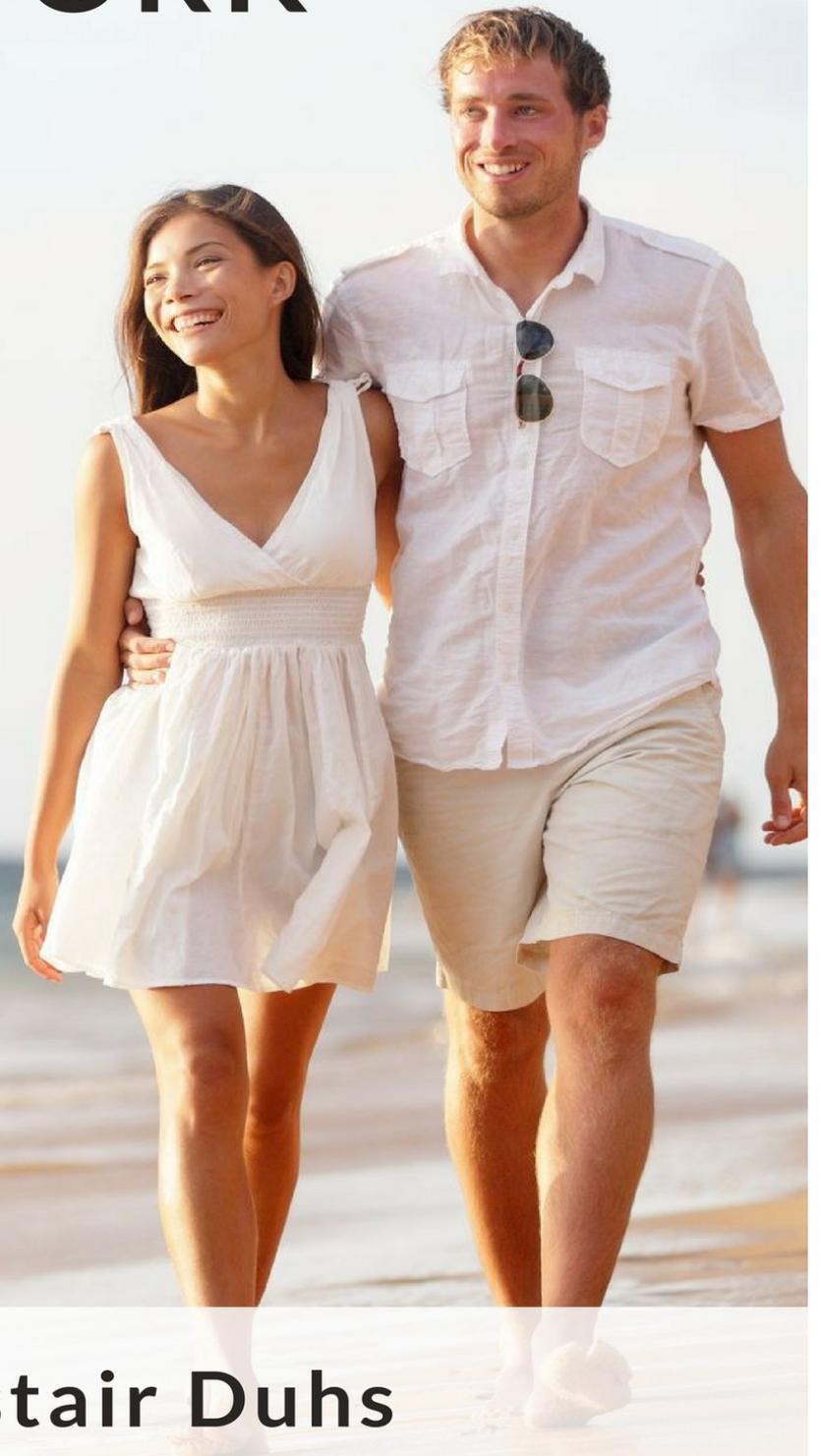


THE TOP 5 SECRETS FOR MAKING A RELATIONSHIP WORK



Alastair Duhs
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Introduction:

For the last 17 years I have worked with couples experiencing relationship issues. For some, anger, abuse or violence is a problem. Others struggle with the aftermath of an affair. Many have lost the love, happiness and friendship that was present in the early stages of their relationship.

