



## STEP 5

### CRITICAL DIMENSIONS

1. Emotions
2. Romance
3. Responsibility
4. Companionship
5. Appreciation
6. Trust
7. Family Relations
8. Intimacy
9. Sex
10. Letting Go



### Critical Dimension #1: Emotions

The emotional dimension of a relationship is the most important. It is also the most difficult to describe because it encompasses so many things.

One major need is to feel emotionally supported by your partner. Another is to feel that your partner contributes to your emotional well-being in positive ways. This is what we mean when we talk about the emotional dimension of a relationship.

When your relationship is working properly, it can provide a major foundation for your emotional well-being and positively contribute to your emotional life. Your relationship can help you feel hope when you feel hopeless, feel joy when the world gives you grief, and provide support for all that is happy, fulfilled, and vital in you.

If you feel that your relationship isn't functioning this way right now (and if you have picked up this course, it almost certainly isn't), you will want to work on this dimension.

#### ACTION

Take out your journal, ask yourself these questions, and write down what you think:

- Does my partner affirm and support me when I need it? If so, how do they do this? If not, what specifically could they do to show me the kind of affirmation and support I'm seeking?
- Do I feel validated in this relationship? (Think about this in terms of your whole relationship, including its history, as well as the present.) How does my partner validate me? If they aren't doing such a good job of this, how might they validate me?
- Do I feel stable and secure in my relationship? What aspects of my relationship make me feel particularly stable or unstable? Be specific.
- Have I consistently attempted to contribute to my partner's emotional well-being in the ways in which I expect to be attended to? How, specifically, have I done this? If I haven't been attentive in this area, how might I improve?
- What other ways, not addressed by these questions, might my partner contribute to my emotional well-being?
- What other ways, not addressed by these questions, might I contribute to my partner's emotional well-being?



- How could my relationship be more emotionally satisfying? If someone looked at a “before” and “after” videotape of our relationship, what would they hear and see that would be different between the two tapes?

## **Critical Dimension #2: Romance**

Earlier in the section, I suggested that romance is important because it encourages and invites a closer relationship. Taking a moment to make your partner feel special is one of the most important things you can do for that person. This is what romance is all about: opening up the opportunity to show how much you care for your partner.

Often, when listening to the initial problem as presented by a couple, each person is hurt and angry, accusing each other of not being caring. When I reflect back the feelings, the partners usually have the same or similar concerns – he is not treating her in a way that helps her to feel special, and she is not treating him in a way that helps him feel special.

How many times have you brought your partner flowers during their lunch hour? This is not a question directed specifically to men; believe it or not, ladies, men would like to receive more flowers from you.

Some people say, “I’m just not a romantic person.” This simply can’t be true because romance (despite the image we are given in popular culture) is not about a particular inborn sensibility. It is about doing something special for the person you care about. Everyone is capable of this.

Romance doesn’t have to be complicated. A simple and well-planted note that says, “I love you,” can be more romantic than a boat ride in Venice or a candlelit dinner under the Eiffel Tower. Romance is about opening up and giving the softer side of yourself to your partner.

Romance is often difficult after an affair. Don’t rush into it. There will be a time when you feel it is right to be romantic again.

### **ACTION**

For now, just explore this dimension of your relationship by answering the following questions:

- When was the last time my partner did something romantic for me? What did they do? How did I feel?
- When was the last time I did something romantic for my partner? What did I do? How did I feel about doing this?
- Come up with a list of ways that you could be more romantic with your partner.

Here are a few ideas to get you started:

Buy your partner flowers, and attach a special note. Have them delivered to work or leave them where your partner will find them.

Plan a romantic evening out.

Take a walk under the stars.

When your partner comes home from a long day, have some nice music playing. Keep the lighting low, and offer them a massage.

Sit quietly alone together, and just talk.

Plan a candlelit dinner at home.

