

**BUILDING A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP**

**PATRICIA J. POPE**

B.A. University of British Columbia, 1970  
Cert. Ed. University of British Columbia, 1972

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## Abstract

When couples come to counselling, they often do so because the behaviours that were once successful are no longer working for them. Frequently, these couples have little idea of what actually constitutes a healthy relationship because they have not had an appropriate model. They are often anxious to discover what a healthy relationship looks like.

This project has been designed to be used as a supplementary tool in couples' counselling. It is a series of exercises whose purpose it is to facilitate discussion during the process of couples counselling and to challenge client behaviours beyond the confines of the counselling session. The themes of communication and conflict form the basis of these exercises whose purpose is to provide relevant information about a healthy relationship as well as to give clients an opportunity for skill development and practice. The expectation that clients will regularly complete relevant homework assignments is implicit in the effective utilization of the communication exercises. Furthermore, an emphasis on changing behaviours and cognitions is critical to this process that actively engages clients in the process of their own growth. The exercises deal with topics such as communication skills, effective listening, boundary issues, intimacy and conflict resolution. The degree of client engagement and utility is linked directly to the relevance of the subject matter as well as to the competence and expertise of the counsellor in utilizing the materials.

The exercises were developed during counselling sessions with couples and were "tested" with these couples. What has emerged after a vigorous process of organization and reorganization is a series of 18 exercises that can be used by counsellors to facilitate and

enhance a counselling process whose goal is to teach clients the skills that will enable them to learn and maintain more positive patterns of behaviour. It must be stressed that the exercises represent a supplementary tool and that good client preparation is essential to both client engagement and relevance. Furthermore, they have been designed to identify and track small behavioural changes that will be immediately recognizable to the clients. Therefore, counsellor affirmation and celebration of small but significant behaviour change is an important element in the incorporation of the exercises into the counselling process. The reality that change can occur even in deeply entrenched relationship patterns is immensely empowering to clients. The role of the counsellor in guiding a process where couples are challenged to think and to act differently cannot be over-emphasized. The nature of the counsellor/client collaboration provides the energy and creativity that will drive the counselling process and maximize the impact of the communication exercises.

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## Introduction, Literature Review and Project Rationale

### Introduction

Effective counselling of couples is of critical importance and yet it is often intensely frustrating. It represents the point at which excellence in counselling skills and competence in counselling process collide with the painful realities of human communication and conflict. The triadic dynamic of couples' counselling renders it complex in nature, while the impact of counselling process and change is often intense and far-reaching.

It is clear that when couples come to counselling, they do so for a wide variety of reasons. Some couples come because, although they may have given up on the relationship, they want to be able to say that they've tried counselling. Others come hoping to enter an alliance with the counsellor for the purpose of "fixing" their partner. Still others come because a particular crisis has prompted them to do so. In our modern society, people are often advised and encouraged to seek counselling through the intervention of concerned friends and family.

The variety and strength of one's reasons for seeking counselling have a direct impact on one's chances of achieving a successful counselling outcome. When couples are motivated to seek counselling in order to improve their relationship, it is the responsibility of the counsellor to determine and identify exactly what the couple is expecting from the counselling process. At the same time, the counsellor must assess the willingness of his/her clients to engage in a process of change and growth. Therefore, the motivation to seek counselling and one's willingness to engage in the change process are

the foundation upon which one can begin to build a healthier and more satisfying relationship.

My experience with couples has convinced me that this foundation is essential in order to develop a good collaborative relationship and to begin to work towards mutually satisfying counselling outcomes. Although this does not guarantee success, it establishes a healthy pattern of accepting responsibility for past failures and a willingness to engage in a process of continuing accountability. This pattern is often unfamiliar and intimidating. When individuals realize that old patterns of behaviour are no longer working for them, they may begin to consider new and alternative behaviours. However, a counsellor must recognize that it is often difficult to leave the security of the familiar. It takes courage and commitment to the counselling process, as well as faith in the ability and competence of the counsellor to guide this process in a manner that is both clear and purposeful. When the counselling process is rendered transparent, both clients and counsellor are able to track changes, growth and setbacks as movement is made towards the articulated counselling goals. In my experience with couples counselling, the generic goal has been to work towards an improved and healthier relationship—one that is characterized by more honest communication and by the development of effective and creative strategies to resolve couple conflict. Thus communication and conflict have become the primary focus of my counselling interventions.

The context of my counselling practice has been a community-based Christian counselling agency whose mandate it is to provide a quality counselling service within the framework of fundamental Christian beliefs and values. However, the agency draws its clientele from far beyond the confines of the church community. Consequently, the

counsellor is expected to respect the unique belief system of the client and no attempt is made to proselytize nor to take advantage of a client's vulnerability. The spiritual dimension to health and healing is incorporated into the counselling process when the counsellor/client alliance assesses its usefulness in determining how to best serve the particular needs of the client. This flexibility allows for a spiritual component to counselling that is essentially client-driven.



## Literature Review

As I began to review relevant literature, it became clear that there is no paucity of resources that attempt to address relationship issues. Indeed, the self-help paradigm has successfully invaded the relationship market as couples actively seek both direction and strategies to enable them to develop and grow in this particular aspect of their often complex lives (Kaminer, 1992; Worthington, 1989).

The available literature, manuals and seminar programs are simply too numerous to document. Therefore, I have included the resources that deal specifically with themes of communication and conflict within a couple's relationship. I will assume that the skills, competencies and resiliencies identified as effective in these areas can and will be successfully transferred and applied to other relational concerns.

When couples seek counselling, their motivation to do so is frequently multifaceted. However, a common denominator in couples counselling is couples who come because the cognitive and behavioural patterns that were once successful in maintaining the relationship are no longer working for them. Therefore, couples often need to be challenged to both think and do something differently (O'Hanlon and Weiner-Davis, 1988). The focus of this project is to illuminate the path that couples take in engaging in the process of learning, re-learning and developing new skills. They must develop a vision to enable them to see themselves in new ways and to be empowered to view themselves as the primary agents of their own change process (Mahoney, 1991). Once the couple is actively engaged in the process of relationship exploration and the barriers to healthy growth have been identified, a counsellor is able to join with the couple in a collaborative partnership for the purpose of discovering innovative strategies that will

stimulate positive action and result in healthy change and growth (Jacobson and Christensen, 1996; Worthington, 1989).

The nature of a healthy relationship.

According to the fundamentalist Christian world view, a healthy relationship is one that is firmly grounded in one's personal relationship with God. Thus, the strength and resources required to develop and maintain a dynamic relationship can be discovered through the application of biblical truths and in God's intervention on behalf of the couple (Harley, 1986). The Bible states emphatically that there is a different set of needs for females than for males within a couple's relationship. This view is expanded through challenging men and women to identify these needs and to develop strategies that will enable them to successfully meet the relational needs of their partner (Chapman, 1992; Gray, 1992). Intimacy with God is seen as a model and goal for all human relationships. In the marriage relationship, the oneness and covenantal bonding is meant to reflect the oneness and unity of the Trinity itself. Within this framework, the purpose of the union is to glorify God by the quality of a relationship that is characterized by sacrificial love, exclusivity, commitment, sacrifice and discipline (Masterson and Masterson, 1999). A healthy relationship evolves as a couple engages in a process of continued change and growth that is the result of a conscious decision to channel a substantial amount of time and energy towards meeting the needs of each other.

A significant challenge to couples in a secular as well as in a Christian context is to maintain a dynamic equilibrium of reciprocity in the midst of the ongoing challenge and change of modern family life (Bradshaw, 1996). Since the forces that can sabotage a

couple's unity represent a continued threat, it is crucial that the relationship is not simply maintained but that it is continually changing and growing to meet the ongoing demands of a complex society and the dynamic and evolving needs of the family (Fisher, 1992; McGraw, 2000). Assuming responsibility for change in a relationship is a crucial step towards improving an already good relationship or reconnecting with a partner who, for a variety of reasons, has become emotionally remote (Kirshenbaum, 1998; Mahoney, 1991).

Psychologists have concluded that the need to feel loved is the primary human emotional need (Chapman, 1992; O'Neal, 1998). If indeed, at the heart of mankind's existence is the desire to be intimate and to be loved by another, a couple's relationship should provide the appropriate environment, motivation and opportunity to achieve this end (Harley, 1986; McGraw, 2000). To love someone demands a conscious and deliberate choice and as such, it demonstrates a conscious commitment to focus one's thoughts, feelings and actions towards the satisfaction of another (O'Hanlon and Hudson, 1996). It also involves a recognition of what is not working in a relationship or those elements within a relationship that are destructive and unhealthy (Egan, 1992). Attitudes towards verbal abuse and other dysfunctional patterns are beginning to change through the efforts of committed individuals who are prepared to recognize that these things not only harm individuals and families, but also our society as a whole. Marriage breakdown impacts all areas of the lives of the individuals involved. It has been said that the roots of a divorce are in the circumstances, hopes and expectations at the time of the marriage (Fisher, 1992).

For this reason, it is incumbent upon us as professionals to work towards bringing hope and stability to struggling couples through a process that provides support, encourages growth and stimulates the acquisition of healthier relational skills and behaviours (O'Hanlon and Hudson, 1996; Quick, 1994). For the purposes of this project, a healthy relationship is defined as one that is characterized by deep commitment, sacrificial love, reciprocity and a dynamic process of change, growth and challenge (Chapman, 1992; McGraw, 2000).

#### The development and maintenance of a healthy relationship.

A healthy relationship is characterized by a dynamic state of growth and development. Consequently, it requires tender and gentle nurturing as well as the appropriate environmental factors that will stimulate and sustain the necessary growth (McGraw, 2000; Worthington, 1989).

