

Sync Your
Relationship,
*Save Your
Marriage*



PETER FRAENKEL PH.D.

Praise for SYNC YOUR RELATIONSHIP

"Time has been called the 'new currency' in today's world with too much to do and not enough time to do it. Yet each of us manages these pressures in different ways. In a fascinating new book, Peter Fraenkel shows us how our approaches to time and the rhythms of our lives spill over into our couple relationships. Even more importantly, he offers practical suggestions for improving."

—Ellen Galinsky, President, Families and Work Institute, author of *Mind in the Making*

"Peter Fraenkel offers an original and profoundly accessible way for people to think about their relationships. His book is alive with insights and examples that enable the readers to observe their relationships freshly, with easily applicable tools."

—Janet Reibstein, author of *The Best-Kept Secret: Men's and Women's Stories of Enduring Love*

"Couples today are time starved and out of sync. Peter Fraenkel has devised a powerful set of tools to help couples take on the challenges of time pressure, overstuffed work schedules, and contemporary life's frenetic pace, so that partners can reconnect, revitalize, and preserve their relationship."

—Evan Imber-Black, author of *The Secret Life of Families*

"A very timely book on a topic that all couples deal with... Peter Fraenkel helps us understand that our internal pace and couple rhythm are hidden under virtually all issues, and he uncovers the mystery of time in ways that will amaze and engage all readers."

—Howard Markman, Co-director of the Center for Marital and Family Studies and author of *Fighting for Your Marriage*

"Peter Fraenkel puts forth some of the most pertinent and useful ideas about the time famine that afflicts couples today. You must take the time to read this timely book and find out how you can redeem your relationship from the time crunch. Peter Fraenkel is an inspiring writer and an inspired therapist. You are sure to enjoy your time with him."

—Esther Perel, author of *Mating in Captivity: Reconciling the Domestic and the Erotic*

"Peter Fraenkel has written an outstanding guide for couples and families who want to take charge of the time crunch and transform their lives for the better. In a highly readable and often humorous style, *Sync Your Relationship* gathers the evidence for why we need to take back our time, and then he shows us how to do it. If you want to build a happy, healthy relationship, read this book!"

—John de Graaf, co-author of *Affluenza* and Executive Director of Take Back Your Time

"Peter Fraenkel analyzes, with immaculate timing and much humour, common dysfunctional couple 'arrhythmias,' and he provides many solutions to stuck 'dance routines' as well as terrific tips on how partners can jazz up their relationship. Unique and most refreshing!"

—Eia Asen, M.D., author of *Multi-Family Therapy* and Visiting Professor, University College London

"Most things in life come and go, but time only goes. Often the love goes with it. In this remarkably creative new look at relationships, Peter Fraenkel helps us see how our invisible relationship to time shapes our lives and our intimate connections with others. Then he gently and compassionately guides couples away from the despair of core differences and into an appreciative dance of complementary personalities. I heartily recommend this book for any couple that wants to get 'that swing' back into their marriage."

—Christopher K. Germer, Ph.D.,
author of *The Mindful Path to Self-Compassion*
and Clinical Instructor, Harvard Medical School

"Some say 'sex,' some say 'money,' but Peter Fraenkel says 'time.' In this brilliant book, Peter Fraenkel, master clinician, teacher, and researcher, illuminates how couples construct and manage time—the 'hidden dimension' in couples' lives. This book will help couples and therapists understand the critical but seldom acknowledged role that time plays in couple conflicts, alienation, and loss of intimacy. Even more importantly, Fraenkel presents the guidelines he has evolved over years of practice and reflection to help couples learn to manage time more effectively—to get in sync with each other. The goal of 'flow' and the road to get there are the great contributions of this wonderful book."

—William Pinsof, President,
The Family Institute at Northwestern University

"Whether you play in a band, do corporate work, are an air traffic controller, or are part of a comedy troupe, timing and teamwork are essential. Peter Fraenkel's new book deftly shows how couples will thrive once they start playing the same tune."

—John Riley, jazz drummer

"All couples struggle with the rhythms of family, business, and personal priorities. So your relationship had better be in sync. Peter Frankel sheds light on the key challenges couples face and addresses them in a way that is extremely consumable, and most importantly, actionable."

—Gregory T. Rogers, founder and President, RayLign Advisory

Sync Your Relationship, *Save Your Marriage*

**FOUR STEPS TO
GETTING BACK ON TRACK**

PETER FRAENKEL, PH.D.

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Names and identifying characteristics of individuals mentioned have been changed.

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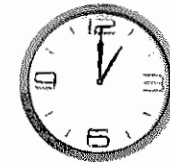
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*To my family, Heike, Lena, and Noah, for our precious
time together every day*



Time and Rhythm: The Hidden Dimension of Intimacy

IT WAS JUST ABOUT 20 years ago when I started noticing the power of time and rhythm to improve intimate relationships—and to mess them up. I was a newly minted Ph.D. in clinical psychology, in my first year of postdoctoral training in couple and family therapy at the renowned New York University Medical School. I was also a professional jazz drummer, the guy who sets the beat and helps the combo keep time together. Walking into the consulting room for their first session with me were John and Tina.¹ Trim, blond, and lanky, his face just starting to show the signs of middle age, John exuded a laid-back temperament. With a nervous grin he plopped down on the couch, a battered pair of sneakers peeking out from under his slightly frayed chinos. At his side, perched on the edge of the sofa sat Tina, a slender, fine-featured brunette in her early 30s, dressed immaculately in a sharp business suit, no-nonsense pumps, and pearls.

I welcomed them, and asked them to tell me about the problems bringing them to couple therapy. Before I could complete the sentence, Tina jumped in, speaking in rapid-fire staccato: “Well, you see, John and I met a couple of years ago, and actually we really get along most of the time, so it’s not really us that’s the problem per se but how to deal with Tim, John’s son from a previous marriage.”

Having run out of breath, Tina stopped long enough for me to interject, “So, John, what’s your point of view about this?” John took a few seconds to consider the question before he opened his mouth to speak. But before he could complete a sentence, Tina jumped in, a hint of exasperation curling the corners of her mouth, and declared, “Oh, yeah, and that’s another thing—this always happens: John’s never willing to talk about our problems!” John’s eyes

met mine with eyebrows raised in a plaintive glance, as he slowly intoned, “I am *trying* to, but I just take a while to get my words out is all!”

By the session’s end, it was clear that whatever problems they had with John’s son, Tina and John differed drastically in their life rhythms, especially in one aspect that I call life pace: the speed of everyday activities such as walking, talking, eating, and getting ready to leave the house. Not surprisingly, their professional choices matched their personal rhythms—Tina was an investment banker and John a private boat captain who took small, elite groups on private cruises around Manhattan. Like so many couples, those very pace differences formed a powerful force of attraction when they first met: Tina loved John’s mellow style—“he calmed me down,” she sighed, remembering the early days of their infatuation—and John was drawn to Tina’s up-tempo energy—“she was so exciting!” And yet, like so many couples, over time those same differences became major sources of irritation and misunderstanding between them.