Put an “I love you” note in the refrigerator, on the stove, in the clothes you know your partner is wearing that day, or on the seat of the car – somewhere it will be noticed when you are not there. Be sure to include your partner’s name on the note. After an affair, a note with no name might be misconstrued.

Call in the middle of the day, and say, “I love you and I look forward to seeing you tonight.”



Mail a “Thinking of You” card to your partner.

When you first see your partner after work, quickly put down whatever you have with you, “run” over, and give them a big, long hug. Include a big, long kiss if you are back to kissing again after the affair.

Just before bed or during supper, look at your partner and say, “I really like the way you look.”

### **Critical Dimension #3: Responsibility**

While intimate relationships are founded on emotional connection and romance, a big part of the work that goes into this kind of relationship lies in the responsibilities you have toward each other and to your mutual life together.

Both partners in the relationship should share obligations in a division that is equitable.

That doesn’t mean that you both need to count the number of house chores each of you does, and it doesn’t mean that you divide the work evenly on any other quantitative level.

Rather, you should feel qualitatively that the responsibility each of you carries in the relationship is equitable. Part of the beauty of operating in a relationship is that you can share the burdens of this life with another person.

Neither of you should feel too buried by these burdens. Instead, you should feel buoyed up by the amount of responsibility your partner contributes to your life together. If you do feel buried, it is a sign that you may need to consider a redistribution of responsibilities.

You need to take caution that you don’t follow the all-to-common tendency of discounting the time your partner is working when you can’t see them doing this work. For example, you are chopping wood and moving furniture all day, while ten miles away, your partner is involved with one problem after another preparing depositions for trial. Either one of these people might think, “Here I am, slaving away, while my partner is somewhere taking it easy,” when that isn’t, in fact, the case.

The Wall Street Journal (May 19, 2005) reports a survey showing that today’s women estimate that their husbands do about 33 percent of the housework, while their husbands rate it at 42 percent. Several studies figure the actual number to be closer to 39 percent.

This goes to show that what you think you do and what your partner thinks you do can be two different things.

#### **ACTION**

In order to more clearly understand how you feel about the responsibilities in your relationship, explore what responsibilities you have and how you feel about them by asking yourself the following questions:

- What do I do to figure out my partner’s needs?
- What do I think my partner’s needs would be if they clearly told me?
- What intentional activities do I do to meet my partner’s needs?
- Do I think I am adequately meeting my partner’s needs?
- If you have any children, ask yourself this question: How do I share in the responsibility of caring for our children? If you have not been primarily responsible for the children, you should find out what tasks are involved because no matter what their ages, if they still live at home or are at college, there is probably a very large and complex set of tasks related to caring for your children.



- In what ways do I contribute to our financial well-being? When answering this question, you should consider money earned, money spent, money saved, money invested, and who writes the checks, does the housekeeping, and manages the investments.
- Which house chores do I take care of?
- Do I take part in the household shopping in anyway? When answering this question, think about who makes the lists, who purchases the items, who carries them into the house, and who puts them away.
- What part of the cooking do I take responsibility for? Think about planning, setting up, cooking, and cleanup.
- How do I contribute to organizing our leisure time? When answering this question, you might want to consider planning events, making reservations, or arranging babysitting.
- How do I perceive my own contributions to our relationship and our family? When I am completely honest with myself, how do my contributions make me feel?
- What is my perception of my partner's contributions in these areas? If I am completely honest, how do their contributions make me feel?

## **Critical Dimension #4: Companionship**

In successful intimate relationships, both partners feel as though they have a lifelong and constant companion. This doesn't mean that you spend every minute together. If you do that, you are bound to drive each other crazy.

What it means is that you make a point to spend quality time together. Companionship is about the time you spend together being friends, talking, walking, playing chess, sailing, or going to the movies. Doing these things helps fulfill our basic human need for social interaction.

Human beings are biologically engineered to be social creatures. We are most successful when we are surrounded by others in a community that supports a substantive part of each other's needs. All kinds of studies in numerous fields reveal this fact. Human infants end up with physical health problems if they are left alone too long. Indeed, the very history of human civilization is predicated on the idea of community and companionship.

