

## *Part six*

### *changing within a relationship*

One of the secrets of equable marriage is to accept one's partner for the person he or she is. Each can have only what the other has to offer. Expecting more leads to frustration and disappointment.

Susan Needham, Chairman,  
London Marriage Guidance Council 1990-1995



## Love is not enough

Relationships *always* bring our individual procedures to a head. Whether they are relationships with people at work, in groups, within our families or with friends. And intimate relationships are most likely to press us on the core pain we carry: on our fears associated with getting close, feeling dependent or needy, our fear of rejection or abandonment, of feeling jealous and envious. It's possible, through revision of our individual procedures and the way these interact with those of our partners, to elicit changes that free us to enjoy relating.

It seems too that collectively we need to make relationships with others in a clearer way. Duty, religious belief, social tradition or just love are not enough to sustain relationships through the current times in which we live, and the basis upon which people live together must meet a new challenge. The increasing divorce rate and the number of children born outside marriage, together with a sense that the family has failed, points to a human struggle about relating. While this book will not debate political or sociological issues, Cognitive Analytic Therapy can contribute ideas about how we might establish more flexible relationships with ourselves and with others. By understanding the interplay of reciprocal roles, we change how we become entangled or enmeshed with other's roles.

### **Idealisation and reality in relationships**

In his book *Love is Never Enough*, Aaron Beck (1988) writes about how marriage or intimate relationships differ from other relationships. He describes how the intensity of living with someone fuels dormant longings for unconditional love, loyalty and support, and sets up expectations and desires. These are often based on an idealised image of love and acceptance. Idealisation is present in every hope and is useful for initiation, but it can set up impossible and unrealistic standards that cannot be met by another person. People with a history of early losses or poor bonding sometimes develop an over-idealised image of how relationships should be in order to compensate. While dreaming about this imaginative, 'happy ever after' world helps us to cope with a miserable home life, it cannot serve as a basis for relationships with others. When there is an over-idealised idea of how relationships 'should' be, whatever a partner does or does not do tends to be judged against a variety of these expectations or desires. Relationships can then become stuck, as each individual blames the

### Changing within a relationship

other for their disappointment and sense of failure. And relationships can become blocked when each person carries one end of the reciprocal role and there is no room for flexibility. The relationship then remains at this superficial level and the deeper layers of potential within the couple cannot be reached. Relationships can only be truly satisfying when we learn to live with the other flesh and blood person we are not trying to reform.

Falling in love and sexual attraction are only the initial (but important!) triggers that draw two people together. *How* two people live together and sustain differences and difficulties is a test of maturity, generosity, endurance and humour. If we remain individually limited in our thinking and movement, we lack the flexibility required to dance in time with another, perhaps very different, person. Revising individual beliefs when they are redundant or damaging can be the beginning of allowing a relationship to flourish.

We have seen in Chapter 4 how the internal core pain from our childhood is carried by the internalised child self and maintained by both the learned procedures based on old beliefs and by the internalised adult or other. Thus it's easy to understand how, until revised, we may choose partners from our internalised child self who confirm the old beliefs of that child self and maintain the core pain. Someone with a crushed child self who expects a conditional other will tend to be drawn to someone whose attitude will confirm this; or, they will tend to see only the conditional response in the other, and react to this in the old way. Even when there is goodness between two people it can be undermined by these old, now outdated procedures. Someone with an over-idealised view of relationships who was neglected as a child will long for fusion and closeness, and yet at the same time fear being abandoned. They may set up impossible demands which force their partner to flee, so confirming their belief that it is not worth getting close because everyone always neglects or leaves you in the end. What needs revision is the procedure for dealing with deprivation. Instead of longing for fusion or perfect care, the internalised child self needs to be recognised and cared for first, so that we do not expect this hunger to be met totally by another. The core procedures that dominate relationships and maintain pain need to be revised together.

We have seen many other patterns of relating throughout this book. We have seen someone who, when close to another person, becomes 'mother' or 'father', taking care and control of the other and denying their own needs, only to feel used and lonely. We have seen how the fear of loss of control can lead someone to seek to take charge of every interaction, creating a suffocating atmosphere where sooner or later one person will either explode or hit out, so establishing the very chaos the control pattern was designed to avoid.

### Suggestions for couples

This section is for couples who are concerned about their interaction with each other and wish to make changes. Work individually first to establish your own individual pattern of procedure.



Read through Chapter 4, 'Problems and dilemmas within relationships'. Then make your own individual diagram for reciprocal roles, as guided in Chapter 13. It might help to notice how you feel with your partner at certain times when things seem to go wrong. Are you feeling like a crushed child or a furious parent? A critical carer who can only be martyred or a rebellious infant who wants to stamp its feet and run away?

Keep a journal individually (without reference to the other), for one week, of the times in which you have been pressed on a core pain place, or pushed into that bottom-line 'as if' core pain statement. Try not to make assumptions or judgements, but simply keep a record.

Having read through the chapters on traps, dilemmas and snags, write down which of these apply to you, and which procedures for coping with core pain are most dominant in your life.

Complete your examination of traps, dilemmas and snags by predicting which your partner would identify. Then look together at how each of you sees the other, and how this differs from your individual identification of traps, dilemmas and snags.

As part of gathering information, you might also like to go back in time and make a note of the qualities that attracted you to your partner in the first place. Qualities such as spontaneity, warmth, fun, humour, caring, depth, perception, strength, intelligence. What were you hoping for from these qualities? Having made this note, make another column to record how you feel about these qualities now. If they seem to have changed, ponder on this. Sometimes when we are drawn to certain qualities in a person it is both because we like and respond to those qualities, and also because we want to develop them in ourselves.