What force draws us inexorably to the person who will become our soul mate, our life partner? And why is it that—though inconceivable in those heady beginning days and weeks and months of lust and love as we are flooded with the hormones that make our hearts pound and our heads swim²—this same soul mate also inevitably becomes the person with whom we wrestle emotionally, struggling with our frightening feelings of dependency and need?³ The person toward whom we stoke simmering, overwhelming, self-righteous resentment; the one by whom we feel controlled, pushed away, misunderstood? The person alongside of whom we experience the most intense, confusing, painful loneliness imaginable?

Over the past 30 years, truckloads of self-help books have stocked shelves describing the most common relationship problems and how to solve them. Books for couples on money management. Books on improving couple communication. Books on reaching the pinnacle of sexual satisfaction. Although useful in many ways, none of these books help couples reveal the *hidden dimension of time and rhythm* that keeps their dysfunctional dance going. Time is everywhere—we swim in it and we breathe it, yet because we can’t see it, we don’t recognize its fundamental power in structuring our lives and our relationships.

After more than 20 years of working with couples and researching the causes of couple conflict and satisfaction, it’s clear to me that unless couples can “hear the beat” of their conflict, they can’t change it. You can’t understand your anger with your partner until you realize the huge, underlying differences in your *pace*, your *tempo*—that what’s angering you is how slowly

he gets things done around the house, while he feels frustrated that you’re always trying to complete tasks at the speed of light. Nor can you solve your persistent arguments about spending or saving money unless you realize that she focuses on the future (not just about money but in general) while you live more for the moment—a difference in what’s called time perspective.

You can’t overcome the fact that you never communicate, never make love, rarely have a date, or haven’t had a quiet evening together in months until you realize that your work schedules are out of sync. And you can’t explain to yourself (or to him) why you melt down when your partner is five minutes late to a date until you realize that being punctual is a key to keeping you calm and, moreover, that it was a point of pride in your family. And he can’t explain why he feels you’re incredibly rigid and unforgiving until you both realize that his family’s strict rules about being on time made him feel oppressed in his youth.

In all these examples, your rhythms mismatch, you do not dance to the same beat, and, therefore, you struggle. And yet, when you go back to those early days and weeks and months of your love, you will find that, “surprise!” lo and behold, the very time differences that now drive you nuts about your partner were, unbeknownst to you, one of the things that most attracted you to each other. You *liked* his fast pace and high energy; he *loved* your laid-back side. You respected her incredible organizational skills, her focus on the future, and she dug your beach-bum, catch-the-wave approach to life. You both wanted someone talented and competitive and dedicated to his or her career—and you got it, but not much time for each other. And you sometimes couldn’t stand your own uptightness about being on time, and he was often embarrassed by his own lateness, so you each unconsciously looked to the other to provide a punctuality corrective, but when it was offered, it was too different.

When we can hear the beat beneath our conflicts, perceive the time patterns that govern daily existence, rediscover the positives about them, and revise the patterns that lock us in distress, we can bring our relationship to new heights of connection and joy. In *Sync Your Relationship, Save Your Marriage*, I will teach you how to hear the clashing rhythms inside your flashpoints. You will learn the powerful four-step Relationship Rhythms Analysis:

1. Reveal your couple rhythms
2. Revalue the rhythms that work
3. Revise the rhythms that don’t
4. Rehearse—practice the new rhythms

Before you can do something about a problem, you've got to diagnose it accurately. That's where the Relationship Rhythms Analysis comes in. It's the couple's equivalent of what any good physician does for us—our doctor takes our pulse, listens to the regularity of our heartbeat, determines the rate and balance between our systolic and diastolic blood pressure, and listens to the rhythm of our breathing. When the body's rhythms are off, it's a sure sign of disease. Same goes for relationship rhythms—when rhythms are off between partners, it's a sign that something's wrong.

To get a quick sense of where your time troubles lie, complete this brief version of the Couples in Time Questionnaire (the full version is available on my Web site, www.syncyourrelationship.com):

COUPLES IN TIME QUESTIONNAIRE: BRIEF VERSION

By answering these questions, you will get a snapshot of how greatly time issues affect the quality of your relationship. For each aspect of time, circle one number from 0 to 3 that describes the degree to which you experience this as a problem in your relationship.

0 = not at all a problem, 1 = a little problem,
2 = somewhat a problem, 3 = definitely a problem

- | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Finding adequate amount of time together | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 2. Sense of time pressure | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 3. Mismatch in daily schedules | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 4. Mismatch in life paces (speed of walking, talking, eating) | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 5. Differences in caring about or being punctual | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 6. Differences in desire for time alone as a couple | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 7. Differences in when we wake up or go to bed | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 8. Differences in our focus on past, present, or future | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 9. Differences in concern about using time effectively | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 10. Different preferences about how to spend leisure time | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 11. Match in satisfaction with progress toward life goals | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 12. Differences in when we have the most energy during the day | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 13. Balance of work and personal time | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 |

Total Score: _____

If you scored:

- 0–7: You're in the Groove! (little or no problems with couple time)
8–15: A Little out of Sync (mild difficulties: need a couple time tune-up)

- 16–23: Missing Some Beats (moderate difficulties: need to examine and change some rhythms)
24–31: Out of Step (notable difficulties: attention needed to several aspects of your couple time)
32–39: Couple Arrhythmia (significant problems with couple time: need major overhaul)

If you scored between 32 and 39, you may be suffering from a case of couple arrhythmia: Like a heart that's beating irregularly, you're significantly out of sync with your partner, and your relationship might be at risk. A score of 24–31 means you've got some notable difficulties connecting with one another in time, and your couple rhythms need immediate attention. A score of 16–23 says you've probably got some moderate difficulties getting together in time. A score of 8–15 indicates mild difficulties; if you scored between 0 and 7, congratulations, you have no time problems—except you're probably clueless or lying to yourself! From what I've seen in working with hundreds of couples over 20 years, time differences are endemic to couple life. And they can be solved. You are not alone.

Being out of sync in one or more aspect of time almost always plays a part in creating or sustaining conflict in couples, but it's often not the overt problem for which couples seek therapy. Many of the common problematic interaction patterns that distressed couples find themselves in play out in conflicts about time. As I describe these common couple problems, I'll also introduce you to some of the things therapists can help couples do right from the start to understand the nature of distress. And I'll give you examples of how these patterns play out in the arena of couple time.

The Sources of Couple Suffering and the Steps Toward Change

Couples suffer—and some come to therapy to relieve that suffering—because one or both partners are unhappy and view their unhappiness to be at least in part caused by the other person and the qualities of the relationship. This statement might seem obvious, but it's worth delving into a few details. By the time *most* couples seek help, both partners agree something's not working well. And that's no surprise, because one study found that the average length of time couples are distressed before seeking therapy is six years!⁴ Even if initially one partner is more unhappy than the other, after six years (but usually long before) we'd expect that the other partner is unhappy too—if only

because of sensing his or her partner's discontent. Partners often disagree about the cause of problems and usually blame each other, but usually agree that there *is* a problem and that they are both unhappy.

However, both partners don't *always* admit that there's a problem. Sometimes, even by the time they first show up for therapy, one partner is significantly more unhappy or, at least, more vocal about it.

As a couple therapist, my first step in figuring out the pair's problems is to establish that both partners acknowledge a dynamic worth changing. I do this by getting a sense of whose idea it was to seek therapy and why, and if it wasn't a mutual decision, how the other partner feels about coming (and if they don't want to, why). By the end of the first or second session, both partners need to become stakeholders in the change process, to find something they could get out of it, or else the therapy will resemble their relationship—with one partner naming the problems and the other defensively denying their existence.

