Wellness Files
Spring 2013

Interpersonal RELATIONSHIPS

...just why do they matter so much to our mental health?

Relationships **determine** the quality of life

Relationships

ARE CRITICAL IN OUR LIVES ...BUT HOW CAN WE IMPROVE THEM?

CAN PEOPLE CHANGE?

The Early Years

POSITIVELY OR NEGATIVELY AFFECT OUR CAPACITY FOR HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

HOW TO ENHANCE

YOUR RELATIONSHIP SKILLS

Relationship Fractures AND YOU

MIXING FOOD and relationships

an ancient practice that we still need today

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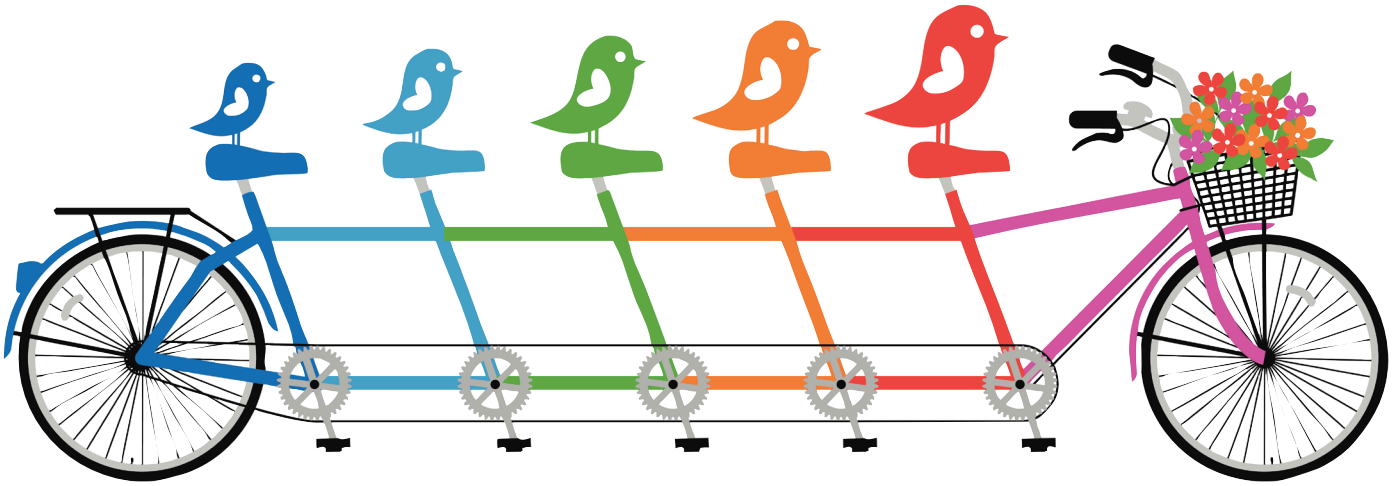


In the movie, Lars and the Real Girl, the socially reclusive protagonist brings Bianca, his Danish-descent, wheelchair-bound, Brazilian missionary girlfriend whom he met on the Internet, to a family dinner. His brother and sister-in-law's initial excitement that Lars has a girlfriend turns to a state of shock when they discover that Bianca is an anatomically correct, life-size doll. (stop at this point and watch the movie trailer to get the full gist of it: in YouTube search for "Lars and the Real Girl, movie trailer")

As the tale unfolds, it comes to light that Lars, whose mother died in childbirth, was raised by his father; a man who spent his remaining years mourning his wife and ignoring his son. As a result Lars has grown into a man who is so incapable of developing relationships that it actually causes him pain to be touched by others.

The story of Lars illustrates two important points. First, events that occur in our childhood can impact our ability to develop and maintain healthy relationships. Second, developing relationships is so integral to human nature that in the absence of real ones, some of us, like Lars, will create imaginary substitute relationships. Others will seek out ways to fill the void left by unmet innate needs for emotional connection by turning to activities such as video games, pornography, Harlequin romance novels etc. These activities may bring a sense of relief by distracting us from our innate need for emotional connection. However, when they replace intimate relationships they lead to greater levels of emotional isolation and disconnection from others.

When we use the word "relationships," we tend to immediately think of the romantic type. We think of the relationship we have with the person we are dating, the person we are engaged to or the person we are married to. However, we also have relationships with our family-members, our friends, our co-workers, our neighbors and so forth. Obviously, all relationships are not equal. The relationship we have with our significant other is far more... significant... than our relationships with our neighbors or many of our co-workers. Aside from the fact that we subjectively know this to be so, it's further validated by browsing through any bookstore where we'll find far more advice books on romantic relationships than books on cultivating relationships in the workplace. However, our relationships with our family, friends and co-workers are as significant as the one we have with our romantic partner. Would we be willing to invest so much time and money into our relationships if they weren't important? The irony is that we live in a knowledge-based society that provides us the resources to develop the skills to perform all sorts of complex tasks. But when it comes to our relationships, which are essential to our psychological and physical health, we are often left to muddle through them. It would seem that for something so crucial to our humanity, we would invest more into making our relationships successful. After all, even when the least of our relationships becomes troubled, our lives are potentially disrupted and our sense of happiness and fulfillment deteriorates.

