

# Harmonious Relationships

*Given we humans have evolved over millions of years and have developed our intelligence to an extremely high level, then we should be perfectly capable of creating harmonious relationships, alas we still seem to struggle in that area!*

*Take for example, your own circle of friends, how many relationships are harmonious and how many are dysfunctional, often meaning they would be better off apart?*

*So, what is at the root of our dysfunctional relationships?*

*Is it we have...*

- different values (that which is important to us)?*
- different beliefs (that we have been taught by our parents)?*
- different customs (family, community, national, religious)?*
- or is it we just believe we are right and our partner is wrong (judgements we were taught about right and wrong)?*

*So, how come our differences become the reason to abandon our relationships?*

## What has evolution given us?

Over millions of years, our brain went through three stages of evolution. Each stage gave us a mechanism to respond to any situation whether threat to our survival or not.

The first stage was a very primitive brain, its decision-making process was simple and is hard-wired into our genetic fabric. We are born with it, and because it is hard-wired it does not have a learning curve for it to function. It is often referred to as our 'reflex' brain which responds at great speed to danger or pain. You may recall when your 'reflex' was tested by tapping the front of your knee or the inside of your elbow with a small hammer.

This brain became known as the 'Reptilian' brain because it mimics reptiles, such as snakes, lizards, and crocodiles. This type of response is categorised as Stimulus-Response (S-R) because there is a direct response to the stimulus with no intervening intelligence.

Unlike reptiles, we moved on and evolved our brains to include an intervention between stimulus and response. This gave us more options as to how we respond. This came about as we evolved our 'limbic system', a brain that uses a hormonal-based mechanism called our emotions. We now have the capability to learn from our experiences and in so doing make different choices based on our learning.

Whereas the 'reptilian' brain is hard wired, the 'limbic' brain is soft-wired meaning it is programmable and we are now capable of learning.

We now have a mechanism which learns through earlier emotional experiences and is categorised as Stimulus-Emotion-Response (S-E-R).

Any species that evolved this form of 'Limbic' brain can learn, such as humans, dogs or horses, which is a big advantage over species who only have the 'Reptilian' brain.

We did not stop there, we continued to evolve a more complex brain called the 'Cortex'. It is this last stage that differentiates us from all other species. It is the reason why we became supreme in the world, whether you think that is a good thing or not.

This third stage could analyse the sensory information, understand its meaning, and explore infinite possible ways to respond. This was labelled our 'Intelligence' and categorised as Stimulus-Emotion-Intelligence-Response (S-E-I-R).

'Intelligence' in this context refers to our mental ability to make sense of data and form logical conclusions leading to more informed decisions.

In summary, we have evolved three types of 'brain' function each have a mechanism to make decisions when confronted with a stimulus whether benign or dangerous.

The big question is:

“How do we make use of our three brain functions– reptilian, limbic and cortex – to create and maintain harmonious relationships?”

The next topic in part provides an answer to this question.

## **Emotional Intelligence**

Daniel Goleman is the author of a book called ‘Emotional Intelligence’ 1995. He proposed ‘Emotional Intelligence’ as a far more valuable measure of someone’s ability to lead than the traditional IQ measurement.

It took me a while to understand this theory until I realised it meant ‘being in control of my emotions’. An example of not using my emotional intelligence might be: ‘when someone angers me, I shout back at them and punish them’. If I were to use my Emotional Intelligence then I might: ‘at the first sign of anger, control my emotion until I understood the situation better, and then make a more intelligent response’.

According to research, people who can do this make good managers and leaders. Try the following question for yourself: “Who is more likely to be successful at managing you, someone who shouts and criticises you when under stress, or someone who is in control and calmly assesses your situation? I assume you would choose the latter, as they were obviously in more

*control of themselves and the situation – this is the sign of Emotional Intelligence.*

*How do we make use of our inherent emotional intelligence to create and maintain harmonious relationships?*

*The three steps to recovering dysfunctional relationship habits:*

*Step One – RECOGNISE you are rerunning an old emotional pattern.*

*Old emotional patterns are learnt in your early years when your 'limbic brain' (emotional brain) was the only decision-making mechanism available to you. Their purpose is to control and protect you from a perceived threat. Whilst running an old emotional pattern, you are not able to think clearly nor behave rationally nor autonomously because your 'limbic brain' (emotional brain) has dominated your 'cortex brain' (thinking brain).*

*The key word here is 'RECOGNISE'. You realise you are running an old emotional pattern when you feel the emotion associated with the original experience, and that is because your 'limbic' (emotional) brain searches for a match that resembles the stimulus that you are experiencing today and reruns the old pattern.*

