

**AN ORIENTATION TO  
IMAGO RELATIONSHIP THERAPY**

For

Prospective Clients

And

Other Interested Persons

By

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Other suggested Reading:

*Getting the Love You Want* by Harville Hendrix, Ph.D.

*The Companion to Getting the Love You Want* by Harville Hendrix, Ph.D., and Helen Hunt

## WHY DON'T RELATIONSHIPS WORK?

From earliest times to the present, the testimony is consistent: men and women have trouble with their most important relationships. The *divorce* rate nears fifty percent, and for second marriages it is even higher. Of people in intact marriages, eighty percent report varying degrees of dissatisfaction. In earlier days, the divorce rate was lower, but there is no reason to believe that marriages then were more successful, if we measure that in terms of satisfaction and happiness. Of all human enterprises, marriage shows the starkest contrast between beginnings and outcomes, between the enthusiasm and hopefulness of the launching, and the pain and distress of the storm-tossed passage.

We think that contrast is not accidental or just pervasive bad luck. We believe that there is something in the nature of primary love relationships that moves almost inexorably from what could be called the stage of romantic illusion to the subsequent stage of disillusionment and power struggle. We believe that the natural history of relationships can be diagrammed as follows:

NATURAL		UNNATURAL (LEARNED)		
ROMANTIC LOVE	POWER IMPASSE	AWAKENING	TRANSFORMATION	REAL LOVE
Attachment	Disappointment	Information	No-Exit Decision	Knowing
Hope	Disillusionment	Options	Stretching Principle	Accepting
Bonding	Coercion	Decisions	Effective strategies	Valuing
BioChemical	Manipulation		and skills	Appreciating
	IMAGO	Purpose:	- Communication	Understanding
Founded in	The Death -	To Heal	- Caring Behaviors	Respecting
Projection	Dream	and		
Nature's Anesthesia	The Grief Process	Be Healed	- Behavior Change	
Illusion	Stuck	Safety	Requests	
		ReCommitment	- "Container"	

## ROMANTIC LOVE

Romantic love is powerful and important, and can be glorious, but we believe that it contains within it the seeds of its own decay. Our thesis is that a Primary Love Relationship emotionally recapitulates important aspects of the early life situation of each of the lovers. Experiences in infancy and childhood with significant caretakers leave all of us with important residues of “unfinished business”, frustrations, hurts and unmet longings, residues that we unconsciously carry into our life with our present partner. That pattern of unfinished relational business is attached to what we call the Imago.

How the Imago is formed and how it functions will be described in greater detail below. For the moment we propose that the Imago unconsciously guides our selection of a romantic partner. The Imago is the key to that mysterious spark that draws two lovers together “across a crowded room”, out of a myriad of other choices. What we bring to that romantic encounter is not only our present needs for companionship and love, but also our unconscious hope that the partner will meet, touch and heal the hurts and unmet longings we bring from the past. Ironically, the old hurts are likely to be reactivated and exacerbated with this partner, as will be explained later. As that happens the disappointments, frustration, hurt and rage can be profound.

## THE POWER IMPASSE

The romantic or honeymoon stage of marriage, as long as it lasts, is sustained by idealization of the partner, and the hope that at last one has found the partner who will meet one's deepest needs. It seems almost inevitable for that stage to decay ("the honeymoon is over when..."). The breakdown may occur quickly or over a long period of time, but few couples escape it. In ways that partners often have trouble understanding, frustrations and disappointments appear: "This is not turning out the way it was supposed to." Each has a deep image of the way the other is "supposed" to be, and the natural process seems to be that partners begin trying to maneuver each other into fulfilling that image. Forms of maneuvering may be open or hidden, loud or quiet, active or passive. For example, one partner may yell, and the other retreat in silence. Each is trying to get his or her needs met, but the coercive process is counter-productive. It can reach a tug-of-war or impasse state in which each is feeling enormous frustration and hurt. The more intractable and repetitive the arguments ("We go round and round on this issue, over and over again."), the more likely it is that they are rooted in unfinished business and unhealed hurts in each partner from past relationships in childhood.

