

THE
SEVEN
SECRETS
TO
HEALTHY,
HAPPY
RELATIONSHIPS

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Chapter 2

The Secret of Freedom

*I said “until death do us part—
not breakfast, lunch, and dinner.”*

—Unknown

The next foundational secret to happy and healthy relationships is freedom, as so many of our domesticated ideas of love are tied to a lack of it. We can see it in our metaphors for committed relationships: we speak of the “bonds” of marriage or the “old ball and chain,” or we hear that someone is finally “tied down.” The truth is that while constant physical proximity might be desired and attainable in the first flush of a new love, as a relationship matures and grows freedom becomes more and more necessary.

As we build on the first foundational secret—that of commitment to ourselves—we now embrace the seeming paradox that only by extending real freedom

to our beloved can we open the door to deeper, more meaningful connection. Furthermore, like a boomerang, the freedom we proffer comes right back to us. When we free others, we also free ourselves.

Relationships thrive when both partners feel free and when there is room to grow and stretch in new and fascinating ways. In a partnership like this, each person shares responsibility for the relationship as an entity in and of itself—the sea stretched between shores, which is wild and unknowable and yet also defined by and confined within the lands that border it. Freedom in a relationship means that both parties are responsible for their own well-being yet each chooses to share this fascinating journey of life together. Each party continuously makes conscious choices, free of domesticated ideas and societal influences.

Some of you reading this may be thinking, “But I don’t feel this type of freedom and spaciousness in my current relationship.” That’s understandable, given the number of messages, subtle and overt, that bombard us in our society. And it’s okay. Remember, freedom is an ongoing, evolving negotiation of give-and-take. Where you are today does not have to dictate where you will arrive tomorrow. The good news

is that there are some specific steps you can take to foster an atmosphere of freedom. But before we get to those, let's look at some of the behaviors that can stifle and suffocate the feeling of freedom between couples.

Attempts to Control

Many of us believe that in order to get what we want in a relationship, we need to coax our partners into behaving how we think they should. We usually accomplish this by offering some type of reward for the desired behavior, typically our love and affection. On the other side of the same coin, we may punish our partners for not behaving the way we want them to. We might berate them in emotional outbursts or subject them to passive-aggressive behavior such as withholding our love and affection.

In these ways, we make our love conditional in an attempt to domesticate our partners into doing what we want them to do, instead of encouraging them to follow their heart and be who they are in the warmth and strength of our unconditional love.

Here's a simple example of this in action. Joe and Mary have been in a long-term committed relationship for many years. Although they have plans for a dinner at Joe's parents' house, Mary calls him that

morning and tells him that some friends have an extra ticket to an event that night, and she asks Joe if it would be okay if she attended that instead of the dinner. Joe really wants Mary to come to the dinner, but instead of saying so, he tells her to go with her friends. Joe is secretly upset the rest of the day, and when Mary gets home that night after the event, he is cold and withholds his affection and attention. Mary senses this distance and becomes resentful, choosing to withhold her love as well in retaliation for his punishment of her free choice.

If Joe and Mary had managed to communicate better, this issue might have been averted. We will certainly be exploring communication in great detail in chapter six because good communication practices are vital to happy and healthy relationships. But for now, our focus is on the motives and the energy created between the partners in this situation.

In this instance, not only is Joe punishing Mary by withholding love (as well as punishing himself), he is also letting Mary know that if she behaves this way in the future, she can expect more of the same. He is trying to influence and control her future behavior. Mary is sending a similar message—that punishment she deems unjust will be met with more

punishment, rather than curiosity, understanding, or love. In this way, both parties are trying to domesticate each other to their respective points of view. As a result, the night might explode into an argument, or they might both go to bed carrying these negative emotions with them. As you can imagine, neither of these options are conducive to happiness.

It's all so obvious from the outside. Most of us can spot this type of passive-aggressive and controlling behavior in others, but we have much more difficulty identifying it in our own behavior. We tend to be very attached to whatever beliefs compel us to act in these ways. This is especially true when we justify our actions by telling ourselves that we have our partner's best interest at heart or that we are trying to get them to behave in a certain way "for their own good." In fact, we have been conditioned to believe that this kind of caring for others is part of the central definition of what love *is*.

The truth is that we don't know what is best for anyone else, even when we have their best interests at heart. Everyone else, including your beloved, is on their own path. We really don't know what is best for them, even when we think we do. Only by extending

freedom can we truly allow—and trust—our partner to figure out what is best for them.

