

The Good Enough Couple



Rules for a relationship

Alfons Vansteenwegen

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This book was previously translated from Dutch to German, Italian, Afrikaans, Greek, Spanish, Hungarian,
Chinese, Turkish and French.

Liefde is een werkwoord. Spelregels voor een relatie

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1. Living with a partner: The friendship marriage

In this first chapter we will present some fundamental questions. Is living with a partner still a viable reality? Can a marriage succeed 'naturally'? Is it an intimate or business relationship? If it takes a turn for the worse, can people change the state of their relationship? What is an equivalent relationship? What are the conditions?

Living together is a (nearly) impossible task

If you live together with someone, you desire a good relationship with that partner: a relationship that flourishes, that lasts and brings happiness. Those who step into marriage have high expectations, often influenced by romance and the deep desire for marital bliss.

Reality sets in fast when living together and differences are part of that. Problems are inherent to co-existence. There are several explanations for this. Sometimes they result in a crisis. These crises can facilitate delving into a deeper level of relationship. Living together is not easy, it rarely comes naturally.

In this book, we will use the term “marriage” in the psychological sense of the word. What we propose here applies to cohabitation between two adults, married or remarried, in civil partnerships or simply living together as partners. A co-habitation partnership can also consist of a family and thus entail aspects of parenting. All these forms of living together have their own meanings and definitions.

Many people cherish romantic expectations about marriage: everything will harmoniously go as expected. These romantic expectations about marriage are heavily tainted by a model of unity, love and harmony. We can illustrate this with a summary as follows:

When we are married, I will understand my partner completely (and vice versa).

Once we live together we will know each other intimately. When we are married, we will love each other every single day. We will never have any conflicts. We will always want the same things, at least most of the time. We will be able to fulfill the other's wishes without them having to articulate them. These are the romantic expectations of our society: being attuned to each other, wanting the same things, not having any conflicts, always loving each other, never cursing the other, never being hateful towards, or irritated with, each other. This is love colored by harmony. This also applies to the so-called "total communication". My partner is a person I can say anything to, without effort. I can share all my feelings and he or she will understand me completely. To sum things up, everything will happen naturally.

In comparison, there is reality. Reality teaches us that people are very diverse. The dream of unity does not last. Once you live together, marriage will confront you with your daily differences. Here are a few examples:

Pouring coffee with Ben and Veerle. Ben believes that when Veerle pours him a cup of coffee, he only receives half a cup. "Full" for Veerle is a little over half a cup. "Full" for Ben is a full cup, almost to the edge. Veerle thinks Ben has been giving her too much coffee for over fifteen years. To get enough coffee, Ben continues to insist she pour more and has to hold his cup up to her longer. In Ben's eyes, Veerle pulls her cup away too soon.

The sun visor in Wim and Katherine's car. On sunny days, Wim and Katherine use the visor in the car quite differently. In the morning, Wim will put the sun visor down, but will rarely put it back up. Katherine puts the visor down every time she turns down a sunny street. Every time she turns down a shady street, she puts it back up again. Up, and down. This annoys Wim beyond belief.

The mugs of Bart and Eveline. When Bart clears the table in the morning, he takes the coffee mugs one at a time. In Eveline's mug, there is always a little coffee left. His own mug is empty. For him, a mug that is considered empty is completely empty. For her, empty means there is still a little covering the bottom of the mug. He does not find this annoying. But every time he goes to put the mugs in the dishwasher, he has to empty her mug in the sink first, because there is still a little bit of coffee left in it. This is a detail, a detail he has dealt with every day, for fifteen years, over and over... It really is annoying. A small obstacle, a little resentment...

Warm and cold with Andy and Nele. Nele likes it warm in the morning and crisp in the evening. Andy likes it cool in the morning and warm at night. In the morning, she likes the door closed. It has to stay warm. He would rather have the door open because if it is not cool for him, he will not wake up enough. In the

evening, it is exactly the opposite. Andy likes it warm, Nele likes it cooler. This is a small detail. Every day it's the same thing: "Close the door! Don't leave the window open! You know how cold I get". He returns with: "Yes, but I find it too warm and I can't wake up. I like it a little cooler". It's a small detail. You live together, you get to know each other and every day it happens again.

The toothpaste of Martin and Tina. Martin and Tina use the same tube of toothpaste. Martin is a conscientious man. He always squeezes the tube of toothpaste from the bottom. She squeezes it in the middle of the tube, every day, twice a day. Naturally, if you squeeze the middle of the tube, toothpaste will come out, but that is not his system. Martin does this carefully, until the last bit of toothpaste has been pinched out of the tube. She squeezes in the middle. That is fine, but then the tube will expand on both ends. Every day she pushes from the middle. It is a detail. It is not important, but after a few years, it begins to weigh you down.

This is how anyone who starts living together with a partner comes in contact with a variety of differences. Usually it is about small differences, but they come back daily. There are differences in the manner of setting a table, putting together and eating breakfast. These differences are reminiscent of each one's family of origin. It's about small things that are not that bad as such, but they keep coming back. It is like the man who was annoyed that every evening his wife would be eating an apple when all he wanted was to make love. Every evening it's the same. There are so many little things that can only ever-so-slightly irritate you: polishing shoes, choosing an outfit, getting dressed, sitting, standing, walking around the house. Nobody gets mad about these things, but you can become irritated with them. It pinches.

Those who end up living together also come upon *Major differences*. These are the kinds of differences in which both parties expect the other to give in to, or even give up, certain things in order to make a relationship work. These are differences in the "program", the "menu" on how to live with a partner. These are differences about what it means to live together, what it means to be husband and wife. Everyone is influenced by their parental family on what it means to be living together as husband and wife. Growing up, everyone has experienced a time when they thought: "That is what I want in my marriage.", but most of us have also come across: "That will not happen to me, I will do things differently." Well, those differences always exist between partners. Even if you compare yourself to someone who lives on the same street, speaking the same dialect, on the same social level, with the same education and the same political beliefs, each one of us is raised in a

unique family. There can be very large differences between families on the same street. It reminds me of Karel and Linda.

