

SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE, UNSUCCESSFUL RELATIONSHIPS

Tom arrived home after working his typical 12-hour day and was looking forward to a relaxing evening. After several attempts to open the front door, he realized that something wasn't right. The locks had been changed. His wife had finally made good on her threats to end their marriage. His addiction to work and perpetual justification that he was providing a comfortable lifestyle for his family would no longer cut it. Their lives would be altered forever. He would never again routinely wake up under the same roof as his children and would assume child support and alimony payments for years to come. Both spouses would have to adjust to their assets being cut in half and eventually deal with their partner finding another relationship. Their family would be torn apart.

Of course, Tom never saw it coming. He thought his strong work ethic was admirable and didn't perceive the resentment building in Ann or the distance growing between them. He ignored the red flags and believed that *presents* could replace *presence*. But Ann was tired of his excuses. She had felt lonely and angry for a long time and the couple had lived as roommates for several years. The disconnectedness had become intolerable. Ann finally decided that the conflict in the household and lack of emotional affection between her and her husband were more damaging than a divorce.

Both Tom and Ann contributed to their marital failure, but in different ways. Each was devoted to one area of life, whether it was work or the children, but neither did a good job balancing the rest. Their marriage received the scraps that were left over at the end of the day. She tried to get him to change, but her badgering and mothering approach caused him to retreat further into his work cave. He avoided confrontation and worked long hours as an alternative to communicating about their conflict. When they did communicate, they expressed their negative emotions in hurtful and vindictive ways.

Divorce loomed in the near future. But the story wouldn't necessarily end there. Many spouses, after enduring a breakup, never address their emotional baggage and carry it into their next relationship. No surprise then that the divorce rate for second and third marriages is over 60% and 80%, respectively. For some, a traumatic event or self-destructive act has to occur before professional help is considered, and even then change may be resisted.

So why do highly successful, intelligent people have such difficulty nurturing and maintaining healthy relationships?

Our first stop is the family of origin. Many high achievers grew up in families that valued a strong work ethic and reinforced achievement. My own father worked two jobs to provide for our family, and I learned early on that working hard was one way to get Dad's approval. Acceptance through achievement was firmly rooted in my psyche.

Personality traits also contribute to the formula. A high achiever rises to a challenge and won't take no for an answer. When I heard, "you can't do that," a fire was ignited in me to prove "I can and I will." At first glance, this doesn't seem like a bad thing, but high achieving can become a compulsive force that slams the door on emotional relationships. The same characteristics that make high achievers professionally successful often result in the downfall of their personal relationships.

Why can't high achievers, who are so adept at solving problems at work, fix the problems in their relationships?

Before you can fix a problem, you need to recognize it. But high achievers spend so much time with others like themselves and often don't objectively see the issues. Moreover, many high achievers are handsomely rewarded for their success and, therefore, see no reason to change behaviors that allow them to live their desired lifestyle. These issues make it challenging to convince the person that a problem exists and to sell him/her on the idea that change is beneficial. Therapy helps to raise awareness of dysfunctional patterns, identify their source, and provide concrete strategies to change so that relationships become a higher priority for everyone.

All relationships require attention, commitment, and perseverance. It is helpful to think of marriage as a muscle: it requires work, flexibility, and times of rest. Our muscles ache when we exercise them, but some discomfort can be a good thing. While changing destructive patterns in a marriage is often painful, it is necessary for a positive outcome.

The process of change not only requires awareness of what needs to change, but a plan of how to change. Below are some ideas and strategies. Take action now so that you can achieve balance and connectedness in life and provide that legacy for your children.

Feed Your Spirit

- Take 5 to 10 minutes every day to pause, reflect, and be still so that introspection and self-awareness can take hold.
- Develop, nurture and make time for same-sex friendships, which will enhance your individual identity and bring more variety to the marriage. Each partner should be able to experience joy and happiness through activities and friendships that are self-generated.
- Take the time to nurture your physical, emotional, relational, spiritual, and recreational well-being. Consistent exercise, daily prayer, and hobbies are healthy ways to feed your being. We can meet our individual needs without being selfish if we consider others' plans and needs when scheduling time to fulfill our own. The goal is to be balanced and diversified in life, like your stock portfolio.
- Give back through volunteering, charitable contributions, and/or community service since giving back keeps us humble, centered, and appreciative. Conversely, being self-serving will reinforce addictiveness and narcissism and perpetuate a never-good-enough mentality.

Transition from Work to Home

- Develop calming and relaxing rituals for your commute home to release stress and leave your work frustrations behind.
- Spend a few minutes visualizing how you wish to interact with your family when you arrive home. Having a mental blueprint puts you more than halfway there.

Communicate Often and Well

- Set aside at least 15 minutes, 3 times per week, to sit down and communicate with your partner without distractions. Use an object like a pillow to determine who has the floor, passing it every 2-3 minutes. When your partner is speaking, really listen. Then, paraphrase by repeating back in your own words what you heard and validate by acknowledging and accepting your partner's emotions. It is not necessary to agree with your partner's emotions. When it is your turn to speak, start your sentences with "I" rather than "You" to avoid sounding accusatory. Share emotions and increase vulnerability. The nine most important words at times of conflict are: I am sorry; I was wrong; Please forgive me.
- Work on increasing emotional awareness by choosing 10 different emotions (5 positive, 5 negative) and writing each one on an index card. Pick one emotion card per day and be aware of when you or someone you encounter experiences that emotion. Be able to talk about the experience with your partner that evening.
- Confront and resolve conflict constructively and assertively. Conflict that remains in your head will never be resolved; it needs to reach your lips. But remember, it's not only what you say, but how you say it.
- Maintain healthy boundaries and remember that you teach others how to treat you by the way you treat yourself.

I challenge you to create more opportunities for relationship development and nurturance, allocate more time and energy for personal growth, and focus on achieving a healthy and balanced life. When you connect more intimately in relationships and experience emotion more consistently, life will be more fulfilling, passionate and complete.