



Leaning into Love: Building Strong Relationship Bonds

Why did we choose the title, “Leaning into Love?” Well, it was chosen to underscore the notion that, in order to get the benefits of a loving relationship, you must be willing to lean in. You must be focused on the act of loving as something you do and something you give, as opposed to something you get. It is a bit of a paradox that you must give in order to receive, but in fact it is true.

In a culture that has such Hollywood expectations of love it is easy to be convinced that love is something that happens to you, rather than something that you have to invest in. The Hollywood version is a love that “knocks you off your feet, makes you starry-eyed, and takes your breath away.” The Hollywood version is one where love transports you to another world, a world of bliss and magic, and a world that makes all the clouds disappear.

In a world that frames love this way, with such wild expectations, it is understandable how you could become disillusioned in your love relationship. It’s no wonder that after the infatuation, or chemistry phase wears off, you may begin to think that you are being slighted somehow when faced with the reality that every loving relationship requires an investment. There are moments of magic. There is tenderness and friendship, and there are many other qualities in good relationships. But one thing is certain, every loving relationship requires each partner invest in the relationship or it will falter. Each partner must lean in, must contribute, and must feed the relationship in order to keep it strong and growing.

With all the challenges love relationships face, how do you keep up the investment? Especially if you are caring for someone with medical concerns, mental health concerns, your own health challenges, financial and work stresses, caring for children, and your home. It is certainly a challenge to balance all this and continue to invest in your relationship. It is an amazing testament to your love commitment that you are able to stick it out with one another at all, given how much you cope with, and how many ways a partnership can be tested. Caregivers can begin to wonder, “How can we hang in there with one another? How do I keep the love alive?”

All relationships have complexities, hurts, unresolved issues, and unique struggles to stay connected. Our focus in this group is to empower you to build on the investment in your loving relationship. How can you meet the challenges you face and become closer, more connected and loving with one another despite these challenges? We will look at some practical tools that you can incorporate into your daily life to



negotiate the expected conflicts and differences that arise in all relationships. We then want to examine some tangible skills that you can use to build, restore and maintain the love that brought you and your Veteran loved one together in the first place. Ok, let's get started.

There is no doubt, all relationships are confronted with struggles that are challenging to negotiate. I can guarantee that regardless of how wonderful your relationship is, all relationships have conflicts. In every relationship, there are areas in which you and your partner clash, or come in to conflict with one another. Some of the differences will be resolvable conflicts and some will be perpetual sticking points or reoccurring conflicts. You may think, "Oh, if our relationship was 'right' we wouldn't have these problems," but the reality is, all relationships have problems. You simply invest in a new set of problems when you form a relationship with someone new.

It is a normal and expected part of every relationship to have differences and conflicts. The difference in relationships that work, isn't that there are no conflicts. The difference is in how you are able to negotiate and learn to ride out these challenges together. Relationships work best when you are willing to learn from your differences and navigate these differences without being destructive to one another or your relationship.

How do you make it through these differences or conflicts with a little less hurt and a little more understanding of one another? If the conflicts in your relationship have escalated to the point of threats and violence, it is most helpful to first get help individually to sort out what you need to do in order to free your relationship from the threats of violence. There is help available at the Domestic Violence Hotline 24-hours a day, every day of the year. This nationwide toll-free phone number is 1-800-799-7233. We encourage you to reach out for this support if threats or violence are part of your relationship concerns. Safety is the priority and should always come first. Conflict is painful for everyone. We hope to help you develop some guidelines to find your way through your relationship conflicts in a manner that is fair and respectful.

A researcher named John Gottman has studied couples' interactions and wrote a wonderful book for couples named, *The Seven Principles for Making a Marriage Work*. Dr. Gottman identified particular behaviors that are destructive and some rules of fair play that couples can engage in to preserve their relationship. The way you engage in conflict can contribute to managing the differences successfully or work toward eroding your relationship.



It helps to know that it is normal to have conflict and normal to find there are some differences that will remain even in the best relationships. When in conflict, there are certain reactions that will most definitely keep the conflict escalating and can wear down your relationships over time. If you recognize using these destructive strategies, you will have to make a conscious decision to stop in order to prevent these behaviors from draining the love and closeness that you might enjoy. Let's take a look at some of these destructive behaviors.

Research has shown a direct correlation between your ability to use rational logical problem-solving skills and the degree that you are distressed, feeling threatened or emotionally flooded. The more distressed you are feeling, the less clear and rational your thinking will be. If you want to present your upset feelings clearly or actually listen rationally to another person's point of view, you need to be calm enough to be rational. Although you may be angry, annoyed, disappointed and hurt, it is really helpful if you can try to be calm enough to make your upset feelings known in a way that doesn't come across like a tidal wave or explosion. Furthermore, if your partner is feeling so stressed that they can't have a reasonable response to your feelings, both of you would be better off at that point to take a break until you both calm down.

