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EVER AFTER

HOW TO CREATE THRIVING RELATIONSHIPS  
AT MIDLIFE AND BEYOND

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## EVER AFTER

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RELATIONSHIPS  
AT MIDLIFE AND BEYOND

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## CHAPTER EIGHT



# Two Ten-Minute Conversations a Week

Most couples suffer from a lack of intimacy—but the loss often goes undetected because it erodes so slowly they don't notice it. Here's why: Emotionally rich communication gets extinguished over time, replaced by random talk about the “stuff” of life—a child's dental appointment, the broken upstairs toilet, who's going to pick up food after work. Communication about “stuff,” particularly about “stuff that's not working,” gradually becomes the dominant tone of the relationship.

One of the best things we ever did in the early years of our own relationship was to come up with a new solution to that problem. We put it to work first in our own lives, in the form of two sit-down conversations per week, each devoted to a specific purpose. We devoted one ten-minute session to what we designated Stuff Talk, all the business-y things that need to be dealt with in every relationship. We devoted the second sit-down conversation to what we called Heart Talk: all the feelings, both tough and tender, that often don't get discussed consciously in the course of the week.

Our own Heart Talks and Stuff Talks were much longer in the beginning, usually a half hour or more. As we began to teach other couples how to do the process, though, we found that briefer is better. We discovered that thinking of it as a ten-minute process

rather than an open-ended one made it work better, partly because there was a clock ticking in the background. Shorter meetings were also helpful in getting cooperation from both partners (especially if one of those partners happened to be a man!) We were pleased to discover over time that most couples can easily do the Heart Talk and the Stuff Talk in less than ten minutes.

We'll have more to say about that shortly, but first, explore an important question with us.

### **What Does It Really Take to Solve a Problem So It Doesn't Return?**

Most relationship problems never really get solved. They return again and again, sometimes on a seeming perpetual tape loop. All too often, they resurface across time and space in different relationships. By midlife, most of us have solved the relationship problems we know how to solve. What's left to confront are the crystallized issues we don't know how to get our heads or hearts around.

While that can be a maddening feature of relationships at midlife and beyond, it actually has a powerfully positive possibility built into it. When we work with a couple or a single person, we always start by asking them what the absolute most important outcome would be, a life change that would make them say something like, "Wow, I can hardly believe it, but I actually made *that* happen!"

In other words, we're looking for what would make the biggest difference to them first. In working with relationships after midlife, we've found that there are usually only one or two problems that have eluded earlier attempts to resolve them. However, those one or two problems are often so entrenched by midlife that only a radical procedure can release them. Although the instructions are simple for both the Ten-Minute Stuff Talk and the Ten-Minute Heart Talk, both are radical procedures—they go to the root of the problem and set in motion its release.

There's another major reason problems often never get resolved, another force that causes them to linger and recycle for years: many people, when they really get in touch with themselves, realize they were never actually committed to solving the problem. In fact, many people discover that far from being committed to solving the problem, they were unconsciously committed to keeping it going. In other words, they didn't realize they had an unconscious commitment to perpetuating the problem that was bigger than their conscious intention to solve it.

What would cause such a thing? Why would people—often extremely smart and good-hearted people—go out of their way to keep from solving a problem . . . often for decades? The main reason we found is that there is a larger and more painful issue that would need to be confronted if the problem were actually resolved. Not solving the problem keeps the bigger issue at bay. For example, if a couple can keep fighting, year in and year out, about socks being left on the floor, they can distract themselves from asking whether they are each fulfilling their own creative destiny.

However, it's hard to avoid the big issues forever. No amount of distraction can ultimately quell the gnawing awareness that our creative potential is being squandered. It is a special kind of pain; it feels deeper than the physical, more down near the soul. It's the growing sense that we won't get to make our unique and singular contribution. Around the world, whether you're looking into the eyes of a beggar in Calcutta or a wealthy socialite in Beverly Hills, you recognize the pain caused by lack of creative fulfillment.

