

## **CHAPTER SEVEN:**

### **Laying Your Weapon Down**

As you learned in Chapter Six, beliefs of overall blame are at the top of the list of things that negatively impact relationships, though few people realize it. If you want your partner to become more caring and responsive to your needs, the first thing you may need to do is to lower the weapon you've got pointed at her head. Your "weapon" is the belief that your partner is more to blame than you for the less-than-desirable condition of your relationship. If this doesn't apply to you (i.e., you believe that you are just as much to blame as she is), you may be able to advance directly to the second phase of relationship transformation. But before you skip to the second phase consider this question: Regardless of whether you actually believe your partner is more to blame than you are, is it possible she thinks you believe it? If she suspects you think she's the main problem, your relationship may be suffering just as much as if you actually did believe it. If your partner suspects you believe that she is more to blame, the first phase of relationship transformation needs to involve you *explicitly acknowledging* that you are just as much to blame for the condition of the relationship as she is, and backing up your acknowledgment by discussing some of the specific things you have said and done over the course of your relationship that have been just as detrimental to your relationship as things she has done.

#### ***Exercise 1: Accepting Your Share of the Blame***

In our work with couples over the years, we've found that one of the best ways to begin reversing the damage of overall blame involves writing a letter to your partner in which you present a compelling case for why you don't think she is any more to blame for the unsatisfactory condition of your relationship than you are. Drawing upon the insights you gleaned from chapters 1-6, you'll describe the specific ways you've contributed to the current less-than-desirable condition of your relationship, and tell her why you have come to see your contributions as being just as significant as hers.

#### **Sample Format**

In writing your letter, you can use the following general format as a guide:

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

1. To be honest, in the past I believed you were the main problem in our relationship. I thought your behavior was more damaging than mine. (If this is not true, move on to #2) I'm writing this letter to let you know that I'm realizing I've been biased in my thinking, and I really don't have much room to talk. There's no justification for me to be riding on a high horse.

2. I'm realizing that in my own ways, my actions have been just as harmful to our relationship as yours have been. For example...

- Detail your detrimental disagreement-related habits. Own up to your bad habits, drawing on the information about the disagreement-related offenses summarized in [Table 6.2](#) on page 70.
- Talk also about the needed things ~~that~~ you have often failed to do during disagreements (i.e., the skills described in chapter two and summarized in [Appendix I, Table 1](#) on page 157).
- Give concrete, specific, credible examples of disagreements ~~that~~ you handled badly in order for your partner to sense that you really mean what you're saying rather than just going through the motions. This is the most important part of the letter.
- Acknowledge any Obvious Offenses you have committed (see page 51) and regret. You don't need to go into a lot of detail about them. Just let your partner know you realize that more extensive healing may need to happen because of your actions and you are willing to engage in whatever process may be needed to facilitate healing.
- Use the [Chart for Exercise 1](#) in Appendix III (p. 179) to help prepare your thoughts.<sup>1</sup>

3. If you're worried that your partner is going to be skeptical about your sincerity, consider saying something like...

*"Please understand that I still feel that many of my complaints about you are valid, and I know that for me to feel better about our relationship, I'm going to need to feel more caring from you than I've been feeling for quite a while now. I'm just realizing more clearly that I haven't exactly made it easy for you to care about me, and many times, I have failed to care about you, too. In fact, I've acted in ways that have been downright disrespectful to you. I've done my share of things that have been detrimental to our relationship, and I want to take responsibility for them."*

(Explanation: Throughout the letter, you will be talking about your own faults and owning up to your share of the blame. It's likely that across time, your partner has been hearing you say things [verbally or attitudinally] that seem directly opposite to what you are saying in this letter. In other words, she has been hearing you talk about *her* faults, and implying *she* is the main problem. Now all of a sudden you are saying something dramatically different. In fact, it may be so different that your partner may think you are not sincere. She may think you are just doing what the exercise requires and that it would look politically incorrect if you didn't follow the instructions. For this reason, it can be good for you to keep it real by reminding her that you still feel many of your complaints about her are valid.)

