

IMAGO RELATIONSHIP THERAPY

INTRODUCTION

by

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We are born in relationship.

We are wounded in relationship.

We are healed in relationship.

IMAGO is the Latin word for *image*. It refers to a constellation of memories of our caretakers, created in childhood, that in adulthood serves unconsciously as a template for the selection of an intimate partner who will be similar, in significant ways, to our caretakers. When there is similarity between the memory constellation and the traits of our selected partner, we call that an Imago Match.

Imago is a way of thinking and a way of doing. It is both a cosmology and a practical set of instructions for doing couples therapy. The term refers to an intellectual system about relationship that is expressed operationally as a couple's therapy, a relationship education curriculum and a social movement. This book is about the theory and practice of Imago Relationship Therapy. Its intended audience is clinical professionals, graduate students in the fields of mental health, undergraduate students in psychology, other professionals interested in relationship education and anyone curious about marriage and other intimate relationships.

Just as everyone unconsciously looks for a partner through a lens shaped by childhood memories, so every therapist unconsciously looks at clients through a lens shaped by their personal history, by implicit assumptions embedded in professional training and by unconscious cultural assumptions. Every perception is an interpretation. Therefore, before we get into an overview of Imago theory and practice, we want to take a short, but important detour, into a description of the Imago lens through which an Imago therapist looks at the client couple and the therapy process.

We are but actually our minds operate t cannot be otherwise, because it seems we we sit with our clients, we do not see them as they are but n Imago, the basic assumption is that people see things the way they are prepared to see them, that your understanding is formed by your pre-set patterns of thought and by your expectations. If someone convinces you that you are about to see a white dog cross the road, you will see that white dog, even if it's a white rabbit. If you think people are no damn good, that will certainly be your experience. If you believe Jesus is your personal savior, you will find His

handiwork everywhere. If you are convinced that life is suffering, you will experience your trials as the gateway to spiritual enlightenment.

What this means for someone about to undertake the role of therapist is that you will be expanded or constrained based on your education and your mindset. You may be able to report accurately the client behavior you are witnessing, but how can you understand it without some background in psychology, biology, and perhaps even philosophy? This is why we believe setting therapeutic techniques into a broader context of relationship theory is a good idea.

For this reason, we like to start explanations of Imago by sharing our view of the Big Picture. From time to time, everybody asks larger questions about the meaning of life and their place in it. Who hasn't beseeched the gods in a moment of despair, What's the point? Or, the famous one, Why me? But when cries of anguish are over, there follow times of reflection, when it makes sense to try to answer the larger questions about what kind of an existence we find ourselves in. It seems to be part of the human condition to look for patterns in the way things happen, to try to sort through the chaos we so often experience. It is comforting and useful to think we might be able to predict the vagaries of human behavior and consequently, (as T.S. Eliot says in *Prufrock*) have time to "prepare to meet the faces that we meet." It is through this kind of existential wrestling, that each person writes the "operations manual" for his or her life.

The operations manual for Imago has evolved in conjunction with some profound questions that go beyond the personal. We have felt it necessary to create Imago (or to *discover* it, a la Michelangelo) within the larger context of philosophical inquiry. What unites all the phenomena of the universe? What are the fundamentals of human behavior? What can we learn about the unities of body, mind, and spirit from recent discoveries in science? And most important of all: in what ways do our answers help us see into the difficult situations that confront us in the therapy room? How do the concepts that form the Big Picture impact the concepts of Imago Therapy?

We are continually asking and answering these larger questions as we seek to become more effective professionals and equally important, better people. Much of this fertile questioning has taken place within the larger Imago community where many different voices have contributed to Imago as it is practiced today. We are convinced that the more serious we are about a coherent working philosophy, the more knowledgeable our approach to helping others will be. A wise philosophical outlook leads to wiser therapeutic practice.

The purpose of this chapter is to give you the grounding you need to understand the practice of Imago Therapy, the details of which are discussed in Part II of the book. The basic ideas introduced here will be expanded and exemplified and dissected into their component parts in that section of the book. For now, it is important to get to know the general terrain of Imago and to follow the path from theory to

therapy. This chapter will provide an overall understanding of how the pieces of Imago fit together into a unified perspective that helps therapists reunite splintering couples into whole conscious partnerships.

To start with a definition then, Imago (the Latin word for *image*) is an integrative and systematic theory of intimate partnership and a unified, theory-based therapy for couples. Its perspective is based in part on a diverse collection of psychological theories, and on ideas borrowed from cosmology, quantum physics, philosophy, Eastern thought and Western religious traditions.

Introduction: Three Universal Principles

Imago Theory is a new way of thinking about couples. This new way of thinking comes from three sources: existing psychological theory, decades of direct experience with couples themselves, and a broader search for underlying principles to be found in disciplines outside psychology.

We have been motivated to search outside psychology for the Big Picture partly because such inquiry is fascinating in itself. This wanting to know for the sake of knowing is well expressed by Goethe in *Faust*, when he talks about wanting to know “what deep within it holds this universe together.” But partly, we’ve been led into deeper waters by the practical necessities of trying to understand why couples do the things they do.

