

A Matter of Choice



Deciding: to be right or be married?

By Terry Real • There's an ancient saying that's profoundly applicable to couples therapy: the laws of nature are like a miller's wheel—they'll grind you to powder, unless you learn to be the miller. In our close relationships, the laws of nature that threaten to grind our love into powder are the multigenerational legacies that come to us, unbidden, in those moments when we're least responsible and our actions are most automatic. The crux of the difficulties couples experience is the playing out, in ways large and small, of those unresolved feelings of childhood: pain, rawness, fright, anger.

"Jimmy, why don't you tell Terry what *really* happened?" Julie says in a tight voice, twisting in her chair to confront her husband. With black hair and ice-blue eyes, 36-year-old Julie is as Boston Irish as a cold beer at Fenway Park, and about that frosty.

"You go ahead; you tell him," Jimmy grumbles, trying to sound tough. At 41, six feet, five inches, and an easy 260 pounds, he looks like a linebacker gone to fat. In her stocking feet, Julie might clear five one or two, but beneath his bluster, Jimmy seems afraid of her. Watching her lean into conflict with a hard smile on her face, I'm a little afraid of her, too.

"No, Jimmy," she insists, her voice hard, "you tell it. Just do it right."

"I thought I was," he says.

Julie had called me about two months earlier, complaining that their bickering was out of control. Now, in this, our fourth session, she and her husband are doing a great job of letting me see what she meant by that. They're describing what should have been a fun waterskiing afternoon with their 8-year-old daughter the previous weekend.

"Where was Chloe?" Julie demands, turning to face Jimmy full on.

“What? Why are you—? She was in the water,” Jimmy answers.

“What was she doing?”

“Jeezus!” Jimmy’s eyes dart around the room as if looking for an escape route. “Skiing, Julie,” he responds. “You were in the water with her. I was in the boat and you were in the water right next to her.”

“Was she crying, Jimmy? Was your daughter crying?”

Jimmy lets out a sigh befitting his size. Suddenly he looks like a Tibetan Hungry Ghost to me—a big blob of a creature with a tiny little mouth; all the air has gone out of him.

“What was she crying about?” Julie continues relentlessly. “What was Chloe crying about?”

“Me, no doubt,” Jimmy tries sarcasm. “She was crying about her out-of-control father.”

“We were heading toward the propeller, Jimmy!” Julie yells, dropping her payload. “The propeller you wouldn’t turn off.”

“You were a good 30 feet away!” Jimmy yells right back.

“She was frightened,” Julie responds undeterred.

“You could have settled her down,” says Jimmy

“And you could have turned off the motor till I did, like I asked you to,” Julie concludes harshly, blame incontestably shooting from her eyes.

Jimmy frowns and sighs again. He has no reasonable comeback to this, though the scowl on his face indicates that he no longer considers this a reasonable conversation anyway.

Who’s Right?

Here’s the back story. Chloe was learning to water-ski. Mom was in the water with her; Dad was in the boat. Chloe had almost gotten up a couple of times, but she was nervous, scared of hitting the water, scared she wouldn’t get it right, and scared of the propeller. “Which wasn’t turning,” Jimmy insists.

So Chloe was afraid, but then again she has a lot of fears; she's an anxious, slightly obsessive-compulsive kind of kid. Julie told Jimmy to turn off the motor. He ignored her. She said it again. He looked at his daughter. "Chloe, you have the rope, right? Just lean back and I'll pull you up this time."

"She's not ready," insisted Julie.

"She would be if you'd just shut up," Jimmy called back, evoking a chorus from both mother and daughter simultaneously: "Dad!" "Jimmy!" And that was it for him for the rest of the afternoon.

Jimmy hauled his daughter into the boat. Julie followed along with a muttered string of invectives. Then no one spoke a word, while Dad drove his sullen, defeated family back to the pier. It could have been worse. Three months before, after such a challenge by this coalition of females, Jimmy would have headed back and popped open a beer, which would have led to a few more, and then a few more after that. Now he's one month sober and a sporadic attendee of AA meetings. His newfound abstinence hasn't pulled him back from the brink of divorce, however. Listening to them and watching them, I can see why.