The parental families of Karel and Linda. Karel comes from a family where work is very important. You live to work and work to live. You have to work hard to make it in life. You have to put in the time and effort to get ahead. This was a priority in the family he was raised in. Secondly, saving is important. Try to be thrifty with what you have earned. Don't waste it. Third, when you marry, it is important to have your own place. Building a house, or at least furnishing a home, is an essential part of life. Fourth, children are important. You live for your children. As a parent you should have only one priority, namely that your children are happier than you are and get further in life than you were able to. A parent lives in service of their children. Relaxing happens within the family. Going out to party or hanging out at a bar is bad. Receiving friends and visiting with people does not really fit. Karel feels uncomfortable every time he visits a restaurant because as a child this social behavior was frowned upon. His parents did not receive many guests. One could call this a closed family. Having very few visitors and perhaps a family gathering now and again, where people eat from morning until evening, that is the right way to party. It is not necessary to have many friends or acquaintances.

Linda comes from a family where members have contracted jobs at government institutions. Work is important and promotions will happen eventually. There is a different attitude towards work. It is important, but you don't have to put all your effort into it. If you have an income, why would you have to keep saving? You only live once. Why should you track your expenses? Go on vacation, buy what you like, have fun. What are you saving up for? And why would you want to own a house? You know you will move a few times in your life, sometimes for work. Owning a house is not a wise decision, it will only give you heartache. What about children? Well, they are an option. You can have children, but not to say they should be your reason for living. On the contrary, once you have them, it is the job of the caregiver or the mother to take care of them. As a man, you should not be pre-occupied with children. Children are part of life, but they should not be the goal of life. Going out and socializing is important. Eating is not a necessity, it is merely a pretense to meet with people and socialize. Drinking, on the contrary, is vital.

This is not about a married couple with issues, this is an average couple. When people step into a relationship together, it naturally comes with a few problems. What does it mean to live together? What does it mean to be married? What does it mean to be a husband? A wife? A father or mother? Immediately this raises a few questions. How important is it to have a job or career? If we are employed, how

important is our income? Will we save up to invest or spend it wisely? Is it necessary to track expenses? Do we want to rent or own a house? Will we have children and if so, are they our main focus, or just part of life or do we treat them as visitors who will eventually leave our lives again when grown up? Will we have a social life and make friends? Do we want a public marriage or do we keep our private life behind closed doors? Will we be legally married or just live together in a civil partnership?

Beware. There is no right or wrong here. There are only the desires and expectations of each individual and they will have to cope with this. What it means to live together and how to make this work is something that they will have to figure out together. For example: a father should be part of his children's lives. In one family, a father reads the newspaper while his children are playing on the floor in the same room. In another family, dad helps his children with their homework every day and helps them understand what they are teaching them in school. How do you define being part of their lives? What is the role of a father or a mother? What does it entail? There are many contrasting opinions here which are influenced by expectations and values and what marriage model was given during childhood. The consequences of these opinions can be enormous depending on their individual points of view.

There will always be conflicts, but a marriage is a special situation. If you have a difference of opinion with a colleague, you discuss it a few times and come to an understanding. A marriage is a very different relationship. You are confined. This is the closest relationship known and, in addition, it is meant to last forever.

Once you enter into this marriage, it is meant to last. You could say that the differences are meant to be part of this unique relationship, a relationship which warrants closeness and longevity. These two special features ensure that both the small and much larger differences strike much deeper and become more important because they continuously arise. You can't say: "We have our differences but it's alright because next year I will be playing with another team or new teammates." Instead we say: "I am different from you but I am planning on staying as close and long as possible with you." This unique living situation gives you a phenomenon that one could compare to bedsores.

Bedsores are wounds that you get by laying still in bed. Because you do not move, on the place where you lay a wound will appear that is very similar to a burn and that heals very badly.

In a marriage, something similar can occur. The small differences are like grains of sand. By living in such close proximity to each other, you constantly rub up against each other, every single day. Every hour there are those strange habits, those

annoying tics, that irritating gesture. It agitates you over and over, again and again, until finally it causes a type of sore. In other words, it burns, it pinches, it repeats itself endlessly: every time Bart clears the table, every time Maarten brushes his teeth, every morning Nele walks into the bathroom. It keeps happening. Every time he forgets something, it bothers her. It doesn't happen just once, but repeatedly, a thousand times. Every time she eats an apple in bed, every time he says he will do something and doesn't, it wears one down. These two traits, the length of living together and closeness during that time, make living together a difficult thing. A marriage is strenuous because two people live in close quarters for a long time. That causes little sores, small wounds; little obstacles that throughout the years can turn into enormous problems.

If you add all this up, these are problems inherent in living together. Differences are part of a marriage. This is normal. One could say it is healthy. Being married can and will lead to several issues that are unavoidable. There is no such thing as constant contact without friction. Just like you can work out problems among friends, at work with colleagues, or in an association, to come to an understanding and build upon this new, better relationship, the same can happen in a marriage. That does not mean that new problems will not continue to arise.

Something interesting happens when it comes to problems within a marriage. It appears that most problems get worse before they ever get better. Let's have a look why this is. There are four possible reasons for this.

Reason number one: One of the partners pulls the emergency brake and goes looking for help. One partner finally breaks down and says: "This is it. I cannot take any more. I am calling in the expertise of a professional therapist, even a lawyer." The other partner will most likely experience this as shock. Everyone can get to a point where they feel like giving up. Your partner can think: "Oh, I've heard that before, we always manage to work things out." And then that one time it really happens. Someone tells a professional that they no longer can cope. This time it's for real. Their partner finds out and goes into shock, unaware that the situation had got out of control. It was supposed to work itself out like it always does. This time it got much worse before it got better as one of the two hits the panic button.

A second possibility: Trying to make things better can sometimes make things worse when neither party knows what the cause of the issue is. Why do we do things we do not want to do? After the fact, people realize their childish behavior. You don't want to fight and I don't want to fight. How does it happen that we always end up fighting? You end up displaying behavior you don't mean to and you have no idea how these patterns came to be. Very few people have learned what

marriage is about, how it works and what makes it tick. It gets harder because you don't have a blueprint and you lack insight into a practical, useful view of the matter. This marriage business is not something you are taught in school. It is not something explained to you growing up. How is this supposed to work?

