zone relationships have difficulties finding a balance between intimacy and freedom. Many feel suffocated in the relationship and controlled by their partner. R.D. Laing wrote about the ontological insecurity of such people,

"...the individual dreads relatedness as such, with anyone or anything or indeed, even with himself, because of his uncertainty about the stability of his autonomy and identity...Thus, instead of the polarities of separateness and relatedness based on individual autonomy, there is anti-thesis between complete loss of being by absorption into the other person (engulfment) and complete isolation."^(Ref 7).

People loving in the Green Zone are comfortable not only with themselves but also in the intimate relationship. They are so secure and confident of their emotional independence that they are not worried about losing themselves in the relationship.

Green Zone couples, in spite of being very close to each other, are also respectful of each other's freedom and independence. Their intimacy does not suffocate or intimidate the other person. Each partner can ask for time and space

for their independent hobbies and work without worrying about offending the other person.

5. Green Zone Couples Deal With Families and Communities in a Constructive Way

Green Zone couples deal with their families and communities in a respectful way. If the families and communities are supportive and live in their Green Zone, they have a lot to share; but if the families and communities are critical and prejudiced because they live in the Red Zone, then the couple finds a respectable way of distancing themselves without giving offence. Green Zone couples maintain their creative and loving lifestyle in spite of the difficulties they face in their social lives. Many times such social obstacles bring them closer and make their relationship stronger rather than weaker. They tend to establish a social network of like-minded people, whom I call “A Family of the Heart”. Social problems are more likely to happen if it is a mixed relationship and partners are from different cultural and religious background. Dealing with conflicts and social obstacles is part of the growing process of Green Zone couples.

6. Green Zone Couples Are Aware That Relationships Are Temporary

Green Zone couples have an existential attitude towards life and relationships. They are aware that as much as we love life and our dear ones, we all have to part from each other one day. People loving in the Green Zone are aware that they may have to separate if partners grow apart over a period of time and they might have to face permanent separation even if they lived together all their lives, when

one of them dies. Members of Green Zone couples, in spite of the sadness they experience at the time of separation or death, are able to continue living successfully and happily. They have a tendency not to put all their eggs in one basket. They receive enough satisfaction from other involvements in life and enough security from other friends and support networks that even when they lose their partners they manage to recover with relative ease. In many cases even when they part as lovers, they can still be friends. People involved in Green Zone loving relationships are aware that love cannot be controlled, it can only be followed. Kahlil Gibran stated in his book, *The Prophet*,

"And think not you can direct the course of love, for love, if it finds you worthy, directs your course."

7. Green Zone Couples Have a Mystical Dimension to Their Relationship

Alongside the physical and emotional parts, Green Zone relationships also contain a mystical part, which is quite mysterious and makes the relationship unconventional and non-traditional.

Abraham Maslow, discussing the characteristics of a self-actualized person, states that such a person, whose basic needs are fulfilled

"is primarily motivated by the need to develop and actualize his fullest potentialities and capacities...so in such people's lives sex plays a secondary role. On one hand they have the capacity to tolerate its deprivation with great ease, enjoy it casually, fuse it with feelings of tenderness, care and respect for others and make it such a significant and profound encounter that it becomes a mystical experience."

“subjects are simultaneously very spiritual and very pagan and sensual even to the point where sexuality becomes a PATH to the spiritual and religious.”

Many Green Zone couples are connected to their deeper selves and their love is as much an expression of sensuality as of creativity and spirituality.

8. Green Zone Couples Have Loving as Part of Their Characters

For people who live and love in the Green Zone, love is not a feeling that they share only with their partners, it is an integral part of their personalities and lifestyles. They are quite warm and gentle with their relatives and colleagues and friends. They are even kind and compassionate to animals, birds and inanimate things. It is part of their positive attitude towards life. They relate to life in a loving and compassionate way.

People involved in Green Zone relationships are caring people. Rollo May stresses the importance of *care* as a precondition for being able to love in a healthy and mature way. Care, he says,

“is a state composed of the recognition of another, a fellow human being like one’s self, of identification of one’s self with the pain or joy of the other, of guilt, pity and the awareness that we all stand on the base of a common humanity from which we all stem.” (Ref 3)

In Green Zone relationships, both partners are in tune not only with themselves but also with each other. They keep on creatively adapting to their personal and social lives, using crises as opportunities to grow.