Through years of studying couples closely, and at the same time, reading widely in science and philosophy, we are now clear that human beings and their relationships *mirror* the principles that operate in the universe as a whole. Throughout this book, we will see over and over again how discoveries in brain science illuminate both the mechanism and the observable phenomena of couple behavior. We will see how discoveries in quantum physics, epigenetics and biology have led to a new relational paradigm as a way of understanding what happens between partners and what needs to happen to repair their partnerships. We are both biological and spiritual beings. We are *of* Nature and *in* Nature in ways we’ve just begun to grasp.

We have based Imago Theory on three fundamental attributes that scientists understand apply to Everything There Is. In a neat example of the unity of things, these abstract principles have direct application to our understanding of what goes wrong in couples and how it can be repaired. The macro view of the universe turns out to be relevant to the micro view of us poor struggling humans.

Energy

The first principle is that matter can be understood as *energy*. Einstein built a whole cosmology on this premise. Human beings are, like everything else that exists, an expression of cosmic energy, magnificent

specks that are made from the same elements that make up everything else. We are energy fields, *not* psychological metaphors. As well as being ennobled by this thought, we are also led to see ourselves as dynamic and interactive, rather than static and separate. We partake of the dynamism that is present in every area of science: the vibration of violins strings, the movement of neurons in the brain, the slow oscillation of a swinging pendulum.

On a practical level, this means that the Imago therapist is sensitive to the energy each partner brings into the room, the energy they generate together, and how this energy is changed and transmuted into something else by the interactions that occur. The core techniques of Imago are designed to turn negative energy into open energy and then positive energy. Partners often come in sleepwalking through their days, automatically reacting to the things that happen without any real stirring of genuine feeling. They say they feel like they are the walking dead.

Therapy is hard work. So where is the energy needed for transformation to come from? At first, the fuel that powers the work must come from the cognitive decision the partners make to engage in the process, regardless of how much enthusiasm they may or may not feel for it. But after that, it is generated out of the moments of being heard and hearing, being accepted and accepting, being cared about and caring. Thinking of your clients as energy fields rather than discrete constructions with absolute identities reminds you that change is your milieu. You are working with live, fluctuating, oscillating forces that you can learn to direct but never to control.

Consciousness

Second, Imago understands the universe to be constantly engaged in the process of healing itself. By extension, when we as therapists assist in this process, we are in harmony with the fundamental forces that drive all that exists. For humans, the process of healing is the process of becoming conscious. In this sense then, we are midwives to *consciousness*. Our goal is to help people move from the darkness of unconscious reactivity to the light of conscious connection.

Healing in Imago is a journey through expanding consciousness and can be understood simply in this outline: 1)unearthing earlier wounds, 2)learning how defenses developed as a result, 3)reconnecting to the person who both embodies one's wounds and has the power to heal them, 4)connecting with each other in safety and nonjudgment through dialogue, 5)stretching to meet each other's requests for changed behavior, and 6)becoming comfortable in getting and receiving appreciation and humor.

This journey cannot be undertaken in darkness. If partners remain unconscious they remain the victims of their own hidden wounds, narrow and closed. They interact with their partners through overly intense emotion or minimizing under emotion. They are triggered to react rather than stimulated to respond.

They react with no awareness of what is going on, continuing legacy of pain that they themselves have inherited.

Fortunately, we know that the past doesn't have to be a prison sentence. It's possible to open the bars and breathe deeply the fresh air of other possibilities. A new and different energy can create a new and different consciousness. A volatile partner who is under pressure can, over time, learn to calm down and become thoughtful and caring. This is the purpose of Imago Therapy – to free people from the prison of the self and regain their natural state of open collaboration with others. If they can connect to their capacity for self-knowing and therefore to knowing their chosen Other, they find themselves feeling a broader communion with everything else in life - spiders, hedgehogs, clouds, rocks – all of it!

Connection

And that brings us to our third and most important understanding of the ontological reality of the universe – connectivity. *Connection is what is most real.* It denotes an ever-flowing exchange of energy, a dynamism that allows seemingly discreet entities to influence, and even more, to co-create each other. Interconnectedness is the essential condition of human life and of everything else in the universe - from the interactions of massive star systems, all the way down to the way nanoparticles react in concert with each other.

In human terms, our ontological connections are easy to see. As biological beings, our mind and body are connected. As family beings, we are intimately connected to the functioning of other family members. As social beings, we are part of the interlocking webs that describe our various communities and demographics. In an exciting way, our small interdependencies mirror the essential conditions of the universe. Discovering these interdependencies and what they mean is one way to define the role of scientific inquiry. How do atoms combine, how do diverse elements of ecosystems fit together into interdependent wholes, how do trees exhibit intelligence by self-regulating their growth according to which others are growing nearby? It's literally impossible to think of any element of the natural world that stands absolutely alone. Life is not made that way.

Imago's emphasis on connection as the fundamental reality of everything that exists has implications for how we see The Self. In conventional religion and psychoanalysis, the self has been almost like an object, a separate and distinct "thing" with characteristics and needs, a definable entity that has an identity. But in Imago, the self is more like a process than a thing. It is an experience that is co-created by the continuous vibration between the outer world and the inner world. The self is always forming through the action of external forces, which include actual material circumstances as well as abstract cultural values, and their action on the inner world of feelings and memory.