#### **Drawn to opposites: FRANCES and MIKE**

Frances, an only child, grew up in a very serious household. When she met Mike, who came from a large, noisy, fun-loving family, she was immediately attracted to what she had not experienced. For Frances, living with Mike was both a rebellion against her serious parents, who thought Mike a renegade and drop-out, and a challenge to her own learned seriousness. She hoped that Mike would help to heal her loneliness and allow her to expand her spontaneity. While this was ultimately a healthy option for her, in their first years she found herself being snagged by feelings of guilt for choosing such a different life from her aloof parents, as if her fun was at their expense. She had visions of their lonely existence in front of the one-ring gas fire while she was dancing the night away. This made her anxious, but she dared not confide in Mike because she did not want to spoil their enjoyment. She began to have panic attacks and to fear going out, returning instead to lying alone in bed and to the idea that she was not, after all, meant to go out and enjoy herself. A revision of her 'magical guilt', and speaking to Mike and her parents about the reality of their lives, helped her to begin to claim the life that she had chosen.

## Changing within a relationship

### **Drawn to similarities: BILL and EMILY**

Bill chose Emily because she was just like his mother. Bill hated change, which he saw as rocking the boat. He wanted someone to be there for him when he came home from work, who would look after him and serve his needs. For Emily, who came from a rather cold background where she had had to placate in order to feel a sense of worth, it was heaven to be so wanted. But over time, because the glue that bound them together was based on earlier needs, they began to come unstuck. Bill found Emily boring and demanding – just like his mother in the *bad* sense. And Emily found his need of her oppressive and began to have angry outbursts and tantrums. She felt that he never listened to her but was always demanding, and she started to dream of being alone, of leaving, or of having an affair with someone she was attracted to at work.

If each set of individual procedures is locked together unhelpfully, without revision, the relationship can reach crisis point where the only solution seems to be to get out. This does not have to be so.

### **Hidden complementarities: FRANK and MAGGIE**

Frank and Maggie find it difficult to live together without continual angry rows, when things get said which are regretted, only to be used as fuel for the next argument. They have separated several times, but found it equally difficult to live apart. Figure 14.1 is a diagram of how their relationship moved from initial closeness to anger, separation and then loneliness and reconciliation.

Frank and Maggie had actually separated when they first came to see me, and saw our meeting as a last-ditch attempt to save the relationship, although both were pessimistic, and both were deeply entrenched in their survival modes. Maggie was frightened, shaking and withdrawn; Frank aloof, controlled, calm, but his face white and muscles tense. By the time we had worked on their individual stories they had got together again and were both moved when each read out their story to the other.

In the early days they worked by doing simple self-monitorings. Frank was to monitor each occasion when he thought, 'I've had enough, this is terrible, I'm getting out'; similarly, Maggie was to monitor the times she thought, 'I want more, this isn't enough, this isn't how it *should* be'. It appeared as if these thoughts developed into a compulsion to act which, when followed through, served to keep the trap going. Both found self-monitoring very difficult. But as they gradually came to understand more of the other's history and to allow for each other's fragility, they were able to hold on to the space long enough to listen, and later to have a discussion. To this end, they used their tape recorder to record conversations, later setting aside time together to listen to what had transpired between them. They were frequently shocked and moved by what they heard.

*This is what I wrote and then read aloud to Frank and Maggie in therapy:*

## Love is not enough

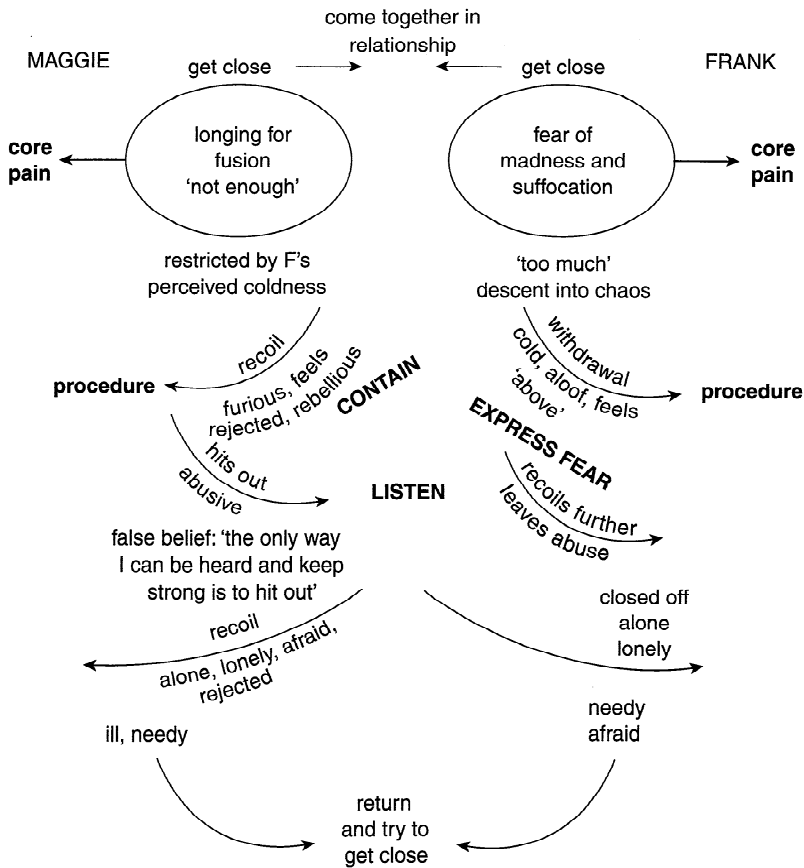


Figure 14.1 Frank and Maggie's relationship trap

The three of us agreed to look afresh at the situation within your marriage, which operated to make it difficult to live together or apart. You had been in different therapies, both individually and together, in a quest to find answers to the dilemmas you both face as a couple. A great deal of perseverance, time and effort has gone into this quest, perhaps indicating a desire to find a way to be together more harmoniously, and perhaps out of a yet not understood love for each other. The individual reformulations (life stories) gained over three sessions, reveal similarities. You are both intelligent people with damaged siblings. There is considerable self-negation and disappointment in all four parents' lives. 'Magical guilt' is strong in both of your lives. You both learned not to appear too well or happy. Magical guilt presupposes that we have received something good at another's expense, and that if we have what we want later on in life someone else will be damaged.