Identifying Polarizing Patterns

One of the most frequent polarizing patterns is known as the “pursuer/distancer” pattern. This occurs when one partner attempts to raise an issue, often in a perfectly reasonable manner, but the other feels unfairly criticized, blamed, or attacked, unable to acknowledge or verbalize his (or sometimes her) vulnerable feelings, and withdraws, refusing to talk about “it,” whatever “it” is. Meanwhile, the partner raising the issues now feels unfairly burdened with all the responsibility of starting the conversation. She feels wrongly characterized as an attacker when, at least initially, she simply tried to raise legitimate concerns. As one person makes a demand, the other shrinks back and grows defensive.⁵ The louder one knocks, the less willing the other is to open the door.

In heterosexual relationships, it's more often men who withdraw from conflict and women who then are stuck trying to get men back to the table to talk. Underlying this pattern is often a power struggle in which the man refuses to be influenced by his female partner. This refusal to be influenced is sometimes based on the man's conscious or unconscious belief that it would be “unmanly” for him to accept critical input about his behavior, or to agree to change something if that request for change comes from a woman—especially his intimate partner. Men often learn this belief about gender and power through what they observed in their parents' or other adult family members' relationships. These beliefs are then reinforced by movies, television shows, photos, news stories, popular

songs, and other sources of messages about relationships that pervade most of the world's cultures—despite, and sometimes in reaction to, feminist gains toward the equality of women and men. As a result, not only may the male partner be unwilling to respond to the specific requests or concerns of his female partner, but also his refusal to be influenced by her may show up in not being willing to talk at all.

Even more often, men refuse to converse about their partners' concerns in order to protect themselves emotionally. This is due to another rule of the constricting male code: Thou shalt not experience or express vulnerable emotions.⁶ (Actually, those gender-power beliefs have stayed in place to be relied on by generations of men in part *because* they serve to safeguard them, at least partially and temporarily, from dealing with negative emotions.) Starting when they are infants, men and women are still raised with different expectations about their needs, abilities, rights, and responsibilities to experience and express uncomfortable emotions such as anxiety, fear, sadness, weakness, loneliness, shame, and guilt, or to listen to and empathize with expressions of those feelings by others.⁷ Despite the cultural revolution of the 1960s that encouraged both men and women to “let it all hang out,” “get in touch with your feelings,” “be real,” and “be intimate and empathic,” boys and men generally continue to get the message that it's OK to express and act on emotions associated with strength (like anger), to assert themselves, and to say “no,” but that it's not OK to have emotions associated with vulnerability (like embarrassment), or to “give in” to others' needs and requests. In contrast, girls and women continue to be trained to feel and express the emotions associated with vulnerability, and to take care of the vulnerable feelings of others. And women as a group are still generally discouraged from asserting themselves in business or in their personal lives,⁸ or from openly expressing dissatisfaction or outright anger.

Unfortunately, when the man withdraws, it may only stimulate the woman to increase the intensity with which she raises the original issue, as she may feel even more pressed to initiate a conversation about it. Although he may show little emotion, the withdrawing partner is likely experiencing the uncomfortable physiological signals associated with the body's fight-or-flight response—increased anxiety, increased heart rate, shallow breathing, and other signs of stress.⁹ The other partner also experiences these symptoms of stress, along with feeling frustrated, abandoned, or disrespected.

Here's a good juncture for me to note that when I describe general patterns about men and women in relationships—how they handle difficult emotions

or common patterns of couple interactions—it is almost always based either on research, carefully studied clinical cases discussed in professional articles (mine and those of other experienced therapists), or both. As much as possible, I'll let you know in the back of the book the sources that support what I describe about couples. But even when my statements are based on some of the best research or clinical observations in the field, these general statements about couples are always based on averages. Every person and couple may be different. For instance, in any particular couple argument, or for a particular couple in general, it may be the woman who withdraws and the man who is trying to raise issues, and the woman who's less comfortable with vulnerable emotions and the man more so. And this pattern by no means occurs only in heterosexual couples. Although many same-sex/gay or lesbian couples attempt to avoid some of the problematic aspects of stereotypic heterosexual relationship patterns and roles, and although in many same-sex couples both partners may be relatively comfortable experiencing and discussing feelings, in others, one partner pursues, the other withdraws. So, many gay or lesbian couples resemble heterosexual couples in their gender roles and problematic patterns. In other words, men and women, gay or straight, may act in ways traditionally associated with the societally defined gender roles of masculine or feminine, or may act differently than those roles. Likewise, men and women, gay or straight, vary widely in their degree of comfort with vulnerable emotions. The good news is that relationship patterns and comfort experiencing and expressing emotions are behaviors that can change and can be learned.

In any case, once the pursuer/distancer pattern captures a couple, each partner may feel manipulated by the other's seemingly self-serving behavior. Over time and repetition, each comes to view the other's behavior in this pattern as reflective of the worst aspects of their partner's personality and as unlikely to change. Yet, as I've noted, there are usually some good intentions underlying each one's behavior: The pursuer is trying to get the withdrawer to talk, solve the problem, and end the conflict, while the withdrawer is trying to minimize conflict in the moment. Each is earnestly trying to reestablish harmony, but they are working in an uncoordinated way, at cross-purposes. Each one's efforts interlocks with the other's like two perfectly fitted components of an ill-fated device that then spins out of control, creating greater polarization.

The pursuer/distancer is only one of a number of polarizing patterns couples fall into, and a skilled couple therapist can begin to identify these patterns within the first session or two (and now, with the information I've provided, hopefully, so can you!). Another frequent one is called the "overfunctioning/

underfunctioning" pattern: One partner takes much more of the lead in effectively organizing the household, finances, social events, parenting, or other aspects of daily life, while the other rarely shows initiative or skill in managing these things. The more one exerts his or her competence, the less the other demonstrates his or hers. Although some couples seem patterned this way from the get-go, more often the differences develop over time, with each one's contribution becoming increasingly unequal. The partner who, when he lived alone or with another partner, was quite skilled in all manner of life management tasks, now finds himself feeling that his partner always has a better way to do the laundry, cook a sauce, or keep track of finances. Rather than acknowledging her greater skills and accepting her invitation to learn her way of doing things, or suggesting his own twist and possible improvement to what she does, he pulls back and stops contributing—sometimes sullenly (e.g., "well, if she doesn't like my way of doing things, then I guess I'll just let her do it"), and sometimes because she tells him not to bother trying since he always does a substandard (that is, according to her standards) job anyway. Likewise, the partner who's taking over more and more responsibilities might wish that her partner would take charge of more of these tasks, yet as long as she insists on her way as the only way, or goes ahead and does it before he gets a chance, that's not likely to happen. The result? She feels burdened, he feels useless, and each blames the other. And, by the way, I've worked with just as many couples in which it's the man rather than the woman who believes he's got all the best ways to do things around the home, and who doesn't value and adopt any of her ways, leading her to feel disrespected and disempowered. I've also worked with plenty of gay and lesbian couples for whom the same dynamic occurs.