Helping couples regain the love and happiness that they once had can be difficult. However almost all couples benefit from simple, practical advice. In this ebook I describe what the top 5 “secrets” that help most couples improve their relationship. Each secret can be a short-cut to developing a happy, long-lasting relationship. While it is difficult to implement all these secrets, using even one or two can dramatically improve a relationship.

If you have any questions or comments about these secrets I am happy to answer them. You can contact me via my website www.relationshipexpert.co.nz. I also provide relationship counselling to couples who are struggling in their relationship. Please contact me via my website to arrange this.

About Me:



My name is Alastair Duhs and I am a relationship counsellor based in Auckland, New Zealand. In the last 17 years I have helped hundred of couples create happy, healthy and long-lasting relationships.

Besides working as a relationship counsellor, I am a keen competitor in endurance sporting events. I have completed Ironman New Zealand five times. I am also a keen astronomer, chess player and kayaker.

Before training as a relationship counsellor I completed a Masters Degree in Quantum Physics from Auckland University. I have also worked as a patent attorney for several years.

To contact me please visit my website www.relationshipexpert.co.nz.

Secret 1: Understand Each Other Deeply

The start of a relationship is an exciting time for most couples. You anxiously wait for your new partner to call. You think about your first kiss. You can't stand to be away from your partner. You spend hours together talking. You share together the times you are most proud of and your most embarrassing secrets.

Unfortunately, as relationships progress, many couples grow apart. Each person develops new interests. They get lost in their own worlds of work, raising children or taking up new hobbies. As the gloss of a new relationship fades, couples stop talking to each other. And if one person does talk, the other does not listen. In the words of well-known relationship therapist John Gottman, couples “turn away” from each other.

If this turning-away process is left unchecked, each person in the relationship can easily feel alone. Their partner no longer knows them the way she used to. Their inner life becomes separate from their partner. Doors to closeness and intimacy close and doors to affairs, distance and separation open.

It is important for couples to maintain high levels of communication to stop this turning away process. Talking to each other binds people together and helps each person to understand their partner in a deep and rich way.

One of the major obstacles for couples to communicate effectively is listening skills. Listening is one of the most powerful gifts you can give another person. By listening to another person in a deep and real way you gain an deep understanding of that person.

As listening is a skill that one can learn, I spend much time with couples assisting them to develop good listening skills. The following what I see as the seven most important aspects of listening:

- 1) **Be Attentive:** As simple as this sounds, to listen effectively you must pay attention to the person talking. Turn off the TV or your phone, log off Facebook, move away from other distractions and pay full attention to your partner.
- 2) **Don't interrupt:** Good listeners allow the person talking to have their say fully. Interruptions of any type, including verbal objections, changing the subject, talking about your experience, sighing or looking away simply stop the listening process.
- 3) **Don't be Defensive:** This applies especially to men. Defensiveness usually arises

