

HOW TO HAVE A FIGHT-FREE



RELATIONSHIP

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHORS

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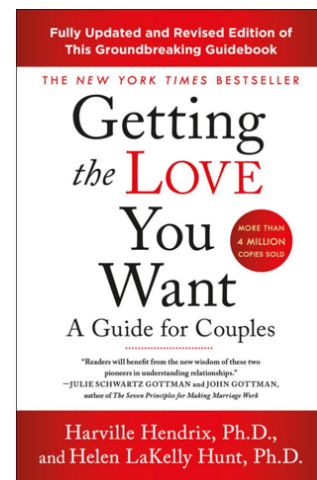
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How to Have a Fight-Free Relationship

by Harville Hendrix Ph.D. and Helen LaKelly Hunt Ph.D.

A Frustration is a Wish in Disguise

How do you feel when your partner does something that irritates, insults, disappoints, or bothers you? Do you react by using negativity, shame, blame, or criticism? All couples have conflict—either minor, serious, or severe. But, it's possible to have a fight-free relationship. By “fight-free,” we mean that when you or your partner are experiencing a frustration in your relationship, you can quickly move through the frustration toward mutual understanding and respect without emotionally destroying each other.

If you have been with your partner for a period of time, you probably have experienced what we call the “core scene.” It comes right out of the relationship script, the scene where familiar feelings come to the forefront, in countless subtle variations. It's the fight where you know your parts by heart and words like “always” and “never” are frequently heard.

“You always want it your way.”

“You didn't call!”

“I can't believe you just said that.”

“I never am a priority to you.”

“You never initiate sex.”

“You were late...again!”

“You always . . .”

“You never . . .”

It's the scene where certain “triggers” send off immediate negative “responses.” Small frustrations quickly spiral into angry words spewing, eyes rolling, and doors banging followed by a period of prolonged, resentful silence.

Dumping out your frustrations on your partner is toxic to the relationship but to break this destructive pattern of conflict requires effort. To have a fight-free relationship, you need to overcome your Autopilot responses and learn a new way of talking and listening. We call this intentional way of talking and listening the “Imago Dialogue.” It is a structure to help facilitate partners a way of talking without criticism, listening without judging, and connecting through differences. Using this process, both the talker (the “Sender”) and the listening (the “Receiver”) will feel more respected and heard which begins to shift the negative patterns of relating. Here are six of the main steps of Imago Dialogue:

1. Make an Appointment With Each Other:

The first step toward a fight-free relationship is to express frustrations by appointment only. This prevents you from dumping on your partner “in the heat of the moment.” We ask

our couples to use the sentence stem, “I would like to talk with you about a frustration. Is now a good time?” This honors your partner’s boundaries and ensures more focused attention from him or her. It also helps you develop the muscle to be more intentional rather than reactive.

2. Share Frustrations Using “I” Messages and Positive Language:

After agreeing on a time to talk, the Sender then shares the frustration using “I” language. For example, instead of, “You are always late!” you can say, “I feel frustrated when you are late.” You also avoid all negative language (no criticism, shame or blame...ever!) Negativity begets negativity and ruptures connection.

3. Mirror What Was Said and Check for Accuracy:

As part of this Imago Dialogue process, the Receiver mirrors the Sender by saying, “If I got it, you said _____” and then checks for accuracy. The mirror can either be “word for word” mirroring or an accurate paraphrase. For example, “If I got it, you said you are frustrated when I am late. Did I get that?” The Sender then says “Yes” or “No” or “Almost.” (If “No” or “Almost”, the Sender resends the message until the Receiver got it accurately.)

4. Respond With Curiosity:

Rather than the typical response, “Are you done yet?” the Receiver asks a magical question: “Is there more about that?” This allows the deepening of the Sender’s share, which frequently uncovers a deeper fear or feeling underneath the frustration.

5. Express the Feelings Underneath the Frustration:

Next, the Sender shares more about the feelings underneath the frustration (again, using “I” messages). For example, “When you are late, I feel like I am not important to you, that you don’t care about me.” When you can discover the root of the frustration, the dynamic between you and your partner begins to shift – from being accusatory and defensive and toward understanding and empathic.

6. Convert a Frustration Into a Wish:

Couples who enjoy a “fight-free” dynamic learn to express their frustrations in a non-blaming way and convert their frustrations into a request for what they want. If the frustration is reframed as a wish, it invites the co-creation of a solution between the two partners. And, if the wish is granted, both people feel safer and respected in the relationship.