One of the core ideas in couple therapy is that polarized patterns like the pursuer/distancer or overfunctioning/underfunctioning are much more powerful than partners' personalities in determining the quality and longevity of couple relationships. Research shows that, for the most part, no one personality style has a better or worse chance of a happy relationship.¹⁰ Each partner brings his or her personality style and associated skills, tendencies, sensitivities, and vulnerabilities into the relationship. You are more verbal, he is less so. She is more anxious, you are calmer. You consider yourself a realist, he always sees the positive, the possible, the humorous. She is more organized and obsessive, you are more spontaneous but a bit chaotic. You are more social and enjoy big parties, while she prefers dinner for two. More important than the initial personality styles each partner brings to the relationship, it's how these styles play off one another that

determines the impact of personality on their joint happiness. For instance, as one partner becomes the flag bearer for organizing time efficiently, the other champions a looser, take-it-as-it-comes approach, and then the more one insists on the correctness of her approach to time, the more the other argues for the correctness of his approach. In other words, through the centrifuge of a couple's circular conflicts, a wide range of personality differences can spin out into polarizing patterns.

Both the pursuer/distancer and the overfunctioning/underfunctioning patterns had just started to take over John and Tina's relatively new relationship when they came to see me. Tina interpreted John's slower pace of responding in their conversations about problems as evidence that he didn't want to talk about her feelings and their issues. True, John was not as comfortable experiencing anxiety as Tina was, nor was he as adept as she at speaking about those feelings. That meant she was the one to pursue the issue of the weekend time crunch on their relationship when John's son, Tim, came to visit twice a month, and John sometimes didn't want to talk about it because he didn't know how to solve the problem. He said he felt "stuck between a rock and a hard place," trying to please Tina while fulfilling his responsibilities to his son and his ex-wife, who relied on those every-other-weekends apart from Tim to catch up on her work and spend time with her new romantic partner. Meanwhile, Tina felt frustrated that she had to take charge of raising the issue and offering possible solutions.

To free them from the grip of these polarizing patterns, I taught the couple some powerful communication skills that you will learn in chapter 9, skills developed and tested by Howard Markman, Scott Stanley, and their colleagues at the University of Denver's Center for Marital Studies,¹¹ and which I've taught to hundreds of couples in my private practice and at the New York University Family Studies Program.¹² These skills create a safe space for experiencing and talking about unpleasant feelings.

For Tina and John, these skills helped equalize the pace of their conversation, so that the couple's differences in speaking speed did not interfere with their communication. They moved onto problem solving, and with the pace of conversation now more equalized between them, it turned out John had some great ideas about creating a regular weekend rhythm when Tim visited that Tina liked and helped refine. In this rhythm, John would spend the morning with Tina until Tim woke up, then make brunch for everyone, then go play ball with Tim for a few hours (giving Tina some much-needed time for herself), followed by an activity together as a threesome—taking in a movie, going for a walk, playing a board game. Tina and

John would then make dinner, order in, or they'd all go out for pizza, and then they'd decide together what to do with the evening until Tim's bedtime. After Tim was in bed, the couple would have a little cuddle time. The couple tried it the next weekend, and it worked, and through this approach to talking and solving the problem, we had disrupted all of the polarizing patterns—pursuer/distancer, overfunctioning/underfunctioning, fast pace/slow pace—that had begun to take hold of their love.

Personality differences like those between John and Tina are not only normal. Appreciated and used positively, they can be among the couple's greatest assets. Just as partners' different levels of skill in managing finances, interior decorating, home repair, and cooking can complement one another's abilities, differences in emotional styles can allow a natural division of labor for the psychological management of a loving relationship. If one partner is more social and the other shyer, that can translate into a better balance between time with others and time alone as a couple than either might have achieved with someone exactly like them. If one tends to envision the future with more hope and confidence and the other is more clear-eyed about potential setbacks, those different perspectives can combine to provide an approach that both reaches for the stars and touches the ground. If one partner has an exploratory streak while the other hews to the tried-and-true pleasures, this can result in a life filled with both adventurous novelty and comforting reliability. If one partner wants to discuss feelings associated with problems and the other jumps right to solutions, they can learn to combine these inclinations sequentially. Either approach alone is limiting.

In other words, it's not differences per se that cause problems in couples. It's how those differences are utilized. When partners understand their own and each other's personality styles and tendencies, when they recognize the value of each other's styles and discuss them respectfully, and when partners can put these differences to use, they reap the full benefits of being part of a "we" instead of just a "me."

While we're on the topic of utilizing rather than trying to eliminate the differences, let's examine a contemporary myth that many couples labor under: trying to establish a relationship in which each partner contributes exactly 50 percent in all life tasks. In fact, having a fair, equitable "peer marriage"¹³ does not require each partner to do exactly 50 percent of everything and to develop equal skill in all areas. Indeed, the myth of the 50–50 marriage is an unreasonable standard that often makes couples feel deficient. The key to fairness is that neither partner feels forced by the other to take on a particular role and responsibility. For instance, as often

happens, when working women feel forced by their male partners to do a disproportionate amount of the housework or childcare—either because of his financial advantage, his dead-set belief that men earn the money and women tend to the home and children, or because he just doesn't fulfill commitments to do his share—this can result in women feeling the relationship is extremely unfair. And among other effects, the sense that the relationship is unfair acts like an anti-aphrodisiac—when women feel the relationship is unfair, they become much less interested in sexual intimacy.¹⁴ (Which is why one of my first recommendations to men who want more sex with their partners is that the men should do more housework.) But as long as partners don't feel unduly burdened with one or another task or emotional role, and as long as one partner doesn't feel that the other refuses to allow joint control or decision making, it can work well that one partner is the leader and the other the assistant in certain domains. Or at least, that one is initially the teacher, the other the learner, and then both can function equally “on the job.” For instance, one may be the better cook, but the other can serve as sous-chef. Or one may be Ms. Fix-It, and the other can be the journeyman. Or one may be highly skilled in organizing finances, but the other can learn the system and share the work.

As some of my examples so far have illustrated, the general tendency for partners to polarize is one of the key ways that differences about time become a couple's problem. Like John and Tina, one is slower, one faster, and this initially appealing pace difference transforms from asset to annoyance as it gets more extreme. Other couples differ on punctuality, with one always on time or early, the other more relaxed about promptness. Although both tendencies have value in different circumstances, conflict ensues when each insists on the exclusive correctness of their approach. Or when one insists on detailed planning for the future and the other insists on detailed enjoyment of the here and now, partners miss the opportunity for a complementary combining of their equally important time perspectives. Instead, they're stuck in a polarized pattern, with the result that they neither enjoy the present nor prepare well for the future. Or one partner is a morning person, the other a night owl. I worked with one couple with a two-year-old child for whom this became the make-or-break issue. He, regularly in bed by 11:30 P.M. and up at 6 A.M. to go to work, was terrified that his wife, who regularly stayed up until 1 A.M. and rose at 10 A.M., would not be able to get up earlier in the morning when it came time to bring their daughter to preschool in two years, and that they would need to rely on their expensive live-in nanny forever. And she refused to change her

diurnal rhythms until the daughter came of age for preschool, saying she'd always been late to bed and late to rise.