We live in a knowledge-based society that provides us the resources to develop the skills to perform all sorts of complex tasks. But when it comes to our relationships, which are essential to our psychological health, we are often left to muddle through them.

Strong, well-balanced relationships are important for our physical and psychological health. Horses and goats are also social animals. If the young foal or kid is completely isolated from its mother, it will demonstrate signs of anxiety. If the young animal knows that its mother is near i.e. only a fence separates them, the foal or kid will be relaxed. Women, who are at risk for clinical depression, are less likely to experience a depressive episode if they have a supportive husband. Married men typically live longer than single men.

We're only now beginning to discover why relationships are so integral to our mental health. What is known is that all relationships, even a bridge or bowling club or church group, have huge beneficial effects. However, the close, intimate relationships found in a healthy marriage and other highly important relationships, such as with our boss, our siblings and so forth, demonstrate the greatest benefits. Aside from the general benefits on our psychological health, a variety of relationships help us maintain healthy habits and develop strategies to overcome obstacles in our lives.

It is clear that most of us would prefer real flesh and blood relationships rather than imaginary relationships such as Lars creates. Like Lars, though, we turn to others for our self-esteem and our social needs. Our friends, family co-workers and romantic interests are all sources for fulfilling these basic human needs.

A critical factor in our ability to have and maintain the types of relationships that are essential to our humanity is how we engage and connect. Eventually, Lars' communication with Bianca becomes increasingly dysfunctional and the relationship begins to fracture. For Lars, the only loss is a delusion. For the rest of us, we risk the pain that comes with the loss of someone from our lives.

Deep down we all know that relationships are important to us. It is for this reason that all of us, men and women, seek strategies for salvaging our damaged relationships or strengthening our healthy relationships. It's only when we become motivated to actively and deliberately develop our relationship skill-set that true change is possible.

No one assumes
POWER IN A
relationship, it is shared.

LISTEN

Respect & Trust.

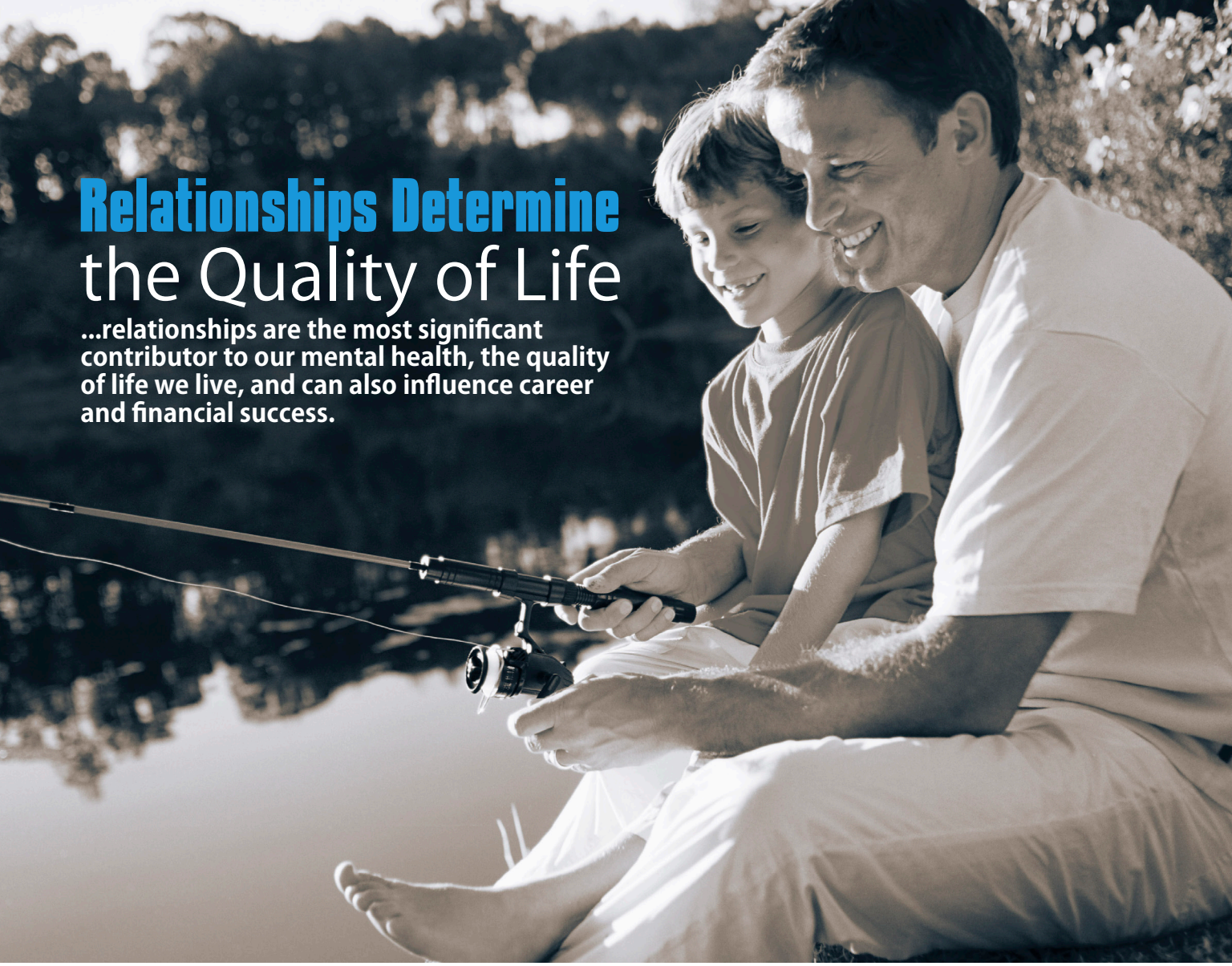
Be positively
assertive
and permit opinions.