A third possibility: Problems get worse because the couple does not have a common understanding. Take this classic example of a marriage problem with a man who says nothing.

Silent John. John is a quiet, taciturn man, whom you must shake before you get anything out of him. He just sits there and says nothing, or barely anything. This frustrates his wife, Lisa. Lisa is bothered by the fact that John doesn't say much; he doesn't pay her enough attention. There is very little contact between them. She feels lonely in the relationship and believes this has to change. John agrees, except their views on this aspect are very different. Lisa sees it one way: "If you want a marriage to work, you have to talk it out. If you really want it to work, it will." Her views on marriage problems come from wanting and doing. It's all about willpower. And she will tell him: "If you *wanted* to make this work, you *would* talk to me. You just don't *want* to!" His opinion on this matter is very different (but also justified): "If you have something to say, it will happen spontaneously. There is no reason to force myself to think of something to say. If I have something to say, I will say it. It will come naturally." After all, it is not fun to live with a man who speaks because he feels obligated to say something. He is of the opinion that marriage problems will be solved by spontaneity. If you have to force spontaneity by willpower, it just won't happen. And there they are. Lisa is unhappy because John barely talks to her. He is irritated that he feels obligated to speak to her when he has nothing to say. Both of them are unhappy.

What makes this problem even worse is that there are always two sides to a story. You could look at it as "Taciturn John", but in the same relationship you could describe it as "Lonely Lisa". It is the same marital issue, as seen from two points of view: Spontaneity versus Willpower. A third reason why marriage problems can get worse is because you may have a different opinion of what exactly the issue is.

There is a fourth reason and this one is closely related to the third. It is a matter of finding a common solution. Partners cannot agree on which method they can use to solve the problem at hand. Let's use the present example to clarify this. Lisa believes the correct method is her belief in willpower. She uses this against John: "Don't you have anything to say? Let's talk about this. There you are, being silent again with nothing to say. Speak to me!" He will most likely come back with "I have nothing to say, I cannot force myself to talk to you when I don't have an

answer for you.” He believes the solution is his method, letting it happen when he sees fit, spontaneously and naturally.

These are four main reasons why marital issues -which everyone may encounter- tend to get worse before they get any better. This is called a problem situation. This means that the problem lasts and even gets worse. It gets worse because couples are not familiar with these patterns in their relationship, they do not have a common view of what the exact issue is. Someone hits the panic button to the surprise of their partner and they cannot agree on one method to solve the problem at hand.

Now, there is another reason why different issues are inherent in living together. A marriage is not something that is ever static. Marriages change and go through different stages. Newlyweds without children are not in the same phase as a marriage with adult children. Families with toddlers are in a very different situation from a family with teenagers. Sometimes you can look at a couple and think “They would be great with teenagers”, other couples you see and think “They would be wonderful new parents”. Unfortunately, you usually get teenagers after you have babies. You can still pick out those couples who would have a natural talent for raising young children. Some couples you can tell have no aptitude for it at all. Some people have no clue how to handle a newborn, but have a knack for talking to adolescents about life and relationship problems.

Every marriage goes through phases. Let’s sum them up. The childless phase, the newborn phase, the phase where the first child enters kindergarten (sometimes very dramatic) or grade school, the phase where the child enters high school, the phase where the first child leaves the parental homestead, the phase of re-kindling after all children have left the house (previously also known as empty-nest syndrome). This last phase is usually most difficult as both partners are once again confronted with each other and their differences. If nothing more than the children was keeping the couple together, at this stage nothing more will be left. There is no marriage left to be salvaged. Children can be bumpers between parents, a crowbar to keep them apart or even the glue that keeps them together.



Figure 1a

Between each of these different phases within the marriage, there is a transition. Every transition between phases we call a crisis period (see figure). Problems within a marriage are considered normal because a marriage has to go through all these different stages and crises. It is not because a family deals well with small children that it functions the same way with adolescents. It's a very different lifestyle. In addition, different phases in the relationship itself will cause crises as well and thus problems are simply inherent. It's not easy, it does not come naturally.

Once we take all this into consideration, it becomes apparent that one should not strive for one hundred percent marital happiness. Given previously discussed information, attempting to accomplish perfection is pursuing the impossible. It simply cannot be achieved. You have to look at it from another angle. Once married, you should observe it from the bottom up. Each party must consider what he or she puts in to the relationship and what profit they may get out of it. Marriage is something that requires much time and energy. It will cost you a lot; not financially but on an emotional level, as a person. Sometimes it can be very painful and trying. It shapes you. Sometimes you can get a lot out of it as well: It can make you feel good and give you pleasure. It can give you strength, support, companionship and intimacy. These are things you may find in very few other places.

Take some scales and fill one side with everything a marriage requires: patience, tolerance, energy, time, effort, etc. On the other side, fill the scales with the benefits of a marriage: happiness, comfort, satisfaction, self-realization, companionship. If we compare the two sides and the scales balance towards the positive, namely what you gain from a marriage, we can talk about a positive marriage. Marriage will be experienced as positive when what we get out of the relationship outweighs the energy and effort we must put into it to make it work. One can try to tip the scales even more and attempt to get even more out of the relationship, starting at the bottom. This marriage is nearly impossible; both parties aiming to get more out of the relationship than they put into it. Be happy you both have positives. Don't set the bar too high, there is really no such thing as a perfect marriage and marital bliss. It's actually all about a grown-up version of contentment. In other words, this contentment is limited satisfaction. One must get to the point where one realizes that when weighing the pros and cons, they are happy to be in this relationship. "Sometimes I get frustrated, annoyed and impatient. Sometimes I feel sad, lonely or resentful. All in all, marriage is good though. Ultimately, it is worth the price you pay." In the end, it's worth the effort. This, then, concludes our first topic.

In our first topic, we determined that a marriage is not a simple thing. These

days, it is nearly an impossible feat. This is because people have unrealistic expectations about how this relationship is supposed to work. Romantic expectations of unity, solidarity and harmony are confronted with reality. Society confronts living together with radical and extreme opinions. We have concluded that there are two types of differences: small differences that are not unimportant and major differences like what it means to be married. Marriage will cause friction between couples because you spend a lifetime together in close quarters. This brings problems of its own as well. We've seen how small issues can become something more when you focus on them. One partner can hit the panic button. Couples struggle to find the root cause of their problems. Couples do not have a common understanding, or the same point of view concerning the actual issue, and finally they may not have any idea how to find a common solution. Furthermore, a marriage is difficult because it is ever-changing, and transitions between phases of a relationship can cause crises.