The commitment that is referred to in the previous section is often diluted in much of the popular literature of our day. The recovery movement and similar self-help paradigms emphasize the needs, thoughts and desires of the individual rather than focusing on the dynamic of a relationship (Evans, 1996; Kaminer, 1992). In such a therapeutic model, truth may become highly subjective to an individual whose central experience may be perceived as one of victimization. Furthermore, it is often difficult, indeed almost impossible, to move beyond the self to a place where the relationship is the focus of attention rather than the individuals who are involved in it. There is an inherent danger in a view that seems to value testifying as a substitute for thinking and where the label of victim may reflect resignation and an unwillingness to perceive one's life and his/her relationships in a different way (Kaminer, 1992; McGraw, 1999). Literature that

addresses specific problem areas in relationships seems singularly reluctant to offer either hope or solutions. Frequently, the focus of such efforts is a rather complex examination of the characteristics that an individual is likely to demonstrate if he/she has been the victim of a particular situation (Evans, 1996).

Whilst there is some benefit to naming the problem and studying its impact on an individual, there appears to be little potential for change or growth. Thus, a collective sense of futility in one's circumstance has become an unwitting symbol of the recovery movement (Kaminer, 1992; McGraw, 2000).

A different focus in dealing with relationship issues are workbooks and inventories that serve as diagnostic tools to assess a couple's weaknesses, strengths and potential growth areas. The emphasis is then directed towards developing new behaviours, acquiring specific strategies to address problem areas and improving and enhancing basic communication skills (ENRICH CANADA). The healthy relationship is one that encourages emotional closeness and open communication, mutual support and pride in one another's accomplishments, confronting problems together with courage and confidence and enjoying quality time together as well as making a tangible contribution to one's community (Bradshaw, 1996).

This relationship is developed and maintained through a couple's motivation to grow and develop and through their willingness to engage in the work that is necessary to effect positive change (Mahoney, 1991). The degree to which change may occur is in direct proportion to client motivation and the energy that they are prepared to harness and direct into improving and enhancing their relationship (Egan, 1984).

The specific needs of each person in the relationship must be identified and articulated so that the meeting of needs may become a realistic focus of the relationship (Harley, 1986; O'Neal, 1998). To this end, it is essential that couples not only determine what they want in a relationship, but also what each individual has to offer the other. This is particularly relevant in working with couples whose goals may be self-directed and egocentric. A lasting bond cannot be created unless each person is willing and prepared to consider the needs of his/her partner (Chapman, 1992; Lewis, 1963). Furthermore, any assumption that the needs of each partner will be similar is usually an erroneous one. On the contrary, the dynamics involved in developing a close emotional connection and in giving and receiving love are usually as diverse and as paradoxical as the individuals involved (Chapman, 1992; Masterson, 1999). Therefore, it becomes essential that each individual discover what he/she can do/say that will be most meaningful to his/her partner. This demands a continued commitment to the relationship and a willingness to take risks and to discover creative ways to love and cherish one's partner (Chapman, 1992; Gray, 1992; O'Hanlon and Hudson, 1995). However, the pay-off for one's efforts can bring immense satisfaction and can create a closer, more loving relationship in which each partner may be cherished, valued and affirmed (McGraw, 2000; Worthington, 1989).

While building on individual strengths and identifying and meeting one another's needs can enrich a couple's relationship, there are certain negative behaviours that can be guaranteed to sabotage it. In working with couples, it is often wise to be pro-active in identifying the potential "minefields" that may threaten relationship health and inhibit positive growth (Kirshenbaum, 1998; O'Neal, 1998). Couples must become aware of the

behaviours that can threaten to derail a healthy relationship—behaviours such as letting maintenance (of the relationship) slide, overt and continual criticism and put-downs, the chaos of daily pressures and business, breakdown in positive communication, physical and emotional exhaustion and toxic build-up from the past. Most couples that come to counselling need a solid, practical way to reframe their lives and their lifestyles in order to create a healthy relationship rather than to continue to live in such a way as to maintain and support a bad one (McGraw, 2000; Wolf, 1977; Worthington, 1989). Unfortunately, the reality is that most couples proceed into a relationship with ill-defined goals, skills and expectations. Change can only begin when a couple is prepared to recognize that the behaviours that once sustained the relationship are no longer working for them and that it will be necessary to discover and adopt new and more constructive behaviours (McGraw, 2000; O’Hanlon and Hudson, 1995). The strategy for rebuilding and maintaining a healthy relationship involves an honest assessment of the relationship, a recognition of the negative cognitions and behaviours that are sabotaging the relationship, a willingness to embrace healthier behaviours that will enhance couple closeness and a positive reconnection to your partner and commitment to the relationship (Smalley, 1988; Worthington, 1989).

In summary, it is clear that the dominant themes in relationship counselling reflect a commitment to change one’s actions as well as one’s thinking. Whilst Christian couples draw on faith in God as a source of strength and direction, other couples focus on rebuilding and relearning particular communication skills. Learning to meet the unique needs of one another, developing creative ways to demonstrate and receive love and embracing actions rather than simply pondering ideas are positive steps that will enable

couples to reconnect and will enhance their daily communication. A couple's commitment and motivation to the counselling process as well as their willingness to engage in the work that is necessary to effect positive change in their relationship are essential elements in achieving a successful counselling outcome. Couples must be prepared to adopt new behaviours—behaviours that will enhance the relationship through stimulating individual and relational growth. The challenge to look at themselves and their relationship differently is an ongoing one for couples. Goals specificity and the couple's commitment to these goals provide the motivation for healthy change and growth (Mahoney, 1991). Therefore, it is essential that a couple not only identify the characteristics of a healthy relationship but that they are willing to engage in the process of change that will move them towards that relationship. Clients will not be empowered by trying to escape unpleasant states of confusion or turmoil, but through learning to transform their suffering—in acquiring the tools that will enable them to mediate times of challenge, growth and uncertainty (Rico, 1991).



## Project Rationale

Based on an exploration of dominant themes, a review of relevant literature and my own personal experience of frustration in identifying appropriate resource tools for use in couples' counselling, I began to develop a series of exercises that would facilitate and support the work undertaken during counselling sessions. Prior to this process, I had attempted to incorporate particular sections of texts, manuals and workbooks into my counselling repertoire. Unfortunately, none of these resources proved to be particularly successful in capturing the interest of my clients and thereby engaging them in the counselling process. They seemed to suffer from a surfeit of words and concepts, abstract thoughts, lengthy theoretical explanations and irrelevant information. My clients required tools that were concise, relevant, practical and affordable—an appropriate catalyst towards putting into action what they had learned in the counselling sessions. The dynamic of learning and absorbing new information and appropriating innovative ideas had to be followed immediately by an opportunity for practice and skill development. As a beginning counsellor, it seemed logical to assume that my effectiveness and credibility in sessions would be enhanced through utilizing exercises that I had personally developed through a strenuous process of trial and error that had led me to a growing recognition of what worked in my particular client/counsellor dynamic. The exercises that are presented here have been successful in engaging clients in a therapeutic relationship that has driven them towards practical and observable change. In this model, it is essential that the clients assume responsibility for their behaviours and that they become willing to identify and address the problems in their lives. Thus successful counselling of couples, rather than

attempting to repair the relationship will re-engage the clients in a process of self-organization.

Prior to presenting the exercises, I must emphasize two points: First, these exercises speak primarily to the initiation and exploration stages of counselling process whose outcomes are that the client should be fully heard and understood and that client issues should be fully explored. Therefore, the series of exercises and worksheets that are included in this manual represent specific initiation and engagement strategies.

Secondly, the generic goal of couples counselling is to explore the relationship, identify the primary barriers to healthy growth and to introduce strategies that will enable the couple to overcome those barriers and to make significant and positive changes in the dynamics of the relationship. Given this definition, it seems clear that each exercise included in the manual represents an attempt to work towards this end. Prior to having clients engage in the exercises, I looked at each one carefully in the light of counselling outcomes and counselling goals. The exercises that have been included are consistent with respect to both outcomes and goals.

It must be emphasized that the exercises included have been used as a supplementary resource in counselling with couples. These clients (ten couples) represented one aspect of my student practicum experience. Their primary presenting issue was one of conflict in communication. The pattern that consistently emerged was one of a history of ineffective and negative communication styles that was characterized by ongoing tension, habitual conflict and frequent arguments.

Since it is clear that conflict and communication have a strategic impact on other areas of relationship, I decided to focus on communication and conflict issues for the

purposes of these exercises. I believe that if there is a significant improvement in positive and skilled communication, as well as a substantial reduction in conflict, the couple will become increasingly well-equipped to address other areas in the relationship. Although the exercises have been arranged in a particular sequence that seemed appropriate for most couples, each exercise is able to stand alone and it is not essential to adhere rigidly to the particular sequence nor for clients to complete all the exercises. Client utility, relevance and the particular agenda of a couple may impact the inclusion and sequence of the exercises. The couples engaged in these exercises participated in the counselling process once a week (for an hour session), for a period of 8-15 weeks. The exercises were introduced during the sessions and were often given to the clients to be completed as homework. On other occasions, the content was discussed completely within the session with an expectation put on the clients to apply the information during the following week. The material—whether it be in the form of questions or practical theory, was always reviewed at the beginning of the next session. Clients' questions pertaining to the exercises and worksheets were dealt with at that time. Throughout the counselling process, an attempt was made to introduce the materials into the daily dynamic of the relationship. It became increasingly obvious to me that information that had no immediate practical value to the clients was summarily rejected as useless and irrelevant. What is included in the manual represents those materials that have withstood the test of both client engagement and utility.