As the impasse deepens, partners may:

1. Give up and leave the relationship. This usually means carrying their problems with them, to be re-enacted in new relationships.
2. Sink into some kind of disappointed or despairing or hostile coexistence.
3. Take a new look at the relationship and work together to understand and transform it.

## AWAKENING/AWARENESS

For a couple at this critical stage Imago Therapy has unique and important forms of help. It offers a theory of how the uncompleted emotional agendas of childhood are likely to be re-enacted in present marital conflict. Imago Therapy offers ways to access and bring into awareness that material so that it can be used by the partners to re-create the healing and caring relationship which each seeks.

### **TRANSFORMATION PROCESS**

Imago Therapy employs a number of other specific procedures for helping couples transform their relationship. Among these are the “No-Exit Decision” and the “Stretching Principle”, which are described in greater detail below. In addition we teach skills in basic communication, empathic communication, target caring behaviors and restructuring frustrations. A most potent strategy is “The Container”, a process for the safe and constructive expression and resolution of anger.

### **REALITY LOVE**

The goal of the transformation process is to help a couple develop their capacity for what might be called “Reality Love”, in contrast to the illusory quality of romantic love. Reality Love is based on knowledge, care, respect and valuing of the other. We know from observation and experience that that kind of love is a possibility for couples. Although we speak of it as the last stage in the process of transformation, it is probably more correct to think of it as a journey in which couples can learn how to travel well together, rather than as a final destination.

## FORMATION OF THE IMAGO

We turn now to a more detailed description of the Imago and how it functions. A basic assumption of Imago Relationship Therapy is that deep in the mind of each person is an unconscious image of the opposite sex. This image began to form in earliest infancy and became fairly complete in later childhood. We call this image the Imago.

A second assumption is that the Imago greatly influences the type of person we select as a primary love partner in adult life, as well as how we will relate to that person.

How does the Imago come into being? And what determines its content? What seems to happen is something like this: In the normal childhood situation, each of us spent our first years in a social environment with our parents and other adults who were responsible for our care and upon whom we were dependent for our basic needs. We will call these persons “primary caretakers”.

Our early needs were simple but compelling. We can summarize them as:

1) instinctual needs (food, touch, attention, etc.); 2) safety needs (not being left alone, knowing the parents would protect us from danger, etc.); 3) intimacy/closeness needs (comfortable openness with feelings and thoughts); 4) distance/freedom needs (have own space, come and go as one pleases). These needs are natural and universal. We cannot choose not to have them. Our desire for them to be met is human. Our frustration when they are not met is logical. In childhood, the gratification of these needs is our right. In adulthood, it becomes our responsibility.

In infancy and childhood, each of us tried the best way we knew to get our caretakers to meet our needs. And our caretakers tried the best they knew to meet our needs. However, no matter how adequate our caretakers were, they could not and did not meet all of our needs all of the time, and that left us frustrated some of the time.

In addition, some of us had caretakers who had their own problems. Sometimes they were depressed or preoccupied, busy or angry. At other times we were left alone because of their sickness, work, divorce or death. Others of us had parents who were cold and detached some or most of the time. Whenever our caretakers' needs made them physically and emotionally unable to meet our needs, we experienced pain and intense frustration.

Each transaction with our caretakers left an impression in our minds. In some transactions our needs were satisfied and we experienced pleasure. When we were frustrated, we experienced pain. Each pain left an "imprint"; each imprint became part of a "picture" in the deep part of our mind. That picture we call the Imago, the deeply embedded imago of the "other", the opposite sex.

The Imago is a synthesis of the positive and negative traits of all our primary caretakers as they were related to the satisfaction or frustration of our needs.

