

Section 8

Step 8. Developing, Clarifying, and Changing Goals for Yourself and Your Relationship

[Question 8](#) | [Answer Booklet](#) | [Table of Contents](#) | [Printable Page](#)

Until now, Steps 1-7 have been focused largely on controlling conflict and setting up a structure so that some type of separation could take place, if necessary. Some couples remain stuck in the earlier roller coaster ride of fear, hurt, anger, disbelief, conflict, chaos, acting out, etc. If a couple has reached this step, chances are that at least one, if not both partners, has begun to see that he/she has played a part in the relationship crisis and are now ready to take a deeper look at his/her own issues. In my experience many partners, whether they enter counseling or not, want their partner to change. Many partners who decide to end their relationships do so believing that their partner is defective in some way. I hear things like, “He has never learned to take responsibility for anything, he is so selfish”; “He doesn’t know how to communicate, he keeps things to himself all the time,”; “She is no fun and doesn’t know how to let down her hair down”; “All she does is criticize me for not living up to her expectations,”; “Our sex life is boring, same old, same old, time and time again. She has no interest in spicing it up!”, etc. The list of complaints goes on and on. While some partner’s complaints are either tolerated or accepted, for others it is the beginning of thinking about straying into an affair or ending the relationship.

In my experience, some of the key factors that keep a relationship healthy and fulfilling and are also necessary to reconciliation, rebuilding and recovery include:

- The level of **investment and commitment** in a relationship. This includes the willingness to take responsibility to work on oneself and those issues that affect the process of how partners deal with conflict, communication, problem-solving and emotionally meeting each other’s wants/needs. (see-Relationship- Investment- Commitment Scale)
- Willingness to let one’s partner **influence** oneself.
- Willingness to give a partner **the benefit of the doubt and make up** after relationship conflicts.
- **Empathy** building

1.The level of commitment and investment in a relationship is perhaps the most important factor in whether couples manage through a crisis or problems. As you can see from the scale, (Relationship- Investment-Commitment Scale), the only two levels where a partner will most likely put energy into working on their relationship issues is, Level 1 “I’m committed and invested”, or Level 2 – “There must be a change”. On the other levels on this scale, the primary issue for partners is deciding whether one wants and/or is willing to reinvest and recommit, do nothing and stay stuck, or whether it is time to end the relationship. I hear so many partners say, “We tried a separation, but it didn’t work!” Taking physical space alone could help reduce the immediate crisis and conflict, but if and when one or both partners decide to return to their relationship and home, they will still need to learn how to manage conflict together and improve those areas and patterns that have not worked for them that result in ongoing conflict. When I see two willing partners express a desire to work on their issues, I quite often see success. This does not mean the work will be easy, but the time and energy will be available for the work that must be done.

If one partner is unsure of whether he really wants to recommit and reinvest time and energy into a relationship, that partner may need time and space to figure out what he wants. Separation Management was designed for partners who are ambivalent and on the fence. Getting some physical and emotional space could allow one to see oneself and one’s relationship more clearly.

On the other side of commitment and investment (Levels 3 & 4), I sometimes see couples or a partner where only one party is invested and committed. Some examples are: When one partner remains committed while the other is having an affair; one partner refuses to discuss finances or spending habits that puts the other partner in financial risk; one partner refuses to get help for abusive or addictive behavior; one partner refuses to discuss how to improve their relationship; or the stress from conflict in your relationship is making one partner emotionally and physically ill. It has been documented that relationships that are not working could actually make you sick, weaken your immune system, fuel depression and anxiety and hasten your death.

Step 8 is about getting to know, express and take care of oneself. The better one knows oneself, the better decision one can make about the future of a relationship. This is fundamentally linked to what one tolerates, experiences and creates in one's relationships. Getting more OK and satisfied with oneself before one makes a major life decision about a relationship is what Separation Management is about.

2. The willingness to allow oneself to be influenced by a partner is important to the level of satisfaction and connection one feels and experiences in a relationship. (Gottman, John. *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*. New York: Fireside, 1994. Gottman, John and Nan Silver. *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*. New York: Three River Press, 1999.)

A majority of partners that I see in couple's work are openly or silently asking me to help them gain some influence and personal power with their partners. This is not negative or abusive power, but influence and power to get their partners to understand, work and cooperate on what is important to them and their relationship. If one really wants to end a relationship, then stop listening and helping with a partner's desires and dreams for what she wants in her life. In stuck relationships, I often see one very resistant partner who refuses to allow his or her partner any influence with him or her.

The prognosis for an improved relationship goes up dramatically when partners allow each other to have influence with them. There is a sense of being together, connected and supported in their mutual effort, whatever that might be. I believe this is one of the primary functions of family which I call **emotional caretaking**. This does not mean over-compliance where one partner always does everything their partner wants and asks. There is discussion, negotiation, problem-solving and compromise.