Our natural pull to be in an intimate relationship with another person is part of our requirement for companionship. Without it, we shrivel up emotionally, physically, and psychologically. This sense of companionship seems to be particularly important in the modern world. Our hectic lives often keep us from communing with people around us. We are on the road, at work, or in front of the TV so much of the time that we feel isolated on a level unheard of in most cultures prior to ours.

In a cultural environment where you can only really feel a deep connection to one person, your partner, this companionship is incredibly valuable. If it is lacking in your relationship, there is work that needs to be done.

### **ACTION**

To start that work, ask yourself these questions:

- How am I a companion to my partner? What do we do when we spend time together that gives us a sense of companionship?
- What are some of our favorite activities to engage in together? How often do we do these activities? If we haven't done them in a while, how long has it been? Would they be fun to do again? When and how can we plan for these activities?
- How do I feel when I spend time with my partner doing fun activities such as those I wrote about above? How do I feel without this time?
- What other things can we do together to reinitiate companionship in our relationship?



## Critical Dimension #5: Appreciation

Part and parcel with the emotional needs of a relationship and the requirement for companionship is a regular and genuine expression of appreciation for your partner and what they do for you. It is important not only that you feel appreciation but that you express it often and aloud.

But it is more than just telling your partner that you appreciate them. Words can fall flat when they aren't supported by actions. You have to show your partner that you appreciate them. If you say, "I appreciate you," and then lock yourself in the office for the fourth night in a row, you aren't genuinely expressing appreciation.

You need to learn how to talk and act in a way that helps your partner feel that they are really special in your life. You should have some sense of how to do this. Even if you aren't successfully doing it right now, you were probably able to do it at some point in the past – even if you have to go back to the time you were first dating. It's time to get that back.

If you feel as though you don't appreciate your partner right now (for example, if they are the cheater), think back over the course of your relationship and remember the things they did that you appreciated. You must appreciate them on some level; otherwise, you wouldn't be putting all this effort into repairing your relationship. Think carefully about what it is you appreciate.

### ACTION

Explore the following questions to look at how well you have been showing your appreciation to your partner:

- What do I appreciate most in my partner? Have I told them this or shown them this recently?
- How do I show my partner that they are truly special in my life? How does my partner show this to me? What could I do to communicate this feeling or communicate it even better than I have in the past?
- What is one small step I could initiate on my own to show appreciation for my partner?
- Does my partner show appreciation for me and all I do for our relationship? If so, how? If not, how could they improve in this respect? What is one small step they could do that would help me feel appreciated?

## Critical Dimension #6: Trust

Trust is one dimension that inevitably is damaged by an affair, and it is so important that this be looked at and dealt with in order to heal.

People feel safe in a relationship because they can trust the other person. This is invaluable. Imagine what it would be like to live in a world where you could never be yourself because you were always worried that someone would attack you directly or indirectly, hurt you in some way without warning, or let it be known through action or inaction that they would do for themselves even when it was injurious to your interests. That is what it is like to live in a world without trust.

Part of that cozy and relaxing feeling of "going home at night" is going home to your partner. You want to walk through the door, put down your bag, and breathe a sigh of relief because the person that is standing before you is somebody you can trust completely.

Trust is one of the glues that hold a relationship together. When this is jeopardized, it is frightening for two reasons. The first is that you might start to worry that you can't trust any one around you. After all, if you can't trust your partner, who can you trust? Secondly, you worry that your relationship might come apart because the glue of trust that has bound it together has given way.



These feelings of insecurity and mistrust are feelings that infidelity produces in the injured person. In order to overcome these feelings, the injured needs to be able to trust the cheater again. We already discussed ways the cheater can become transparent in order to assist in this process, but it will take time to reestablish trust. Section 7 will explore the issue of trust in much greater detail.

However, you have a sense of what you would like this dimension to feel like in your relationship. You might have memories of being able to trust your partner completely, or you might have an ideal image in mind for the future.