In the rest of this book, we will offer some insight into how a marriage can work and which methods to use to resolve conflict. This book contains a few models, points of view, and the framework of a basic marriage so it becomes clearer where the exact issues may be. It may assist in finding solutions. In addition, suggestions will be made on how to handle different situations. Certain thinking patterns and methods will become obvious when looking at various examples. These are insights –coming after years of marriage- that have provided positive outcomes and have stood the test of time.

Two types of relationships

In this second topic, we will make a clear distinction between two types of relationships: business relationships and intimate relationships.

First, let us touch upon the business relationship. A business relationship is a bond created between people having a common goal that is not part of the relationship itself. Although it does not appear that this has anything to do with marriage, there are people who have a purely business marriage.

Pieter and Elaine: The business marriage. They have been married for fifteen years. They have three children between the ages of ten and thirteen. Pieter has a full time career; she has a part time job. They are well off with a large house and two cars. They are a very well organized family. The children are not left to fend for themselves; they are well taken care of. However, it is common that when one parent comes home, the other departs. It is all very well organized. They have a nice

income, there is always food on the table and they are always well dressed. One parent will go over the children's homework. One will take them to the dentist; the other will transport them to music school or their track meet. Everything is arranged in detail. Pieter and Leen sleep in different rooms, however. There is no connectedness of feeling between them. Leen actually has an intimate relationship with someone else. Everything considered, they find it easier to stay living together under one roof, even if it is merely for material purposes. Financially, living together makes more sense and the children have a home. The reason to remain together is not for the relationship itself, but rather the benefits it brings to each. "We have a house together, why would we sell it? If we split everything, we both will have less."

A business relationship is more contractual. The common goal consists of transactions that take place outside of the actual relationship. In a marriage this may mean staying together because it is more beneficial financially to share a house, one fridge, one washing machine, etc.

Tony and Hilde: The silent couple. Tony and Hilde, 64 and 62 years of age, are farmers who live on a large farm. Their three children are all grown and moved out several years ago. The two of them are now solely responsible for this large working farm. Their sexual intimacy ended over twenty five years ago. Hilde went in for a gynecological operation and they couldn't be intimate during her recovery. The intimacy never returned. Ten years ago, after a fight, they decided to sleep in separate rooms. Two years ago, Tony decided he no longer wants to share a meal with Hilde. Now they eat separately: Hilde waits until Tony is done in the kitchen before she makes herself a meal. They haven't spoken a word to each other in several months. Yet they continue to live together. They only exchange necessary information with regard to the farm business. When asked by a counselor what keeps them together, what their common goal or the reason for their continued relationship might be, the answer is usually short. "We have worked so hard on this farm." Both individuals are extremely hard workers and always put in long days to keep the farm business going. "Maybe if our son is willing to take over the business, then we won't have worked in vain." This is a business relationship. The goal of the relationship is to keep the company going. Hilde still has an intimate relationship with her daughters on Sunday afternoons when they visit and she can complain about Tony. On Sundays after church, Tony goes to visit his unmarried sisters who live nearby. He uses this visit to vent a little as well.

Let us move on to intimate relationships. In an intimate relationship, the goal is within the relationship itself. People live together to be together. Being together is their goal. "Because I like you, enjoy being with you and you are interesting. I get

something comforting out of this relationship.” An intimate relationship is a relationship where the common goal is being together. There is no other reason than being together. They live together for the happiness it brings each of them. Consider two young adults who enjoy dancing. Both individuals need a partner to dance and are thus looking for another dancer. That is not the same reason engaged couples dance together. They dance together because they like each other and this in return becomes an excuse to dance together. Being together is their primary goal and they are using the dancing as an opportunity to get out of the house and be together. In the first instance, one is looking for a transactional business relationship: a dance partner. The second example describes an intimate relationship where the couple dances merely to be together.

Another example is playing cards. Some people are in it for the game and even to gamble or win something. Others play cards as a way to be social, be close to others, spend time with people and have an intimate relationship with them. Sometimes both these types of people play cards together. If there are two players whose sole goal it is to win and two players who are just playing cards while they chat about their day, there will most likely be a disagreement. The first players may insist the others stop chatting and focus on the game while the other two don't understand why you wouldn't want to be social. The cards are merely an afterthought. These, respectively, are business and intimate relationships.

We have to delve more into this intimate relationship because this is the one that matters most. The modern marriage, the friendship marriage, is much more focused on intimacy than it ever has been. Today's younger generation may never understand this, but marriage used to be much more focused on the transactional and much less involved with intimacy than it is today. First, we should elaborate more on what intimacy is.

First of all, it consists of a relationship in which you can be yourself. Most people think: “How ridiculous. If I am not myself, I am not me.” That is not necessarily true. Most of us have experienced a time in which we must fulfil a role where we cannot be who we really want to be. People say it all the time, how at work they have to smile and always be nice and friendly to patrons. You should always be in a good mood. In an intimate relationship, that is not the case. In an intimate relationship, I can be who I want to be. I can have flaws. I can be downhearted or sad. I can be unhappy or act crazy. In this respect, an intimate relationship is a relationship in which I can be who and how I want to be. It's a luxury. I do not have to pretend to be better than I truly am. It is a relationship in which you do not need to wear a mask. You don't have to walk on eggshells to

make the other person happy. In an intimate relationship, you don't have to force yourself to behave a certain way. You can just be yourself including your limitations and that is very important. "Sometimes I can act silly and crazy. I can do something stupid or make mistakes. It's okay to forget things. I can be me without worrying about it."

Secondly, an intimate relationship is one in which you can express your feelings. In this relationship you are allowed to have an opinion. "When I am sad, I can be this way", but now the focus is on expressing the feeling. "I am unhappy today and I am entitled to be this way. I can act silly if I feel giddy." It is a relationship in which you can easily express your feelings.