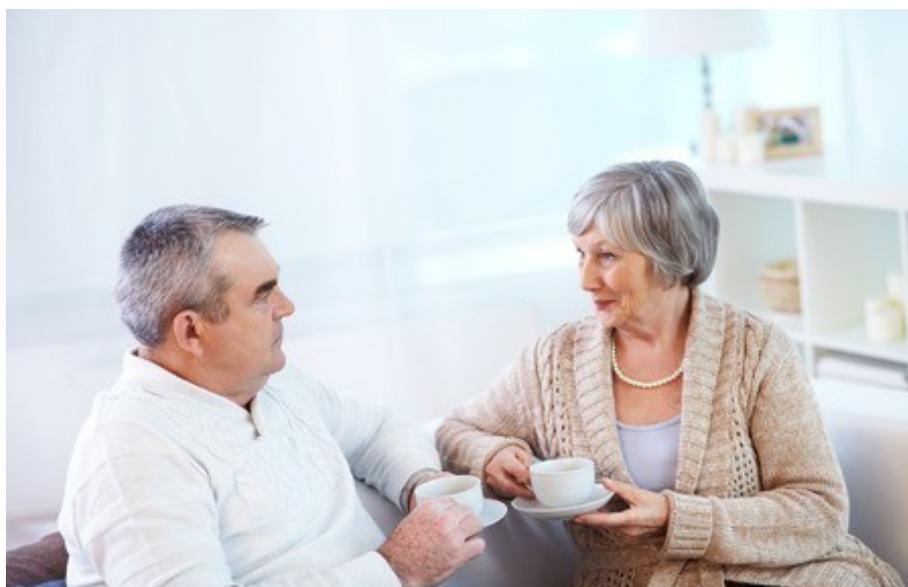
in response to perceived criticism. For example, your partner may say something to you that you think is critical (for example “You never think of my needs”). Rather than defending yourself (such as by saying “Yes, I do”) it is more effective to find out why your partner is thinking or feeling that way (such as by asking “Why do you think that? Have I done that recently?”).

4) Ask Questions: One key to really understanding someone is to ask them questions. As you are listening to your partner think about questions you may have. Do you really know how your partner felt while their story was taking place? If not, ask him or her. Are there other aspects of the story you are not sure about? Ask!

5) Ask About Feelings: Following on from the above, many people ask questions about events in a story their partner may be telling. They ask “What happened next?” or “And then what did he (or she) say?”. Good listeners do this, but they also ask about how their partner felt during the events they are speaking about. This helps the conversation to reach a much deeper place.

6) Summarize: While listening it is easy to get confused as to the main points your partner is trying to share. A good way to clarify this is to summarize what you have heard so far. Do this in a tentative way. Check with your partner if your understanding is correct by asking questions such as “Is that right?”. He or she can correct you if you have understood the story incorrectly, helping you both to remain on the same page!

7) Give Positive Feedback: Speaking about oneself can be difficult. As a listener it is always good to give positive feedback to your partner. Examples of this feedback could include statements such as “I’m glad you told me about that” or “I think you handled that well”. This lets your partner know that you are supportive of them!



Understanding Each Other Deeply Exercise:

As a couple, set aside 20 minutes each week to practice listening. For the first half of this time, one person takes the speaker role. The speaker then talks about any important event that happened during the week. During this time the role of the listener is simply to listen, using the skills above (including not interrupting, asking questions, giving positive feedback, etc). It is important that listener stays in the listening role and does not start talking about themselves or debate any of the points the speaker raises!

After 10 minutes bring this conversation to an end. It is useful at this point for the listener to thank the speaker for what he or she has shared. Then change roles. The listener now takes the role of the speaker and the speaker takes the role of the listener. As in the first part of the exercise it is important that the listener stays in the listening role! Continue for 10 minutes with the speaker talking about an important event in the week. After 10 minutes finish the conversation. As before it is useful for the listener to thank the speaker for what he or she has shared.

This sharing exercise will both help practice your listening skills. It will also help you gain a deeper understanding of your partner. Continue this exercise every week until your listening skills are perfected!

Secret 2: Manage Conflict

Arguments, fighting and conflict often lead to couples separating. Anger, abuse and violence will always cause damage in a relationship. Men are especially at risk of acting in these ways as they are usually physically stronger than their partners. Men are also often socialized to express anger in physical ways.

For relationships to thrive it is important that people manage anger in arguments. One simple tool can help with this.

The Tension Scale:

To control their anger a person has to be aware that he or she is getting angry. Without this awareness it is impossible to change how a person is acting.

A simple tool for gaining awareness of your anger levels is the "Tension Scale". The Tension Scale is a scale of how tense or stressed a person is getting. Level 0 on the Tension Scale indicates no tension or stress (this is very unusual). Level 10 on the Tension Scale indicates maximum stress and anger (also very unusual).

Throughout any day, everyone's tension levels fluctuate. Your tension may rise if you get stuck in traffic on the way to work. Then you arrive at work and your boss isn't there yet and your tension drops. This process happens to us continually throughout the day.