Admittedly, it's easy to allow someone the freedom to be who they are when they are doing things we like. The challenge is to extend this same spirit of freedom when they are doing things we don't like. For instance, can we extend freedom to a partner who is late (again)? Who has differing political views? Who refuses to engage or communicate with us about certain topics? Who has different views on parenting (either in relation to kids you share or kids from prior relationships)? Life generously gives us plenty of times to practice allowing others the freedom to be who they are.

Unconditional love says, "I choose to respect your freedom to make your choices and decisions, even if I don't like them." Conditional love says, "I will grant you freedom to make your own choices and decisions as long as they serve me and my agenda in some way." The former is true freedom; the later is control.

One of the things that makes the desire to control others such a difficult habit to break is that sometimes it appears to work. We either coax or force our will on someone and they comply, so our

ego takes the bait. When our will works out well for both parties, we declare victory. You might be aware of this type of victory when you hear yourself say, “I told you so!” to your partner. This is a very typical victory cry in this area, because it celebrates how what we deemed helpful to someone else turned out to be true—even though we may make them feel hurt in the long run by instilling our will on them rather than letting them decide for themselves (even if their decision proves to be a mistake). The truth is that you can’t control anyone else’s behavior for very long, as everyone is responsible for their own choices and actions in all circumstances—including you. Even when it seems to work, it’s only a matter of time (sometimes a long time) before the other person rebels, but eventually they will, in one form or another.

Sometimes our efforts at control arise from different motives. For instance, if we have been hurt in the past, we may consciously or unconsciously feel the need to protect ourselves. In this instance, we might use conditional love to try to stay safe by keeping others in line so they won’t have a chance to hurt us. However, this behavior is really just another way we close our hearts off at the deepest level. We

attempt to buffer ourselves from being hurt, not realizing that our attempts to play it safe through control will actually cause more pain in the long run. When we shield ourselves from pain by shutting down ourselves or others, we also block expressions of joy and the free-flowing energies of love.

Human beings have an innate desire to be free. If we don't extend that sense of freedom to those we are in a relationship with, ultimately they will want to change the terms of the relationship or leave it altogether, even if they aren't conscious that their desire to be free is the reason. When one person controls another for long enough, the resistance swells until there is a breakout, and it usually isn't pretty. Either the controlled person openly revolts, or they do something behind the back of the controller, typically leaving the controller surprised.

Anytime we attempt to control someone—whether it's to protect ourselves or to get what we think we want—we open the door to a host of other unwanted and unhelpful outcomes. Whenever we are trying to control something, we are simultaneously closing down our capacity to listen, to learn something new about them, and to adjust to the truth of the present moment. Trying to control also

shuts us off from the gifts of our own compassion, dims our creative responses to challenges, and dampens our access to our intuition and inner wisdom.

The case for extending freedom to your partner is a strong one, and now let's look at three simple but very effective ways to create the space for freedom to emerge: encourage your partner to choose what they really want, recognize your partner's accomplishments, and support them in activities that don't involve you.

*Encourage Your Partner to
Choose What They Really Want*

One of the most important ways you can engender freedom in a relationship is to encourage your partner to do what they really want to do in any given situation, rather than asking them to do what you may want them to do. You can start simple here. For instance, "do you want to attend a movie with me, or would you rather go out with your friends?" "Do you feel like eating Chinese food or something else?" Encourage your partner to be open with you about their wants—and remind them that while you might not always like or agree with what they say or do, one of your most important values in a

relationship is freedom. In this way, you're conveying to them that your interest in knowing and supporting their deepest desires is a natural extension of your unconditional love for them.

This is not always easy to do with more serious issues, and it is certainly fine to express your own preferences to your partner when appropriate. Just remember that their truth may be different from yours—and that's a good thing. Encouraging them to follow their own heart is a great gift to yourself in that you get to know your partner on a deeper level, because now you are seeing what they really choose in a given situation. Additionally, encouraging your partner to choose what they really want is a concrete way to eliminate the cycle of “you change yourself for me and I'll change myself for you.” That cycle always leads to frustration, resentment, and a feeling of constriction in the relationship.

