

THE ZERO NEGATIVITY



GUIDE FOR COUPLES

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHORS

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by Harville Hendrix Ph.D. and Helen LaKelly Hunt Ph.D.

There is a lot of negativity happening in our society today. It almost seems like Pandora's Box was ripped open, and there's an untethered freedom to hurl a barrage of angry, hurtful, and unfiltered words at other people. Many might want to blame the media, politicians, or some sort of cultural shift. But, to us, what is reflected in society is mirrored in our own psyches. What shows up on a macro level is an expression of the micro level. We can only be capable of a negative-free society if we can first be capable of a negative-free relationship at home.

In our most intimate relationships, we start with expressions of unconditional love: doting behaviors, letters, text messages, and phone calls declaring our pledge, feeling positively joyful with ourselves and the world. Yet, when we fall in love, we are not able to maintain that level of perfect love. Soon after, the ecstasy of love wanes. For example, we might begin to notice that Bob is slightly careful with money or that Joan is a bit opinionated. Before long, Bob is *always* stingy and Joan *always* has to have it her way.

We call this stage – which naturally follows romance – the power struggle. And, just like in our culture, when couples are in a power struggle, the full blame falls on the other: "It's your fault!" (Conversely, "It's never my fault!") And we try to change, coerce, and/or threaten them to be "more like me."

The “Experts” Who Almost Didn’t Make It

We, ourselves, are also victims and culprits of this blame game. After a decade of marriage, we found ourselves teetering on the edge of divorce. And, this was after our book, *Getting the Love You Want*, sold millions of copies, Harville appeared 17 times on Oprah as a premier couples expert, and over 2,000 therapists worldwide were trained in our techniques to save marriages!

Of course, we blamed the other for the condition of our relationship. We kept trying to make it work, sought out the top relationship therapists in New York City (a few fired us, and one we fired). Not holding onto too much hope, we gave our relationship one last try, committing to another three months to do everything we could to salvage our relationship.

During this time of uncertainty, we were visiting a book store when we happened on a book about how astrology affects relationships. Just for fun, we opened to the page where our two astrological signs intersected. Then we read, “You will destroy your relationship unless you stop the unrelenting negative scrutiny of each other.” We were stunned. And, then we laughed. We knew the book had gotten it right.

For a time, we were quiet and separate as we turned our thoughts around those words. That sentence fell like a bombshell, because we knew it was true. The more we thought about it, the more we realized we had to stop what we now call the “invisible abuse” of belittling, negating, and undermining each other. We started by trying to be more aware of what we were saying, what words we used. We worked out a plan to monitor ourselves for negative behaviors, and negative thinking.

At the beginning, as we tried to stop, we grew to realize our negativity seemed to have a life of its own. It didn't take much. A critical comment. A moment of impatience. A raised tone of voice. Sometimes, we would degenerate into loud arguments. Whenever we descended into negativity, our pain was acute. Negativity never got us what we wanted. It always made matters worse.

When we cooled off, we realized that it would take us hours or even days of repair work to feel connected again. Eventually, it became clear as day that being negative with each other was irrational, abusive, and counterproductive. We then realized we were addicted to our negativity. We agreed that the only solution was to eliminate all forms of negativity once and for all. We pledged to be "Zero Negative" and decided to go cold turkey.

What is Negativity?

What do we mean by negativity? Negativity is any thought, word, or deed that tells your partner: "You're not okay when you think what you think or act the way that you act." In essence, you are rejecting your partner's "otherness." We sometimes feel the need to negate our partners when they do or say something that makes us uncomfortable. Usually, they are just being themselves. But from our point of view, they are threatening an image that we have of them, or they are failing to meet an unspoken need of our own.

Typically, negativity makes its first appearance in a love relationship as denial: "I can't believe you did that!" "You never said anything like that before!" "You can't really mean that." "You're not that kind of person." The fact that your partner is a separate

individual with wishes and needs different from yours is starting to dawn on you, and you feel threatened. Your denial is a desperate ploy to hold on to your illusions.

When your partner continues to depart from your projected image, the tendency is to bring out the big guns, one by one. Your arsenal includes shame, blame, criticism, invasiveness, avoidance, and, finally, blanket condemnation. First you shame. "How do you think that feels?!" "You ought to be ashamed by the way you treated my friend." In essence, you are trying to make your partner feel guilty for being who he or she is.