When we work with a couple or a single person, our goal is to help them end that pain as soon as humanly possible. To end the pain requires a radical adjustment, something that can break up the cycle of repetitive conflict that never quite gets resolved. What's needed is something that can halt the destructive pattern and clear the path for some brand-new conscious choices that partners can reliably use in the day-to-day life they create together. There's only one thing we've found that's powerful enough to cause that kind of transformation.

## Conscious Commitment

We've been privileged to see a certain look of astonishment on the faces of many people as they made a breakthrough—suddenly realizing they had the power of choice. One moment they were thinking of themselves as victims of a lot of bad breaks, then a new possibility dawned: *I actually got here through a series of choices, most of which were so totally unconscious they didn't even seem like choices!*

To wake up to the power of choice is to seize control of your life from the forces of your unconscious—the part of you that compels you to fret, blame, and procrastinate. The moment you celebrate the power of choice—Wow! I make up my life one choice at a time!—you also pull the plug on your old unconscious programming. The roiling, restless ferment that's been driving your dissatisfaction suddenly turns into a reservoir of creative energy. You have a new energy source to draw upon.

Being with people as they make those realizations is one of life's best experiences; even though we've seen it dawn on people many times, it always comes like a beautiful sunrise. No matter how many gorgeous sunrises we've seen, the next one inspires just the same awe.

## Committing Leads to Conscious Choosing

Choosing comes to its full fruition in the act of committing. It's one thing to say to a potential marital partner, "You're the one I want." Making that choice is a key step, but the real magic happens when you go all the way with your choice. When you stand before a religious authority or a judge at your wedding, the assembled multitude—whether it's a multitude of a thousand or a few—isn't there to see you point to your beloved and say, "You're the one I want." They're not going to go home happy until the moment they hear you say something definitive, such as "Yes, I do." Some members of the multitude are probably waiting to hear

an authority figure say, “I now pronounce you married” and see a signed document that has your name on it.

A couple came in a while back with an unusual problem. After 14 years of living together harmoniously, through illness and health, hard times and good times, Jerry and Jen had finally decided to get married. The day after the wedding they got into an argument the likes of which they had never seen in all their years together. Their relationship fell apart; after years of contentment living together, within three weeks of their wedding they weren’t speaking.

What could possibly account for such a thing? Jerry and Jen eventually got their flow going again, but not until they understood the force they’d unleashed. You turn on one of the most powerful forces in the universe by uttering the magic word “Yes” (or in this case, “I do.”) An even more powerful force gets set in motion when you speak your “Yes” in public and accompany it with a signed document. Those are the ones that send your life off in a different direction.

We all create our world through the power of yes and no. The choices we make send us in one direction or another. Yes creates one world. No creates an entirely different one. We can tell you, though, from 30-plus trips around the world teaching relationship seminars, that many of us are not aware of the power of choice.

For example, through repeated unresolved conflict, many people become entrenched in thinking of themselves as victims and the other person(s) as villains. If the perception of oneself as a victim goes on long enough, it can obscure a fact that is dazzlingly obvious usually to everyone else: *I got to where I am through a succession of choices.*

In teaching seminars we’ve seen a certain stunned look on many people’s faces when this awareness sinks in:

*Wow, you’re right! It was my choice to go out with him/her!*

*Wow, you’re right! It was my choice to invest in my brother-in-law’s gold mine!*

There is great liberation in realizing the power of choice. With one swoop you free yourself from the bondage of the victim

position; that by itself would be a fine outcome. However, at the same time you also unleash one of the world's greatest untapped resources in your favor. Few people realize they are creating their lives by moments of choice. Once you awaken to this realization, you occupy a rarified territory in the stratosphere, a zone where you and other awakened people are literally creating magic by making simple, easy choices each day that make radical, positive changes in your relationships.

By living your new life out of this awareness—that you are creating your life one choice at a time—you have an awesome power at your fingertips in every moment. Your only question is: *What do I want to do with this power?*

That was the position we found ourselves in when we woke up to this realization a year or two into our marriage. One of the best inventions that emerged from our newfound power was how to eliminate recycling problems with the power of commitment and conscious choice. The Ten-Minute Heart Talk and the Ten-Minute Stuff Talk evolved out of this quest.