Recognize Your Partner's Accomplishments

Most of us are in tune with the importance of supporting our partner through difficult times such as job loss, health issues, and the like. Doing so is a vital part of a healthy relationship. Sometimes we overlook another powerful means of support, which is

applauding your partner when they achieve a goal, take on a new challenge, or otherwise accomplish something meaningful to them. Be mindful that this recognition doesn't spill over into conditional praise, or trying to influence or control your partner's behavior. This type of encouragement—given honestly—helps create an atmosphere of freedom as well as support. “Congrats on getting that promotion,” or “I’m so proud of you for trying something new.” Your partner feels your enthusiasm for their passionate pursuits and your regard for their accomplishments.

An extension of this is the incorporation of a shared gratitude practice focused on your most intimate relationships. The benefits of gratitude are well documented, as numerous studies have shown that expressing it regularly can improve not just your physical and mental health but also your outlook for the future, and it can even help us sleep better. Expressing your gratitude and thanks to your partner directly is an essential component of a healthy and happy relationship. It also helps create an atmosphere of freedom when we openly acknowledge that which is done or given in a spirit of generosity. The little things are often the most transformative: saying thanks for taking out the trash or picking up

the dry cleaning. And certainly the more broad gratitude is welcome, such as a general thanks for being such a great parent. We've included a very effective exercise for enriching your gratitude practice within your relationship at the end of this chapter.

Support Activities That Don't Involve You

We've all heard the cliché about absence making the heart grow fonder, but it points to a deep truth: oftentimes we gain renewed appreciation for what we have by stepping away from it and returning with fresh eyes. One way to help your partner feel freedom in your relationship is to encourage them to engage in pursuits on their own or with other friends—to literally spend some time and energy away from you in a healthy way.

One common lament that we hear in relationships is that one partner is feeling neglected, while the other is feeling constricted. We would venture to say that this is a function of domestication at work: feeling like we aren't "good enough" can lead to trying to boost our value based on another's desire to spend time with us. So we turn to conditioning to try to coax or persuade someone into giving us more closeness. Needless to say, this is not enjoyable for

either party and only serves to reinforce the feelings of inadequacy. Further, it sets up a no-win situation for the person who is feeling constricted. Either they choose to disappoint their partner by maintaining distance or acquiesce to a demand for attention and resent their choice in the matter.

Relationships facing this difficulty actually benefit most from a renewed commitment to freedom for both parties. The irony is that when you begin to encourage your partner to be free, they often want to spend more time around you. And even if they don't, when you embrace your commitment to loving yourself, you can begin to enjoy your own freedom as well, and love them for being able to do what they want to do. You can even affirm this joy and tell them honestly how exciting it is to watch them thrive and do what they want to do.

Of course, this process may reveal that you both have some work to do in evaluating the agreements you have in the relationship. You can only do this from a place of mutual respect and freedom. Only then can you decide where you want the relationship to go.

These three practices each stand as a powerful tool to make space for more freedom, and when

woven together, they can empower a huge shift in your relationships.

Extending Freedom and Making Boundaries

As we mentioned earlier in the chapter, when we allow others freedom, life will offer situations in which our partners choose things we don't like or agree with. What then? How can we hold space for their freedom even when they are acting in ways that we find objectionable? One way to start is by listening to what else is true for us in the situation and turning our focus inward. When we put less of our attention on what our partner is doing and more attention on why those actions make us uncomfortable, we can start to unravel the things within us that make us want to control others. We can acknowledge if we are afraid, scared of, or confused by the choices they are making or contemplating and look deeper inside ourselves for the reason why. We can listen to and support ourselves so that we can be comfortable in these situations while continuing to allow space for our partner's freedom. When you find yourself wanting to change your partner in some way, ask yourself these questions: What am I trying to control? What do I need to let go of?

Allowing another person the freedom to be who they are does *not* mean that you must agree with or like everything that they say or do. We can allow freedom and wish the results of that freedom weren't happening, or not like it, but what is important is to practice choosing what works in the long run rather than achieve a hollow victory by forcing our will on someone. Conditional love and attempting to domesticate others are a deeply ingrained habit and won't be something you stop doing completely right away. The trick is to notice when you are doing this and make a different choice.

To be clear, we are not saying that you should stop making boundaries or that you should simply tolerate someone else's behavior, especially when it's abusive. Remember the bedrock of committing to yourself first? Your freedom is just as important as another's. You must know what you are willing to commit to in a relationship and what you will not allow. After all, your job is to be true to yourself. The other person's job is to be true to himself or herself. When both parties do this, you have laid the groundwork for true freedom, and you can encourage an atmosphere of freedom in a relationship, even with healthy boundaries.