Green Zone couples believe that growing together is more exciting, adventurous and meaningful than growing alone.

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SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONNAIRE FOR INDIVIDUALS

Over the years we have developed a questionnaire that is interesting and revealing, yet quite simple to complete, as it will introduce you to our concept of the Green, Yellow and Red Zones. It will help you to discover for yourself the strength and weaknesses of your personality and lifestyle. It will also help you to decide whether you need professional assistance to improve your quality of life.

THE GREEN ZONE

When people choose to live in the Green Zone they are, amongst many other things, pleasant and cheerful. They easily carry on a rational discussion with those around them and should a difference of opinion arise, they are able to enthusiastically connect with a healthy and constructive inner strength that will encourage the dialogue that helps to resolve or dissolve their conflicts – and most importantly —build bridges that span all differences.

THE YELLOW ZONE

When in the Yellow Zone people feel distressed, and anxiety, sadness and anger too often rule their thoughts and

actions. Because of their discomfort, they are unable to communicate with others properly and are poorly equipped to deal with stressful situations or interpersonal conflicts. This Zone is a slippery slope that often leads to many problems that await them when they cannot hold on and fall into the Red Zone.

THE RED ZONE

Those who occupy the Red Zone are extremely unhappy, emotionally exhausted, usually maintain a high state of hidden anger and are extremely distressed. They often lose control and become abusive or completely withdrawn from others, sometimes fleeing to escape — even from themselves! They have great difficulty dealing with stressful situations, unable to have a rational discussion to resolve or dissolve their interpersonal conflicts. At times they lack the will to take care of their personal appearance, overlook proper nourishment and avoid being responsible for family members in their charge.

Loving in Your Green Zone

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. What Zone colors have you lived in most of your life?
(if more than one, use a percentage figure to show the comparison.)

	Green	Yellow	Red
Up to 15 years	_____	_____	_____
16 to 30	_____	_____	_____
31 to present	_____	_____	_____

2. In what Zones do you presently spend your time?

	Green	Yellow	Red
Mostly	_____	_____	_____
Occasionally	_____	_____	_____
Rarely	_____	_____	_____

3. What Zones do you presently live in within your family environment?

	Green	Yellow	Red
Mostly	_____	_____	_____
Occasionally	_____	_____	_____
Rarely	_____	_____	_____

4. In your work environment, what Zones do you presently live in?

	Green	Yellow	Red
Mostly	_____	_____	_____
Occasionally	_____	_____	_____
Rarely	_____	_____	_____

5. In your present social environment what Zones do you live in?

	Green	Yellow	Red
Mostly	_____	_____	_____
Occasionally	_____	_____	_____
Rarely	_____	_____	_____

6. If needed, what three things can you do to recover from Yellow and Red Zones?

A. _____

B. _____

C. _____

7. What are the three most important things you can do to restrain yourself from falling into the Yellow and Red Zones?

A. _____

B. _____

C. _____

- 8a. List your significant relationships and then decide in what Zone each lives.

Name	Relationship	Green	Yellow	Red
1.	_____	_____	_____	_____
2.	_____	_____	_____	_____
3.	_____	_____	_____	_____
4.	_____	_____	_____	_____

5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

8b. With which significant relationships can you comfortably discuss the concept of Green Yellow Red Zones that will improve the quality of that relationship? (Please refer to item 8a above and circle the appropriate numbers.)

8c. In which significant relationships can you discuss the issue of finding a Mediator or a Therapist? (Please refer to item 8a above and add a square box around the appropriate numbers.)

8d. Which significant relationships can you dissolve (have little or no communication with in future) because there is no hope or willingness with either party to resolve conflicts that could improve the quality of the relationship? (Please refer to item 8a above and draw an X through the appropriate numbers.)

9. List social, professional, political, religious or cultural organizations you belong to and then decide the Zone you live in with each one.