### Changing within a relationship

In Maggie's case, her unconscious involvement with self-sabotage revealed itself immediately in terms of the appointments we made, and that it took us five arranged appointments to result in three actual sessions. It was 'as if' something operated in Maggie's life to prevent her from getting help, fulfil obligations or grow and become happier and more fulfilled. Maggie has recognised how she follows patterns of depriving and punishing herself in order to feel good about herself, and talked about the fact that she doesn't dress as well as she might because she feels she doesn't deserve it. All good things, because they make her feel 'bad' and guilty, have to be either denied or demolished in order to fulfil the unconscious pull of self-sabotage. Maggie's self-sabotage feels at its heaviest when it links in with the part of Frank she sees as 'Superman': superior, clever, successful, controlled and better than herself. Because her antennae are tuned to expect personal demotion and criticism, it gets set up unconsciously, again confirming the myth of magical guilt. And when this happens, and she feels criticised or punished, she falls back on survival tactics, becoming either rebellious and aggressive or passive, ill and in need of care.

Self-sabotage in Frank's life seems to operate in the way he does not feel free to express himself emotionally or with any vulnerability, and in the fact that he feels compelled to 'walk on eggshells' for fear of triggering Maggie's wrath or abuse. Early in his life, control, success and intellect were very important, and emotion and feeling were associated with chaos and madness. His professional life is successful and free of chaos. But in personal relationships there is another challenge. He was possibly drawn to Maggie because it would enable him to become more in touch and comfortable with a whole range of feelings. At difficult times he experiences emotional inertia and feels stuck, putting up with unpleasantness and appearing cold and unresponsive, or, more recently, allowing anger to surface.

Magical guilt carries with it the fury and rage at the restrictions it imposes. Each of you offers the other a vehicle for this magical guilt. Freeing yourselves individually from this would mean that it would not have to be played out in the drama of marriage.

The other area that links you together negatively at present is the struggle around closeness and intimacy. It seems as if you have opposite ideas, and idealised ideas, of what being close means. For Frank, closeness is self-contained and intellectual, and anything else feels suffocating and frightening, out of control. For Maggie, closeness is fusion, being constantly together, contained and safe, perhaps reflecting an inner longing to be held in a complete, symbiotic way. If you keep holding on to these polarised ideas your relationship will be a constant battle. Perhaps if you question the validity of these ideals and work towards making them less absolute, you could find a reasonable place from which to be close to each other. Freeing yourselves from magical guilt would mean that you could allow for, and maintain, good feelings and closeness, without having to sabotage it by all the 'as ifs' we have mentioned.

*This is what Frank and Maggie wrote in return:*

### **What we've taken home**

We are learning that each of us carries substantial burdens from the past, which result in 'snags'. For example, for different reasons, each of us has difficulty with intimacy. Rage and frustration always get in the way of our being close. We are each well advised to make the effort to accept the reality and validity of these snags in the other, even though we may not always like the resulting behaviour. To deny and reject these personal characteristics in the other is futile. It also devalues the other person and therefore causes unhappiness.

So, we need ways to cope. We must learn to use them effectively. First, we can understand them and empathise. We can also gracefully fall back and use and cede space. Apartness need not be rejection, and sometimes can be constructive.

On top of this, we realise that each of us has difficulty delivering on some of the other's primary needs. These were detailed by Liz in one of her reformulation documents. Just sensitising ourselves to this reality is a step forward. We must also think constructively and take more initiatives.

Finally, it should be said that our continuing resolve and application shows that we love and need one another. But it's a rocky, non-placid road that we are gradually learning to travel. The good times are worth it.

Frank and Maggie are still struggling to listen to and contain the feelings produced by their very different responses to getting close. Although their relationship is not easy, they are still together, and there are some good times which make the effort feel worthwhile.

### **SEAN and MARY**

Sean and Mary sought help as a couple because of the painful rows which threatened their relationship. Their dreadful quarrels seemed to develop a life of their own and escalate out of control. They each began to look at their individual traps, dilemmas and snags, and kept a record of exactly what happened, what they were thinking, what was said and when they had a row.

Sean's early experience was of a critical father, before whom he felt inadequate. Mary felt that Sean constantly criticised the way she did things. Her own pattern was to take the blame for any disagreements. After one of their rows, each drew up their own diagram (see Figures 14.2a and b).