That's where I come in. By naming the polarizing pattern, letting the couple know they are not the first (and won't be the last) to fall into it, by explaining how they each contribute to it, by identifying the honorable intentions behind each one's behavior, and by noting that the pattern can change, I provide the couple some initial hope and relief. By showing that I understand each one's perspective, by showing them that it's not one of them that's to blame for the conflict but rather it's a dance they do together, I validate each one's feelings and model one of the key things partners must learn to do with one another when in conflict: to put aside their own needs, pain, and frustration for a moment and see the relationship and themselves from the other's point of view. This is simple to say, and again, perhaps obvious, but it's not so simple to do. Much of couple therapy centers on helping partners feel safe enough to acknowledge, first to themselves, and then to their partners, their most vulnerable feelings—feelings of hurt, fear, loneliness, disappointment, despair. And as hard as it may be, they need to hear the other's feelings, really take them in, and imagine what the relationship feels like from the point of view of the partner. I then help partners re-value the differences between them that likely served as a powerful source of attraction in the first place. And help them find ways to synthesize those differences into a more usefully complex “we,” so that they escape the battle between “me” and “me.”

Building Mutual Awareness: From Me versus You to We

The capacity to listen and to understand the other, to imagine the feelings and honorable intentions beneath the other's annoying behavior, and to tolerate knowing that there are differences between oneself and one's partner goes by various names—positive attributions, empathy, intersubjectivity, reflective functioning—depending on the specific psychological theory. But despite some important distinctions among them, all of these concepts highlight a core capacity that both partners need in order to thrive in an intimate relationship over time. For some of the couples with whom I've worked to facilitate this act of deep listening, it's the first time one or both partners has realized that his or her partner is not a mirror image of him or herself, but rather, has his or her own feelings, perceptions, needs, sensitivities, and capacities, which may vary quite radically from his or her own.

As individuals' projections of who their partners are (and who they wish they would be) dissolve, and as they come to see and hear each other more clearly, couples often move from initial anger and frustration to sadness and an unexpected sense of aloneness. The expectation of blissful, seamless merging promised by the early, heady, biochemically infused days of romance transitions to a renewed sense of separateness, a stepping back from assumed unity to a fuller appreciation of differences and of the need to negotiate compromises. Suddenly, being in a relationship seems like it's going to be "hard work," and that can feel discouraging. My role at this moment is to normalize this as an inevitable stage in the development of intimate relationships and to help couples see it as a major step toward becoming much more fully appreciative of one another, and in most cases, more fully and enjoyably connected in a deeper, more realistic, and ultimately more satisfying "we."

Building mutual awareness helps avoid the four major destructive patterns of communication identified by research with thousands of couples: Escalation (one partner says something with critical or contemptuous affect, and the other responds in kind, in a kind of Ping-Pong match of negativity); Withdrawal (which we've discussed in detail already, when one partner gives verbal or nonverbal signals that he or she is avoiding or pulling out of the conversation); Invalidation (putting down the partner's point of view or efforts, often with critical or contemptuous facial expressions and voice tone, or minimizing the concerns by underresponding to the distress); and Negative Interpretations (developing a kind of theory of "mal-intent," an explanation of how the partner's unpleasant behavior is motivated by his or her secret, pervasive, deep-seated, malevolent intentions and feelings—usually expressed in phrases such as my partner doesn't really love me, is trying to control me, doesn't respect me, is not truly committed to me—revealing deeper "hidden issues" that go well beyond the specific distressing behavior).¹⁵

Let's look at some examples of Escalation, Invalidation, and Negative Interpretations as they occur when couples argue about time.

Escalation

Jim to Linda (with an impatient tone): "Why are you so late—again?"

Linda to Jim (equally terse): "Because I had things to get done—for our family."

Jim to Linda (with a rising tone of outrage in his voice): "Are you implying that I don't do enough for this family?"

Linda to Jim (sarcastically): "Got that one right, big guy. Why is it that we both work full-time jobs but I get to do all the shopping and other chores?"

Jim (loudly): "Right, right, you are so burdened, it's just horrible, what a terrible life you have—I only work about 10 hours more a week than you, do you ever think of that? If you could manage your time better, you'd get everything done twice as fast."

Linda (shouting now): "And if I had a husband that even once would offer to pick up the dry cleaning on his way home, I'd get things done twice as fast."

And on and on they go, until either Jim or Linda leaves the house, angrily slamming the door behind. The way to avoid these kinds of escalations is to stop as soon as they begin and shift to using the communication skills described in chapter 9, with each partner getting a chance to speak while the other listens and paraphrases, with both avoiding critical and contemptuous statements.

Invalidation

A couple I worked with hadn't had a night out and away from their toddler in almost a year. So they bought tickets to the opera, which in their "pre-child years" was one of their joint passions. Joanne, who'd left her job to raise their daughter full time, shed her "mommy clothes" and dressed up for the first time in months, arrived early to pick up tickets, and then took her place at their old meeting spot, just to the left of the fountain in front of the theater. She smiled. It felt good to be doing this again, and standing in that old meeting place brought back a flood of warm memories of the early, indulgent years of their love. But as curtain time approached with no sign of her husband, Tom, she started to worry. As other well-dressed patrons started to leave the plaza and file into the theater, she started to panic and to feel a bit annoyed as well—what could have happened? Was there yet another last-minute work crisis that Tom had to attend to? She understood his work was demanding right now as he sought to become a partner in a law firm, and she was eager to see him advance his career, but this was their first special night out in a long time. Surely nothing at work could be that urgent. And why hadn't he called? As it reached 8:05 P.M., she felt flooded with disappointment, tinged with frustration—no chance of seeing the first act now, the curtain was up, and doors would be closed.

At 8:20, Tom finally showed up in a cab. It seemed to Joanne that he took forever to pay the taxi driver and that his slow saunter toward her didn't

match the moment's urgency or her own agitation. Nevertheless, not wanting to spoil the evening further with anger and realizing she should give him the benefit of the doubt—who knows, maybe he had a good excuse?—she stifled her frustration, greeted him, then said in a tone of obvious disappointment, “Tom, what happened? We’ve missed the first act!”

Rather than offering a ready apology and showing that he recognized, understood, and shared her disappointment, Tom shrugged his shoulders and said almost nonchalantly, “Hey, what can I say? I left in plenty of time, but the crosstown traffic was terrible, and my phone battery died so I couldn’t call. Let’s just go get a drink or something before the second half.”

Joanne was stunned: “Tom, we’ve been planning this for months, this was our big night out, I’m not blaming you for being late, but I’m really disappointed and frustrated, can’t you see that? Aren’t you?” Tom looked at her coolly and said with controlled emotion, “Hey, come on, Joanne, get over it. It’s just the opera. We’ll catch the second half.” Joanne exploded in angry tears, Tom turned away, then they fought right there at the fountain and passersby were treated to a very personal operatic tragedy.

As we discussed the event in their first couple therapy session a week later, Joanne felt that Tom’s words and behavior completely dismissed her legitimate feelings of disappointment, worry, and frustration. Although she was upset that he was late, she wasn’t even blaming him and yet he seemed so defensive. Or, she thought, maybe he really wasn’t looking forward to this big night out as much as she was.