Then you blame. "You were late, and that made me really upset. That's why I haven't been talking to you." "If you hadn't been so angry, we would have been able to settle the matter in very little time." When you blame, you put all the burden of your frustrations on your partner.

Next, you begin to criticize your partner's character traits in addition to his or her unacceptable behaviors: "You are so insensitive." "You are untrustworthy." "You always think about yourself first." You are attempting to paint your partner not only as the source of all your frustration but to make them into a "bad" person as well.

A more subtle ploy is to invade your partner's psyche and act as if you had x-ray vision: "That is not what you really think." "The reason you're so crabby is that you are obsessing too much about work." "If you'll just listen to me, I'll tell you what you need to do."

The final weapon is absolutism: "You never listen to me!" "You always leave the hard work for me." "That's just the way you are." "Every time I make a simple suggestion, you have a big fit."

It's no wonder that our partners feel depressed, stay late at work, drink too much, and/or don't want to make love, or stay up late by themselves. Being with us is not a safe place to be. They experience being chopped up into little pieces, dissected, and rejected. This is a form of emotional annihilation. At the base level, it expresses contempt. No one – and no relationship – can be healthy in such a toxic environment. To get the love we want, we need to eliminate negativity in all its forms.

One question we are often asked is whether “all negativity is bad.” And our unequivocal answer is, “Yes!” No relationship can grow or deepen or survive in negativity no matter what form it takes. Negative words inflict emotional injury. You can call it sarcasm or humor, or whatever excuse you make (“I was only kidding!”), but it is abuse. If you find yourself saying, “Can't you take a joke?” or, “I was only kidding,” or “I'm just offering constructive criticism,” chances are you are harming your relationship. And criticism may not always take the form of words. It can be a touch, a glare, an eye roll, or two hands thrown up in the air. However it comes out, the message is that one person is superior and the other inferior. One person is up, the other person is down. It's an unpleasant feeling for the person down, a feeling that has its roots in the “old brain” that is responsible for warning us from danger.

Harsh words can induce a feeling of anxiety. Anxiety, at its roots, is the nervous system responding to a stimulus of danger -- the fight or flight response. And even negative thoughts can provoke a defensive reaction. Because we all have internal radar that makes us astute at picking up nonverbal cues from our partners, we can detect the subtle changes in posture and expression that accompany negative thoughts. The response of the criticized person also takes one of these forms: They may slink away

("the silent treatment"), play dead in a submissive posture, or take on the accuser by fighting back.

There's another good reason to that negativity is bad: the negativity that we express toward our partners (or relatives, friends, even strangers) comes back like a boomerang and affects us as well. That's because the old brain does not know whether the negativity is being directed outward or inward. This theory has been backed up by studies showing that when one person yells at another, the person being yelled at produces more of the stress hormone cortisol. That's to be expected. But, perhaps more interestingly, the same increase in cortisol is seen in the angry person as well. One could say that any negativity that we direct toward others is a form of self-abuse.

We teach couples that in order to have the relationship of their dreams, we need to be responsible for how we treat each other. There is a responsibility of how we talk, look, share, treat one another. No shame, blame or criticism – ever. Whether criticism is phrased in a gentle way or a cruel way, it comes from the same place of judgment. Unconsciously, the critic believes that their opinion is the "only" correct one. The way he or she looks at the world is the only reasonable way to see it, and if the partner, on some level, differs, they must have no sense, or taste -- in fact, they're crazy! The other person, in a way, ceases to be a person, and is instead an object to be molded into the critic's (sane) way of looking at the world.

Back to Our Story

To enforce our decision to eliminate all forms of negativity from our relationship, we purchased a calendar, put it in our bedroom wall, and spent a few minutes every

evening evaluating whether either of us experienced negativity from the other. If one did, we would draw a frowny face on the calendar. If we were successful in getting through the day without experiencing negativity, the day would receive a smiley face. For a while, our calendar had more frowny faces than smiley ones but this observation trained us to be more intentional and affirming.

It took time, but we pledged that if we didn't have something positive to say, we wouldn't say anything at all. But, then we experienced a strange awkwardness. We went silent. We would go on a date night vowing there would be no negativity, and we had nothing to say. The place where all that negativity had lived was now quiet, but we were still not close. We were acutely aware at the distance between us.

Filling in the Gaps

To fill in the empty space, we designed another experiment. We began a ritual of appreciations. We pledged to end each day with the expression of three appreciations of each other. And we could not use the same three the next day.