One of the simplest definitions of boundaries we know is from researcher Brené Brown, who says that boundaries are simply what's okay and what's not okay. Just because you are allowing someone freedom doesn't mean you are abandoning your boundaries. The two are not mutually exclusive. Remember that first and foremost, your commitment is to yourself, and creating healthy boundaries—as well as expressing them to those around you—is another way to honor that commitment.

In our view, one way to express a boundary is through a conscious “no.” When we look within ourselves and say to another person, “no, I don't want to do that,” or “no, that won't work for me,” we are speaking with the authority of a conscious no. This “no” reflects your focus on what is true for *you*—what is okay and what's not okay from your perspective. In this process, you must remove any guesses or wishes about what may or may not be true for your partner. In this way, you are committing to you while simultaneously granting freedom to your partner. You are not judging their behavior, guessing at their motivations, or demanding that they change (even if inside you might hope that they do).

Sometimes this can be emotionally difficult, as in the following example. We have a friend whose spouse, after several years of marriage, conveyed to her that he wanted to change their agreement from a monogamous relationship to a sexually open one. She did not share this view and explained that while she loved him and wanted him to be happy, that was a deal breaker for her. She told him that she appreciated his honesty, and now she had to share hers. In this case, she said to him, “You are free to take that route, but please know that I won’t be able to stay in this relationship with you if you do.” There was no energy of threat or punishment in her response to him; she was simply stating what was true for her. She wasn’t making her love conditional; she was simply maintaining her commitment to herself while allowing him the freedom to make his own choices (in contrast to giving him a condition to try and control his choices).

Making a good boundary means that we say “no” clearly and with an open heart, which in most cases involves the willingness to speak up and state your truth. We know that for many people, speaking your truth can be difficult—particularly in the midst of a wrenching emotional moment or a

conflict situation. While we will dive into communication later, for now, in the context of our lesson on freedom, we are simply asking that you *become willing* to speak up and state your truth.

Many of us haven't been taught how to make good boundaries without feeling guilty or using them as a way to manipulate another. As a result, you may either apologize profusely for saying no or say no while simultaneously acting out in a passive-aggressive manner, hoping that "if they love you" they will change their own behavior.

In addition, our domestications encourage us to say yes, even when we really mean no, and the result is that we often don't make the boundaries that we need to stay committed to ourselves. If this behavior continues, over time we stifle ourselves, building a dam to hold back our silenced nos. Eventually they form a tidal wave of emotion so powerful that when we finally say no, it comes out as a you-shall-not-pass, over-the-top, emotionally charged outburst rather than a clear and honest boundary.

Remember that setting boundaries with an open heart takes practice, and remind yourself that you are learning. You won't be able to do this perfectly; many of us haven't had good role models for how to

create honest, healthy boundaries in the context of freedom, so in many ways we have to make it up as we go along and create role models for ourselves by modeling the behaviors we wish to see on our own.

Every time you say no to someone else you are also saying yes to yourself. Eventually you'll find that there is no difference between sharing or receiving a yes or a no; they are both simply responses that you can give or receive openheartedly. It doesn't mean that you want to say no necessarily, because you love your partner and want them to be happy; it just means that you realize you can't say yes and stay true to yourself. Your response may look something like, "I wish I could say yes to this, because I know it's important to you, but for me it's a no."

When you become good at this practice, a profound change takes place. You'll notice that you stop changing your own behavior based on what you think your partner's reaction will be. You want harmony, but you also know that this isn't possible in all areas. Furthermore, you realize that life without conflict would be very boring! Our disagreements actually help our relationships grow and stay fluid. Through the constant negotiation of different priorities and preferences, we can continue to look at our

own beliefs and ideas and see if they have changed, while allowing our partner the space to change if they wish, remembering that their behavior isn't up to us. When you don't need your partner to be different, you can stay present in your disagreements with them, including their upset or fear, without betraying your truth. If you allow them the freedom to feel their own fear, then there's a space for them to find a new way. In moments of difficulty, the more we come back to ourselves, honor our fear, and love ourselves with the intent of extending freedom, the more beautiful, surprising, and authentic the results. Our hearts can learn to stay open even in challenging situations.

Explorations

Shared Context and Differentiation

In his book *Passionate Marriage*, therapist and author David Schnarch suggests that the most bonded intimate relationships happen when couples have what he calls shared context and differentiation. One way to think about this is your shared yeses and your divergent nos in a relationship.