## Communication Exercises

### Relationship Realities and Couples' Growth Plan

#### Counsellor's notes.

Exercise 1 and Exercise 2 (APPENDIX A) have been designed to stimulate thought and discussion regarding the present state of the relationship. Exercise 1 answers the question “What does the relationship look like right now?” while Exercise 2 is a guide to help the couple to set realistic relationship goals. In defining and describing the characteristic of realistic goals, Exercise 2 enables the couple to identify specific growth areas and to frame a realistic and relevant growth plan. This plan must represent the articulated goals of the couple if it is to have an impact on the counselling process. Therefore, the couple must “own” this plan—it must make sense to them and it must be attainable and do-able with reference to their present life style.

It is recommended that the counsellor take about 20 minutes at the end of a session to review these two exercises in order to clarify terminology and to answer any questions. It is recommended that the counsellor suggest some examples of growth areas in order to stimulate the couple to begin to think in these terms. The couple will then complete these two exercises for homework before the next session and will be asked to bring the completed exercises to the next session. It is important to recognize that many couples will have had no experience in this type of activity. Therefore, the counsellor must not introduce these exercises prematurely, but rather following extensive discussion (at least 1-2 sessions) about the dynamics of the relationship and the process by which the relationship realities can be “reframed” in terms of a practical growth plan.

## Relationship Expectations

### Counsellor's notes.

Exercise 3 (APPENDIX B) is an assessment instrument that can be utilized to determine the expectations of each individual within a relationship. It not only speaks specifically to the manner in which the individual responds and reacts to others, but also to the perceived expectation that others have of that individual. The exploration process is one of identifying the relationship dynamics that have been adopted by each person in the relationship not only as they pertain to his/her partner but also with reference and relevance to other relationships.

It is recommended that the exercise be used at the beginning of a session as it serves to facilitate discussion of practical expectations within a relationship. Towards the end of the previous session, the counsellor will spend about 10 minutes explaining the concept of expectations with specific reference to the items on this list. Following the completion of the exercise as homework, the couple is encouraged to share and discuss their results with one another. Ideally, this discussion will be continued with the counsellor during the next counselling session. At this time he/she will begin to assist the couple in identifying areas of concern and to stimulate their thinking in developing practical strategies that will enable them to address some of these concerns. It is also essential that the counsellor emphasize how individual expectations can impact the relationship dynamic. At this point it is necessary to explore expectations that may be either unhealthy or unrealistic within the relationship as these factors have the potential to sabotage the relationship as well as the counselling process.

## Acquiring Good Listening Skills

### Counsellor's notes.

Couples are introduced to the idea of listening as a skill that must be learned, applied and practised in their daily lives. This exercise (APPENDIX C) is a worksheet that provides relevant information on “active” rather than “passive” listening. Clients will learn that good listening is a discipline and that it requires both commitment and focused effort. The most helpful way to utilize this information is to present it to clients during a session (i.e. working through it together) or to give it as a homework assignment. Since there are no questions, the clients are asked to review the materials with particular attention paid to those aspects of listening that present problems in their relationship. The exercise represents the introduction to a series of exercises that focus on the acquisition of healthy communication skills. Listening attentively and sensitively is a key step towards improved communication and it is important that clients recognize this and are prepared to assess their present level of competence and to commit themselves to developing expertise in this area.

If the exercise is given as homework it is suggested that 10 minutes be set aside at the end of the session to introduce the topic and to identify any difficulties in understanding the materials. Clients are encouraged to write brief comments that speak to their competence or weakness in this area. They may share and compare this information prior to the next session. During the next session, the counsellor and the couple will begin to identify areas of difficulty and to develop healthier behaviours that will stimulate skill development in the relevant areas.

The time taken to review and discuss the pertinent materials will vary according to the specific needs of the clients. However, since this area is often overlooked in addressing communication problems, it is recommended that at least 40 minutes be allotted in order to fully explore this area. Although it is often assumed that good listening skills are instinctive, this is simply not true. It is recommended that clients refer back to these listening skills in later sessions in order to assess their progress in this area. Although this is a subjective assessment, it is encouraging to clients to identify improvement in a specific area. This may be accomplished through a couple's recognition and affirmation of specific growth or through the input, acknowledgment and validation of the counsellor with respect to particular skill development.

Key point. In the process of working with couples, it is important to acknowledge each small step and to celebrate each victory.

## Healthy Communication Patterns

### Counsellor's notes.

The key element in this exercise (APPENDIX D) is that clients understand that communication (indeed even conflict) can occur in a respectful, calm and constructive manner. This involves treating one another with respect (making requests rather than insisting on demands or control) and beginning to develop a communication pattern that invites openness and honesty rather than provoking conflict, bitterness and resentment.

This particular exercise is used within the context of a counselling session and its purpose is to teach couples to discriminate between healthy and unhealthy communication patterns and to apply the healthy patterns to their present situation. There is space to include examples and it is suggested that these be drawn from the personal experience of the couple.

This exercise is essentially client-driven with the client providing the raw materials from which the counsellor is able to teach and demonstrate positive communication patterns. Through revisiting personal examples of controversy, clients are able to identify why and where the interaction went wrong and to suggest alternative ways of dealing with the situation. As a caveat, I would strongly suggest that it is important that the counsellor prevent clients from dwelling on negative aspects of the conflict but rather to utilize this exercise as a teaching resource that may lead to a healthier communication pattern.



## Setting Boundaries Within a Relationship

### Counsellor's notes.

The issue of boundaries surfaces frequently during the process of couples' counselling. Conflict arises when the personal boundaries of an individual are habitually violated by his/her partner. These negative and potentially abusive patterns of behaviour must be identified and dealt with firmly but sensitively. This worksheet (APPENDIX E) is introduced during the latter half of a counselling session. The information is explained briefly and clients are asked to complete the questions on the first page and to read through the rest of the material, with particular attention given to areas that may be relevant to their situations. The concept of boundaries (particularly within a couples' relationship) may be a foreign one. For this reason, it is important that the counsellor take the time to explain concepts and to answer questions before the clients are asked to complete the worksheet. The following session may be entirely devoted to a discussion of these boundary issues with an intentional focus on areas of particular concern. As is true in other areas, the counsellor must gauge his/her clients' need for attention in this area. For this reason, the time required to deal with this issue is essentially client-driven. It is recommended that the counsellor be continually open to the relevance of an issue to the clients even if the clients should initially discount its importance in their relationship.

In a relationship where there is evidence of severe verbal, physical or sexual abuse, it is often more appropriate for the counsellor to meet with the abusive partner on his/her own for several sessions prior to dealing with the issue within the couple's relationship.

The worksheet that deals with the intention to establish and maintain a particular boundary within a relationship has been included to stimulate client commitment to this area. If boundaries are a significant area of conflict, it is recommended that the counsellor address those issues thoroughly and advise their clients to fill in the statement of intent. Follow-up in later sessions is essential in order to track progress in this area. Clients often require assistance in establishing goals regarding boundary issues and the counsellor is encouraged to work closely with the couple to establish goals that are practical, realistic and that will enhance and facilitate the development of a healthier relationship.

Communication vs. Conflict  
and  
Working through Conflict

Counsellor's notes.

Both Exercise 7 (APPENDIX F) and Exercise 8 (APPENDIX G) should be completed as homework. Exercise 7 has been designed to identify the couples' present pattern of dealing with conflict. It is recommended that this exercise be introduced during the latter half of a counselling session with a thorough explanation regarding the content and questions. One of the critical elements in assigning worthwhile and thought-provoking homework assignments is to ensure that clients have a clear idea of what is expected of them in the assignment. It is also important to continually link each exercise to the broader goals of counselling process so that the clients are able to identify both process and purpose with each step.

The materials covered in these exercises are not only for the purpose of identifying present patterns that are no longer working for clients, but also for introducing and building new and healthier patterns of communication. The idea of changing behaviours is one that challenges the couple to become flexible, creative and vulnerable. However, once clients begin to recognize the "pay-off" of even the smallest change, they become well-motivated to continue in the process. They begin to realize that there has to be a significant shift both in thinking and in behaviour in order for enduring change to occur.

Clients are urged to take at least 25 minutes to complete Exercise 7. Exercise 8 may be completed either as homework or within the session under the supervision of the counsellor. Both exercises yield information that can provide a catalyst for open and

honest exploration within the counselling session. It is recommended that each exercise provide the basis for an entire session. However, this may fluctuate according to client need.

It is advised that Exercise 8 be completed several times during the counselling process in order to track change and progress in this area. The frequent re-visiting of the past weeks' experience provides a unique opportunity to practise what has been assimilated during the sessions. Clients are often encouraged to use Exercise 8 as a framework for resolving future conflict and to document this information for presenting during the next session.

Again, one must be warned that considerable firmness and direction is required by the counsellor in order to keep clients "on track" and to prevent them from digressing back to a particular unpleasant episode with its elements of judgment, blaming, criticism, etc.

Couple Conflict—10 Steps towards Resolution  
and  
Couple Negotiation

Counsellor's notes.

Exercises 9 (APPENDIX H) and 10 (APPENDIX I) are a continuation in the process of teaching clients specific communication skills and giving them the opportunity to practise these skills.

It is appropriate to incorporate the exercises within the context of the counselling session as the input of the counsellor can enhance the clients' understanding of the principles as well as facilitate a discussion of how to apply these principles to their daily lives. This is not to say that the clients lack the ability to process this information but rather that these particular exercises provide an excellent opportunity for the counsellor/client collaboration that can stimulate new ways of thinking and behaving. These new ways of thinking and behaving can be an effective catalyst towards positive and creative change.

The recommended approach to Exercise 9 is to identify a particular area of conflict and to use this example in beginning to learn to move through the resolution process. Learning occurs more rapidly and change is more enduring when practical and real issues can be identified, dealt with appropriately and resolved.

The role of the counsellor as guide and facilitator is an important one with respect to these two exercises. At this point in counselling, the emotionally-charged areas of conflict can often be effectively neutralized by the counsellor's emphasis on process rather than content. This is important as the purpose of the exercises is to teach both skill and process. Furthermore, if the clients are able to grasp process, they can become

empowered to apply it to the next controversial issue. For this reason, it is suggested that a full session be committed to this process as described in Exercises 9 and 10.

