The Science of Trust: Emotional Attunement for Couples.

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Chapter 6 How Couples Build Trust with Attunement (pp 176-222)

This chapter explains how couples get into the negative story-of-us switch by failing to "attune." It describes how research in my laboratory on "meta-emotion" in parenting and in a couples' relationship led to the discovery of the "attunement skill set." The chapter presents a theory of the skill of attunement and its consequences in three relationship contexts: (1) "sliding-door" moments, (2) negative-affect moments or regrettable incidents, and (3) conflict. The roles of attunement, the Zeigarnik effect, and the story-of-us is explained by this theory. Research shows how attunement builds trust and leads to positive outcomes in relationships. The theory also leads to precise "blueprints" for building trust in each of the three relationship contexts.

How did couples get into the sorry state of the negative story-of-us switch? The simple answer is that they let trust erode. However, we need more from research than that answer. We need to know how couples build trust, and how they make it erode.

The Big Trust Question Is "Are You There for Me"?

Colloquially, trust in a relationship is usually expressed as the question: "Are you there for me?" As I mentioned earlier, this question of trust formed the basis for all the 130 newlywed couple conflict discussions I studied in Seattle in my love lab. In their conflicts discussions these couples fought about questions such as: "Can I trust you to choose me over your friends?" "Can I trust you to choose my interests over those of your parents?" "Can I trust you to care more about this relationship than about yourself?" "Can I trust you to be home when you say you will be home?" "Can I trust you to be motivated to earn money and create wealth for our family?"

In these arguments they were asking whether they (1) "truly saw" their partner's real character, which referred to a kind of transparency, and (2) whether their partner was really there for them in the clinch. Most couples colloquially described trust in terms of two dimensions.

The first dimension referred to transparency: the partner's keeping promises and doing what he or she says he or she will do. This dimension is the opposite of lying and deceit. Trust for these couples meant that they needed to be able to count on the partner to be a truthful person who is what he or she appears to be within the relationship. However, there was more to trust than just that—no one would be happy, for example, with an evil partner who was nevertheless truthful about his or her evil intentions and evil acts. This means that trust is about more than just truth, honesty, and transparency.

This leads us to the second dimension of trust: positive moral certainty about the partner. We must have a confidence and knowledge that our partner is an ethical, moral person—a good person, someone who will treat us and others with high moral standards, integrity, honesty, kindness, love, and goodwill. This second dimension of trust is about our partner's intentions, motives, and actions toward us. It's about the question: "Just where do I fit into my partner's motivational scheme?" "Do I come first in some important sense, compared to other people or my partner's goal, or do other things take priority over me?" The question we are asking is whether this colloquial use of the two dimensions of trust is related to our previously defined trust metric. It turns out that they are totally related to each other, empirically.

How Couples Build Trust

Part of the news in this book is that trust is built by couples using the skill of "attunement." In this chapter I am going to start describing this skill as a blueprint for building trust in long-term committed relationships.

To create a constructive blueprint for building trust, it is necessary to discuss the use of the attunement skill in three different relationship contexts. As I have mentioned, the contexts for building trust are like a folding fan. Each area of the fan is about the basic question of trust, "Are you there for me?" These are micro trust tests, where trust has built up over time, or eroded over time. Here are the three major trust-building contexts, or parts of the trust fan: (1) the everyday interactions I call "sliding-door moments," (2) regrettable incidents or past emotional injuries, and (3) conflict interactions.

Sliding-door moments, the first part of the fan, are very small moments in which a need is expressed and the responsiveness of one's partner is a test of trust. In these moments we test whether we can trust that our partner will turn toward our expressed need.

The second part of the fan involves a moment in which at least one person is experiencing negative affect and longs for a voice and connection with the partner. It can be a negative emotion that is about the partner, or it can be just a personal negative emotion that is not about the relationship at all. This second context also includes "regrettable incidents" that are about the relationship, in which we hurt our partner's feelings or have an unfortunate argument.

The third part of the fan involves an actual conflict discussion (Rapoport's debate mode). In this context a couple has decided to discuss an area of impending decision and they expect some disagreement between them. In the next chapter I will also talk about how the skill of attunement is used by couples for building trust during another important part of the "trust fan": the more intimate romantic, passionate, and sexual moments.

How the Attunement Skill Was Discovered

Here's the story of how the process of attunement in couples was discovered. In 1985 I developed an interview I called the "meta-emotion" interview for parents.[1] In this interview we asked people how they felt about specific feelings in themselves and in their children.

The term "meta" is a reflexive word in psychology that sort of folds back on itself. Here's what I mean. The term "meta-cognition" means how we think about our thinking. The term "meta-communication" refers to how we communicate about communication. By "meta-emotion," I mean how we feel about feelings.

We interviewed people separately. We used that interview to talk to parents about their history of emotion—specific emotions like anger and sadness, but also emotion in general. We asked them how they felt about their own feelings and about their children's feelings, as well as about their general philosophy about emotions, emotional experience, and emotional expression. We asked questions like: "What's been your experience in your life with anger? with sadness?" "Could you tell growing up when your father was angry? What effect did this have on you?" "What has been your own relationship with anger?" "How did your parents show you that they loved you?"

So what's so special about this interview about how people experience emotion? The answer is that people all over the planet experience and display at least seven basic emotions (anger, sadness, disgust, contempt, fear, interest, and happiness) in the same way. Carrol Izard and Paul Ekman established these facts.[2] For example, people have essentially the same spontaneous facial expressions when they feel sad. When people feel sad the inner corners of their eyebrows go up and together, forming a brow that looks like an upside-down V. When people feel angry their brows tend to come down and together, forming a vertical furrow between their eyebrows; their upper lip may also tighten, or their lips may be pressed together. When people are surprised, their entire brow goes up, their mouth may drop open, their upper eyelids raise, and their eyes become wide. When people are afraid, their brow becomes almost totally horizontal, the whites of their eyes may show, and their lips become tightly stretched horizontally. If they feel disgusted, their nose may wrinkle or their upper lip may become raised. If they feel contempt, the left corner of their lip may be pulled to the side by the lateral muscle called the "buccinator" and a dimple may become evident; this may be accompanied by an eye roll. There is even evidence that people across the planet have the same autonomic physiological responses to each emotion as well, although the "autonomic specificity hypothesis," created by Bob Levenson and Paul Ekman, is still controversial. For example, as part of this specificity Levenson and Ekman discovered that heart rate increases in fear and anger and decreases with disgust. The hands become hot with anger and cold with fear.[3]

Despite the universality of emotional expression and experience, there is huge variation across people in how they say they feel about each of these emotions, about their histories with specific emotions, and about emotional expression and their internal emotional experience. We interviewed people about the history of their experience with the emotions of anger, sadness, fear, affection, pride, and positive states such as play, fun, and adventure. We also asked them

about their philosophy about emotion in general. We asked them how they experienced these emotions growing up. We asked them how they and their partner experienced these emotions in their relationship. Our interview is one way of linking individual therapy with couple therapy.

This turned out to be a powerful interview. Let me give you an example. There was one woman who described the deathbed scene of her father. She held his hand and said to him, "Dad, you have never told me you love me. It would mean so much to me if you said it now." Her father said, "If you don't know by now, you never will." And then he died. She left his room furious with him, unable to mourn his death. We asked her what the effect of this experience was on her. She said that she was determined that not a day would pass without her telling her children that she loved them.

I interviewed another woman who said that she and her sisters at a young age made a pact to always convert their sadness into anger because they saw their mom depressed and bullied by their father. They decided that when she was 8 years old. From that time on she said that she was never sad; she was angry instead. How had this decision affected her? She is now a crusader in the community for various social causes, and for their dyslexic son at school. When I then asked, "What do you do when Sam [her 4-year-old son] is sad?" She said, "I go for a run." In that family, Dad was the one who talked to Sam when he was sad.

When we asked, "How did your parents show you that they were proud of you?" many people wept. They said that their parents never came to one of their games, or plays, or recitals. When we asked them, "What are the implications of this for your own family?" people usually had a lot to say about expressing pride in their children.

There was great variability in how people felt about feelings. For example, one man in our study said, "When someone gets angry with me it's like they are relieving themselves in my face." But yet another man said, "Anger is like clearing your throat, natural, just get it out and go on." These two fathers felt very differently when their children became angry with them.

In that study we discovered that there were basically two types of parents in our data: "emotion-coaching" parents and "emotion-dismissing" parents. I am simplifying a bit here, because people can be one way with a specific emotion and another way with another, so the results of the meta-emotion interview are very complex. Some parents were very positive about their children's negative emotions and acted like "emotion coaches." Emotion coaches viewed their own and their children's negative emotion as an opportunity for teaching or intimacy. They noticed lower-intensity negative emotions in their children. Overall they went through five steps during talking about an emotional event. I called these five steps "emotion coaching." I will describe them in a moment.

Other parents were trying to get their children to change what they viewed as their negative emotions to positive emotions. They used many techniques, like distraction, or admonishing their children to "roll with the punches" and change how they felt. They believed that the emotion one

had was a choice, and therefore they were impatient with their children's negative emotions. Their attitudes toward negative emotion were called "emotion dismissing," which included being disapproving of the negative emotion.

 Here's what emotion dismissing parents were like:

- They didn't notice lower-intensity emotions in themselves or in their children (or in others, either). In one interview we asked two parents about how they reacted to their daughter's sadness. The mom asked the dad, "Has Jessica ever been sad?" He said he didn't think so, except maybe one time when she went to visit her grandmother alone and she was 4 years old. "When she boarded the airplane alone," he said, "she looked a little sad." But all children actually have a wide range of emotions in just a few short hours. A crayon may break, and the child becomes immediately sad and angry. These parents just didn't notice much of Jessica's more subtle emotions.
- They viewed negative affects as if they were toxins. They wanted to protect their child from ever having these negative emotions. They preferred a cheerful child.
- They thought that the longer their child stayed in the negative emotional state, the more toxic its effect was.
- They were impatient with their child's negativity. They might even punish a child just for being angry, even if there was no misbehavior.
- They believed in accentuating the positive in life. This is a kind of Norman Vincent Peale, the power-of-positive-thinking philosophy. This is very American view. The idea is: "You can have any emotion you want, and if you choose to have a negative one, it's your own fault." So, they think, pick a positive emotion to have. You will have a much happier life if you do. So they will do things like distract, tickle, or cheer up their child to create that positive emotion.
- They see introspection or looking inside oneself to examine what one feels as a waste of time, or even dangerous.
- They usually have no detailed lexicon or vocabulary for emotions.