#### **ACTION**

Explore what you would like to see in the trust dimension of your relationship by answering the following questions:

- In my ideal relationship, how would trust manifest itself?
- How do I know when someone trusts me? What could my partner do or say to show that they trust me?
- How do I know when I trust someone? What could my partner do or say to help me trust them again?
- Was there a time in your relationship when you felt as though you could trust your partner completely? How did that feel? Other than having had an affair, are there any other differences you notice in what they did or said then compared to what they do or say now?

### **Critical Dimension #7: Family Relations**

Although at first glance it might not seem that your relationship with your family directly affects your relationship with your partner, a careful investigation will reveal that the way you interact with your immediate and extended families has a powerful influence on the way you operate as a couple. Hence, the area of family relations is the seventh critical dimension of a relationship.

Anyone who has children has experienced this. When children come into your life, it alters the way that you behave as a couple in fundamental ways. The way you spend time together, date together, even your sex life can change substantially.

Even if you don't have children, family relations can have an important impact on your relationship. If you spend a great deal of time with your family, then you automatically spend less time alone with your partner.

There is nothing wrong with the way different people choose to interact with their families. Some people like to have close relationships with their extended families, some don't. Some parents like to have their children with them all the time, some don't. The choices themselves aren't problematic.

Problems can arise when you and your partner do not agree on how much interaction you want to have with the various aspects of your family. If one of you likes being with your extended family on a regular basis and the other doesn't, this clearly can cause problems in your relationship.

#### **ACTION**

In order to better understand what you are looking for in terms of your relationship to your family, answer the following questions:

- Ideally, how much time would I spend with my extended family? Who does this include? How do I see my partner fitting into this picture?
- How do we balance our time as a couple and as a family? (Think about this in terms of children if you have them.)
- What would the ideal family event be like for me?



- How can I ensure that my relationship is getting the attention it needs and is not subsumed by the needs of our family?

## **Critical Dimension #8: Intimacy**

When we talk about intimacy, we often think about sex and love. These are incredibly important aspects of intimacy that should not be underestimated. However, intimacy is more than this, and we will be looking at intimacy and sex as separate (though equally important) dimensions of your relationship.

Intimacy is the sense that you have touched something emotionally soft and private inside the person. An intimate moment is when you connect with each other in a tender, subtle, and unspeakable way that deepens your feelings for each other at the moment. An intimate relationship is built on collecting many intimate moments with one person and feeling safe in the knowledge that you trust the person with your past and future intimate moments. This brings your relationship to a unique, shared closeness special to the two of you.

For now, I would like to discuss what intimacy means for long-term relationships, and more specifically, what intimacy means to you, how it operates in your relationship, and how you would like to see it made manifest in your relationship.

When a relationship is young, intimacy seems to come very easily. You want to know each other so much and so completely that you feel naturally inclined toward intimacy. You naturally spend time together and contact each other in intimate ways.

As your relationship ages, intimacy often takes the back seat to more present and pressing matters. Bills, work schedules, the birth of children, the increasing responsibilities of your job, carpools, homework, meals, and your own neglected needs all start to take priority over intimacy.

You are changing in other ways, too. Natural biological changes (getting older) can dramatically alter the nature of both emotional and physical intimacy. Too often, intimacy is sacrificed completely in order to accommodate these other factors. This is a major mistake.

Intimacy is an important human need like each of the other needs explored in this section. When it is neglected, the relationship always suffers.

### **ACTION**

Think about intimacy in your relationship when you respond to the following questions:

- How important has intimacy been in my relationship? Have I inadvertently let it slip away?
- What kind of intimacy is important?
- What are some of my favorite intimate memories with my partner?
- What could I do to increase the intimacy in my relationship? Don't be afraid to be specific. There is no harm in being as thorough as possible here.