In dealing with areas of conflict, it is important that couples gain practice and experience in adopting healthier patterns of behaviour in order to break negative patterns that may have become a habitual part of their communication repertoire. Given that it often has taken years to develop and perfect negative patterns, it is not surprising that a substantial amount of time must be committed to the development of new patterns of behaviour.

## Meeting Each Other's Needs

### Counsellor's notes.

This exercise (APPENDIX J) is designed to identify needs within the relationship and to focus on strategies that will enhance a couple's ability to effectively communicate these needs. It represents a natural extension of the previous exercises on communication skills as it challenges a couple to harness their newly acquired skills in order to articulate, express and respond to their individual needs.

This exercise requires 5-10 minutes introduction and overview prior to being assigned as homework. It is a positive catalyst for discussion and for encouraging a couple to articulate their needs within a safe and caring environment. It should be reviewed during the following session with particular attention given to:

- a) the present ability of a couple to articulate their needs
- b) encouraging a couple to become increasingly motivated to better meet the needs of each other
- c) enhancing the ability of the couple to develop strategies that will enable them to communicate their needs with increased clarity, purpose and sensitivity.

## Increasing Intimacy

### Counsellor's notes.

This exercise (APPENDIX K) focuses specifically on creating and sustaining intimacy within a relationship. It encourages a couple to become vulnerable in articulating their intimacy needs and it challenges them to actively seek to fulfill the needs of each other. This focus on intimacy appears towards the end of the exercises as this may be a difficult area for exploration and inquiry. The counsellor is advised to work through this exercise with the clients in order to clarify concepts and to expand upon the material. Under the supervision and direction of the counsellor, these statements can often stimulate lively and energetic discussion that may lead to the implementation of practical, relevant and satisfying changes. These changes are then linked to the shared goals/outcomes of the counselling process and to the concerns documented in Exercises 1 and 2.

This exercise requires no preparation as it represents a collaborative process with the counsellor. The completion time may vary but it is important that the counsellor stay with those statements that most concern the clients rather than push through to completion. The Action Plan demands attention as it is the small changes that encourage a couple not only to continue in the counselling process but also to engage in the hard work that is necessary to accomplish major relationship changes.

Key Point. The willingness of a couple to take risks, to work hard in the process and to challenge and alter negative behaviours must be continually honoured, affirmed and celebrated by the counsellor.



## Communication and Forgiveness

### Counsellor's notes.

This exercise (APPENDIX L) illustrates how miscommunication or lack of communication may sabotage a relationship. People may feel hurt when important needs are not met. Therefore it is important that couples become skilled at articulating their needs in a manner that demonstrates consideration and clarity. It is almost impossible to achieve success in meeting needs that have not been adequately expressed.

This exercise provides an opportunity for couples to not only articulate their needs, but also to begin to deal with the hurt and bitterness that results when needs have not been met. A pattern of forgiveness must be set in place in order for couples to move towards a healthier and more satisfying relationship.

The timing of this exercise is critical. In terms of counsellor process, couples should have reached the point at which they are prepared and motivated to accept responsibility for past hurts and misunderstandings. It is essential that couples understand that forgiveness is not forgetting, but that it represents an opportunity to simultaneously embrace and be free of their past. Choosing to forgive is a conscious decision to make a choice for freedom—freedom from the resentment and bitterness that can threaten to control one's life and behaviours.

Clients often find this process difficult. For this reason, a counsellor is advised to allow the necessary time to deal with the topic in a comprehensive and sensitive manner. Thus, the exercise may take 30 minutes or it may remain an important focus for several sessions.

It is recommended that the exercise be introduced during the second half of a session (15-20 minutes) and subsequently assigned as homework. The following session is then utilized to debrief the exercise, to respond to questions and to identify practical examples in the lives of the clients.

Key Point. Forgiveness is essential in maintaining a healthy couples' relationship. Since it is both a process and a skill, forgiveness must be demonstrated and practised in real-life situations. Couples require instruction, encouragement and affirmation in developing a pattern of forgiveness that will be characterized by mutual respect and reciprocity.

## Dynamic Communication

### Counsellor's notes.

Good communication involves actions that are clear, purposeful and effective. In a healthy relationship, communication should not only be positive and encouraging but it should also challenge the other person to change and to grow. It is essential that couples learn to express their concerns and requests in a manner that demonstrates consideration and caring for their partner. These skills can only be acquired as a couple becomes aware of the pitfalls of blaming and judging and makes a conscious decision to avoid them. Furthermore, they must be continually encouraged to focus on recent events rather than getting bogged down by the past.

This exercise (APPENDIX M) is of particular importance for couples who are struggling to move beyond an unsatisfactory past. It is the responsibility of the counsellor to persevere in maintaining the focus of discussion on the present and to concentrate on recent events. Couples should be affirmed at each small stage of progress so that the possibility of change can become a growing reality.

It is recommended that this exercise be introduced and reviewed during the counselling session and that an entire session be devoted to clarification of the materials and responding to the clients' questions and concerns. The questions may then be assigned for homework to be reviewed at the beginning of the following session. The focus on specific actions can be greatly affirming to a couple who have become stuck in how they feel about the relationship. If they are able to do something differently and see positive and tangible results, there will be a gradual shift in their feelings and cognitions.

This is not only immensely motivating to the clients, but it also enables them to begin to take control and ownership over their own change process. Empowering clients to trust in their potential and in their ability to change creates the positive energy that is necessary to develop and maintain a healthier and more satisfying relationship.

## Nurturing a Healthy Relationship

### Counsellor's notes.

Exercise 15 (APPENDIX N) is a continuation of Exercise 14 as it expands upon the theme of demonstrating love and concern through particular actions that have meaning for the other person. The idea that one partner expresses love in actions that are significant to the other is an important one. It speaks clearly to the uniqueness of each individual and it challenges the individual to discover what his/her partner finds meaningful rather than what he/she would find meaningful. This is a learning process that demands absolute honesty and a willingness to articulate that which is most significant to an individual.

This exercise also emphasizes the importance of initiating actions that demonstrate one's care and concern rather than waiting passively for one's partner to do or say something different. The idea that a relationship can be maintained by a 50/50 mentality where each partner makes a 50% contribution to the relationship is shattered. Couples must realize that each partner must contribute much more than 50%, that each bears considerable responsibility for the relationship and that the relationship will grow and thrive only to the degree that each is willing to participate actively and enthusiastically. Furthermore, it is vital that couples recognize the importance of doing things differently when the present behaviours are no longer working for them. The collaborative counsellor-client alliance is the ideal environment in which creative and innovative alternative behaviours may be generated. The counsellor must continue to be fully with his/her clients as they struggle to replace old and unproductive behaviours with new and more satisfying ones.

It is recommended that this exercise be the focus of at least half a counselling session and that the discussion should stimulate some effective brainstorming of strategies and ideas that will empower the couple to transform the materials into viable relationship realities.

“Red Flags” in Relationships  
and  
Negative Messages that I Send Myself

Counsellor’s notes.

Now that we have established some parameters within which couples can begin to develop a healthy relationship, it is important to identify the pitfalls that they are likely to encounter in the process. “Red flags” represent negative behaviours that may persist despite a couple’s efforts to eliminate them. These behaviours have become habitual and the process of change necessitates an immense effort that combines an unwavering desire to change with the willingness to engage in the hard work that is essential if that change is to result in a lasting and enduring cognitive restructuring. In utilizing these exercises (APPENDIX O and APPENDIX P), the counsellor must be guided by the particular needs and issues that the client brings to the sessions. If the counsellor recognizes that this material is particularly relevant to his/her clients, it is recommended that at least one session be taken to specifically address these particular issues. For example, verbal abuse can often be present even as change is occurring. In this situation, it is crucial that clients be made aware of the problem and that they recognize its potential to sabotage the development of a healthier relationship. Clients and counsellors should work together to discover creative strategies that can be set in place to minimize any difficulties. However, it is important that clients not become discouraged in this process and that even the smallest positive change be affirmed and celebrated.

Exercise 17 (APPENDIX P) focuses on the individual who struggles with issues of acceptance and low self-esteem. These issues can profoundly impact the couple’s relationship and can threaten to sabotage a process of healthy change and growth.

Therefore, it is extremely important to confront these issues and to challenge the individual to think and to act differently. If the problem is deeply-rooted, it may be advisable for the counsellor to spend time alone with an individual--exploring the issues and developing strategies that will begin to bring about healthy changes in both perceptions and behaviours. Although it is possible that this exercise might require only cursory attention, the reality is that issues of self-esteem often surface during the process of couples counselling. They must be dealt with in a manner that is not only direct and confrontational, but also sensitive and respectful. Since the amount of time devoted to the exercise is essentially client-driven, it is crucial that the counsellor accurately discern client need.



## A Healthy Relationship Checklist

### Counsellor's notes.

This exercise (APPENDIX Q) offers a general assessment of relationship strengths and weaknesses and identifies areas that require additional growth and development. In terms of counselling process, the completion of this exercise at the termination of counselling can often be an affirmation of the progress that has been made and an encouragement for the couple to continue diligently in that process. It is recommended that this exercise be completed during the last session as part of the collaborative counsellor/client evaluation and assessment of the counselling sessions. It is important that clients be encouraged to continue in the process of developing and maintaining a healthy relationship once they leave the counselling office. If the counselling process has been successful, clients will be well-equipped with the tools, resources and strategies that will enable them to continue to work together towards building a relationship that is strong, resilient and open to positive change.