Communicate your
FEELINGS & NEEDS
openly and honestly.

GET CONNECTED

To learn more about healthy relationships, log into your health portal and go to the third menu item "**Healthy Living**" and select "**Healthy Relationships**".

A University of San Francisco study on happiness reports that having friends to call on in times of need has an equivalent impact on a person's happiness as a 150% increase in salary.



Relationships Determine the Quality of Life

...relationships are the most significant contributor to our mental health, the quality of life we live, and can also influence career and financial success.

Mahatma Gandhi said, "Where there is love, there is life." Without our relationships, we cannot have love and we can't give love. Even the most introverted or independent-minded among us need relationships because everyone needs to love and to be loved. Love does not bring us together. Instead, it is what holds us together. It is love that sustains us. It is love that gives us our dreams of a future. And our love is created out of our relationships.

Our relationships are central to our lives. Without the ability to form and keep relationships, our ancestors would have died. Granted, we don't need our friends to help us hunt the great Woolly Mammoth or prepare the buffalo skins anymore. Times have changed. In fact, since World War II, our relationships have changed even more. In the United States and Canada, the majority of people no longer remain in their towns or neighborhoods. Putting distance between themselves and their friends and family means that the mechanics of those relationships and some of the expectations of those relationships have changed. For example, it is unlikely that your mother can easily come over and watch the kids for a few hours relief, or that your brother lives just down the street and can easily pop in to watch an ailing parent. But we have adjusted, just as we are adjusting to the new revolutionary force impacting how we find friends and form relationships: the Internet. Despite all of these changes, however, our essential need for relationships and why they are important to us hasn't changed.

For most of us, our first relationship is with our primary caregiver, who is typically our mother. Our mothers do more than feed us, clothe us, bathe us and change our diapers. Research has shown that this relationship is critical in the development of our brain. For example, the time our mothers spend talking to us as infants, stimulates the development of the brain's language centers so that our speech is understandable when we start school. Our mothers are important in the development of those parts of the brain that are responsible for fear, anxiety and the ability to trust. Mothers, who inappropriately interact with their children, will have adult children with a heightened sense of fear, anxiety and distrust. In fact, it is this first connection that heavily influences our ability to form relationships, as we grow older.

RELATIONSHIP BENEFITS

Help us maintain a strong sense of hope

The biblical King Solomon said, "Hope deferred destroys the heart. Close friends propel us to overcome hopelessness and not give up when the going gets tough."

Help us reach our full potential

We all have blind spots that stop us from reaching our full potential. Inviting trusted friends to give us feedback is the easiest way to reveal the negative impact of blind spots, which help us reach our full potential.

Fulfill our need for intimacy

Without intimacy we are highly susceptible to activities that can eventually turn into addictions (video games, emotional eating, substance abuse, porn etc.).

HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS ARE THE FOUNDATION FOR A HEALTHY PSYCHOLOGY

Provide safety

It only takes a few close and trusted relationships to create a sense of community, which provides us with that sense of safety that is a deep and innate need.

Help us regulate our emotions

We all experience hard times and stress which is nothing more than our thoughts and emotions escalating. Getting escalated is normal, but staying in that state makes us susceptible to mental illness. Learning how to bring escalated thoughts and emotions back to a regulated state helps us to regain a healthy perspective on our circumstances. Expressing our pain and frustration to an empathetic listener best achieves that state. Pain held in, doubles while pain expressed is cut in half.

Build self-esteem

Healthy relationships validate us, confirming that we are okay and give us clarity as to who we are. The results are self-confidence and healthy self-esteem that help us know we're okay when we start doubting ourselves.

Of course, all of our early relationships can impact the type of relationships we have later on. This is because our relationships are a reflection of ourselves, influencing how we perceive ourselves. They tell us who we are, not just by the type of people we spend time with, but also by how they treat us. An adolescent girl, who is already struggling with self-esteem, may have a father who begins to avoid his daughter because he is uncomfortable being around this girl-becoming-a-woman. She may develop feelings of rejection or view herself as unattractive. Without this major male figure to bolster her self-esteem, she may turn to other males for validation; and these males may not have her best interests in mind. In short, healthy relationships can enhance our self-esteem, thereby providing us with the confidence to take the chances needed to pursue our dreams and goals. Unhealthy relationships, on the other hand, can lead to poor self-esteem and essentially cripple our ability to have good mental health or live a full and productive life.

Nothing is set in stone, though. Our lives are a continuous movement. The relationships we develop as we mature can change who we thought we were and help us become the person we are meant to be. Friends, teachers, co-workers can all act as mentors for us. They can give us advice about how to progress and they can give us constructive feedback on how well we are progressing. These relationships help us develop the wisdom to make smart decisions. If we have healthy relationships, the people in our lives can help us to see through the deceptions and illusions that confront us, so that we can develop a better idea of the world we live in as well as discover what is important.

