

Getting Our Hearts Right

Three Keys to Better Relationships

Conflict is a universal human problem.

We all hope to have good relationships—thriving marriages and families, close friendships, and well-functioning teams at work. And yet, along the way, we all encounter conflict and disagreements. Despite our best efforts and intentions, we bump into conflict regularly.

Many of us are in relationships with lingering frustrations and enduring conflicts. Family relationships and friendships that used to be close and satisfying begin to be the source of irritation and disappointment. We drag into work trying to figure out how to deal with a difficult manager or co-worker. We hope to get along with people, but find ourselves feeling annoyed by others more than we want. Perhaps there are relationships that were once very important to us that we have lost or that are “on life support.”

Even in our healthiest relationships we sometimes get into arguments, have bad feelings, or push for what we want in ways that hurt people we care about. Most of us experience more conflict than we want in important relationships. How can we heal these conflicts?





Dealing with conflict requires more than just knowledge and skills.

We all know kind, generous, and helpful things we should do to be better family members, friends, co-workers and neighbors. Many of us have learned new relationship skills from articles, books, or watching TV programs. Yet even when we understand what we need to do to improve our relationships, we don't always use those skills.

Irving Becker observed: "If you don't like someone, the way he holds his spoon will make you furious; if you do like him, he can turn his plate over into your lap and you won't mind." Sometimes we don't even realize that we are making a choice between being angry or peaceful. Sometimes we don't recognize that our hearts are hard toward some people while being soft and kind toward others.

There are several reasons we don't consistently use the knowledge and skills that we have.

- **We are creatures of habit.** And we develop habits in the way we relate to others. We sometimes fall into unhealthy behavior patterns in our close relationships. Then we sit in a class or read a book and learn a new skill. We think to ourselves: This is a good idea—I should do this in my life. We assume we will be able to easily implement those ideas. Yet because of the habits we have developed, unless we truly work on changing our hearts, we fall right back into our old pattern of behavior.
- **We react out of emotions that don't serve us well.** Often during times of conflict, we respond based on anger, frustration, a need to be in control, a need to get what we want, etc. New skills can't flourish until we manage those emotions and get our hearts right.
- **We give new skills a half-hearted try.** Sometimes when we discover it is going to take effort to change our behavior, we give up. Or things don't go exactly as we hoped on the first try, and instead of continuing to practice and improve, we decide the skill doesn't work. We move on in search of the next new idea. However, change requires sustained effort over time.
- **We expect others to change.** We may learn a new skill and think: That is a great idea—the other person in the relationship should hear about this and change. But trying to change others only increases conflict. We have to acknowledge that the only person we can control is ourselves. We have to be willing to get our own hearts right.

Personal biases make it difficult to evaluate conflicts fairly.

Most of us believe we are pretty good at assessing the people and events in our life. We weave our perceptions about people and events into stories that make sense to us. We think we are able to objectively interpret truth. We are confident that we can trust our conclusions about life and our opinions of people. But research has repeatedly found that all humans are biased. We rarely—if ever—see the whole picture. We form opinions based only on partial truths.

One of the biggest problems is that we rarely see our own bias. Below are some of the most common biases. Please read each description and see if you can identify that bias in your own thinking.

Common human biases

How have you seen this bias at work in your own thinking?

Egocentrism: We focus on ourselves and our needs. We can be blind to the needs and pain of people around us.



Fundamental attribution bias: We tend to excuse our mistakes and faults because of our circumstances while blaming others' misdeeds on their bad character. We give too much credit to people we like and too little credit to those we don't.

Naïve realism: We tend to see bias and bad logic in other people but fail to see it in ourselves. As a result, we believe that no one gets it right—except for me! I see things as they really are.

Anger narrows and blinds us. It closes our minds to the broad picture and shuts down our compassion for others.

Confirmation bias: We tend to accept only information that supports what we already believe. We criticize and reject information that disagrees with our view.

Unreliable memories: We regularly reshape our memories to fit our objectives. We don't remember reality; we remember what we want to believe.

Negativity bias: We tend to be overwhelmed by bad things and forget good things.

We all see the world through muddy glasses.