At times like this, Jimmy and Julie have been completely taken over by what we at the Relational Life Institute call "Whoosh!"—being emotionally triggered, and completely losing it. We also call it "first consciousness"—the instantaneous knee-jerk reaction, the unconsidered, visceral response, to an emotional trigger. It's the miller's wheel. Whoosh comes up from the feet like a wave washing over you, creating a pit in your stomach, a tremor in your hands, a reddening in your face. It's highly physical and totally convincing. When Jimmy and Julie are screaming at each other, whether on the water or in my office, they're truly lost—lost to each other, and lost to themselves.

At first glance, they look like they're fighters, but really their whoosh is a two-step pattern. First they fight, and then, once it becomes clear that neither of them is going to get anywhere, they withdraw in different ways: Julie turns to the kids, and, until recently, Jimmy turned to the bottle.

Most couples who come to see me are on the brink, like Jimmy and Julie. Luckily for them, we specialize in pulling couples back, working with intractable partners to produce quick,

dramatic change in their marriages. Our model, Relational Life Therapy (RLT), does this by focusing on restoring connection.

All couples therapy welcomes increased connection between partners, but RLT tracks the patterns of connection and disconnection explicitly and single-mindedly. We see authentic connection as our natural state and birthright. Closeness is our therapy's compass. When we watch a couple behave like Jimmy and Julie, we're looking at what we call "relational deformities," the characteristic ways each partner obstructs or pulls away from the satisfaction and vulnerabilities of that simple state of connection. All other considerations—the particular stressors, family dynamics, communication patterns—while important, are secondary. From an RLT perspective, the critical questions for each partner to consider are: *What do I do that pulls me out of that state of connectedness?* and, *What do I need to do to return to it?* But even asking those questions, let alone answering them, demands something beyond whoosh, something more than first consciousness. Couples have to see themselves in the moments of disconnection, and remind themselves that they want something different, something more.

"Look," I tell Jimmy and Julie later in the session, laying out for them the particulars of their relational deformity and how they collide. "When you're busy screaming at each other, it's Self-righteous Indignation Meets Self-righteous Indignation. That goes on until you've had enough, and then it turns into Disgusted Withdrawal Meets Disgusted Withdrawal. Both halves of this pattern suck."

"So, what are we supposed to do about it?" asks Jimmy.

I look at them both for a moment, he hulking and put-upon, she restive and sharp. "Wake up," I tell them. "What you need to do is wake up."

Awakening the Consciousness Within

A central insight of RLT is that what matters in couples' interactions isn't primarily external circumstance—for example, whether the boat's motor should or shouldn't have been turned off. What matters isn't even primarily the dance between the partners, like Self-Righteous Indignation Meets Self-Righteous Indignation, or Withdrawal Meets Withdrawal. What

matters most occurs not between the partners at all, but within them. The question is: which part of the person is talking—the mature, present-based part (associated with the prefrontal cortex), which wants a solution, or the immature-child part (associated with the limbic system), which wants to be proven right, control his or her partner, or vent frustration, anger, contempt, and self-righteousness?

Implicit in RLT's focus on internal states is the belief that people can change those states, but changing them is a matter of choice and practice. This is different from most forms of therapy, which consider issues like shame, grandiosity, and triggering fairly intractable—structural parts of a person's character. In RLT, we see character itself not as deeply wired-in structure, but as nothing more than one's internalized repertoire of relationships. Common wisdom has it that the goal of couples work is behavioral or systemic change. If you want deep character change, you must do one-on-one therapy, often for months or years. By contrast, we work to change the system by transforming the consciousness of those within it, using relational mindfulness.

I'd argue that increased relationality—connectedness to self and others—is the very definition of character transformation. RLT uses the data from the actual relationship and the leverage of being in relationship as the crucible in which relationality is taught and practiced. This method makes no distinction between intrapsychic and interpersonal work; they're flip sides of the same coin.