Our relationships have the ability to keep us healthy. Having a supportive partner or friend, means we have someone with whom we can vent our concerns, stresses and pain. Having the opportunity to purge ourselves of this psychological "poison" helps to keep us psychologically fit. Our psychological fitness plays a major role in our physical health.

Our relationships provide us with the foundation upon which we build our lives. This is why it is important for us to be able to form healthy relationships because without them, we will have a difficult time realizing our dreams. And it is only in healthy relationships that we will be rewarded with the love that gives us life.

The Early Years

POSITIVELY OR NEGATIVELY AFFECT OUR CAPACITY FOR HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

The early childhood years can affect our capacity for healthy relationships.

We are the sum total of our past, with a dash of our future mixed in for good measure. Our future, whether feared or hoped for, impacts our current choices. It is our past, however, that is the driving force behind who we are and who we will be. Our ancestors, being the source of our unique genetic history, are part of that past. But genetics are not destiny. The traits that we've inherited can be modified by our experiences, thereby becoming stronger or weaker.

As we get older it becomes less obvious, but all of our experiences are continually molding and changing us. Nonetheless, it is those experiences that occur during our first seven years that are extremely critical. During those years, the foundations of our lives are laid down. If good materials are used and a solid foundation is built, a child will have a good chance of living a fulfilled life, attaining their goals and building healthy relationships. If poor materials are used and the adults in the child's life don't take the time and effort to build a good foundation, the child may have a difficult future ahead of them.

Attaining our dreams and goals is a daunting challenge. Without the support of healthy relationships, it can be even more so. Attachment Theory, as developed by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, says that during our infancy we develop an attachment style, either secure or insecure, based upon how our primary caregiver treated us. These attachment styles can impact our ability to form healthy relationships later on. As the name suggests, someone who has a secure attachment style will be able to form well-balanced relationships whereas those with insecure attachment styles will have greater difficulty creating healthy relationships.

Recently, the results from the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (ACE Study), conducted by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention and Kaiser Permanente, have begun to be released. The ACE Study has had some startling but, in hindsight, very expected findings. An adverse childhood experience, or ACE, can take the shape of abuse, neglect or extremely dysfunctional family dynamics during those early formative years. The more ACEs in a person's life, the greater the likelihood that person will develop cognitive/emotional problems, health problems, and unhealthy behaviors that lead to social problems and early death. The horrible toll that these events take upon an individual is life-long.

It is not all doom and gloom, however. Human beings are resilient. The human brain is continuously being shaped and reshaped by the experiences of its owner. To change our future, we need to change our past. The first step to change is recognition of our attachment style and the ACEs in our past. Facing them down strips them of any power they hold over us. This simple act can put us onto the path to healthy relationships.

Individuals with insecure attachment styles or multiple ACEs are those for whom the adults in their formative years failed to build a good foundation. Instead, the adults were responsible for shaping the child's brain to develop so that they had the tendency to have maladaptive interactions with their world. An individual's ability to form healthy relationships is severely hampered because of these early childhood experiences. And without healthy relationships, the person's ability to achieve their goals, let alone avoid unhealthy choices while remaining physically and mentally healthy, is limited.

"Attachment Theory, as developed by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, says that during our infancy we develop an attachment style, either secure or insecure, based upon how our primary caregiver treated us. "

Search in YouTube "bomb in the brain" to learn more.

Food & MIXING RELATIONSHIPS

an ancient practice that we still need today

Think of eating as an activity that is intrinsically tied to relationships. We come into this world feeding from our mothers' breasts, families eat together, friends meet over coffee, lovers dine out, and we celebrate specials occasion around food. Eating with people enhances the occasion for the simple reason that we're combining two powerful experiences together.

As our world evolves at a faster pace and we jam more to-do's into it, we are spending less time sitting down and eating a meal together. Make it your goal to increase the amount of time you spend eating with other people.

PREPARE	Announce when supper preparation will start and have all the ingredients ready to go.
COOK TOGETHER	Give everyone a role cutting and preparing this recipe as it requires lots of chopping.
EAT TOGETHER	Make sure everyone sits together and starts eating together. Give thanks for the meal or have someone propose a toast to the team effort.

HAYSTACKS

Brown Rice:

1 cup brown basmati rice
1 ¾ cups water
1 tbsp. curry powder
2 tbsp. dried parsley
½ tsp. salt
2 – 3 tbsp. olive oil

Bring to a boil. Stir, then turn heat down to low with pot lid on and let simmer for 40 – 50 minutes till done.

Cut up in separate bowls:

2 stalks celery — chopped
large cucumber — chopped
½ red & ½ green pepper — chopped
1 can sliced black olives
1 can pineapple tidbits, drained
greens or romaine lettuce — chopped
2 tomatos — chopped
1 avocado — cubed

Baked Beans in tomato sauce (home made or canned)

Salsa

Creamy Seed and Garlic Dressing (I put it in a squeeze bottle)

Corn Chips

Stacking Your Stack
(be careful how much you put on your plate, hay stacks have a way of piling up!)

On plate in this order:

1. Rice
2. Beans
3. Salsa
4. All of the other veggies of your choice
5. Creamy Garlic Dressing
6. Eat with baked style corn chips

Creamy Seed & Garlic Dressing

Combine all ingredients into a blender and add a small amount of water if you need to make it thinner.