A story of a couple—two good and hard-working people—illustrates the problem of bias. Occasionally the husband got irritated and complained about his wife’s faults. Finally she got tired of being criticized and declared, “You know, you have faults, too!” The husband replied, “Yes. But they don’t bother me like yours do!”

It can be difficult to hear other perspectives clearly. **At the root of our problem is our focus on our own thoughts.** Although we interact with people constantly, the music always playing in our minds is our own story, our own history, our own aspirations—and our own frustrations. We rarely stop the soundtrack of our own lives in order to hear the music in someone else’s life. In all our interactions, we hear the racket of our own soundtrack competing with their music, their story, and their way of seeing the world. When their music is out of harmony with ours, we assume they are out of tune. We judge them negatively.

We also judge others based on our own frustrations and pains. Maybe we had terrible relationships in the past and we have grown suspicious of people. Maybe we are overwhelmed at work. Maybe our hopes and dreams are drowning in disappointment. We process our perceptions through our own life stories. A person with terrible past relationships may decide no one she meets is worthy of trust. A person who is overwhelmed at work may feel his wife is too demanding when she asks him to help more around the house. Someone facing disappointment may assume that others are perfectly happy and therefore require no empathy.

When our misperceptions combine with our hurts and frustrations, we get irritated. We find ourselves in conflict. Instead of being loving and understanding, we are defensive, judgmental, and argumentative.

This is common in close relationships, especially within families. Partners misunderstand and annoy each other.

Parents irritate and even exasperate their children. If this pattern continues, a once loving relationship becomes filled with accusations, arguments, and smoldering resentments. Every day is filled with hard feelings, unpleasant words, or a cold wall of silence.

When we feel distant, accusing, or uncaring toward someone, we call that hard-heartedness. Our hearts are impenetrable. They are not open to the perspectives, feelings, experiences, and preferences of the person we are shutting out. We will not let that person’s story enter our minds and hearts.

The solution to our bias is to get our hearts right.

This description of the human condition—that misunderstandings and conflict are common in relationships—may sound bleak. Yet there is a way out of these misunderstandings. The key is getting our hearts right.

While we sometimes try to deal with conflict by avoiding it, endlessly discussing it, or painfully living with it, there is a better way. We can approach conflict with new hearts. Rather than resenting irritation when it occurs, we can choose to see it as an invitation to activate our hearts. We can learn to appreciate the music in other people’s lives.

This program is focused on three keys for activating our hearts. When combined with our knowledge and skills, these keys can turn our differences and conflicts into harmony and growth.

Key 1

Humility opens our hearts.



It is perfectly normal and beneficial for people to focus on their own needs and preferences. Yet this focus can make us unbalanced. We might put ourselves and our needs ahead of everyone else. We might believe we are better or more important than other people. We may assume we have a better understanding of truth than others. These ways of thinking create many of the relationship problems we face every day. They separate us from each other.

Some people think of humility as passivity or a lack of self-respect. But healthy humility is neither of those.

- **Humility** is the recognition that, while our needs matter, so do the needs of other people.
- **Humility** is the willingness to admit that we do not have a complete understanding of truth. It is being open to other people's opinions.
- **Humility** is a willingness to admit that we make mistakes. It allows us to continue learning and growing.

Humility is the foundation of healthy relationships. Those who are humble are ready to learn from people and experience.

How to Cultivate Humility

All of us get blindsided by bias and find it hard to get to humility. Author Wally Goddard tells this story:

Nancy and I were sitting by the side of a small lake feeding ducks. A little boy came along who was fascinated by the ducks. He ran toward them which made the ducks squawk and run. I turned to the boy threateningly: "Do not chase the ducks." My wife nudged me. "Maybe he would like to feed them." I immediately recognized my hard-heartedness. I asked the boy: "Would you like to feed the ducks?" He was delighted. So I taught him to stand quietly in front of me and throw the food to the ducks. The ducks gathered around us again and the boy was thrilled. Nancy's comment helped me recognize my own bias. I had been so absorbed in my own needs that I had failed to see a little boy who just wanted to play with the ducks.

How can you activate humility in your life and relationships?



Reflection

In order to apply these principles to your life effectively, please think of a recent or current conflict in which you find yourself irritated with another person—family member, co-worker, friend, or child. Write a few words describing that conflict.



How can you look past your own needs and preconceptions and try to be open to other people and their stories? There are two important steps.