The best way to make a request is to be “smart” about it. Here’s what makes up a S-M-A-R-T request:

- Specific—a behavior
- Measurable—observable, quantifiable
- Attainable—a small step
- Relevant—applicable to the frustration or desire
- Time-limited—such as daily for the next two weeks

This structured process (where we practice listening and talking in a new way and convert frustrations into requests) will work wonders toward a fight-free relationship. It will help remove the toxins that eradicate your sense of safety . So instead of “You are always late!”

you move into “I feel frustrated when you are late. It makes me feel like I am unimportant to you. I want to feel important, valued, that you care. I would appreciate it the next time you are going to be late, if you can call or text me to let me know.” By reframing a frustration as a wish and making a SMART request, you can help your partner focus on small, doable steps they can take in response. A request made SMART-ly and succinctly communicated with a kind tone of voice treats your partner with the dignity and respect they deserve!

Once the Sender makes a SMART request, the Receiver mirrors, checks for accuracy and then gives the request as an unconditional gift (or, if unable to, co-creates an alternative gift.) This can be a difficult process. The Receiver needs to STRETCH into some uncomfortable new behaviors. We encourage partners to practice with “minor” frustrations in order to practice the process and ensure success. We will talk more about this stretching principle later in this article.

One last point: Using this process of sharing SMART requests using “I” language is a relational education process, not therapy. If you have serious struggles in your relationship, do seek out a counselor or therapist, who can help you succeed when you use this process.

Conflict Is Growth Trying to Happen

Hopefully, you realize that the conflict you’re experiencing is not only normal, but inevitable and even valuable. Don’t try to avoid it. Don’t try to deny it. Don’t run away from it or wish it away. Stay with it and you’ll discover something wonderful right around the corner.

While conflict might make you uncomfortable, it can also invite you to reflect on your situation from a new perspective. You have a choice. You can act in ways that keep the conflict going. Or, you can turn the conflict into creative tension, which gives birth to new insights and talents. In fact, conflict is growth trying to happen.

All of us want real love. It’s what we thought we were signing up for when we said, “I do.” And we were, but there are two necessary pit stops on the journey:

Pit Stop 1: Romantic Love

This pit stop is pure ecstasy! Pleasure chemicals are released into your brain, bonding you to your partner. It feels great. You’d happily stay here forever.

Pit Stop 2: The Power Struggle

Eventually, every couple ends up here. You start to see all of your partner’s negative qualities, which suck the pleasure chemicals in your brain dry. Feeling lost, it seems like you’re going down, down, down!

Survive these two pit stops and you’re well on your way to the real love you desire. Communion is created from a relationship built on mutual caring and respect. Like anything worth having, getting to real love is a process.

We highlight these pit stops, because so many conflicted couples believe there is something wrong with their relationship. There is a myth in our culture: If you're having problems in your marriage, it means you're with the wrong person. This is not true!

Sadly, the pain and confusion of the power struggle cause many couples to consider bailing out altogether. They love the romance, but assume that the power struggle means it's time to take the exit ramp. Some get divorced. Others stay together, living parallel lives. The ones who bail think they're lucky. But, any new relationship journey begins with romantic love.

The power struggle phase is right around the corner. No couple escapes this! The new love interest may look, talk, laugh, and act differently than your current partner. But once romantic love fades, watch out. They will morph into an eerie replica of the partner who was left behind.

Bailing during the power struggle phase stops something beautiful that is struggling to be born into your relationship. You'll be getting rid of your partner, but still keeping the problem. In contrast, it's much better to keep your partner and get rid of the problem. How? Get curious about what the conflict is trying to birth in your relationship.

Stopping the Cycle of Conflict

Couples who attend our workshops feel such relief when we explain that every couple gets locked into the power struggle phase. They realize they aren't alone! The trick is to use conflict to jump-start growth.

Sadly, we were just like our workshop couples. Our relationship entered a period where we were absolutely deadlocked in the power struggle. Here's a bit of how it looked, and how we eventually found the promised land on the other side.