Ten minutes may not sound like much time to discuss important matters, whether they are matters of the Heart or the Stuff of life. That's where the structure of the process plays a significant role. The way the process is laid out allows people to go deeply very quickly. Couples who learn the process often report back to us their astonishment at how much deep connection can be generated in such a short time.

Speaking of astonishment, most couples are also amazed at how much intimacy the Stuff Talk creates. In fact, many couples have reported back to us that their Ten-Minute Stuff Talk was the key factor in helping them rebirth passion and ease in their relationship. There's a good reason for this: most people in relationships do not realize how much of their intimacy is being eaten up by scattering talk about Stuff throughout their conversations, day and night.



## **The Ten-Minute Stuff Talk**

This simple conversation has extraordinary power. First, it gives you a way to organize a significant part of relationship life. In close relationships there will always be details about things that need to be done or fixed. The trick is to manage those details so they don't proliferate and block the flow of presence and intimacy in the relationship. Second, the Stuff Talk gives a big boost to your creativity. When we first started to do our own Stuff Talks in the early 1980s, we did it simply as an organizational tool. However, we quickly realized that the Stuff Talk also has great power as a facilitator of creativity. Without hiccups in the flow of intimacy caused by communication glitches around trivia, we found a deeper degree of connection with our creativity.

## **Necessary Trivia**

The Ten-Minute Stuff Talk gives you a simple way to handle a category of life we call Necessary Trivia. For example, picking the right doorknobs for your dwelling is trivial but necessary. If you're passionate about interior decorating, getting the right doorknobs might not even seem trivial. In any case, it will need to be discussed at some point.

However, you don't need to start discussing it, as a couple in one of our seminars did, in the midst of making love. On the final day of a seminar there are often both tears and hilarity in the air, and there were both when Sharon and Ben shared a recent wake-up moment. They had been entwined in the midst of making love when suddenly one of them whispered, "Did you remember to look at the doorknob samples today?"

Oops. The other person had not remembered to look at the samples that day, and soon the lovers were on hiatus from intimacy and into a doorknob skirmish. That's an extreme example, but think of it as a metaphor for a habit we humans have: interrupting the flow of intimacy with communications about things we don't actually need to be talking about right then.

By cutting down on talking about “stuff” at times when you could be enjoying intimacy, you open up new ways to connect and to receive support. With the Ten-Minute Stuff Talk, your main goal is to pack as much of the “stuff” as possible into the ten minutes of the meeting, so that conversations about the trivial necessities of life don’t get scattered throughout the day.

Get started with an essential preparatory step:

### **Make and Maintain a List**

One key to successful Ten-Minute Stuff Talks is to keep a list between meetings so you can jot down the things you need to talk about during the ten minutes of the session. For example, we tend to do our “stuff” meetings on Tuesday or Thursday evenings. If something comes up during the rest of the week, we write it down on a pad we keep for the occasion. Here’s our list from a recent Stuff Talk between us:

- Materials for Creativity Camp
- Donations
- Gophers
- Transport to LA

We were deep into preparing for one of our favorite seminars of the year, our five-day immersion program in creativity. We put that up top because it branched off into a whole set of tasks that needed to be done. After we got that handled, we took a couple of minutes to decide whether to donate to some charitable organizations that had been soliciting us. Then we burrowed deeply into a conversation we’d had on other occasions: gophers. Until we moved to our now-beloved small town of Ojai in 2002, it’s safe to say to say neither of us had given a minute’s thought to the subject of gophers. We didn’t give gophers any thought the first few years in Ojai either, because our backyard was so pristine that we often hosted neighborhood croquet games on its unblemished

turf. Then one day in glorious spring we walked out into our backyard and saw three massive mounds right in the middle of our manicured lawn.

We soon discovered a truism about our small town: if you want to get up a discussion with an Ojai resident, simply mention gophers or ants. Soon they will be sharing their frustrations and magical cures; if they really take a shine to you, they may even share the name of their Gopher Man, from the small brigade of specialists you go to when all else fails.