Consider your biases.

We all have biases. It can be very difficult for us to see them in ourselves.

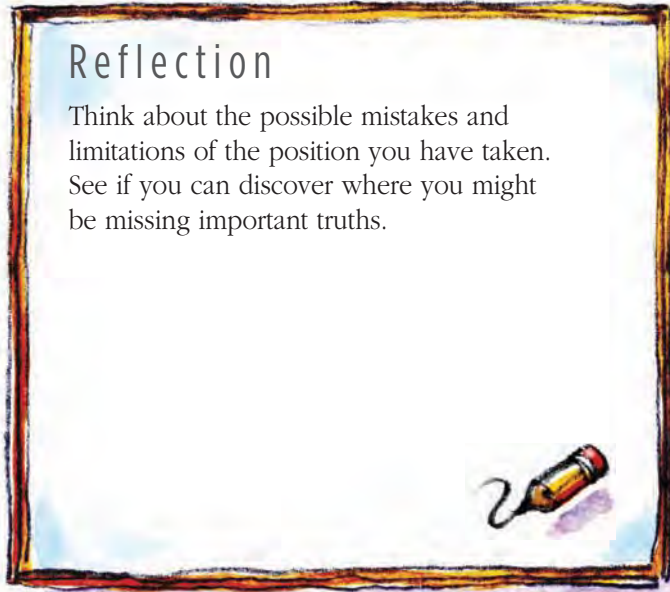
Reflection

Review the list of biases. As you consider the conflict you described, ask yourself how you have seen these biases at work in your thinking. What keeps you from seeing the whole story or the other person's story in the conflict you described? (While the other person is also vulnerable to bias, this exercise only works if you focus on YOUR biases.)



Consider the weakness in your position.

No one gets it just right. We all have weaknesses in our arguments.



Applying Humility to Your Own Situation

When we are humble enough to be open to other people, we can make exciting new discoveries. Instead of being focused on our view, our opinions, and our preferences, we open ourselves to their world.

How could you use the principles of humility to help you successfully open your heart regarding the conflict you described?

A small illustration of a yellow pencil with a pink eraser and a sharp lead tip, lying horizontally. It is positioned at the bottom right of the lined writing area.

Key 2 Compassion connects our hearts.



Compassion is being sensitive to the struggles and suffering of others. It means experiencing others' sense of struggle and suffering along with them.

We often think we are quite compassionate even when we are not. We may feel empathy, sympathy, or pity—for those who deserve it. Isn't this compassion?

Yes and no. It is a good thing to feel tenderness for those who suffer. But if we limit our compassion to only those who "deserve it," pretty soon we shut out a large portion of the world. People often feel compassion for their own kind, but are glad to see their enemies suffer. Some people have felt that certain races, types of people, or those with different values don't deserve caring and compassion.

Compassion is being sensitive to the struggles and suffering of others.

Full-fledged compassion involves feelings of tenderness for the struggles and hopes of all people, even those who are different from us or with whom we disagree.

We might think it would be easier to feel compassion towards those we are close to. But as the saying goes, "Familiarity breeds contempt"—and that familiarity can lead us to label and stereotype them. We develop a set of perceptions, and then we create labels. For example, we start seeing someone as immature, irresponsible, or self-centered. Then we start to see all their behavior through that lens.

Since we are all biased, we tend to blame others for how we are feeling. We believe they are insensitive or wrong in their thoughts or actions. We judge them and justify our lack of compassion towards them.

When we are frustrated or hurting we often don't see the needs or pains of others. We don't see the way our own ignorance and narrowness irritates and hurts them.

When we remember that we only see our side of the story, we are prepared to be compassionate. We can then connect with other people's needs and pains, even if we are feeling frustrated or hurt.

How to Cultivate Compassion

Sometimes we are very selective in our offering of compassion. We think people must deserve it before we can offer it. Yet compassion should be given because it is needed, not just because we deem someone worthy of it.

On their way to the playground, Hannah and Emily needed to cross a street. When they got to the crosswalk, Emily stopped and Hannah ran into the street where she was hit by a passing car. Fortunately the car was traveling slowly but she still lay in the road with painful scrapes. What should we do? Hannah had acted foolishly. Maybe we should give her a lecture about looking before crossing streets. Maybe we should put her in time-out. Those heartless responses lack compassion. The right response—the compassionate response—is to do everything we can to comfort Hannah and get her healing started. It does not matter that she was foolish; when people are hurting, we show them compassion.