Following the work of my mentor, Pia Mellody, RLT personifies the refractory, immature part of us as the “adaptive child,” a conglomerate of all those inner parts that developed during childhood to help us adapt to our families as we grew up. The adaptive child is our first consciousness, our knee-jerk reaction: fight, or flight. It's what Austrian-American psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich (of Orgone Box fame) would have called our Character Armor, what psychiatrist James Masterson called our Character Defense. Our adaptive child has everything to do with our family role and our childhood experience. It's first consciousness in action, the repository for all our trigger points and hot buttons.

One hears all the time about how marriage will “push your buttons,” but rarely is the nature of those buttons described. Let's go back to the waterskiing incident. Julie's request that Jimmy turn off the motor was simply a fact, an occurrence. That's the button's first layer.

Jimmy, like all of us, then gave meaning to that occurrence. He told himself a story in which he was (unfairly) mistrusted. The meaning Jimmy gave to the occurrence is the button's second layer. Why is Jimmy prone to ascribe that particular meaning to the incident? It should come as no great surprise to learn that his mother was critical and controlling. She found fault with much of what he did; she was continually in his face about what he should have done or how he should have done it, whether homework, behavior at the dinner table, or who his friends were. Family-of-origin resonance is the third layer of his button. Jimmy adapted to his mother's intrusion with anger and rebellion, treating her pretty much the way he now treats his wife, with sullen resistance or open defiance. Similarly, he flat-out refuses to honor his wife's request and turn off the motor because, in that moment, he's back asserting his much-challenged autonomy against his controlling mother. In other words, he's been completely taken over by his adaptive child.

Here's the bitter pill: the adaptive-child part of you has no interest in intimacy; it's wary, doesn't like feeling vulnerable, and is preoccupied, above all, with self-protection. None of these traits sustains a loving, trusting, relationship. I have a favorite question I use with volatile partners: "You can be right or you can be married, what's more important to you?" Ask that of the adaptive child and the answer is instantaneous: "Being right isn't the most important thing: it's the only thing."

In moments of whoosh, like the incident between Julie and Jimmy on the water, most couples don't manage to find a solution because once their immature parts take over, they're no longer interested in solution; other agendas have hijacked love. Through RLT, we teach couples to identify 5 of those self-protective, vulnerability-avoiding, relationship-ruining agendas:

- Being right
- Controlling your partner
- Unbridled self-expression
- Retaliation
- Withdrawal
- RLT also teaches 5 winning strategies:
- Going after what you want
- Speaking for repair

- Listening with compassion
- Responding with generosity
- Cherishing

The winning strategies are all effective, but only if they're used! How do we help clients get into a frame of mind that allows them to consider and then act on these strategies?

Beyond the Knee-Jerk Reaction

The critical first step, when one feels the pull of whoosh taking over, we call “remembering love”—reminding yourself that the person you’re speaking to is someone you love. Or, if that’s a step too far, then at least recalling that you must live with that person, and that you’re speaking to reduce the current impasse and make things better. Before blasting your partner, ask yourself this crucial question: *Wait! Why am I talking?* If you’re talking to prove that you’re right, control your partner, vent excessively, retaliate, or flee, then it’s better to shut up. By asking someone like Jimmy or Julie to take up the practice of mindfulness in heated moments of whoosh, we invite them literally to stop their old selves in their tracks—take a walk around the block, splash some water on their faces, breathe, have a little chat with themselves, and come back when they really want to work things out.

Remembering love is precisely what Julie and Jimmy aren’t doing when they yell at each other, nor when they stomp off in disgust. I’m not suggesting that all my clients learn to go from attacking each other to feeling all gushy inside every waking moment. But when a couple like Julie and Jimmy reach for second consciousness, when they practice relational mindfulness, they begin to commit to what we call “full-respect living,” neither dishing out nor passively tolerating disrespectful words or behaviors. Gushy love all the time? No. Respect in both directions? Twenty-four/seven. As we teach the practice of relational mindfulness, we help bring clients like Jimmy and Julie into nonviolent lives—nonviolent between them and others, and nonviolent between their ears—because you can’t simultaneously remember love and do violence to someone you care about. Mindfulness is a violence-dissolver.