For his part, Tom felt he’d done what he could to get there on time. He had a habit of running late, of trying to do too much in too little time, and he was determined not to be late to their date. He’d really been looking forward to this evening and made special efforts to block any last-minute phone calls that might keep him late at the office. He just about burst a vein sitting in that cab stuck in traffic and felt mad at himself for forgetting to charge his phone that day. He’d tried to calm down before he got to the theater, but when he saw Joanne so upset, he felt bad, and the frustration welled up in him. He was trying to help her calm down by keeping his cool and by trying to put this disappointment in perspective so they could enjoy the rest of the evening, but when Joanne seemed to get even more upset after he explained what happened, he felt she must be blaming him even though she said she didn’t. He felt that wasn’t fair and started to feel angry, but again, to keep from spoiling the evening, he squelched his feelings and tried again to stay cool and put the disappointment in perspective. But when Joanne then started crying and seemed so angry, he “lost it.”

This kind of unfortunate event is all too common in the lives of couples. One partner inadvertently slips up, inconveniences, hurts, or annoys the other. Although there are to my knowledge no research findings on this, clinical researchers estimate that in all but the most distressed couples, about 90 percent of the things partners do that hurt one another are unintentional, not deliberate attempts to cause pain. But we seem to have a hard time apologizing to our partners for the unintended impact of our behavior. Instead, we focus on the fact that we didn’t “mean it.” That leaves our partner feeling hurt, angry, and invalidated.

To avoid having an experience similar to Joanne and Tom’s, my suggestion to couples is that they make a clear distinction between the impact and the intent of their behavior, and learn to apologize for the impact of their unwittingly hurtful behavior, allow their partner to vent, sit with their partner’s emotion and empathize with it. In turn, the responsibility of the hurt partner is to avoid taking advantage of the partner’s apologetic stance by going on and on about the incident, or by using it as an opportunity to vent about all manner of other, past insults and injuries (as in, “this is just like the time when you...”). Instead, the hurt partner needs to allow him or herself to be comforted by the inadvertently hurtful partner’s apologies and to move on together.

Negative Interpretations

Joanne had already started to develop a theory about Tom’s frequent lateness: that he really preferred spending time at work to spending time with her and their child. In the course of addressing the incident of his lateness to the opera, Joanne expressed her emerging negative interpretation in what we call a “negative mind-reading statement”—“Face it, Tom, you just like being at work more than you like being with me!” Tom was stunned and hurt by this accusation. From his point of view, he had difficulty saying no to authority and setting boundaries on work, especially now that they had a child and other colleagues had lost their jobs. It was important for Joanne to hear this from Tom, but it was also clear he needed to assert himself with his boss and set some boundaries on work, even if it meant jeopardizing his job, if she was going to be able to dismiss her emerging negative theory. He talked to his boss, and to his amazement, his boss smiled slightly, nodded, and said, “Tom, I completely understand. I wish I’d had the guts to stand up to my boss years ago... it could’ve saved my marriage.”

Although more often than not our theories of mal-intent about our partners are wrong—at least in our sense of their degree or

breadth—unfortunately, sometimes our theories are not entirely off-base. For instance, it may actually be that our constantly late partner really *doesn't* respect us much (or our time), or *doesn't* want to spend time with us, or balks at our attempts to share control of the schedule, or *is* more invested in work, parents, friends, or video games. But given that our partners haven't spontaneously shared with us their control issues or their diminished love, respect, or concern for us, telling them definitively that we *know* what's behind their bad behavior (because, after all, we can read their minds) is a surefire way to get off on the wrong foot. Instead, a better way to bring it up is to say, "Sometimes I wonder if you really don't want to be with me, when you are frequently late for our dates," or "When you won't negotiate the weekend schedule with me, it seems to me that you won't give me any control, and that's upsetting." Rather than saying that you definitively *know* what your partner's intentions are, these statements tell the partner what you are thinking about his or her behavior and give your partner space to affirm or disconfirm your impressions.

The Place of Time in Couple Problems and Solutions

One of the major issues that couples argue about and that also affects *how* couples argue, is time. That is one of the reasons I have found time to be such a useful focus in helping couples change. Consider again John and Tina, whose radically different paces created a polarizing pattern that precluded clear communication and left each feeling controlled by the other. This unrecognized temporal pattern was so powerful that they couldn't make headway on the explicit time problem they'd come to therapy to discuss—how to balance time together as a couple with time for John's son. And eventually, the solution to their problem was to create a new rhythm, a new time structure for when Tim visited them on weekends. Time issues underlie all the other common problems couples argue about, and changing couple time patterns is often the key to dissolving those problems.

When I tell people that I work with couples to help them solve their problems with time, they frequently say, "Oh, you mean how nobody has any time for relationships anymore?" For sure, if there's one common cry from couples today, it's "We have no time!" Partners are stretched to the max with demanding work schedules that are cranked up by technologies that link them to the workplace twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. The

ever-increasing work hours and the speeding up of our lives through technology over the past two decades have definitely challenged couples' abilities to synchronize their lives. When stressed couples sense that the work-life balance equation is impossible to solve, burnout sets in.

Burnout is a state of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress. It shows up as disengagement or loss of interest and motivation for a work role that one originally sought, reduced energy, feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, cynicism, resentment, and lowered self-worth and self-efficacy.¹⁶ Burnout damages not only partners' psychological and physical well-being, but by lowering productivity on the job, it affects the corporate bottom-line, and ultimately, the nation's economy.

But besides the time famine most often emphasized in the media, I've discovered that there are many other ways that couples come into conflict about time. Ever since I became a clinical psychologist and therapist, I've been struck by how many of the conflicts couples experience result from falling out of sync and out of rhythm. Because partners inevitably differ in at least one or more of the ways that they view time, prefer to use time, and organize their lives in time, I can safely say that all couples face time challenges.

Maybe it's my background as a conservatory-trained percussionist and my continued parallel life as a jazz drummer that especially tuned me in to the rhythms of relationships. After all, I'm the guy who sets the beat and helps the combo keep time together. I know that a jazz group can't swing together if they're not keeping time, if they don't have the same understanding of beat, tempo, and rhythm. And I see the same thing in couples—if they can't "get in the groove" together, nothing else seems to work well.

Or maybe it's partly my personal time challenges, juggling two busy careers as a psychologist and jazz drummer with being a husband and a father of two kids; my own imperfect attempts to balance fast-paced periods in my work and personal life with time for slowness, relaxation, and reflection; my own struggles to immerse fully in the present moment while still effectively planning my future, and while remembering to pause long enough to cherish and learn from my past.

Whatever led me to discover it, I've found that one of my most efficient, powerful therapeutic methods is to observe, reveal, and help couples change the ways they think about and utilize time.

Consider the following vignettes. All are real-life couples I worked with, couples for whom identifying and changing the time problems underlying their other conflicts (about money, intimacy, in-laws, and the like) was the key to improving their relationships.

Money Problems That Hide Time Problems

In my first session with Cindy and Jerry, I witnessed their constant conflicts about how much money to spend or save. At base, Cindy and Jerry's conflicts were just one outgrowth of a fundamental difference between their respective *time perspectives*—how much a person values and focuses on the past versus the present versus the future.

Cindy was a responsible and competent personnel manager in an advertising agency who grew up in a future-focused family in which every activity was carefully scheduled and planned weeks or months in advance. Finding this oppressively constraining, Cindy vowed to live her adult life making the most of the present moment. She invited friends over for impromptu dinner parties with just a day's notice (or less). She once decided on a whim to fly off for a short vacation to a distant city over a long weekend. She would pop into a new restaurant she'd just walked by rather than calling ahead for reservations. And although fiscally responsible by most standards, she believed it foolish to save everything for a future that might never come and preferred to spend a high percentage of her discretionary income on present pleasures and passions.

