THE 6 SECRETS TO REPAIRING RELATIONSHIPS:

How to Reconnect After Conflict

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THE 6 SECRETS TO REPAIRING RELATIONSHIPS:

6 steps to creating Safety, Peace and Love in Your Relationships

Click here to watch a video on how to use this guide!

Give yourself plenty of time to read the introduction and each of the 6 secrets. Take one a day for 6 days or even one a week. Be sure to set aside enough time to answer the questions fully and to discuss your thoughts and answers with a partner if you are doing this with another person. If you like, write your answers in a journal. Practice the steps and come back in a few months and see if your answers have changed.

Why Am I Offering This Guide?

As a psychotherapist, I have learned that love and connection are essential for humans– and yet we are so good at disrupting and even destroying the loving relationships we want and need most. No two of us are exactly alike, so it only stands to reason that our wants and needs may never totally coincide, and when conflict occurs, a chasm can open up between us. Disagreement can leave us feeling deeply injured, wanting to yell, wall off, become aggressive, and forget all the good we share. We can get lost in the rupture between us and not know how to find our way back. Yet, what I see again and again is that what we really want is Repair; we want to return to love. But most of us never learned how to Repair hurting and broken relationships, or how to leave the ones we can't repair in peace and safety. Instead, we develop all kinds of defenses to try to ward off the pain, and often repeat the same dysfunctional behaviors in our next relationships, or, not knowing what to do, we wait for someone else to come along and love us better.

I never knew any of this growing up. I didn't have a clue that I was contributing to the downfall of relationships that weren't working. I didn't know how to initiate and implement Repair when something went awry, and I had no idea *I could play a vital role* in creating and recreating the relationships I most wanted.

What I am going to share with you I learned through trial and error, by walking through the pain of hurt and loss, through years of my own therapy, many more years as a psychotherapist for others, and through the rewards of implementing the tools for Repair in my present day relationships. I have found that The 6 Secrets of Repair are critical to a truly healthy relationship, and that commitment to Repair is the key to our well-being, fulfillment, and our ability to create an environment that is functional and healthy for others.

The beauty of Repair– it works and it spreads! The more I seek Repair with you, the more likely you are to seek it with me, and with everyone else you meet. I want to share with you what I learned– we don't have to reinvent this wheel.

My Background

I have worked for 30 years as a psychotherapist. I have treated children, families, couples, and individual adults, and have worked extensively with abuse and dysfunctional family dynamics. My two previous books, *A Light in the Darkness* and *Into the Fire,* focus on my own healing journey. My latest book, *America in Therapy: A New Approach to Hope and Healing for a Nation in Crisis,* explores the roots of divisiveness and violence in America from a psychological point of view, with the goal of bringing the best of what heals relationships and restores us to safety, into national conversation. I live with my husband in Taos, NM and am now focused on writing and speaking.

Why do we need The 6 Secrets of Repair?

In the fall of 2006, the man I was about to marry and I had one of our worst fights cleaning out his pantry. I wanted to toss and he wanted to save a host of glass jars that, in my view, had been sitting empty or half-filled with fossilized pinto beans for the last 25 years. God knows what we ended up yelling at each other, but at just the right moment he playfully threw a big plastic bucket onto the floor and we both started laughing.

The crazy irony of it was that we were getting the house ready for our wedding! I was 62, thousands of dollars and countless hours of therapy (and a graduate degree in Psychology for me) later, and we still got caught up in that very important struggle over a bunch of old glass jars.

Absurd as this may sound, I think all the therapy we both did to scratch our way up and out of our most hurting places, paid off in that moment of laughter. We dropped the argument, could laugh at ourselves, and *reconnect* to each other and our love. Years earlier, I might have walked away, walled off for goodness knows how long, and I would have convinced myself that he was the problem. My husband and I have learned a lot since then; we still have our bumpy moments because we're human, but the container of love in which it occurs and to which we return, with greater skill, is stronger than anything I believed possible. The secret is that we have become committed to Repair.

Repair is the pathway to reconnection with one another, and reconnection is the strongest foundation for healing our wounds and restoring us to peace and safety– before anyone gets hurt.