Having to express three new appreciations each day forced us to observe each other to find traits and behaviors we liked and to put them into words. We both learned negativity in our families, as they learned it from theirs. We unlearned it in that nightly ritual of ten minutes or so of expressing love in a new way, through appreciation and gratitude. "I appreciate the fact that you were an attentive listener to me last night, even though you were very tired." "You gave me such great feedback on the letter I was writing to the board members." "I loved it when you took the time to go for a walk with me, even though you were busy."

Each positive statement had to be unique and specific, and we couldn't repeat anything we had said before. A hidden benefit of this rule was that we discovered many wonderful things about each other that we had been overlooking when we were upset.

We also discovered the reality that it is hard to be completely free of negativity. Our childhood, our culture, our "freeze, flight, or fight" evolutionary responses inevitably makes us susceptible for being a provider and recipient of negativity. Of course, we ourselves have fallen many times – even with our backgrounds in psychotherapy and our pledge to save our marriage. But, out of that experience, we developed ways to quickly repair the relationship which we now call the Reconnecting Process. (You will learn this process at the end of this guide.) We began to be more forgiving of each other's "slip ups" and more committed to, not only pledging Zero Negativity, but more importantly, pledging to reconnect when either of us experienced a put-down.

The Results of Going Zero Negative

Eliminating negativity is the most powerful way to transform your relationship. Indeed, it is the foundation for lasting love. Ultimately, though, all committed relationships contain a seed, no matter how small it may seem, of meaningful love and affection. Even if the approach of Zero Negativity leads to, essentially, a vow of silence, eventually the mantle of fear will dissipate and both parties will find the warmth toward each other that they once had. They will find things to say that are neutral and eventually positive. As the activated fear in the old brain diminishes, both people will begin to feel safe with one another, which is the primary and most important foundation of a healthy relationship.

We now think of negativity as an emotional disease on the order of cancer. It is pervasively destructive and ultimately kills the relationship. But unlike cancer, negativity can be stopped. You can decide now to stop all negativity. Act on that decision and everything will change. To be blunt: negativity is invisible abuse and is an addiction of the human race. When you eliminate this invisible abuse in your primary relationship, then you eliminate it in your relationships with your children, your friends, and the broader world. You become a person of peace!

Happily Ever After

Eventually, we overcame most of our problems by using the exercises we actually taught to couples. Imagine that – we began to practice what we preached. We practiced listening and sharing responsibly. We became more thoughtful lovers and made frequent expressions of love and gratitude through words, notes, gifts, and caring gestures. Our statements of appreciation increased the flow of love between us. Every time we told each other something we genuinely admired about the other, we were deeply moved—each and every time.

Our admiration gradually evolved into a state of “chronic adoration.” (A much different – and preferred - experience than our chronic criticism!) Over time, we learned how to work together harmoniously as partners. There were moments when we felt deep love and empathy for each other. Removing all negativity from our relationship was the final turning point for us. We found our way back to each other. We experienced a level of emotional safety with each other that we had never known before, and our hearts opened to a deeper experience of love. We fell in love again. But this time it was different; it was better. Passion returned and we began to feel fully alive and joyful.

We felt so blessed by what we had achieved that we held two recommitment ceremonies, the first of which was at our annual conference with our colleagues in the Imago community. We wrote new vows of commitment that were in keeping with all we had learned and recited them before the group. Afterwards, our colleagues lifted us high in the air and paraded us around the room while everyone sang and danced.

Two months later, we held a New Year's Eve ceremony in the majestic Riverside Church in New York City, where we were members. Our pastor led us through our vows in front of 250 family members and friends, after which we retired to a grand hall on the Hudson River where we ate and danced and were roasted and toasted until midnight. When the fireworks exploded, we felt like they were just for us. We included all the celebrants of the New Year as witnesses to our love and our future.

Finally, we were giving each other the respect we both wanted on a continual basis. What's more, we found it easier and easier to do. Our relationship had become such a sacred place for us that we had no desire to violate it. To slip back into old behaviors became unthinkable.

Take the Zero Negativity Challenge

When people tell us how hard it is to stop being negative, we remind them it's like first learning to ski. We can't imagine going down the slope with our feet turned inward. When we ask, "Why?" the instructor answers, "So you won't die." It's the same answer for eliminating negativity. You have to learn how to stop, or your relationship will die.

That said, a relationship without one person being able to express a concern, is also an unhealthy place. Suppressed thoughts and feelings lead to passive-aggressive behavior, or to the gradual dissolution of affection for one another.

