

CHAPTER 1

Three Sides to Every Story

- Debra thinks Frank is emotionally bankrupt. Frank thinks Debra is insecure.
- Frank thinks Debra's on an endless emotional roller coaster. Debra thinks Frank hides his feelings.
- Debra wants to talk about what's bothering her. Frank wants to decompress by *not* talking about what's bothering him.
- Frank thinks Debra is relentless. Debra thinks Frank just doesn't care.

How did this couple end up feeling like adversaries when what brought them together a decade ago was love? As it turns out, there are three sides to every story. Let's hear each of them.

Debra's Story

How long can you be married to a stranger? Looks like I may be about to set a record of some kind.

After 8 years of marriage—10 years of being together—I still can't communicate with Frank. The problem is, he doesn't listen to me. He never shares his feelings with me, just turns off, withdraws. I hardly ever can figure out what's going on with him.

It's gotten to the point where I feel closer to my friend Joan, a woman I've been working with for just a year. At least I never have to wonder what she's thinking or feeling—she lets me know. Huh, communication—imagine that! I swear, I think Joan knows more about what's going on with me after a 5-minute coffee break than Frank does after an entire weekend together.

Frank and I are intimate in some ways, of course. I know his body very well, from years of stroking and exploring. And from his grunts and moans, I've figured out his sexual preferences pretty well. I could write a book about his personal habits: the obsessive way he flosses his teeth, the careful way he blow-dries his hair to cover his bald spot, the meticulous way he lines up his clothes in the closet.

But I sure don't know what he's thinking and feeling most of the time. He gets this look that's part tired, part concerned, part preoccupied. But when I ask him if anything's wrong, he says, "No." When I ask him what he's feeling, he says, "Tired." When I ask him what he's thinking about, he says, "Work." If I ask him *what* about work, he says, "Just some problems." All his answers seem perfunctory and dutiful, like he doesn't want to tell me but has to. He might as well say it right out: "I don't want to talk about this anymore." He'd rather watch a stupid show on television than connect with his own wife.

Sometimes I wonder if he even *has* any feelings other than fatigue. (Is that really a feeling?) He just plods through life, always taking care of business, preoccupied with getting his work done but never showing much excitement or pain. He says his style shows how emotionally stable he is. I say it just shows he's passive and bored.

In many ways I'm just the opposite: I have a lot of ups and downs. But most of the time I'm energetic, optimistic, spontaneous. Of course I get upset, angry, and frustrated sometimes. He says this shows I'm emotionally immature, that "I have a lot of growing up to do." I think it just shows I'm human. He's the one who's emotionally stunted.

I do share most of my thoughts and feelings with him: my problems at work, my reactions to my friends, my emotional highs and lows. His response? A sort of bland tolerance—sometimes interested, sometimes not, sometimes just going along out of habit, sometimes. . . . I really don't know. How can I, when he doesn't tell me what's going on with him? So I just ramble on, feeling more and more like I'm talking to myself. The chatterbox wife with the bored husband.

It wasn't like this at first. He was never very expressive, but he enjoyed listening to me. And he would tell me things about himself. In the beginning, even though the communication between us was never balanced, it was at least mutual. I thought he'd eventually get more comfortable with me and confide in me more, but he actually confides less now than when we first met!

His lack of communication bothers me most when we disagree about something. I want to discuss our differences and try to work out a solution. I expect conflict in a close relationship; I'm not threatened by it, and I want

to deal with it openly. But Frank won't even discuss it. At the first sign of tension, he runs. He offers some feeble platitude like "Things will work themselves out."

I think the root of our problem is Frank's sensitivity to criticism. He can't stand any suggestion that he might have done something wrong, especially if I show that I'm angry about it. It's like he wants our relationship to be elevator "muzak"—so boring, nondescript, and utterly forgettable that it fades into the background. Well, guess what, Frank? This is real life! He's not perfect, I'm not perfect—we're different people with different needs. So of course we're going to get angry sometimes. That doesn't mean we don't love each other—in fact, it probably means we *do*. Yet whenever I get critical or angry, he acts as if I've violated some sacred law of nature. And then he gets even more critical and angry at me (for being critical and angry at him) than I was with him in the first place.

I remember one incident that kind of sums up the way I see Frank. We went out to dinner with a couple who had just moved to town. The husband was a friend of one of Frank's college roommates, and the evening started out great. They were a charming couple, and since we'd never met and they were new in town, we had a lot to talk about. As the evening wore on, I became more and more aware of how wonderful their life was. They seemed genuinely in love, even though they had been married longer than we have. No matter how much the man talked to us, he always kept in contact with his wife: touching her, making eye contact with her, or including her in the conversation. And he used "we" a lot to refer to them. Watching them made me realize how little Frank and I touch, how rarely we look at each other, and how separately we participate in a conversation. I wanted to put my hand on Frank's knee or hold his hand, just to have the appearance of being a couple. But I was afraid Frank wouldn't respond or, worse, would give me that look that says "Not now!" Sometimes I think he is embarrassed to be with me.