Another difference between responses is that first consciousness is always linear: someone’s doing something to you, or you to them, and the natural logic is a straight line toward retaliation or escape. Second consciousness, by contrast, is ecological: you don’t

see yourself or your partner as standing apart from the two-person system and controlling it. In all of our relationships, whether within a marriage, a family, a work environment, or a community, we're parts of systems and living inside them. What we chose to do or not do in one place has consequences for us in another. Your release of emotionally toxic energy in the living room results in your partner's coolness in the bedroom later on.

So, in the moment when Jimmy is arguing with Julie, he's angry, quickly shedding his adult self, and reverting back to his negative, childhood-based, self-protective state of being. How does he rescue himself, reclaim his adult self, and shift the tenor of the exchange before it's past all hope of repair? He does all this simply by being aware and bringing mindfulness—the exercise of meta-attention and self-reflection—into play in moments of whoosh.

Let's go back to the session in which they describe the boating incident. Jimmy is trying to explain himself and getting into quite a state as he does so.

"Look," he tells me, "I know I'm supposed to be big about it," (Jimmy's phrase for second consciousness), but I mean, give me a break. Her need for control drives me insane, OK?"

"Actually, Jim, it's not OK," I say. "You're in two counts of boundary failure, but we'll get back to that. First, I want you to do something for me."

"You want me to breathe," he says, the put-upon student.

"Close your eyes," I answer. "Slow your breathing down a bit and deepen it a little." He does so. We can all feel the immediate shift in the room's emotional temperature. "Now—."

"I know—."

"Let me say it. Take your breath and bring it into your heart. Imagine your healing breath bathing your heart. Got it?" He nods. "OK, Jimmy, now breathe yourself out of all that angry-victim stuff. Nobody drives anybody anything. Who's responsible for your feelings?" I ask. This is, by now, an old question between us.

"I am," he says.

“Keep your eyes closed. Now I want you to work on bringing yourself down; down from all that righteousness and contempt. Ya there?”

“I am.”

“Good,” I say. “Open your eyes.” He does, turning to look at his wife. “Now Jimmy,” I add, “from this place, talk to your wife.”

He turns on the couch to face Julie and reaches out his big hands so she can place her tiny hands in them, which she does.

“Honey,” he begins (letting her know that he cherishes her).

“That’s better,” I mutter from the sideline.

“Julie, if you’re scared, just say so. Don’t boss me around or try to control me” (going for what he wants).

“But you’re so reckless,” Julie wails.

“Hey Julie,” I say, “How about a change in your tone?”

“But he is reckless,” she protests.

“I’m still on your tone,” I persist. She takes a deep breath.

“James,” she says more softly. “I’ll try to do that. And you can help by giving me less to be frightened of” (asking for what she wants).

“Well done,” I observe.

“Jules,” Jimmy says, talking as softly as she does, “I don’t want to scare you” (speaking for repair).

“Then just stop—.” Julie starts to crank it up, but catches herself (a moment of second consciousness). “Try to keep that in mind, Jim. OK? I appreciate it,” she says, more calmly and generously.

“Nice work.” I conclude. “Nice save there, Julie.”

She smiles, clearly pleased. “It was a hail-Mary pass,” she confesses.

The Importance of Tone

In these sessions, both Julie and Jim use a host of skills not all that different from those taught in couples therapists offices everywhere: speaking from the “I,” letting go of objective reality, negotiating their needs. But the particular skills are less important than their willingness to use them in the first place, less important than their changed internal state. That’s why we pay so much attention to tone. Tone trumps content, because tone will tell you where the person is inside. The tone we look for in a session is simply a switch from their usual: you want the weak, one-down, shame-based client to sit straight and speak up; you want the strong, one-up, dominating client to become more open and soft. Sitting with these two fighters as they began waking up to second consciousness, I knew that this is a state of mind that rarely comes spontaneously; it must be sought out and cultivated through hard work. Here’s how Jimmy describes it in a later session.

“So I come home after being away on a business trip, OK? I’ve got a heavy bag on my shoulder; I’m tired. She meets me at the door in a state, you know: ‘I’ve been alone with the kids for three days! You barely called!’—the whole nine yards. Now, in a former life—,” he says, leaning forward.