When my mother died, I (Harville) was too stunned to cry, at first. At the funeral, my family complimented me for holding it all in. One of my older sisters admiringly called me a "little man." But, I was only six years old. When the shock of my mother's death wore off, I was ready for tears. But I'd absorbed the powerful message from the adults around me that expressing my feelings was not okay. As a result, I buried my feelings deep inside. This caused me to relate to people in my life through my intellect. I committed myself to developing outstanding communication skills, logically writing, and speaking my thoughts.

My emotions were so deeply buried that sometimes I didn't even know how I felt. This frustrated Helen as we got closer in our relationship, especially when she wanted to work on the exercises we developed together to explore how our childhood impacts our current relationship. Looking into my blank face, she felt like she was married to a robot.

By contrast, I, (Helen) grew up in a family that gave me permission to feel, laugh, play, sing, dance—even cry. Remember, we're talking about the "Southern Belle Culture" back in the 1970s and 1980s. It was fine for women to express their emotions. But we weren't expected (or even really encouraged) to develop logical, linear skills. And, just forget about

technical or office skills. My all-girls school didn't even teach typing. When I asked why, I was told I wouldn't need it.

The message was clear: it was okay for me to feel—but it wasn't okay for me to take ideas too seriously or logically organize my thoughts. So, I would ramble in my conversations and talk about my feelings...a lot. And, it began to drive Harville nuts! The only thing we agreed upon was that Harville cornered the market on "thinking" in the relationship and I on "feeling." Can you guess what happened next? Our frustrations intensified and exacerbated our feelings of disconnection.

See the picture? How did we get out of this mess? This is where our conflict helped us grow something new in our relationship by using creative tension.

We came to realize that the part of your partner that drives you crazy is often the part you secretly long to be more like. Once we recognized this, the real work began. We wound up giving birth to whole new parts of ourselves!

Over time, we learned to stop berating each other and created a safe space to express our frustrations and feelings. We took turns talking, sharing our frustrations using "I" language (and away from the "you" language that was filled with blame and criticism), and learned to convert our frustrations into wishes. And eventually, we were able to grow and stretch into new behaviors.

For me, Harville, my first task was to give myself permission to feel. This was terrifying. It meant experiencing what the loss of my mother had really felt like for my six-year-old self. It's a place I'd avoided for decades. I'm a guy who likes control and order, and I wasn't exactly keen on having to go there. Who would be?

Thank goodness, Helen wasn't afraid of the chaos that came as I learned how to express my deep feelings. She knew I could do it, and her confidence in my abilities was so important to me—because I wasn't feeling confident at all. Lifted up by her faith in me, I explored this new emotional terrain.

The more I went for it, the greater the gifts. For me, connecting my heart and brain actually deepened my wisdom and understanding. Though diving into my feelings was challenging at first, I wound up gaining so much! Here I was, the scholarly robot, suddenly tearing up when seeing a beautiful sunset or crying when someone did something caring for me. I'm continually amazed when I let in those meaningful life moments.

For me, Helen, I started expressing myself in a more organized way. One day, I went to Harville with an insight: "I want a computer!" Ever ready to be logical (okay, yes, and critical), Harville said, "What on earth for? You can't type!" (How's that for sensitivity?) Refusing to give up, I responded, "Well, I can teach myself." Then, I marched out of the room.

The next day, I came home with a laptop. Harville, trying to undo the criticism from the day before, immediately helped me set up my new laptop and found a computer program to learn typing. Neither one of us knew quite what we were unleashing.

After three or four months, I was just going to town on my new computer. One day, Harville asked me what I was typing. "I've never told you this before, Harville," I said, "But, I think there's a book inside me. My mother wanted to write a book, but she never got it finished. I don't know if I will either, but I've got to try." When my first book was published, we were both so proud.

Often, what we need most from our partner is what they are least capable of giving. This also means that we're the least capable of giving them what they most need from us. Sadly, adults can find it hard to learn new skills. Learning something new takes courage.

In order for your relationship to grow, get ready for some serious s-t-r-e-t-c-h-i-n-g. It won't look pretty at first, and it certainly won't feel comfortable. This is why we call it the "Stretching Principle." Growth requires both partners to stretch into new ways of being. It's about using emotional muscles that we haven't used before.

The Stretching Principle

As mentioned earlier, Harville needed to work on expressing his feelings. In contrast, Helen needed to work on thinking and talking more logically. Each week, we'd stretch a little bit more. We cannot tell you how hard this was for both of us. Bit-by-bit, though, we made progress (and still are today, by the way). The more we stick with it, the easier it becomes. And, the more amazing it feels. The huge conflict we used to experience resulted in giving birth to profound new parts of ourselves.