2 tbsp. flax seed oil or hemp seed oil
½ cup fresh squeezed lemon juice
1 cup zucchini — chopped
1/3 cup nutritional yeast
¼ cup tamari sauce
½ cup raw sunflower seeds or cashew nuts
2 tsp. Dijon mustard
2 tsp. agave syrup
1 pkg. stevia
1 tbsp. dried basil
2 cloves garlic

Creamy Black Pepper Corn Dressing

Combine all ingredients into a blender add a small amount of water if you need to make it thinner – only if you need to.

2 tbsp. flax seed oil or hemp seed oil
½ cup fresh squeezed lemon juice
1 cup zucchini — chopped
1/3 cup nutritional yeast
¼ cup tamari sauce
½ cup raw sunflower seeds or cashew nuts
2 tsp. Dijon mustard
2 tsp. agave syrup
1 pkg. stevia
1 tbsp. dried basil
2 cloves garlic
1 to 2 tbsp. black pepper corns

Relationship Fractures and you

What are relationship fractures? Relationship fractures are... well, they are what it sounds like; a seperation between two people or an awkwardness that results in stress and the reduction of the TQ (trust quotient).

These aren't ordinary disputes over money, where to eat lunch or what television show to watch. Although minor conflicts over things like washing the dishes can take on a greater magnitude in the presence of a relationship fracture, in the absence of any fractures, they are at most disruptive and irritating. On their own, they aren't sufficient to severely damage or end a relationship. Relationship fractures, on the other hand, are major breaches that by themselves end an important relationship.

How Do Relationship Fractures Happen?

When a relationship fracture occurs in a high-valued relationship, pain and awkwardness dominate that relationship. People usually aren't hurt or feeling pain during a fight over money or who gets the television remote control. This is because those are struggles over power and control in the relationship and it is normal for all relationships to experience such conflicts. Although the outcomes of these struggles are important to the dynamics of a relationship, they don't typically threaten the foundation. Unless, that is, these conflicts fail to get resolved. Then the cumulative effect of the stress and strain can become a fracture in its own right.

Relationship fractures threaten the foundation. The foundation of a relationship is built upon boundaries and trust. Strong foundations are needed to create the atmosphere of intimacy necessary for a person to be and to become who they truly are. Fractures in relationships occur when boundaries are overstepped and trust is compromised.

Who Can Relationship Fractures Occur With?

Relationship fractures can occur with anyone. They can happen to anyone. It isn't really so much that a fracture occurs that is important. Instead, it is the pain and hurt and potential loss of the relationship that is critical. The more valued the relationship, the greater the pain experienced. We might experience a fracture with the person at the grocery checkout counter, or the person who prepares our daily latte. In such situations, we aren't likely to experience much pain and we'll just go to someone else for service. It's not so easy with our important relationships.

FRACTURES... HOW MUCH DO THEY COST YOU?

Nearly everyone has experienced relationship fractures. After all, in our post-industrial modern era, learning relationship skills seems to have been relegated to trial and error. It is only after a relationship fails that we try to figure out how to avoid future mistakes and failures. One thing we almost never think about is how much the failures cost us. If we actually saw the cost that relationship fractures can cause, we might be motivated to learn the skills necessary for having successful, healthy relationships before we run into problems. If you'd like to evaluate your costs, **log in to your health portal**, and on the home page, bottom right-hand corner, select "**Relationship Fractures**."

Our most valued relationships occur in the following four areas: Primary love relationships, core family relationships, friends and relatives, and work relationships. Unfortunately, not only are these relationships not immune from fractures, but fractures are more likely to happen in them. And as anyone can bear witness, the pain and hurt that come with fractures in these intimate relationships is horrible.

What Is the Impact of Fractures?

A fracture in a high-value relationship will impact us in at least one of four ways. Relationship fractures can cost us mentally-emotionally by increasing our stress levels, anxiety, anger and sadness. Fractures can impact us socially, resulting in being ostracized, feeling lonely and invalidated. There can be costs to our career with a lack of advancement, loss of camaraderie and a decline in work-related motivation. Finally, there can be a financial cost to our relationship fractures.

Can We Learn to Repair Our Relationship Fractures?

The good news is, yes we can repair fractures in our relationships. The bad news is that it might not be possible to repair all fractures. As heartbreaking as it is, relationships sometimes just have to end. However, we can learn the skills to repair many of our relationship fractures. With patience and those skills, we can return our high value relationships to health.

Can We Learn to Reduce Relationship Fractures?

Once again, the answer is yes. This time, though, there are no real downsides. All it requires is learning to build solid foundations by learning the skills to navigate through the ocean of emotions that occurs between two people and to communicate well. Remarkably, the majority of fractures could be avoided if we did so. Unfortunately, we aren't born with this knowledge. We need to take the time and make the effort to learn these skills if we value our relationships with others.

It is important to keep in mind that relationship fractures can't be completely prevented. But then again, not everyone we have a relationship with is going to think as highly of us as we do ourselves. When we think about it, though, does it really matter if those relationships end? After all, at the end of the day, wouldn't we rather spend our time with those who value us as much as we value them?