This is a shift in emphasis from the primacy of the *inner* life of the individual to an understanding that inner and outer experiences act together to affect and form the individual. The most significant influence on any one person is the intimate *interaction between* that person and the others close to him or her. This has big implications for conventional psychotherapy as we shall see in the next chapter. It means that the therapeutic techniques of psychoanalysis, behaviorism, and cognitive therapy, can be helpful but they are not complete. Being present and connecting through relationship is ultimately what heals individuals, not attempting to change yourself as an individual person.

If connection is of paramount importance, then it stands to reason that dis-connection is equally important. What happens when inter-connected elements break apart? This is the central narrative of Imago Therapy. As we shall see, ruptured connection has fundamental consequences for individual, couples, families, and not least, for our wider society.

Introduction: The Space-Between

Identifying energy, consciousness and interconnectivity as the driving principles of life focuses our attention on *the* central therapeutic concept of Imago. If we are saying that *human beings are in essence made of energy and consciousness that is connected* – what does this tell us about therapy? It tells us that the place where these powerful but unseen forces reside is of crucial importance. It tells us that paying attention to the emotional force-field that partners generate together is where we should start our work, and where change happens.

We call this mutually generated and mutually connected mental and emotional space the Space-Between. The term and the basic idea comes from Martin Buber, the Austrian born Jewish Israeli philosopher born in 1878. We have developed Martin Buber's concept of the In-Between to the point where it is central to both Imago Theory and Imago Therapy. It isn't just a psychological construct – a clever idea so to speak - but rather a reality that we work *with and in* when we are helping couples. Physics has schooled us to accept the reality of things we know are there but cannot yet see (like black holes, dark matter, nanoparticles, etc.) and this has been our experience with Imago Therapy.

What it means to us is that the couple really consists of three entities, not just two. There is “I” and “Thou” but there is also what they have created together in the space that unites them or separates them. The space between isn't empty, it is filled with abstract realities like criticism, anxiety, mutual blaming, disappointment The list goes on. Conversely, it can be filled with appreciation, admiration, and confidence. It can also be filled with secrets, shadowy feelings and memories that are hidden from awareness. These are abstract ideas in the sense that they don't have corporeal manifestations, but their existence is real and their effects are important.

As you can see, we have identified *processes and not entities or objects as the fundamental reality of the universe*, which includes human beings and their complex behavior. Our job as therapists is to understand the implications of this idea and employ these processes for the purpose of rewiring the connections that have broken, thereby participating in the great on-going work of the universe, which is to heal itself.

Introduction: Imago Theory About How Couples Work

Having a specific theoretical understanding of what it means to be human, and to have needs and desires, and to get off track, and to suffer pain in relationships is fundamental to knowing how to repair and to heal.

This book is an interweaving of how theory and practice interlace to form a coherent understanding of couple dynamics, and a guidebook for therapists who want to help partners move from failure to thrive into a state of alive partnership. We will be building on our understanding of theory as we go along, augmenting and enriching with specific examples and techniques.

As we shall see, especially in chapters 2 and 3 (the Relational Paradigm and Preparing the Therapist), Imago Therapy does not work on the medical model. The DSM-5 lists 354 mental disorders that can be diagnosed and treated. One of the effects of this point of view is that people *become* their diseases and are treated as objects. Our view is simpler. All of those 354 diagnoses are symptoms of one common problem. The problem occurs because we rupture our connections and are therefore at odds with one of the basic rules of the universe: the rule of interconnectivity.

The Human Birthright: We Are Born In Relationship

Human beings are born into a connected state with an attuned caretaker. The baby and mother together form two points in a seamless, harmonious bond. The mother smiles and sings, and the baby laughs and coos. The baby's survival depends on this mutual intuition he shares with his mother. She must "know" what her baby needs and act on her knowingness to keep her child safe and happy.

There is a remarkable video available on line (FN) of an experiment done at Harvard where the interactions between and mother and her baby are filmed as she responds to him in perfect attunement, and then turns away for a time, and then turns back with a mask of unresponsiveness. The effect on the baby is graphic evidence of what happens when the connection between mother and child is broken. This experiment was called, "Still Face" and we will talk about its implications further in the next chapter.

The Human Problem: We Are Wounded in Relationship

Therapists hear a phantasmagoria of horrors when they ask couples what brings them to therapy: affairs, addictions, abusive behavior. And on the other end of the spectrum: freezing the partner out, not responding, belittling. It is true that some relationships need to end, especially when there are safety issues. But in cases where both people want to make things better and are willing to work for it, Imago Therapy is always helpful.

To begin with, we think of presenting problems as *symptoms* of the Human Problem we've been talking about. There has been a rupture of connection that the couple is unable to repair by themselves. Because Connection is Being, it follows that Dis-Connection plunges us into Non-Being. That is, we become not integrated, not harmonious, not at One. As a result, we become very afraid. It feels like our survival is in jeopardy.

