

A Snapshot View of the Couple and Intimacy Intensive Series

By Clare Mézes, M.Sc., R.P.

Introduction

The Couple and Intimacy Intensives are a series of private workshops that I developed for couples who are experiencing a distance in their relationship and who are at a loss about how to become close again. Participants are encouraged to share their relationship stories with me in order to begin the process of reconnecting with each other.

Understanding Relationship Dynamics

By encouraging couples to share key information, I am able to get a detailed picture of their relationship dynamics. Most relationships reach a stalemate when couples find themselves in an emotional dance around a central conflict—sometimes more than one. They are so hypersensitive to each other on these matters that each partner has a knee jerk reaction to the first hint of that behaviour or issue. As both partners react in opposition, benign conversation turns into an escalating conflict. In Relational Life Therapy, we call this "the more, the more" (Real, 2007). One example of this can be the more needy one partner is, the more the other partner pulls away, or the

more one partner shuts down, the more the other partner becomes boundaryless.

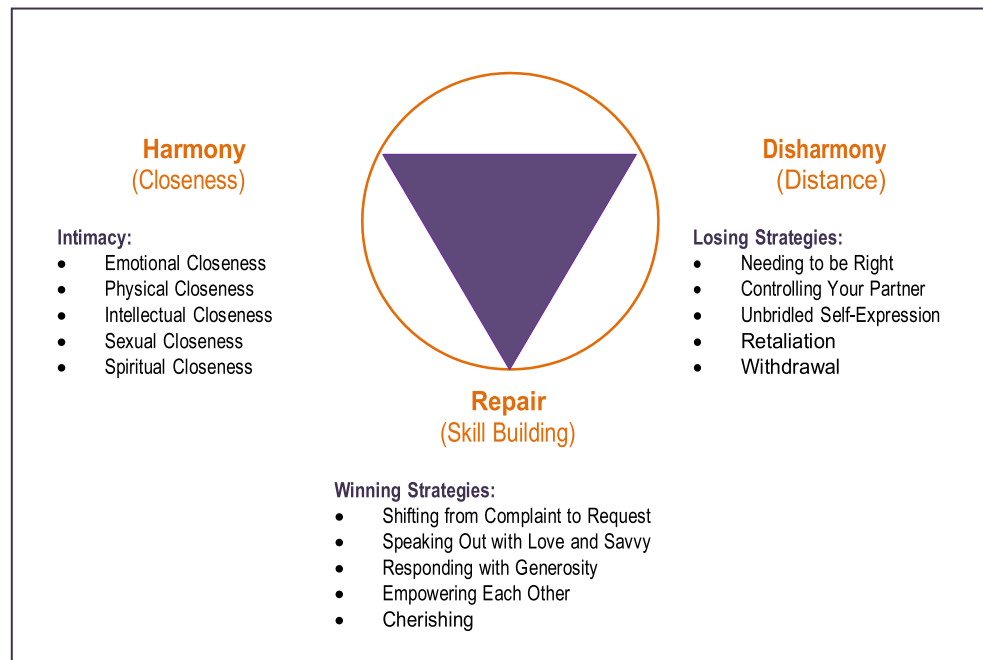
Once I identify a couple's unique relationship dynamics, I begin to assess how they communicate with each other. Each person has a communication habit; some are successful, others not so. I look at the distance in the relationship by examining the "Losing Strategies"

that a couple uses to communicate with one another, and I teach couples how to repair their relationship by using skill-building exercises known as "Winning Strategies" (Real, 2007). The diagram on this page shows a circle representing the repeated cycles of relationships—harmony (intimacy), disharmony (losing strategies) and repair (winning strategies).

The Family Legacy

Almost all relationship dynamics originate from

what we learned in our families of origin. As individuals, we bring those skills and habits into a relationship and together "sculpt" (craft) new dynamics out of the legacy of two families. When couples are at their worst and having relationship difficulties, family of origin issues play themselves out. In the Couple and Intimacy Intensives, each person in



the couple is asked to sculpt a significant memory about an unresolved childhood issue. This is a very powerful exercise which often reveals why each person retreats into habits of losing strategies and why they are so sensitive to certain behaviors and issues in their relationship.