Shared context is your joint yes: the things you and your partner like to do together. Take a moment

and examine: Where are your yeses as a couple? What inspires and opens both of you? It might be going to the movies, salsa dancing, or going for long hikes. To build your intimacy and joy with each other, make a plan to do one more thing this week that brings both of you happiness.

The key to locating your shared context is that you have to be honest. If you pretend to like something your partner likes just to “keep the peace,” then eventually you will become resentful. Doing something you dislike for your partner’s sake every once in a while is fine; there is a beautiful joy in seeing our partner enjoy something, even if we are not thrilled about it. But if you have made a habit of watching football or going to modern art museums or hanging out at the beach when that is not your thing, then you will need to course correct and find out where your true shared context is.

Differentiation is just as valuable as shared context, and in fact it is just as crucial for all committed relationships. We need to have places where we honor our unique passions, separate from our partner. This helps us learn how to honor and share our nos with each other: No, I don’t want to go ice-skating, but I’m so happy to drop you off while I go read at the

library. No, I'm not interested in watching the soccer game, but I'll make snacks for you and your friends and go for a long walk in the woods. No, I don't want to have children, but I'm open to fostering some older kids. These are divergent nos.

As we open to each other's differences, we get the opportunity to learn about how other people view the world. When we bring respect and curiosity, we learn it's okay to both love and enjoy the places where we have similarities and also love the differences. Recognize that no relationship will be in alignment 100 percent of the time. If you are always in agreement, it probably means that one or the other of you is not saying what is true in order to keep the peace.

Celebrate and open to both your yeses and your nos with each other, and you'll find more peace in your relationship and more fun!

Notice the interactions in the upcoming week where you and your partner have shared contexts (yeses) and differentiation (nos). Do you ever find you or your partner "keeping the peace" to have shared context? Notice if there is a time when encouraging differentiation could provoke a deeper, more honest discussion.

Opening to Yes, Opening to No

At our workshops, we do an exercise early on that helps couples understand the practical implementation of allowing freedom for another as well as yourself. We call it the Yes/No Game.

Yes is a word that conveys freedom. Just think how much better you feel when you say “yes.” Now imagine standing across from your beloved (real or imagined) and the feeling of you both saying “yes!” out loud to each other for no specific reason. Feel your enthusiasm, your full-bodied YES being received and mirrored back by your partner’s full-body YES.

Now think of the things you agree about. In what moments do you say yes to each other? Yes, we choose to be with each other. Yes, we agree to live in this city. Yes, we want our children to be home-schooled. Imagine the places you say yes with one another, and feel those yeses as they move through your body.

That feels delicious, doesn’t it? We all love that feeling of agreement, when our yes is mutual.

Now imagine both you and your partner saying “no” with each other. You both are in agreement with your clear NO. It feels powerful and unified.

You are aligned in your no: No, we are not going to give six hundred dollars to a distant cousin for the fifth time. No, we are not going to allow our neighbors to tear down our back fence. No, we are not going to let the doctor give our child that particular medicine. NO.

Clarity and connection, in both our yes and our no, create a sense of harmony.

And now comes the hard part.

Think of a time when you recently wanted something—you had a full-on YES—but your partner had an equally adamant NO. Or maybe your partner wanted something, but your answer was an absolute NO. How did you resolve it?

Now imagine a new scenario where you and your partner are in disagreement. This is where the work in freedom comes in. This is where it becomes important to try this exercise—with your beloved if they are in agreement—so that you can learn to feel what it is like to be in disagreement, even passionate disagreement.

As you try this exercise, you will become more practiced in holding space for disagreement without letting it lead you into believing that to disagree means that you're going to fight or argue or dissolve

your relationship. Disagreement is a part of healthy relationships—what can be unhealthy is how we react to it or when we try to change ourselves or our boundaries to avoid it; so practicing at being in compassionate disagreement can make it more comfortable when disagreement arises naturally.

Gratitude Practice

Here is a simple and powerful practice you can do with your beloved. Every night before you go to sleep, tell your partner three things they did that day that you are grateful for. These things can be little or big, but it helps to be specific. For instance, “I am grateful that you met me for lunch today,” or “I am grateful that you listened to me when I was having a bad day at work,” or “I am grateful that you picked up the groceries.” Invite your partner to do the same. These specific expressions of gratitude not only create a sense of happiness and well-being, they also support an atmosphere of freedom.