Here's an example of an emotion-dismissing attitude. When asked about his daughter's sadness, one father we interviewed said, "When she is sad I tend to her needs. I say, 'What do you need? Do you need to eat something, go outside, watch TV?' I tend to her needs." This child might confuse being sad with being hungry. Here's another example. A father said, "Say my kid has a problem with other kids. Let's say someone took something of his. I say, 'Don't worry about it. He didn't mean it. He will bring it back. Don't dwell on it. Take it lightly. Roll with the punches and get on with life.'" This father's message was: "Get over it. Minimize its importance."

The emotion-coaching philosophy was quite different from the emotion-dismissing philosophy. For example, for the same peer situation, another father we interviewed said, "If a kid were to be mean to him, I'd try to understand what he's feeling and why. Some kid may have hit him or made fun of him. I stop everything then; my heart just goes out to him and I feel like a father

here and I empathize." I interviewed one emotion-coaching couple in my lab. She was a professional cheerleader and he was a quarterback for a professional football team. She told me that the reason she liked her husband was that she once came across a smiley face calendar from her youth when she was unpacking and moving in with her husband. She said that when she was a little girl, if she were cheerful that day, her parents would put a smiley sticker on the calendar. If she got 20 smiley faces a month, she got to buy a toy. She hated that calendar. She said, "What I like about my husband is that I can be in a crabby mood and he still wants to be with me. I don't have to be cheerful."

Following is a summary of what we discovered about emotion-coaching parents:

- They noticed lower-intensity emotions in themselves and in their children. The children didn't have to escalate to get noticed.
- They saw these emotional moments as an opportunity for intimacy or teaching.
- They saw these negative emotions—even sadness, anger, or fear—as a healthy part of normal development.
- They were not impatient with their child's negative affect.
- They communicated understanding of the emotions and didn't get defensive.
- They helped the child verbally label all the emotions he or she was feeling. What does having words do? They are important. With the right words, I think the child processes emotions usually associated with withdrawal (fear, sadness, disgust) very differently. I think it becomes a bilateral frontal-lobe processing. Withdrawal emotions still are experienced, but they are tinged with optimism, control, and a sense that it's possible to cope.
- They empathized with negative emotions, even with negative emotions behind misbehavior. For example, they might say: "I understand your brother made you angry. He makes me mad too sometimes." They do this even if they do not approve of the child's misbehavior. In that way they communicate the value, "All feelings and wishes are acceptable."
- They also communicated their family's values. They set limits if there was misbehavior. In that way they communicated the value, "Although all feelings and wishes are acceptable, not all behavior is acceptable." (We had other parents who did everything else in coaching but this step of setting limits, and their children turned out aggressive.) They were clear and consistent in setting limits to convey their values.
- They problem-solved when there was negative affect without misbehavior. They were not impatient with this step, either. For example, they may have gotten suggestions from the child first.
- They believed that emotional communication is a two-way street. That means that when they were emotional about the child's misbehavior, they let the child know what they were feeling (but not in an insulting manner). They said that was probably the strongest

form of discipline, that the child is suddenly disconnected from the parent—less close, more "out."

Other things were different about these two types of emotion philosophy. In particular, the two groups of parents were very different in the way they taught their children something new. An honors student named Vanessa Kahen-Johnson (now a psychology professor) discovered this. Emotion-dismissing parents taught their child in the following ways:

They gave lots of information in an excited manner at first.

- They were very involved with the child's mistakes.
- They saw themselves as offering "constructive criticism."
- The child increased the number of mistakes as the parents pointed out errors. This is a common effect during the early stages of skill acquisition.
- As the child made more mistakes, the parents escalated their criticism to insults, using trait labels such as "You are being careless" or "You are spacey." They sometimes talked to each other about the child in the child's presence, as in: "He is so impulsive. That's his problem."
- As the child made more mistakes, the parents sometimes took over, becoming intrusive.

In a book adult sons wrote about their fathers,[4] a professional writer named Christopher Hallowell said that when he was 6, his dad said, "Son, I'm gonna teach you how to make a box. If you can make a box, you can do anything in the wood shop." Chris's first box was a little shaky, but it had a lid. His dad examined it and said: "Chris this is a wobbly box. If you can't even make a box, you can't do anything in the wood shop." Chris, at age 35, still has that box on his nightstand. He still sees his dad's face in the lid, saying, "Chris, you'll never amount to anything." Small moments can have huge implications for kids, because they tend to believe their parents, even about themselves.

In our lab not all children of emotion-dismissing parents did poorly on the task their parents taught them. Some children with parents dismissing of their negative emotions during learning the task got angry with their parents and did well on the lab task. They did well to spite their parents. So the parents got a good performance out of their kid, but at the expense of trust. In her dissertation, a former graduate student of mine, Eun Young Nahm, compared parenting in Korean-American and Euro-American two-parent families with a 6-year-old child.[5] The Korean-American parents were primarily emotion-dismissing or disapproving, using shame-based tactics to encourage their children during a tower-building task, while the Euro-American parents were primarily emotion-coaching, using praise-based tactics to encourage their children during the tower-building task. The Korean-American children did significantly better on the task than the Euro-American children. However, the levels of depression in the Korean-American children were significantly higher than those of Euro-American children. Higher achievement in this case came at an emotional cost.

Vanessa Kahen-Johnson also discovered that emotion-coaching parents taught their children in a dramatically different way from emotion-dismissing parents.[6] Emotion-coaching parents:

- Gave little information to the child, but enough for the child to get started.
- Were not involved with the child's mistakes (they ignored them).
- Waited for the child to do something right, and then offered specific praise and added a little bit more information. (The best teaching offers a new tool, just within reach. Then learning feels like remembering.)
- The child attributed the learning to his or her own discovery.
- The child's performance also went up and up.

It's important to point out that when we measured parental warmth, we found that emotion-dismissing parents can be very warm. In our coding we found that warmth was statistically independent of emotion coaching or dismissing. For example, a parent can very warmly say, "What's wrong sweetheart? Put a smile on your face. There, that's daddy's little girl. Isn't that better now?" It is not cruel to be emotion-dismissing. Parents really mean well when they do it.

In fact, I am not saying that emotion dismissing is "bad." It is an action-oriented and problem-solving approach to problems. Both coaching and dismissing attitudes are important in parenting, but we discovered that they need to happen in the right sequence. For example, my daughter Moriah was once afraid of learning mathematics, and she discussed her fears with me. I empathized with the fears and she felt a lot better. However, after all that understanding, she actually did need to learn the math. Problem-solving and an action orientation is absolutely necessary in life and in parenting. However, as Haim Ginott once said, advice is always more effective when *words of understanding precede words of advice.* First a child needs to feel that he or she is not alone. We need to feel understood and supported. Then we are more likely to be able to turn toward action.

It was interesting to me that emotion-dismissing and emotion-coaching people also had different metaphors about negative emotions. Dismissing people saw anger as like an explosion, like losing control, or as aggression. Coaching people saw anger as a natural reaction to a blocked goal. They suggested understanding the frustration, the goal, and what was blocking it. The dismissing people saw sadness as wallowing in self-pity—as inaction and passivity, akin to mental illness—and they had metaphors of death. Coaching people saw sadness as something missing in one's life. They said that they slowed down to discover what was missing. Emotion-dismissing people saw fear as cowardice, and inaction, as being a wimp. Coaching people said that fear was telling you that your world was unsafe. They said that when they felt afraid, they found out how to make their worlds safer. About negative emotion in general, dismissing people said feeling the negativity leads nowhere, that one should roll with the punches, get over it, go on. They viewed examining negative emotions as akin to pouring gasoline on an open fire, very dangerous.

In short, coaching people said that exploring a negative emotion wasn't dangerous or scary. They said that it gave a person direction in life, like a GPS. Dismissing people thought of being positive as a choice, and they viewed dwelling on negative emotions as harmful and pessimistic. They thought it simply invited chaos.

In our initial study, as we followed the 3-to 4-year-old children, there were consequences of these two types of emotion philosophy. We discovered that children who were emotion coached at age 4 turned out to be very different at age 8, and at age 15, compared to the children of emotion-dismissing parents:

They had higher reading and math scores at age 8, even controlling statistically for IQ differences at age 4.

This effect was mediated through the attentional system.

Coached children had better abilities with focusing attention, sustaining attention, and shifting attention.

Coached children had greater self-soothing ability even when upset during a parent-child interaction.

Coached children self-soothed better, delayed gratification better, and had better impulse control. Parents didn't have to down-regulate negativity as much.

Coached children don't whine very much. Coached children had fewer behavior problems of all kinds (aggression and depression).

Coached children had better relations with other children.

Coached children had fewer infectious illnesses.

As coached children got into middle childhood and then adolescence, they kept having appropriate "social moxie."

Emotion-coaching parents also buffered the children in our sample from almost all the negative effects of an ailing marriage, separation, or a divorce (except for their children's sadness). The negative effects that disappeared were: (1) acting out with aggression, (2) falling grades in school, and (3) poor relations with other children.

As Lynn Katz, Carol Hooven, and I reported in our book Meta-emotion, coached children, as they develop, seem to have more emotional intelligence.

The positive effects of teaching parents emotion coaching has been demonstrated in a randomized clinical trial by Sophie Havighurst in Australia,7 and in a large-scale school-based

intervention by Dr. Christina Choi in two Catholic Boystown orphanages in Korea (in Seoul and Busan).[8]

Teaching Emotion Coaching

There are only five steps in emotion coaching and there are now materials that teach this skill to parents.[9] These five steps are not difficult to teach parents. They are:

1. Noticing the negative emotion before it escalates.
2. Seeing it as an opportunity for teaching or intimacy.
3. Validating or empathizing with the emotion.
4. Helping the child give verbal labels to all emotions the child is feeling.
5. Setting limits on misbehavior, or problem-solving if there is no misbehavior.
6. If the parent doesn't do this last step, the kids tend to wind up becoming physically or verbally aggressive toward other children.

