



How to keep your relationship in shape

An introduction to Imago

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Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to read this short introduction to the principles of Imago Relationships.

Harville Hendrix PhD wrote this to give some explanation and perspective about what he saw as the causes of the conflict in relationships, and his alternative ideas and approaches to resolving them. We hope the information contained here will help you in your journey toward a safe and passionate relationship, whatever stage you are in your relationship.

What's Really Going On in Relationships?

What is really happening when we fall in--and out of--love? What's really going on when couples fight? To gain insight into the hidden agenda of a relationship, we need to look at the complex process of human growth and development, and at how we human beings fit into the larger scheme of things.

I believe that we are creatures of nature, with the evolutionary program of our species encoded in our genes, and that we all begin life in a state of relaxed and joyful bliss, with a feeling of connectedness to everything and everyone. Our overwhelming impulse at birth is to sustain this feeling of connectedness, to remain attached. If our caretakers are attuned to our wants and needs, ready and able to provide warmth safety and sustenance, our feelings of aliveness and well-being are sustained. We remain whole.

But even in the best of circumstances, our parents are not able to maintain perfect standards, to be available every minute, to always understand exactly what is needed or to meet every demand. Research indicates that we are likely affected in the womb as well. More to the point, most of our parents, hampered by their own nurturing deficits and beset by long-standing problems of their own, are unwilling or unable to meet our infant needs. Tired, angry, depressed, busy, ill, distracted, afraid--our parents fail to sustain our feelings of security and comfort.

Every unmet need causes fear and pain and, in our infantile ignorance, we have no idea how to stop it and restore our feeling of safety. Desperate to survive, we adopt

primitive coping mechanisms. Depending on our temperament, and the nature of our caretakers' neglect, our feeble defenses may take the form of constant crying to get attention or alternatively, we may withdraw from whatever attentions our caretakers do provide, denying that we even have needs. Though we do what we can, already the world feels unsafe.

The journey of emotional growth

Our impulse to remain attached is only the first in a programmed series of impulses that emerge as we grow. After the Attachment stage, the need to explore emerges, and our mission changes accordingly: We need the freedom to move away from our caretakers, and the reassurance that we can reliably return to them. Again, our ability to master this task of Exploration depends on how well our caretakers understand and support this new impulse. It also depends on how well our caretakers laid the foundation at Attachment. And so it goes, as the impulse to explore gives way to the impulse to establish a sense of Identity, then Competence, and on through Concern and Intimacy. Each stage builds on the last, forming the foundation on which new skills are built. Any impairment along the way compromises our ability to competently negotiate the next stage.

Meanwhile, throughout our childhood, we are also being socialized, molded by our caretakers and communities to fit into society. We are told what to do, what to say, how to behave; we see behavior modeled by friends, teachers, TV characters; we are intimate witnesses to the relationship modeled by our parents. Observant and malleable, we learn what to do to gain love and acceptance. Socialization, too, chips away at our sense of wholeness and safety, for inevitably we come to see that certain aspects of ourselves aren't accepted--the way we look or talk, the things that interest us, our abilities, our attractiveness as boys or girls. In the interest, again, of survival, we repress or disown parts of ourselves that society finds unacceptable or unlovable. Our sense of "allrightness" diminishes further; we end up as shadows of our whole, true selves.

At age two or three, most children are still exuberant, lively, unique and eccentric, though some already show signs of apathy, anger or fear that a deprived infancy can create. By age eight or ten, the inhibitions become more obvious and numerous; it's the rare ten-year-old who is still unmistakably, unabashedly himself. By mid-teens the effects of incomplete nurturing and societal conditioning are widened in the rebellion, depression, or lack of self-esteem we often see in inadequately loved teenagers. To the degree that our caretakers and our society are able to support the emergence and solidification of our innate impulses, and to the degree that we are allowed to be ourselves, we survive and prosper. Most of us had "good enough" caretakers; we do all right. Some of us didn't fare so well, and our lives are handicapped by deep hurts. All of us were wounded in childhood to some extent. We are now coping as well as we can with the world and our relationships by using the feeble set of defenses born of the pain of childhood, a

time when parts of our true nature were suppressed in the unconscious. We look grown up--we have jobs and responsibilities--but we are walking wounded, trying desperately to live life fully while unconsciously hoping to somehow restore the sense of joyful aliveness we began with.