Triggers Can be Reframed as Opportunities for Healing

My husband and I usually find that the present problem has triggered an old hurt–a time we felt overpowered, unheard, abandoned, put down, or mistreated. Conflict opens the door to unhealed wounds from childhood and suddenly we both become 2 or 5 or 11. Underneath the present issue, we find a rupture in our connection with others that occurred long ago and likely has been repeated and reinforced in other relationships. One small step at a time, we come back into our adult selves and learn to communicate safely, end the tug of war, and grow our empathy for ourselves and each other. Again and again, through trial and error, we discover that *reconnecting is what matters most.*

Understanding and implementing the best tools for Repair is critical to preventing the worst outcomes of ongoing conflict and healing our relationships. Repair means we use everything we know to reconnect as quickly as we can, without abandoning ourselves. It is hard to grasp when we are in the midst of conflict, that in fact the *best protection from hurt is to safely address the causes of painful human relations at their core*.

And when we are at our very best, which is not always, we understand that the ways we trigger each other can be reframed as opportunities to strengthen our own self-control, deepen our understanding of ourselves and others, stretch the limits of tolerance of our own and the other's distress, and deepen our empathy for our very human fallible condition. In the Repair process, we learn to step back, manage ourselves, and keep communicating our way back to each other. Why? Because the satisfaction of being right is dimmed by the sweet taste of all the love available in moments of actual cease-fire and reconnection. This is what I have learned in my relationship with my husband. This is my hope for humanity and for you.

Creating a Win/Win For Real

One of the hardest things to give up or move beyond in any conflict is the belief that we are right and the other is wrong. We seem determined to fight, sometimes to the death (death of the relationship or even literal death), to force others to comply with our point of view, admit guilt, or bend to our will. The problem is very simply that we *all* feel we are right; those we are in conflict with are just as attached to "winning" as we are. This is the recipe for war– war in our personal lives and around the globe. If you have been in this kind of war– and most of us have to some degree – you know that while "winning" can perhaps produce a momentary high, it is often followed by the pain of a relationship that has become estranged, damaged, or lost. And then the work of Repair is even harder!!

In the field of psychology we know that *getting off that battleground* is what most of us actually want. We want love, acceptance, belonging, cooperation and safety with others, but we don't know how to get them. Repair of human relations really means giving up the win/lose paradigm and moving to a *Win/Win*. Not easy, but possible if we have good tools, and more importantly if we the tools.

Most of us have never seen a relationship in which people listen to and speak to each other in a way that works.This is what the 6 Secrets to Repair of Relationships are all about.

The 6 Secrets of Repair are the six principles of how we can make these changes ourselves. And when both people in a relationship are enrolled, all the better!

So let's jump right in!

The 6 Secrets of Repair – 6 steps to creating Safety, Peace and Love in

Your Relationships

(These principles apply when there is no overt danger or threat of harm to any party.)

There are six essential elements of Repair: Restraint, Reflection, Responsibility, Rehabilitation (of self), Resolution, and Reconnection. While you will see that they overlap, it is helpful to address them one by one. The basis of these six elements is that one person– you or me– can alter the interpersonal dynamics that are not working in our lives by practicing the principles of Repair.

We learn to listen the way we want to be heard and speak the way we want to be spoken to–with openness, patience, respect, a willingness to see beyond our own reactions, and a desire to come back into caring, if not loving, connection.

Secret #1. Restraint

Restraint is the Bottom Line for Creating Safety

Repair cannot take place if we feel unsafe. Therefore, the first element of Repair is restraint of any threatening or injurious impulses– from verbal, emotional and physical assault, from subtle or overt disapproval and threats, and from self-harming behaviors. Restraint might be as simple as not making a bored or angry face, or it can be as challenging as agreeing to hold off on finalizing a divorce. I can learn to keep from walking when you're talking, from scowling at you or refusing to make eye contact. And I can also ask that you lower your voice when you start to yell or that you don't check your watch when it's my turn to talk. Most of us have behaviors that don't contribute to safety or openness in communication and we can learn to restrain ourselves. No judgment here– we are all learning.

Take a look at what behaviors you would want others to restrain when they are upset or angry with you. Do you do any of these behaviors yourself? Or, on reflection, are there other reactions you could learn to restrain when you are upset, that you see don't serve safe communication?

Creating a Bridge Between Us

Imagine there is a bridge between you and someone you are having difficulty with. Right now you are each on your own side of the bridge, firmly entrenched in some opposing point of view or walled off in hurt and anger. Now imagine that when they are speaking, you make eye contact with them and do your best to cross the bridge into their world, be open to their point of view, their upset, hurt, needs– in exactly the way you want to be heard. Literally, we are learning to restrain ourselves from the behaviors that most likely led to the ruptures in our relationships in the first place. This is a critical first element in building bridges back to connection with one another.

