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Mapping Your Strategy

You may have noticed by now that this book has avoided “the seven secrets” formula frequently adopted in self-help literature. A quick perusal of self-help titles gives the impression that truth always comes bundled in batches of five, seven, and ten. If it were only that simple. A less cartoonish view acknowledges that relationships are far more complex. I’ve never seen a book titled *Jet Engines for Dummies*. The human mind is infinitely more complex than a jet engine. The real truth of intimate relationships is messy. Good couple therapy often resembles detective work as the therapist works through a maze of interlocking dynamics. So how are average people supposed to make sense of all this confusion and improve their relationship?

The current chapter lists some recommended strategies for several common relationship problems. The list isn’t all-inclusive and it can’t solve the most difficult problems. After all, the title of this book refers to a first-aid kit and not deep surgery or intensive care. Simple remedies are suggested for the more simple problems. It also offers initial direction for more complex problems and that’s worth a lot.

It’s particularly helpful to conceptualize relationship problems as occurring on three levels of difficulty. They involve deficits in knowledge, skill, or capacity. These categories aren’t necessarily exclusive, but let’s not overly confound the subject. A knowledge deficit is when a person lacks the information about how the problem can be solved. They can easily learn it. Then they can voluntarily and relatively quickly change their behavior. For example, knowing that your partner needs regular nurturance can inspire you to immediately change your routine. Many couples have found that such a

simple intervention can increase their affection and reduce fighting. The information allows a change in their voluntary behavior. This is the level at which most self-help books are written. “Follow these steps. Do this and do that.” It’s a strategy that works for some problems but not for others.

Skill deficits involve a greater level of difficulty. A skill involves a learned behavior shaped by training. You can’t get the desired effect on your first try. You have to repeatedly practice the behavior in order to perform it correctly. Using stick shift on a car becomes easy only after a lot of practice. Implementing “The When and Where Rule” during a toxic conflict also requires practice. Most people can’t remember the rule just from verbal instruction. When their adrenalin flows, their good judgment and memory both take a hike. However, they can train themselves to remember it if they repetitively use the rule in practice drills. Then the skills will be available to conscious memory when they need them.

Capacity deficits cause the greatest difficulty in a relationship. By referring to capacity deficits, I mean limitations that are basic and involuntary. Any improvements require much time and effort if they can be changed at all. Cognitive recovery after a stroke is one example. The stroke victim’s memory may gradually improve but will still probably show residual deficits. Low intelligence, a low level of consciousness, and poor emotional regulation are all types of capacity deficits. The integrity foundation in a relationship is the capacity issue we’ve been discussing throughout this book.

Increasing your capacity is extremely difficult because you have to fundamentally change your brain. It’s true that instructional learning and skill learning both involve new brain growth. However, that type of growth is highly specific to either verbal information or a particular behavior. Changing capacity requires pervasive changes in your brain, most of which are unconscious. For this reason, it’s more accurate to say that you might be able to slowly **grow** your capacity but you can’t rapidly change it to your liking. Certain kinds of experience can catalyze faster growth in capacity by accelerating the brain’s ability to grow new connections.

There’s no way that I can assign a simple prescription for every problem behavior that occurs in relationships. The biggest reason involves a psychological phenomenon known as “equifinality.” Equifinality means that different combinations of history and emotional dynamics can produce the same behavioral outcomes. For example, lying comes very naturally to a sociopath. But lying is also a common defense for someone who has conflict phobia. The psychopath is undersocialized, while the person with conflict phobia may have been trained by his parents to surrender all boundaries. The underlying emotional dynamics are different. Another example of equifinality involves women who show no sexual interest after they’ve married. For some women who have poor autonomy and fear conflict, normal marital friction can gradually turn them numb. Other women who never developed their sexuality before marriage might later revert to their usual non-sexuality once they feel safe in

motherhood. Different pathways of personal history and emotion can lead to the same end point. This is why effective planning for change has to consider a person's context in the form of personality and social history. Their context gives important clues about which emotional dynamics need to be targeted. The problem is that there are too many contexts to put into any all-inclusive list.

In the following scenarios, some of the more common problems are described in various contexts. Where the proposed strategy involves readings, I highly recommend that both you and your partner read each section and discuss it together. The proposed strategy usually won't work if only one of you does the reading and has the responsibility to explain it to the other. Don't do that! It's a set-up for failure. You both need to take full responsibility for your strategy.

It's a good idea to plan a weekly meeting with your partner outside of the home. You can both relax in a coffee shop with a copy of this book, as well as two pads of paper. You can then take each relevant chapter from the book and discuss it section by section. Plan how you will implement any of the recommended exercises. You can also use these meetings to review your progress and make changes if your strategy needs tinkering. The trick is to be methodical and consistent. It's the biggest determinant of success. Some effective strategies require months to produce the desired outcome. Changing your capacity requires even longer, sometimes years.

Deficits in Knowledge

For these kinds of problems, change can come quickly. You need to learn how to do some things differently, but there's no skill training required. You just need to follow through with a better plan than you have in the past. Here are some common scenarios.