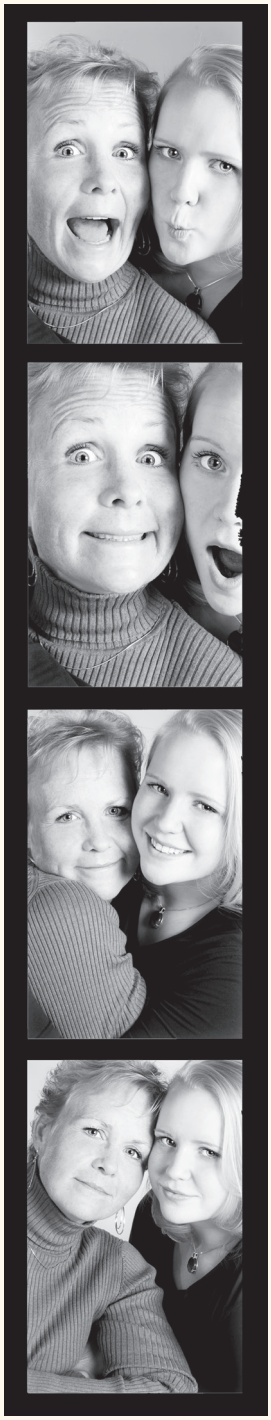
CAN PEOPLE CHANGE?

We live in an era of advanced sciences that is leading to accelerated change all around us. One particular field of science that is advancing at a rapid pace is behavioral health, which refers to the reciprocal relationship between human behavior, individually or socially, and the well being of the body, mind, and spirit.

In the last decade we learned the brain is capable of neuroplastic changes – meaning that its organization can alter as a result of new perceptions and environments. This means that people can transform themselves, yet there are many folk whose experiences have led them to believe that we are who we are and that people cannot change.

Dr. Mimi Silbert's work proves otherwise. She runs a program called Delancey Street Foundation (watch the video) with ex-cons and individuals who have had extremely difficult pasts such as release from long prison sentences for gang activity, murder etc. Studies indicate that graduates of her program have a rehabilitation success rate of more than 70 percent. There are several other studies that show change in people can occur if the correct program and environment is provided. If you still believe change in a person is not possible consider the following.

What initially shapes a person's character are the relationships they experience as children. The responses to our early role models have a huge impact on our current behaviors. For example, if we had a parent who got angry when things did not go their way, it's likely we'll respond in one of two ways. Either we will follow the same pattern we observed growing up and become angry when things don't go our way or we'll take the opposite tack. Instead of getting angry, we fear conflict. We are intimidated by anger and have a difficult time setting healthy boundaries. Another example would be if we had a parent or primary role model who could not express their opinions or emotions easily. Again, we'll most likely respond to that conditioning in one of two ways. Either we'll take on that same behavior or conversely we may react against it by becoming overly opinionated and domineering.



As we grow into adulthood with this conditioning, it becomes our operating system but only until we decide we want to change it and find the right support to do just that.

Perhaps one of the most exciting journeys of exploration and discovery is the one in which we learn how to enhance our relationship skills. Like the progress that allows us to send a rocket to land on Mars, or to do a heart transplant, the advances in behavioral science are helping people experience the incredible benefits healthy relationships bring to their mental health and quality of life. The key is believing that change is possible because as Henry Ford said, "If you believe you can or can't, you're right."

Q&A

This month's Q&A is an interview with Darcy Kuhl and Vic LeBouthillier who work with a clinical group called Leap. Leap is an organization that helps people overcome mental health challenges and enhance their relationship skills.

Q-1: What are some benefits of enhancing relationships skills?

A: When our closest relationships are working well they produce in us great feelings of satisfaction, joy, and overall fulfillment in life. Conversely, when these relationships are not going well they can evoke in us gut wrenching pain, feelings of despair and may even affect our workplace performance. Many mental health struggles can be directly linked to fractures in our most important relationships, either those of the past, or those in which we are currently engaged. Healing the pain of those fractures can be an important part of overall emotional health recovery. Furthermore it should be noted that healing relationships significantly improve a person's happiness quotient. Our brains are intrinsically wired for connection. When these needs for connection are not met, emotional pain is the predictable result. Conversely, when our needs for deep emotional connection with another human being are met, the pleasure center of our brain lights up and we experience a deep sense of satisfaction and contentment. In short, good relationships are essential for optimal mental health and feelings of happiness.

Q-2: Tell me, is it possible for a person who has not had the opportunity to develop relationship skills in their youth, do so as an adult?

A: Absolutely. Although the initial wiring of our brains is established in the context of our early experiences of emotional connection or lack thereof, the wiring of our minds is never completely set in stone. Rather, we always have the capacity to change, grow and adjust both our internal emotional states and the patterns by which we respond to others. Although, the journey to develop healthy relating skills can be challenging at times, particularly as we learn to rework old habitual ways of reacting to others, those who stay with this process reap the great rewards that come from connecting with others at deep emotional levels.

Q-3: Can you give me some examples of people who have successfully worked to enhance their relationship skills?

A: Of course, lets start by taking the example of a woman we will call Sally who sought help in developing her relational skill due to a crisis in her marriage. At the time she struggled with intense anxiety, which could be activated by seemingly minor life events. Her fears commonly drove her to respond to her husband in a manner that left him feeling controlled and criticized. He subsequently responded to these reactions by withdrawing emotionally. Although Sally's husband did not initially engage in seeking help, Sally persevered in learning how to manage her portion of the relationship conflict.