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<sup>1</sup> Appendix III charts are downloadable in Word format at <http://thecouplesclinic.com/dhrs-charts/>.

4. If you're worried that your partner is going to interpret this letter as an admission that you are the main problem, you can say something like...

*"Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that I'm more to blame for our problems than you are. I think you've done your share of things too. I'm writing this letter to own up to my share of the blame, and to let you know ~~that~~ I feel bad about the things I've done that have been hurtful to you."*

5. I want you to know ~~that~~ I intend to do better, and that if situations come up where I don't like the way you are thinking or acting, I'm going to try to talk to you about it in a more respectful way than I have done in the past.
6. End by letting your partner know that you are hopeful, you still want to be close to her, and you're ready to give this process everything you have. For example, you might say things like...

- "I still remember how good our relationship has felt in the past and I want to get to that place again."
- "When we're not connected, life doesn't feel right to me."
- "I need your love, and I'm willing to do everything I can to earn it back."
- "I hate the fact that I have made you so miserable. You are beautiful and vibrant (fill in your descriptions of how your partner is when she's at her best), and I feel awful knowing that I've squashed that in you."

## Reluctant?

Some people are reluctant to "go on record" about their faults and to publicly admit mutual culpability for the unsatisfactory condition of their relationships. These people often say things like, "Do I really need to write it down? Isn't it enough for me to realize that I've done my share of damage and for me to make changes from now on?" The answer is – you really need to write it down. There is something very important in your willingness to swallow your pride and explicitly accept your share of the blame. If you are like most people who write acknowledgement letters, you will look back later and recognize that your letter was an important turning point in your relationship. You'll find that the letter symbolized how serious you were in your intent to take the steps needed to heal your relationship. In retrospect, you'll likely see that the letter-writing process helped you to become clearer in your mind about the specific ways you contributed to the unsatisfactory condition of your relationship, and it helped you articulate the reasons why your attitude and actions were just as damaging as your partner's.

For many people, it's not easy to put themselves on the same level as their partners when it comes to the question of blame. It seems to be human nature to want to retain the upper hand.

## Common Sources of Hesitation

Let's review some common reasons why people are often reluctant to acknowledge responsibility.

**1. "I don't want to let my partner off the hook. I'm concerned that she will use it as license to do whatever she wants!"**

If you have this reservation, you may believe that your anger and resentment keeps your partner on her best behavior, and that the only thing that keeps her in check is the fact that she is "in the doghouse." Usually, the opposite is the case. Most people whose partners put them in the doghouse don't really think they should be there. While some of them may outwardly accept blame, inwardly they resent their partners' villainizing beliefs, and this prevents them from caring about their partners' feelings. The best way to get your partner to treat you well in the future isn't by keeping her in the doghouse -- it's by standing up for yourself in a respectful way -- something you have probably been unable to do in the past with as much skill as was needed. Sooner or later your partner will do things that are upsetting to you regardless of whether you try to keep her on the hook or not, and you are going to need to improve your ability to stand up for yourself skillfully. When you do, your partner will likely be more responsive *unless she's carrying resentment from being villainized by you.*

**2. I don't want to give my partner the impression that her actions have been acceptable in any way.**

An important part of your letter may involve you clarifying that you aren't really letting your partner off the hook with your letter -- you're putting yourself on the hook beside her. You may need to clarify that you still feel that the way she acted was wrong, and you're not going to be able to move forward with your relationship unless she is willing to make some changes. But at the same time you need to assure her that you realize that you also need to make some changes. You have both likely been caught in a vicious cycle where *feeling* disrespected justifies being disrespectful in turn. It might not seem that you have treated her as disrespectfully as she has treated you, but this is likely because your form of disrespect has been different from hers. Remember that some forms of disrespect are more aggressive while others are more passive and inwardly judgmental.