Her husband, Jerry, came from a family similar in some ways to Cindy's, with lots of regular routines, hard-working parents who scrimped and saved and planned in order to secure their future. But unlike Cindy, who had largely abandoned living for the future, Jerry was convinced that this was the only responsible and satisfying way to live. He preferred to plan social events and make restaurant reservations well in advance, plan vacations a year ahead, and carefully managed the couple's investments for long-term growth. He regarded Cindy's desire to "live for the present moment" as "flighty" and "irresponsible." She increasingly found him "uptight" and "anal," and complained that he was boring and unimaginative.

Pace Differences That Create Conflicts about Chores

On the surface, Mary-Lou and Bill were troubled by the frequency and intensity of their arguments over every aspect of maintaining the house. Bill took much longer to complete chores and fix-it tasks, while Mary-Lou started immediately and worked extremely rapidly. He saw her speediness as reflecting an attempt to get things done as quickly as possible, irrespective of the quality of her work; she regarded him as a tinkerer who dragged things out because he resented doing them. Although initially attracted to his laid-back style, over years of living together she became irritated

not only by his slower pace of completing chores, but by his slower pace of walking, eating, and talking. In turn, although at first he found her fast pace exciting and enlivening, now he complained of feeling constantly rushed by her.

Eroded Trust and Asynchronous Daily Rhythms

Roger, a corporate lawyer, and Tim, an interior designer, sought therapy with me for what they described as "trust issues." Tim had engaged in a number of casual affairs, all after Roger started working later. Their newly asynchronous schedules had led Tim to feel lonely. Although Roger was not against either of them occasionally having casual sexual encounters with others, Roger was devastated that Tim did so without telling him and while he was putting in longer hours at the office. Tim stated that he loved Roger and was quite committed, but complained that he got frustrated "waiting around" for Roger. Roger bitterly countered that he was the main breadwinner, and that if Tim worked a more demanding job, Tim would understand the pressure.

Mismatched Personal Timelines

Marcia and Fred, both academics, were out of sync in how they thought about the link between their present and their future. They had differences in what I call *life plan timelines*, one's personal chronology of an imagined or planned future.

Both in their late 30s, Marcia was now desperate to start a family, and she wanted Fred to "grow up," which meant to stop being a student and assume adult responsibilities. Fred, who had recently begun postdoctoral studies in his discipline, argued that if having children were so important to Marcia, she should have met someone earlier with whom to start a family. He angrily rejected her implication that he was depriving her of this experience. The more Marcia insisted on her vision of their joint timeline, the more Fred held to his current plans. Each partner infuriated the other. Deadlocked, Marcia and Fred turned to me, gazing imploringly for a solution.

Arguments about Time Allocation

Many couples argue about how to spend or divide their time. One couple I worked with struggled over how much time to spend on the weekend with in-laws versus just the two of them and their young son. She wanted to visit her traditional Italian-American family every Sunday, while he, desperate to leave behind that same traditional culture in which he also was raised,

thought Christmas and Easter were quite enough contact. He felt the visits with her parents got in the way of connecting with his son, whom he rarely saw during the work week. In contrast, she relished the opportunity to hand over child care and cooking to her mother once a week.

Struggles over Sequence: When to Do What

In yet another twist on time problems, a couple I consulted with argued about how to *sequence* activities over time. He preferred to make love before tackling the housework on a weekend morning, while she described feeling restless and distracted until all the chores were complete. They also argued about *when*—within a day, across the weeks, months, and year—to do a variety of things. When to wake up and go to bed (she was an early riser, he a night owl). When to take vacations (he preferred the winter, she, the summer). When to tackle the taxes (for her, as soon as the W-2's arrive, for him, in the last possible week). The only activity they seemed not to argue about was when to argue. With all these differences around when to do everything else, they argued all the time.

The Power of Punctuality

Another couple came to me in great distress, on the brink of divorce, because he felt so insulted whenever she was late (which was, by both their accounts, constantly). He was raised in New York City and tightly wound. She was raised in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and more laid back. He became anxious when not on time; she became anxious when she *was* on time (punctuality reminded her of her “snobby parents,” who tried to distinguish themselves from stereotypes about “lazy” Brazilians by being “superpunctual”).

Rhythm Problems That Lead to Intimacy Problems

Sunita and Bhanu sat at opposite ends of the long couch in my therapy office. They'd come to see me to set their marriage back on course. Bhanu fidgeted anxiously forward, his torso tightly folded over his knees and polished shoes. Sunita slouched with legs crossed at the ankles, head resting askew on a cushion, as she absently twirled a long strand of her jet-black hair. The couple looked discouraged and exhausted. Both had recently completed highly competitive residencies at prestigious New York City medical centers. Bhanu was on the fast track to a career in cardiology while Sunita was taking time off, turning down offer after offer for positions in pediatrics, wanting to “get off the treadmill for a little while.” The couple had married four years

earlier, and although Sunita and Bhanu were once madly in love, they now warily eyed one another. “I have no faith that he wants anything to do with me, really,” Sunita sighed, a distinct hint of bitterness in her exhaling breath.

He jumped, clearly injured by this assessment. “What are you talking about?” Bhanu said. “Haven't I been making an effort lately?”

“You mean, in the last week, since we've decided to come here?” she countered.

Bhanu simmered quietly, before responding, “You know, I am also lonely. I feel like you never want to touch me anymore.”

Sunita's eyes darted as she said, “When should I? When you come home and just sit like a vegetable on the couch until you pass out?”

He shrugged. She grimaced and turned away.

You don't have to be a professional therapist to see that Bhanu and Sunita were out of touch both physically and emotionally. Seated at opposite ends of the couch, never touching, they couldn't even make eye contact. Each felt unloved. They struggled with many of the most common couple problems: decreased intimacy, blocked communication, conflict about the in-laws, her resentment about the amount of time she spent on chores, his concerns about disparities in how much money each earned and spent. They also engaged in some common polarizing patterns: He expressed more positive emotions and hopefulness; she expressed more negative emotions and hopelessness. She overfunctioned and he underfunctioned in the area of planning enjoyable events for their leisure time. He tended to pursue while she withdrew in problem discussions.

But beneath these apparent problems in communication and intimacy—what therapists call “the presenting problems”—was the hidden time dimension of their relationship, their unique couple arrhythmia. As we talked further, I was quickly able to help them understand that while their operating rhythm worked for them professionally, it put a constant strain on their relationship. Few couples grasp the connection between time and love, and even fewer realize that this problem can be approached and solved.

To illustrate how I work with couples to solve their underlying problems with time, I'll describe how I helped Sunita and Bhanu. My first step was to draw their attention to the power of time in their personal lives. I aimed to highlight their sources of time pressure, their chronic state of couple arrhythmia, and the lack of reliable, protected time for togetherness on a daily and weekly basis. They had grossly underrated the obvious strain sustained from years of long hours of study and patient care. Both were from hard-working, high-achieving families, in which it was assumed that their lives would focus

on higher education and career. But with my encouragement, they reflected on how much relationship time they had done without in doggedly pursuing professional goals, and their mood softened.