It is interesting to note that our research showed that dads made a great deal of difference both for sons and for daughters. Fathers who emotion coached their children were better dads and better husbands. Their children felt closer to them, and moms appreciated them more. During conflict with their wives, emotion-coaching dads were not contemptuous; they were respectful. They knew their wives well and communicated a lot of affection and admiration to them in the oral history interview. They had a positive oral history switch. For the dads we studied, marriage and parenting was made of the same fabric. To read more about this meta-emotion study, see my book with Joan DeClaire, Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child, and my book with Lynn Katz and Carole Hooven, Meta-emotion.

Attunement Is Emotion Coaching for Couples

The term "coaching" suggests an asymmetry. Parents coach children, but children don't coach parents. To generalize the concept of emotion coaching, we developed the idea of "attunement." The idea of attunement is based on my former student Dan Yoshimoto's coding of the couples' meta-emotion interview in his dissertation.[10] Dan's interview was an extension of our earlier work on the parental meta-emotion interview. Dan's doctoral thesis extended the meta-emotion interview to couples and developed a new coding system for the new interview.

Each partner was again interviewed separately. The interview was again very rich and a great deal of fun to do. We now think of the interview as a potential bridge between individual therapy and couples' therapy because after doing the interview with both partners, there is an obvious intervention. That intervention is to have them talk to each other about what they each said in their individual interviews. It turned out that a lot of the issues in couples' relationships were at their base about differences between the partners in how they felt about positive emotions (particularly love, affection, and pride) and negative emotions (especially fear, sadness, and anger).

In Dan's interview we asked people about their history and philosophy with five different emotions—anger, sadness, fear, affection, and pride (being proud of one's accomplishment)—and about their philosophy about the experience, exploration, and expression of the emotions in general. Dan's dissertation focused on sadness and anger. We discovered what kind of families and cultures each partner thought they came from as children in terms of the expression and experience of the emotions. Often these childhoods were quite different across partners.

We also scored these interviews for the extent to which people felt that they and their partner could talk fully about their emotions. We wound up dividing people into either dismissing or attuning toward their partner's emotions. Attuning is the opposite of being impatient with, disapproving of, or dismissing of negative emotion.

It's important again to point out that when people are dismissing of their partner's negative emotions, they may still be warm and affectionate in their attitude. They might say: "Oh honey, don't be sad, don't cry, cheer up. Look on the bright side." They are not necessarily being mean. However, it's the case that, as child psychologist Haim Ginott once said,[11] emotions do not vanish by being banished. Dismissing an emotion tends to inadvertently communicate: "I don't want to hear about it when you feel this way." The person doing the dismissing may not mean it that way. The intended message of dismissing is: "Just replace that negative emotion with a positive one." But the person with the emotion hears: "Yuck. Just go away and be unhappy somewhere else! Don't drag everyone down with your negative mood!"

Sometimes emotion-dismissing partners were, in fact, upset with their partner's negative emotions and described their partner as "overly negative" or "overly needy." These people found their partner's negativity a burden because it brought their own mood down, even when their partner's negative emotion wasn't about their relationship. For these people, the meta-emotion mismatch was a serious issue in their relationship.

We discovered that, as with a parental emotion-dismissing attitude, an emotion-dismissing attitude among couples is based on the belief that a person can have any emotion that he or she desires—that it is a matter of will. It's like putting on one jacket instead of another jacket. If one holds this belief, it makes sense that if a person feels unhappy, that person should want to put on a happy jacket rather than an unhappy jacket. That's the message someone who is emotion-dismissing is trying to convey.

We also discovered that when people are disapproving of a negative emotion, the disapproval often arises from them taking personal responsibility for making their partner feel good. Unfortunately, one cannot make someone feel a particular way. So this added responsibility is doomed.

What's the alternative? If one doesn't take responsibility for one's partner's negative emotion, what do you do with that partner's unhappiness? The answer to this question that our attuning subjects gave is the basis of the attunement skill set. Attunement turns out not to be a very

complex social skill. It is the elusive basis for "being there" for one's partner whenever he or she is feeling emotional or has a need. It's essentially about listening nondefensively and emphathetically in order to better understand the partner's emotion.

Scoring the Attunement Interview

We scored the interview for specific aspects of people's awareness of an experience with emotions, and for their ability to respond to each other's emotions. The word "ATTUNE" is an acronym that stands for the following scoring categories:

1. Awareness of the emotion
2. Turning toward the emotions
3. Tolerance of the emotional experience
4. Understanding the emotion
5. Nondefensive Listening to the emotion
6. Empathy toward the emotion

These six dimensions are part of what Dan Yoshimoto's coding system measured. We coded each of these six dimensions for each partner from our videotape of the couples' meta-emotion interview.

Although attunement is not a complex skill, it is difficult to do unless one decides to do it. For emotion-dismissing people, that requires a shift in emotion philosophy from dismissing or disapproving to attunement. It means giving up responsibility for changing someone else's emotion and shifting to genuinely trying to understand one's partner's emotions. Once a person decides to attune, it is possible to get better and better at this skill. If a couple takes turns as speaker and listener, the skill can be broken down as follows:

Awareness. The aware speaker responds to smaller, less escalated displays of negative emotion, without blaming the partner. The aware listener periodically takes the partner's "emotional temperature," usually by asking questions like "How are you doing, honey?" or "What's up with you, baby?" Emotionally aware partners talk about these events as an opportunity for intimacy and closeness, rather than being impatient or annoyed (for example, by asking, "What is it now?" or "With you it's always something isn't it?"). In short, aware speakers and listeners are not dismissing or disapproving about the negative emotion.

They also kept in working memory an awareness of what UCLA psychologist Tom Bradbury called the partner's "enduring vulnerabilities" and sensitivities. For example, if the partner was sensitive to being excluded, they said that they remembered this fact, and they softened a discussion of an issue accordingly. If the partner was sensitive to criticism or anger, they reported softening the way they raised an issue, doing what we now call "preemptive repair" (see Chapter 8). In my private practice, I tell clients that no one escapes childhood without some scars, and these scars become triggers that escalate conflict. I suggest that they imagine that each

person is wearing a T-shirt with their enduring vulnerabilities written on it. Some of my favorites are: "You don't want to try to improve me with constructive criticism"; "If you want to see defensiveness, just try blaming me"; "Don't scold me"; and "Don't try to control me."

The goal of this part of attunement appears to be soothing to reduce threat in "processing" negativity for both people. We psychologists have learned that a young baby is in one of two modes with respect to incoming stimulation. I call these two modes the "What's this?" response and the "What the hell is this?" response. For example, show a baby a slide of a clown and the baby may orient toward that slide openly, a response Russian psychologist Andre Sokolov called the "orienting reflex." In this mode, the baby's heart rate decreases, the baby stops moving, the baby looks directly at the slide, the baby stops sucking the nipple, and the baby's pupils dilate. This is the "What's this?" response.

Alternatively, the baby might respond as follows: the baby's heart rate increases, the baby starts moving, the baby looks away from the slide, the baby starts sucking the nipple, and the baby's pupils constrict. This is the "What the hell is this?" response. In attunement people try to keep their partner in "What's this?" rather than "What the hell is this?" mode.

Turning Toward. This means that speakers tend to talk about their feelings in terms of their positive need, instead of talking about what the speaker does not need or want. Positive need is a recipe for success by the listener. It is what would have worked for the speaker if the discussion of a negative emotion or a regrettable incident were replayed. For example, if the speaker were upset by their conversation at dinner, a positive need might be, "I need you to ask me about my day." It's a recipe for success for that speaker. So the rules for attunement were that while the listener has responsibilities, so does the speaker. In turning toward, the speaker cannot begin with blaming or criticism. Instead, it is the responsibility of the speaker to state his or her feelings as neutrally as possible, and then convert any complaint about the partner into a positive need (i.e., something one does need, not what one does not need). This requires a mental transformation from what is wrong with one's partner to what one's partner can do that would work. It is the speaker's job to discover that recipe. The speaker is really saying, "Here's what I feel, and here's what I need from you." Or, in processing a negative event that has already happened, the speaker is saying, "Here's what I felt, and here's what I needed from you."

How do couples find that positive need? How do they convert "Here's what's wrong with you, and here's what I want you to stop doing" into, "Here's what I feel (or felt) and here's the positive thing I need (or needed) from you"? I think that the answer is that there is a longing or a wish, and therefore a recipe, within every negative emotion. In general, in sadness something is missing. In anger there is a frustrated goal. In disappointment there is a hope, and expectation. In loneliness there is a desire for connection. In a similar way, each negative emotion is a GPS for guiding us toward a longing, a wish, and a hope. The expression of the positive need eliminates the blame and the reproach.

Tolerance. With tolerance, each partner subscribes to the belief that in every negative emotional event there are always two different but equally valid perceptions of the event. Although partners may share the same viewpoint, they each believe they can learn from the other's viewpoint. This tolerant viewpoint has to be reciprocal. Although people may not agree with their partner's reporting of the facts, they avoid arguing about the facts and are tolerant of their partner's perceptions. They don't try to change the partner's emotions or talk their partner out of having those emotions. They accept anger as well as sadness. They don't take their partner's negative emotional state personally. The view they seem to have is that (as Ginot suggested) all emotions and wishes are acceptable, although not all behavior is acceptable. Also, the tolerant person subscribed to the belief that emotions have a purpose and logic.

This contrasts with an emotion-dismissing view that everyone can select which emotions to have. Tolerance is a recognition that it makes sense to talk about emotions and that it is productive to fully process emotions with oneself and one's partner. Tolerance does not mean agreement or compliance. Nor does it mean having to adopt the partner's perspective as one's own. Rather, tolerance means that one believes that it is important to inquire about the partner's perspective.