Most of us can manage these daily fluctuations of tension. However, most of us has a certain level of tension and stress where we become angry. Often this is around 7 on the Tension Scale. If a person's tension rises higher than this, we are likely to become abusive or violent.

The secret to managing conflict is to pay regular attention to your Tension Scale. If you are reaching a level of 6 or 7 during an argument you need to do something to lower your stress or tension. This is always more productive than trying to continue the argument.

There are many things people can do to lower their tension. The technique I recommend

most is called "self-talk". Self-talk is practicing thoughts that encourage a person to calm down during an argument. Examples of good self-talk statements include:

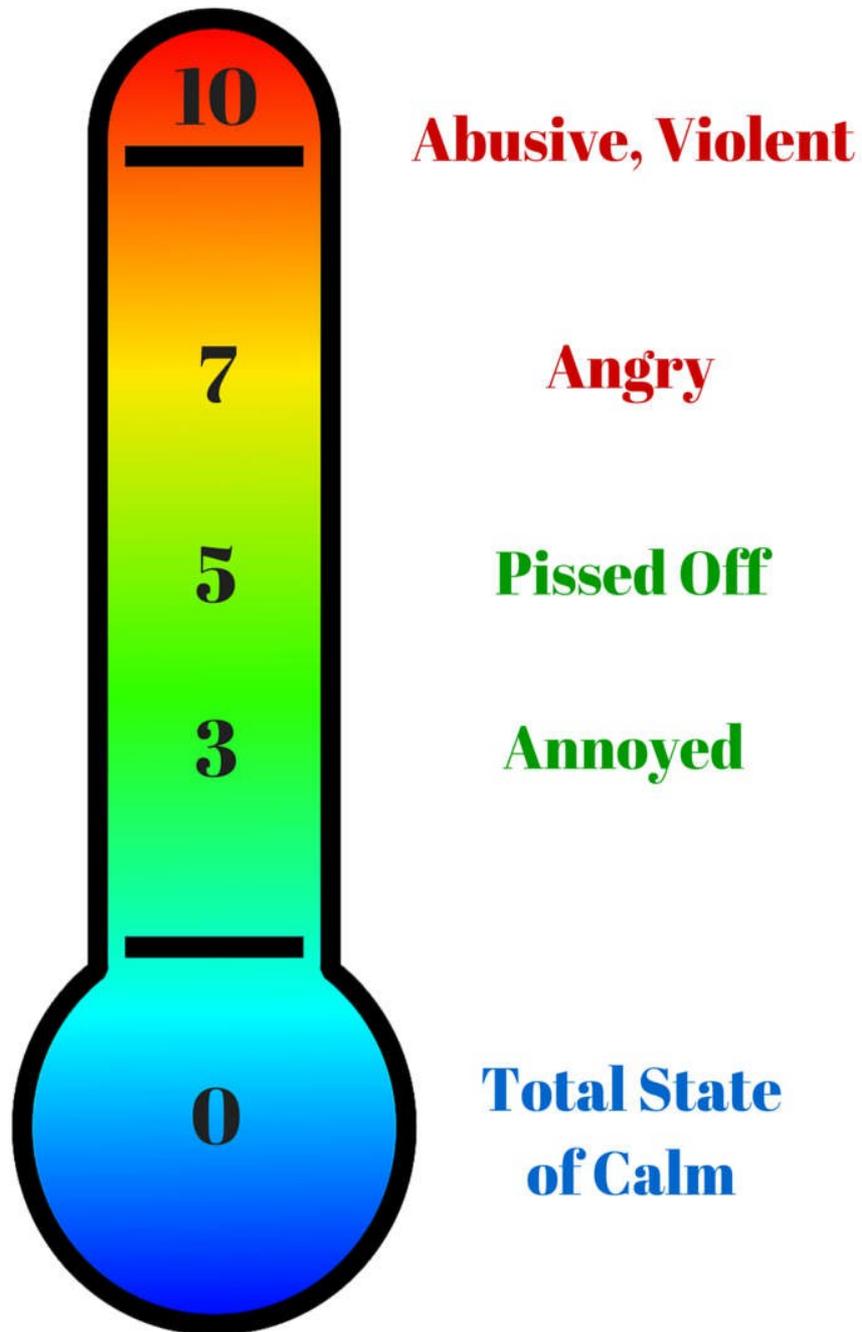
- "I need to calm down"
- "I need to take some deep breaths"
- "I need to remember what happened when we last argued"
- "If another person criticizes me, I can handle that"
- "I don't need to be right all the time"
- "My partner may have a valid point. I need to calm down and listen to him (or her)"
- "Being right isn't as important as this relationship is to me."