Anyway, I admit it. I was envious of this other couple. And to make matters worse, they had *money*. Of course, they were much too polite to mention it, but as they casually referred to the private schools their kids went to and the vacations they took, I realized they were not struggling to get by. After dinner, we went back to their place, and their house was incredible—not ostentatious, but tasteful, classy, and expensive, with some beautiful antique furniture and some oriental rugs that I was tempted to steal. We once looked for a house in their neighborhood, but we couldn't afford even the least expensive ones.

They seemed to have it all: loving family, beautiful home, leisure, luxury. What a contrast to Frank and me: struggling along, both working full-time jobs, trying to save money, sometimes barely managing to pay the

bills. I wouldn't mind that so much, if only we worked at it *together*. But we're so distant. Even though we have similar goals in mind, it doesn't feel like we're on the same team.

When we got home, I started expressing those feelings. I wanted to reevaluate our life—as a way of getting closer. I don't like the materialistic side of myself; envying other people's wealth makes me feel shallow. I thought maybe we needed to adjust our priorities, not struggle so much for the almighty dollar. Maybe we couldn't be as wealthy as these people, but there was no reason we couldn't have the closeness and warmth they had.

As usual, Frank didn't want to talk about it. When he said he was tired and wanted to go to bed, I got angry. It was Friday night, and neither of us had to get up early the next day; the only thing keeping us from being together was his stubbornness. It made me mad. I was fed up with giving in to his need for sleep whenever I brought up an issue to discuss. I thought, why can't he stay awake just for me sometimes?

I wouldn't let him sleep. When he turned off the lights, I turned them back on. When he rolled over to go to sleep, I kept talking. When he put a pillow over his head, I talked louder. He told me I was a baby. I told him he was insensitive. It escalated from there and got ugly. No violence but lots of words that shouldn't have been said. He finally went to the guest bedroom, locked the door from the inside, and went to sleep.

The next morning we were both worn out and distant. He criticized me for being so irrational. Which was probably true. I do get irrational when I get desperate. But I think he uses that accusation as a way of justifying himself. It's sort of like "If you're irrational, then I can dismiss all your complaints and I am blameless." But I didn't make much of a protest. I just thought, what's the use?

Frank's Story

Debra never seems to be satisfied. I'm never doing enough, never giving enough, never loving enough, never sharing enough. You name it, I apparently don't do enough of it. There's a line from an old song that goes "Too much is not enough." That's Debra.

Or to put it another way, I sometimes think of the old Dylan song "Too Much of Nothing." Debra sometimes acts like everything I do to please her amounts to nothing. I get no credit for what I do for her.

Sometimes she gets me believing I really am a bad husband. I start feeling as though I've let her down, disappointed her, not met my obligations as a loving, supportive husband. But then I give myself a dose of reality. What

have I done that's wrong? I'm an okay human being. People usually like me, respect me. I hold down a responsible job. I don't cheat on her or lie to her. I'm not a drunk or a gambler. I'm moderately attractive, and I'm a sensitive lover. I even make her laugh a lot. Yet I don't get an ounce of appreciation from her—just complaints that I'm not doing enough.

I think she must be insecure. She wants constant reassurance. I told her once in desperation, "Look. I love you. Until further notice to the contrary, you can assume that I still love you. I promise to inform you of any change in the status of these feelings. You don't need to keep checking." Maybe she's bored with her life and blames that on me. She's always looking for high drama and excitement in the relationship. It's really a soap-opera view of love, where everything has to be heavy and emotional. But marriage should be a place where I can retreat from the stresses and demands of my life, not an addition to them.

She's always asking me how I'm feeling. The truth is, sometimes I'm not feeling a damn thing—and that feels damn good! It's like she assumes I have all these emotions bottled up inside and I'm refusing to share my inner life with her. But that's not the way it is. Often I'm exhausted from work and just want to veg out—flip on the television, crash on the sofa, and suck on a beer. It doesn't matter what show is on—heck, I even like the commercials. I'm not there for intellectual stimulation or social chit-chat. Maybe one of these days I'll start growing vines from my ears, as Debra suggests. But to me it's relaxing. Now I ask you: Is what I'm doing morally wrong? Is it constitutionally forbidden? Is it a positive sign of decadence? To hear Debra, you'd certainly think so.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not always exhausted or stressed out. In fact, I think I pace myself rather well—especially compared to Debra. I organize my life so I'm prepared for the demands and stresses that go with my job and my home life. I'm not thrown by events the way Debra is. Her feelings are like a roller coaster: it's a fun ride sometimes, but you never know if there's a stomach-churning drop around the next turn. I can't live that way. A nice steady cruising speed is more my style.

But I don't put Debra down for being the way she is. I'm basically a tolerant person. People, including spouses, come in all shapes and sizes. They aren't tailored to fit your particular needs. So I don't take offense at little annoyances; I don't feel compelled to talk about every difference or dislike; I don't feel every potential area of disagreement has to be explored in detail. I just let things ride.