Since connection is our most essential state - the condition under which we do our best work and our best loving - and our best *being*- when intimate connections are ruptured, the perceived loss of connection is what drives our unhappiness and our dysfunction. Although we cannot actually separate ourselves from the universal web of existence, we often lose our awareness of our essential connectedness. And when we *think* an important connection is broken, it may as well, in fact, be broken.

Unfortunately, we can see that the three universal attributes we've been discussing are conjoined in such a way that when one is damaged, the other two are also affected. When partners lose their connection, they lose vital life energy, and they are more likely to revert to the wounding behavior that comes from the unconscious default. When the energy needed to interact isn't there, it's easier to subside into separate, hostile camps, and so on. If not redressed, the rupture of connection can become a psychological emergency that needs immediate triage, although it rarely receives such assistance.

Why do we say that loss of connection is universal? It starts early, since our first and most profound losses occur in childhood. These breaks are inevitable. It doesn't mean that our parents were ogres (although some are), for most people it just means that our parents were flawed human beings. (Surprise!) If the ruptures are constant or permanent as the child grows through the stages of development, she experiences these losses as a disruption of her universal sense of Being, although she wouldn't be able to put it that way. She probably *would* be able to recognize that she is angry and depressed and that she feels worthless. This leads to self-absorption, difficulty in differentiating, (maybe a FN here on what differentiating means) and a loss of empathy. During the teenage years, she starts searching in all the wrong places for stimulation that she hopes will stifle the anxiety and fill the void.

We will spend a lot of time in this book learning about childhood wounds and how they are likely to manifest in relationships and therefore how to treat them, but for now let's follow one thread that begins in these large and small woundings and winds itself around everything that happens after. This raveled thread is our search to find other intimate connections as life giving as the ones that are now

broken. We spend our lives looking for the safety of our first secure connections. We don't know that's what driving our decisions and our behavior, but for most of us, trying to establish positive intimate connections is thematic.

We Try to Fix the Problem Through Romantic Love

The search begins in the early school years when we start auditioning BFFs (best friends for life). In adolescence, we venture into the risky territory of crushes and infatuations and romantic skirmishes. When we get older, the search takes on the heavy tone of search and rescue. We are looking for Romantic Love. When we find it, we feel like we are home free as we re-experience the bliss of romantic and sexual attraction. All of a sudden, we are more happy and creative and generous and energetic, and most of all, more beautiful, than we have ever been.

Our Fix Doesn't Last: The Power Struggle

It's too bad it doesn't last. Enduring, mature love is possible of course, or we wouldn't be putting so much effort into figuring out how relationships work. But Romantic Love is a beautiful bubble. Sooner or later (actually about 3 years later), it bursts and we find ourselves battling it out with our partner in the Power Struggle. In a cruel paradox, our beloved has become our enemy. How could this have happened? Imago Therapy has a lot to say about this. We know about the power struggle and why partners who love each other replay the dysfunctional dynamics they had with their parents, and we know how to help them untangle this messy skein of disappointed hopes. We have learned a lot about why the trauma of childhood has become the drama of marriage.

The story that ends with the Power Struggle always begins in early childhood. As we have said, the seeds of marriage trouble are sown unwittingly in childhood through moments of neglect, anger and insensitivity. We can add to this legacy of early wounding all the other baggage both partners bring to their romantic relationship, including the multifarious childhood wounds, defenses, and character flaws they developed when they were younger. As their frustration with each other grows, the emotional symbiosis they formed during the Romantic stage is ruptured and they react with the same unconscious and automatic defensive adaptations that they developed in childhood. Spontaneous feelings of romantic love are replaced with negativity. Increasingly, they use negative reactions and other forms of coercion to get their needs met. And they end up unconsciously re-experiencing and reacting to each other in the same ways they did toward their imperfectly attuned caretakers during childhood.

The negative projections of the Power Struggle follow this general trajectory:

The partners fall in love and become enmeshed in symbiotic projection. They experience each other in fusion rather than differentiation. They don't really want to know their partner as someone separate from them, they want their partner to be who they *need* them to be. Each of them just made up their

soulmate, and one effect of this is that *knowing* you are not who your partner thinks you are, means living with some anxiety. Both partners are suffering from some degree of Imposter Syndrome and feeling like they are living on borrowed time. Each of them experiences the discomfort of believing that they are not being loved for who they truly are, that their real accomplishments are not enough. As soon as their partner discovers the “real me,” they will be exposed as a fraud. This and many other anxieties cause the problems that bring couples to therapy.

This is discouraging but it also makes sense. There is a reason that the Power Struggle follows Romantic Love like night follows day. It has to do with *why* we choose the partners we do in the first place.

The Curse (And Redemption) of the Imago Match

One of the important insights of Imago is that we are attracted to potential partners who have the same traits as the parent we had the most difficulty with. We say they have made an Imago Match. It is unconscious of course. Who could imagine that we would want to be with a man who was as unavailable as our father was, or as intrusive? It defies logic that we would want to replay the drama we experienced with our mother who was overly controlling or, conversely, dependent. The traits are not gender-specific but our propensity for the familiar conflict or obstacle or injury is undeniable. Never underestimate the power of the unmet needs that slumber fitfully in the unconscious.