The first step that Sally took to begin this process was to learn how to pay attention to her own emotional state without reacting to it. She also began to learn how to separate her husband's actions from her emotional responses and to free herself from becoming enslaved to impulsive judgments. As she learned to manage her own perceptions and subsequently her reactions, she began to respond to her husband in a calmer manner. As a result he also began to respond to her differently. This change in their relational dance created a dramatic improvement in how each of them related to the other and subsequently drew them back into repairing the connection they had lost.

Another example comes from the case of a man we will call John. John sought help because he wanted to improve his relation-ships skills so he could learn how to maintain a relationship with a girlfriend. Although he felt confident in asking women out and had been on several dates, these relationships were usually short lived because he would commonly react to minor irritants with impatience and anger. These reactive responses typically, caused relational rifts and drove his potential partners away. In order to change this pattern John sought help in understanding his anger and developing emotional regulation skills. Although it took some time for him to fully make the changes in his response patterns he eventually learned how to challenge his own perceptions and respond in kinder, gentler ways. As he did so, he became more attractive to potential partners, and today John is happily married.

The third example I have is the case of a man we will call Kevin. Kevin sought help because he was having challenges in his role as a team leader at work. Feedback from his job performance evaluation showed that he lacked some key relational skills, which caused Kevin's boss to feel hesitant about promoting him. Kevin's boss suggested that he access relationship skills-training to improve his skill-set as an effective leader. Kevin followed up on his boss's suggestion by attending a three month program designed to enhance his emotional intelligence. Through attending this program he learned how to use empathy to engage his team more effectively and motivate them to give their best performance. As a result, Kevin's entire department benefited from his new relational team leadership approach and he was placed in a prime position for further promotion.

HOW TO ENHANCE YOUR RELATIONSHIP SKILLS

MOST OF US HAVE

probably heard about the things that contribute to good relationships. They include things like kindness, fairness, patience, empathy, calmness and appreciation.

No one would disagree that these are good attributes that can strengthen our relationships. The real challenge is implementing new skills into our relationships; something that is often easier said than done. Surveys indicate that most people aspire to increase their relationships skills and recognize these skills as being critical to their mental health and quality of life. However, when it comes to taking action, many people don't know where to start or where to find support

Just like an iceberg that is 9/10th underwater, advanced behavioral sciences are teaching us that most of what drives behavior is unseen. Our behavior in relationships (what we see on the surface) is driven by our own personal psychology (the invisible part buried deep inside us). To illustrate, here are a few examples:

OUR PSYCHOLOGY: If we're impatient and get easily frustrated and angry:

BEHAVIOR: We will tend to be critical and make judgmental statements.

RESULTS: We will push people away causing fractures and a lack of intimacy.

OUR PSYCHOLOGY: If we struggle with a low sense of value and self-worth:

BEHAVIOR: We will avoid asking for what is important to us.

RESULTS: It will be difficult for us to set boundaries and experience equality in our relationships.

Our relationships can only be as healthy as our own psychology. By improving our own mental health, we will find an increased capacity to successfully put into practice healthy relationship skills. We can accomplish this by learning how to create healthier beliefs, thoughts and emotions. It is from these very things that our behaviors are produced. These are real life stories of people who increased the health of their relationships by improving the health of their own psychological state (beliefs, thoughts and emotions):

Sarah was always worrying, repeatedly asking herself: "Am I good enough?" and "Will people like me for who I am?" She intensely feared being rejected and possibly being alone. Working to overcome these beliefs that she was unworthy, Sarah was eventually able to carry her increased self-confidence into her relationships which then significantly improved.

John was consumed with thoughts that people were not doing things right and, as a result, he felt anger towards them. After learning to drop his unrealistic expectations about people, he was able to create more positive thoughts and his anger significantly decreased. John's relationships improved when his mental state improved.

Kelly was always pushing himself to work harder. A little voice in his head kept telling him that he needed to do more at work. This drive to continuously increase his performance was motivated by fear. Furthermore, this drive was not limited to his own work-related performance but also extended to those who reported to him. By learning to release himself from fear, he was able to create healthier thoughts and behaviors. To his surprise, his relationships with his team improved as well.

STEPS TO IMPROVING OUR PERSONAL PSYCHOLOGY AND OUR RELATIONSHIPS

The following steps do not describe behaviors that will be used directly in relationships. Instead they are skills that help us improve our own psychological health and im proving our psychological health will, in turn, enable us to increase our relationships skills. Remember that willingness and commitment are the keys to changing and improving ourselves.

ACCESSING YOUR EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE:

Emotional intelligence is a central feature of psychological health. Increasing our emotional intelligence is perhaps one of the greatest steps we can take to improving our relationships skills. To learn how to increase emotional intelligence log onto www.talentsmart.ca and take the emotional intelligence assessment. Here there are programs and exercises that will enable you to dramatically improve relational skills. The program measures individual progress at the start and again at the four-month mark to highlight changes as they are made.

INCREASE YOUR EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE BY LEARNING HOW TO REGULATE YOUR THOUGHTS AND EMOTIONS:

Our psychological state typically exists in one of two modes: regulated or escalated. When escalated, we engage in behaviors that we'll later regret. These behaviors often result in fractures in our relationships. A good first step is to become aware of those thoughts and emotions when they become escalated. This enhanced awareness helps us to learn how to bring them back into a regulated state.