It is important to recognize when the distress results in an elevated physical reaction, or the fight or flight reaction to stress is happening to you, so you can put the brakes on and calm down. If you can calm or soothe yourself, and then come back to the conversation, it will be a much more rational and productive interaction.

No one finds it easy to share feelings of being upset. It's a risk to let someone know your feelings are hurt or that you feel let down, and it is equally hard to be told these things, especially by someone for whom you care for and love. If your feelings of upset come across like a bulldozer, it is not likely that you will get your partner to hear it. It always helps to remember that being on the receiving end of a complaint can feel really difficult. This is why fair communication is so very important.

Sometimes the receiver may act in ways that make it feel as though they are discounting you, verbally attacking you, or maybe ignoring you, but often these reactions are a sign that the person is actually feeling defensive or threatened by what you are saying. This defensive behavior is just a way to try to get some space from intense feelings. The important point here is to remember that, though your partner may appear calm, if you are getting a defensive reaction, it is very likely they are feeling threatened.



There are things that you can look for which indicate when someone is feeling overwhelmed, emotionally flooded or threatened. You may benefit from noticing defensive reactions and ask yourself, "Is the person too flooded or too distressed to hear me?" Other signs of being flooded can include noticing their eyes flutter or close. Their first comment may be a defensive remark; they may tighten their jaw, raise their voice, or hold their breath or sigh. Maybe they turn away from you, or act like they are doing something else. These may all be clues that a person is feeling flooded and is struggling to listen.

If you notice any of these signs in either yourself or your partner, you may want to take a breath, or even say, "OK I see we are both upset. Why don't we take a break and talk about this in a half hour or so when we are both calmed down?" By taking a break or getting some space, you are giving yourself and your partner some time to catch your breath, relax, ease the initial defensiveness, and you may find that it is easier to work through the problem. If you realize your approach was rough and you want to start over. You could say, "Maybe I said that the wrong way. I'm sorry. Let me try again."

Dr. Gottman's research also identified some common destructive defensive behaviors that people engage in during conflict. He calls these destructive behaviors the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. These destructive behaviors are a way to ward off feeling flooded, attacked or accused, when you are presented with a complaint or conflict by your partner. These behaviors which I will describe in more detail are: criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling. These behaviors will most definitely contribute to getting stuck in conflict and can be damaging to a relationship over time. See if you can recognize their presence in your conflicts. Listen for them in your next conflict and try to put the brakes on them.

The first of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse is criticism. Criticism is when you take a complaint, which we all have with one another, and you turn one individual behavior or incident and you make it a global accusation. By that I mean saying "you always do this, or you never do that." Then to make matters worse, you add a dollop of personal criticism to the mix by saying something like, "You are this kind of person" or you make a reference to their bad character or bad intentions. Saying things like this results in the person feeling defensive and overwhelmed. You can't even address such a global complaint.



For example, if your complaint is, “There was no gas in the car. I thought you said you were going to fill it up.” This is a simple, straight forward complaint of a onetime event. It is not making assumptions of bad character but rather stating just the facts. This is completely different from saying, “I thought you said you were going to fill up the car with gas. Why can’t you ever remember anything? You are so selfish. The only one you care about is you.”

Do you hear the difference in the way the complaint was stated? When you have a complaint, go ahead and make it, but be careful to make a specific, onetime event and not an accumulation of complaints. When you add words like, “you always” and, “you never” to a complaint it feels like an immense amount of criticism is being thrown at you. You can’t even try to fix something that is described as “always” or “never.” Make your complaint a singular specific issue that your partner can do something about. Keep judgments of your partner out of the complaint. Name calling like “you are so selfish” or assuming that you know someone else’s thoughts or intentions are negative, is unfair and destructive.

The second destructive horseman is contempt. This is when you explain your frustration or complaint with sarcasm, mocking, eye rolling, or name-calling. Doing this is very corrosive to any relationship. It is relationship poison. It is sending the message to the other person you are disgusted with them and don’t value their opinions. There is usually a great deal of hurt, disappointment or frustration to get to the point of using sarcasm, but it is not going to get you anything but a loss of closeness between you and your partner if you resort to sarcasm or name-calling.

When you think about it, why would anyone want to mend a mistake with someone who is disgusted with them? Sarcasm results in your partner feeling as if you have given up on them, and that hurts. If you want to be heard and understood by your partner, it simply isn’t going to happen unless you change your approach and stop using sarcasm. It will not accomplish anything other than you feeling isolated or alone. You can start to change your behavior by noticing when you are being contemptuous and put the brakes on. Apologize and find a respectful way to share that you’re upset.