I expect my partner to do the same for me. But when Debra picks at me about every detail that doesn't fit with her idea of what's right, I do react strongly. My cool disappears, and I explode.

Debra accuses me of being an emotional pack rat, of storing bad feelings until an opportune time, but that's not true. I don't go around dwelling on whatever injustices or irritations I've had to put up with. I don't hoard them in secret until I can reveal them in some dramatic display. But when I'm criticized for some small thing, I suddenly remember what I've suffered without a word, and I get furious at the injustice of it.

I can handle most of my problems myself. I don't lay them on other people, and I don't hold others responsible for solving my problems. Debra can't seem to understand that there are certain things that I can only work through alone.

I remember driving home with Debra after a night out with a couple we had just met. The husband was a friend of my college roommate, Willie. They were an attractive, impressive couple. He had come to town to manage one of our commercial banks; she had joined one of our family law firms. I was surprised that old goofball Willie, whom I had always thought of as sort of shallow, had such interesting and classy friends.

On the way home I was wondering what kind of impression I'd made on them. I was tired that evening and not at my best. Sometimes I can be clever and funny in a small group, but not that night. Maybe I was trying too hard. Sometimes I have high standards for myself and get down on myself when I can't live up to them. But this other couple wasn't particularly clever either. Maybe we were all sizing each other up, like on a first date. I never much liked first dates, always wanted to get past them to the comfortable stage.

Debra interrupted my ruminations with a seemingly innocent question: "Did you notice how much in tune those two were with each other?" Now, I know what's behind that kind of question—or at least where that kind of question will lead. It always leads right back to us, specifically to me. Eventually the point becomes "We aren't in tune with each other," which is code for "You're not in tune with me."

I dread these conversations that chew over what's wrong with us as a couple, because the real question, which goes unstated in the civil conversations, but gets stated bluntly in the uncivil ones, is "What's wrong with Frank?" So I tried to avoid an unnecessary fight by answering that they were a nice couple.

But Debra pushed it. She insisted on evaluating them in comparison to us. They had money and intimacy. We had neither. Maybe we couldn't be wealthy, but we could at least be intimate. Why couldn't we be intimate? Meaning: Why couldn't *I* be intimate? I tried to lighten up the conversation, suggesting that maybe we lacked an intimacy gene. She was not amused.

When we got home, I tried to defuse the tension by saying I was tired

and suggesting we go to bed. I *was* tired, and the last thing I wanted was to get into the same old fight all over again. But Debra was relentless. She argued that there was no reason we couldn't stay up and discuss this. I wanted to say that there was no point in discussing because it wouldn't be a discussion—it'd be a trial. But I didn't because that would be just another piece of evidence she would use to convict me.

I proceeded with my bedtime routine, giving her the most minimal of responses. If she won't respect my feelings, why should I respect hers? She talked at me while I put on my pajamas and brushed my teeth; she wouldn't even let me alone in the bathroom. When I finally got into bed and turned off the light, she turned it back on. I rolled over to go to sleep, but she kept talking. You'd think she'd have gotten the message when I put the pillow over my head—but no, she pulled it off. At that point I lost it. I told her she was a baby, a crazy person—I don't remember everything I said. Finally, in desperation, I went to the guest bedroom and locked the door. I was too upset to go to sleep right away, and I didn't sleep well at all.

In the morning, I was still angry at her. I told her she was irrational. For once, she didn't have much to say. The truth is, we were both exhausted.

The Third Side: An Objective Story

The differences that Frank and Debra find so upsetting in each other were there from the beginning. Debra was emotional and outgoing. She formed close ties to others and got emotional support and stimulation from these relationships. Her style was to speak her mind and be open about her feelings.

Frank, on the other hand, was private and shy. An only child, he had grown up an outsider, with few friends. He didn't like to socialize much and often felt uncomfortable in the presence of others. He sought security, not so much in the company of others, but in a stable, organized, rational life. You could always depend on Frank. His checkbook was always balanced, literally and figuratively. His life was a lesson in the avoidance of excess.

Frank and Debra had much in common: similar backgrounds, almost identical values, and some common interests in sports. They found each other physically attractive, and even the differences between them were a source of attraction. Frank's calm manner was a nice balance for Debra's moodiness, while her comfort in social situations allowed him to be private but still take part in the conversation. Frank's penchant for organization helped Debra live at a less frenetic pace, while her optimism and enthusiasm added energy to his plodding style.

Ideally, these differences would have brought them to a happy medium.

Frank might have learned to be more open about how he felt, while Debra might have become more comfortable with privacy and time alone. He might have developed a more zestful, spontaneous approach to life, while she might have learned to pace herself. He might have become more comfortable in social situations, while she might have learned to value the peace and quiet of solitude.

Because the contrasts between them at first seemed appealing, Frank and Debra appreciated them and were open to mutual influence and change early in their relationship. However, in time, their own needs and the inability of the other to satisfy them made those already existing differences larger. Frank's need for time alone conflicted with Debra's need for time together. The more he sought independence, the more she pressed for closeness. The more emotional she became, the more he "turned off."