It requires *restraint* to reel ourselves back in and cross the bridge to one another, but when we don't restrain ourselves, we will most likely evoke our partner's worst defenses and deepen the distance between us. Doing our best to cross the bridge to one another is the beginning of a *Win/ Win* experience. But it is also important to understand that we react in unconstructive ways not because we are bad but because we are human and we haven't learned more effective skills. We have wounds that can be activated in an instant, or gaping holes of unmet needs lying right below the surface that can erupt like long dormant volcanoes.

Restraint means we learn to *tolerate our own distress instead of acting it out*, precisely because it opens the door to deep listening *and* because we want others to tolerate their distress and not act out on us. Restraint might mean tolerating anger without exploding, pain without yelling, hurt without retaliating. It might mean taking a few deep breaths and counting to 10 before responding. Or it might mean we ask for a time out with a commitment to return to the conversation when we have calmed down. These things do not come naturally for most of us, and sometimes it takes hearing ourselves yell or say something unkind, to summon the will to restrain our least constructive reactions. That's okay. *It's never too late to come back to Repair*… as long as we come back.

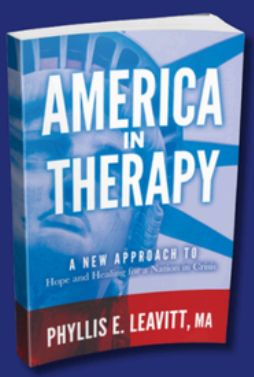
For most of us, the challenge to navigate our triggers and our issues is ongoing. We don't have to do it perfectly, and *perfection is not the goal. The goal is Repair!* Whatever we do to restrain and redirect our upset is a win if it helps us stay at the table and listen better.

Questions to Ask Yourself (and share with a partner):

- What did you learn about how to handle conflict growing up? Has it helped you or created problems?
- Have you felt unsafe in a relationship? When? What was that like? How did (do) you handle it? What would you like to be different now?
- Have you been unsafe for others? When? What was that like? What were the results? How did (do) you handle it? What would you like to do differently now?
- Have you or someone you were relating to successfully restrained dysfunctional reactions? What did that feel like? What did it produce for you and for the relationship?
- What stands out to you most from the discussion above? Be specific. Write down what restraint means to you now and practice these new behaviors. Take a risk and ask for feedback.
- Share your results with another person.

Be sure to give yourself credit for any new behaviors or attitudes you practice, even if not perfect, even if you lose it and have to find your way back. Any and all efforts at tolerating your own distress without acting out help open the door to safer, deeper communication. If I maintain eye contact with you even when I want to turn away, steady my voice even when angry, refrain from interrupting you (a big one for most of us), and don't make that disapproving face or roll my eyes when I think you're totally nuts!, it is a *Win* for both of us! The more I restrain myself, the more you are likely to do the same. Together we learn to keep the door open to Repair. Restraint makes it possible to move more easily into the next of The 6 Secrets to Repairing Relationships– Reflection.

Contact Me



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Reflection Means I Am Willing To See That I Am Part Of The Problem and Part of the Solution

Secret #2. Reflection

Reflection means I am willing to see how I might be contributing to our upset and how I can help us get through it.

Even if I totally disagree with you and am not likely to change my mind, even if I have legitimate concerns or complaints about your behavior, can I ask myself if I am speaking to you the way I want you to speak to me? Am I being impatient, rigid, uncompromising, condescending? Am I channeling my mother when she was projecting her anxiety onto me or when she was criticizing my dad for forgetting to buy the grapefruit? There is always something to see about myself, and the more I am willing to look, the more I will become the person I want to be and the partner (or friend or colleague, etc.) you desire.

Taking the Focus Off the Other Person

I must be able to look at myself and not be totally focused on you and whatever I believe you did, to have even a prayer of seeing my own contribution to our difficulties. *I must be willing to see things about myself that are uncomfortable* or don't fit the image I have of myself or want others to have of me--my own critical nature, impatience, anger, or intolerance. But this is exactly what we want from others! We want them to see and acknowledge their shortcomings and all the ways they have hurt us. Repair means we learn to give to others what we want them to give us. It means we learn how to reflect on ourselves and acknowledge the truth of what we see that might not be all that wonderful. Yes, I didn't like what you said to me, but was my response to you any better? Reflection takes courage and a willingness to stop justifying ourselves or focusing on blame.

How easy or difficult is it for you to reflect on your own part in an upset?