The third horseman is defensiveness. Defensiveness is when you or your partner rush to explain, deny, or fend off any acceptance of responsibility for the complaint or issue. Defensiveness is an argument or explanation back that says there is no truth or validity to what is being said. It is taking the concern and tossing it back. If you are entering a conversation defensively, you are unable to hear things from the



other person's perspective. It always helps to try to look at the issue from their side as well as your own.

Like it or not, every complaint, concern or perception that we have of one another, always has a grain of truth to it. It is often difficult to hear or accept that grain of truth. We are quick to feel defensive and fight back instead of saying to ourselves, "Hey, maybe there is something to what they are upset about." If you can try to take in the other person's perspective or ask them to try to see yours, you will move much farther down the road to understanding.

If you feel your partner is being defensive or if you find yourself being this way, it's ok to name it, and try to simply pause. Try to take some responsibility for that grain of truth or ask your partner to look at things from your point of view. You'll find that making this attempt to listen openly to one another makes communication much better between the two of you.

Finally, the fourth horseman is called stonewalling. Stonewalling often occurs as the result of an individual feeling criticized or attacked. It is an attempt to retreat, tune out the distress, and close oneself off in order to avoid conflict. Stonewalling is often the result of feeling overwhelmed, in need of an escape hatch, or not recognizing any options in regard to the complaint being discussed. If you recognize that you or your partner is stonewalling, it is most helpful to know ways to calm down, to soothe yourself or soothe your partner in order to lessen the desire to withdraw for safety.

While stonewalling may result in avoiding the conflict, it also ultimately contributes to people living disconnected lives, becoming two ships in the night; separate, lonely and disconnected. Be alert for stonewalling behaviors, look for ways to try to calm down, and then find ways to get back together and not let the distancing continue.

Let's summarize what we've covered so far. First, we discussed that conflicts are common and arise in all relationships. Then we examined how to recognize the signs that indicate conflict is present. Next, we looked at the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse and the destructive behaviors that interfere with successful communication.

Now, let's focus on building the love in your relationship. Researchers have found that it isn't an individual conflict, per se, that is the major factor contributing to relationships falling apart or the primary cause of divorce. The major cause of



relationships falling apart is a loss of friendship, a loss of connection, feeling isolated and alone in your relationship.

There are very tangible, positive, realistic ways to bring that connection back into your important relationships. It is within the power of every committed couple to contribute, to build, or restore their loving connection.

There are two quotes that emphasize our focus. The first is by philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche who states, "It is not a lack of love, but a lack of friendship that makes unhappy marriages." The second quote is by the author Anais Nin who noted that, "Love never dies a natural death. It dies because we don't know how to replenish its source." Couples who remain together are not without conflict, but are those that in many small ways, every day, are "leaning in" and investing in maintaining their attention, affection and friendship for one another on a regular basis.

The challenge is being able to contribute to each other regularly, even when there are life changes and adversity which is expected over the course of a lifetime. How do you keep the attention that fosters this love when there is adversity? How do you remember the love that brought you together when there is aging, illness, unemployment, or financial strain? When you have a bank of friendship, fondness, affection, and admiration to draw on during the tough times you can weather these trials with greater success. This is the glue that keeps you connected. It is by contributing to one another each day that you are keeping your connection strong.

Hurts and disappointments can cause you to pull back and to wait for your partner to make the first move, to ask for help, or make a concession to heal the conflict. This behavior, while understandable and protective, unfortunately often results in losing your connection to your partner. Someone needs to decide to give in.

If you count what you give and making sure you get back, you also may not find the results that you desire either. If, you can risk giving to your partner in small ways each day, you can build and strengthen the connection that will help you both. People are frequently surprised by the powerful shift that can occur when you give the gift of your attention to your loved one. You really can turn a sour, lonely, negative relationship around simply by leaning in toward one another in a loving way. How can you lean in?

One way is to remember what brought you together in the first place. When was the last time you thought about when you first met? What attracted you to one another?



Was it their beautiful eyes, their smile or the way they carried themselves? What is it that you admire about your partner? What was the magic that drew you together? Let yourself remember. Even if your love story has been neglected you can awaken a spark of the original fire that brought you together by remembering falling in love. You can fan these flames by remembering, by showing appreciation, thinking of what attracts you, and reflecting on what you admire in your partner.

Another way to awaken the relationship is to learn more and know your partner. Be their best friend, be aware of what matters to them, ask about them and their day, their interests, know what they like, their friends, their goals, their desires, and really pay attention to these issues over time. Each one of us changes across time, so you need to keep updating your knowledge, staying in tune on a daily basis. How does it feel when someone really knows you?