Problem Scenario:

You and your partner have drifted apart. You had a close relationship even following the "*in-love*" years. However, life has become more stressful and you both struggle to take care of all your responsibilities. You almost never have time together when you're not problem solving or doing chores. You're trading barbs or worse with increasing irritability.

Proposed Strategy:

Read Chapter 4 again. Then follow the directions for instituting a weekly together time for intimacy. Don't settle on "date nights" in which you go out to movies or see friends. Make sure you schedule a regular weekly time for intimate talk. You can start by following the directions for intimacy exercises. Plan to have most meals together and agree to go to bed together. Your long history of closeness indicates that you're both capable of intimacy because you had more than the initial *in-love* infatuation. You just need to start nurturing attachment in the relationship again.

Problem Scenario:

There are many arguments about household chores. One of you frequently complains about not getting enough help. When you're both away from home, you get along and enjoy each other. Your sex life is good.

Proposed Strategy:

Read Chapter 10 again. Follow the directions for methodically negotiating responsibility and ownership for all the chores. Then negotiate an agreement with your partner that helping with chores will only be voluntary and not obligatory. In other words, there will no longer be a "helper" role. Also put up a chalk board for miscellaneous chores as described in Chapter 10. Your good sex life and your good relations away from home both suggest that your problem is narrowly focused and not some facet of a larger underlying problem.

Problem Scenario:

There are many arguments about money. One partner sometimes won't tell the other about how joint funds are being spent until the deed is done. There's a sense of defiance in the air. At least one partner doesn't own a private account for personal spending and the rest of the accounts aren't designated for specific purposes.

Proposed Strategy:

Organize your accounts after reading Chapter 10. Make sure that you each have your own private account for personal spending. Do the necessary research to construct a budget. Then organize your common accounts so that each is used only for specific kinds of purchases. Set up periodic business meetings to jointly revise your model.

Deficits in Skill

You will need to sharpen your skills in order to resolve these kinds of problems. You're usually pushing against the opposing force of well-entrenched habits and emotions. Success won't be immediate, but disciplined practice will still get you there. Here are some common scenarios.

Problem Scenario: One of you is the evader and the other is the pursuer. The evader doesn't have a history of childhood abuse that might otherwise explain the avoidance. The evader feels free, alive, and fun-loving only when away from the pursuer. In addition, the evader typically thinks more about the pursuer's desires than his or her own needs. The pursuer complains about lack of closeness, but the evader feels no attraction. He or she just feels numb and confused.

Proposed Strategy: This is probably a case of hedonic inhibition due to relationship shame. The evader hasn't done a good job of servicing his or her need for autonomy within the marriage. The best intervention strategy consists of several stages. First, the pursuer needs to explicitly agree that the evader shouldn't try to force affection. It's already being blocked. Unrealistically high expectations of emotional performance will only worsen the evader's "emotional impotence." It's more realistic to expect that it will take months of work before the evader can thaw out. Second, you both need to frequently practice boundary micro-corrections for at least six to eight weeks. (See Chapter 8) This practice will train the evader to use an active defense system that allows him or her to come back into the relationship. The third stage involves the evader practicing the hedonic strengthening exercise described in Chapter 7. It should be practiced at least twice a day for another six weeks. The hedonic exercises should start only after the micro-correction phase is finished. This multi-phase strategy follows a logical sequence: 1) readjusting expectations, 2) strengthening a new engaging defense style for the evader, and 3) strengthening the evader's core hedonic self within the marriage. This strategy requires methodical work, but it can have amazing results for those couples willing to employ it.

Problem Scenario:

You have escalating fights during which each of you tries to have the last word. They go on and on, long after any real constructive communication has ended. However, when one of you finally chooses to leave the conflict, the other follows. You have never openly discussed each other's right to privacy.

Proposed Strategy:

It's important that both of you can separate and allow each other privacy to self-stabilize. Read Chapter 9 again, particularly the section about "The When and Where Rule". It's very important that you practice the recommended exercises. This will give you the skill to postpone conflict when you're overly aroused and have difficulty remembering the rule. You should also learn the principles of effective negotiation. You can train by reviewing previous fights with your partner. Then you both can discuss what you might have done differently if you had used the principles. This type of *post hoc* review will instill the principles more deeply into your memory.

Problem Scenario:

One of you doesn't enjoy intimate conversation. The other partner is frustrated and wants to feel closer. There's still good will, sex is good, and you both enjoy having fun together. The person who avoids intimacy has no family history of trauma or abandonment.

Proposed Strategy:

This is a case that can be helped by training. The good will, playful affiliation, and absence of trauma all suggest that there's not a more serious capacity problem like hedonic inhibition. It's more likely that the person has not been trained for intimacy. If the person comes from a family that was concrete and avoided intimate talk, then he or she probably never developed a good theory of mind. A theory of mind is the implicit understanding of how feelings and thoughts operate in a person. A good theory of mind allows a partner to feel competent at intimacy. One doesn't have to fear being emotionally inadequate. Group therapy is great for training this kind of competence. It needs to be a process group that's relatively unstructured and focuses on emotions and interactions among group members. I've seen many couples dramatically improve their intimacy by one of the partners participating in this kind of group. The time scale for improvement will usually be more than a year.