Understanding. These people, while listening, say that they agree that they will seek an understanding of the partner's emotions—their meaning, their history—and whatever events may have escalated the misunderstanding, conflict, or hurt feelings. They are saying, "Talk to me, baby." When they are listening to their partner, they postpone their own agenda in a search for understanding the partner's point of view. "Postpone" is the operative word, instead of ignore. They say that this creates a situation in which both people rest assured that they will each be understood. The only goal is understanding, not giving advice, or correcting and guiding.

I think that this point of view changes the job description in conflict from persuading one's partner that one's point of view is worth understand to trying to find out one's partner's perspective and trying to understanding it. Somewhat counterintuitively, understanding is facilitated by taking no responsibility for the partner's feelings, except trying to understand. When one's partner is crying, for example, the response should not be, "Please stop crying," but something like, "Please help me understand what the tears are all about." The goal is understanding, and that is enough. An important part of this understanding is asking, "Is there anything more? Do you have any other feelings and needs about this situation?" I think that a lack of impatience arises from the belief that in every situation people usually have more than one emotion, and they have emotion blends. Emotions line up like dominoes, and people often process only the lead emotion or domino, the primary affect, making it necessary to revisit the situation because they were not done fully processing it.

 Nondefensive Listening. To facilitate understanding, attuned people down-regulate their own defensiveness and flooding as they are listening to their partner's negative emotions and perceptions. I think that this is in many ways the most difficult social skill in attunement, probably more important than empathy. These people down-regulate their defensiveness

primarily by keeping quiet, pausing a beat before responding, listening a little, and postponing their own agenda while they focus on their partner's pain, getting in touch with their own feelings of love and protection. What's really important, I think, is that they focus also on their partner's perceptions of the situation, not on "the facts." They remember that they respect and love their partner. They wait rather than reacting swiftly. They remember to breathe and self-soothe. To the extent possible, they maximize agreement, seek common ground, and try not to take their partner's emotions as a personal attack or something they have to fix.

It isn't easy to down-regulate one's own defensiveness. Therapist Dan Wile suggested that defensive feelings can be turned into self-disclosure, as in: "Right now I am feeling defensive, but I don't want to respond defensively." Down-regulating defensiveness is hard if people are "running on empty" in the relationship. If the emotional bank account is low, they become hypervigilant and overly sensitive to their partner's negative affects. They may even see negativity when it is not there, and they tend to miss some of the positivity their partner is displaying. As noted earlier, in 1980 two researchers, Robinson and Price, did a study in which they put observers in couples' homes just to observe positivity. They also trained the couple to do the same job. When the couple was getting along, the observers and the couple were in synch in terms of their observations, but when the couple was unhappy, the partners missed 50% of the positivity that the observers saw.

Empathy. The final part of the acronym refers to attempting to listen to the partner's negative emotions with compassion and understanding and trying to see the partner's emotions through the partner's eyes. This process reminded me of Mr. Spock's "Vulcan mind meld" in the original Star Trek. Spock, who is a Vulcan, can telepathically meld his mind with another person's. He leaves behind his own mind in some ways as he performs the mind meld. He genuinely sees the world through that person's eyes. Empathy, when it works, is like this telepathic seeing of the situation (and feeling it as well) through the eyes of one's partner. Empathic listeners become keenly aware of the distress and pain of their partner. This is a resonant experience of temporarily becoming the partner and experiencing the partner's emotions. They then communicate empathy and validation. A good summary of this validation is being able to communicate something like: "It makes sense to me that you would have these feelings, and needs, because…." Validation is a very important part of the attunement attitude. That's a general definition of what we code in the attunement interview. Attunement as a general skill set is important in three different social contexts, and it varies with each context.

Context #1. Attunement in Sliding-Door Moments

In the movie Sliding Doors, the protagonist, played by Gwyneth Paltrow, decides to go home from work because she is not feeling well. She runs to catch a train in the London tube but just barely misses it. In the next scene, we see her boyfriend, who is about to cheat on her with her best girlfriend. Catching the next train, Paltrow comes home, completely unaware of what her boyfriend has done. Then suddenly we are jerked back in time, back again to the same train

platform, only this time Paltrow makes the train and walks in on her cheating boyfriend in the act. Two trajectories thus unfold in the movie, somehow strangely intertwining and meeting at the end.

Here's a sliding-door story that happened to me: I was getting ready for bed, putting a mystery novel I hadn't had time to finish by my bedside. When I went into the bathroom, I saw my wife's face reflected in the bathroom mirror. She was brushing her hair and looked sad. She hadn't seen me yet. In one version of the sliding-door moment I could have slowly backed out of the bathroom, gotten into bed, and picked up my book. In that universe, later my wife would have joined me and I might have turned to her to initiate sex. She, still feeling sad, probably would have pulled away because she wasn't in the mood for sex. But then—like in the movie—I was back to the sliding-door moment, poised at the bathroom entrance. This time, however, I actually did enter the bathroom. I took the brush from my wife's hand and began brushing her hair. That was a different universe. She closed her eyes and leaned back into me, and I said, "What's wrong, baby?" We talked about her sadness, which was about her 92-year-old mother's deteriorating mental alertness with Alzheimer's disease. Later we both got into bed and I did turn to her to initiate sex, and she responded warmly.

Now imagine that we are again back in the first universe. This time when she pulled away I might have become angry. I might have said, "You're being so cold." That could have started a regrettable incident. Thus, in this manner, small moments in a relationship unfold—ordinary moments, with ordinary decisions, but very different trajectories for a relationship over time.

There are many, many such moments in a relationship. At each of them there is a tiny turning point—an opportunity, or a lost opportunity, for connection. Failing to turn toward our partner in any one of these sliding-door moments may not have hugely negative consequences. However, when we add up many such choices to dismiss emotion instead of attuning to it, the result is two different trajectories leading to very different universes.

These frequent sliding-door moments serve as small "trust tests." They are moments of choice, when the partner directly or indirectly asks for something. We call that a "bid for connection"— and the choice is made to turn toward, away, or against that bid. The request for connection can be made directly and verbally or indirectly and nonverbally. In many, many of these moments the trust metric is subjectively evaluated—often without our awareness—and cumulatively, over time, we decide whether we can count on our partner to be truthful and truly "there" for us. This is where our work on trust links to Susan Johnson's emotionally focused couple therapy (EFT). The turning away can have consequences for the security of the partners' attachment to each other and sense of safety with each other.

The request for connection ("being there for me") can be as small as getting the partner's attention for an instant. We may want to show our partner something, comment on something, tell a joke, or in a myriad of ways have our partner see our immediate current need. For example,

we may say, "Will you please help me fold the laundry?" or we may just audibly grumble while folding the laundry as our partner walks by. The bid may also ask for more than attention, like asking for the partner's active interest.

What is even more interesting is that these bids for connection in sliding-door moments are actually organized in a hierarchy, kind of like a ladder. The level in the bid hierarchy depends on how much we are asking for in terms of cognitive or emotional effort from our partner. Following are some examples of bids and where they roughly fall in the hierarchy, with the first lowest on the ladder and the last at the top.

- A bid for attention
- Simple requests (e.g., "While you're up, get me the butter.")
- A bid for help, teamwork, or coordination (e.g., help with an errand)
- A bid for the partner's interest or active excitement
- Questions or requests for information
- A bid for conversation
- A bid for just venting Sharing events of the day
- Stress reduction
- Problem solving
- Humor, laughter
- Affection
- Playfulness
- Adventure
- Exploration
- Learning something together
- Intimate conversation
- Emotional support
- Understanding, compassion, empathy
- Sexual intimacy

For example, "attention" is lower on the list because if you can't even get your partner's attention, you aren't as likely to make a bid for conversation or emotional support. That means that attachment security at an easy level on the ladder leads to more risk taking and vulnerability at a higher level on the ladder. I trust my partner with my vulnerability on a higher level of the ladder if the relationship has passed trust tests at a lower level of the ladder. Couples we see in restaurants who uncomfortably eat an entire meal and never talk to each other are stuck at a low level of connection on the ladder.

My former student Janice Driver coded these bids made in our apartment newlywed study lab in her "bids and turning" coding system.[12] In general, people can respond to the bid positively, which we call "turning toward." It doesn't take much. Sometimes even a grunt will do as

sufficient turning toward. If partners respond in a large way, which Jani calls "enthusiastic turning toward," that usually has huge possibilities for emotional connection. For example, suppose one partner is watching TV and says "They went to Spain for a honeymoon. Wow!" A minimal turning toward would be "That's nice." Or it can be enthusiastic, as in, "Wow that would be great. Why don't we go there this summer?"

Or a person can totally ignore the bid, as if he or she hasn't heard it or noticed the request, which we call "turning away." Or the partner can respond to the bid in a grumpy, irritable, or aggressive fashion, which we call "turning against."

In our newlywed study Jani found that the couples who had divorced 6 years after the wedding had turned toward their partner (in our love lab) an average of 33%, whereas the couples who were still married 6 years after the wedding had turned toward their partner 86% of the time.[13] That's a big difference.

Jani also discovered that turning toward builds an "emotional bank account" that makes conflict far more likely to be filled with positive emotions, particularly shared humor. Her first discovery was just a correlation, which could have been a chance association. But then we actually did a randomized clinical trial (which was Kim Ryan's dissertation) that showed that changing just the first three levels of the Sound Relationship House (love maps, turning toward, and fondness and admiration) in a one-day workshop increased the amount of positive affect during conflict, particularly shared humor. That study was an important part of verifying the causal model of the Sound Relationship House; it suggested that, in part, turning toward causes positive affect during conflict.

Why would this be so interesting? We had previously discovered that what predicted divorce or stability best among our newlyweds was the amount of positive affect during conflict, particularly humor, understanding, and affection. But what good is that piece of information? It's a useless finding because inducing positive affect during conflict is not possible by working on conflict directly, any more than ordering someone to laugh is effective at inducing humor and amusement. However, discovering that turning toward bids is related to positive affect during conflict gave us a clue about how to positively alter the nature of conflict. It therefore gave us our only method for building the very effective repairs of humor and affection during conflict. We can do it without directly working on conflict. We just work on turning toward bids.