Once a person notices that they are going up the Tension Scale, they should use self-talk to lower their stress and tension. As a last resort, the person may also need to leave the situation that is leading to their anger.

Managing Conflict Exercise:

For at least one day per week, pay attention to your Tension Scale as you go through your daily activities. Notice especially if you get about 4, 5 or 6 on the Tension Scale. At these times practice using self-talk to calm yourself down. If you find that you have one self-talk statement that is most useful to you, write it down on a piece of paper. Then put this paper where you are likely to see it, such as on the fridge or near your car seat. The more you practice self-talk the better you will get at it, making it easier to calm down in all situations!

The Tension Scale



Secret 3: Maintain A Positive Emotional Bank Account

In his book “7 Habits of Highly Effective People” American author Stephen Covey describes a powerful metaphor for understanding relationships. He calls this metaphor the “Emotional Bank Account”.

Just as savings accounts in banks measure of our financial well-being, emotional bank accounts measure of the level of trust in a relationship. Just as we make deposits and withdrawals from physical bank accounts, we also make deposits and withdrawals into our relationship's emotional bank account. Deposits into this account build trust and repair relationship damage. Withdrawals break trust.

In good relationships the emotional bank account between partners will be high. However in many relationships, events chip away at this bank account. Arguments, misunderstanding, forgetfulness and other events erode the goodwill and trust between partners. Over time a couple's emotional bank account can become low or even negative. At these times partners struggle. Some decide to leave the relationship.

Fortunately there are many ways to ensure our emotional bank account with our partner remains high. One way is to make as many deposits into this account as we can. We can make deposits by:

- Showing kindness, courtesy, and respect to our partner
- Seeking to understand our partner's point of view rather than trying to convince her of our own
- Keeping promises and commitments
- Being loyal to our partner in thoughts and action
- Being clear with our expectations in our relationship
- Apologizing when we make a mistake
- Sharing parts of ourselves with our partner by using “I statements”. For example: “I like it when you pay attention to me at parties” or “I felt hurt when you forgot our anniversary”.
- Focusing on our partners strengths rather than weaknesses.

In addition to making frequent deposits into our relationship's emotional bank account, it is also important to minimize withdrawals from this account. People make withdrawals by:

- Acting in hostile or aggressive ways
- Not listening to our partners
- Forgetting important relationship milestones
- Putting our partners down, criticizing him or her or emotionally withdrawing
- Acting in abusive or violent ways
- Spending too much time away from the relationship, usually at work or doing hobbies
- Arrogance
- Blaming your partner for problems (such as “You never listen to me”),
- Not talking about relationship issues
- Being defensive

To maintain a strong emotional bank account it is important to make many more deposits than withdrawals into this account. Some people suggest that the ratio of deposits to withdrawals should be as high as 5:1. Relationships with healthy emotional bank accounts are far more likely to withstand the pressures and tensions of everyday life.



Emotional Bank Account Exercise:

At the start of a week, sit down with your partner and assess the strength of your relationship's emotional bank account. Write down at least two or three things each partner can do to make more deposits into this account. It is most useful if this list is put where both partners can see it-on the fridge or next to the bathroom mirror are good places for example. At the end of the week note whether these activities have increased the level of your emotional bank account. If they have, continue them or add new activities!