Feelings impact you when you do something. You do not create feelings. They are an effect of being. One is not an author of feelings, they are discovered. Research shows that communication of negative relational feelings is very important in a relationship. Negative relational feelings are used to describe negative feelings partners have towards each other: anger, disgust, envy, disappointment, fear. The durability of a relationship is dependent on the ability to communicate these negative feelings. For instance: "I am disappointed in you", "It annoys me when you do that" or "That hurts my feelings."

It is important that you voice these feelings in a timely manner. Hinting at or showing feelings are not enough. If you talk about your frustrations, you can search for a solution together. This is essential in a bonding relationship. If you bottle up your feelings, they can express themselves under other pretenses, such as physical complaints. They will be reflected in your attitude and impact your health and sexual relations. This indirect expression of feelings will make it more difficult to process later on.

Third, it is a relationship in which both parties are attuned to each other and have compassion for their partner. It is a relationship in which one can be empathetic when the other is sad or happy. Compassion is not "I have the same feelings as you", but more appropriately "I can understand where you are coming from and why you feel that way. I don't feel sad, but I can feel with you. I have compassion for you." It is about understanding each other. It is not an understanding on an intellectual level, but rather on an emotional level, understanding from the heart. There are a variety of words which describe this, such as empathy and compassion.

Fourth, intimacy also encompasses physical relations. Intimacy is being close physically and sexually in a broad sense of the word. Sexual means close to the touch, holding hands, cuddling, kissing, lying with each other, stroking, sexual

intercourse and falling asleep together. Physical proximity is the fourth element of an intimate relationship. A real intimate relationship is often characterized by a kiss, a slap on the behind, running your fingers through their hair, sharing a hug, etc. All these forms of physical contact, physical proximity and being close together, are part of an intimate relationship. It is about mutual, pleasant physicality. This is not the case if one of the two becomes uncomfortable, irritable or intolerable of the other.

The fifth and last element is time. An intimate relationship takes time. Those who live life in the fast lane, have difficulty with intimacy. Intimacy requires slowing down and even stopping in your tracks. You could say that intimacy is standing still twice. First off, you stand still for yourself. "Who am I? What do I want? How do I feel?" It is about consciousness, self-exploration and meditation. How can I share myself if I don't know myself? The second standstill is considering your partner. "Bit by bit I begin to understand you. One step at a time, I can share my feelings with you." This takes time. A fast-paced life stifles intimacy.

When you combine all five of these elements, you find the description of an intimate relationship. The modern marriage, the friendship marriage, has a much larger emphasis on intimacy than ever before. Every marriage relationship consists of transactional as well as intimate relationship elements. The transactional, business side of it entails having an income together to put towards a rent or mortgage, food, bills and clothes. These are important elements in daily life. Sometimes, the younger generation dreams about having a gentle intimate relationship, but they cannot imagine what it means to take care of the material side of life: finding a job, having an income, providing for your family. In recent times, the modern marriage has moved the focus more to the intimate aspect as opposed to the business aspect of a relationship as society has become more accountable for the business aspect. Back in the days before pensions, it was necessary to have a large family with many children so when you grow old, they will be able to provide for you as a parent and take care of you. If you did not have a large brood, you risked becoming an outcast without an income, food or clothes. The transactional or business aspect was closely linked to large families, being married and large clans. In some cultures, this is still the case. In our culture, school takes over part of raising our children. Our income is fixed with a legal state minimum. Once retired, you can count on a pension, retirement fund or social security. Society has created a few structures, which makes a few elements of the transactional relationship obsolete.

In contrast, our society has created anonymity in social life which turns many of our relationships dry and transactional. Shopping in a big city has become a journey among unknown and anonymous peers. This change in society has emphasized the

need for living together and pursuing marriage as an intimate relationship. Questionnaires have shown that many people do not enter marriage with business motives, but rather go in search of intimacy. People want security, conviviality and dependability. We can put all of these elements under one heading, namely intimacy.

In the modern marriage, intimacy has become a focal point. When intimacy is gone, people lose interest. Divorce rates show that people are in search of something more in a relationship besides the business aspect. It used to be much simpler. "He doesn't drink, he uses his income to provide for his family and he doesn't beat his wife. Why is that person not happy?" Well, 'that person' is not content with just the fact that he doesn't drink, doesn't hit her and helps provide. That's not why she married him. After all, she has her own income now. She seeks attention, compassion and physical attraction. If those elements are missing, she didn't find what she is looking for. Perhaps he didn't find what he is looking for in this relationship either and that is when couples start questioning their marriage.

The elements of intimacy are not easily determined. When is there sufficient intimacy? How does one measure intimacy? In a business relationship, you can measure certain elements. Are the children taken care of? Is there an income to provide for the family? Intimacy is dependent on individual desires. Some people need lots of intimacy. Some are a little too dependent on it. It is a subjective matter. In the modern marriage it has become crucial to couples. When couples enter into marriage today, it is usually to get something out of it. The importance of intimacy is a characteristic of modern society. It has become a personal matter.

In this second topic of this chapter, we proposed a difference between a business relationship and an intimate relationship. Keep in mind that both these aspects are usually present in a marriage and, preferably, intertwined. You will sleep with the person who cooked carrots for dinner even if you hate warm carrots. You will be intimate with the person who watched TV all day with you. You will share conversation with your partner who has been working all day. Business and intimacy mingle together. In marriage, these two aspects always go hand in hand. That is a reason why couples fight about the small, material items in a relationship. Large emotions are attached to small transactional differences. She will lose it if he doesn't put his shoes away. Why is she so upset about a pair of shoes? How can you make your own life so miserable because of a pair of shoes? This is the man she wants to share her life with though. Her emotions are attached to him, and his shoes, his jacket, his manner of preparing food and how he relaxes. When visitors are coming for dinner, he helps set the table. When she exits the kitchen, she yells:

“Don’t you see you used the wrong knives! If you loved me, you would have known which knives to use for a dinner party!” The material and the emotional, setting the table and the feelings towards that person, this all runs together.