Turning Away or Against in Sliding-Door Moments

We noticed on videotapes in the apartment lab that a partner's turning away seemed to make the bidder's body position crumple a bit, which was usually followed by some face-saving activity like straightening the curtains. So it's probably a small hurt, not a big one. Often the person turning away just doesn't think this moment is important; turning away is not necessarily mean-spirited. Yet that small turning away builds the groundwork for a bad habit.

As Susan Johnson noted in training therapists in our clinic, however, there are some bigger moments when a bid means more, and when turning away may in itself lead to a huge loss of trust in the implicit relationship contract that we are in this relationship for each other—that it's a contract of mutual nurturance and being there for each other. People then often experience great disappointment, anger, and loneliness. Susan Johnson said that the emotional unavailability or unresponsiveness of an "attachment figure"—that is, someone who is supposed to be a source of safety and security, who is supposed to "be there for you"—is a great source of anger and panic in the person who gets a turning away from the partner. Part of Johnson's emotionally focused couple therapy, is, when necessary, spent on understanding, processing, and healing what she calls these "attachment injuries."

The big attachment injuries Johnson is talking about are the moments of turning away that don't just erode trust. They shatter trust. An example is a husband Johnson saw in therapy who earlier had refused to talk about his wife's miscarriage because he didn't find these conversations "positive and constructive," so she was left to deal with her grief and loss alone.

The secret of turning toward bids in sliding-door moments is first noticing the bid, and second responding to the bid. These two steps usually require some heightened awareness of how our partner tends to make requests, and an attitude that we wish to meet these needs a large percentage of the time. We are thus communicating: "I hear you, baby. Talk to me. What can I do to meet your need?"

Context #2. Attunement with Regard to Regrettable Incidents

Regrettable incidents are inevitable in all relationships. A simple mathematical proof will suffice to explain this idea. If we were to estimate the percentage of time we are emotionally available when with our partner—ready to listen wholeheartedly—most people would agree that 50% is a generous estimate. That's the probability of tossing an coin and getting heads versus tails. If we then ask, "What is the probability that both partners will be emotionally available at the same time, assuming independence of emotional availability?" that probability is 0.25 (0.5 x 0.5 = 0.25), the probability of tossing two coins and getting two heads. Therefore, 75% of the time, even with this generous estimate, the ground is ripe for miscommunications. A more realistic estimate of emotional availability might be 30%, in which case the probability of both people being emotionally available at the same time is 9%, with 91% of the time being ripe ground for miscommunications. Regrettable incidents are par for the course. They don't imply that it's a bad relationship, just that there are two very different minds in any relationship.

After a regrettable incident, in attunement we need first to be able to calm down, and second to have a conversation that processes the incident. "Processing" means that a couple can talk about a regrettable incident without getting back into the incident or fight that may have followed it. It's as if they are on a balcony, having observed and being able to talk about a play they saw on stage that involved the two of them. Again, they are saying, "Talk to me, baby. I'm here for

you." In my clinical practice I have people take turns doing this. That attitude and the skill of listening with (1) awareness, (2) turning toward, (3) tolerance, (4) nondefensive listening, (5) understanding as a goal, and (6) empathy is the basis for the conversation that can create emotional connection during sliding-door moments.

The late great comedian George Carlin had a section in one of his books called "Here are some things you never see."[14] One of those, he claimed, is the popular bumper sticker S#!T HAPPENS on a Rolls Royce. Only the down-and-out put that sticker on their car, he said. But in all relationships, negative emotions, unfortunate events, and regrettable incidents inevitably happen, whether one is driving down the road in a broken-down Ford or in a Rolls. S#!T HAPPENS to everyone.

What matters for building trust is how one responds to one's partner's negative emotions. What are the most common regrettable incidents or S#!T that happens for couples? Surprisingly, they aren't disputes about particular topics, like sex or money. Reporters often ask me, "What do couples fight about mostly?" I answer, "Absolutely nothing. They fight about nothing." Couples rarely sit down, create an agenda, and argue about specific topics, like the budget. Sometimes they do. Instead, they usually hurt each other's feelings in very ordinary, seemingly meaningless, small moments that seem to arise from about absolutely nothing. S#!T just happens. For example, a couple is watching television and he has the remote control. He is channel surfing when she says, "Leave it on that channel." He says, "Okay, but let me first see what else is on." Generally women want to watch television and men want to see what else is on. She responds by saying, "No! Just leave it. I hate it when you channel surf." He throws down the remote and angrily says, "Fine!" She responds by saying, "I don't like the way you just said 'fine.' That hurt my feelings." He says, "I said 'fine' because you are always going to get your way, so fine, have it your way. I don't want to argue." She says, "I don't even want to watch TV with you anymore." He responds by saying, "I don't want to talk about it," and leaves the room. Something small has turned into a regrettable incident. They do need to talk about control and influence. If they talk about it using this process of "attuning," they will usually increase their understanding of the event and each other's perception, thereby increasing a sense of trust through connection. If they dismiss these negative emotions in this regrettable incident, they typically will still eventually drift together again, but trust will have eroded a small amount.

A Theory of Building Trust When SH#!T Happens

Physicists since Albert Einstein have been searching for what they call the "grand unified theory" (or GUT) that will unify all four of nature's forces: gravitation, electromagnetic force, the weak force of radioactive decay, and the strong force that holds the nucleus of atoms together. They haven't found it yet.

In the area of relationships, things are apparently much simpler than in theoretical physics. I want to propose a GUT theory of trust when S#!T happens in love relationships. Our data show

that attunement is the ultimate way to down-regulate flooding and avoid the negative oral history switch. Now we have a theory that can explain why some relationships work and others fail. Here's the theory.

Explaining relationship failure.

Negative events in couple relationships are inevitable. The way relationships fail is through something called the "Zeigarnik effect." If a couple's negative events are not fully processed (by attunement), then they are remembered and rehearsed repeatedly, turned over and over in each person's mind. Trust begins to erode. Eventually "cognitive dissonance" arises: One is staying in a relationship, but that relationship is a veritable fountain of negativity. That cognitive dissonance is like a stone in one's shoe. It gets resolved by deciding that one's partner has lasting negative traits that "explain" the continual negativity. Empirically, the most common negative attribution is "my partner is selfish." This fact shows that it is precisely trust that erodes. People stop believing that their partner is thinking about their best interests. The potential for betrayal increases as we start believing that our partner is primarily interested in his or her own gains. During conflict discussions, negativity is more unpleasant, but it is more likely to be reciprocated and escalated. These negative exchanges during conflict become an "absorbing state," easier to enter than to exit. They also build betrayal, because conflict becomes more like a zero-sum game. What is sad is that the absorbing-state quality spreads to non-conflict interactions as well. Gradually, during conflict and non-conflict interactions, people are unable to act with their partner's best interests at heart, and, instead, respond with their own interests at heart. That means that not only has trust eroded, but the potential for betrayal has increased as well. Positive sentiment override becomes replaced by negative sentiment override.

New, continually unprocessed negative events that involve the erosion of trust, as well as increases in the potential for betrayal, add to this picture until eventually a threshold is crossed through the Zeigarnik effect. I believe that this is when the oral history switch flips. A major threshold has then been passed. Then there is an internal retelling of the relationship's history within each partner.

The negative events now trump the positive, and the partner's negative traits now trump his or her positive traits. The cost-benefit analysis of the relationships turns to an imbalance of greater costs instead of greater benefits. Negativity becomes self-generating. People now think, "Even if my partner does something nice for me, it is still a selfish person doing something nice— someone I no longer trust."

Explaining Relationship Success

The way relationships work well is that when negative events are fully processed, there is no Zeigarnik effect. Hence, these events are not very well remembered, nor are they mentally rehearsed. Instead, positive events are remembered and rehearsed. Trust is built because our partner has "been there" for us. We believe that our partner acts with our best interests in mind.

Our partner, through processing our negative emotions, has demonstrated that he or she has our best interests at heart and is "there for us." We remember these positive moments because thinking about them is intrinsically rewarding. Our needs matter to our partner. We then go on to forget the specific information about our hurts, and we minimize the negative in the relationship. There is no cognitive dissonance. One is staying in a relationship, and that relationship appears to be a veritable fountain of positivity. We decide that our partner has mostly lasting positive traits that "explain" why we are staying with this person who generally makes us happy, whom we can trust, whom we feel safe with, and whose negativity is somewhat hard to remember. The most common positive attribution is "my partner is so loving and generous." Now, if our partner is thoughtless, irritable, emotionally distant, or unkind, our explanation is that he or she must be "stressed," because we trust this person. Negativity does not become an absorbing state because when we try repairing the negativity, our partner tends to accept our repair attempt. In fact, we see our partner being gentle with us and doing "preemptive" repair to soften any discussion of a disagreement. We are able to laugh together even when we discuss a disagreement. There is a lot of affection between us.

New, continually processed negative events are recalled, but only dimly. The oral history switch stays positive. There is even a retelling of the relationship's history emphasizing the positive. The positive events trump the negative; the partner's positive traits trump his or her negative traits. The cost-benefit analysis of the relationship stays with much greater benefits than costs. Now positivity becomes self-generating. Even if the partner does something nasty, he or she is seen as a wonderful and trustworthy person who is temporarily stressed or in a bad mood. The event is minimized. If it lasts too long, the partners will attune again.

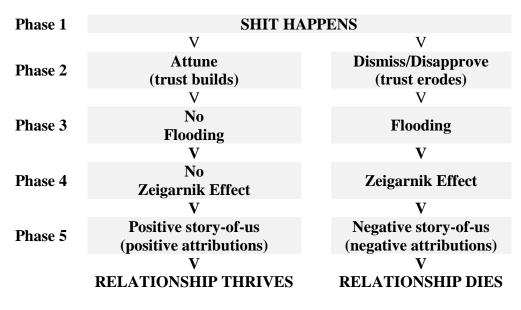**A Flowchart for Building Trust in Context #2**

The diagram pictured in Figure 6.1 shows the two possible tracks for a relationship. As mentioned, negative events, or regrettable incidents, are inevitable. In the right hand track, the emotional event is dismissed or disapproved of. There is no emotion processing. No connection. Flooding occurs, or it continues and distrust builds. The Zeigarnik effect leads this event to be remembered and rehearsed. Negativity during conflict and non-conflict interactions becomes an absorbing state. Cognitive dissonance leads to a negative oral history switch. The negative event is "explained" through the lasting negative traits of the partner and the fleeting, situationally based positive traits of the partner.