These differences were difficult for them to manage because of enduring emotional sensitivities that each brought to the relationship. Debra experienced Frank's withdrawal as rejection of her, which at times it was. A difficult and painful period of adolescence, where she felt unattractive to any boy, probably contributed to her sensitivity to rejection. Because of this experience, Frank's frequent need for distance was especially difficult for her to accept, unless there was the buffering of closeness and intimacy beforehand. Frank's experience as an only child, carefully reared by protective parents who shielded him from any criticism, made him react strongly to it as an adult, particularly from a spouse, unless it was buffered by praise and appreciation. And Debra often leveled her criticisms sharply. These sensitivities provided the emotional fuel that often triggered conflict over their natural differences.

Stressful events often played a part in exacerbating the differences between them and triggering their sensitivities. When work was demanding for Frank and not going well—calling his competence into question—he especially needed time alone and was particularly sensitive to criticism. When her interpersonal relationships at work or with her family weren't going well, Debra especially needed quality time with Frank and was particularly sensitive to rejection. Thus, stress was a catalyst for triggering behaviors that were difficult and painful for the other, a pain intensified by those very stressors.

Their differences, emotional sensitivities, and stresses then became a source of argument—an intricate dance of criticism, defensiveness, withdrawal, and counterattack. They had danced this dance many times before, but neither was quite sure how to turn off the music. Given her greater comfort with communication, especially negative communication, Debra was more likely to start a conversation about their differences by expressing

her needs or feelings, particularly when Frank had been distant. But Frank felt criticized by her statements—partly because they often *were* critical and partly because he was already sensitive to criticism and had become more so during the course of his relationship with Debra.

For example, Debra's comments about the other couple on the way home from their evening out seemed to Frank a statement about him—one carrying the strong implication that he wasn't as "in tune" with Debra as their new male friend was with his wife. It's hardly surprising that Frank took the comment as a criticism, since she has criticized him many times for not being sensitive to her. Debra has often complained, with some justification, that Frank is not attentive and involved enough with her. So, although her remark about the other couple was heard by Frank as a criticism of him, criticism was not what she had intended. In fact, her feeling at the time was more envy of their friends and a longing for the intimacy they seemed to have than a particular complaint about Frank. However, their past conflicts over intimacy and being "in tune" with each other, plus Frank's acquired sensitivity to Debra's criticism, led him to take her comment personally.

Because Frank feared an ugly argument with Debra, he sidestepped her comment. Sometimes diversions like this work for Frank because they bypass the conversation and avert an argument. However, sometimes—as on this occasion—his tactics frustrate Debra and contribute to the very conflict he is trying to prevent. The more he withdraws, the angrier she gets. What little conversation they have consists of mutual attacks and defensive maneuvers, and the dance goes on. So stuck are they in their respective roles that they fail to notice the feelings they have in common—on this particular evening, they were both envious of their new friends.

As Debra and Frank's problems have accumulated, each has developed a theory of how the other's difficulties are damaging the relationship. They each think the other is at fault, and thus they both selectively remember parts of their life, focusing on those parts that support their own points of view. For example, Debra thinks Frank is socially awkward and afraid of intimacy. He has few friends and no close friends. When she tries to talk to him about their own lack of closeness—such as after the night out with their new acquaintances—he avoids the discussion. This avoidance, in Debra's view, proves that his fear of intimacy, even with his own wife, is the source of their problems.

In contrast, Frank believes Debra's insecurity and immaturity are the source of their problems. He uses the same incident, but interpreted differently, to support his point of view. As he sees it, Debra got upset that night merely because their friends made more money and were more affectionate in public than he and Debra. Frank thinks they have problems because

Debra cannot accept herself and others (even her own husband) for what they are. He sees her emotionality as immaturity, her energetic tempo as exhausting, and her desire for closeness as weakness.

As they each carry around these theories about the other, they become entrenched in their positions and blinded to the various ways one *could* look at their problems. Debra ignores any evidence of Frank's social competence, such as his sense of humor, his kindness and consideration toward others, or his passionate lovemaking. Yet these positive qualities were reasons Debra was attracted to Frank. In parallel fashion, Frank overlooks obvious signs of Debra's psychological security, such as her persistence and optimism in the face of disappointment. Each expects the other to be inadequate, acts as if he or she is, and in so doing promotes the very characteristic that is so disliked. Debra, assuming Frank won't participate much in social encounters, provides little opportunity or incentive for him to speak and thus contributes to his shyness and social withdrawal. Frank, assuming Debra will get upset at any bad news, doesn't tell her things like his problems at work that he thinks will bother her. When she eventually finds out, she gets more upset than she would have had he told her in the first place. Plus now she is angry with him for concealing information from her.