## Reflective Critique of the Exercises

In critiquing these exercises, it must be acknowledged that their efficacy is largely dependent on the specific counselling skills demonstrated by the counsellor. Competence and expertise in the generic counselling skills as well as experience in the field will greatly enhance the impact and relevance of the exercises. In my experience as a beginning counsellor, I have become increasingly aware of my own growth process and the challenge to continue to hone my counselling skills as well as to improve and revise these particular exercises. It has also become quite clear that an exercise that generates active participation and energy in one couple may seem irrelevant to another.

As I have worked with couples during the past seven months, I have assimilated not only an increased competence in counselling skills, but also a recognition and appreciation of the individual differences amongst my clientele. Although this may seem rather obvious, it was an epiphany (of sorts) for me to realize that each couple not only brings a different agenda to the table, but also that there are significant discrepancies in their innate strengths and resources. Therefore, couples will approach the exercises according to their own personal agenda for change, their personal strengths and weaknesses, their willingness to change and grow and the present state of their relationship. It requires particular skill to identify and understand this dynamic as well as to develop the insight to deal with each couple as they present for counselling. Understanding whether or not the counselling process is being threatened by counsellor incompetence or by client resistance is extremely important. In terms of these exercises, it was important to recognize these factors. Consequently, the exercises have been subjected to a vigorous process of re-organization and re-evaluation.

In assessing each of the exercises I considered the client degree of engagement as well as the client perception of utility. Therefore, this is a subjective interpretation that speaks to the following questions:

1. Did the clients complete the exercise?
2. What did the clients do with the exercise?
3. Was the exercise consistent with the generic counselling outcomes and with the specific goals of counselling?
4. Was the exercise clear, relevant and capable of being completed within a reasonable time frame?
5. Did the exercise have personal relevance to the clients?
6. Did the exercise succeed in facilitating and enhancing open and honest communication between the clients and within the framework of the counselling session?
7. What were the strengths and limitations of the exercise?

Exercises 1 and 2 were included not only to initiate the counselling process through actively engaging the couple in an exploration of their relationship, but also to enable me to gain insight into the specific dynamics of the relationship. The data gathered allowed me to begin a process of collaboration with my clients to determine focus and direction, and to set realistic goals for the counselling process. It also enhanced my ability to identify areas of growth, strength and harmony in the relationship as well as those of conflict, dissonance and miscommunication. The exercises functioned as an efficient catalyst towards an honest exploration of the relationship, generated the clients' interest and participation in the counselling process and immersed them immediately in the hard

work that is necessary to promote change and to generate strategies that will move them towards a healthier and more satisfying relationship.

In critiquing these exercises, it is important to assess the degree of client input and energy in order to predict client engagement. Building on that information, the counsellor can then adopt the appropriate measures to encourage/affirm the clients in this process. If clients feel that their contribution is valued and necessary towards achieving a positive counselling outcome, they will become empowered to assume partial ownership of the process. It was essential that I focus continually on honouring and respecting the contribution of my clients to ensure that their concerns were fully heard and understood.

My clients became actively engaged in completing both these exercises. However, this occurred following a thorough explanation of the exercise terminology and expectations, as well as the assurance that weakness in some areas would not preclude success in the counselling process. Continued affirmation and encouragement were necessary to enable couples to focus on their shared concerns and to articulate potential growth goals. The explanation regarding realistic goals was extremely helpful to clients as it facilitated a process of goal-setting that involved setting priorities and making healthy growth choices. Through completing the exercises, clients became part of the process of change rather than being, as one client put it, “just the problem.” This was very encouraging and empowering to clients to see their input, suggestions and ideas transformed into clear and relevant process goals. The effectiveness of the exercise was dependent not only on the expertise of the counsellor to engage the clients but also on the clients’ willingness to participate fully in the process. Client resistance to change along with inappropriate and selfish motivations to seek counselling sabotaged the impact of

these exercises. This was discouraging and demoralizing. However, with one resistant couple, I was able to meet individually with one partner to explore his particular concerns with the result that he became willing to assume some responsibility for the state of the relationship and to consider the possibility of personal change and growth. Clients were encouraged by the idea that they could do something differently right at the outset of counselling. Although clients often came into counselling with a sense of inadequacy and trepidation, the energy generated through the initial exercises often carried them forward with a renewed hope for change and positive growth.

Exercises 5 through to 8 (Communication, Boundaries, Communication and Conflict) were also effective in challenging and enabling clients to become fully involved in the counselling process and in accepting responsibility for their relationship. Communication breakdown, boundary violations and conflict resolution were common themes that had brought clients to counselling. Driven by these issues and fuelled by a desire to improve the present situation, clients are prepared to engage enthusiastically in these exercises. However, this is not to say that the vigour of the involvement was always positive. Indeed, it was a considerable challenge to direct the discussion towards what could be done rather than back to what had been done and to whom. The client pattern of apportioning blame and lobbying for my advocacy in the conflict was not uncommon. Therefore, it became an ongoing challenge to establish firm guidelines for appropriate client behaviour during the sessions as well as to maintain neutrality and objectivity as a counsellor. As I became increasingly comfortable and competent in driving the process of couples counselling, the exercises acquired greater relevance to the clients.

It should also be noted that a clear and comprehensive explanation of the exercises had a huge impact not only on the efficacy and utility of the exercise, but also on client engagement and participation in the process.

In summary, it seems clear that enthusiastic client engagement is essential to realize a successful counselling outcome. These exercises provided an opportunity for clients to participate freely in this process within an environment of mutual trust and respect that had been established at the onset of counselling. However, it has to be emphasized that this atmosphere of trust must be stringently maintained and protected during the counselling sessions. The burden of this responsibility falls squarely on the counsellor whose credibility and efficacy is dependent on his/her ability to maintain this equilibrium. The tendency to defend oneself and to blame the other has often become a well-established pattern in a couple's relationship. The challenge to confront the couple and to change destructive patterns of behaviour form the basis of the exercises. These emotionally-charged issues must be faced with determination, courage, wisdom and sensitivity by both counsellor and clients. Each must be heard as they begin to grapple with behaviours that may have become habitual and demoralizing.

If the counsellor is able to assume ownership of the counselling process, he/she will be able to lead the clients not only towards an understanding of the issues that define their relationship, but also into a process of strategizing that will result in healthier and more satisfying behaviours.

Exercise 3 (Relationship Expectations) provided an opportunity for couples to begin to articulate and acknowledge the expectations that they have of themselves and of others. The efficacy of the exercise depends on the honesty of client response and the

discussion of its content. Clients were prepared to complete this exercise but required some assistance in applying the expectations to the dynamics of their particular relationship. A comparison/contrast of each partner's expectations is essential if the exercise is to have an impact on the counselling process. Obvious discrepancies need to be articulated and explored. Clients saw the value of the exercise in discovering the inconsistencies in their expectations of themselves and of their partner. This provided an effective catalyst for an exploration of those expectations that might be unrealistic or unhealthy with respect to the individual and/or the relationship. Frequently, clients reported that they had just become aware of an expectation that their partner had of the relationship. Obviously, it is difficult to meet an expectation that is hidden or unarticulated. Therefore, this exercise seemed to have particular relevance for couples who had not been communicating relational or personal expectations—possibly because they feared rejection or ridicule. This exercise provided a tool that enabled clients to get past this resistance. The exercise also provided a safe environment in which couples were given an opportunity to affirm and encourage one another. One gentleman said to me at the close of this session: “We need to communicate like this more often . . . and not just here in your office.”

As in all exercises, it was necessary to gauge the level of client engagement and/or relevance and allow adequate time to deal appropriately with the materials. The limitations of Exercise 3 seemed to be in its relevance to the particular couple and in that couples' willingness and desire to engage in a discussion that demanded a conscious decision to become open and vulnerable in the process of exploring both individual and relational dynamics. These limitations also apply to Exercises 6, 7, 11 and 12

(Boundaries, Communication vs. Conflict, Meeting Needs and Increasing Intimacy)

whose subject matter is emotionally-charged and value-laden. It is challenging to confront couples with the realities of their behaviours in a manner that does not suggest judgment and condemnation. In my experience with these exercises, I attempted not only to maintain an atmosphere of mutual respect but also to be honest, directive and inoffensive. It was also important to utilize these exercises to challenge inappropriate behaviours, to name these behaviours, to have the client(s) acknowledge them and to commit them to a process of significant change. Since most individuals are uncomfortable with change, I found this to be a difficult and painful process. The value of these exercises is in their potential to stimulate honest responses that will enable clients to begin a process that identifies key issues, encourages them to assume ownership of these issues and instills hope towards achieving healthy solutions and positive change.

Client willingness to be honest and transparent is enhanced not only by a desire to change and grow but also by the counsellor's ability to be transparent in the counselling process. Creating an environment that fosters openness whilst guarding client safety is an ongoing challenge.

The inclusion of Exercise 4 (Learning Good Listening Skills) is significant in couples' counselling. Indeed, it is often obvious right at the outset of counselling that clients will have little success in resolving relational issues until they have developed some expertise in listening to one another.

This exercise was initially greeted with some reluctance and resistance by my clients. Competence in listening skills was assumed by most individuals. However, as we worked together through the materials, clients began to realize that they often had much



to learn in this area. Furthermore, those individuals who thought they were doing an adequate job in their listening were frequently challenged by their partners as to the focus, sincerity and depth of their skill and attention. In discussion with clients, I realized that they needed to identify those aspects of listening that had blocked open and healthy communication. If one partner felt neither heard nor understood, further efforts at communication were often futile.

Couples were able to not only identify and recognize their weaknesses, but also to begin to formulate strategies that would lead to improvement and growth. The opportunity to establish some small but significant changes encouraged and affirmed them in their willingness to participate fully and to promote positive change in the relationship. The key to Exercise 4's relevance and impact on clients was in my ability to identify those areas that were of practical concern. The exercise's main limitation was that it did not involve the client in responding to questions but rather in the process of identifying particular behaviours. Therefore, its impact was primarily dependent on the skill of the counsellor in engaging the couple and stressing the relevance of listening skills in the communication dynamic of the relationship. Similar skill-building and development was encouraged through completing Exercises 5 (Communication), 6 (Boundaries), 7 and 8 (Communication and Conflict) and Exercise 9 (Conflict Resolution).