### Changing within a relationship

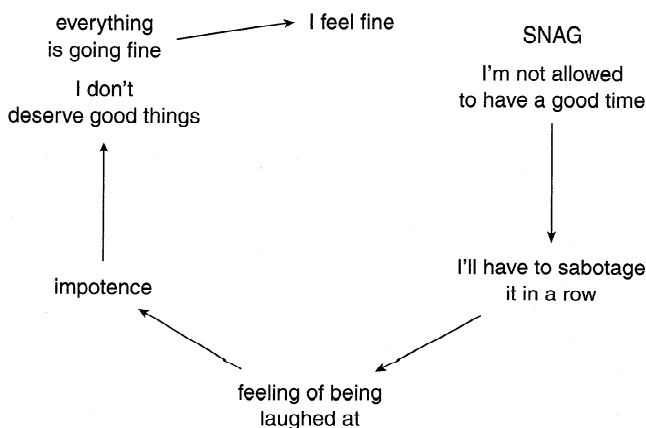


Figure 14.2 (a) Sean's diagram

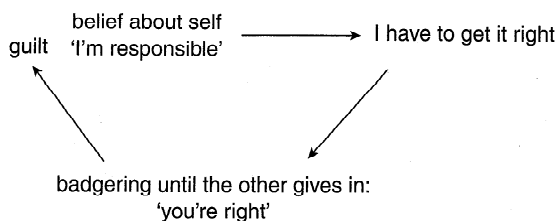


Figure 14.2 (b) Mary's diagram

One row occurred when they were laughing and joking, and about to make love. Mary said something which she thought was very funny but which had a dramatic effect: Sean turned away, seemed to lose all interest and became very angry. Mary became upset, and very soon they were deep into a conflict from which they could not extricate themselves. When Mary had made her jokey remark Sean had experienced her as the critical and contemptuous castrating father. For Mary, Sean's withdrawal was devastating. She needed desperately to please in order not to be rejected. She took the blame for the row and badgered Sean to tell her what she had done. This only increased Sean's feeling that he was being harried and put down, and that he must give in to Mary even though he did not agree with her. Following the row, and Mary's appropriation of the high moral ground, Sean withdrew, which left Mary feeling frightened and abandoned, just as she had experienced as a child.

Sean and Mary quickly saw how their responses to each other had been affected by earlier maladaptive ways of communicating, which were now preventing

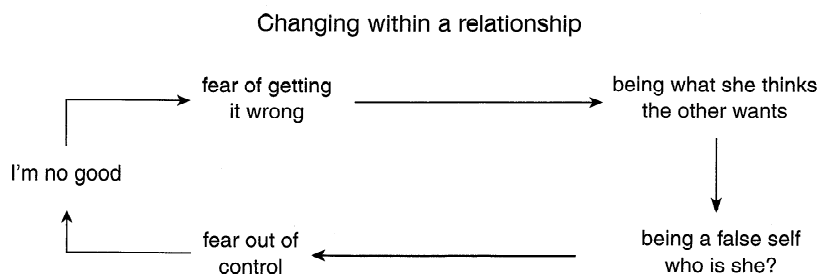
them from seeing each other clearly. For Sean, Mary had become the castrating, rejecting father; and for Mary, Sean represented the rejecting father for whom she could never do anything right. It was a shock for Mary to discover that Sean's perceptions were entirely different from her own. One of the values of working together in this way is the opportunity it gives to each person to hear the other's side and to witness their learned patterns of response.

The following is an account of the focused therapy Sean and Mary had with two cognitive analytic therapists.

The previous hypotheses of Sean and Mary's traps and dilemmas were given added confirmation during the following session. Once again they had had a row which had lingered on in a desultory fashion. It was as though Mary had to keep picking at Sean in an attempt to put things right, trying at the same time to do and be what she thought he wanted of her, and in the process ignoring what she wanted. Sean, unaware of Mary's needs and feeling only a sense of being smothered and of her underlying withholding of approval, retreated behind his newspaper resigned to the fact that the situation could not be resolved. Later they decided to go out to the park and then on to an AA meeting. This, however, only intensified the tension between them, because Sean had to wait for Mary to get ready, all the time becoming more and more irritated at the delay. From this we were able to tease out the trap and dilemma that Mary was in (see Figure 14.3a).

What seemed to be happening for Sean was that he felt, once again, he could not win. This brought back two important memories of his father. In the first, he and his father were staying with a much-loved jovial uncle in the country. The two men had arranged to go somewhere. Sean's father, up and ready early, stood in the middle of the room, jingling his keys and almost bursting with irritation at his brother, who was taking his time putting on his boots, completely unconcerned by the other's impatience. Clearly, in the incident with Mary it was Sean who had become the irritated, impatient father, while Mary had assumed the role of the laid-back, disorganised uncle.

The second memory involved Sean's desire to become a car mechanic. His father, however, had wanted him to have a more respectable, higher status career in management. Unable to go against his father and choose what he wanted to do, but equally reluctant to go along with his father, Sean fell between two stools and ended up in a series of jobs where he did just enough to get by. It was as though if he were to succeed, particularly at something his father disapproved of, he would incur not only his father's envy but also his anger. On the other hand, if he failed he risked his father's contempt. It seemed as though the only course was simply to get by. This was seen not only in his work but in his behaviour at home. He would start something – putting up shelves, decorating etc. – have piles of wood all over the flat, and then leave



or to put it in terms of her dilemma:

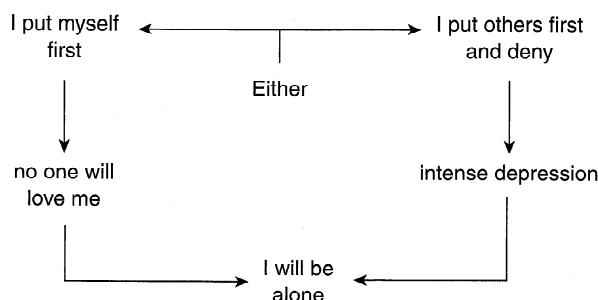


Figure 14.3 (a) Mary's trap and dilemma diagrams

the jobs half-done, a source of irritation to Mary and incomprehension to them both. We were able to see here how the memory of his father once again seemed to be intruding (see Figure 14.3a).

In the fourth session we linked their responses to the relationship between them to possible past modes of behaviour. For example, in response to the first trap, avoidance, Mary felt responsible for Sean and for the possibility that they might split up, so she had to prevent this by trying to do what he wanted. This had parallels with her earlier life, when she had needed to be both in control of her siblings and responsible for their welfare, particularly after her mother died.