Some marriages have issues in the business aspect of their relationship. These are couples that haven’t sorted out how to organize living together. These are improvisers living together with lots of love for each other, but forgetting that you need a fridge, or heat. They think life will sort itself out with the love they share. That is an extreme case. They lack the business aspect of living together. They have no rules or regulations. They are not organized in life and believe everything will sort itself out spontaneously. Usually these couples do not get very far with lots of intimacy but no organization.

The opposite can also occur. Some couples have their lives sorted and everything runs according to plan, but they do not have much regard for each other. They lack attention for each other. They are organized, but there is no intimacy.

Change?

The third topic is change. If you are reading this book, it is most likely that you have a goal to bring about change in your relationship or, at the least, make things better. Can people change? When we ask the general population, we are confronted with a very pessimistic view. Generally, the public does not believe that people or relationships can change. They cannot change because humans are born with certain characteristics. If you are taciturn, you will be that way from birth until death. The saying goes: “Once a thief, always a thief”. Someone who cannot be trusted on one occasion will never be trusted again. Popular belief states that a person simply cannot change. The same thing goes for relationships. If you have argued for ten years, you will argue for the next forty years as well. Why would you think that could ever change? You speak about the relationship as you would about a person with a born characteristic. “That is how he is. He has always been a quiet man and he always will be.”

When John wed, his mother said to Lisa: “You will have to learn to live with him, he has always been a man of few words. He doesn’t say much. He never has been, and never will be, very vocal.” You assume that is a characteristic of his. He was born a quiet man, taciturn.

When using the word characteristic, we are describing an element of personality that will not change. The word ‘character’ is used to describe a person’s traits that will be part of that person from birth until death. Projecting a single trait to an

entire person is incorrect. This is an exaggerated way of thinking. We can illustrate this with an example that has absolutely nothing to do with marriage, but it is a nice example.

The mathematical knot. What is a mathematical knot? Well, it is a little ball of approximately one cubic centimeter (probably about the size of a hazelnut) in the back of your head. If you have this little knot in the back of your head, it pretty much assures you an understanding of mathematics. You won't even have to study. It will all make perfect sense to you because you have a mathematic knot in the back of your head. You will never have to sweat mathematics. However, if you do not have the knot, don't even bother trying. It won't work. You will never get it. You can stand on your head trying, but you will never master mathematics. You don't have a little ball in the back of your head. You are lacking the mathematic knot. This is a good example to demonstrate that a human characteristic is either present or not. Either you have a knot in the back of your head or you don't. It becomes part of you like a limb. "If you have it, consider yourself lucky. If you don't have it, don't even try. You can't force it." This conception of a characteristic is so exaggerated that people confuse it with physical attributes (a knot). We all know this is incorrect, but this example clearly illustrates how people believe personality traits and characteristics work. If someone is very quiet, or they do not enjoy physical intimacy, or they will not articulate how they feel, etc., then this is part of that person's character. That is just who they are.

Let us oppose this. We will disagree with the concept that humans, traits and relationships are unchangeable. We will state that human characteristics are taught more than we realize. Genetics teaches us that human traits are not necessarily hereditary. What you inherit is the predisposition of a certain trait or characteristic. We still need the correct environment to develop it successfully. Take, for instance, a child in the slums with a predisposition for classical music like Mozart. Chances are that this child will spend most of its short life in search of food among the trash to stay alive. It will never have the means to develop its musical talent due to its surroundings, in contrast to Mozart, who was raised in a musical milieu and given the chance to develop his talent. We can state that the child's predisposition is lost due to lack of means in its environment. Naturally, the opposite can happen and the child can find its way out of the slums, but this is a very rare occurrence. The environment does not provide the means to develop this characteristic or talent and thus it will not develop. The trait is present, but he is starving. He may not make it to his fifteenth birthday. Human traits are not hereditary but the predisposition for them is.

In fact, what we are talking about is behavior. These are traits that are taught more than we realize. People learn how to be silent. People learn to talk and express themselves a certain way. Some people are taught to hide their feelings. Not all these behaviors are taught, but it is often the case. This occurs during childhood, early on, and this occurs during the course of a marriage as well. Some traits are taught early on, but some occur during a marriage by living together. This is very interesting. Couples can learn certain behaviors during a marriage that they do not intend to learn. Here is an example to clarify.

Peter and Ann learn to whine. He turned her into a whiner, but he doesn't remember how it happened. He even started to whine about the fact that she was such a whiner. This is a true story that we were only able to reconstruct systematically after the fact. Peter was unaware of how this happened, how he turned his wife into a whiner. He was very unhappy that his wife was like this. When he left work, he dreaded going home to her. "She's just going to whine about something." This is what we were able to find out: when he got home from work, she did indeed start whining. He thought she was just a whiner. It is a trait and that is just how and who she is. It turns out, she hasn't always been that way. She never whined before their marriage and it didn't occur within the first five years of their marriage. This is when things became interesting. How does one learn to become a whiner? This is how it happened. The first few years were good. They had a typically organized married life with a classic role distribution: Peter worked all day while Anne stayed home with the children. The first few years, everything ran normally. When Peter came home from work and Anne hadn't talked to him all day, she began to tell him about her day with the children. He, in turn, told her about his day and they listened to each other. This was a key element: He listened to her. Slowly, after five years of marriage, he started to lose interest in hearing about her day which didn't change much. He started to listen less and less. When he came home, he started reading the newspaper while she talked about her day. "Go ahead, I'm listening. I'm just going to check the sports in the meantime." He wasn't listening. She knew it and this annoyed her. He didn't hear a word she said all week, until one day something bad happened, a small drama during her day. Anne said: "And then he fell down the stairs! I thought he was unconscious. He may have a concussion. He's fine now but he will have a bad bruise." Peter reacted immediately: "What happened? Did you take him to the doctor? Did you give him ice to put on it?" Suddenly he was interested and listening again. This pattern seemed to be a recurring thing. When she just told him about her ordinary day, he didn't seem to listen. A few months' passed. Anne learned to talk about her day as if

it was all very dramatic. That was the only way he would pay attention. Peter was right, she started whining. She told him about the most ordinary, mundane things, such as what they had for lunch, in a very theatrical and dramatic way. She made it sound like the end of the world was near. Once again, Peter started to tune this out as well. This made her whine even more. A very curious interaction occurred: every time she produced more decibels, he became more immune to it. Gradually, he became deaf to her. This was exactly what set her off. He complained about the fact she was always whining. She whined about the fact that he no longer listened to anything she had to say. "If I don't dramatize, he won't listen. He is deaf to me." The more whining, the more deaf he becomes. The more deaf he becomes to her, the more she whines. She produces the decibels and he learns to drown them out. They end up in a vicious circle. Peter was convinced his wife was just a whiner because that is a trait she has always had.