Every couple starts out, like Frank and Debra, with a number of differences between them—differences that may nourish the relationship or damage it. When the differences are linked with emotional sensitivities, as they often are, or when stress exacerbates the differences, as it often does, the stage is set for conflict. Like Debra and Frank, the couple may argue. Each partner alternates between criticizing the other for being different and defending against the other's criticisms. Or, instead of outright argument, they may withdraw from each other, expressing their dissatisfaction through avoidance. Rather than solving the problems or minimizing the differences, these destructive cycles can maintain and even exaggerate the very differences that caused the problems in the first place. The end product of this vicious cycle is that the differences often seem irreconcilable.

The Purpose of This Book: Creating Acceptance and Change in Relationships

In the last 20 years, we have developed a new approach to couple therapy, called integrative behavioral couple therapy (IBCT), and done research on it. We have collected extensive data on its effectiveness. We completed two randomized clinical trials sponsored by the National Institute of Mental Health and, in the largest randomized trial of couple therapy ever con-

ducted, showed that our approach can strengthen relationships and prevent divorce in most couples for at least 5 years (the last point we contacted couples). But we also know that therapy isn't for everyone, and we wanted to help people who are looking to improve or strengthen their relationship on their own—people just like you. That's why we wrote *Reconcilable Differences*. We took the best and most important parts of our proven couple therapy and designed them so that you could benefit from them on your own time, in your own home, without needing to talk to a therapist. Of course, talking to a therapist about topics in this book can also be very helpful, and, as we'll explore in the last section of this book, perhaps necessary in some cases.

Since the first edition of *Reconcilable Differences*, published over 10 years ago in 2000, we have learned much about how to disseminate IBCT, primarily through two large programs. First, this treatment was adopted by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) as one of its evidence-based psychological treatments, and as a result, we have spent a lot of time training VA therapists in the treatment. Second, we received a grant from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development to adapt this treatment for an online intervention. As a result of both of these efforts, we have learned ways to describe the approach that make it easier to understand and follow. Human relationships are complex, and efforts to change them can be difficult. Our motivation in making the current revision of *Reconcilable Differences* was to include these simpler ways of teaching about relationships and how to improve them. As part of this effort to simplify, in this edition of the book we have you focus on one core issue in your relationship. By applying each of the concepts in the book to this core issue, we believe you will achieve a more profound understanding of yourself and your partner and have a better chance of improving your relationship.

The purpose of this book is to help you understand the conflicts you have with your partner and then to transform those conflicts into greater peace and intimacy. When you get embroiled in conflict with your partner, you both may blame the trouble on faults in the other. You each try to correct these faults by changing the other. But the other resists change, and so you get locked in a struggle that erodes your good feelings for each other. Each of you can feel stuck, not knowing how to cope with unwelcome differences in the other and resorting to blame, criticism, defensiveness, and withdrawal. These ways of coping serve only to hurt each other's feelings. Bruised and injured by your attempts to resolve your differences, you may feel that the chasm has become impossible to breach.

In this book we will show you a way out of this impasse: by accepting your partner. The natural inclination is to try to change your partner, but efforts directed solely at such change often make the conflict worse. When

you genuinely accept your partner, you may achieve peace from the conflict and, paradoxically, change from your partner. Your partner probably wants to make you happy. When you are able to accept each other's experience, and often the behavior that results from that experience, you both may make spontaneous changes to accommodate to the other. Acceptance offers a route for you both to move toward a happier and closer union.

How can you achieve genuine acceptance? And how can acceptance transform conflicts into intimacy? Although they are painful, conflicts offer a window into the emotions of both of you: your disappointments, hopes, strengths, and weaknesses. If you can look at these conflicts not with the goal of blaming and fault finding but with the goal of understanding the strong emotions that drive each of you, you can learn more about yourself and your partner individually as well as how you interact. This understanding allows you to appreciate each other more completely and more honestly and can inspire compassion for each other's position. Through this understanding you also may gain some perspective that will lessen your conflicts, perhaps even enabling you to laugh at them at times. Understanding and compassion for each other and greater perspective on your conflicts may then lead you to an acceptance of each other's feelings and behavior, which in turn breaks your vicious cycles of argument, disagreement, and withdrawal—or at least allows you to recover from those cycles more quickly. At the very least, the process of analyzing and discussing your differences and conflicts in an atmosphere of acceptance will promote greater tolerance between you; in the best case, it can enhance the intimacy between you. Conflict offers not only the threat of alienation but also the possibility of intimacy.

Change is the brother of acceptance, but it is the younger brother. When acceptance comes first, it paves the way for change. When you and your partner experience greater acceptance from each other, your resistance to change often dissolves. You may be more open to adapting to each other and accommodating in ways that reduce conflict. You may be able to communicate more clearly and negotiate and problem-solve more effectively since you are no longer adversaries. In this book we will also discuss strategies for promoting change in relationships once greater acceptance has been achieved.

How the Book Is Organized

Our book is divided into five parts.