With Sean, his fear of standing up to his father leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy that he was no good, followed by inevitable depression. What became very clear was that his fear of succeeding in his relationship with Mary stemmed from his conviction that he must pay for success, and so he has to sabotage it.

Both Sean and Mary were very afraid of something within them that seemed out of their control. Sean's other procedures were his avoidance of his feelings about partings and loss, and his destruction of his creativity, which he longed to enjoy. For Mary we highlighted her need always to take responsibility for others' feelings, and her pattern of being unable to value, and thereby destroying, her creativity.



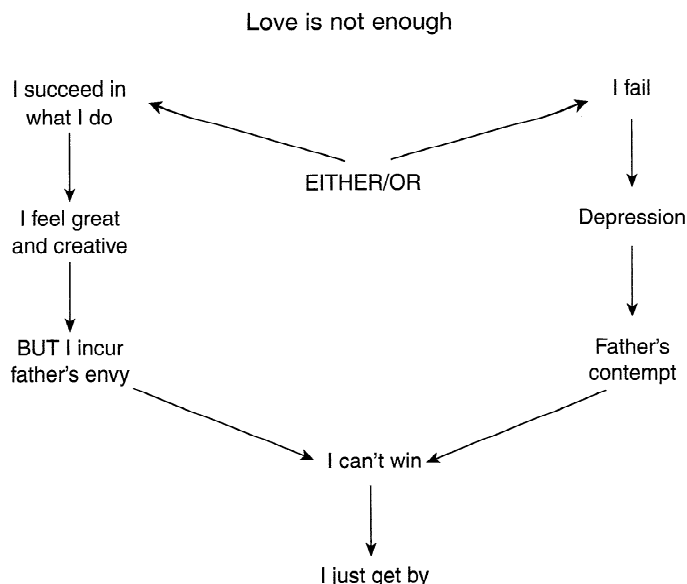


Figure 14.3 (b) Sean's trap diagram

The nub of the work over sessions 6–15 focused on analysing together any rows they had had during the week, and seeing where their individual false beliefs got tangled up with the other's in these quarrels. Sean and Mary became very good at this, which gave them a sense of control that they had never experienced before. The weekly sessions became both a safe place to defuse explosive feelings held about the other, and a place to learn techniques to take with them for the future. Both Sean and Mary liked the idea of seeing their often repeated procedures caught on paper for them to refer to, and would regularly point out where they saw themselves as being on their diagrams. Sean put it this way, 'It's like opening a book and seeing all the stuff in my head laid out plain on the page. I can see how all my life I have got into the same patterns.'

In the early and middle weeks of our work the reported rows were fierce and felt catastrophic, but it was exciting to see how quickly Sean and Mary began to recognise patterns from childhood in their behaviour. Both came to see how their fathers' voices chimed in on them so often and stopped them from being themselves and expressing their spontaneity. In session 8, Mary talked about her struggle to confront her daughter's unjust and hurtful behaviour in saying things about her to a third party that were untrue. We saw her caught in the now familiar dilemma (see Figure 14.3c).

She was able to see that the exit here was to hold on to the right to her own feelings, and to express them. Sean witnessed her struggle with this problem and was able to be protective and supportive in a helpful way. At the end of session 8 we suggested each of them compose a description of themselves, as if written

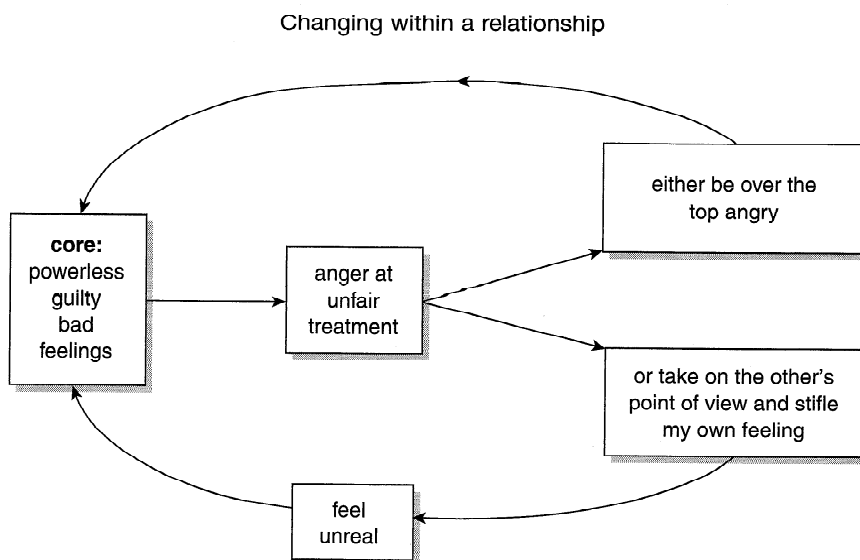


Figure 14.3 (c) Mary's diagram of Sean's false belief

by a loving friend. Mary, we found, was able to really enter into this fully and present herself as the warm, ebullient person she is, but Sean found it hard to see himself in a favourable light and could only come up with a description of how he would like to be. This brought home to Sean how hard it was for him to be appreciative of himself. His father's critical voice was pervasive.

In the middle of our work, in session 9, there was a big row that seemed to be connected with their feelings about the therapy coming to an end. Apparently they felt they were not getting enough from us, and were taking out their anger about this on each other. Mary said she had left the last session without feeling the closeness to Sean that she usually experienced at the end of a session. She felt let down, and this was transferred onto Sean. She said Sean seemed depressed, and in swung her need to jolly him out of it: if he were down, it must be her fault (as with her parents when she was a child). She then felt guilty and that Sean was critical of her (when in actual fact he did not feel that at all at the time). It was clear to see how plugged in to each other's moods Mary and Sean had become. They could see this and were able to identify the points at which they had each pinned their own feelings on the other.