Looking at this case, we can tell he has trained her to do this. He started to tune her out and only paid attention when something dramatic happened. This is a form of rewarding. By rewarding a certain behavior, you intensify it. She started whining more and intensified the effect it had, namely him not listening. The story of the whiney wife and the deaf husband shows that these behaviors can be taught. Behavior is taught more than we realize. You can think she is a nag, but curiously, she didn't do this with her friends. She didn't whine to her family, only to her husband. That shows that they taught each other this behavior. He listened to others very well at work, but he wouldn't listen to a word his wife said. He became immune to her. She trained him in this. She taught him not to listen to her nagging and carrying on. In fact, this is taught behavior.

As result, two main concepts emerge about marriage, two philosophies. The first concept is that of adjustment. It's an acceptance philosophy. If you want your marriage to last, you should be quiet and accept. This is one concept that you may have heard from your parents or grandparents. "It's all about adjusting."

A second philosophy is to ask your partner to change. It seems reasonable to ask for participation. If it is a taught behavior, it only makes sense that they can change. If it is a trait they are born with, it only makes sense that you will have to adjust to it. In a good marriage it is all about a happy medium between adjusting and asking for change. You should not have to endure everything, but you also shouldn't want to change it all. The solution lays between the two. Sometimes it is not enough to adjust, but one must seek adjustment of their partner as well. In the case of Peter and Anne, this could be Anne asking Peter to put the paper down for five minutes while he listens to her. After that, he can go back to reading the paper. That is one

way of asking for attention. It is a very different manner of seeking attention by raising her voice and being dramatic. You can ask for change, you don't always have to be the only one to adjust. There must be a good balance of give-and-take. Every marriage works this way.

Some people are now stuck with the question: "What do I adjust and how much do I have to change?" That depends on your partner. There is something to be said about this though. You cannot change a marriage without your own sacrifices. Every change takes time and energy. Change requires sacrifice. This does not mean that modern married couples require immense change and sacrifice from both parties involved all the time, but change is imminent and very important. It is possible that one partner asks the other to change and the other replies with: "I cannot do that. It takes too much. If I do that, I will not be me anymore." The cost of change is too high. Being yourself in a relationship is fundamental. This can become a reason for divorce: one partner is asking for too much change from the other which would result in the other becoming someone they are not. The cost related to the change is too high: namely, losing yourself and who you are as a person. When is the price too high? What are you willing to change because your partner asked and when should you reply with "take me as I am, you will have to adjust to me."? This varies depending on the marriage. Some people are willing to sacrifice it all, we call this "relationship addiction". There are people who are not willing to budge at all. The rule is: if the price to pay to make it work is too high, the relationship is bound to fail. Marriage tends to stop working when the desire for change from your partner is too high and you are unable to deliver. "I have to jump through hoops to satisfy your wishes. I won't do it. We will need to live separately."

There are two important aspects here. On the one hand, change requires effort. Change in marriage is a process. Change does not happen without effort. Change does not happen naturally. On the other hand, people should not have to change at the cost losing their selves. Everyone has to make these decisions for themselves. If one partner wants the other to change, the other has to make the decision if the change required is acceptable. If they are unwilling to make the change as requested or if they believe it is an impossible request, they should take the liberty early on to state this. It is better to call it quits ahead of time rather than wait until the situation has got out of hand.

So, the third topic of relationships we have discussed here is change. In this topic we have discussed that the general population does not believe this can be accomplished. This is where we established that human characteristics, traits and behavior are taught more than once thought. This has led us to apply this notion to

a marriage. Marriage is all about changing behavior and seeking balance in a marriage by giving in to change as well as asking for change. When this balance cannot be achieved, this becomes the moment that couples start contemplating divorce when one requires too much of the other.

Relational Thinking

In this fourth topic, we will discuss relational thinking. To explain this, we will place this model in contrast to other mental models. Most of us were raised with a mental model called 'individual thinking'. This means that we have been taught to think in terms of me, you, him, etc. How can you recognize an individual thinker in a relationship? Usually you can tell by the questions they start asking when something goes wrong: "WHO? Whose fault is it? Who started it? Who did this? Who is abnormal? Who is sick? Who is healthy? Who is crazy? Who is smart? Who is stubborn?" The question of who in marital issues usually indicates that the cause is one of the two individuals involved. We call this individual thinking. Either it is you or me. Either way, it is one of the two. Individual thinking will always result in the question: "Who is at fault?" By the way, usually the answer is 'you'. These questions are then usually followed up with: "You are stubborn. You are stupid. You are at fault. You are mean. You started it." Most people have the tendency to blame the partner for any issues. The opposite also can occur when a person will blame themselves for all issues which occur between couples: "I am at fault. I was wrong. I am a bad person. I am guilty. I didn't try hard enough. I have failed." In both of these cases it always comes back to "Who?"

Relational thinking doesn't function like this. This way of thinking is very different. The questions we pose when it comes to relational thinking are "How? How do people interact with each other?" This is a very big difference. How does the interaction between the two individuals go? This is a different type of question, about an action between two subjects. This is relational thinking. This is learning to look at the relationship itself, the interaction, the communication, the way of handling, cooperation and synergy between two people. These are all synonyms. It is always about the same thing. We look at the relationship itself rather than the individuals and this is why it is called relational thinking. So, the words cooperation, synergy, interaction, communication, exchange of behavior all mean the same thing. The terms we use when seeking a solution for these couple-issues are expressed in relational terms. Let us have a look again at the case of Peter and Anne, the silent one and the whiner. Using an individual thought model, we would ask

the questions like: “Why is Anne such a nag? Is it part of her personality? It can’t be a personal trait because she doesn’t whine like that around her friends.” Individual thinking would state that Peter is at fault because he doesn’t listen. However, we know this is not the case because at work, he can hear just fine and listens to everybody. Peter is not deaf. So what is the issue if both these statements are incorrect? The issue lies in the combination of the two, the problem is their interaction. Peter taught her to whine, but you can also say Anne taught him not to listen. It is the interaction we are interested in here. Individual thinking would start with the statement: these people interact in such a way *because* of their personal traits. Their characteristics are as such, nagging and deafness, and thus their interactions will be based on their characteristics. We would like to turn this around and state that these individuals *became* this way (a nag and a deaf person) through their interactions with each other. The whining and deafness are results of their intercommunication with each other. This has become their way of interacting with each other.