Whenever you encounter situations in which you are upset by the words or actions of others, these steps will help you activate compassion to deal with the situation more effectively.

Stay peaceful.

We may disagree with other people's reasons for their actions. They may be mistaken about many things. Yet we are probably mistaken about many things as well. And we are normally so absorbed in our own stories and needs that we fail to understand theirs.

Rather than respond to an attack with a counter-attack, we can be the person who breaks the pattern of war. We sometimes forget that when we scold children, it is hard for them to learn because they feel so anxious. When we chew out our partners, it is hard for them to hear us because they are defending themselves against our attacks.

We can declare peace. This is not an admission that we are wrong. It does not mean that we agree with the other person. Declaring peace means that we believe

the relationship is more important to us than being right. We believe that we can solve problems without hurting and insulting others.

We are more likely to find good solutions to problems when we are calm and peaceful. When we feel irritated, tired, or angry is not the best time to discuss a disagreement. We may need to take a time-out and give ourselves a chance to calm down. Then we can return to the conversation later when we are better able to respond with compassion.

Reflection

What are some ways you react badly when you are in conflict? How can you avoid that behavior and stay peaceful?



Recognize that your perceptions are not the whole story.

Other people have motives and logic that make sense to them. People do what they do and believe what they believe for reasons that are just as sensible to them as your motives and logic are to you. Be open to the other side of the story.

Reflection

Can you see vital parts of the story that you may be missing? What is the other person's story? How is that different from the way you have seen things?



Listen to and understand the feelings of others.

Compassion really comes to life with this step. When we humbly respect the people we disagree with, we can then move on to gaining an understanding of why they are taking their position. This is more than understanding their thoughts. This is appreciating their motives and feelings. Invite the person with whom you have disagreed to help you understand the motives and feelings behind his/her position. Then truly listen.

How we listen is important. We should not interrupt. We should not be thinking about whether we agree or disagree with what is being said. We should not become defensive. And we should not be preparing counter arguments that we will launch as soon as it is our turn to talk. We should genuinely pay attention to what the other person is saying to gain insight about his/her feelings. Maybe she's afraid of being abandoned. Maybe he doesn't feel respected.

When we humbly respect the people we disagree with, we can then move on to gaining an understanding of why they are taking their position. This is more than understanding their thoughts.

This does not mean that we must agree with the other person's position. But understanding why the other person feels the way he/she does will help us have a more compassionate discussion. It also may be the key to finding a solution to the conflict. As long as people remain stuck on arguing their positions, it will usually be very difficult to find a mutually agreeable solution. Appreciating the motives and feelings of others will often help you think of creative solutions that will satisfy everyone.

When someone shares an idea that doesn't make sense to us, we may blurt out: "That's a stupid idea!" We may mutter: "Hmmm. I don't care." Or we may choose to connect to that person: "That's an interesting idea. Please tell me more."

Compassion involves turning towards another person with our minds and our hearts. As much as anything else, the purpose of relationships may be to help us learn to join our stories with those of other people.

Instead of seeing our differences and irritations as a problem, we can see them as an invitation to learn about each other and to become closer friends.



Now prepare questions to help you understand the other person. Maybe you could ask: "Will you help me understand your point of view?"

Applying Compassion to Your Own Situation

When we are humble enough to listen to someone else's view and compassionate enough to want to understand and help, we become healers. Rather than condemn people for their humanness, we recognize that many people act badly because they are hurting. We want to help them rather than condemn them. Compassion helps us forgive each other and forgiveness frees our hearts.

Let's return to the conflict that you identified earlier. How could you use the principles of compassion to help you successfully connect your heart to the other person's heart?



Key 3

Positivity inspires our hearts.



Positivity is the practice of seeing the good in people. In every relationship there are times of irritation and frustration. Positivity is deciding not to dwell on those moments or allow them to define the relationship. It is the choice to notice and dwell on what is good about the other person and the relationship. We focus on all the ways this relationship enriches our life. Positivity is the basis of kindness. Kindness sustains relationships.

“Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.”

Albert Einstein



Research on relationships consistently suggests that healthy relationships are more idealistic than realistic; that is, the partners emphasize the good in each other and downplay each other's faults. In fact, one of the biggest discoveries from decades of studying marriage is that people in strong relationships have about five positive interactions for each negative interaction. That means that for each time we complain about a spouse being late, there should be five times when we thank him or her for helping us in the yard, for offering supportive words, for rubbing our sore shoulders, or some other positive expression of love and care. People in ordinary relationships have about two positive interactions for each negative.

This does not mean that somehow the partners in such relationships were lucky and got a relationship with lots of positives. It means that people who look for the good in relationships are far more likely to have strong relationships.

How to Cultivate Positivity

We tend to believe that circumstances determine our thoughts and feelings. But we can choose how we process our thoughts and feelings about those circumstances. We can decide to focus on what is irritating and disappointing in our relationships. Or we can choose to appreciate and focus upon the good, even during times of conflict.

At their 50th wedding anniversary, friends asked the honored couple the secret to their happiness. The wife replied that, when they first got married, she decided to forgive her husband ten of his faults. The curious guests asked her to name some of the faults. She replied that she never got around to listing the faults—but every time he did something that made her mad, she told herself: “It’s a good thing for him that is one of the ten!”



We can remember the good times in a relationship.

We can choose to remember and honor all that has been positive and meaningful about the relationship. In the case of enduring relationships, it might help to keep reminders of those good memories such as pictures and keepsakes.

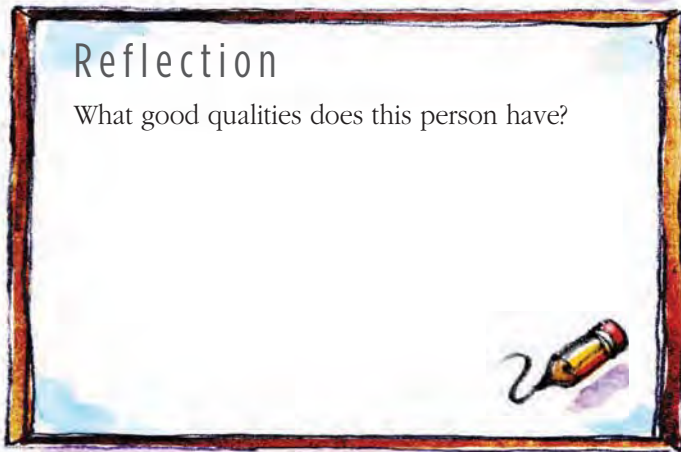
Reflection

Think of the person in the conflict you described earlier. What are your best memories of this person?



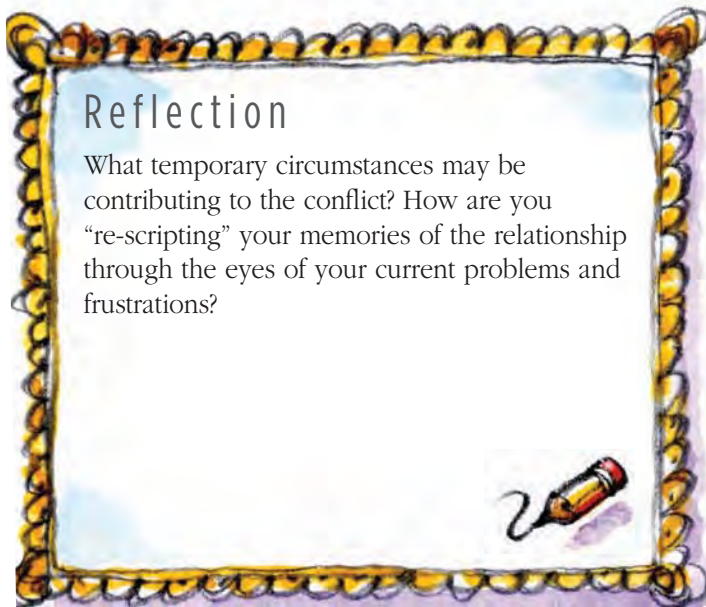
We can focus on the good qualities in people and appreciate how they enrich our lives.