Couples often articulate a desire to do things better but feel that they are ill-equipped for the task at hand. A counselling process that harnesses a client's strengths and resources, taps into his/her motivation to change and grow and utilizes his/her

willingness to acquire new behaviours as an opportunity to teach the skills that will facilitate growth, is a potent one.

During my brief time in counselling practice with couples, I have had the privilege to teach communication skills that have enabled clients to implement significant changes both in their cognitions and in their behaviours. I have been humbled by their courage and determination in this process.

The success of the degree of client engagement and participation in couples counselling can be attributed to client willingness to identify both negative and positive patterns of behaviour as well as to the expertise of the counsellor to facilitate client communication and to initiate the exploration of issues that may be particularly sensitive and deeply ingrained within the repertoire of the clients.

Exercises 5 (Communication), 7 (Communication and Conflict) and 8 (Working through Conflict) are primarily client-driven with respect to specific content as couples are urged to provide the data from which various communication patterns may be identified and explored. An honest appraisal of existing patterns—both positive and negative—will give couples a springboard from which to generate healthier behaviours that will enhance their relationship and lead to healthy change and growth.

It has been my experience that the counsellor must be extremely disciplined in leading this discussion towards a positive outcome rather than letting it degenerate into some sort of justification for apportioning blame and guilt. Therefore, in critiquing these exercises, it would be reasonable to conclude that its open-endedness may not only stimulate honest investigation and challenge to positive growth but may also threaten to immerse the clients in an unhealthy obsession with past behaviours. It is the

responsibility of the counsellor to be vigilant in his/her use of the exercises and to engage the clients in a highly focused and directive manner. Clients readily engaged in these exercises and were willing to describe various patterns of communication. The challenge for me has been to facilitate the development of healthier couple communication patterns through leading the clients in utilizing their creativity and resources to discover practical ways that they can improve and grow. Thus, these exercises may be immensely empowering to clients if they are able to seize the opportunity to take control of their relationship and to begin to improve it in small but significant ways.

Exercises 9 (Couple Conflict), 10 (Couple Negotiation), 12 (Increasing Intimacy)-13 (Communication and Forgiveness) deal with areas that may provoke significant stress and as such have the potential to threaten the development of a healthy relationship. In my counselling practice, I have been impressed by the willingness of my clients to confront these issues. My challenge has been to guide the process through which clients are able to recognize and eliminate negative behaviours in order to embrace and assimilate healthier behaviours. The exercises have been an effective tool for isolating and identifying the present behaviours that is particularly powerful because the clients must name the behaviours.

Exercise 13 (Communication and Forgiveness) was included as a teaching tool as well as a tangible reminder that patterns of forgiveness must become an ongoing dynamic in a couple's relationship. The impact of this exercise is in its connection to the couple's willingness to speak honestly about their relationship. The reality of forgiveness within the context of the relationship presents a far greater challenge than its theoretical concept. Putting theory into practice presents an ongoing challenge to both clients and counsellor.

Exercises 14 (Dynamic Communication) and 15 (Nurturing a Healthy Relationship) speak directly to the challenge of doing something differently within the relationship. They assume client knowledge, awareness and skill development and are demanding a specific change in client behaviour. It is difficult to assess the effectiveness of these exercises as client acquiescence and participation during counselling sessions does not guarantee a change in life behaviours. However, in my counselling experience, I have utilized role-playing to give clients an opportunity to practise the behaviours. The lasting impact is realized in the client's home situation and may be reflected and verbalized during future sessions. Clients often appreciate an opportunity to do something differently rather than attempting to change their thinking. I have frequently heard the imperative: "Tell us what to do" and it gives me a sense of hope for that couple. The couple who is not prepared to engage in the hard work involved in doing things differently does not benefit from couples' counselling. I have sent several couples home to ponder this truth and two did not return. I have learned that while this is very discouraging, it does not necessarily represent an assault on my counselling competency and expertise.

Exercises 16 (Red Flags) and 17 (Negative Messages) speak directly to particular issues that may/may not be germane to a couple. Therefore, they must be considered and critiqued with respect to their particular relevance and client utility. I learned this through including these exercises in all couples counselling until I realized the obvious truth that when a particular exercise has no significance for a couple, they will neither complete it satisfactorily nor will they be prepared to engage in a discussion of that topic. However, during the sessions with new couples, I began to ascertain the value of including or not

including these exercises. Indeed, it has been my experience that when these topics were relevant to the couple, they participated both in the completion of the exercise and in the following discussion with considerable vigour and enthusiasm. In other words, when these issues are timely for a particular couple, there is much that can be discussed, taught and assimilated. It is important that issues of low self-esteem, physical and verbal abuse and codependency be addressed at some point during the counselling process. If the counsellor has not yet done so, these exercises may provide an opportunity for discussion and exploration of these issues.

During the sessions in which I used these exercises, I encountered some client resistance that was demonstrated in an unwillingness to share openly and honestly. At this point, I must reiterate what I have already stated regarding such controversial issues—that the counselling environment ought to be a safe and comfortable one and that the counsellor maintain his/her emphasis on dealing firmly, yet sensitively, with these topics.

Exercise 18 (Healthy Relationship Checklist) has been included as the last in this sequence of exercises. It could also be used effectively at the beginning of counselling to facilitate the counsellor's exploration and assessment of the present state of the relationship. Clients were able to complete the exercise without any hesitation and they were eager to discover the responses of their partners. The one caveat that I would suggest when using this exercise would be that the counsellor be prepared to reassure and affirm a couple if all the scores should be low ones. This is particularly relevant if the exercise is completed at the onset of counselling when there is often much work to be accomplished. However, I have discovered that a comparison of a couple's responses at

the onset of counselling with those at the completion of a series of counselling sessions can be encouraging and empowering to clients. The exercise is a clear representation of what a healthy relationship looks like and, as such, is a useful resource and relationship goal for a couple.

### Summary/Conclusion

It is a tragic reality that many couples have neither a useful nor healthy model for their relationship. In my counselling experience, I have met many couples who are longing to find out what a healthy relationship looks like and what they can do to move towards it. The concept of illustrating a healthy relationship has been the motivating force that has driven and fueled my search for appropriate resource tools. I have developed this sequence of communication exercises as a supplementary resource that will facilitate couples in moving towards a healthier and more fulfilling relationship. Through engaging in these exercises, clients were not only able to identify areas of concern but also to gain competence and expertise in addressing those issues. The generic stages of the counselling process—exploring relationships and issues, identifying barriers to healthy growth and developing strategies that will facilitate and enhance positive change—have been realized through the conscientious integration of the materials in these exercises into the lives of couples.

Furthermore, it has been my intent to produce a resource that would immediately engage clients not only through its relevance to couple concerns, but also in a format that was clear and concise. Although preparation during counselling sessions was a key element in the successful completion of an exercise, the exercises themselves were presented in a way that was straightforward and arranged sequentially in what seemed to be a natural and logical progression. Clients were motivated to complete the exercises for homework and eager to share the results during the following sessions.

The emphasis on communication and conflict was timely, relevant and appropriate. It was a challenge to keep couples on task and to create additional

opportunities for demonstration and practice of communication skills. I found it intriguing that while there were regular complaints about my relentless pursuit of structured, weekly homework assignments, clients appeared rather disappointed on the occasional week when there was no such assignment. Homework had become an opportunity for ongoing client engagement, skill practice and development and an ongoing expectation both of counsellor and clients. The appropriate and conscientious completion of homework became a reference point from which to identify small but significant changes—both in behaviour and in cognitions. Healthy changes were affirmed and celebrated during counselling sessions. The energy that couples brought to the counselling sessions not only emphasized their engagement in the process but enhanced the process of strategizing and generating new behaviours.

The limitations of the exercises took the form of client resistance, the perceived irrelevance or relevance of a particular issue and the inexperience of the counsellor. My learning curve during the time that I have utilized these exercises has been a steep one. As I have gained in competence and expertise in guiding counselling process, my clients have made significant and identifiable progress in their patterns of communication. This collaborative learning was immensely affirming to all participants in the counselling process.

In encouraging couples, I found it helpful to focus initially on 2-3 areas in order to begin the process of identifying negative behaviours, discovering alternative behaviours and implementing strategies that would result in change and growth. Healthy change was acknowledged at each stage and clients were encouraged to identify its value and to celebrate each small victory. When change became a reality rather than just a possibility,



the tremendous hope and energy that was generated could be harnessed and directed towards the next stage of the process.

The termination of a couple's counselling should not represent the end of a process of growth development and change. A relationship must continue to be a dynamic entity in a world that is characterized by constant change and in which a couple may find themselves continually stretched and challenged. It is a counsellor's responsibility to prepare a couple for that change—not only as it affects their daily lives but also as it impacts their connection to one another.

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## APPENDIX A

Exercise 1: Relationship RealitiesInstructions:

In the list below, examine each of the ten areas of your relationship in terms of your present reality. Evaluate yourself in each area with a number from 1 to 10 (with 1 representing a very low score and 10 representing a very high score)..

|   | Score |
|---|-------|
| 1. Shared goals and values                  | _____ |
| 2. Commitment to the relationship           | _____ |
| 3. Communication skills                     | _____ |
| 4. Conflict resolution                      | _____ |
| 5. Expression of appreciation and affection | _____ |
| 6. Agreement on the raising of children     | _____ |
| 7. Team work                                | _____ |
| 8. Sexual intimacy and satisfaction         | _____ |
| 9. Finances                                 | _____ |
| 10. Decision making                         | _____ |

Action Plan.