The path out of this relational trap is to first take on an approach of Zero Negativity: for both parties to commit absolutely to refraining from put downs, negative comments and behaviors. While Zero Negativity does mean refraining from all put downs, negative comments and behaviors, it does not mean we cannot express our negative feelings or frustrations but we can share them in an intentional, responsible way. The task may seem daunting, but the rewards are great. As negativity recedes, goodwill rushes in to fill the void.

Without conscious effort, you find yourself focusing on your partner's admirable qualities, much as you did during courtship. Only this time, you have the insights and tools you need to sustain your regard. Meanwhile, your partner will also be seeing you in a much more positive light, and you will both thrive in its warm glow. Eventually, a sacred space will well up between you, one that both of you want to nurture and protect. With conflict removed, connection will deepen and passion will flow.

We challenge you to give it a try -- not a word, not a comment, not a thought, not a glance in a negative direction. Ask your partner to take the Zero Negativity Challenge. You will be amazed at the results.

Tips for Going Zero Negative

1. Self-Reflect: Keep in mind that the goal is not to repress the feelings behind our negative thoughts and behaviors—that would only add to our store of pent-up

emotions—but rather to bring them out into the open and see them for what they really are: a warning sign that some aspect of the relationship needs work. One of the best ways to start solving a relationship problem is to look at your own contribution: “Here I am, having critical thoughts about my partner again. What does this say about me? What am I doing or not doing right now that is feeding my negative attitude?”

2. Start with an achievable goal: We remind couples to start with small goals. For couples taking our workshop, we ask them to pledge to Zero Negativity for the remainder of our weekend time together. For others, we encourage taking a 30-day Zero Negativity Challenge. For others still, even a 24-hour commitment can be a stretch and all they can commit to at the time. Once you build up small successes, you can commit to longer periods of time.

3. Move from “You messages” to “I messages”: When we are frustrated, it’s easy to move into negativity with “you messages” (you always, you never, you are such an &#%!@?!) To help us move away from disparaging language (that provokes a reaction), we teach couples to use “I messages” (“I feel...,” “I experience...”) This helps you take responsibility for your feelings and also help your partner “hear” the frustration rather than move into a defensive stance.

4. Learn Ways to Reconnect: Signing the Zero Negativity Pledge means that you agree to refrain from any “put downs” during your 30-day commitment. It does not mean that you cannot express your needs and deal with your issues. On the contrary, it means that without the contamination of negative exchanges, you will be able to deal with your issues in a healthier way. It’s what we say and how we say it. It’s a rule that’s easy to remember but may be difficult to follow at first. In time, you’ll begin to notice all the ways you were being unconsciously critical -- making jokes at the other’s expense, speaking negatively about them to others, thinking passive aggressive thoughts. This awareness itself can motivate change.

5. Assess Your Relationship: Keep in mind that the pledge is to keep your relationship free of negativity. You will be assessing your relationship, not each other. In addition, what matters is if one partner experienced negativity from the other – regardless of whether that was the intention.

Zero Negativity Challenge Instructions

The purpose of this challenge is to remove all negativity (criticism, shame, or blame) from your relationship. Follow these instructions:

1. With your partner, read out loud together the Zero Negativity Pledge on the next page and agree to commit to Zero Negativity for 30-Days by signing the pledge. (If you cannot commit to 30 days, then mutually agree a time a period of time.)
2. Using a monthly calendar (or using the blank one provided in this guide), place the calendar in a place where you can see it, like your bathroom mirror. At the end of each day, review with your partner whether your relationship got a “negative” that day. If YES, draw a “frowning face” on the day. If NO, draw a “smiley face” on the day. (Remember, you are accessing your relationship as a whole, not each other.)
3. Read the Reconnecting Process (page x) and discuss ways to quickly repair and reconnect whenever you experience a put-down.
4. When you have successfully completed the challenge, keep renewing the challenge for a period of time until Zero Negativity is a condition of your relationship.

THE ZERO NEGATIVITY PLEDGE

We understand that “negativity” is any transaction that ruptures our connection, whether intentional or accidental.

We pledge to make our relationship a **Zone of Zero Negativity** for 30 days. To that end we pledge to avoid any transactions that could be experienced as a “put-down,” thus rupturing our connection.

If we have a frustration, we will change it into a request and ask for what we want without criticism.

If we experience a rupture, we will send a gentle signal (bing, ouch, oops, wow!) to communicate that we have experienced a “put-down,” and then begin repairing the rupture by using the Reconnecting Process.