**3. I can acknowledge my faults, but my feelings of resentment aren't going to go away overnight. I don't want my partner to get the idea that all is forgiven.**

The realization and acknowledgment that you are as much to blame for the unsatisfactory condition of your relationship as your partner won't necessarily make you feel less resentful to-

ward your partner. Just because you accept mutual responsibility for your relationship problems doesn't mean you can lower the shield you've developed over time to guard your heart. You won't be able to feel truly safe with your partner until you sense that she genuinely cares about your feelings and feels regret about the hurts she's caused. But your partner won't be able to genuinely care about your feelings as long as you have the weapon of overall blame pointed at her head. Lowering your weapon (by acknowledging your mutual culpability) is the first step in a cascade that will eventually result in the healing of resentments. Acknowledgement of mutual blame is a necessary first step – regardless of how heartfelt the acknowledgement is.

#### **4. I'm afraid that my partner will try to use information from the letter against me later.**

You may feel hesitant to acknowledge your faults because there is a risk your partner will use information from your letter against you at a later time. For example, you may worry if you admit that you have often been defensive in the past, your partner may claim that your self-acknowledged defensiveness is the reason for your relationship problems. People who are skillful in relationships don't worry about this because they know how to stand up for themselves. If their partners try to use the acknowledgment of faults against them, rather than getting defensive they acknowledge the truth in their partners' claims (e.g., "I indeed have often been defensive"). But they don't stop there. They also note that their partners don't have any room to act high and mighty because they also have had damaging relationship habits. If pressed, skillful people are prepared to give specific details of their partners' harmful habits or actions *while continuing to acknowledge their own faults*. This combination is amazingly powerful, and you may need to feel more confident that you can implement it before you are comfortable writing a letter in which you acknowledge your faults. A skilled therapist can help you prepare to stand up for yourself effectively in the event that your partner tries to use your acknowledgements against you later.

### **Things to consider while composing your letter**

1. Try to avoid using the sample phrases offered above and use your own words.
2. Keep the main purpose of the letter in the forefront of your mind: To make a compelling case for why you are just as responsible for the depleted condition of your relationship as your partner is.

**Q:** What should I do if I'm not really convinced that I have contributed as much to the depleted condition of our relationship as your partner has?

**A:** Above all, be honest. Don't say it if you don't mean it. There are stronger and weaker statements about blame that you can make, but the bottom line is this: Any recognition of the possibility that you may have

done more damage through your own actions than you previously realized will be valuable. Just go as far as you can.

Here's an example of a strong statement:

- "I'm realizing that I have done just as much damage to our relationship as you have."

Here are some examples of weaker-but-still-valuable statements:

- "I'm really struggling with the idea that I have done just as much damage as you have, but I want you to know that I'm really considering it and I realize my emotions may be biasing me from being able to see things objectively. Either way, my eyes are certainly more open to what my faults are..."
- "Our therapist seems to think I have done just as much damage to our relationship as you have. I'm having a hard time accepting this, but I'm really trying to be open to it. Obviously our therapist has a lot of experience and knowledge and I think it would be stupid for me to dismiss the idea out of hand just because I don't like it."

### 3. Be clear about what the letter is not:

- It is not intended to be a comprehensive accounting of every single instance of your faults or transgressions across the years. Simply write enough to give your partner a sense that you really do feel you have done as much damage to the relationship as she has (or that you are at least openly considering the possibility that you have done as damage as she has).
- Acknowledge the most significant things:
  - a) Be sure you acknowledge any obvious offenses you may have committed (see page 51).
  - b) Acknowledge and give examples of any damaging habits you have repeatedly enacted during disagreements over the course of your relationship (see [Table 6.2](#) on page 70).
  - c) Talk about the needed things you have often failed to do during disagreements (i.e., the skills described in chapter two and summarized in [Appendix I, Table 1](#) on page 157).

## Preparing to Share Your Letter with Your Partner

Your partner may or may not be doing this letter exercise along with you. Regardless of whether she's doing it or not, it is in your best interest to prepare a letter for her, and to read it aloud to her if she's willing to listen. Owning up to your share of the blame will have an impact on her regardless of whether she is ready to do the same at this point. In fact, your willingness to own up may serve as a catalyst for her to follow suit.