When you have finished the list, compare your scores. If you have different scores in some items, try to determine why this is so. If you have similar scores, but low scores in some areas, don't be discouraged. This indicates that you have some things to work on but you are focused in the same direction. This is encouraging because you can then concentrate your efforts and energy in particular areas.

## Exercise 2: Couples' Growth Plan

### Background Information:

Realistic goals are those that:

- a) make sense because they lead to growth and a healthier relationship
- b) make life less chaotic and stressful
- c) have an immediate "pay-off" to both individuals
- d) address specific issues
- e) will be attainable within a reasonable time frame.

### Instructions:

Working together, look at your relationship realities and identify 6 areas in which you would like to grow as a couple. Set some realistic goals for growth.

### Action Plan:

We would like to grow in the following areas:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

### Key Point:

It is important to agree on the goals that you would like to pursue and to arrange these shared goals in order of their importance to you.

## APPENDIX B

Exercise 3: Relationship ExpectationsInstructions:

Put a “Yes” if the expectation applies to you and a “No” if it does not. Put an “S” for sometimes if it applies some of the time..

- 1) \_\_\_\_\_ I must meet everyone’s needs.
- 2) \_\_\_\_\_ I should protect the people in my world from getting hurt.
- 3) \_\_\_\_\_ I must win the approval of most people.
- 4) \_\_\_\_\_ I must not let anyone down.
- 5) \_\_\_\_\_ I shouldn’t have to be perfect.
- 6) \_\_\_\_\_ Nobody should get angry with me.
- 7) \_\_\_\_\_ Other people seem helpless and they can’t do anything without me.
- 8) \_\_\_\_\_ Other people are responsible for their own lives and I should let them  
get on with it.
- 9) \_\_\_\_\_ Other people should meet all my needs.
- 10) \_\_\_\_\_ If a friend gets angry with me, it should not be the end of our relationship.
- 11) \_\_\_\_\_ The expectations that others have of me are always right.
- 12) \_\_\_\_\_ My opinions have equal importance to those of others.

Action Plan:

Discuss how you will begin to replace unhealthy and unrealistic expectations with more appropriate ones.

## APPENDIX C

Exercise 4: Acquiring Good Listening SkillsBackground Information:

1. Develop good *attending* skills, i.e. eye contact, body language, open posture, relaxed manner, eliminating distractions, communicating warmth. Focus on the individual with genuine caring so that they will feel valued and safe.
2. Develop a manner that is relaxed, open and unhurried. People will respond positively to a person who seems to have the time and energy to focus on them.
3. Hear what is being said and what is not being said. Look for clues such as tone of voice, inflection or volume that express feelings and thoughts that may not have been verbalized. It is important to reflect these back to your partner. This will inspire confidence and encourage a sense of being understood and accepted.
4. Listen with *empathy*, taking great care to discern how your partner is feeling as well as to understand the specific content that is being communicated. Be encouraging and supportive.
5. Listen with *understanding* and *without condemnation*. Identify with what the person is going through and accept his/her concerns and feelings with grace and respect. Good listeners show respect for the other person, even when they do not agree with what is being said. Resist the impulse to blame, criticize, judge, negate or analyze.



6. Listen patiently through periods of *silence*, but also develop wisdom in asking questions that might clarify the situation. Reflect on you have heard in order to communicate that you fully understand what has been said.
7. It is important to identify the real concern, rather than probing for ideas that may be interesting but irrelevant. Be patient and resist the temptation to share what you would do in the situation. This shifts the focus away from your partner.
8. Always respect *confidentiality*.
9. Forget about yourself. What is important is your commitment to your partner and this must be the focus of your energy.
10. Regularly practise good listening skills and develop a habit of paying attention.  
Effective listening requires lots of energy, discipline, hard work and practice...but it will “pay off”.

Action Plan:

Select one or two of these areas to practise during the following week. Give one another regular and constructive feedback on your partner’s progress. To determine some sense of your partner’s listening skills, ask yourself if you feel fully heard. Continue to focus on these skills as you move through the next exercises.

## APPENDIX D

Exercise 5: Healthy Communication PatternsBackground Information:

Communicating feelings (without hurting someone else)

When you ....

It makes me feel like ....

What I need is .... What I'd like is ....

Would you ....

Could you ....

Action Plan:

Think of something that you would like to communicate with your partner and frame it in terms of the above pattern of making requests rather than insisting on demands. Try and incorporate this pattern during the following week and take time to discuss this with your partner. It is possible to communicate anger or frustration without hurting or insulting an individual.

Types of Communication

Type A

- ◆ Passing on information with little emotion
- ◆ The sociable conversation that goes on most of the time (this is emotionally neutral conversation)

Examples:

#### Type B

- ◆ Trying to dominate or manipulate the other person.
- ◆ Couples may use it to blame, control, demean each other.
- ◆ This is used to blame or control the other person and it usually puts him/her on the defensive.

Examples:

#### Type C

- ◆ Rational, diagnosing, analyzing.
- ◆ Functions at an intellectual rather than an emotional level.
- ◆ Looks objectively at the situation, seeking explanations and possible solutions.
- ◆ Is open-minded, flexible.

- ◆ It is an attempt to deal with a problem apart from feelings that are involved.

Examples:

Type D

- ◆ Honest and open sharing of feelings
  - a) Without blaming or attacking the other person.
  - b) Without defending yourself (becoming defensive).
- ◆ It is an invitation to solve problems.

Examples:

Key Point:

The most effective communication pattern is a combination of Type C (factual, analytical) and Type D (feelings, emotions) behaviours. It is essential that neither facts nor feelings be discounted in healthy communication.

Action Plan:

For each of the following types of communication, provide examples from your own life experience. Discuss how that interaction made each of you feel and whether you thought that it represented a healthy communication pattern.

### To Change Communication Patterns

1. A couple must become aware of the problems in their communication.
2. They must be willing to break old patterns of communication.
3. They must be prepared to work hard at building new and better communication patterns (that are focused on meeting the needs of the partner).

$$\text{Happiness} = \frac{\text{Performance}}{\text{Expectation}}$$

Couples must learn to focus on developing realistic expectations of one other and of working hard to communicate effectively within the relationship (increasing one's own performance). This will strengthen the relationship.

## APPENDIX E

Exercise 6: Setting Boundaries Within a Relationship

Any confusion about responsibility and ownership in our lives is a problem of boundaries.

Background Information:

## A. Kinds of Boundaries

1. Physical Boundaries— help us to determine who may touch us, how, and when.
2. Mental Boundaries— give us freedom to have our own thoughts and opinions.
3. Emotional Boundaries— help us to deal with our own emotions and disengage us from the harmful, manipulative emotions of others.

## B. Examples of Boundaries

1. The skin or physical self. Personal boundaries are meant to protect us from infection as well as physical and sexual abuse.
2. Words — just as in the physical world fences can delineate a boundary, good protective “fences” can be created with your words. The most basic boundary-setting word is no and it lets others know that you exist apart from them and that you are in control of you.
3. Geographical distance — physically removing yourself from a situation may help maintain boundaries. When a relationship is abusive, one of the only ways to finally show the other person that your boundaries are real is to create space until he/she is prepared to deal with the problem.

4. Time – taking time off from a person, or a project, can be a way of regaining ownership over some out-of-control aspect of your life where boundaries need to be set.
  
5. Emotional Distance – is a temporary boundary to give your heart the space it needs to be safe or to heal. You should not continue to set yourself up for hurt and disappointment.
  
6. Other People – You need to depend on others to help you set and keep boundaries. People who have become habitually subjected to another person's addictions, control or abuse desperately require the support of others in establishing and maintaining boundaries.
  
7. Consequences – Trespassing on the other people's property carries consequences.

C. What falls within our personal boundaries?

1. Feelings

Feelings should neither be ignored nor placed in charge. They are your responsibility and you must own them. They must be respected and validated by your partner.

2. Attitudes and Beliefs

Often we hold other people responsible for our discomfort rather than our own attitudes and beliefs. We must learn to set limits and accept responsibility.

### 3. Behaviours

All behaviours have positive or negative consequences. Problems arise when an individual is rescued or protected from the natural consequences of his behaviour.

### 4. Choices

We need to take responsibility for our choices rather than disowning them and trying to lay the responsibility for them on someone else. If we believe that someone else is in control, we will not take responsibility for our choices.

### 5. Values

Boundaries can help us not to deny our values to satisfy or please those who do not share them.

### 6. Limits

Setting limits on others (i.e. setting limits on our exposure to our partner when he/she is behaving poorly).

### 7. Talents

Taking ownership of our talents and abilities can be risky.

### 8. Thoughts

We must own our own thoughts, grow in knowledge and clarify distorted thinking (the latter pertains particularly to personal relationships where our perceptions are distorted by past relationships or we merely see what we want to see).

### 9. Love

Many people have difficulty giving and receiving love because of hurt and fear. We need to take responsibility for learning to trust and love others and for responding to



the love and trust offered to them by others. Loneliness is often the result of one's lack of responsiveness due to past hurts or fear.

Instructions:

Complete the following questions on your own and come to the next session prepared to discuss your answers with particular reference to your relationship. Discrepancies in what are perceived to be appropriate boundaries should be explored and those boundaries re-evaluated for the purpose of a healthier and more positive couple's relationship.

1. Can I set limits and still be a loving partner in a relationship?
2. Are there legitimate boundaries in a committed relationship?
3. What if my partner is upset or hurt by my boundaries?
4. How do I respond to someone who wants all my time, love, energy or money?

5. Why do I feel guilty or afraid when I think about setting boundaries?

6. Aren't boundaries selfish?

Action Plan:

After completing the questions, select one boundary issue to which you will commit to work with the goal of creating greater personal freedom within the relationship. It is essential that each partner learn to recognize and respect the legitimate personal boundaries of his/her partner.