This way of thinking is rarely used, but it proves very important in a marriage. It’s about learning how partners interact with each other. The problem we looked at earlier was about a couple who always fought. They don’t like to fight and both want it to end, yet they continue to disagree. The question here is: How are they interacting with each other that continuously causes them to fight? This is a much better question than simply stating that we are dealing with an aggressive man and an aggressive woman (they both must have aggressive characters) and that is why they end up fighting so much. Arguing is a relational phenomenon. You need two to tango. (You can always end an argument by yourself by taking distance from the situation). To play this game, you must have a worthy opponent. You cannot fight by yourself. A part of arguing is convincing the other to become your opponent in the fight. Arguing without a decent opponent is not exciting. You are looking for a reaction from your opponent.

This being said, we can state that interaction is important. It’s not necessarily the person, their character, their individuality that makes up a relationship, but rather what happens between two people. A relationship is the interaction. It is all about the communication between the two, like talking to each other, but it encompasses much more than that.

Relational thinking is thinking in terms of the relationship and the bonds between people. You cannot state: “That individual has these traits, so that is how they will act towards their partner as well.”

This needs to be stated because many marriages have a bad habit of appointing a

guilty party at times of difficulties. They end up blaming someone: “It’s either your fault or mine.” The question should not be who is right or wrong, but rather how these two individuals go about interacting with each other. When reading a book about relationship problems or taking part in a self-help program, people still have the urge to do this as a means of proving that they are right and their partner is wrong. During a three week self-help course they will try to prove whose fault the issues are. “You are wrong and I can prove it. Just read this book and you will see that it’s all your fault.”

Relational thinking does not split couples into a good guy and bad guy. It’s about learning to deal with your partner in relational terms. It comes down to finding another manner of interacting with each other to prevent or fix the differences at hand. Learn to talk to each other, find another way of relating to each other, and try to connect on a different level. Relationship therapy shows us that this is possible rather than finding someone at fault. The goal of this book is not to spilt couples into good and bad. People exaggerate in both directions. Some people always give their partner blame, while others blame themselves for everything. This is not correct. Fault does not lie with an individual, but it can be found in the interaction between the two.

If you change the way you relate to your partner, they, in turn, can change as well. This can shift the entire dynamic of the relationship. Don’t expect to find out who is at fault. That is not the point. How do things go awry between couples without having someone to blame? Here follows an example.

Hans and Vicky on the Lesse. Hans and Vicky rented a kayak for two to sail down the Lesse. Sailing down the river is not difficult at all. You get in the kayak and go downstream. It all pretty much happens naturally. Some days it gets very busy on the river though. Some days there are a lot of other boats in the water. When there are so many other people on the Lesse, it happens occasionally that two boats collide. Sometimes you can end up stuck on the riverbank or on a big rock in the water. You have to maneuver down the river, avoiding obstacles like other boats and running aground. You have to move from left to right and navigate accordingly to avoid collision. Although Hans and Vicky are an average happy couple, they somehow manage to get into a big argument while kayaking. Vicky, for example, wanted to move left while Hans was planning on maneuvering right and put his oar in water on the right. The boat starts turning the wrong way and they end up running aground. When they decide to exit the boat, it causes the boat to take on water and tip over. Now they are both up to their knees in the river and start yelling at each other. “Why did you try to go left, when you should have known to go

right?” It is important to know that both individuals are good rowers and either direction they took would have kept them clear of their peril. It is not that one side would have worked better than the other or that Vicky or Hans are at fault because of their lack of skills. The problem lies with the fact that one tried to go right while the other went left, leaving them stranded and resulting in tipping over. The fault is not the rowing. The fault is with their interaction, their teamwork, their combination of rowing. There are many combinations that would have worked out. There are duo’s where the front rower goes left and the second follows suit. In this case there are no difficulties. There is no problem because the second rower adjusts to the rhythm of the first. In a marriage it is the same concept: It’s not the rowers that are incompetent, it is the combination of how the two can work together that decided if their task at hand will work. Hans and Vicky can both row well, but can get into difficulties when they are not attuned to each other. If one is attempting to go fast and the other is trying to slow down, they may end up in peril. It’s all about teamwork. The problem does not lie with the players, it’s how you play the game.

This example of a kayak has a lot to do with marriage. In marriage, you ask yourself the same questions: how does one person react to the other’s actions. You question their compatibility, their interaction. If one puts their oar in the water to stop, but the other keeps rowing, the boat will start going in circles. It will only work when the two work together, a combination of their efforts. We can illustrate this with another example also involving boats.

Joe, Ann and their sailboat. Joe and Ann have a little sailboat on a lake. We know it is custom to lean over the side of the boat while sailing to seek balance or counterbalance to the sails. In this case, something peculiar has occurred. On one side, Joe is hanging far over the port side of the boat, while on the other side, Ann is hanging far over the starboard side. Both of them are hanging on to ropes and both of them are hanging far overboard on opposite sides. They are both hanging so far back that their heads almost touch the water. If you ask Joe what he is doing, he would answer with: “Have you seen Ann? Luckily I am acting as counterbalance or we would have capsized!” Joe is right. If you go to Ann and ask her the same, she would answer: “Have you seen my husband? If I weren’t here to offer a counterbalance, we would have capsized!” She is also right. This almost sounds like we are speaking of their marriage. However they managed to get in these extreme positions, they speak of the other’s situation and how their own counterbalance is trying to make it better. In this hypothesis, if one of the two would sit up, the boat would probably capsize. Keeping marriage afloat is not easy. Both partners must be part of keeping the balance.

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