Falling in Love

When we fall in love, we believe we've found it. Suddenly, we see life in technicolor. We nibble each others' ears and tell each other everything; our limitations and rigidities melt away. We're sexier, smarter, funnier, more giving. We decide that we can't live without our beloved, for now we feel whole, we feel like ourselves. For a while we are able to relax. Finally we feel safe, and breathe a sigh of relieved deliverance. It looks like everything is going to turn out all right, after all.

But inevitably--often when we marry or move in together--things just start to go wrong. In some cases, all hell breaks loose. The veil of illusion falls away, and it seems that our partners are different than we thought they were. It turns out they have qualities that we can't bear. Even qualities we once admired grate on us. Old hurts are reactivated as we realize that our partners cannot or will not love and care for us as they promised. Our dream shatters.

Disillusionment turns to anger, fueled by fear that we won't survive without the love and safety that was within our grasp. Since our partner is no longer willingly giving us what we need, we change tactics, trying to maneuver our partners into caring--through anger, crying, withdrawal, shame, intimidation, criticism--whatever works. We will make them love us. Now we negotiate--for time, love, chores, gifts--measuring our success against an economic yardstick of profit and loss. The power struggle has begun, and may go on for many years, until we split, or we settle into an uneasy truce, or until we seek help, desperate to feel alive and whole again, to have our dream back.

The Imago Emerges

What is going on here? Apparently you have found an Imago (IH-MAH-GO) partner. Someone, I'm afraid, who is uniquely unqualified (at the moment), to give you the love you want. Furthermore, this is what's supposed to happen!

Let me explain. We all think that we have freedom of choice when it comes to selecting our partners. In a way, we do; ours are not arranged relationships--after all, there are no exchanges of money or cows between our families. But regardless of what it is we think we're looking for in a mate, our unconscious has its own agenda.

Our primitive "old" brain has a compelling, non-negotiable drive to restore the feeling of aliveness and wholeness that we came into the world with. To accomplish that, it must repair the damage done in childhood as a result of unmet needs, and the way it does that is to find a partner who can give us what our caretakers failed to provide.

You'd think, then, that we would choose someone who has what our caretakers lacked. If only that were so! But the old brain has a mind of its own, with its own checklist of desired qualities. It is carrying around its own image of the perfect partner, a complex synthesis of qualities formed in reaction to the way our caretakers responded to our needs. Every pleasure or pain, every transaction of childhood, has left its mark on us, and these collective impressions form an unconscious picture we're always trying to replicate as we scan our environment for a suitable mate.

This image of "the person who can make me whole again" I call the Imago. Though we consciously seek only the positive traits, the negative traits of our caretakers are more indelibly imprinted in our Imago picture, because those are the traits which caused the wounds we now seek to heal. Our unconscious need is to have our feelings of aliveness and wholeness restored by someone who reminds us of our caretakers. In other words, we look for someone with the same deficits of care and attention that hurt us in the first place.

So when we fall in love, when bells ring and the world seems altogether a better place, our old brain is telling us that we've found someone with whom we can complete our unfinished childhood business. Our imperfect caretakers, "freeze-dried" in the memories of childhood, are "reconstituted" in our partner. Unfortunately, since we don't understand what's going on, we're shocked when the awful truth of our beloved surfaces, and our first impulse is to run screaming in the opposite direction.

But that's not all the bad news. Another powerful component of our Imago is that we also seek the qualities missing in ourselves--both good and bad--that got lost in the shuffle of socialization. If we are shy, we seek someone outgoing; if we're disorganized, we're attracted to someone cool and rational. The anger we repressed because it was punished in our home, and which we unconsciously hate ourselves for feeling, we "annex" in our partner. But eventually, when our own feelings--our repressed exuberance or anger--are stirred, we are uncomfortable, and criticize our partners for being too outgoing, too coldly rational, too temperamental.