 In the left hand track, the flooding is down-regulated and attunement occurs. Conflict is not an absorbing state, and it is easily exited through repair and positive affect like shared humor and affection. There is no Zeigarnik effect and mostly positive events are recalled and "explained" through the lasting positive traits of the partner and the fleeting, situationally based negative traits of the partner. Let's look at the Five phases a little more closely. The diagram in Figure 6.1 sums them up.

Phase 1. S#IT HAPPENS As I discussed, negative emotions and regrettable incidents are inevitable in all relationships. However, the response to these moments is critical. That leads to Phase 2.

Phase 2. Attune or Dismiss/Disapprove. After a regrettable incident happens, there is a sliding-door choice point, one of two paths: or attuning to the partner's negative feelings or feelings about the regrettable incident, or dismissing or disapproving of them. Escalation and alienation occur when we listen defensively to the hurt caused during the regrettable incident. The escalation and alienation take place instead of the attunement conversation the couple needs to have. With attunement trust is built.

Conversely, with dismissing, trust is eroded. Our partner is not there for us. Dismissing is also more likely to occur when there is a power asymmetry. The dismisser has more power than the person whose emotion is being dismissed. Power asymmetry is therefore a setting condition for dismissing. The dismisser is more removed, like the withdrawer is in the demand-withdraw pattern.

Phase 1	SHIT HAPPENS	
	V	V
Phase 2	**Attune** **(trust builds)**	**Dismiss/Disapprove** **(trust erodes)**
	V	V
Phase 3	**No** **Flooding**	**Flooding**
	V	V
Phase 4	**No** **Zeigarnik Effect**	**Zeigarnik Effect**
	V	V
Phase 5	**Positive story-of-us** **(positive attributions)**	**Negative story-of-us** **(negative attributions)**
	V	V
	RELATIONSHIP THRIVES	**RELATIONSHIP DIES**

Figure 6.1 The Five Phases of Regrettable Incidents

An analogy to attunement is tuning two musical instruments to each other, which requires grounding in a reference note. The choir may need to hear an A-tone. Similarly, in relationships, we need to become grounded in our partner's point of view when our partner needs to talk about a negative emotion or when there's been a regrettable incident. It's easy for a choir to drift out of tune; it's natural. There is a need for the choir to tune up periodically, and that is the way it is in relationships, too. What happens when one partner doesn't attune? Trust is eroded. The dismisser usually withdraws more, and becomes the distancer. The pursue-distance dynamic is created, and

Phase 3 happens—we become flooded. This creates asymmetry in power, with the pursuer suddenly becoming less powerful. (In the final chapter of this book I will talk about how these power asymmetries can be defined and measured mathematically.)

Phase 3. No Flooding or Flooding. During the expression of negative emotions or during a regrettable incident and the dismissing afterwards, most of us will become flooded, or overwhelmed by negative affect. Being flooded often is the cumulative effect of repeatedly getting into a physiological fight-or-flight state. When we're feeling flooded we would rather be anywhere on the planet than in this room talking to our partner. Flooding predicts that our shields will go up, because we feel overwhelmed and either want to flee or immediately vanquish our partner's negativity. But it turns out that the more flooded we are, the more we initiate nasty interchanges, and the more we summarize ourselves instead of taking in new information.

Overall, in a regrettable incident following a negative sliding-door moment, flooding is the biggest block to reconnecting and repair. As noted earlier, our data also show that men become flooded far more easily than women do, and they have much more trouble self-soothing. In general, when we become flooded we cannot process information very well, and we have dramatically reduced access to our ability to be empathic, compassionate, creative, or laugh at ourselves. All these wonderful capabilities seem to evaporate when we become flooded.

When we are flooded not only has trust already eroded a bit, but also the untrustworthiness metric has increased. We start seeing our partner not as our irritating friend but as our adversary, and we start acting out of our own self-interest. We are in great danger of seeing the regrettable incident as a power struggle and a zero-sum game. We are inviting the dynamics of betrayal. When we're flooded we are not a bad person, nor do we suddenly develop a psychopathology, nor are we necessarily in a bad relationship. We are simply flooded. We can't compassionately listen to our partner, even if we wanted to. Our recent data suggest that there are three parts to flooding. The first part is the shock of feeling attacked, blamed, and abandoned. The second part is awareness that we can't calm down. The third part is emotional shutdown. When we are flooded we become like a city under siege. Conflict then starts becoming an absorbing state.

Understanding the concept of flooding itself provides some relief to partners who have trouble listening to their partner. It suggests that when people are flooded they can't listen, even though they might wish to. It's not anyone's fault that they can't listen when flooded; it's a natural fight-or-flight response, though operating a bit out of context. The concept of flooding also suggests the importance of attuning to oneself when one is flooded, and the overwhelming importance of knowing what we are feeling and of self-soothing rather than fighting or fleeing. When flooded, we can't recall why we ever liked our partner, and we can't be very creative.

Phase 4. No Zeigarnik Effect or Zeigarnik Effect. In 1922, a petite 21-year-old newlywed Jewish woman named Bluma Zeigarnik sat in a café in Vienna and watched as professional waiters listened carefully to huge orders from large gatherings without writing anything down.[15]

Then she watched as the waiters flawlessly filled their orders. Always the astute observer, Zeigarnik later interviewed these waiters. As had filled the orders, they had forgotten everything. In other words, when the orders remained unfilled, they remembered them, but after the orders were completely processed, the orders were forgotten. This was later coined the "Zeigarnik effect." It is defined as follows: We have better recall for events that we have not completely processed. Zeigarnik found that, on average, there is 90% better recall for "unfinished events" than for events we have somehow completed.

The famous social psychologist Morton Deutch, reviewing Kurt Lewin's social psychological field theory in the Handbook of Social Psychology in 1968, discussed what he called the "Zeigarnik quotient," which is the ratio of unfinished tasks that are recalled divided by completed tasks that are recalled.[16] Zeigarnik predicted that this ratio would be greater than 1.0. Deutch reviewed research that found that the Zeigarnik quotient averaged 1.9. Some writers have even claimed that the Zeigarnik effect forms the basis for night dreams, as we often dream about uncompleted daily events. Others, like psychiatrist Daniel Siegel[17], have claimed that the Zeigarnik effect could explain why traumatic events linger in the body, ready to be activated again with the right trigger. Yet if equally traumatic events later become completed autobiographical stories with words attached to the traumatic bodily sensations, the traumas lose their lethality. In other words, they have been fully "processed." We are done with them, so they occupy a less potent memory space.

The Zeigarnik effect may not merely be limited to memory for facts, but also govern how negative emotional events are stored in memory. Berkeley researcher Mary Main developed an interview called the "Adult Attachment Interview." In this interview, Main scored how people told the story of their childhoods, and whether or not these childhoods were painful and traumatic. She was less interested in the content of the stories than in how the stories were told. People who were able to tell coherent stories about their traumatic childhood were observed to be very different kinds of parents than people who had the same amount of childhood trauma but were somehow not done with it. They were anxious, preoccupied, dismissing, or simply incoherent in their account of these childhood events. When studying the babies of these two types of parents, Mary Main discovered an amazing effect. The people who were somehow done with the trauma, who could tell a coherent story about it, who were not disorganized and flooded with emotion while telling the story, had infants who were securely attached. On the other hand, the people who were not done with the trauma, who could not tell a coherent story about it, who were disorganized and flooded with emotion while telling the story, had infants who were insecurely attached. The security of infant attachment had been established as one of the central buffers conferred by healthy parenting on children, a buffer that saw them well throughout life. Securely attached children did better in school, did better in social relationships, and generally fared better throughout life than insecurely attached children.

The Mary Main findings—and the Zeigarnik effect—became the basis for Daniel Siegel and Mary Hartzell's program for improving parenting (see their book Parenting from the Inside Out)

Other writers such as Ian A. James proposed that the Zeigarnik effect was the basis of all emotional disorders. He suggested that the maintenance of intrusions and "perseverations" reflect the presence of unresolved issues, which he called mental "pop ups." James suggested that the Zeigarnik effect may have important implications in a wide range of psychiatric disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder, unresolved grief, obsessive-compulsive disorders, and general anxiety disorders. James suggested there is a strong "completion tendency" in these disorders.

Recently Carol Tavris and Eliot Aronson published a book titled Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me).[18] The title is a quote taken from Henry Kissinger, who, when asked what it was like to serve in the Nixon administration, said that mistakes were made, but not by him. Tavris and Aronson's book is about self-justification, or how people complete memories for which there is a discord—some mismatch between memory and experience. The Wall Street Journal said in its review of the book that the volume was entertaining and amusing, until one realized that it was about one's own tendency toward self-justification, at which point it suddenly became horrifying. The book was an excursion into the phenomenon called "cognitive dissonance," first discovered by social psychologist Leon Festinger. Festinger had written a book titled When Prophesy Fails, which was about his observation of a cult who believed strongly that the world would be destroyed on a specific date. Festinger was present when the moment came and went. He wanted to know what the cult members would do when their prophesy failed—how would they resolve the "cognitive dissonance" created by their obviously false belief. Here's what happened. The cult leader waited a long time until she was sure that the prophesy had actually failed. Then she announced to the group that it was their faith that had miraculously saved the world from annihilation. Festinger reported that the cult's belief became even stronger and more steadfast. They had found a way to resolve their cognitive dissonance.

The potential role of the Zeigarnik effect is colossal. If we engage in attuned processing of a negative emotional event or regrettable incident with our partner, we will only foggily remember it. The details will become hazy, and the event, insignificant. On the other hand, if we dismiss and avoid processing a negative emotional event, it will not disappear. It will fester, ready to be triggered again.

This is why attuning to a negative regrettable incident is so incredibly important. Like the Vienesse waiters in Zeigarnik's café, if partners avoid processing the incident with attunement, the event and its negative emotion will lie inside of each partner like an improvised explosive device (IED), ready to explode if inadvertently stepped on.