Given the realities of the Imago Match, it’s not hard to predict the rocky road ahead. We are now in a declared relationship with a person who has the power to wound us as we were wounded in childhood. Only now we are adults with the sharpened tools of increased sophistication. We’ve accumulated some ideas about standing up for ourselves in arguments, or the power of freezing out the opposition. Whatever our defenses, they are bigger and better than they were when we were living at home. And we do not hesitate to deploy them in service to our need to “win” this time around. We’re going to make it come out better than it did when we were ten years old. We are not only wounded but *wounders*.

Whenever a couple gets angry at each other and views the other as the enemy, it can be tied to an earlier incident when they, as children, weren’t seen for who they were, weren’t noticed, understood, or even loved. Being able to climb out of this Sough of Despond feels hopeless. But, of course, it’s not. In order for partners to grow up as individuals, they need to grow up as a couple, and new ideas and insights, and therefore new behavior, has to be introduced into the mix. Otherwise, the dysfunctional merry-go-round just goes round and round until the end. And the end is one of three outcomes: a parallel marriage, a “hot” marriage, or a divorce.

Surprisingly, in Imago, we don’t see this boggy mess as The End. The truth is that the sorrow and disappointment and anger the couple feels is not the end of the line. They haven’t necessarily failed or married the wrong person. They have simply arrived at the point where unmet childhood needs can

finally be understood as the determining factors that they really are, which means that they can also be met. Taking the long view, intimate partnerships in all their messiness are the best chance we have to participate in the universe's drive toward generativity and wholeness.

We've already mentioned the paradox that our beloved becomes our enemy, but it is a double paradox that our beloved enemy can then in turn become our healer. Estranged partners have the potential to be each other's best healers. Warring partners can become allies. They can lose their sense of alienation, reform their defenses, change their behavior and re-experience the sense of connection that will nurture them in love and safety. In fact, in Imago we say that the unconscious purpose of marriage is to finish childhood and go on to live your best life.

In this sense, then, the Power Struggle can be the beginning of better things. The strongest partnerships are the ones that have experienced the Power Struggle, transcended the chaos, and emerged into the consciousness of Real Love. This admittedly difficult process makes it possible for the couple to understand the cracks in their individual psyches and the conflicts they've engendered together, and finally do something about it. They were wounded in relationship and they can be healed in relationship.

The Human Solution: We Are Healed In Relationship, only

It's important now to introduce the ground from which this healing begins to take shape. Elaboration of these ideas can be found in Chapter 3, which is written for the therapist with a detailed map of the Imago process that moves couples from the Power Struggle to the high plain of Conscious Partnership.

Earlier, we introduced the concept of the Between as a guiding principle for the therapist. It is a way to focus attention on the atmosphere the couple has formed around them. The definition of an atmosphere is "an envelope of gasses surrounding the earth or other planets." That may be amusing, but it is actually helpful in envisioning how the Between is both diagnostic and the medium through which positive change can occur. Couples have a field of energy that holds them in a certain position in relation to each other and their bond is strong in some ways and weak in others. Healing involves a bit of psychological chemistry. We want to help them change the energy and the elements that make up their bond and therefore change their relationship.

Paying attention to the Between, can help a couple move from a "me" and "you" preoccupation to an "us" focus. Not, "What have you done to me?" but "What exists between us now?" Not, "Who did what and to whom?" but "What feelings do we share?" "What binds us together and splits us apart?" Thus reinforcing a basic tenet of Imago: Being present and connecting through relationship is ultimately what heals individuals, not attempting to change themselves as separate, individual people.

One of the implications for therapy is that the important action takes place *between the partners*, not between the partners and the therapist, although the therapist is an invaluable guide. She keeps tabs on

the Between that exists, not only between the two people she is guiding, but also between herself and the couple as an entity. It is natural for people to look to the therapist for answers as the authority figure, but developing the concept of the Between makes it possible for the therapist to redirect the partners to look to themselves and their tri-partite reality for the solutions they seek. By paying attention to the atmosphere the couple has created around them, each partner is depathologized as the focal point of the problem, and the emphasis is put on the attitudes and feelings that will allow them to work together in ways that are to co-operative and appreciative.

As we will discuss in the next chapter, the concept of the Between is a natural consequence of our understanding of the Relational Paradigm, which is the bridge between the philosophy of Imago Theory and the practice of Imago Therapy. The Between places the focus where it ought to be – on Relationship as the functional principle in all of life, not just on separate individuals.

Help the Couple Establish Safety

In his new research on the physiology of safety, Stephen Porges has gathered convincing evidence about the essentiality of perceiving yourself to be safe and the biological changes that happen when you either think you are or are not. (FN) Talking with someone who feels supportive and encouraging is completely different from talking with someone who is hostile. A hostile reaction makes you escalate your negativity or stop talking all together. You may not remember much about what was said but you sure remember how you felt when facing down the glare and the scowl.

We said above that something new has to come into the unhappy vortex of the Power Struggle in order for things to get better: not only new knowledge of each other as differentiated human beings, but simply new information about certain key ideas. These ideas (which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3, along with references and resources) include: how the human brain is primed to equate feelings of emotional threat with threats to physical survival; how defenses arise unconsciously and automatically in knee-jerk patterns of reaction; and the importance of careful, intentional behavior in creating safety.