Part I, "The Conflicting Sides of Conflict," which you have already begun, describes common ways of interpreting arguments that just make

these arguments worse. As part of this section, you will complete some questionnaires about your relationship to understand how it is functioning now. You will also have a chance to select a particular ongoing core conflict between you and your partner so that you can apply your growing understanding and skill to easing this struggle.

Part II, “A DEEP Understanding of Conflict: The Third Side of the Story,” introduces a new way of understanding conflicts that can lead to their acceptance and resolution. *DEEP* is an acronym that stands for the four major factors that come into play in conflicts and hold the key to resolution through both acceptance and change: natural *d*ifferences between the two of you, *e*motional sensitivities in each of you, *e*xternal circumstances that create stress for each of you, and the *p*atterns of communication in which you get stuck as you try to resolve the conflict. You will be given plenty of illustrations from other couples and will be asked to apply this “DEEP understanding” model to the core conflict between you and your partner that you selected. By the time you have finished reading Part II, you will have an essential foundation for using the rest of the book.

Part III, “From Argument to Acceptance,” shows the ways that you and your partner can foster acceptance of each other, focusing first on the core conflict you identified. Acceptance cannot be demanded or forced, yet it is anything but a passive state. It is crucial to establish some measure of acceptance if you hope to ease the conflict in your relationship and facilitate the changes in each other that are really important to you. In these chapters you will learn the important difference between acceptance and resignation and see how even small steps toward mutual acceptance and compassion can improve your relationship.

Part IV, “Deliberate Change through Acceptance,” discusses ways in which you can pursue change directly, but in the context of acceptance. As in earlier sections, the core conflict you selected will be the initial focus.

Finally, Part V, “When Acceptance Is Not Enough,” looks at those cases when your partner presents special challenges because of his or her own disorder, such as depression, or when your partner mistreats you, such as by having an affair. This section also discusses professional help for individual and relationship problems.

Each chapter in the book relies heavily on examples from couples. To preserve confidentiality, these case examples are an amalgam of the hundreds of couples we have seen in therapy, of couples we have known socially, and even of our own relationships. These examples provide “living evidence” of how our ideas play out in real life. Each chapter ends with a short summary of the main ideas and an exercise that will bring the ideas of this chapter home to your own unique relationship.

Ideally, both you and your partner would read this book and do the individual exercises. It can be helpful to discuss the ideas and relate them to yourselves. But a word of caution is in order: it will be easier to find your partner in these chapters than it will be to find yourself. To prevent the discussions from leading to blame (“You do exactly what they talk about in Chapter . . .”), it is always helpful to focus on applications to yourself rather than applications to your partner.

Whether your partner reads the book or not, it can still be helpful for you to read it. Most of the exercises are designed to be completed alone. Some of the later exercises will prepare you to share your understanding with your partner, whether he or she has read the book or not. These later exercises also prepare you to engage in specific actions that can lead you and your partner to resolve the conflict. While the book will focus you initially on a core struggle that you select, the same strategies can be used for other conflicts.

RECAP

This chapter took a single conflict from a married couple and presented three sides to that conflict: the wife’s view, the husband’s view, and a more objective view that incorporated both spouses’ positions. This three-sided view of conflict gives a taste of what is to come in the next chapter, where we explain conflict from the perspective of the participants.

This chapter also gave an overview of the focus of the book, with its emphasis on acceptance as a path toward resolving conflict, and an overview of the format of the book.

Exercise: Your Current Satisfaction as a Couple

The first step is to evaluate how your relationship is functioning right now. Please complete the 16-item questionnaire below, which was developed by Janette Funk and Ronald Rogge at the University of Rochester in 2007 based on a thorough analysis of items from a variety of questionnaires designed to assess relationship quality. Collecting data from thousands of couples, they were able to show that the items below discriminate best between different levels of relationship satisfaction. Because low relationship satisfaction can result from the absence of positive qualities, the presence of negative qualities, or by some combination of the two, we next ask you to complete the brief Positive Relationship Quality and Negative Rela-

relationship Quality questionnaires, developed by Frank Fincham of Florida State University and Ronald Rogge in 2010. After you complete these three short questionnaires, we will show you how to score and interpret them so you know where your relationship currently stands. For this exercise and each of the remaining exercises in the book, your partner can answer the questions separately if he or she is reading the book also, and you two can come back to these questionnaires after working through the book to see how your relationship has changed.

Couple Satisfaction Index

1. Please indicate the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship.

Extremely unhappy	Fairly unhappy	A little unhappy	Happy	Very happy	Extremely happy	Perfect
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

2. In general, how often do you think that things between you and your partner are going well?

All the time	Most of the time	More often than not	Occa- sionally	Rarely	Never
5	4	3	2	1	0

3. Our relationship is strong

Not at all true	A little true	Some- what true	Mostly true	Almost com- pletely true	Com- pletely true
0	1	2	3	4	5

4. My relationship with my partner makes me happy

0	1	2	3	4	5
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5. I have a warm and comfortable relationship with my partner

0	1	2	3	4	5
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6. I really feel like **part of a team** with my partner

0	1	2	3	4	5
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	Not at all	A little	Some- what	Mostly	Almost com- pletely	Com- pletely
7. How rewarding is your relationship with your partner?	0	1	2	3	4	5
8. How well does your partner meet your needs?	0	1	2	3	4	5
9. To what extent has your relationship met your original expectations?	0	1	2	3	4	5
10. In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?	0	1	2	3	4	5

For each of the following items, select the answer that best describes *how you feel about your relationship*. Base your responses on your first impressions and immediate feelings about the item.