Waking Up to Reality

All of this seems to be a recipe for disaster, and for a long time this depressing state of affairs puzzled me. How can we resolve our childhood issues if our partners wound us in the same ways as our caretakers, and we ourselves are stuck in childhood patterns that wound our partners?

Consciousness is the key; it changes everything. When we are unaware of the agenda of love, it is a disaster, for our childhood scenarios inevitably repeat themselves with the same devastating consequences. However, there is method to this madness. The unconscious recreation of the ambience of childhood has the express purpose of bringing this old impasse to a resolution. When we understand that we have chosen our partners to heal certain wounds, and that the healing of those wounds is the key to the end of longing, we have taken the first step on the journey to real love.

Conflict is Natural

What we need to understand and accept is that conflict is supposed to happen. This is as nature intended it: Everything in nature is in conflict. The hard truth is that the grounds for marriage really is incompatibility; this is the norm for relationships. Conflict needs to be understood as a given, a sign that the psyche is trying to survive, to get its needs met and become whole. It's only without this knowledge that conflict is destructive.

Ignorant of this process of healing childhood wounds through conflict in current relationships, our culture has made incompatibility the grounds for divorce. This counters nature's intention. Society has institutionalized permission for divorce out of a response to the childish wish for idealized, conflict-free relationships, which is a distortion of the natural process.

Divorce does not solve the problems of relationship. We may get rid of our partners, but we keep our problems, carting them into the next relationship. Divorce is incompatible with the intentions of nature.

Romantic love is supposed to end. It is the glue that initially bonds two incompatible people together so that they will do what needs to be done to heal themselves, and in the process, heal the rifts in nature, of which we are an integral part. If we remain fixated on romantic love --"in love with love"--we remain stuck at the one-year-old stage of Attachment. To restore our wholeness, our relationships need to successfully grow through all the developmental stages that were mishandled during our childhood. The good news is that although many couples become hopelessly locked in the power struggle, it too is supposed to end. The emotional bond that is created by romantic love to keep partners together through

the hard times evolves into a powerful organic bond through the process of resolving conflict.

The way I have come to see it is that nature is healing itself in our relationships. Each individual is a thread of energy woven into the tapestry of being, a tapestry frayed and weakened where there is conflict. With our self awareness, we humans do not have to remain stuck in childhood patterns; we are uniquely able to correct what has gone wrong. When we heal our relationships, we heal the rift in nature: putting our relationship to rights is ecologically sound!

Making the Choice for a Conscious Relationship

A Conscious Relationship is not for the faint-hearted, for it requires reclaiming the lost, repressed parts of ourselves which we were told were dangerous to have, and which we unconsciously hate ourselves for having. And it means learning more effective coping mechanisms than crying, anger withdrawal or other defensive behaviors which have become so habitual for us. In Imago, we change to give our partners what they need, no matter how difficult it is, no matter how much it goes against the grain of our personality and temperament. We stretch to become the person our partner needs us to be in order to heal. This is not easy, but it works.

Regardless of what we may believe, relationships are not born of love, but of need; real love is born in relationships, as a result of understanding what they are about and doing what is necessary to have them. You are already with your dream partner, but at the moment, he or she is in disguise--and, like you, in pain. A Conscious Relationship itself is the therapy you need to restore your sense of aliveness. The goal of Imago is to extricate you from the power struggle and set you on the path of real love.

What Happens in Imago Practice?

How do we set about disentangling ourselves from this mess? By redesigning our relationship to complete the unfinished business of childhood. In other words, our unconscious aim--to become whole, to restore our joyful aliveness--must become our conscious intention. Your goal is to become passionate friends with your partner, to develop what might be called "Reality Love," which is based not on childhood notions of Attachment, but on knowledge, care, respect, and value of the other.

If you choose to go and see an Imago Therapist they can provide a safe setting in their office to begin structured work which you and your partner will do together. In this work you will:

1. Tell each other about the wounds you received as a child;
2. Tell each other exactly what would make you feel loved;
3. Use that information to re-channel behavior into effective strategies for loving and caring for each other, as well as for meeting personal needs;
4. Dismantle inappropriate beliefs from childhood;
5. Replace inappropriate behaviors and defense strategies;
6. Give your partner what he or she wants.