We have two indices in our lab that tap into the extent of the Zeigarnik effect. The first index is the average value of the video-recall rating dial. The reasoning is that, if negative things are unfinished, the ratings will be lower than if negative things are finished. The second index is all about the attributions people eventually start making about their partner's lasting personality traits. As I mentioned, the most common research finding across labs is that the first negative attribution people start making when the relationship becomes less happy is "my partner is

selfish," a direct reflection of a decrease in the trust metric. They then start to see their partner's momentary emotional distance and irritability as a sign of a lasting negative trait. On the other hand, in happier relationships people make lasting positive trait attributions, like "my partner is sweet," and tend to write off their partner's momentary emotional distance and irritability as a temporary attribution, like "my partner is stressed."

Phase 5. The Ever-Changing "Story of Us." When the Zeigarnik effect takes hold, unresolved negative emotions capture people's consciousness. Over time, as the relationship passes a critical threshold of dismissed negative emotion, we will enter negative sentiment override. In negative sentiment override, our cost-benefit analysis of staying in the relationship begins to change, tilting more to the cost side than to the benefit side. Our thoughts naturally drift more toward leaving the relationship rather than staying in it.

How does this happen? The final phase in a relationship's slow death transforms the innermost story that we tell ourselves about our relationship's history and our partner's underlying character. The lesson is this: Negative emotions do not vanish by being banished. When they are not fully processed, they linger, and the Zeigarnik effect takes over. Our thoughts dwell on these emotional injuries. The injuries become a stone in our shoe that we cannot remove. We turn these events over and over in our mind, studying every facet, trying to make sense out of what happened. We are faced with a cognitive dissonance, an internal mismatch. On the one hand, we think, "I am staying in this relationship," but on the other hand, we think, "I am having all these negative emotions and repeated regrettable incidents that I can't seem to get out of my mind." Something is really wrong.

We eventually resolve this intensely uncomfortable cognitive dissonance by telling ourselves a negative story-of-us. Unfortunately, this process also includes mentally attributing negative, lasting traits to our partner, such as selfishness. Now conflict is becoming an absorbing state, a zero-sum game. In this new story-of-us, we drift slowly toward scanning the past for clues of selfishness and other negative traits. We maximize the importance of past negative events and minimize the importance of past positive events. We tell ourselves that our fights were truly meaningless, as they ultimately failed to improve our relationship.

We now wear a perceptual filter that tells us everything is getting worse. Once we switch to making these negative attributions about our partner, it's very hard for us to alter them. For example, if our partner is suddenly and surprisingly nice to us, we still think it's our selfish partner doing something nice, so the effect of our partner's niceness is trivialized.

If switched to a negative story-of-us, the relationship will almost certainly follow a sad, predictable trajectory. But if switched to a positive story-of-us, the relationship will most likely take a very different trajectory, toward positive sentiment override, a buffer against momentary negativity or emotional distance.

Clearly, the skills of attunement can make all the difference between a relationship's strength versus its demise.

Context #3. Attunement During Conflict

The third context in which attunement is needed is conflict. Recall the finding that trust is eroded is when conflict becomes an absorbing state. If partners are unable to repair their interaction during the conflict, if the conflict escalates or they withdraw, if the conflict becomes an absorbing state, if they are unable to avoid flooding or DPA, and if the four horsemen emerge during the conflict, then trust will be seriously eroded. If this pattern of conflict becomes characteristic of how partners handle all conflicts, trust will eventually disappear, and the couple will enter what we call the "distance and isolation cascade."[19]

In the distance and isolation cascade, partners will gradually start to avoid talking about that issue, start believing that there is no point in trying to talk to their partner, eventually avoid each other entirely, begin living their lives in parallel, and become increasingly unhappy and lonely. Conflict avoidance becomes the norm.

The Blueprint of Attunement in the Three Contexts

I now will discuss the blueprints necessary for attunement in each of the three relational contexts.

Blueprint #1. Attunement During Sliding-Door Moments

One of the most common causes of shattered trust in these three contexts is a mismatch in partners' meta-emotion. Sometimes these differences in meta-emotion can become perpetual sources of conflict. Let me give you an example of a couple I saw in therapy, Bill and Diane.

In his individual interview, Bill said that whenever his wife came into a room he tensed up, and he scanned her body to see if there was any evidence of a dark mood. He was always on edge, afraid that a big negative incident might be on his hands at any moment. He wanted me to determine if there was something mentally wrong with his wife.

Diane came in to her individual interview and said that whenever she walked into a room, Bill became like the Batmobile, with shields coming up immediately, making him invulnerable, like a knight in armor with two slits for his eyes. There was no way she could get close to him. She claimed he never listened to her. "You are never there for me when I need you," she said. He claimed that he listened to her all the time.

As I observed them together it was clear that his attitude toward her bids and negative emotions was impatience, a kind of "What is it now?" attitude. He also didn't make very many discriminations between one negative emotion and another; things were equally bad if she was sad, angry, afraid, or anxious, or even if she just had mixed feelings about something. Anything

less than cheerfulness and optimism worried him enormously. She described him as constantly irritable.

As Bill tried to listen to her, he said that he saw himself as responsible for changing her negative state to an optimistic one. He was also impatient with her because he was so focused on his work; he claimed that his time was in short supply, and he was always in a hurry. Yet he saw his role as her husband to make her happy, so when she was unhappy he would suggest a way that he would solve a problem like hers and make himself feel good in spite of how the world was treating him, so he snapped quickly into advice mode. He became angry with her "yes, buts" in response to what he saw as his excellent advice. His sense of responsibility for changing her negative moods was the root of his Batmobile behavior.

Bill was full of what he saw as sage advice, but this advice was dismissing, like "When the world deals you a bad hand, you just play the hand you are dealt." The advice did nothing to help his wife feel listened to. On the contrary, it made her feel that he thought she was stupid to be distressed at all, so she felt humiliated for having been so emotional.

What is the solution to this couple's dilemma? Part of the solution was for Bill to learn that if Diane made a bid for emotional connection, he made enough of a contribution by just listening to her and being understanding, and by turning toward the expressed need in the bid. To facilitate that end, Bill needed to believe that there would be a good outcome if he just listened without giving Diane advice. That took some work. The blueprint for this context requires two things: (1) building awareness of how one's partner makes bids for emotional connection, and (2) the attitude that one ought to turn toward bids whenever that is possible.

Blueprint #2. Attuning During Regrettable Incidents

The second context for building trust through attunement is processing past regrettable incidents, or emotional injuries. For this we learn to use the "aftermath procedure." As William Faulkner wrote in Requiem for a Nun, "The past is not dead. It is not even past." Emotional injuries live in current issues when they are unaddressed. The Zeigarnik effect is operating to make sure that the dissonance is resolved.

We have used the the "Gottman Recovery Kit" to process a fight or regrettable incident (see www.gottman.com for a copy). Couples are guided in a full reprocessing of the past events. By "processing" we mean that the couple has enough emotional distance on the situation that they can talk about the incident without getting back into it, preferably with neutral or positive affect. That means they are not flooded as they talk about the event.

Specifically, they will not argue about "the facts" of the situation, but rather subscribe to two beliefs: (1) perception is everything, and (2) there are always two valid points of view in every situation. An outline of the six steps in this aftermath method follows:

1. Feelings. Each partner describes how he or she felt, without any explanation of why he or she felt that way. They can select from a list of 45 possible feelings provided by the form, or add their own. There is no debating here, just a neutral listing of how each person felt during the incident.

2. Subjective realities. They take turns as each person describes his or her subjective reality during the incident—what happened—without blaming the partner, making the partner defensive (no attacks), or using "you" statements (except to describe the scene as neutrally as possible). They can talk about what they might have needed from the other person in that situation, selecting from a list of 29 possible needs, or adding their own. The other person then validates the partner's reality by saying something like: "It makes sense to me how you saw this and what your perceptions were. I get it."

3. Accepting responsibility. Each person then shares what might have set him or her up to become hurt, respond defensively, withdraw, or otherwise escalate the quarrel. They can select from a list of 22 sample items, or add their own items. Then they summarize overall what their contribution was to the fight or regrettable incident. This moves the couple into what therapist Dan Wile calls "The Admitting Mode."

4. My triggers. They share what triggers escalated them, consulting a list of 27 possible triggers or adding their own. They describe these as their "enduring vulnerabilities."

5. Why these triggers? If it is possible, they also take turns sharing a story that explains what experiences early in life have created these triggers and resulted in what Tom Bradbury calls "enduring vulnerabilities." These are vulnerabilities each person wants the partner to remember so the partner can be more sensitive to these old wounds.

6. Constructive plans. Each person talks about (1) what the partner can do to make this better the next time this kind of situation arises, and (2) what he or she can do to make it better next time.

The Gottman Recovery Kit makes these six steps easier by following Dan Wile's three modes of conflict (Figure 6.3).

The message here is: You have to go through admitting mode to get to collaborative mode, or there is no taking responsibility for the miscommunication. Anything less is dismissive. Dan Wile has anticipated my research results through his astute clinical intuition and articulate writing.

Let's revisit Bill and Diane. There was a problem that Bill expressed about his being able to talk issues over with Diane. Whenever he was angry with her, or hurt, or embarrassed by her, or disappointed, he would try to tell her what he felt. His goal was to raise an issue, solve the problem, and be done with it. He was trying to be constructive, to improve her and the

relationship, but he claimed that she would almost always become upset with the way he had expressed himself. Then, he claimed, the conversation would become all about her reaction to him, and about how he had said things wrong. He said that they would rarely get back to the original problem that he had raised. He was right. I saw that very thing happen in my office. She felt criticized, rapidly became flooded, and counter-attacked. She would become very emotional, usually crying, and then he would begin comforting her about the hurt he had caused. He'd wind up sort of apologizing, and then they'd drop the subject entirely.

ATTACK-DEFEND MODE

>>>> **ADMITTING MODE**

>>>> **COLLABORATIVE MODE**

Figure 6.3 The Three Modes of Conflict

There was a hidden problem for her as well. For her, the way he raised a problem was very much like the way her father had raised a problem with her personality, like a disappointed, corrective mentor. She would immediately respond with shame, and then her shields would be up. She was instantly flooded. Both of them became triggered.