A key issue for Sean came up at this time. Mary was bringing to the sessions her painful feelings at the death of a close friend, which in turn resonated a whole untouched area of feelings about the death of her father. She was able to express her rage and hurt forcefully, and explore some key issues about the rejection by her sister and mother. This was so hard for Sean to witness, as his pattern had always been to swallow feelings about loss and endings. He was surly and irritated at Mary's outpouring of feelings of grief at the death, and by the fear, anger and hurt she displayed at the thought of losing us. Sean was able to say it frightened him. We noticed at this point that his false belief charts showed that no progress had been made on changing his usual pattern of

avoiding grief, so this became an area of focus. We realised we had been colluding with him on this. As the weeks went on he was able to make two significant steps in dealing with this problem: (1) actually to tell his son, when he was leaving to return to Ireland, how hard it was to say goodbye to him and how much he loved him, and (2) to tell us how much he would miss the sessions and was afraid he might not manage without us.

Another area that Sean confronted in the middle sessions was the child part of him that needed constant reassurance from Mary that he was allowed to do something (e.g. watch football on television). This pattern worked quite well between Sean and Mary for much of the time, as Mary would be the reassuring mother to Sean's reassured child.

At this point the therapists sketched the diagrams shown in Figure 14.4.

At times, however, his need would exceed Mary's ability to keep giving, and we traced the rows that ensued. Yet another pattern for Sean was his jealous and rivalrous feelings when Mary paid attention to others. (She was a sponsor for other AA members.) They would often phone, and she would spend considerable time talking to them, sometimes adopting what Sean called a flirtatious manner. He would then become sullen and withdrawn, which would in turn evoke Mary's need to take responsibility for his feelings and her sense of guilt – his moodiness was her fault. Both were able to recognise this pattern, as well as the way in which Mary's attention to others evoked the insecure jealous child who was afraid of rejection in Sean. These feelings also came out in a dream Sean brought to the session at this time. He dreamed he was on a coach sitting beside Mary who was making love with the man next to her. In the dream Sean went off and sat by himself away from Mary.

A breakthrough came in another session over the escalation issue. There had been a small row over a football match. Sean and Mary had both been watching the game on television. Mary left the room to do something during a break for advertisements, but Sean failed to call her when the match started again. The reason for jubilation was that Mary, rather than nursing her anger and allowing it to swell inside with a kind of masochistic pleasure, was able to let go and the row did not escalate. We all four felt triumphant at this (see Figure 14.5).

Another issue that surfaced at this time was that of differences. We all noticed and discussed how different were Sean's and Mary's patterns of response to situations. Mary tended to feel anxious and insecure if Sean saw things differently from her – for example, if he took an opposing view to her at an AA meeting – and could see how this was linked to the hurt she had felt as a child whenever differences arose between her parents. She and Sean were able to say, 'We are different, and it is acceptable to be different, to be ourselves.'

In sessions 12 and 13 the focus turned particularly to Sean's sense of despondency at never finishing anything creative he planned. He said he felt things would be better between himself and Mary if he could have something purposeful to do. We laughed and joked over all the unfinished DIY jobs, the half-completed bed. He was able to hear his father's voice clearly telling him

### Changing within a relationship

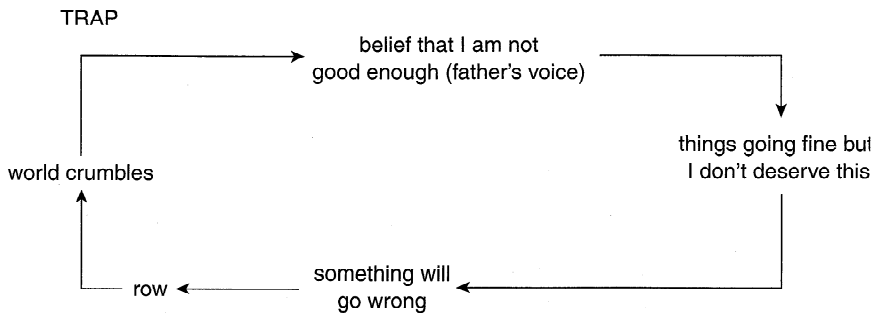


Figure 14.4 (a) Therapists' diagram of Sean's false beliefs

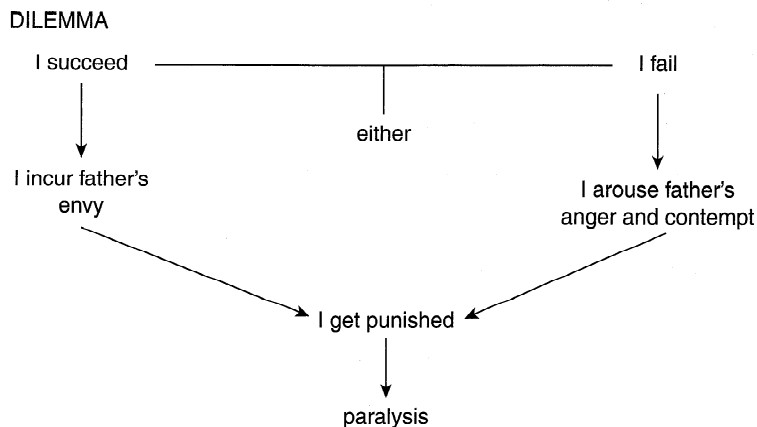


Figure 14.4 (b) Therapists' diagram of Sean's dilemma

nothing was good enough. The exit from this snag was 'to have a go', he said.