Focusing on those good qualities in the midst of a conflict can help us avoid slipping into irritation and negativity. We can strengthen relationships with people we care about by choosing to make more positive and encouraging statements to them—and about them—rather than negative or critical statements.



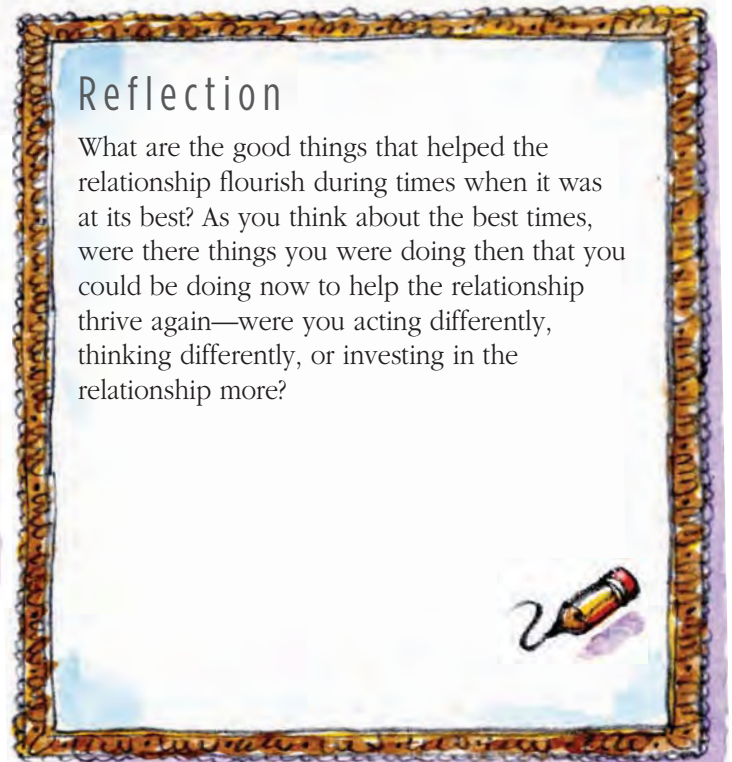
When relationships don't go well, we can assume that problems are temporary or minimal.

We do not allow today's problems and frustrations to take over our minds and hearts. During times of conflict we often "re-script" our memories. We replay the history of our relationship, emphasizing current frustrations and minimizing the good memories. This creates the feeling that the problem is permanent and unsolvable. Instead we can recognize that conflict is often the result of a rough day, a bad mood, or a temporary misunderstanding.

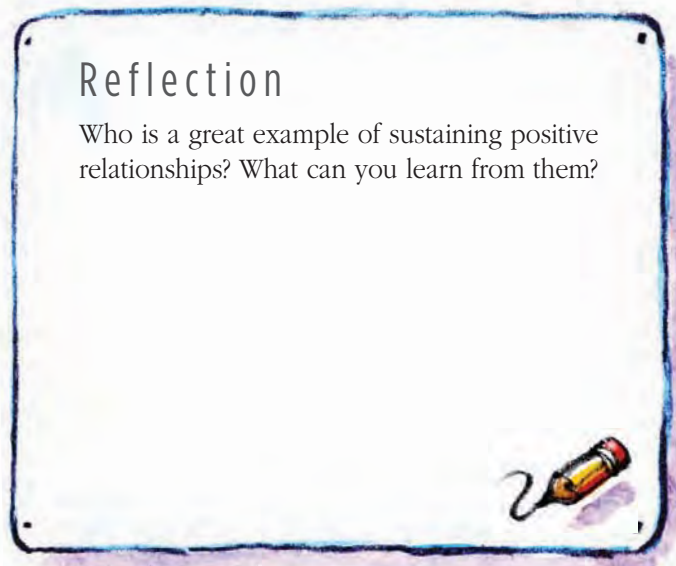


We can see the good things in our relationships as enduring and typical.

We choose to celebrate the good. We can dwell on it and create ways of remembering it.



We can identify examples of people who sustain positive relationships and learn from their examples.



When we emphasize the good, relationships keep getting better and better.

Applying Positivity to Your Own Situation

When we are humble enough to listen to someone else's view, compassionate enough to want to understand and help, and positive enough to see the good in another person, our hearts are changed. We are prepared to have rich and full relationships with all kinds of people.