## *Step Two - INTERVENE in your old emotional pattern*

*The key word here is 'STOP'. Another word often used is 'INTERVENE' meaning that you take control of your 'limbic' brain (emotions) and start to think clearly about the situation (cortex brain).*

*This is often referred to as using your 'emotional intelligence'. This needs practice, and it is sometimes helpful to practice this with a safe ally with whom you do not feel judged.*

## *Step Three - COMPROMISE without losing respect for yourself and your partner.*

*To 'Compromise' requires us to make assumptions that neither of us are right and neither of us are wrong, nor that one of us is the 'victim' and the other is the 'persecutor' or 'rescuer'.*

*The 'Limbic' brain will always try to assert its rights over the other partner by setting out to prove they are wrong or to blame them in some way. Remember, the old pattern's purpose is to protect you.*

*This is why we need to INTERVENE and allow the 'cortex' brain – the thinking brain – to do its job. It is far more capable of finding a compromise that respects each other's values and family culture.*

## IN SUMMARY...

- *We make progress when we learn to listen to ourselves and recognise when old emotional patterns are controlling us.*
- *We remove conflict in the relationship when we agree we are both wrong. It changes our perspective of the situation and removes the threat of feeling criticised or blamed.*
- *We make better decisions when we engage our 'Emotional Intelligence'. In that way we make the best use of our three brains – reflex, limbic and cortex.*
- *Harmonious relationships happen when we 'recognise', 'intervene' and 'compromise' (meaning both sides change).*

## Principles that help recover relationships

*Principles, by their very nature, sit higher up the pyramid of understanding than the content and subjective feelings of an experience. As we look down from this higher viewpoint we can see more, be more objective and even critical of our situation.*

*By working with higher level principles, we are free to challenge our and our partner's processes and experiences.*

*Their purpose, therefore, is to challenge and channel your thinking, by elevating your mind in order to become more objective about your yourself, your partner and your situation.*

### **Principle 1**

*“In order to think about your relationship, you must dedicate time to the relationship.”*

*This is where most of us fall down. It maybe because we are too busy, or feel it is too self-indulgent, or maybe our conditioning has set us up to believe: ‘We are right and they have to change’.*

*Whatever the reason, it is a showstopper. Nonetheless, the essential first step to recovering your relationship is to dedicate time to working on your relationship, without which you will make no progress. The essence of this principle is:*



*“The more you dedicate time to your relationship, the more you will reveal about yourself and the uniqueness of your relationship, and therefore the more chance you have of changing your relationship for the better.”*

## **Principle 2**

*“We begin the process of relationship change by disclosing our inner thoughts and feelings to each other.”*

*This is where I talk about one of my heroes, Sidney M. Jourard who in his book ‘The Transparent Self’ (1971) established the importance of being known all the way through by at least one person. It would seem we can only get to grips with our inner demons by disclosing them to another human being.*

*In doing so, they not only lose their potency but you can see for yourself how misguided they are. It is by far the most effective process of personal change.*

*It is a natural process that nourishes you to become a healthy person. In my experience, it is the ‘must have’ approach to all personal change. Without it, you will not reveal your hidden beliefs and fears that covertly inhibit the recovery of your relationship.*

*You will benefit from the healing power of sharing and being known to another when you invite and entrust partner to*

*listen to your inner thoughts and fears as part of your personal journey.*

### **Principle 3**

*“Where you are is where you have chosen to be”*

*This is the principle that usually stuns people. And yet it is a principle that challenges the misguided belief that one’s current situation is not one’s fault or responsibility.*

*Whilst we believe our situation is not of our making but rather the responsibility of someone else (usually our partner), then we do not have the power to change it – they do!*

*As a result, we give up our freedom to choose and feel victim to our partner’s position.*

*Of course, many people on first hearing this, want to prove me wrong – but no-one has.*

*Why not?*

*If you feel a victim of your partner, then it could not have happened without you having made the decision to be a victim – your choice. So, where you are is where you have chosen to be – do you see that?*

*If you do and you agree that you made the decision to be a victim or whatever, then you can change because it was your decision, not theirs.*

*Either way you will be taking control of your life and responsibility for your own decisions once again.*

*Why once again? In my opinion, we are born with this facility to choose at whatever level we are able. It is our upbringing and education that interferes with this original facility. To the point, sometimes, we feel we have no facility to manage ourselves and remain dependent on others.*

*Take a look at this next principle which is closely related...*

#### **Principle 4**

*“You limit another’s growth to the extent to which you take responsibility for him or her”*