## IMAGO RELATIONSHIP THERAPY

A fundamental concept of Imago Relationship Therapy is the assumption that frustration in a primary love relationship can be resolved only by redesigning the relationship so that your unfinished business from childhood can be completed. The previously unconscious aim of your relationship must become its conscious intention; your very source of frustration can become a resource for pleasure and gratification.

Among other things, this redesigning process involves your learning certain relating and communicating skills. With these, you and your partner can help each other to satisfy your longings from your past and to rejuvenate your hopes for the future. If you learn and use these skills to resolve your childhood issues, you will create a high-quality, positive, working relationship that will serve you both in the achievement of your life potential, both separately and together.

If you are considering therapy now, you are probably having difficulties with one or more of the three major issues of a primary relationship, issues which are the same as those of childhood: to feel secure, to satisfy wants, and to attain a mutually agreed upon level of intimacy. You may not now have the skills to solve these problems, but be assured that the goal of resolving these difficulties can be attained through this learning process. Your therapist will assist you in the process.

In each therapy session you will be asked to carry out certain procedures that will help you understand and resolve the troubling issues in your relationship. Some of these procedures will be easy for you; others will be new and difficult. The work of relationship therapy often requires radical changes in both partners. Change can arouse feelings of anxiety, and the prospect of change is often threatening. At times you may feel that you are being asked to do something which is not natural to you and that to accomplish it would mean that you would no longer be "yourself". Such feelings are



quite common and, indeed, they indicate that the process is working. The procedures are doing what they are intended to do!

We all seem to want a positive working relationship, but most of us do not know how to achieve it or sustain it. And yet, such a relationship is a real possibility. There are two conditions: a willingness to master the skills and an openness to change. These conditions are an absolute must.

You will be asked to practice between therapy sessions what you learn in the sessions. Your new knowledge and the tools you will acquire can produce remarkable results in your relationship. But, as with any new tools, you will become adept in their use, and consequently experience their transforming effects, only as a result of constant daily discipline. A relationship is successful to the extent that each partner works to love and to express love as a behavior in small and large ways daily.

The changes you will need to make will serve to increase your satisfaction, security and intimacy with your partner. Also, keep in mind that your partner will be changing in ways that will increase his or her satisfaction, security and intimacy with you. To change a relationship, you both must change what you are doing.

There is one change that you can make immediately: eliminate blame and criticism from your relationship. Just stop doing it! This negative form of communication cannot accomplish anything positive. It will not resolve your frustrations. It deepens them. The truth is, of course, that no one person is to blame in a stressful relationship. Each partner has made a contribution to the difficulty and each partner must contribute to the solution.

You will learn to replace blaming and other ineffective forms of communication with effective skills. By using them instead of your old habits, you will both have a better chance to get your needs met. If you want the same things that have happened over

and over to keep on happening, just continue to do what you have always done. But if you want something different to happen, you must do something different.

To do something different that is effective, you must follow the steps below: 1) inform each other about your own individual requirements for feeling loved; 2) use that information to rechannel behavior into effective strategies for caring and loving the other, as well as for meeting personal needs; 3) de-energize inappropriate feelings from childhood; 4) dismantle inappropriate beliefs from childhood; 5) replace inappropriate behaviors from childhood; 6) reciprocally give each other what each wants, a gift that will satisfy yearnings from childhood that are deep inside each of you.

So the bottom line is this: if you want a deep, loving, durable relationship, you must value your partner's needs and you must meet them. In other words, you must learn how to love.

Learning to love means stretching beyond what feels natural and comfortable. Love is not a natural human response like our instinct to survive or procreate. We do not instinctively know how to love. It is a learned skill and requires knowledge, commitment and practice. In fact, true love is a counter-instinctual; to achieve it requires going against our natural inclinations.

## THE STRETCHING PRINCIPLE

In Imago Relationship Therapy we describe the “learning to love process” as the Stretching Principle. Read the paragraph below which summarizes it and reflect upon its implications.

To change a relationship, you must come to know the inner world of your partner as it is for your partner, rather than as you think it is or wish it were. You must value your partner’s inner world as you value your own, and you must change your behavior to meet your partner’s needs as your partner wants them met, rather than as you want to meet them.