We'll save our ant struggles—now mercifully at truce for several years—for another occasion, but in the case of gophers we were back on the subject at the time we made that list. After many attempts to deal with the gophers through natural means such as herb plantings, benign gopher spray, and yes, even visualizations, we had come to the point at which we needed to select a Gopher Man. The one we liked best had said, “Yep, you got gophers all right. If it makes you feel any better, they probably came over from your neighbor’s yard over there.” It didn’t make us feel any better to know where our gophers came from, but we appreciated his bluntness. The last thing on the list was something that probably pops up at least once a month: choosing one of several different ways to get to Los Angeles. Whether it’s Katie’s car, Gay’s car, train, or car service, the needs vary according to what we’re going to be doing.

Making and keeping a list will help you avoid the trap of trying to remember it in your head, a trap that some say appears to widen as you mature into your later years. If you can possibly write it down, don’t bother trying to remember it.

Here’s the bottom line: if “stuff” pops into your mind when you’re having an easeful flow of intimacy with a mate or a friend—if you suddenly get an urge to discuss doorknobs in a moment of passion—ask yourself if it’s urgent, like an overflowing bathtub or something else that needs to be handled on the spot. If it doesn’t need to be dealt with at that moment to avoid catastrophe, jot it down to be covered in your next meeting.

## Step-by-Step Instructions for a Ten-Minute Stuff Talk

### Step One: Touch and Presence

Begin with a few moments of touch and presence so that you can remember the higher purpose of handling the details of chores and other trivial necessities: feeling a deeper and more harmonious flow of love and intimacy in your life.

Choose one of these options:

- Sit close enough so you can each have one hand on your heart and one hand on your partner's heart. Make sure you find a place to touch where you can rest your arm comfortably there for a few moments.
- Sit side by side with each of you placing a hand on the other's abdomen or thigh. Find a comfortable place to rest.

Breathe together for a minute or so without talking. Enjoy being together. Appreciate each other's presence. Don't skip this step in your haste to get to the Stuff. Presencing is what it's all about and what clearing the stuff will enhance, so favor presence first.

### Step Two: The List

If you made a list beforehand of things to cover, bring the list out and add any other things to it you wish to discuss.

If you haven't made one beforehand, create a list now. When you have your list ready to go, pick the most important item first. If there's disagreement about what's most important, flip a coin. Then tick your way down the list, having what we call Conversations for Action.

### Step Three: Conversations for Action

A Conversation for Action is a simple structure for getting things done on time. Essentially, you complete one sentence: **Who** agrees to do **What** by **When**

Example:

Katie (who) agrees to get the handouts to the printer (what) by 5 P.M. Tuesday (when).

Gay (who) agrees to call John, our videographer (what), to arrange a planning meeting before noon tomorrow (when).

The Conversation for Action structure simplifies a major obstacle for partners, assuming that an agreement has occurred when nothing has actually been decided. If thinking or saying these following phrases sounds familiar, the Conversation for Action will radically change your life.

- “I thought you were picking up the dry cleaning.”
- “You said you’d order those supplies before going to the gym.”
- “Why is there no peanut butter in the refrigerator *again?!*”
- “Why do I always end up with cleaning up?”

The Ten-Minute Stuff Talk is a way to simplify and de-clutter your life. You don’t even need a partner to get value out of a Stuff Talk. Make a list rather than carrying around your to-do list in your head. Dedicate a couple of times each week to sit yourself down and focus intently on your own Stuff. In other words, figure out what you need to get done and by when—it’ll make your life a lot easier than letting your to-dos rattle around in your mind.

### The Ten-Minute Heart Talk

The Ten-Minute Heart Talk is designed to give you a reliable, powerful way to deepen intimacy and move through issues that

have an emotional charge to them. Whether you use it to explore decisions, solve problems, or savor positive feelings, the Heart Talk will bring you closer while honoring your individual perspectives and welcoming your uniqueness into the conversation.