3. Willingness to give your partner the benefit of the doubt allows partners to **repair**, make up, and recover after their relationship and communication process breaks down. This is the capacity to let go and not just blame and find fault with what a partner is doing or has done. This is the willingness to not hold onto grudges but to begin to build back positive energy after a fall-out. This means understanding and perhaps forgiving a partner for the numerous violations that occur in most relationships. This also applies to recovery and rebuilding after an affair. This may mean seeing a partner's actions as human. Of course, like committing and investing in a relationship where one partner remains a victim, this may not always be the best policy if one partner is being used, abused and consciously taken advantage of. This is not always easy to do, especially when a partner's actions have triggered all the painful and hurt emotions that go with violations, betrayals and conflict. A heartfelt apology for how one partner's actions have hurt the other is part of this trait. Love often means having to say "I'm sorry" and is usually the first step in being given the benefit of the doubt and making up. A sense of humor between partners is also very important to making up and getting back on track. But that usually means each partner must have a sense of humor. If one partner wants to joke and play as a way to be intimate or to recover after a fight or breakdown and the other doesn't, it could actually spark more conflict. Although conflicts and crises in relationships do not often initially promote humor, there is point as the crisis quells that humor can help lift spirits, lighten the mood, and provide more emotional closeness and intimacy.

4. Empathy is a primary component of love. I believe that empathy is at the base of all the factors already mentioned. According to Webster, "empathy is the intellectual or emotional identification with

another". The capacity to understand and attempt to get a feel for one's partner is a fundamental component of a satisfactory relationship. Intimate relationships and family life are ideal for empathy to be tested and developed. I believe that as one develops empathy and compassion within and for yourself, one can then feel and experience it with others. Empathy comes from one's heart as well as one's head. This supports the belief that as one works on oneself, he is also working on his relationships with others. Empathy is often expressed in how well one feels validated by a partner. The more developed one is, the better he will be able to validate and understand his partner and express this in his communication process. One does not have to agree fully with a partner to validate him. If one offers validation, she has a better chance of it being returned. When couples first meet there is a large volume of mutual validation. Later as you leave the romance stage, validation tends to decrease. This must be worked on over the life of any relationship since it is so important. Please note that genuine empathy must be distinguished from someone being addicted to a dysfunctional, destructive or harmful relationship. The following examples will demonstrate the factors we have introduced so far.

Couple Situation # 1 - Affair Recovery - Justin and Helen

A crisis!

Helen found out about Justin's affair when she found a dinner and hotel receipt in his coat pocket. Justin at first denied the extent of the affair, but later confessed to the entire affair. Justin moved in with a friend after Helen insisted he move out. Helen felt betrayed, hurt and angry. She felt herself becoming more anxious and depressed as her self-esteem dropped daily. She refused to talk with Justin for several days as she decided what to do. Justin was scared, made some attempts to contact Helen, but respected her request for distance and space right now. Justin and Helen have been married for eight years. Justin and Helen have two children, ages 5 and 3. Both stayed with Helen during the separation period. Justin talked with them by phone during the first week of their living apart. Helen explained to the children that Daddy was busy at work and would talk to them when he had time. This was not uncommon since Justin was away from his family on business trips every so often. After a week or so Helen spoke with Justin and said the only way they would be able to talk at any length was in a counselor's office. Justin said he would make the appointment.

Getting Out the dirt on the affair at a counseling session

Helen's emotional pain was expressed in crying and telling Justin how hurt and angry she was. Helen needed information about the affair, whether she knew the other woman, when it started, why it started and all the other details about how often they met and the extent of the affair. Justin did his best to reveal many of the intimate details about his very private and secret encounter that lasted for several months. During that first session it was revealed that the affair started nearly a year ago. Justin said he was very unhappy in his relationship with Helen. According to Justin they hardly spent time together. He said their sex life was scarce and passionless. He felt that Helen was negative and unhappy with herself and that he ended up being the brunt of her anger and criticism.

Helen's work

Helen's work was to first cope with the shock from finding out that the man she knew and trusted for the last ten years had had an affair. The affair and Helen's thinking triggered off feelings of intense hurt, embarrassment and shame that she was not worthwhile enough. After coping with her first reaction and shock, Helen had to gather information about where Justin stood with the other woman and the marriage. Helen had to decide over time whether she wanted to work on the marriage and eventually whether she was willing to forgive Justin. The initial focus that Helen needed to make was on herself. She had to first cope with the shock and pain of what happened, and then learn how to forgive herself for the blame she took on. The affair triggered off deep feelings of insecurity and anxiety that Helen carried around since childhood. Helen needed to take her share of responsibility for the poor state of her marriage and perhaps not hearing how desperate Justin was. But she did not need to take full blame nor declare herself unfit and unlovable as a partner. Without working on forgiving herself and not letting Justin's actions define who and what she was, Helen could become