“The old Jimmy—,” I respond, joining with him, and underscoring the change.

“Exactly, the old me,” he agrees. “It would have been, ‘Who the hell do you think you are!? I come home after bustin’ my tail putting food on our table—,” he grins. “You get it?”

“Self-Righteous Indignation Meets Self-Righteous Indignation,” I say.

“Exactly. But now,” he says, “another part of me chimes in. It’s literally—I don’t know how it is for other people, but for me it’s literally like a voice in my head.”

“Which says?” I prompt. His grin widens.

“‘Shut the eff up,’ is what it says—. ‘Jimmy, just shut up!’”

“That’s called containment,” I tell him.

“OK, yeah, anyway,” he says, “I breathe, like you told me. Exactly. I breathe into my heart. I bring myself down from all that—.”

“Contempt,” I suggest, “anger. Big angry victim.”

“All that stuff. I put up a boundary. Her shit’s her shit, not mine. But respectfully,” he’s quick to add.

“You hold her in warm regard,” I offer.

“And why not?” he agrees. “We all have our days, right? She was alone with the kids for three days. So, instead of my usual gettin’ all pissy, I—.”

“Ask yourself,” I add unable to contain myself. “What could I say or do right now—”

“—that would be constructive, i.e., pertinent to the current situation,” he completes in his own words.

“And so you say,” I prompt.

“Honey, I’m sorry. Where are the kids now? What can I do to help?”

“What can I do to help?” I repeat, in a tone of awe, marveling.

“And she melts. Terry, I’m telling you. On the spot; she just melts.”

I regard him admiringly. “A-plus, young man,” I tell him, nodding. “Who’d a thunk it?”

Julie, quiet this whole time, raises her hand, a schoolgirl.

“I would have,” she exclaims, “I knew it!” Then she catches her own enthusiasm and grows sheepish. “Well, not for a while maybe, but once, once upon a time.”

The voice Jimmy heard, the one telling him to shut up, was the voice of second consciousness, his adult self, the best part of him—and the only part of him interested in using relational skills. That voice came to him because, under guidance, Jimmy had learned to pause for a second, contain his impulsive actions or words, and tune in to a part of

himself that was healthier, smarter, more loving. The shift from first to second consciousness, from a knee-jerk response to a thoughtful one, is relational mindfulness. It's the skill from which all other relational skills derive.

Mindfulness has been described as a state of meta-attention: attention to what we pay attention to, a state of self-awareness in which we watch our own thoughts and feelings without judgment or control. In RLT, we believe that this self-awareness is a prerequisite for all other shifts in thinking, feeling, or behavior. It's implicit in all therapies that teach either cognitive or behavioral change; but in RLT, we not only make the implicit explicit, we teach people how to do it—how to pause, think, breathe, and choose. Relational mindfulness gives us the freedom of choice.

At first, Jimmy's recitation might sound simple. He just paused for a second and responded better. But a closer look reveals that there's actually quite a bit packed into his narrative. He stops to breathe. He uses both aspects of a psychological boundary: containing himself ("Shut the eff up") and protecting himself from Julie's emotional upset ("Her shit's hers and not mine"). He can combine boundary work with healthy self-esteem, holding his wife in warm regard, even while protecting himself from her emotional energy. Finally, he keeps his eyes on the prize. Realizing that self-righteous indignation was going to lead to the same old same old between them, he gives up the momentary pleasure of being right for the greater pleasure of a decent evening together. All of his internal work culminates in his offer: "Where are the kids? Let me help out." The behavioral shift is the punchline, but the critical change first occurs between his ears.

Changing the Relational Dance

Let's take another look at what we call full-respect living, a pledge to manifest in our actions the principle of healthy self-esteem, seeing ourselves as neither better nor worse than anyone else. The inner benefits of standing up to disrespectful treatment, like the benefits of coming up from shame, are obvious. But it took Jimmy a while to get clear about the psychological benefits of bringing himself down from the seductive one-up position of righteousness and grandiosity. Why is this good for the person doing it? Because, I explain to him, the emotional energy on both poles—up or down, shame or grandiosity—is toxic. In fact, it's the same energy, the energy of contempt, in both its complementary forms. When

contempt is directed inward toward ourselves, we call that shame; when it's directed outward toward others, we call it grandiosity.