11. Interesting	5	4	3	2	1	0	Boring
12. Bad	0	1	2	3	4	5	Good
13. Full	5	4	3	2	1	0	Empty
14. Sturdy	5	4	3	2	1	0	Fragile
15. Discouraging	0	1	2	3	4	5	Hopeful
16. Enjoyable	5	4	3	2	1	0	Miserable

Positive Relationship Quality Rating

Considering only the positive qualities of your relationship and **IGNORING** the negative ones, evaluate your relationship on the following qualities:

	Not at all	A tiny bit	A little	Some- what	Mostly	Very	Extremely
1. Enjoyable	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
2. Pleasant	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
3. Strong	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
4. Alive	0	1	2	3	4	5	6

Negative Relationship Quality Rating

Considering only the negative qualities of your relationship and **IGNORING** the positive ones, evaluate your relationship on the following qualities:

	Not at all	A tiny bit	A little	Some-what	Mostly	Very	Extremely
1. Bad	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
2. Miserable	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
3. Empty	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
4. Lifeless	0	1	2	3	4	5	6

SCORING AND INTERPRETATION OF THE COUPLE SATISFACTION INDEX

Scoring the Couple Satisfaction Index is simple; you just add up the points indicated for each answer for each question. Scores range from 0 to 81. The higher the score, the more satisfied your relationship. Based on research conducted with this measure, we offer the following interpretations of three broad ranges of scores, indicating a positive "green zone," a mixed "yellow zone," and a problematic "red zone." See which zone your relationship falls in.

Green Zone (Scores Greater Than 68)

Your score indicates that overall you are happy with your relationship. Your score is similar to or better than that of the average spouse in the United States. Being very happy with your relationship overall is great news for your relationship! Although you may still have a few focused issues you want to work on in this book, you seem to have many strengths that you will be able to build on when resolving those issues. It's great that you're taking the time to strengthen an already-strong relationship and tackling issues before they get too big.

Yellow Zone (Scores Between 52 and 68)

Your score indicates that you are somewhat happy with your relationship but more distressed than the average spouse in the United States. The fact that you're not really distressed (i.e., in the "red" range) is really good news because you and your partner will be able to build on the parts of

your relationship that are satisfying as you start working on the issues that bother you. It's much easier to deal with relationship problems before they become too serious. However, your scores on overall relationship satisfaction also suggest that, although there are some things you enjoy about your relationship, you still would like to see things improve. People can score in the "yellow" range for lots of different reasons—for example, feeling like you've lost some of that spark or excitement in your relationship or feeling like some problems are detracting from your happiness in the relationship. Your scores on the positive and negative dimensions will provide you some guidance on which might be true for you.

Red Zone (Scores Below 52)

Your score indicates that you are somewhat to very unhappy with your relationship. Your ratings of your global relationship satisfaction place you in the same range as partners who often seek outside help for their relationship, such as couple therapy. Like many of those couples, you may even be feeling frustrated or hopeless about the relationship. However, it's really great that you are looking for ways to work on your relationship, like doing this book. You also likely have some strengths as an individual and as a couple that will help you improve your relationship—we'll return to those throughout the book. We expect that reading this book and completing the exercises can be helpful in improving your relationship. Additionally, we'll recommend additional resources for your relationship at the end of the book if you decide you'd like to seek additional help.

SCORING AND INTERPRETATION OF THE POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE RELATIONSHIP QUALITY MEASURES

Scoring of the two relationship quality measures is also simple. You just add up the points indicated separately for the two questionnaires. Scores can range from 0 to 24 for each measure. The higher the score for Positive Relationship Quality, the higher the positive qualities in your relationship; the higher the score for Negative Relationship Quality, the higher the negative qualities in your relationship. Based on research with these measures, we indicate some green, yellow, and red zones based on your scores on each of these measures and interpret some combinations of the different zones. Based on these scores, we also offer some suggestions for selecting your core relationship conflict, which you will do in the next chapter.

Positive Quality Green Zone (Greater Than 19); Negative Quality Green Zone (Less Than 4)

Congratulations! Your scores indicate that you experience negatives in your relationship (such as criticism or conflicts) less often than the average spouse in the United States. Additionally, you reported that you also experience frequent positives in your relationship. While there might be isolated or occasional problems that you experience in your relationship, they don't seem to be affecting how you feel about your relationship more generally. Given these strengths, the "core issue" you select to work on in this book will likely center on narrow problems or problems that are just starting. That's great because these types of problems are typically much easier to solve!