Name	Green	Yellow	Red
------	-------	--------	-----

- | | | | |
|----|-------|--|--|
| 1. | _____ | | |
| 2. | _____ | | |
| 3. | _____ | | |
| 4. | _____ | | |
| 5. | _____ | | |
| 6. | _____ | | |
| 7. | _____ | | |

10. What five things can you do to live regularly in the Green Zone?

- | | |
|----|-------|
| A. | _____ |
| B. | _____ |
| C. | _____ |
| D. | _____ |
| E. | _____ |

11. Do you need professional help to live in the Green Zone? Explain why.

COMMENT

When you live in the Green Zone during most aspects of your life, you are very likely leading a happy, healthy and balanced life. When the yellow Zone causes pain during much of your life, you need to think seriously about how to improve the quality of your life by immediately discussing it with significant people you trust. When the Red Zone dominates your life, you need to act immediately to seek professional counseling to bring fulfillment and joy into your life.

SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONNAIRE FOR COUPLES

To have a better understanding of the quality and dynamics of intimate relationships we have devised the following questionnaire. Completing this questionnaire will help you and your partner to assess whether you are loving in Green, Yellow or Red Zones.

This questionnaire not only provides insights into the perceptions of partners but also highlights the differences. The answers are quite helpful in opening up a dialogue between spouses and also with the therapist.

Please enter a number indicating your response to each question.

Red1Not at all
Yellow3Moderately
Green.....5Very much

ISSUES	QUESTIONS	SCORE
TRUST	Do you trust your spouse? Does your spouse trust you?	_____ _____
CONTROL	Do you feel free to be your natural self in your partner's company? Do you feel your partner feels free to be his/her natural self in your company?	_____ _____
BOUNDARIES	Do you respect your partner's relationship with his/her friends and family? Does your partner respect your relationship with your friends and family?	_____ _____
INTIMACY	Do you express your affection and love freely and spontaneously? Does your partner express his/her affection and love freely and spontaneously?	_____ _____
VALUES /LIFESTYLES	Do you respect your partner's lifestyle and values? Does your partner respect your lifestyle and values?	_____ _____
CONFLICTS	Are you able to resolve/ dissolve conflicts? Is your partner able to resolve/ dissolve conflicts?	_____ _____

SUPPORT	Do your friends support your relationship? Do your partner's friends support the relationship? Does your family support your relationship? Does your partner's family support your relationship? Does your community support your relationship? Does your partner's community support your relationship?	_____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____
FUTURE	Do you see a bright future for your relationship? Does your partner see a bright future for your relationship?	_____ _____
	TOTAL SCORE	

NOTE. If you would like to elaborate upon any of your answers, please do so on a separate sheet.

RESULTS

- If you are loving in the Green Zone (**Score 80-100**), most likely you are enjoying a happy and healthy intimate relationship.
- If you are loving in the Yellow Zone (**Score 60-80**), you can try for a few months to help yourself to get to your Green Zone, and if you fail, you should seek professional help.
- If you are loving in the Red Zone (**Score 1-60**), you need to seriously consider getting professional help.

DISCOVERING YOUR GREEN DAY AND DISCOVERING YOUR GREEN WEEK

As you seek to spend increasing time in your Green Zone, you can track your progress using the two charts that follow. You might wish to make photocopies so that they will be available over time as you work with them to show you how to fine-tune your awareness and your responses.

DISCOVERING YOUR GREEN DAY		
NAME _____ DAY _____ DATE _____		
ZONE	HOURS	WHAT WAS HAPPENING?
GREEN		
YELLOW		
RED		

DISCOVERING YOUR GREEN WEEK

DATE	HOURS IN EACH ZONE			
	GREEN	YELLOW	RED	COMMENTS
MONDAY				
TUESDAY				
WEDNESDAY				
THURSDAY				
FRIDAY				
SATURDAY				
SUNDAY				

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UNFINISHED NOVEL

*Every human being
is an unfinished novel
that starts at birth
and is left unfinished
at death
When two human beings
get involved in an intimate relationship
they start
writing a new novel together
When three novels
are being written and lived simultaneously
plots thicken
Some novels are short, others long
Some are artistic, others philosophical
Some are boring, others exciting
Some are harmonious, others full of conflicts
There are times
when we all feel
we are incomplete chapters
of an unfinished novel
the novel*

*that human beings
have been writing for centuries
each one of us is introduced
as a new character
but we have to write, act and direct
our own roles
and get involved
in intimate relationships
to create suspense
the irony is
we can't rehearse our roles
or re-write our scripts.*

Sohail.