Check in at the start of the day and ask, "What's on your plate today? What is your plan? Is there anything you are looking forward to or anything that you are concerned about?" It may feel like a small thing, but when you check in with your partner like this, you are letting them know you are with them and that you care. If your partner has a special interest, event or hobby, be curious.

Another way to build the resilience of your relationship and enhance your love connection is to remember and renew your awareness of the qualities in your partner that attracted you in the first place. It can be hard when you are caring for a partner who is grappling with mental health struggles, illness or other problems, to remember to recognize the facets and characteristics that you respect and value, and not get lost in the problems. Bring your attention to the strengths of your relationship and to what you love about your partner.

If you have forgotten or if you have neglected to mention appreciation to your partner, letting days, weeks or months go by without a compliment, it is easy to see how the loving connections can fray. It is easy to see how your most valuable connection can become dull. Without any word of appreciation each partner can feel they aren't special or valued.

So, try to see what happens if you decide, each day, to think about one quality that you admire in your partner. Make a commitment to not let a day go by without paying some form of compliment or showing some kind of appreciation. Maybe your partner is interesting, fun-loving, attractive, strong, energetic, caring, affectionate, organized, handsome, gentle, sexy, sweet, relaxed, assertive, and protective. Think of



the situations in which you admire or appreciate your partner. Maybe you have come to take for granted the little things that you used to acknowledge and mention. You can decide to notice and recognize your loved one and see what happens.

Think of all the compliments and notes, special meals you prepared, the phone calls, flowers and special attention you showered on your relationship when it was new. Part of why it felt so wonderful in the beginning is because you were so attentive and generous, giving of yourselves and attending to your love.

Focusing on the negative brings more negative thoughts, and eventually negative actions. Giving compliments, affirmation, and loving attention, not only strengthens your relationships, it also creates a strong bond. Giving attention to this bond is like magic.

All relationships have to deal with managing time spent together and time apart. We at the support line often hear Caregivers share that their partner with illness, dementia or PTSD may not want the Caregiver to spend time away. But time apart can restore you so that when you are together, there is a new energy and appreciation that comes back to the partnership. You also need to be able to make time together to connect with each other. Consider setting a date night once a week or spend special time together first thing in the morning or at the end of the day. Develop activities or shared projects together as this will support you feeling secure in your connection.

We have covered many areas today that you may begin to use, independently, to build a more resilient loving, relationship with your partner. We discussed the need to lean in and invest in one another. We discussed how differences and conflicts exist in all relationships and the importance of managing these differences in ways that aren't destructive by recognizing the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Recognize these four destructive conflict tactics that you may engage in during conflict. Notice criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling, and stop using them, so you don't escalate the conflict or get stuck in it.

Remember your love story. Acknowledge the importance of knowing your partner and updating this knowledge on a daily basis. This knowing friendship is the cement that can repair damage and hold your relationship together and give it strength to weather the storms. Give thought and consideration to the qualities that you admire, respect, cherish and are attracted to in your partner. Let them know, on a regular basis, that you love and appreciate them and all they do for you. Balance your time together and time apart. Provide the structure of planned commitments for together time along



with verbal reassurances and support for time spent apart. We have given you a lot of tools to consider.

Obviously, there is much that you can do to restore the freshness, desire, friendship, and loving connection with your partner. While your relationships will have many challenges, there are clearly many steps that you can take to fan the embers of your connection to your loved one and improve the condition of your loving relationship. In closing, we want to share some hopeful tips identified in Dr. Gottman's research. He found that couples that remained successfully connected through the long haul, had not dramatically changed their lives, nor were they free from conflict, but they were engaging in what he calls The Magic Five Hours a Week. This is what the magic consisted of, again a total of only five hours.

Partings: Say goodbye in the morning and make sure you learn one thing about what is happening in your partner's day. This takes 2 minutes 5 days a workweek = a total of 10 minutes.

Reunions: Have a stress reducing conversation at the end of each work day. This takes 20 minutes a day x 5 workdays = a total of 1 hour 40 minutes.

Admiration and Appreciation: Find a way every day to communicate genuine affection and appreciation. This takes 5 minutes a day x 7 days = 35 minutes.

Affection: Kiss, hold and touch one another when you are together, and kiss each other before going to sleep every night. This takes 5 minutes a day x 7 days = 35 minutes.

Weekly date: This is a relaxing, low pressure way to stay connected. This takes 2 hours once a week.

Grand Total = 5 Hours! A seemingly small investment that is certain to improve your partnership, keeping it sound and happy.

This is a guide that you can use in your own unique way, to create and keep the resilience of your most treasured connection, your loving relationship. I hope that these tools have been helpful. If you wish to read further about John Gottman's hopeful and practical research, I encourage you to read, "The Seven Principles for Making a Marriage Work." We at the Caregiver Support Line are here to support you as you invest in your most treasured relationship.