As important as the content of your letter is, the way you deliver the letter is equally important. That's why I'm suggesting you take the time to read your letter to your partner out loud. Your words will be important, but she'll also be sensing your attitude and degree of heart-felt sincerity. Here are some suggestions for you to consider as you prepare to read your letter to her:

1. Read your letter slowly.
2. Pause frequently to make eye contact.
3. Speak from your heart, not just your head.
4. If you feel yourself getting emotional, don't try to suck it up. Your partner will benefit from sensing that the things you are talking about have emotional significance for you.
5. Don't be confined to what you have written. If additional words come to you while you are reading, add them. Sometimes the most meaningful words are not the ones you have carefully planned. In fact, you may not want to read your letter at all. Instead, write it carefully, then make a list of talking points from it and use them as prompts to speak about specific things.
6. Consider the possibility that your partner may remember the moments when you read your letter to her for the rest of her life. It may very well be a peak experience for her. You may say things you have never said to her before – things she had resigned herself to assuming she was never going to hear from you. These letters can be powerful turning points in relationships, and it's possible that if you speak from your heart, you may sense an immediate shift in her attitude.
7. However, although the odds are good that your partner will appreciate your letter, don't be surprised if her reaction isn't uniformly positive, and don't conclude that your letter was worthless if her first reactions aren't enthusiastic. Occasionally, when listening to a letter, something can keep a person from taking it all in right away. Self-protective mechanisms kick in that prevent this person from allowing herself to trust what she is hearing. Keep in mind that even if this happens, beneath the surface your partner is likely being moved in ways that aren't obvious. She's just afraid to trust what she's hearing. Have faith that you are doing the right thing even if it doesn't seem to be making a difference right away.

## Preparing to Listen to Your Partner's Letter

If you and your partner are doing this letter exercise together, she may soon be reading her letter to you. Here are some suggestions to help prepare you for listening:

1. Her letter will probably stir feelings of hopefulness in you (or at least some parts of her letter). Don't be reserved about letting her know you feel encouraged by her words and attitude. She's doing a hugely important thing in attempting to identify and acknowledge her faults. Even if you feel her letter could be stronger, focus on the fact that any version of this letter is better than no letter at all. It's a step in the right direction, and you want to reinforce her actions.
2. Be prepared for the possibility that some of the feelings that come up inside of you may also be negative. You might fear she's being less than sincere or fully truthful. You might feel there are hidden statements she's making between the lines. You might be disappointed that there are things she failed to address. If you have negative reactions while listening to her...
  - Keep in mind that your reactions may say more about your fears and reluctance to trust than it does about your partner's willingness and sincerity to assume her share of responsibility. If this is true, there would be nothing more demoralizing than for her to put her guts into this process only to be rebuffed by you.
  - Decide ahead of time that you will acknowledge if you are having mixed feelings, but not go into detail about them. If some of your reactions are negative, it's likely they will not be *uniformly* negative — there will be points you feel good about as well. Focus on a) verbalizing the positive feelings, b) acknowledging ~~that~~ you are having some negative ones as well, and c) asking for some time to digest the negative ones before discussing them. You might make a statement like...

*"To be honest, I'm having a wide range of feelings right now and I may need a little while to process them before I can verbalize them. But I will say this. I really appreciate your willingness to consider these things and you have addressed some things that are really important to me. I feel really good about that. To be honest, I'm also having difficulty trusting some things you're saying, but it could be just my fear from past experiences and I'm going to sit with those feelings for a while and see if they ease up. I don't want them to squash out the positive ones I'm having because they are there, too."*

## **Are You Ready?**

If after reading this chapter, you're reluctant to acknowledge your faults and/or to let your partner know that you believe that you're just as responsible as she is for the unsatisfactory condition of your relationship, consider this: Write the letter just for yourself (and perhaps to share with your therapist), delaying the decision as to whether you will share the letter with your partner or not. The decision should be entirely yours. Even if you decide not to share your letter with your partner, the process of writing it will help you clarify your own thoughts (and it may help your therapist see where you are in your thinking). If you have a therapist, discuss any reservations you may have about writing this letter with him or her.