Secret 4: Know Your Partners Love Language

Tom and Sharon are attending relationship counselling for the first time. Sharon says that she feels that Tom no longer loves her. Tom says that Sharon is being silly. Of course he loves her. Just last week for instance, he fixed the kitchen tap so that she wouldn't have to put up with the dripping. He mows the lawns every week and makes sure that her car is always running well. If that isn't love, he says, what is?

This kind of conversation led to American relationship counsellor Gary Chapman developing the idea of love languages. According to Chapman, people express love in one of five “love languages”. These languages are:

- Words of Affirmation
- Acts of Service
- Spending Quality Time
- Gift Giving, and
- Touch

In the example above Tom is expressing his love for Sharon by doing things for her, or as Chapman says, by performing “Acts of Service”.

The concept of love languages is most useful in relationships where each partners primary love language is different. Sharon for example, grew up in a home where her parents praised her a lot. She knew her parents loved her as they told her this frequently. As a result her love language is “Words of Affirmation”. She feels most loved when people tell her how special she is to them.

As Tom is not predominately a verbal person, he does not say to Sharon often that he loves her or that she is special to him. Instead he expects her to know from what he does. This mismatch is an important reason for the distance in their relationship.

Once a couple such as Sharon and Tom understand that they have different love languages they can start to change the way they express their love to each other. Even though it may be hard, Tom can begin telling Sharon that he loves her. He can work hard

at praising Sharon for the things she does well. As a result, Sharon is likely to feel more loved and their relationship is likely to improve.

Love Languages Exercise:

There are many online quizzes to help people assess what their primary love language is. For example, see [this quiz](#) or [this link](#).

Once you have found a suitable online quiz, sit down with your partner and take the quiz. Discuss with your partner the results of this quiz and how they can more clearly demonstrate their love for you using your main love language. Make sure you both do this so that you are both working on showing more love to your partner.

This exercise can help prevent much relationship misunderstandings and heartache!



Secret 5: Develop Shared Dreams and Passions

It's common from many sports movies. A team forms and begins to have success. Then obstacles are thrown at them. Their star player get injured. The coach develops a drinking problem. The rules change to disadvantage them. However, focused on a shared goal, the team overcome these obstacles. They bond together. They win the championship or beat a rival team. They emerge winners.

In many ways relationships are like this. Most relationships begin filled with hope. People talk about their goals and dreams in life. As a couple you form plans together. Maybe you both want to travel, so you make plans to visit a new country together or backpack through Europe. Maybe you want to buy home and start a family, so you start saving for a house together and think about children's names.

However, just as in the best sports movies, life throws us challenges. One partner loses their job. You start to argue about finances. You notice that you do not have as much in common as you thought. Raising children becomes a chore rather than a joy. What helps couples get through these challenging times?

An important part of successful long term relationships is that people in these relationship have shared dreams and passions. Just as the goal of winning a championship can help a sports team overcome obstacles, developing shared dreams and passions helps partners navigate life's challenges. Examples of such dreams and passions can include:

- Working together towards a shared financial goal
- Working together towards a shared lifestyle goal
- Taking classes together, such as learning to dance together or learning a second language
- Making travel plans together
- Helping each person succeed in an area of life important to them, such as work or a hobby
- Having a shared family goal, such as organizing an important birthday celebration
- Helping children success towards a shared goal
- Having combined sporting goals, such as finishing a marathon together

Any one of these activities will help couples plan and work together. This will increase communication and shared experiences between the couples, leading to more closeness, intimacy and joy.

Developing Shared Dreams and Passions Exercise:

Sit down with your partner with a large sheet of paper and pen. Brainstorm (without criticism or negative comment) all possible shared dreams and passions that you could have together in the next 5 years. Once you have finished this exercise, cut down this list to the top 3 shared dreams and passions that you might want to work on together. Start to think of what the first steps might be in working towards these dreams and passions.



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Relationship counseling can be essential in helping couples create successful and loving long-term relationships. To book relationship counseling with myself (either face to face or via Skype) please visit my website:

www.relationshipexpert.co.nz

If you have any further or comments please [contact me](#).