Consider Samantha and George. Throughout Samantha's childhood, her mother was needy and her father was withdrawn. Samantha became enmeshed, often assuming the role of the peacemaker between her parents. While she felt good because she was favoured, she also felt abandoned because her own emotional needs were not being met. As an adult, she subconsciously re-enacted this familiar role by marrying George, who like her father, resists and feels suffocated by her emotional caretaking. The more he distances himself from her, the more she feels the need to give, and becomes needy like her mother.

In the sculpt, George demonstrated that he had the role of the "clown" growing up in his family. His mother was need-less and want-less, and his father was overbearing. In his case, George used humour to distract his family from their father's control and anger. While this created some lightness in the family, it didn't make up for his father's angry intrusiveness. The impact of his father's grandiose behaviour not only stifled his mother, but it also kept George from expressing his own emotional needs.

George married Samantha, who was attracted to his light-heartedness. The more she gave to him emotionally, the less he received it willingly, and, in turn, the more she felt abandoned. The more abandoned she felt, the more he joked. Samantha became boundaryless in her generosity, which George saw as being intrusive like his father. She also became critical because he never took her seriously. In essence, Samantha mimicked his father in her boundaryless behaviour, and George mimicked her father in his walled-off state. George and Samantha were locked in an emotional dance where their needs for connection were not being met.

During the Couple and Intimacy Intensives, as I coach couples through this sculpt, they become far more conscious of how their partner's childhood wounds are being triggered in their adult relationships. It gives them the opportunity to feel more compassion for how their partners had to adapt to this wounding, and how, mistakenly, they have used the adaptive skills as adults. This consciousness-raising illuminates the need to learn new skills to function as adults in their relationships.

The Outcome of the Couple and Intimacy Intensives

With the relationship dynamics identified and the roots of this behaviour uncovered, I am able to understand the obstacles each couple has in speaking to one another. These obstacles prevent them from articulating their needs in a way that can be heard. To repair this, I teach each partner how to make requests directly and to listen without defending, rationalizing, blaming, or retaliating. With practice, the couple learns how to ask more clearly for what they need, how to listen more openly, and remember the love they feel for each other.

Most importantly, I teach couples to use the communication skills that Terry Real, the founder of Relational Life Therapy calls "The Golden Rule of Relationships"—what can I do to help you give me more of what I need? These skills are practiced throughout the intensives.

Returning to our example, George learned that in his walled-off state, he was unaccountable and grandiose. In the therapy, I taught him how to negotiate his needs and wants rather than resorting to his knee-jerk response of using humour. Once he practiced this, he became more adept at being considerate and compassionate of Samantha's needs. Consequently, she felt supported and her self-esteem was more intact.

Likewise, Samantha learned how to speak more relationally by articulating her needs more directly and within appropriate boundaries,

so that she was not off-putting, intrusive, or controlling. She learned the importance of meeting some of her own needs and not relying solely on George. This helped Samantha take responsibility for her self-esteem. She learned that she *is* enough and she matters. Instead of being critical and judgmental, Samantha learned to be more grateful and to communicate her appreciation of George's efforts. This empowered George to "show up" in the relationship.

As predicted, George and Samantha's overall intimacy improved, and they now both feel more relationally connected.

In Conclusion

The Couple and Intimacy Intensives are a beneficial experience for all couples. The series improves self-awareness, communications skills, and the overall health of the relationship. This type of therapy produces measurable results that ensure long-term happiness and satisfaction.

I welcome your questions about the series and look forward to helping you become more deeply connected to one another.

For more information about the Couple and Intimacy Intensive Series offered by Clare Mézes, M.Sc., R.P. visit www.relationshipsforlife.ca