Stretching is a very positive form of change, which will increase your understanding of your partner and will enlarge your repertoire of response. Application of the Stretching Principle will cause you to grow toward a more accurate perception of your partner’s reality and of your own. As a result, you both will incorporate new capacities for loving.

It is a common misperception that the inner world of one’s partner, or any other person for that matter, is identical to one’s own. Our actions are often based on the belief that the partner’s likes, wants, perceptions, feelings and meanings are the same as our own. We tend to assume that we live in a common world where we both know and share the same symbol system. This mistaken assumption leads directly to stress and pain in primary love relationships.

Quite to the contrary, each of us lives in an idiosyncratic world. We have a private world of personal meaning although we share a system of common symbols. To relate positively to your partner, you must discover the meaning of their private symbol system. You must also share your own in reciprocal interaction. Thus, the Stretching Principle is a process of mutual responsiveness.

During your work together on your relationship, your therapist will assist you in understanding and applying the Stretching Principle. The first major challenge

for you, of course, will be learning to understand your partner by decoding his or her symbol system. You must know your partner's deep-seated needs, which are rooted in childhood. Then you must understand the form in which your partner expresses these needs in adult life.

Here is an example of how this sometimes works. Let's say that when your partner was a child, the mother became ill and had to go to the hospital. Upon her return, she was unable to give her child (your partner) much emotional support. Your partner would have been powerless in this situation and might have developed a fear of being left, attended by a fear of being ignored. These fears would have gone "underground" into the infant's unconscious mind, and might have been expressed later on in clutching, dependent, attention-getting behavior. Unless this was resolved in childhood, these behaviors would show up again in your partner's relationship with you. As you "stretched" to know your partner, you would come to understand that these behaviors, although activated by something you might do, would actually have their roots in your partner's childhood.

The second major challenge in applying the Stretching Principle is in overcoming your own resistance to meeting your partner's needs. Your partner's needs are quite legitimate, even though they may be expressed in inappropriate behavior. Your resistance to meeting them reflects a defense in your own psychological structure. For your benefit, to increase your own pleasure in the life experience, as well as for your partner's very great benefit, this defense needs to be overcome.

Returning again to the example for clarification: If your partner, as a result of being emotionally abandoned as a child, were now to be exhibiting clutching or jealous behavior, it would be safe to assume that you are emotionally distant and unsupportive of your partner. We could assume this because, according to the

Imago Theory, your partner would have an unconscious desire to succeed in changing a person who is emotionally abandoning into a person who is emotionally close. One of the reasons you would have been selected by your partner would be because you possess these required negative traits. Your own emotional distance would most likely be a result of some childhood pain caused by emotional closeness, and you would naturally defend yourself against a recurrence of the experience. However, if you could see that this position has no real justification in the present situation, you would be able to drop your defense. Then you would grow to a new level of experience; your partner's childhood wounds would be healed, and the relationship would transcend its former limitations.

Part of your therapist's job will be to help you through whatever "growing pains" you may experience while you are "stretching", but you must take the courageous stance both during therapy sessions and, most importantly, between sessions when you are practicing what you have learned. The instructions for stretching are critically important in changing your relationship and, as with any prescription, the healing results are obtainable only when you follow directions. No matter how you feel, whether you want to or not, you must complete your assignments if you want to reach your goal.

There is one essential condition for the Stretching Principle to be deeply effective. This condition is the No-Exit Decision described below.

## THE NO-EXIT DECISION

In your first few sessions you will be asked by your therapist to consider making a “No-Exit” decision. Please be sure to ask any questions you have about the meaning, rationale and value of this decision.

Essentially, a No-Exit Decision means that you decide to commit to the goal of creating a positive working relationship with your partner and to participate in the processes and procedures of achieving your goals.