CHOOSE HUMILITY OVER PRIDE:

To grow our relationship skills, takes humility, and receptivity to change. Humility helps us to be better students and more open to learning.

COURAGE:

Change takes courage. To change the way we do things can be scary. For John to let go of his anger was an act of courage. For Sarah to challenge her insecurities and to begin to believe in herself, was also an act of courage.

ADMIT YOUR NEED FOR HELP:

Not all people can improve their relationship skills on their own. Sometimes they may turn to one or two friends who are interested in enhancing their relationships skills as well. On the other hand, many feel overwhelmed by the challenges facing them and require the support of a professional. It takes courage to acknowledge this and find the right person to work with. Find a mentor, life coach or go see a counselor through your EAP.

EVERY GREAT EVENT BEGINS WITH ONE SMALL STEP:

You don't need to become a new and improved you overnight. In fact, if you try to change everything all at once, you are setting yourself up to be overwhelmed and decreasing your chances of being successful. Start with one or two skills. For example, work on becoming more fair. Or work on setting healthy boundaries. Perhaps you feel that you need to let go of your co-dependency. Maybe you need to work on being more appreciative, expressing kindness and patience, or learning to serve those you have relationships with during their time of need. Being successful with just one or two things will greatly strengthen your motivation to be successful in achieving all your goals…success begets success.

how well DO YOU RELATE?

Unique as you are, there's something you have in common with every other individual on this planet: the need for human connection.

Your life is defined by relationships – from the professional ones you maintain with your co-workers and supervisors to the personal ones you share with family and friends. In fact, one of the most reliable means of measuring your quality of life is measuring the quality of your relationships. That's what this assessment is designed to do.

Answer "Yes," "Somewhat," or "No" to each of the following questions; then, ask your partner or someone else who knows you well to also answer them for you on your behalf.

		YES	SOMEWHAT	NO
1.	Are you able and willing to seek advice from family members when in need?			
2.	Do you spend at least one hour a week doing something for another, such as service work?			
3.	Do your family relationships have clear boundaries and a way to process when those boundaries are crossed?			
4.	Are you involved weekly in at least one creative hobby, such as painting or playing a musical instrument?			
5.	Are you involved in learning something new in your life?			
6.	Do you take responsibility for mistakes you make in your most important relationships?			
7.	Do you work with others when there is a problem, showing good listening and empathy skills?			
8.	Are you optimistic and confident in making decisions about moving forward in your life?			
9.	Do you have a primary support group in place where you go to for support when life becomes challenging?			
10.	Do you feel as though you are valued for what you bring to personal relationships?			
11.	Do you bounce back from relationship challenges in a fairly short amount of time?			
12.	Are you actively participating in your immediate family relationships and friendships?			
13.	Do you view and utilize relationship stress as an opportunity for you to learn and grow?			
14.	Do you find that you live up to the same standards/expectations you have for others in your inner circle?			
15.	Are you able to be assertive with your needs in significant relationships?			
16.	Are you confident that you deserve close friends in your life?			
17.	Are you open to considering other's feedback about a concern they may have about you?			
18.	Are you part of a community that knows and values you?			
19.	Do you feel relatively safe and secure in the world?			
20.	Do you have a mentor or someone you look up to as a role model?			
21.	Are you a part of a faith community?			
22.	Are you able to show restraint in the face of temptation?			
23.	Do you take a win-win stance in conflict with others?			
	TOTAL:			

Give yourself one point for each "Yes" and zero points for each "Somewhat," and subtract one point for each "No" answer. Add up the total scores for both and compare them to the legend below to see your grade:

20-23: A

15-19: B

11-14: C

Under 10: F

Whether you need to improve relationships with significant others, family members or friends, increasing your relationship health may require making changes and even following the advice of a professional.

RESOURCES TO HELP YOU IMPROVE
PERSONAL PSYCHOLOGY AND RELATIONSHIPS

Log in to your health portal for these and more resources on personal psychology and relationships:

- What's your relationship with your home and with those who live inside of it? How do you feel whenever you come home -- physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually? Take this assessment to find out your relationship with your home: From the main menu item, "**WELLNESS AT HOME**" select "**Assess the Health of Your Home**".

- This article will help you improve your mental-emotional health through greater emotional intelligence: From the main menu item, "**HEALTHY LIVING**" select "**Mental-Emotional Health**".

- Learn helpful tips for establishing and maintaining healthy relationships: From the main menu item, "**HEALTHY LIVING**" select "**Health Relationships**".

- Learning to control stress will help you with relationships: From the main menu item, "**HEALTHY LIVING**" select "**Manage Stress**".

- Depression and anxiety can effect our ability to have healthy relationships. From the main menu item, "**MANAGING DISEASE**" select "**Depression**" and "**Anxiety**".

- These self assessments relate to your mental health. From the first main menu item, "**DASHBOARD**" select "**Mental Health**" and take the assessments you feel are applicable to you.

- We're relational beings. The quality of our attachment to self and others is vital to our physical and mental health. From the main menu item, "**DASHBOARD**" select "**Relationship Health**" and take the assessments you feel are applicable to you.

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