We pledge to gift each other with three appreciations each day, no matter what!

Signed: _____

Signed: _____

Date: _____

THE RECONNECTING PROCESS

Okay, now that you're taking the pledge, here are some options you can consider if you experience a put-down:

1. If you experience a put-down, communicate that to your partner with a gentle signal (bing, ouch, wow, oops!).
2. Then select a behavior that would restore the connection for you and engage your partner in the process until you feel connected.
3. There are various options to help reconnect:
 - Ask for a RE-DO. Take time out, start over, and re-do the transaction.
 - Model for your partner how s/he might RE-SEND the message so it doesn't produce a "put down."
 - Offer a RE-CONNECTING behavior, a single behavior like an apology, flowers, or a hug.
 - Create your own reconnecting process.

4. Conclude with an appreciation:

What repairs a "put down" for me: _____

What repairs a "put down" for my partner: _____

Remember:

The sign of a thriving relationship is how quickly you can reconnect!

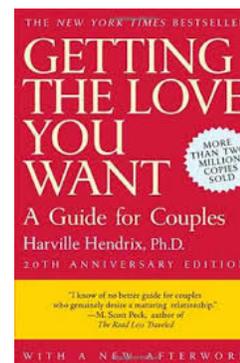
Create the Marriage of Your Dreams

Over 4 million copies sold! ***Getting the Love You Want*** is the *New York Times* bestselling classic that has helped millions of couples attain more loving relationships and experiences these results:

- Develop understanding and compassion for each other.
- Experience more joy together and feel a closer bond.
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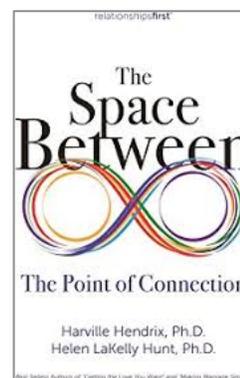


Do you have a nagging feeling that your relationship could be better? Maybe you're in a job transition, raising a child, or experiencing an empty nest. Or, you might be in the middle of a full-blown conflict.

The Space Between unveils the secret to experiencing the joy and wonder that belongs to every human being. Harville Hendrix and Helen LaKelly Hunt explain how the "space between" two people determines the quality of your relationship. And, the quality of your relationship determines the quality of your lives.

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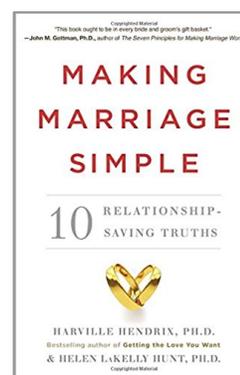
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In ***Making Marriage Simple***, Harville Hendrix and Helen LaKelly Hunt, share 10 essential truths they've learned to create a successful and satisfying relationship. Marriage is never easy, and a number of years ago, Harville and Helen found themselves on the brink of divorce. So, they put themselves back through the exercises they'd coached so many other couples through, saving their marriage, and helping them achieve a true partnership. Written with humor, compassion, and honesty, *Making Marriage Simple* is the blueprint to create a stronger, more satisfying partnership in today's world.

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About the Authors

Harville Hendrix Ph.D. is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Getting the Love You Want: A Guide for Couples*, *Keeping the Love You Find: A Personal Guide*, and with his wife, **Helen LaKelly Hunt Ph.D.**, *Giving the Love that Heals: A Guide for Parents*. Harville and Helen have written over 10 books with more than 3 million copies sold. In addition, Harville has appeared on the Oprah Winfrey television program 17 times.



Harville and Helen co-created Imago Relationship Therapy to promote the transformation of couples and families and create relational cultures that support universal equality. Together, they have developed a variety of resources to help couples, families, and educators strengthen their relationship knowledge and skills. In addition, they co-founded Imago Relationships International, a non-profit organization that has trained thousands of therapists in educators in 51 countries around the world.

Harville has over 40 years experience working as a couple's therapist, educator, clinical trainer, and lecturer. His educational background includes graduate degrees from Union Theological Seminary (NY), the University of Chicago, and a former professor at Southern Methodist University. In addition to being co-creator of Imago, Helen has been inducted into the Women's Hall of Fame for her support of the women's movement.

Harville and Helen have been married for 36 years and have six children and six grandchildren. They live in New York City and Dallas. For more information, visit:

<http://www.HarvilleandHelen.com>

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