*This principle helps me see that my role as partner, as well as a parent or friend has an important purpose. It tells me I must leave them to take responsibility for their situation, and not take it from them. Otherwise, I am implying they are not capable of taking responsibility for their situation and they need me to rescue them.*

*This leads me onto my next principle, one that is directed to professionals as well as partners...*

#### **Principle 5**

*“Whilst you work to be ‘liked’, you will not achieve your purpose, unless it is your purpose”*

*This is a simple principle, but in my experience one that needs a lot of self-awareness and discipline. Too often our decisions are guided by our need to stroke our ego and not the real purpose of our work or relationship.*

*By the way, you can change the word 'liked' to any other word that fits your personal situation, such as, 'feel good', 'praised', 'rewarded' or 'loved'. The principle still works.*

*In your relationship, it challenges whether you are participating in the relationship to look good, win approval, get strokes for your ego or be loved.*

*On the other hand, if you know what the real purpose of your relationship is and regardless of what others think, you carry it out, then you are truly achieving your purpose.*

*What do these three principles have in common?*

*"Where you are is where you have chosen to be"*

*"You limit another's growth to the extent to which you take responsibility for him/her"*

*"Whilst you work to be liked, you will not achieve your purpose, unless it is your purpose"*

*They all focus on 'responsibility'. The first is 'you taking responsibility for yourself'. The second is 'you not taking responsibility for another', and the third is 'aligning your responsibility to achieving your purpose'.*

*They are fundamental principles that will assist you as you work to recover your relationship.*

### **Principle 6**

*"Solutions have a way of revealing themselves"*

*I have used this principle in workshops to great effect. After the participants have told their story to the group, rather than moving onto to problem solving, we ask them to consider their situation again but this time holding in their minds the principle above.*

*Almost without exception, the stress and burden of finding a solution is lifted. Now they would talk about their situation in a different way, as if it was no longer theirs but someone else's. Well, we all know how much more relaxed we feel when the problem to be solved is not ours.*

*Although it may feel like you have given up on your relationship problem, you have not, at least not subconsciously anyway. By working from this place, you are allowing yourself time and space to allow the solution to reveal itself - and it will.*

## **Principle 7**

*“Decisions are not forever”*

*Another interesting place to take. We are so often challenged in our decision making because we believe it must be final and everlasting.*

*We may not want to accept it, but all decisions are ‘draft and never final’. That means we can change our mind whenever we want and as many times as we want. I am not recommending that we act irresponsibly and without consideration of others.*

*No, I am only seeking to reduce the pressure on our decision making. It is more beneficial to decide based on the best information to hand at the time, knowing that if things change then so might our decision.*

*You are freer to think more creatively when you allow your mind to muse without the stress and confines of ‘having to find a solution’ or ‘making the right decision’. Amazingly, the solution always reveals itself.*

## **Principle 8**

*“Our language is less contaminated and more productive when we use ‘verbs’ instead of ‘nouns’.”*

*As we grow up, we learn to use many words to describe people and events. Mostly, we use labels, such as: ‘She is a martyr to*

her children' or 'he is a tyrant to his work colleagues.' When we could just as easily have said: 'She gives her children all her love', or 'he keeps his workers on their toes.'

Can you see the difference?

Using nouns is loaded with judgement, which leaves it open to varied and subjective interpretation as to what is meant by 'martyr' and 'tyrant'. Whereas using verbs informs us exactly as to what they do.

How is this useful? It is natural to respond to any feedback that implies criticism. Usually, it will stop us talking or at least limit what we might say from then on.

For example, one could say:

'Sounds like you were a bitch to your friend, is that what you want to be?' or you could say...

'Sounds like you treated your friend badly, is that what you want to do?'

Which one would you prefer to receive? The former is an attack on the person, and that never lands happily with anyone. The latter is an observation of their behaviour, which has so much more to offer the receiver. It gives the opportunity to change their behaviour without any impact on their identity.

*The moral of this principle is people respond more positively and productively when feedback is observational (what you see or hear using verbs) and uncontaminated by subjectivity (nouns which imply judgement).*

### *Principle 9*

*“A good listening to’ is more useful than ‘a good talking to’?”*

*Most people believe ‘a good talking to’ is what you need when they see you as the cause of the problem.*

*And yet, every time someone listened to me without judging my upset or anger, I magically recovered myself and understood what I needed to change. I am sure you remember times when someone gave you ‘a good talking to’. What was your reaction: complete compliance and understanding or unspoken resistance and resentment?*

*This is an essential ingredient to a successful relationship. The ability to give ‘a good listening’ to your partner will encourage a more productive response every time. And if practiced by both partners then recovery of the relationship is guaranteed.*