Deficits in Capacity

These kinds of problems are the toughest nuts to crack. A huge obstacle is that few people really want to admit to having a weakness. It's shameful. Who wants to admit that they're immature and have a low level of consciousness? Who feels proud about being overwhelmed by anxiety when they face

disapproval? It's no fun to admit that you're afraid to have fun. It's hard to be honest about these things. But if you both can't be honest about what's really happening, you will be dead in the water.

Problems with capacity sometimes require years to improve. For this kind of change, you need a good catalyst. A catalyst is something that you add to a change process to speed it up. When you grow your capacity, you actually catalyze neuronal growth in your brain. Certain kinds of social environments can turn on the genes that cause this faster growth. Therapy is one example of a catalytic environment. Personal growth speeds up in certain kinds of individual and group psychotherapy. Intimate communities in 12-step groups are also catalytic. There's a hard science beneath the effectiveness of these self-help groups.

Here are some common scenarios involving someone's poor capacity.

Problem Scenario:

You have escalating fights where each of you tries to have the last word. They go on and on, long after any real constructive communication has ended. If one of you tries to leave the conflict, the other follows in hot pursuit. The pursuit is relentless to the point of opening locked doors or even forcing entry. You have had unproductive discussions about the right to privacy. One partner refuses to accept the principle of privacy from the other and insists that it's his right to not be put off.

Proposed Strategy:

This scenario is not just about skill deficits. The egocentric perspective and violence by the pursuing partner indicates emotional problems. First go to couple counseling. It needs to be established that the right to privacy is paramount. If you or your partner still can't tolerate the other's retreat from conflict, then that indicates a serious deficit in that person's capacity for self-soothing. Therapy would be in order, particularly if it involves mindfulness training. Dialectic behavior therapy would be especially effective. It can change how the brain regulates anxiety.

Problem Scenario:

Your partner frequently breaks agreements and then lies about it. He or she regularly uses a drug, perhaps marijuana or cocaine, and blames you for nagging about the transgressions.

Proposed Strategy:

There's no one way to respond to this, but you need to realize that your partner's personality is probably regressed because of drugs. You might have to "set the bone" with a separation or even consider divorce. Your partner needs treatment from a professional and/or a self-help program such as Narcotics Anonymous if he or she can't stop or keeps relapsing. It will take close to a year for the brain's

metabolism to rebuild to normalcy. It will take an even longer catalysis in a recovery program for one's level of consciousness and emotional stability to grow. Figure a few years in recovery until one is stable. Meanwhile, get into a self-help group for yourself. Groups like Al-Anon, Nar-Anon, and S-Anon can greatly reduce the unconscious shame that you will inevitably absorb by being in this kind of a relationship.

Problem Scenario:

One of you has a history of hiding sneaky behavior. You (or your partner) also hate conflict and will do almost anything to avoid it. You may have also had an affair that's been recently discovered. You show real remorse and guilt each time you're discovered in one of your transgressions. However, it's only a matter of time before the next betrayal occurs. Your history might involve one or more parents who were authoritarian, exhibited violent tempers, or were extremely critical. It's also possible that you may have had parents who completely avoided anger and conflict

Proposed Strategy:

The person probably isn't a psychopath, but he or she probably does have a relatively low level of consciousness combined with a fear of conflict. One's level of consciousness can be raised by participating in a process therapy group for over a year. This can improve one's self control so that he or she doesn't always act out his or her impulses. The partner will also need some assertiveness training to better integrate his or her anger. In my own practice, I use a conflict inoculation protocol to desensitize the person to facing disapproval.

Problem Scenario:

One of you seems to only want to work. It might involve a job or it could be parenting. Either way, the person historically avoids allocating time for fun and relaxation. This individual may have been raised in an alcoholic family or some other family configuration with unstable parents. She may have been saddled with responsibility for siblings or a compromised parent. Now in adulthood, this individual's current relationship is running down. The other partner feels hurt because he's never pursued for enjoyment. Small quarrels occur about trivial issues.

Proposed Strategy:

This scenario superficially appears to be a problem about needing more nurturance between partners. That's certainly involved, but the root of the problem runs a lot deeper. The telltale symptom is the partner's historical avoidance of fun. Suspect core shame and hedonic inhibition. This person will probably show discomfort with the "I Want ... Will You" test. It's critical that the person comes out of

denial about her inhibition. Ego-state psychotherapy will probably be the most effective intervention. It can help counter-condition the person's core shame about experiencing pleasure. The person could also benefit by reading Chapter 7 and regularly performing the hedonic strengthening exercise during daily meditation periods. He or she will probably work on this issue for many years.

This previous list is obviously limited. It's only a subset of an infinite number of scenarios. It illustrates how devising a good strategy requires that you face what's really going on. As much as you may want to do that, "The Great No-No" might stand in your way. It can be shameful to admit that you have deficits. Many men can't do it. Women generally have an easier time with it. Knowledge deficits are the least difficult to face. They can be fixed with some quick study. But how about admitting that you lack a particular skill or even some emotional capacity? It takes courage to face those kinds of deficits. Do you have it? I'm asking because the future of your marriage might depend on it.