The primary way safety is established is through Imago Dialogue as we shall see, but some psycho-education early on helps the couple begin to understand what is happening to them and helps them gain a sense of control over what has felt chaotic and incomprehensible. Everything the therapist does, especially in the beginning, is done with an eye toward making both partners feel like this is a place to feel and to speak without fear of judgment, criticism, or reprisal. As each partner learns how to avoid whenever possible triggering their partner's childhood wounds, they themselves become more aware of what makes *them* feel angry or afraid, and therefore they learn how to play an important part in making *themselves* less vulnerable.

Because people usually enter therapy overwhelmed by everything, client education is something that can be done over time. No one can assimilate new information during times of stress. Ideally, Imago concepts are introduced verbally as explanations for what is happening between the couple in the moment when they have the opportunity to experience the validity and usefulness of the ideas for themselves.

All Imago tools and techniques have the establishment of safety as their stated outcome or their intended effect. The partners have to know that they will never be attacked, discounted or dismissed. Their safety has to be absolutely reliable and predictable.

Help the Couple Banish Judgment

Eliminating criticism is the central challenge in establishing safety. Anyone who wants to be a therapist certainly knows that there is a straight line from negativity to disconnection. But while it's easy to agree with the concept, it can be difficult to change long-established habits of backbiting and complaint. Most criticism is easy to spot when you hear it, but some is subtle, being buried in benign or even complimentary statements that appear on the surface to be positive.

By the time they get to therapy, many partners are so used to hearing hurtful comments from each other that they have experienced some hearing loss. They may not realize the destructive consequences of their habitual interaction. One of the most important functions of the therapist is to educate couples about these unconscious negative reactions, help them recognize on their own when they are guilty of assault, and learn the Dialogue process, which when properly practiced makes rampant negativity impossible.

Introduction: Therapeutic Solutions

Imago Dialogue, A New Way to Talk

In Imago, there is "one ring to rule them all" and that ring is Imago Dialogue. If they own it and know how to use it, couples can change dross into gold, discord into harmony. They can transcend negativity and experience once again the power of togetherness. A full and detailed discussion of Imago Dialogue is found in Chapter 4, but an introduction now will help you see the fundamental role it plays in addressing the central problem from which all this unhappiness flows, the rupture of connection.

Imago Dialogue is at the ground level of Imago Therapy, the engine that carries all the other therapeutic interventions forward into the couple's lives. So effective is this engine that we have developed a non-therapy version of Imago Dialogue called "Safe Conversations." Our goal is build a social movement by teaching a simplified version to school children, work colleagues, service providers, health workers and

more. We are committed to fomenting a Relationship Revolution by strengthening the relational paradigm in all sectors of society through exposure and education.

Why is Imago Dialogue such a transformative tool? The most dangerous thing we do in our everyday lives is talk. Talking actually changes your brain (as does a full hug that lasts at least three minutes). In other words, the everyday interactions you engage in have significance for body and brain health. If the brain is affected by the experience of talking, and the brain is directly connected to everything in the body, the physiology of the body is therefore directly affected by changing how we talk. (FN)

Much of the time, we speak unconsciously out of a kind of reactivity that seems to offend people. As talkers we don't know why we say the careless or insensitive things we do, and as listeners we don't know why other people say the hurtful things *they* say. Or, more commonly, we don't listen to each other at all. How often do we think, *blah, blah, blah* when someone is trying to tell us something or dismiss them with a disrespectful, *whatever*, either spoken or unspoken.

This conversational impairment isn't just personal. It's trans-personal, ubiquitous. A quick glance at the news or social media, or a sensitive check-in on the family dinner table is enough to lead us to one conclusion: we need a new way of talking! And that new way has to focus on *how we talk to each other*. The *how* is much more important than the *what*. We have discovered, in therapy, that what transforms the couple is not the particular problems they solve but the quality of the interaction they have while talking about their problems. Unless there is a quality interaction, the problems are not solved and the relationship is not improved.

The Benefits of Dialogue

Imago clinical practice focuses on helping couples change the structure and content of their conversation so that six essential ingredients of intimacy are established. These six essentials are elaborated throughout the book. Here they are in summary:

1. Dialogue turns the conversation from an exchange of parallel monologues into a mutual sharing of genuine ideas and feelings. People take turns talking and listening, and in so doing, they establish equality, safety, and connection.
2. Dialogue allows each partner to become present to the other as a distinct person. Just as connection is ontological, so is difference. There is no true connection without realizing that projections are not truth. At some point in Dialogue, it hits them, "My partner is not me." From this epiphany there grows a sense of the "otherness" of the partner and a gradual progression toward the important developmental state of *differentiation*. In this sense, when partners make dialogue central to their relationship, they participate in the expansion of

their own consciousness. As mentioned above, the work partners do to differentiate and reconnect will end up changing the chemistry of their brains. (FN)