Imago Weekend Workshops are another opportunity to begin this work in an environment which is safe, and in which the guidance of a professional is readily available.

Creating a Safe Haven

The essential background to all Imago work is a willingness and openness to change. If you work with an Imago therapist, some of your early therapy sessions will focus on creating a hospitable climate in which to do this difficult work.

1. At the onset, your therapist will ask you to give up blame and criticism. A major weapon in the power struggle, criticism is adult crying; it is not an effective way to get the love you want. Just as you seek safety in your relationship, you must cease being an object of enmity and fear for your partner. In the course of therapy, you will learn new ways to say what is frustrating you, and ask for the behavior that you want.
2. You and your partner will create a Relationship Vision, in which you imagine the marriage you would like to have; this co-created vision will be a daily reminder to you of your goals.
3. To remind you of the love you once felt for each other, you will be Re-romanticizing your relationship, giving each other special loving behaviors--with no strings attached, and regardless of your current feelings about your partner--on a daily basis. These are target specific behaviors, i.e., they are exactly what your partner needs to feel loved and appreciated.
4. Dealing with your issues around gender and sexuality, you and your partner will learn ways to transcend the entrenched roles our culture has defined for us as man or woman, so that you can be wholly yourselves.

5. Through all of this, you will be doing exercises designed to re-awaken your feelings of aliveness as well as relearning to laugh and have fun together.

Changing Our Behaviors

Many couples' problems are rooted in misunderstood, manipulated, or avoided communications. To correct this, you will be introduced to the Couples Dialogue, the core skill of Imago Practice. Using this effective communications technique, you will be able to restructure the way you talk to each other, so that what you say to each other is mirrored back to you, is validated, and empathized with. The Couples Dialogue will help you to tell each other all about your childhoods, to state your frustrations clearly, and to articulate exactly what you need from each other in order to heal. Clear communication is a window into the world of your partner; truly being heard is a powerful aphrodisiac.

Next the dialogue must be turned into action: we must give our partners what they need, and not just what is easy to give. Now we come to the heart of the matter: in a Conscious relationship we agree to change in order to give our partner what s/he needs. This is a radical idea. Conventional wisdom says that people don't change, that we should simply learn to accept each other as we are. But without change, there is no growth; we are confined to a fate, to remaining stuck in our unhappiness.

Change is the catalyst for healing. In changing to give our partners what they need, we heal our own wounds. Our own behavior was born in response to our particular deprivations; it is our adaptation to loss. In giving our partners what is hardest for us to give, we have to bring our hidden selves out into the light, owning traits we've repressed (rather than projecting them onto our partners), and enlivening atrophied parts of ourselves. When we change our behavior in response to our mate, we heal our partner and ourselves.

Here is an example of how this two-way healing works. Let's say that when your partner was a child, the mother was hospitalized, and was unable to give her child (your partner) much emotional support when she returned home. In this situation of powerlessness, your partner might have developed a fear of being abandoned, attended by a fear of being ignored. These fears would have gone "underground" into the unconscious, only to be expressed outwardly as clutching, dependent, attention-seeking behavior. Unless these behaviors were resolved later in childhood, they would show up in your relationship, and be a source of irritation and frustration for you. As you came to know your partner's history through the Couples Dialogue, you would understand that these behaviors, though triggered by

something you might do, actually have their roots in your partner's childhood. Rather than feeling angry or blamed, you would be more sympathetic.

But it would also be safe to assume that you have trouble dealing with this clutching or jealous behavior, and that you are emotionally distant and unsupportive of your partner. We could assume this because, according to Imago theory, your partner has an unconscious desire to change a person who is emotionally abandoning into a person who is emotionally close. One of the reasons your partner selected you is because you possess these required negative traits. Your own emotional distance is probably your way of coping with some childhood pain caused by emotional smothering, and you naturally defend yourself against a recurrence of the experience. However, if you could see that your reaction serves no purpose in the present situation, but instead is distancing you from your partner, you would be willing to drop this childhood defense and try a new approach which brings you closer together. Overcoming your fear and resistance to acting in this uncomfortable and unfamiliar way, you would grow to a new level of wholeness through accessing your denied affectionateness and emotionality. In the course of healing your partner's wound, in this case, the need for closeness--you would heal your own tendency to withdraw emotionally, and your partnership would transcend its former limitations.