## **Critical Dimension #9: Sex**

When a couple suffers an affair, their sex lives are almost always affected. For some, there are a great many questions that come up in terms of when, how, and if they will have sex again; what it will be like when they do; and how they will know when they are ready to make that step. On the other hand, there are couples who jump right in and have better sex than they had before the affair.





The truth is that I don't have the answers to these questions – you do or you will, or maybe you will have answers that change and adapt over time as you continue to heal. However, I will help you search for the answers together in Section 6 where I will guide you through a conversation about sex. Then in Section 8, we will explore how to revitalize your sexual relationship.

For now I would like to help you explore what you envision a great sex life to be, what you desire out of your sexual relationship with your partner, and how you might make that relationship better.

Like intimacy, sex comes easily when couples are young. For one thing, there is the simple gratifying biological aspect of sex that everyone enjoys, but seems particularly gratifying early in relationships. When people are experiencing sex for the first time together, the pleasures that the other person's body holds are new. There is a natural joy in this.

However, as the relationship matures and you mature as individuals, a number of things happen. For one thing, you change physically as you age and this changes the nature of your sexual relationship.

What's more, as the initial vibrant, passionate, sexual interaction gives way to a more mature sexual relationship, you could find yourself desiring different things out of your sexual relationship. For some, new fantasies or sexual proclivities surface. Exploring these with a partner who is used to things being a certain way can be a daunting aspect of your sexual relationship.

This can be complicated by the fact that what your partner wants might be unacceptable to you. Your partner might desire oral or anal sex, and you simply might not be able to accommodate these desires.

You do not need to compromise your boundaries in order to satisfy your partner sexually.

#### **ACTION**

For now, think about what your ideal sexual relationship would be like by answering these questions:

- What do I like about my sexual relationship? (If you aren't having sex right now, think about what you liked about the relationship in the past.)
- What disturbs me about my sexual relationship (if anything)?
- Are there things my partner has asked me to do that are particularly exciting? What are they?
- Are there things that my partner has asked me to do that are particularly disturbing? What are they?
- How would I balance foreplay and afterplay in sex?
- Do I like sex always gentle, always rough, sometimes one and sometimes the other, or in-between?
- Do I always like it the same way, or do I desire some variety? What kind of things would I like to do to vary our sexual relationship?
- How does fantasy play a part in our sex life? Include fantasy for yourself in your own mind and fantasy you share with your partner. How could my partner and I use fantasy to improve our sexual relationship?

### **Critical Dimension #10: Letting Go**

In every relationship, there are small indiscretions that cause tension, but that aren't real crimes. Leaving the cap off the toothpaste, leaving the toilet seat up, embarrassing your partner in public, even something as big as getting in an accident and putting a dent in the car are issues that can cause you some distress, but ultimately shouldn't impact your willingness to move forward with your partner.





I call this final critical dimension your ability to let go. If you are going to have a successful relationship with your partner, you need to let go of the small stuff and move forward in your relationship.

Ultimately, being able to let go consists of two different components. The person who committed the indiscretion needs to make an open and heartfelt apology for what they did, and the person who was offended needs to let go of what happened. These events should happen naturally, without too much planning. They should allow you to continue down the path of your life together.

Mind you, letting go this way does not necessarily work as easily for larger offenses. Later, we will discuss the possibility of accepting the affair for what it was and moving on with your relationship. This process has a certain “letting go” attached to it; however, accepting major problems, like an affair, in your relationship is a much more detailed process than the kind of letting go I am describing here.

#### ACTION

Think about how letting go works in your relationship by using the following questions to explore the issue:

- How does letting go work in my relationship?
- Have there been times I have been able to successfully let go of the small stuff? When were they?
- Does my partner have the ability to let go? What are some times when they let go so we could move on with our relationship?
- Are there times I have not been able to let go of to small issues and made it difficult to proceed in our relationship? When did I do this?
- What are some times when my partner has gotten caught in small issues and not been able to let go?
- Think about the memories you just wrote about letting go, and ask yourself, “What can I do to make it easier for my partner to let go of small things?”