Teaching Jimmy the practice of relational mindfulness—to stop, breathe, and reach for door B, for something better—invited him to step away from indulging contempt in either direction. “Look,” I tell him in one of our early sessions, “here’s how it works in my own life. I’m driving and some SOB cuts in front of me and then slows down just to make me wait. Now, in a former day, I’d have thought nothing of pulling alongside him, rolling down my window, and letting him have it. But now, I breathe myself down from all that one-up stuff, all that righteous anger. And I say to myself, as I look at this driver’s annoying little head through my windshield, I say, ‘I’m not doing this for your sake. I’m not coming down from contempt because you deserve it, but because I deserve it. I’ve had enough contempt in my life. I grew up with it. I internalized it. It became my depression. I’ve ruined relationships by indulging it. No thanks,’ I breathe myself down, as I say to myself, ‘Hey, I can live without it.’”

For most of us, learning to live relationally—practicing relational mindfulness, living with boundaries, exhibiting healthy self-esteem, committing to full-respect living, trading in five losing strategies for five winning ones—takes a few years. I tell clients it’s on a par with learning any complex skill in adulthood, like how to ski or play the piano. That’s the bad news. But there are a couple of pieces of good news as well. First, you needn’t spend those three to five years in therapy. RLT therapy generally lasts a matter of weeks, not months or years. The practice of relational mindfulness occurs mostly outside the office, and after a time, the client begins to work through his or her own process. Second, the practice of stopping oneself, taking a breath, and changing course allows us to begin using all of the skills involved in learning to live relationally, and these skills, starting with relational mindfulness itself, are so effective and so wildly different from what happens in the culture at large that even doing them badly will transform our relationships.

And we can begin doing them badly right now. By focusing on changing consciousness, and, in particular, by teaching clients to bring themselves down from the one-up position of grandiosity, RLT therapists routinely see clients decide to change egregious behaviors they’ve engaged in their whole lives—like being verbally abusive—and stop the old behavior permanently. As Jimmy practices reaching for and listening to that new voice inside, rage is

no longer *the* response but *a* response. Cleavage begins to appear between his sense of self, his “I,” and his first-consciousness behavior.

The therapeutic work involves confronting each partner’s relational deformities, unearthing the fit between them, taking the current dance back into the family of origin, where each partner’s adaptive child was born, and teaching the partners about relational mindfulness and the components of living a relational life. Then it moves on to practicing mindfulness in the office with them, encouraging them to practice it outside in their lives, working with their resistance (their adaptive child selves), and amplifying progress (their functional adult selves), so that the “old Jimmy” begins to yield to the “new Jimmy,” the aware Jimmy—Jimmy the mindfulness practitioner.

“So,” I ask them both later. “You’re in the water. Chloe’s upset. You’re both upset, but you come to your senses. You’re not each other’s enemies; you’re a team. What do you do differently?”

Julie brightens up. “I explain to my husband—as I didn’t at the time—that Chloe is scared of the motor, and I ask him nicely—as I didn’t at the time—to turn it off for a sec.”

“And you?” I ask Jimmy. He doesn’t answer. Instead, he pauses dramatically and holds up the pointer finger of his right hand.

“See this finger?” he asks. “This finger,” he tells us, “can push a button that turns the motor off. And this very same finger can push the very same button to turn it back on again. That’s it. That’s all it takes. This finger. But first I have to pull it outa my—.”

“First consciousness?” I offer.

Jimmy grins. “Exactly.”

Terry Real, L.I.C.S.W., Good Morning, America’s relationship expert, founded the Relational Life Institute, and he’s a senior faculty member of the Family Institute of Cambridge. His books include The New Rules of Marriage: What You Need to Make Love Work.

Contact: tsullivan@relationallife.com. Tell us what you think about this article by e-mail at letters@psychnetworker.org, or at www.psychotherapynetworker.org. Log in and you’ll find the comment section on every page of the online Magazine.