Positive Quality Green Zone (Greater Than 19); Negative Quality Yellow Zone (4–6)

Your scores suggest you experience moderate amounts of negatives in your relationship—somewhat more than the typical spouse in the United States. Fortunately, you experience positives in your relationship as much as—or more than—the typical married couple. These positives can help offset some of the relationship negatives. For example, couples who frequently argue can still be extremely happy if they also feel emotionally or sexually connected to their partners. Given your "green" score for positives, it might make sense to select a "core issue" to work on in this book that focuses on reducing a negative (e.g., conflict) rather than strengthening a positive.

Positive Quality Green Zone (Greater Than 19); Negative Quality Red Zone (Greater Than 6)

Your scores suggest you experience a lot of negatives in your relationship—more than the typical spouse in the United States. Fortunately, you also seem to experience frequent positives in your relationship as much as—or more than—the typical spouse. These positives can help offset some of the relationship negatives. For example, couples who argue a lot can still be happy in their relationship if they also feel emotionally or sexually connected to their partners. Given your high score for positives, it might make sense to select a "core issue" to work on in this book that focuses on reducing a negative (e.g., conflict) rather than strengthening a positive.

Positive Quality Yellow Zone (17–19); Negative Quality Green Zone (Less Than 4)

Congratulations! Your scores indicate that you experience negatives in your relationship less often than the average spouse in the United States. While there might be isolated or occasional problems that you experience in your relationship, they don't seem to be affecting how you feel about your relationship more generally. This is a great strength to have because it will allow you to focus on strengthening the positive aspects of your relationship, rather than on remedying the negatives. You also indicated that you experience relationship positives somewhat less than the typical spouse in the United States but more than people who report being unhappy overall in their relationship. Given that you don't experience many negatives in your relationship, focusing on improving the positives in this book might be the most helpful.

Positive Quality Yellow Zone (17–19); Negative Quality Yellow Zone (4–6)

Your scores suggest you experience moderate amounts of negatives in your relationship—somewhat more than the typical spouse in the United States. You also indicated that you experience relationship positives somewhat less than the typical spouse in the United States but higher than people who report being unhappy overall in their relationship. The combination of these two results suggests that you're dealing with moderate—but not severe—problems with both lack of positives and presence of negatives.

Positive Quality Yellow Zone (17–19); Negative Quality Red Zone (Greater Than 6)

Your scores suggest you experience a lot of negatives in your relationship—more than the typical spouse in the United States. You also indicated that you experience relationship positives somewhat less than the typical spouse in the United States but more than people who report being unhappy overall in their relationship. The positives in your relationship can help offset some of your relationship negatives. For example, couples who argue a lot can still be happy in their relationship if they also feel emotionally or sexually connected to their partners. While there are likely some relationship positives that could be improved, it might make sense

to select a “core issue” to work on in this book that focuses on reducing a negative (e.g., conflict).

Positive Quality Red Zone (Less Than 17); Negative Quality Green Zone (Less Than 4)

Congratulations! Your scores indicate that you experience negatives in your relationship less often than the average spouse in the United States. However, you also indicated that you were unhappy with the level of relationship positives; your ratings indicate more dissatisfaction with this area than the typical spouse and similar to couples reporting general relationship unhappiness. The good news is that, given your low score on negatives, it's likely that you'll be able to fully engage in this book, avoid fights, and regain some of the connection you've lost. Because a lack of positives seems to be the primary problem in your relationship, it will likely make sense to select a “core issue” to work on in this book that focuses on strengthening relationship positives.

Positive Quality Red Zone (Less Than 17); Negative Quality Yellow Zone (4–6)

Your scores suggest you experience moderate amounts of negatives in your relationship—somewhat more than the typical spouse in the United States. Regarding relationship positives, your ratings indicate more dissatisfaction with this area than the typical spouse, similar to couples reporting general relationship unhappiness. However, the good news is that the moderate amount of negative aspects of your relationship suggests that you'll be able to fully engage in this book, avoid fights, and regain some of the connection you've lost. Because a lack of positives seems to be the primary problem in your relationship, it will likely make sense to select a “core issue” to work on in this book that focuses on strengthening relationship positives.

Positive Quality Red Zone (Less Than 17); Negative Quality Red Zone (Greater Than 6)

Your scores suggest you experience a lot of negatives in your relationship—more than the typical spouse in the United States. Regarding relationship positives, your ratings also indicate more dissatisfaction with this area than the typical spouse, similar to couples reporting general relation-

ship unhappiness. Given that you're unhappy with both the positive and negative aspects of your relationship, you'll want to carefully select the "core issue" that you work on in this book. On the one hand, you'll want to pick an issue that, if changed, will substantially improve your relationship. On the other hand, you want to be careful not to pick something that will be too hard to fix—you're probably feeling pretty emotionally drained from your relationship and might not have the energy right now to tackle a huge change. And don't worry—many couples who were unhappy with both positive and negative aspects of their relationship have found this book helpful!

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