For example, Harville's growth empowered him to be more present for loved ones and the world in a way he barely allowed himself to dream of before. This allowed him to find his heart. Suddenly, he could lecture, communicate, and write with both his heart and mind.

Helen's growth empowered her to go back to school, earn her Ph.D., write articles, and become a published author. All of this meant learning how to think and speak logically, which she does beautifully now. As much as writing her book was important to Helen for her own sake, she hoped it could also be a gift to her mother in some way. Helen cannot share this story without tears coming to her eyes.

Many people feel that romantic love fades far too fast. For some, the conflict of the power struggle lasts way too long. Remember, that there is always a purpose to the struggle. To move through it, you have to recognize the real message behind the conflict. It's time for both you and your partner to stretch into meeting your partner's wishes that are under frustrations. Using the conflict as a catalyst enables you to truly become the partner each one of you needs, and also develop fully into all of who you are.

When you view conflict as growth waiting to happen and stretch into meeting the emotional needs of your partner, you can truly experience a fight-free relationship!

As a relationship progresses and the initial romance fades, a power struggle typically begins where a couple begins to treat each other like objects. Only when they become intentional and commit to care about the needs of each other will they stretch to meet each

other's needs. To truly honor your partner's wish, you'll have to stretch beyond your comfort level. Only then do two people truly begin the journey towards real love.

The Jewish mystic and philosopher Martin Buber was mesmerized by the meaning and significance of relationships. His book, *I and Thou*, is now a classic. His thesis was that most people treat their partner like an "It," an object to meet their own needs. But, when two people shift and begin to respond to the needs of each other in a sacrificial way, their partner becomes a "Thou," and then the universal energy of love starts to flow through the two people and into the space between them. This is the beauty of relationships. Whereas we meet in romantic love – when we so freely give to our partner, we battle in the power struggle – where we compete for our individual needs – but we evolve into a conscious, fight-free partnership – where we hear each other, become intentional in how we share our frustrations, and stretch into our growth edges.

We need to grow into offering each other agape love, an unconditional love that transcends our challenges. This sacrificial love emerges in your relationship when you begin to see your partner as a "Thou," someone to be respected and honored. When this transformation happens, a higher love can then become manifest in both of your lives!

- Harville Hendrix and Helen LaKelly Hunt

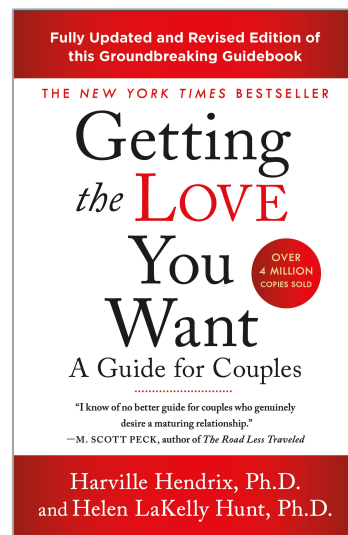
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About the Authors

Harville Hendrix Ph.D. is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Getting the Love You Want: A Guide for Couples*, *Keeping the Love You Find: A Personal Guide*, and with his wife, **Helen LaKelly Hunt Ph.D.**, *Giving the Love that Heals: A Guide for Parents*. Harville and Helen have written over 10 books with more than 3 million copies sold. In addition, Harville has appeared on the Oprah Winfrey television program 17 times.



Harville and Helen co-created Imago Relationship Therapy to promote the transformation of couples and families and create relational cultures that support universal equality. Together, they have developed a variety of resources to help couples, families, and educators strengthen their relationship knowledge and skills. In addition, they co-founded Imago Relationships International, a non-profit organization that has trained thousands of therapists in educators in 51 countries around the world.

Harville has over 40 years experience working as a couple's therapist, educator, clinical trainer, and lecturer. His educational background includes graduate degrees from Union Theological Seminary (NY), the University of Chicago, and a former professor at Southern Methodist University. In addition to being co-creator of Imago, Helen has been inducted into the Women's Hall of Fame for her support of the women's movement.

Harville and Helen have been married for 36 years and have six children and six grandchildren. They live in New York City and Dallas. For more information, visit:

<https://www.HarvilleandHelen.com>

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