It had also never occurred to Sunita and Bhanu how much their emotional distance was maintained and even worsened by their different times of going to bed and getting up (he early, she late on both ends of the day), the absence of an established time to reconnect at the end of the day, the absence of any rhythm of pleasurable activities on the weekend, his 24/7 accessibility by mobile phone to hospital staff and patients, as well as his constant accessibility to his ailing mother and two worried sisters.

Our unhappiness in a relationship may begin for reasons other than time. It may derive from negative reactions to the tone in our partner's voice when they criticize us. Or how our partner touches us (or doesn't) in the act of making love. Or how our partner talks to our parents or disciplines the kids, or scatters clothes all over the apartment and never picks them up. But the negative feelings launched by these issues may be sent into orbit by partners being temporally out of sync, because there's no time to talk about, repair, and resolve these issues, and because there is little reliable pleasurable time together to balance out the difficult moments. Like many couples, Bhanu and Sunita overrated the power of their initial attraction to keep them connected, neglected to repair the fabric of their love when it started to fray, and ignored the need to preserve pleasure time to buffer themselves against difficult periods.

Before Bhanu and Sunita left our first session, I gave them two homework assignments designed to jump start their couple rhythms. First, I asked them to create a nightly sequence designed to help each of them unwind from the day's pressures, to set aside as best they could the work responsibilities and the unpleasant emotions that accompany these, so that they could reconnect with less distraction and with renewed energy. I call this exercise the "decompression chamber," a metaphor meant to conjure up an image of a remedial tank used for deep-sea divers when they've changed pressure levels too quickly by speeding to the surface, risking illness or even death. The decompression chamber allows the diver to more gradually reduce the water and air pressure and adjust to being back out of the ocean's depths. Similarly, we often rush directly from the pressures of work outside or inside the home (including child care) into attempts at couple time. Bhanu and Sunita expected that they could readily chill and reconnect. But instead of chilling, they spilled stress left over from the day, turning what could have been enjoyable, healing time

together into just another night of irritation, disappointment, and lonely disconnection.

To prepare Sunita and Bhanu to try the decompression chamber over the next week, I asked them to tell each other what they most needed in order to slow down, relax, and transition into the rest of the evening. For a moment, they looked at each other blankly and then exploded in simultaneous laughter. "We have no idea!" she exclaimed, as he nodded vigorously in agreement. It was the first bit of levity and consensus to enter our meeting.

Like many couples, Sunita and Bhanu had not yet found a way to deal with periods of what I call sustained stressful situations—work difficulties or other life problems that are extremely unpleasant, often complicated, somewhat or largely out of our control, and not easy to change. Clearly, we had to find a way to balance Bhanu's need to talk about the stressful aspects of his work and his mother's health with a response to Sunita's understandable feelings of being saturated with his unremitting stress. So I suggested a time-based strategy I've found extremely useful for setting a boundary between couple time and these sustained stressful situations. While they would still "decompress" together each night, I recommended that they create a less frequent subrhythm for talking about Bhanu's ongoing stressors.

They agreed to talk about these once a week, barring some urgent new development. During other nightly decompression times, he could say something like, "Ah, you know, same old same old—no big headlines today." Bhanu also liked my suggestion that he try reporting every day on one positive thing that happened at work. He added that it might help him move into a better mood before talking with Sunita if he'd first spend 20 minutes riding the stationary bike that had been gathering dust in a corner of their bedroom for the last six months.

Having spelled out the elements and sequence of their nightly decompression chamber routine, I introduced their second homework assignment. On one weekend day or evening, they were to go somewhere in the city that neither had been before, and spend the time walking around and appreciating the sights, sounds, and smells together, but with one constraint: no talking. To reduce the risk that they might spoil the time by sliding into discussions about their problems, I stipulated that they could only communicate through hand gestures and facial expressions.

A week later Sunita and Bhanu returned, and things were much improved. They'd gone for a nature walk on a Sunday afternoon and had fun wordlessly pointing out special trees and guiding each other to sniff intoxicating flowers. And they'd managed to enact their decompression

chamber most nights, talking and relaxing together more than they had in years. Interestingly, talking less about his work and his mom's health problems seemed to galvanize Bhanu into action to make some changes. He started a more earnest search for another position and found a better specialist to treat his mom.

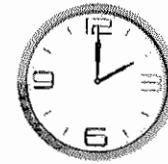
Having identified time as a major underlying source of their disconnection, and having demonstrated that some simple shifts in how they used time could have dramatic effects, over the next few weeks we examined their other temporal differences. His faster and her slower pace of walking, talking, and eating often led him to feel she was purposefully "dragging her heels," signaling that she was reluctant to connect with him. In turn, she felt his pace was just another way that he pushed her around. Exploring their initial attraction to one another when they met in their third year of medical school, pace differences figured prominently. Bhanu said he'd found her bright, beautiful, that she "really cared about making a difference for patients... and I liked that she was more laid back than me, she helped me relax."

In turn, Sunita found Bhanu brilliant yet "not stuck up or sexist like so many other male doctors, and incredibly energetic. It seemed like he could do things so quickly. I found that inspiring at times when I felt like giving up."

In subsequent weeks, they agreed to get their bedtimes and wake times in sync, especially on the weekends. They came to a compromise about how much time to spend on weekends with each other versus with in-laws (he had wanted to spend more time with his mother and sisters than she did). We examined their respective life plan timelines, and they discovered to their relief that their visions of the future were more similar than they'd feared, especially regarding when to start trying to have a child. In addition, by getting in sync in the now, they'd created a platform of positive feeling and trust that enabled them to step away from the painful events of the last few years and put these truly in the past. They'd also created satisfying rhythms that would carry them forward, like a river's steady current, into their shared and hope-filled future.

Time and Your Relationship

This book will help you rethink the way in which time creates problems in your intimate relationships and show you how to use time as a resource to make those relationships better. I'll reveal the many ways time functions as the hidden dimension in your relationships and offer you straightforward, creative solutions for deploying time to transform those relationships.



Time in Mind: Revealing and Balancing Your Basic Time Types

CHRIS AND SUSAN FOUGHT almost every day about the same thing: he needed to use his time effectively, to have something to show for practically every waking minute. He was up early, worked hard all day, and once home, after a short dinner, would often dive into books to improve his skills in computer programming and marketing as he hoped to create a software company. When he and Susan spent time together, he felt it important that they "make every minute count," and he always wanted to plan out their couple time so that they would get the most pleasure out of every moment. His attention to the clock and to making his and their time productive drove Susan nuts. In her time off from work as an assistant director of a successful art gallery where the pace often became stressful, she preferred yoga, meditation, and wandering around and exploring neighborhoods new to her—anything that would help her "stop time" and allow her to "float." Chris's approach to time made her feel tense, while Chris viewed Susan's approach to time as "wasteful and irresponsible." This difference about how to spend their time had created such stress that they were now considering a separation.

As I helped them to see, their dissimilar ideas about how to use their time were linked to extremely different, but potentially complementary and balancing, worldviews on the nature of time itself. For each of them, their strong endorsements of these different views were not abstract and intellectual but visceral and emotional. I understood this because from years of studying time in people's intimate relationships, I have learned