Let's return to the conflict that you identified earlier. How could you use the principles of positivity to help you create a more positive relationship with that person?

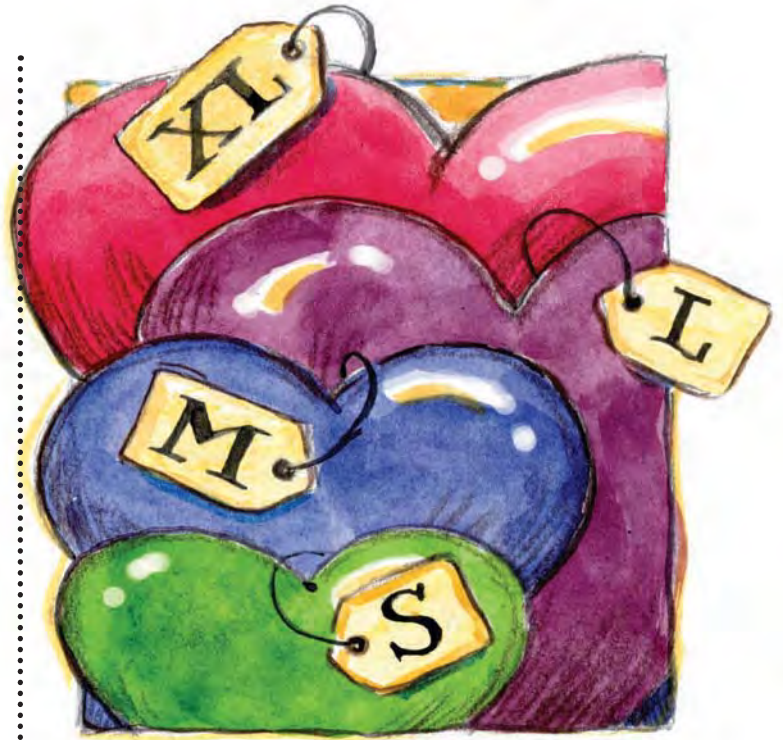


Changed hearts activate loving responses.

Are you ready to have better relationships?

We are creatures of habit. We have practiced our ways of misunderstanding and hurting each other for many years. If we want to improve our relationships, we must be willing to form new habits. This does not happen just because we have learned new principles. It will take conscious effort and enduring commitment to begin living these principles. But it will be worth the effort.

We won't be different all at once. We should expect that it will take a while to get our hearts right. And we likely will make mistakes along the way. Don't become discouraged or give up. Little by little we can learn to be more open to other people (humility), more sensitive to their concerns (compassionate), and more appreciative of their efforts (positivity).



When we catch ourselves acting unkindly, we can take a few minutes to identify where we went wrong. We can apologize and start over again.

Changing our hearts does not mean that we must always give in to others during times of conflict or that our needs will never be met. It means that we commit to having a different attitude when dealing with conflict. We are willing to be open to other's needs as well as our own. We are willing to show empathy instead of hostility towards them. In this way, we can talk about needs in ways that do not harm the relationship. It will also help us seek creative solutions that will work for everyone.

**If we want to improve our relationships,
we must be willing to form new habits.**

When we use the principles that build healthy relationships, we can create new stories for our relationships—stories filled with peace, growth, and sweet companionship. Getting our hearts right will help us have the thriving relationships we want. We will benefit from becoming more generous and gracious people.

We recommend that you reread this program regularly, that you work through the questions thoughtfully, and that you congratulate yourself for every success.

You will enjoy your change of heart. And so will the people in your life.



To get a worksheet for this program or to get additional great programs for families, go to www.arfamilies.org or visit your local county extension agent.

Recommended reading:

- Ginott, H. G. (2003). *Between parent and child*. New York: Three Rivers.
- Gottman, J. M., & Silver, N. (1999). *The seven principles for making marriage work*. New York: Crown Publishers, Inc.
- Haidt, J. (2006). *The happiness hypothesis*. New York: Basic Books.
- Tavris, C., & Aronson, E. (2007). *Mistakes were made (but not by me)*. New York: Harcourt, Inc.

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- Leary, M. R. (2004). *The curse of the self*. New York: Oxford University Press.

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