But you may ask: “What if I am not sure I want to stay in this relationship?” You are still encouraged to commit to the process of creating a positive working relationship with your partner. At the completion of that process, then decide if you want to end or keep your relationship.

The rationale for this recommendation is this: the problems you have in your present relationship reflect your unresolved problems in yourself. You will tend to repeat these problems in any future relationship until and unless you first resolve them in yourself. Many people make the mistake of getting rid of their partner and find that they are still living with their problems!

A No-Exit Decision then has two parts: a commitment to the relationship and a commitment to the process of change.

## **Commitment to the Relationship**

The commitment to the relationship means that you and your partner put yourselves inside the boundary of your relationship and close all the exits to that boundary.

An exit is any behavior that reduces or avoids involvement. Common exits that many couples use are overwork, fatigue, travel, children, chores and community activities. More serious exits are affairs, drugs and illness. The catastrophic exits are suicide, murder, insanity and divorce. The first two categories decrease involvement and the last category ends the relationship.

Closing all the exits means that you will keep all the energy that belongs to the relationship in the relationship for the duration of your therapy work. Any unclosed exits drain energy from the relationship that belongs in the relationship and decrease the possibility of positive and comprehensive change during the course of your work with your therapist.

The act of closing all the exits means that you will become more involved with each other in every area of your relationship. You will end any behavior that avoids an increase in involvement.

As a result of closing the exits you may feel some increased tension in yourself and in your relationship. You may, in fact, feel that your relationship is becoming more difficult. Quite the opposite is true. Increased tension means that you are involved in the process of change. Old patterns of interaction are being broken up to be replaced with new ones. If you stay with the process, the outcome can be a substantial increase in your positive interaction with a resulting increase in personal satisfaction and security.

## Commitment to the Process of Change

The second aspect of the No-Exit Decision is your commitment to the process and procedures of change.

Such a commitment means that you would agree to:

1. Attend a minimum of twelve sessions with your partner
2. Participate in the sessions
3. Complete all the assignments between sessions
4. Make no decision to end or keep your relationship long-term until the end of the sessions

During these sessions you will be guided through procedures which can increase your positive interaction. The procedures can improve your communication, deepen your mutual caring and enjoyment, and help renegotiate the power issues. You will also be assisted in identifying and resolving the residual issues in your early life, which negatively affect your relationship. Regular work at home will be assigned and disciplined attention to the process will be encouraged.

At the end of the twelve sessions, your therapist will assist you and your partner in evaluating your relationship. At that time you will have had the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills to create a positive working relationship. The twelve sessions will have been a combination of learning, change and assessment. You will know how to make your relationship work, and you may also know whether you want to make it work.



## THE WORKSHOP EXPERIENCE

Whether or not you are in couple therapy, you and your partner are encouraged to attend a weekend couples workshop, conducted by Dr. Hendrix and other trained leaders. The Friday evening to Sunday noon workshop format provides an in-depth encounter with the ideas and procedures mentioned in these pages, together with personal workbooks enabling you and your partner to apply the concepts specifically to your own situation. Thousands of couples have attended these workshops and some participants tell us that they consider the weekend to be worth six months of therapy. Couple workshops are offered in the Nashville area and Atlanta.

For information about workshops in other cities and for information about various products, i.e. video and audio tapes, or about Imago Therapy contact the national office:

Institute for Imago Relationship Therapy  
[www.Imagotherapy.com](http://www.Imagotherapy.com)

## Conclusion

Now we turn to two questions: How does the Imago influence our selection of the particular person we chose as a primary partner in adult life? And why are we so invariably frustrated with that specially chosen person?

To answer the first question we need to emphasize two points. First, the Imago is unconscious. The processes of selection are, therefore, out of our awareness. We can say that our choice of an adult primary love partner is made by the unconscious part of our minds for reasons that are equally out of awareness.

The second point is this: In adult life, by an unconscious mental process called “projections”, we attach the Imago to a person of the opposite sex whose traits match our inner image. We select that person as our primary love partner in the hope that this person will meet all or our unmet childhood needs (romantic fantasy). This is known as the experience of “falling in love”.