The boundaries I need with

are

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I will communicate these boundaries by

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If my boundaries aren't accepted, I will

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## APPENDIX F

Exercise 7: Communication vs. ConflictInstructions:

Complete the following questions and come prepared to discuss them at the next session.

1. What things does your partner say/do that provoke conflict?
2. What things does your partner say/do that help to resolve conflict and to facilitate healthy communication?
3. Can you remember a particular situation in which you and your partner enjoyed good and satisfying communication? What happened ...
4. What are your current expectations of your partner? What do you think that he/she expects from you?

5. How do you affirm/encourage your partner? What positive things can you say about your partner?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
6. Respect in a relationship means that I ...
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
7. What did you do early in your relationship that increased your feelings of love and affection?

Action Plan:

The answers from questions 2-5 should be incorporated into your daily interactions. This data will help you to establish a healthy framework for future conflict resolution.

## APPENDIX G

Exercise 8: Working through ConflictInstructions:

- Step 1 Identify a problem or an issue that provokes conflict.
- Step 2 What did you do that contributed to that conflict? What did your partner do that contributed to that conflict?
- Step 3 What can you change about how either of you dealt with the conflict?
- Step 4 Replay the situation with the changes in place.
- Step 5 What can you do differently next time? How will you do it?

Action Plan:

Think of a recent example of relationship conflict and use it to follow through from Step 1 to step 5. Try and incorporate these steps with issues that have the potential to create conflict and dissension. Practise these steps!

Key Point:

When conflict occurs, it is important to avoid patterns of blaming.

## APPENDIX H

Exercise 9: Couple Conflict—10 Steps towards ResolutionBackground Information:

1. Set a time and a place for discussion. It is important that this is mutually agreed upon.
2. Define the problem issue.
3. How do you each contribute to the problem issue?
4. List past attempts to solve the problem that may/may not have been successful.
5. Brainstorm – List alternative solutions to the problem.
6. Discuss and evaluate these solutions.
7. Agree on one to try and stick with it.
8. Agree on how each individual will work towards this solution.



9. Plan another time to discuss your progress.
  
10. It is important to reward yourselves as you make progress in conflict resolution. Each partner should make suggestions for appropriate rewards.

Action Plan:

Using the above information, identify an issue of conflict and work through this resolution process. Focus on the steps that are the most difficult and decide what you can do differently next time. It may be helpful to review past successes in conflict resolution in order to identify those elements that contributed to a positive outcome.

## APPENDIX I

Exercise 10: Couple Negotiation

1. Do not blame your partner.
2. Do not judge, criticize or put down your partner.
3. Discuss the appropriateness/usefulness of each proposed solution. Be realistic and optimistic.
4. Try to stay connected with your partner rather than disconnected from him/her.  
Disconnected implies excessive focus on “me” rather than on “us”.
5. Make all the important issues such as communication and finances shared issues rather than opportunities for one partner to exert control over the other.
6. Set realistic goals for your relationship so that it will continue to grow and thrive.

Action Plan:

Pick an issue and follow through with this pattern for negotiation and open communication. Setting future goals should become a natural result of this process.

Key Point:

Developing a healthy relationship demands an ongoing commitment to a process of developing growth and change.

## APPENDIX J

Exercise 11: Meeting Each Other's NeedsInstructions:

Complete the following questions about your present relationship. Do this on your own but come prepared to share your responses in the next counselling session.

1. What do you think your primary needs are in your relationship? (list at least four)
2. What are your partner's primary needs?
3. Why is it so difficult to meet needs that you do not share? What happens when one spouse gives the other something that he or she doesn't need that badly?
4. Do you think that there is enough affection in your relationship?
5. Why do couples often lose the motivation to please one another once they are married? How is it possible to change and improve this situation?
6. How can the courtship goals of (a) getting to know one another, and (b) letting each other know how much they care for each other, be maintained after the wedding?
7. Is it difficult for you to communicate your needs to your spouse?

8. What are your shared interests?

Action Plan:

Once you have a clear idea of your partner's needs, you can begin to identify practical ways to meet those needs. You will discover what you can do differently in order to become more successful at meeting the needs of your partner?

## APPENDIX K

Exercise 12: Increasing IntimacyInstructions:

Discuss how you can incorporate these principles into your relationship.

1. Praise your partner. The best kind of compliments are observational, behavioural and specific.
2. Take the time to listen to one another.
3. Listen to understand one another rather than to judge one another.
4. Use active listening—this involves summarizing your partner’s comments before you share your response.
5. Be assertive ... use “I” statements.
6. When problems surface, don’t blame one another but rather seek solutions to these problems.

Action Plan:

In order to give your relationship the same priority that you gave it when you were dating, make a wish list of three things that you would like your partner to do more often. Incorporate at least one of these during the following week.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.



4. It is important that each partner assume some responsibility for the issues in the relationship and to ask for the forgiveness of the other. Can you remember a time when you did this? How did you know that you had been forgiven?
5. What causes us to hold a grudge? How can this sabotage the process of confession and forgiveness?

Action Plan:

Use your answers to the above questions to determine how you have dealt with these issues in the past. Then, with the benefit of past experience and incorporating the above principles, establish a plan that will enhance your ability to accept responsibility for your behaviours and to give and receive forgiveness.

## APPENDIX M

Exercise 14: Dynamic CommunicationBackground Information:

Communication within a couple's relationship often involves taking action on a particular problem or issue. Concerns and requests should be expressed in terms of actions rather than by complaints or insults. It is important that you make your concern/complaint clear—focusing on specific actions, words and tone of voice—and that you avoid blaming, labelling, mind reading and generalizing. Make an attempt to eliminate always and never when you are articulating a concern, and express concerns about actions rather than personality traits. Since resurrecting past hurts is often counterproductive, it is recommended that couples maintain their focus on recent events. Requests should be framed in such a way that they become clear, realistic and specific. It is very discouraging to try and meet a request that lacks focus and clarity. Furthermore, it is wise to avoid stories, explanations and theories about why your partner hasn't done things when you are making requests. If the request is not successful, re-phrase it or see if there is some misunderstanding about the action requested.

Key Point:

Asking for specific actions and seeking your partner do these actions can inject new hope into a relationship.

Action Plan:

Identify a concern that you have with your partner. Using the background information above, write down what you would do in order to address that issue. Try to maintain clarity and focus in this process. Apply the following statements to situations in your life.



- 1 Describe an action (past or current) that you appreciated.
- 2 When you become aware that your partner is doing something that you appreciate, let him/her know about it right away and be specific.
- 3 Write a note to your partner telling him/her about a time when he/she made you feel really appreciated.

Key Point

Make it a priority to affirm and encourage your partner—particularly when he/she honours your concerns or requests.

## APPENDIX N

Exercise 15: Nurturing a Healthy RelationshipBackground Information: Love is an Action

1. Avoid 50/50 thinking. Take responsibility for your relationship. Don't wait for the other person to do his or her half first. In other words, rather than looking for the love demonstrated by your partner, be the initiator of loving actions and words. If what you are doing does not work, do something different!
2. It is essential for each of you to be able to acknowledge and validate one another's feelings and points of view.
3. After acknowledgment and validation come actions. Tell each other which actions you experience as loving and which actions don't work for you. If you run into a snag, negotiate until you can find an action that works for both of you.

Action Plan:

1. Learn to recognize and change problem patterns of actions. If you find yourself doing the same thing over and over again, but it doesn't work—do something different! If you used to do something that worked better, then do those things again. Try to be creative and innovative in your relationship.

2. Consider what your partner is doing now that demonstrates his/her way of showing love, and let him/her know whether or not you appreciate it. It's important that you are "on the same page".

Key Point:

If what you are doing does not work, try something different.

## APPENDIX O

Exercise 16: “Red Flags” in Relationships

1. I will allow no verbal or physical abuse in my relationships.
2. I will allow no immoral or unethical behaviour in my relationship.
3. I will allow nothing illegal in my relationship.
4. I will not “rescue” anyone. If I have identified rescuing behaviour as a pattern in my past relationships, I won’t allow it anymore.
5. I will not allow myself to be taken advantage of, manipulated or controlled in a relationship.

Action Plan:

After discussing these statements with the counsellor, you must identify any areas that are of concern to your relationship. Begin to strategize as to alternative behaviour patterns and determine how you will help one another to adopt and maintain these new and healthier behaviours.

## APPENDIX P

Exercise 17: Negative Messages that I Send MyselfBackground Information:

An individual's ability to process positive or negative messages about himself/herself has a huge impact on their relationships. Healthier relationships evolve as the individuals within the relationship develop a more realistic sense of self.

Instructions:

Rewrite these negative messages and turn them into positive ones.

1. I am not okay unless I have the approval of others.
2. I must be perfect.
3. I cannot face the pain of my past.
4. Other people should meet most of my needs.
5. I shouldn't feel angry, hurt or depressed.
6. Expressing feelings is a sign of weakness.
7. I rarely feel safe or cared for.
8. I must not trust anyone.
9. I have to do everything myself.
10. I have little or no value.

## APPENDIX Q

Exercise 18: A Healthy Relationship ChecklistInstructions:

Rate your relationship according to the following criteria:

- 0     never
- 1     rarely
- 2     sometimes
- 3     most of the time
- 4     always

1. \_\_\_\_\_ We have fun and laugh together.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ We encourage and complement one another.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ We respect one another's privacy.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ We express anger appropriately.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ We are willing to negotiate and compromise.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ We talk about our feelings.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ We work through conflicts.

8. \_\_\_\_\_ We are willing to admit when we are wrong.
9. \_\_\_\_\_ We allow each other to make mistakes.
10. \_\_\_\_\_ Our individuality is encouraged and each person is treated equally within the relationship.

Action Plan:

Select together 2-3 areas that require some improvement and develop and articulate some practical steps that you will take in order to stimulate and facilitate growth in that area.