3. Dialogue allows partners to get rid of judgment – the destroyer of intimacy. This means eliminating *all* negativity, since negativity stimulates anxiety, signals danger, and thus activates defensiveness, which is the greatest barrier to intimacy.
4. Dialogue replaces judgment with curiosity, as partners learn things about each other that they didn't know and are stimulated to learn even more. The frame of mind you are in when you are wondering and wanting to know more is antithetical to judging and criticizing. You can't be negative when you are curious. Curiosity is a differentiating process that leads to the discovering the other person. If you really let yourself know somebody, you will learn that they are full of mystery and depth.
5. Dialogue is a structured way to acknowledge and work through conflicts. Partners now have a safe way to bring concerns into the relationship so they can be heard and handled. Disagreements and disappointments, anxieties even, will never be entirely absent but developing a safe and reliable way to process them *is* possible. One way to determine whether a relationship has reached the Conscious Partnership stage is to see how long it takes them to repair the inevitable ruptures that pepper every relationship. Happy marriages do Quick Repairs.
6. Dialogue provides a structure for infusing relationships with positive feelings. It's such a delightful experience when appreciation, admiration, acceptance, humor, and just plain fun become integral. Successful intimate partnerships are characterized by both safety and passion; by both comfort and excitement. It's hard to imagine achieving such a thing without some fun thrown into the mix.

Mirroring

Dialogue involves three steps: mirroring, validating, and empathizing. For our purposes in this overview, let's say a little more about this first step. One partner (a man let's say for the purpose of clarity) says something and the other (a woman) listens and mirrors back what she heard as accurately as she can.

She keeps working at it until her partner is satisfied that she understood when he was saying. Then, going deeper, she asks him, “Is there more about that?” (This question is one of many *sentence stems*, a group of important tools designed to maximize the power of Imago Dialogue.) Asking this question shows that she is curious, she wants him to have the chance to discover for himself whether he has more to say. As we have said, curiosity opens the door to seeing your partner as an Interesting Other and closes the door on criticism. It’s a revival of the kind of curiosity new lovers exhibit about each other when they whisper, “I want to know everything about you.”

Unfortunately, this drive to know and understand the Other is often dulled over time until each partner thinks they know the other inside out. In Dialogue, when the talker is invited to share more, what comes out next is usually surprising to both the one talking and the one listening.

If the rules are followed and the technique is actively practiced, Imago Dialogue will be the engine of transformation that leads to conscious partnership. Just as no one would expect to be a good tennis player without diligently exercising the muscles that get the ball over the net, no one can expect a complete change in perception and communication without dutiful practice of the rules of Dialogue. Once learned, these conversations can be used for many purposes: establishing pleasant interaction, exchanging information, negotiating tricky compromises, airing grievances and so on. If Dialogue is the truck, the cargo in the truck can be anything you want.

In a therapeutic situation, Dialogue is deployed carefully for the purposes of repair and reconnection, as discussed below. We have learned through the years that the most powerful three words in the English language are “*That Makes Sense.*” (Okay, maybe the second most powerful.) Under the guidance of the therapist, the specific instructions of Dialogue are followed to the letter, and the spirit of Dialogue is invoked during all interactions as the desired attitude.

The Tools of Reconnection of The Six R’s

As therapists we are in the business of helping people repair and reconnect. Just as the spirit of Dialogue infuses everything, the goals of repair and reconnection are pervasive. But they can be helped along by intentional actions undertaken by the therapist for specific purposes. Sometime during the initial 12 sessions there will be opportunities to engage the partners in the following exercises that are designed to heal their ruptured connection. They are discussed in detail in Part II of the book on Imago practice, but here, let’s summarize what these processes of reconnection are. Each of the 5 R’s is both an on-going process and a specific set of exercises.

1. **Re-committing** has three parts: to the *relationship for now*, without making any predictions or decisions about the long term; to the *process* through the intention to engage in the

therapy with a willing and open heart; to the *time commitment* by promising to attend 12 sessions.

2. **Re-visioning** means shifting from the negativity that brings them to therapy to an imaginative dream of everything their relationship could be. Shifting the mental state to something expansive and positive introduces the shared energy they have been starving for.
3. **Removing** all negativity from the relationship is an immediate and non-negotiable standard the partners must aim for, although in truth, getting rid of emotional pollution can be a long process. There is a Negativity Bias that makes negative statements much more intense and memorable to people than neutral or positive ones (FN) Undoing years of bad habits takes dedication and a willingness to stretch into behaviors that are not initially comfortable.
4. **Re-imagining** also has three parts: *-our self*, as someone who is not inherently flawed but is wounded, as is our partner; *-our partner*, whom nature has placed us with for the very important purpose of accomplishing our healing and growth; and *-our relationship*, as the vehicle that carries the potential for healing and transformation.
5. **Re-romanticizing** necessitates some sophisticated restructuring as the person associated with our pain becomes the person associated with our pleasure. This healing process is the last one on the list, since if all goes well, it will be the natural result of the work of the previous 4 R's.

These processes of renewal all focus on the quality of the couple's *Between*. The emphasis is not on solving each person's particular problems but on sowing seeds of harmony in the psychic space that unites them. They do these exercises together in each other's company with the guidance of the therapist and watch new love flourish.