## Step-by-Step Instructions for a Ten-Minute Heart Talk

### Step One: Touch and Presence

Choose one of these options:

- Sit across from each other, close enough so you can rest one hand on your heart and one hand on your partner's heart.
- Sit side by side with each of you placing a hand on the other's heart. If you can't comfortably put a hand on the other's chest, rest your hand on his or her thigh or simply sit close enough to be in physical contact with each other.

In either position, put a priority on comfort. Place your hands where they can comfortably rest for a little while. If your hands get tired, it's okay to take them away to rest for a few moments. As soon as fatigue has passed, return to touching your partner.

As you sit touching, focus on your own breathing for a minute or so, as your partner focuses on his or hers. Putting your awareness on your breathing helps you get centered and more open to connecting with your partner.

Enjoy a minute of breathing together without talking. After your minute of purely breathing together, move on to . . .

### Step Two: Expressing Willingness and Commitment

Take a moment to each express your willingness and commitment to communicate everything that really needs to be

communicated within the next ten minutes. It's important to get a "Yes" to that commitment, so that you don't unconsciously let a conflict go beyond your agreed-upon time limit.

### Step Three: Feelings, Wants, and Needs

This step is the heart of the Heart Talk, your opportunity to communicate about the joys, angers, hurts, and fears that go on in the foreground and background of relationships. Do your best to communicate them from a position of healthy responsibility instead of blame. We suggest alternating speaking and listening, either sentence by sentence or using a timer to give each person equal communication time. Listener, this is an opportunity to deepen your presencing skills. You can practice turning toward your partner with an open posture, generating wonder rather than blame, breathing easily and moving so your body doesn't get stuck in familiar ruts. Listener, use the Heart Talk time to practice your Loop of Awareness to deepen your experience of presencing your inner experience, your partner's expression, and the space between you. You can enhance your connection each time you engage in a Heart Talk.

Speaker, focus on two areas: feelings and wants/needs. Say things like:

"I'm so happy that . . ."

"I'm scared about . . ."

"I'm angry about . . ."

"I felt hurt when . . ."

Avoid saying things like:

"You never . . ."

"You always . . ."

"How could you . . ."

In airing out all your feelings, make sure you devote plenty of those ten minutes to sharing positive feelings, things you appreciate about your partner, and good times you've had.

Communicate any wants and needs in the same straightforward way. Say things like:

“Here’s something I’d really like . . .”

“I’d like you to do \_\_\_\_\_ instead of \_\_\_\_\_.”

Avoid saying things like:

“You’re never going to change, are you?”

“You’re driving me nuts.”

“I want something for me for a change, since you always get everything you want!”

The Heart Talk is designed to open and connect you both at an essence level. Sharing feelings and wants deepens your intimacy and felt support. Having someone listen regularly to your evolving heart creates a kind of sweet closeness that can permeate your days and nights.

#### Step Four: Complete with Appreciation

It’s important to make and keep meaningful agreements in any relationship. One way you can practice keeping your agreements is to be impeccable about maintaining your ten-minute time limit. However, sometimes you’ll be in the middle of something important when your ten minutes is up. When that happens, handle it consciously by making a new agreement to continue the discussion. If you do that, though, both people have to want to continue. If both of you can’t agree on whether or not to continue, schedule another Ten-Minute Heart Talk, perhaps later that day or the next day.

When you’re finished with your ten minutes (or have scheduled a follow-up conversation), pause for another moment of silent connection. Tune in to your breathing. At the same time, be aware of your partner’s breathing. Tune in to something you genuinely appreciate about your partner and express that out loud. Make it simple: “I appreciate . . .” Then express from your heart. Rest in connection for as long as you like before resuming your regular activities.

We highly recommend a regular experience of the Love Catalyst, detailed in Appendix A, to fill your intimacy reservoir and give your Heart Talks deeper resonance and power. You’ll find that



the Heart Talk and the Love Catalyst both support daily magic and spark the creative genius of your relationship. Remember, your experience of love, presence, and creativity can continue to grow throughout life. As many of our clients have confirmed, it just keeps getting better.

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