The last four sessions were full of feelings about the ending and reported activities. Sean and Mary expressed their great disappointment that their respective son and daughter had let them down at the last moment by cancelling plans to visit them. This deprived Mary of her fantasy of creating a warm, happy, safe family, and she saw how her hurt over this could have been directed at Sean. This session revealed the pathological part of each of them, how the terrible, enraged, hurt, afraid child could burst in and destroy good things, especially their relationship. It was a sobering session. Mary had told Sean to leave and not come back when, or so it seemed to her, he had put his daughter ahead of her. Sean had replied, 'If I do it might be fatal', and Mary was then able to tell Sean that she hadn't meant it and they managed to de-escalate the row. We reminded them that it is alright to get angry and have rows.

Love is not enough

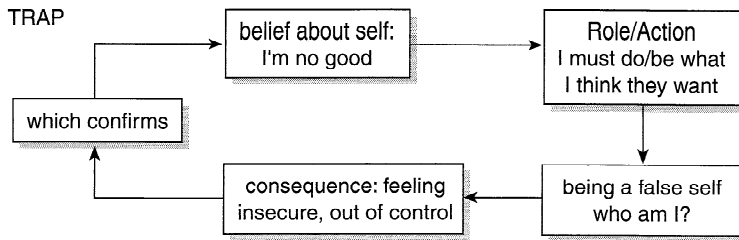
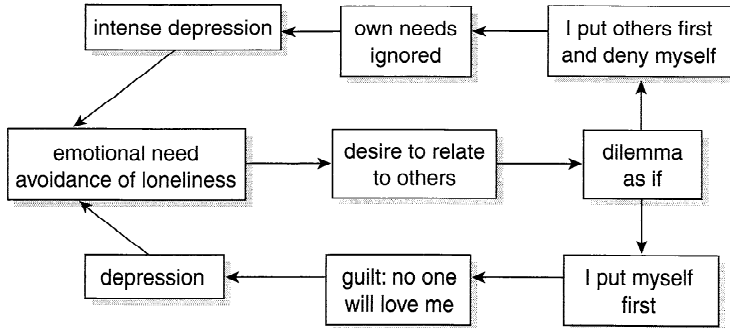


Figure 14.5 (a) Therapists' diagram of Mary's trap

DILEMMA



DILEMMA

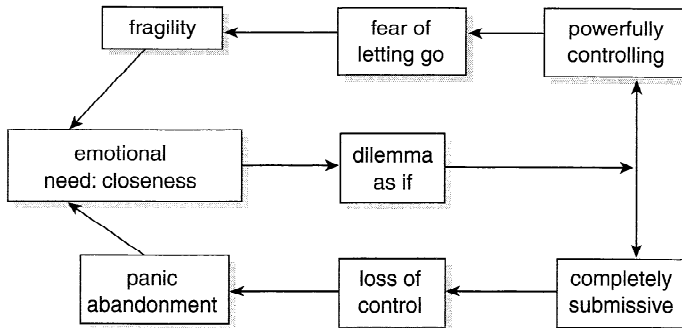


Figure 14.5 (b) Therapists' diagrams of Mary's dilemmas

The next session focused on how hard it was to bring our sessions to an end and on their sense of not having had enough. Even Sean was able to name this. There was some anxiety that there hadn't been a row. On one occasion Sean had felt resentful of Mary's laughter over the phone to someone else and he had been able to express this and be understood by Mary. Sean said in this session, 'Nothing in my life has made a bigger impression than this work.'

### Changing within a relationship

In the next session Mary reported that on three occasions she had succeeded in taking care of her own interests rather than putting the other person first. She was triumphant at her refusal to be domineered, and was encouraged in this by Sean.

During our last but one meeting the issue of ending came up very forcefully. Mary strongly vented all her fears and rage at losing us. Sean was more hopeful, saying he wished he had more time but that he felt they had the tools to go on by themselves. We confirmed that we would meet for a follow-up session in three months' time.

In our last session Sean arrived with a package which turned out to be a painting that had given him great pleasure to do. This was a great delight to all of us. We exchanged goodbye letters, ours being a joint letter to the two of them with separate sections for each of them. We spelled out again the patterns we saw that tripped them up, the enormous progress we had seen them make in finding exits from these snags, traps and dilemmas, and the good things we had got out of working with them. They in turn each gave us their goodbye letters. Each in their very individual way let us know what a landmark experience therapy had been for them. Sean's letter was much longer than Mary's, and once again we saw how they each felt the other must have performed better, as Mary convinced herself that Sean's letter must have been far more thorough than her own. Again we emphasised that it is alright to be different from one another. Both Sean and Mary felt they had gained a great deal of good experience and understanding to enable them to defuse their quarrels themselves, and both could see that using their creativity brought good feelings and was helpful in the relationship. They each expressed their thanks and sadness. We talked of all the changes we had witnessed, their courage, hard work and tenacity, and gave them more forms to enable them to continue the work of monitoring themselves.

Sean and Mary were able to use Cognitive Analytic Therapy to change their relationship. They were able to defuse their quarrels, to laugh at the tangles they got into and to confront things in the 'here and now' rather than carrying them around like a time bomb. Overall they had less devastating rows, which is what they originally set out to achieve in therapy. This change came about because they were each able to see how a lot of the anger and disruption really belonged to childhood experiences. For each, the procedure of trying to placate a powerful father loomed large and got in their way.

Sean recognised how the presence of his father's critical voice inside him created a trap, preventing him from enjoying his creative abilities and reducing his efforts, as well as ensuring that he withdrew from Mary whenever he heard his father's voice in her. He decided to 'have a go' and to enjoy himself, as well as reassuring his inner child and encouraging him to express himself.