For him, the way she raised an issue was to state the problem but then to blame him for insensitivity to her, which was very much like the way his mother had controlled him when he was growing up. He called it the "ultimate guilt trip." He was especially sensitive to the question, "What is wrong with you?"—which seems like a question but is really not. Very few people ever answer that question by saying; "Oh, I'm glad you asked. Let me take a look at myself and see what part of me is defective at the moment." So they each triggered their old enduring vulnerabilities.

The problem they each had was not that they became emotional, disappointed, hurt, angry, sad, or upset. The problem was they just couldn't talk about it. They then fell prey to the Zeigarnik effect.

Because this couple hadn't fully talked things over, both of them turned the negative incident over and over in their minds, examining every facet of it, until, finally, their only explanation was that something was horribly wrong with their partner. He thought she must have mental problems because she was always so negative. She rejected any and all solutions he proposed. Despite his good intentions, he always wound up being the bad guy. She thought that he was just like her father, critical and never satisfied with her. She decided that he simply didn't love her.

He needed someone else, she thought, a more perfect woman, like her father had needed a more perfect daughter. Their oral history switch was flipped into the negative position.

Many self-help books suggest communication "rules" so that negative things can be avoided and people can say things in a more "constructive" manner. There is nothing inherently wrong with this kind of advice. In fact, we also suggest rules for the start of conversations, like Thomas Gordon's suggestion to begin with an "I" statement, like "I'm really upset," rather than a "you" statement, like "You don't care about me."[20] Clearly "I" statements might result in a less defensive response than a "you" statement. However, the problem with communication rules is that when people are flooded, they say things in their characteristically negative ways, so they are likely to become critical and more likely to use negative "you" statements. As Dan Wile says, in the heat of battle you can't remember what an "I" statement is, and you don't give a damn either. So the ultimate solution is not to avoid having negative emotions or being perfect in the way you say things. You can try, but these regrettable events are unavoidable.

Instead, our research suggests that the ultimate goal is being able to fully process these inevitable negative events with each other. That's what I mean by "attunement" in context #2. Once the negative event is fully processed, it isn't remembered very well. Dan Wile said that a lot of conflict is about the conversation the couple never had but needed to have.[21] Instead of having the conversation they needed to have, they had the fight. The conversation they still need to have becomes evident when they attune.

Blueprint #3. Attunement During Conflict

Attunement also becomes a blueprint for making conflict discussions more constructive. Based on Rapoport's theories, this is called the "Gottman-Rapoport blueprint." The Weekly "State of the Union" Meeting Most couples are willing to spend an hour a week talking about their relationship. I suggest that emotional attunement can take place (at a minimum) in that weekly "state of the union" meeting. That means that at least an hour a week is devoted to the relationship and the processing of negative emotions. Couples can count on this as a time to attune. Later, after the skill of attunement is mastered, they can process negative emotions more quickly and efficiently as they occur.

If the couple is willing, they take turns as speaker and listener. They get two clipboards, yellow pads, and pens for jotting down their ideas when they become a speaker, and for taking notes when they become a listener. It's not a very high-tech solution, but the process of taking notes also helps people stay out of the flooded state.

I suggest that at the start of the state of the union meeting, before beginning processing a negative event, each person talks about what is going right in the relationship, followed by giving at least five appreciations for positive things their partner has done that week. The meeting then continues by each partner talking about an issue in the relationship. If there is an issue they can use attunement to fully process the issue.

What is the skill of attunement during conflict? The answer is given, in part, in Anatol Rapoport's book Games, Fights, and Debates. In that book Rapoport talks about increasing the likelihood that people will choose cooperation over self-interest in a debate. His suggestion is that we need to reduce threat—that people need to feel safe to cooperate and give up their self-interest.

Another very important principle in Rapoport's theory is that to make conflict safe, we first need to postpone persuasion until each person can state the partner's position to the partner's satisfaction.

Rapoport's idea is not very complex, but it is sufficient to create attunement and increase cooperation. I have built on Rapoport's suggestion and adapted it for couples. My changes simply involve an understanding of flooding. I agree with Rapoport that it is important to reduce threat. However, I believe that to accomplish this attunement, it is also necessary to constrain the speaker. Our research reveals that once the speaker starts harshly, almost every listener will become defensive, and attunement will go out the window.

So my blueprint is that although the listener does need to attune, not all the attunement responsibility is on the listener. No one can listen nondefensively to a perceived attack. The speaker cannot begin expressing negative affect with blaming or criticism. There appears to be no such thing as "constructive criticism." Instead, the speaker must state his or her feelings as neutrally as possible, and then convert any complaint about his or her partner into a positive need. A positive need is a recipe for one's partner to be successful.

The reason, again, for down-regulating the speaker is that even in happy relationships, in the relatively rare times when people begin the conflict with an attack, the sequences of interaction are not very different than they are in an unhappy relationship. We found that although it happened less often for happy couples, the consequence of an attack was usually defensiveness, the same as it would be in an unhappy relationship. So the speaker has to take responsibility for softened startup (starting gently).

Converting a complaint into a positive need requires a mental transformation from what is wrong with one's partner to what one's partner can do that would work. It may be helpful here to review my belief that within every negative feeling there is a longing, a wish, and, because of that, there is a recipe for success. It is the speaker's job to discover that recipe. The speaker is really saying "Here's what I feel, and here's what I need from you." Or, in processing a negative event that has already happened, the speaker is saying, "Here's what I felt, and here's what I needed from you."

The ultimate goal of attunement is to reduce threat for both people and avoid flooding, so that nondefensiveness, understanding, and empathy can occur. Making that work requires postponing persuasion and problem solving, and down-regulating defensiveness. It means staying in

"What's this?" mode and staying out of "What the hell is this?" mode until each person can state and validate the partner's position to the partner's satisfaction.

It is important to find the positive need. The speaker starts with "Here's what's wrong with you, and here's what I want you to stop doing" and converts it to "Here's what I feel (or felt) and here's the positive thing I need (or needed) from you."

The idea is that each negative emotion is a GPS for guiding us toward a longing, a wish, and a hope. As mentioned earlier, each negative contains within it a recipe that will work. As noted, it's the speaker's job (not the listener's) to identify that recipe. The positive need eliminates the blame. It eliminates the reproach.

Attunement need not always be reciprocal. However, attunement during conflict does needs to be reciprocal. One can postpone one's own agenda and be an attuned listener, but for only so long. In my practice, when using attunement during conflict, I have people take turns as speaker and listener. The speaker will eventually become the attuned listener. I give each partner a pen and a notepad. The speaker is required to express a feeling and then convert it into a positive need. The listener is required to attune, take notes, and be able to repeat the speaker's position to the speaker's satisfaction. That requires not only summarizing what the speaker has said, but also validating the speaker's feelings and need. That means, specifically, being able to complete a sentence like the following, "It makes sense to me that you would have these feelings and needs, because…." It is not required that the listener agree with the speaker, just that the listener can see how the speaker's point of view makes sense from a particular perspective and set of perceptions. Usually, to accomplish this feat, the listener needs to focus not on the speaker's facts, but on the speaker's pain, distress, and anguish, and to get in touch with his or her feelings of love and protectiveness.

To sum up, the attunement-during-conflict blueprint for the speaker is:

- No blaming, no "you" statements
- Talk about how you feel in a specific situation, use "I" statements
- Express a positive need

The attunement-during-conflict blueprint for the listener is:

- Awareness of partner's enduring vulnerabilities
- Turning toward partner by postponing own agenda
- Tolerance by believing there are always two valid realities
- Making understanding the partner the goal of listening
- Nondefensive listening, not responding right away, getting in touch with the partner's pain
- Empathy—summarizing the partner's view and validating by completing a sentence like "I can totally understand why you have these feelings and needs, because…."

The Potential Ease of Attunement

All the couples I see in my practice learn the skill of emotional attunement in the three contexts I have outlined. I tell them that attunement is not a difficult skill set to acquire. I also tell them that this is basically the skill set they will need to create a relationship that really works for them. At first attunement will seem awkward and inefficient. It certainly is not natural. What is "natural" for many people is avoiding talking about negative emotions, or dismissing them, and assuming that just the passage of time will heal all emotional wounds. What is natural is avoiding conflict, but then paying a huge price for that avoidance. Attunement seems unnatural and inefficient, but it is actually potentially more efficient. Like in the acquisition of any skill, the beginning seems strange and awkward. When my teenage daughter was learning how to drive a car, she said, "If they didn't want people to get mixed up they would put the brake and the accelerator pedals much farther apart instead of right next to each other." We forget that it took us a long time before driving was automatic. The same is true for attunement.

Rapoport's "Assumption of Similarity" p248-250

One thing that can help attunement is another brilliant point that Anatol Rapoport made. The point was that during conflict people will see their partner ("opponent") as dissimilar to them, and tend to see themselves as having all the positive history, traits, and qualities. They may also see their partner as having several negative traits as well. This is related to social psychologist Fritz Heider's idea that all humans tend to make the "fundamental attribution error": "I'm okay; you're defective."[22] Such is human nature. We all think we are the central character of the Great Play of Life. Everyone else is a minor player. We each think we are being watched very sympathetically by novelist Kurt Vonnegut's Great Eye in the Sky.[23] As a result, most humans are very forgiving toward their own mistakes and less forgiving of the mistakes of others. People also tend to see themselves as having very few negative traits, little negative history with their partner, and few negative qualities. But people may see their partner/adversary as having most of these negative qualities and few positive qualities. Hence, Rapoport suggested two things. First, when we identify a negative quality in our partner (or adversary), we try to see that very quality in ourselves. That is a truly amazing suggestion. Second, he suggested that when we identify a positive quality in ourselves, we try to see that very quality in our partner (or adversary). Another truly amazing suggestion. To facilitate these suggestions we may try thinking, "The two of us want the same things" or "He is a great father" or "She was very nice to me when I was last sick" or "It's true that I think she is being selfish right now, but so am I right now; maybe we both need to be a little selfish for this to be a great relationship."

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Chapter 6. How Couples Build Trust With Attunement

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