We now turn to the second question: Why are we so invariably frustrated with this person to whom we are so strongly attracted? The answer seems to be somewhat like this:

We are attracted to select only a person who has both the positive and negative traits of our primary caretakers. We become frustrated with this person because we expect them to have only the positive traits. We unconsciously want them not to have the negative traits, so that they can satisfy the needs that were not satisfied in childhood. Yet, without the negative traits, we would not have been attracted to them or have chosen them as a primary love partner, because the negative traits are the strongest part of the attraction.

So why do we unfailingly include the negative traits in our selection process and then in the “blindness of love” deny their existence? Fritz Perls, the founder of Gestalt Therapy, suggests the reasons for this complexity. Perls suggests that we all have “unfinished business” with our early caretakers, because all our needs were not fully satisfied. This unfinished business seems to become “frozen” at some point in childhood, only to be “thawed” in later life by the presence of a person who matches the Imago.

Now let’s look at a brief example. Mary had a critical and controlling mother who, in a crisis, was nurturing and at times indulgent. Her father was emotionally detached and physically absent most of the time. With male friends he would exhibit an infectious childlike playfulness, but never with his family.

As a result of growing up in this environment, Mary is attracted to a man who is nurturing, indulgent and playful, but who also can be critical, angry and distant, both emotionally and physically. This is a blend of the positive and negative traits of both parents.

Mary, however, wants a man who is warm, supportive and playful all the time. She complains that her partner is physically absent, the he is playful and childlike with his male friends but not with her, and that he seems emotionally detached when he is with her. On special occasions, when he does spend time with her and show lots of affection, she is very happy and peaceful. The she wishes the relationship were like this all the time. However, she is a little anxious during the good times, because she unconsciously expects it to end. Inadvertently, she may even do something negative to end the good times in order to recreate the childhood situation. In her frustration she will then complain, withdraw or get sick, as she probably did when she was a child. This is an attempt to get her partner, now unconsciously her surrogate parent, to meet her needs. Her unfinished business is to get an angry, controlling and distant

man who is sometimes nurturing, even indulgent and playful, to be always nurturing, indulgent and playful.

The unconscious mind seems to have no sense of linear time. The person who matches the Imago is, in the timeless unconscious, the early caretaker. For practical purposes then, the current partner is a psychological replacement of the childhood caretaker. The unfinished business with the early caretaker becomes a compelling agenda with the adult partner. The early childhood impasse is unconsciously recreated with an adult partner who has negative traits similar to those of the early caretaker. This unconscious recreation has the express purpose of bringing the impasse to a resolution. Unfortunately, the absence of the knowledge and skills necessary to do this causes the exacerbation of the impasse rather than its resolution.

In summary, we have said that Imago Psychology is essentially as follows: The deep and repetitive problems which couples experience with each other are a consequence of 1) the presence of unresolved childhood needs which each partner brings to the relationship, and 2) a lack of effective interaction skills whereby both partners' deepest needs are fulfilled.

The compelling nature of these childhood needs, and the absence of effective skills for getting them met, often destroys the initial hope of a mutually satisfying love relationship. The promise of love slowly evolves into a destructive power struggle. This struggle, ostensibly focused on dealing with observable issues such as sex, money, time, in-laws, and friends, is actually a grown-up version of a childlike attempt by partners to coerce each other to respond to the unconscious residues of their childhood longings.

Therefore, the most powerful unconscious motivation for entering the primary love relationship in adult life is to resolve the frustrations left over from

childhood. Conversely this unconscious attempt to get our leftover childhood needs met by our partner is the major source of frustration and pain. In most cases, the list of needs we have to be satisfied is not accompanied by a set of skills for their satisfaction. Therefore, some form of intervention is usually necessary to bring about the healing unconsciously sought in the unconscious reconstruction of the frustrations of childhood. One such intervention is Imago Relationship Therapy.