Mary came to understand her fear of putting her own needs first for fear of others' rejection. Her difficulty with expressing her own needs remained hidden under her urge to punish when feeling rejected by being critical or withdrawing. When she began to express what she was feeling, particularly her fear at losing someone, this had a powerful effect on Sean, who was able to share and respect her feelings.

Sean and Mary write that now, five years on, they are still using the diagrams made in their therapy, and are communicating well.

### *exercise*

Write your individual life stories, separately, using the third person – for example, let 'I' become 'he' or 'she'. It helps to step back and reflect. Pick a time when you can be alone together and each read your own life story aloud to the other. Put your observer hat on and just listen respectfully to the storyteller and the drama behind the story. Be as objective as possible and really listen.

Try not to *judge, criticise, object to, take personally, overrule or rationalise* the other's story. To do so would be to fall into a negative, internalised parent trap. If you do find yourself doing any of the above, just make a note of it so that you can refer to it later. Do not act upon it. Listen for the tone of the person who is trying to emerge, and communicate through the drama of the story. Note the way in which your partner has observed their own procedures and how they have survived their early life.

Give some time to the effect of reading the stories together and for each other's response.

Write something together about how your individual core pain and your procedures for coping affect the other.

Make a diagram for yourselves about the ways in which you repeat the ritual of your procedures during a row or difficulty. Note:

- (a) the assumption or 'false belief' that leads to the behaviour ('I believe that ...')
- (b) how this is received by the other which triggers their assumption ('so I do this ...')
- (c) how this assumption results in behaviour ('he/she sees that I believe that ... so this makes me do ...').

Each keep a copy, so you can check where you are if you get into difficulties.

*(Continued)*

## Changing within a relationship

Spend the first week just observing and noting with each other what is happening. Don't yet try to change anything, but use your recognition not to get into the trap or dilemma to which your relationship usually falls prey. See what happens to the space, see what emerges or wants to emerge.

If you find yourselves having strong feelings, write them down, and see where or to whom they belong. How are the feelings connected to your core pain, and how can you best begin to relieve it?

When the energy in a relationship is not taken up with fighting old procedures there is time for other things. Experiment with *how* you like being together, and give feedback to each other on what works and what doesn't.

## Storytime

Begin together to look at some of the powerful myths which you can see operating in your own histories, families, environment and culture. One reason for doing this is to evaluate where some ideas about relationships, and particularly marriage, originate. Another is to check how much influence these myths still have over you and your relationships, and whether they too need revision.

As you read, see which of the myths could be still influencing you in your life now.

### *Role myths*

In my family:

Men always came first.

Women served men.

Men never worked.

Mum and Dad stuck together through everything.

Women never worked.

Dad was always there for me.

Mum was always there for me.

What happened within the family was confidential/secret.

### *Development myths*

In my family:

We had to better ourselves.

No one read books.

We always knew our place.

There were no divorces.

Marriage was for ever.

All the men/women were labourers, white-collar workers, professionals, etc.

To be ambitious was to be selfish.

Any change was bad.



*Sexual myths*

In my family:

We never talked about sex.  
Men were always unfaithful.  
Women were always unfaithful.  
Sex was OK for men but not for women.  
Sex was dirty.  
Mum and Dad never had sex.  
Men have got to have it, but women can wait.  
Sex always led to trouble.  
Sex was very difficult.

*Sexual attraction myths*

Men only like 'good girls'.  
You have to play a game to get a man.  
Only if you are a size – will you get a man.  
Never trust a man until he's put a ring on your finger.  
You have to look – to be sexy.  
Sex appeal: you've either got it or you haven't.  
Independent women are not sexy/are very sexy.  
Men can do and look as they wish and still be sexy.  
A man doesn't have to be sexy to get a woman.  
Girls will be as sexy as they can until they've got you hooked, and then they turn into their mothers.

*Myths about feelings*

In my family:

No one was close.  
We believed, 'Never wash your dirty linen in public'.  
Anger was a dirty word.  
Feelings were bottled up.  
Mum/Dad/Gran/sister/brother, etc. had the monopoly on feelings.  
Women could have feelings, men couldn't.

*Myths about caring and love*

Caring means looking after/being looked after.  
Love means being strict/harsh/hurting.  
Love is only for special people.  
Love and caring means never being cross.  
Love and caring means giving into others.  
Love and caring means sacrifice: others are more important.  
If you love a person of your own sex you are homosexual.

*Moral and religious myths*

Only God knows.  
Marriages are made in heaven.

### Changing within a relationship

God can see everywhere and he knows you are bad.  
To break a commandment means being punished for ever.  
God gave you to us so we can mould you for Him.  
To be good and loving is to serve God in forgiveness, even those who have hurt you.  
Mother and Father always know best.

#### *Family relationship myths*

Should be happy ever after.  
You make your bed and lie on it.  
Should always be hard work or they're not worth anything.  
Should come naturally or they're not true.  
Should be as good as Mum and Dad's, Gran and Grandpa's.  
Being in a relationship is better than being on your own.  
Relationships make you whole (joining a 'better half').

#### *Myths about behaviour*

You can never do anything right.  
You always make me unhappy.  
If you really cared or loved me you would ...  
You will only be happy when you've ...  
You must win to survive, life is a contest of winners and losers.  
Be seen but not heard.  
If you get what you want you will be unhappy.  
Only if you get what you think you want will you be happy.  
Waiting for the 'perfect man/woman'.

### *exercise*

Predict which myths rule your partner's actual thoughts and beliefs, as well as their *hoped-for* myths.

Name the myths which *together* you feel dominate your relationship.

Write the myths as you would like them to be!