Introduction: Mastery

The Cultural Context

Everybody is looking for something. In the West, we are a competitive culture of stimulation and over-stimulation. We are spurred from one shot of intense feeling to another. Our electronic devices are live wires connecting us to words and images calculated to shock, thrill, anger, and grieve us. And, not incidentally, to make us feel inadequate. There is new research showing that we are afraid of boredom

and have underestimated the value of time without a constant stream of stimulating input. (FN:Science Friday)

The search for meaning is as old as human consciousness. In its 20th century form, it wasn't the frantic blitz we have now, but the voice of alienation exemplified in T.S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. The "I" in the poem invites us to walk down "Streets that follow like a tedious argument / of insidious intent / To lead you to an overwhelming question..... Oh, do not ask, "What is it?" And later, in despair, "I should have been a part of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas." In language that betrays both regret and ennui, this question, "what is the point of living?" comes from someone who is exhausted by the vapid meaninglessness of his life.

A few admirable people have sought the answer in religion, or in the arts, or in self-less giving to others. But the majority in our culture do the best they can with drinks after work, recreational drugs on the weekend, blitzed out evenings in front of the TV, obsessive shopping, overeating, or even testing themselves in extreme conditions on the tops of mountains. This frantic pursuit of consuming is *The Way We Live Now*, to borrow from Anthony Trollope.

The problem with all this searching is that it rarely results in any lasting "finding." Hedonic adaptation, a concept first discussed in 1971 and developed by several psychologists since then, is useful in understanding why making more money, buying more stuff, having more sex, and getting famous don't usually make a person happier. No matter what external stimulation we receive, we tend to fall back to the same level of satisfaction we had before the event.

In our experience, there is one best way to fill the void, and that is to do the work to create a conscious partnership; that is, to build a quality, responsive interactive space with a significant other that allows both people to feel safe and spontaneously playful. Couples who achieve this kind of relationship feel fully alive, individually and together. They experience both the peace and the excitement of being part of a whole. Their infantile wish to be totally taken care of is replaced with the best of the best: the mutuality of equal partners, the security of familiar companionship, the loyalty of best friends, and the electricity of lovers.

Substitutes, including the worthy pursuit of knowledge and purpose and meaning and spirituality, do not bring the sense of energy and aliveness that comes with the experience of a conscious and joyful relationship.

What A Conscious Relationship Looks Like

We need better, more exciting, more accessible examples of what good relationships look like. In our country's public life, revelations about powerful men who harass and rape seems symptomatic of a trashed ideal of mature love. And the hook-up culture gets it backward. Sex comes first and fast, and the

process of getting to know and value each other through accumulated conversations and incremental bits of knowing usually doesn't happen at all.

It looks like a shared model of healthy intimacy is not important in our culture and does not claim public attention. Visible real-life examples seem to be rare, or are not accessible enough to make much difference. Men, in particular, seem confused about how to participate in conscious partnerships while still maintaining the kind of masculinity that is attractive to them and acceptable to other men.

Despite all this, a conscious marriage is easy to recognize. It is a relationship that has internalized the basics of Dialogue and that practices its tenets. It is egalitarian and partner-oriented and shares some characteristics with healthy work partnerships. You could say that in a conscious marriage the two people involved work together cooperatively to advance their mutual interests.

Obviously, there's a whole lot more going on as well. The couple likes being together. They enjoy each other's company and do a lot of laughing. They share things with each other on a personal level that they don't share with anyone else. As one woman told us, she finally realized that her husband just wanted someone to have his back. He didn't need her to try to improve him, he just needed her to shelter him.

As we mentioned earlier, one important sign of a conscious relationship is the Quick Repair. Couples are anxious to resolve whatever dissonance has raised its ugly head and they now have the skills to do it. Of course, there are splinters, but they are taken out before they fester or become fatal.

Another quality that pervades conscious partners is a sense of wonder about the Other. This is a quality that is present in Romantic Love, that gets lost in the thicket of the Power Struggle, and that is born again through the process of differentiation, only to flourish in the full aliveness of conscious marriage. Wonder, which implies both mystery and awe, has its roots in the curiosity fostered by Imago Dialogue.

Although the experience of wonder feels like a gift, it is nurtured into life as the partners learn to get to know each other. As we mentioned above, the sentence stem, "Is there more?" has the power to elicit thoughts and connections that may have been hidden until that moment. Assuming the talker is brave enough to honor the question with honesty and ask for what they want, the effect can be electric. "Oh! Wow! I didn't know that." Implied but usually not explicit are these further responses: "I guess I really *don't* know everything! I've stayed curious long enough for you to show up, and you are not what I thought you were. You are not my projections of you." Carrying this attitude of not knowing, and at the same time being curious about learning more, makes room for surprise, for delight, and for magic.

Set in this context, the work of Imago is in service to a higher purpose. Educating, influencing, and therapizing more people into an awareness of the value of quality relationships can be considered a high

calling with social and political implications way beyond the personal. Being able to testify that it is possible is life-giving.

It isn't a big leap from the specifics of couple's therapy to the dream of a whole culture connected with positive energy and full conscious awareness. Having spent so many years on the micro-level, we naturally catch fire at the possibility of applying the principles of Imago Dialogue to relationships that are broader than two people at a time.