Reclaiming Ourselves

Change rarely comes easily; it requires great courage. Awakening traits long buried, traits both feared and hated while, learning new and uncomfortable behaviors can cause tremendous anxiety. As long as we hate ourselves for having repressed traits, we cannot believe that our partners can love us as we truly are. We are trapped in our own lie. But when we stop projecting our disowned traits--anger, stinginess, sexual inhibition--onto our partners, and take responsibility for them, we see that our partners can accept us as we are.

I call the process by which we alter our entrenched behaviors to give our partners what they need stretching, for it requires that we conquer our fears, do what comes unnaturally, and move beyond our accustomed beliefs and behaviors to access long-dormant parts of ourselves. Our resistance reflects our defenses. Often we may feel that we're losing ourselves but we are not ourselves now; it is in the crucible of change that we regain ourselves.

Over the course of time, as our partners demonstrate their love for us, as they learn about and accept our hidden selves, and as we stretch to love our partners, our pain and self-absorption diminishes. We restore our empathic feelings for our partners, and our feelings of connection to the other that were lost in the pain of our childhood. Finally we learn to see our partners for themselves, with their own private world of personal meaning, their own ideas and dreams, and not merely as extensions of ourselves, or as we wish they were. We no longer say, " You liked

that awful movie?", but rather "Tell me why you liked that movie. I want to know how you think."

Learning to Love

The barrier to love is self-hatred. When it breaks down, in the course of dialoguing with our partner and in stretching to meet each others' needs, we see that we can be ourselves and still be loved. Finally, we can relax; everything is all right.

A conscious relationship has tremendous potential to correct the distortions created by our early caretakers and socialization. It is a spiritual path which leads us home again, to joy and aliveness, to the feeling of oneness we started out with. All through the course of Imago Practice, you will be learning to express love as a behavior daily, in large and small ways: in other words, in stretching to give your partner what s/he needs, you learn to love. The transformation of your relationship may not be accomplished easily or quickly; you are setting off on a lifelong journey. In order to have a different relationship, you need something different: The Imago Process is that something.

Imago Relationships International

Imago Relationships International is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to transform the world one relationship at a time and create a new model for marriage. More than 1900 therapists practice Imago Therapy in more than 20 countries. In addition, over 160 Certified Imago Presenters offer workshops and seminars for couples and individuals that help thousands of persons world-wide every year. Imago also offers training programs for qualified therapists to become Certified Imago Relationship Therapists.

Imago Relationship Therapy was co-created by Harville Hendrix, Ph.D. and Helen LaKelly Hunt, Ph.D. Their books on Imago Relationship Therapy, "Getting The Love You Want: A Guide for Couples", "Keeping The Love You Find: A Personal Guide", "Giving The Love That Heals: A Guide for Parents" and three companion books on meditation and exercises, have sold more than 2 million copies and have been translated into more than 50 languages.

About Harville Hendrix and Helen LaKelly Hunt

Dr. Harville Hendrix, and Dr. Helen LaKelly Hunt are co-founders, with other Imago therapists, of Imago Relationships International. Harville, the President of the Imago International Institute, the education division of IRI, is the author of the popularly acclaimed books, *Getting the Love You Want: A Guide for Couples*, and *Keeping the Love You Find: A Guide for Singles*. In addition, Harville and his wife Helen LaKelly Hunt, Ph.D., who has been his partner in developing Imago Relationship Therapy, and co-creator of the concept of the "conscious marriage," co-authored *The Couples Companion: Meditations and Exercises for Getting the Love You Want* and *The Personal Companion: Meditations and Exercises for Keeping the Love You Find*. They also collaborated on *Getting the Love You Want: The Home Video Workshop*, for which Harville and Helen were executive editor and executive producer, respectively. This award winning series was introduced and endorsed by Oprah Winfrey when it aired on Public Television.