Reflection Is About Accountability, Not Self-Blame

But to be clear, *reflection isn't about self-blame either. It is about accountability*, which is a very different experience. Can I be accountable for how I react to you when I am tired, frustrated, hurt, or I don't like how you are behaving? We can still express dissatisfaction or hurt with others, but the work is to come back to reflecting on ourselves in the moment. *Reflection without self-blame creates a non-shaming way for me to see myself as part of the solution.* If I see I am being impatient and judgmental, I can learn to shift my position. It may take everything I have when I still think you are wrong or behaved badly, but if I shift the focus to my own contribution, you are much more likely to do that as well. I've seen this happen again and again with my husband. If one of us acknowledges our contribution to the upset, the other, almost immediately, follows suit.

It happened just this morning. I felt so right about something he wanted to do differently than me. I presented my case, a little too strenuously perhaps, and I could see by his face that he was holding firm. And suddenly, literally, the words" self-reflection" popped into my head and I was able to soften my position. "Why don't we try it the way you want," I said, totally authentically, "and if it really doesn't work for me, can we reconsider?" And of course he was a Yes. That was all it took for Repair and reconnection.

We Might Be Channeling The Worst Of What We Learned Growing Up

I can say with some humor that in fact I have channeled some of the very things my mother did that I found abhorrent. I'm quite sure that is exactly what I was doing in the pantry fight with my husband. Most of us will do some version of what we learned growing up when we are angry or hurt. The more we can restrain ourselves from shame and blame of both self and others, the more likely we will be able to reflect honestly and fearlessly on ourselves and become accountable. When the trigger is bigger and deeper than old glass jars, or one of us is still "in it," the strength it takes to look at ourselves can feel like climbing Mt. Everest. But we can do it! The best way to get to the top of that mountain is to keep trying and not give up. Fighting is easy; Repair is hard work. If I reflect on how I was with you 2 hours or 2 days or 2 weeks after the upset, it is still a *Win* for both of us.

What are you seeing now about your own less than wonderful reaction patterns?

What is something easy to acknowledge? What is something that is more difficult?

Who might you be imitating when you are at your worst? How does it feel to see that?

Try reflecting through the lens of accountability rather than self-blame. What does that feel like?

Reflection Requires A Deep Dive Into Our Motivations and Communication Styles

Reflection means I need to be willing to take an honest look at my motivations, how I come across in the words I choose, my tone of voice, my body posture, the look on my face, and the actions I take. These are all forms of communication. Words alone are only one part of my communication that I learn to reflect on. If I were to say, "I hear you," but my voice is flat, my body posture stiff, and I am not making eye contact with you, it is highly unlikely you will feel heard or validated by me, and it is even less likely our issues will be resolved or that we will feel any sense of Repair.

Self-reflection does not occur in our thinking alone and it is not as simple as a word change, though that may be where it needs to start. In the pantry fight with my husband I had to acknowledge that I wanted things done my way, didn't want my opinion to be challenged, and that I can be very judgmental about the way other people do things. I saw that I can be insistent, pushy, and inflexible. All that reflection allowed me to acknowledge the impact my pushiness was having on the man I was about to marry. Reflection is not for the faint of heart! But it goes a long way toward healing our hearts. Reflection is a lifelong process.

Self-Reflection Takes Courage

Self-reflection may be one of the greatest challenges we humans have ever faced – finding the courage to keep our focus on *our motives and behaviors, and our impact on others.* If you have ever had the experience of moving into fearless honesty with yourself, you know that once you get over the sting of seeing yourself in a less than stellar light, you will naturally change your whole approach to the other person (which is the last thing we want to do when we are stuck in judging and defending). We will be prompted from within to move our body toward them rather than away, relax the tension in our face, soften our voice, and look undefended into their eyes.

Sometimes it takes everything we've got to do this. Yet, it is just this open emotional quality, when we can access it, that is most likely to result in our "opponent" softening their stance as well.

I hope you have been blessed to have the experience of someone doing this for you. But if you haven't (and many of us have never had it, witnessed it, or knew it was possible), I hope you will come to know, *through embodying it yourself,* how powerful this level of self-reflection is for healing our relational wounds.

The Takeaway:

The more we reflect on our own part in conflict, the more we can understand what we need to change to become part of the solution.

Questions to Ask Yourself (and share with a partner):

- What (if anything) did you learn about self-reflection growing up?
- Think of a disagreement you have had. Notice if you reflected on your own reactions, impulses, desires and behaviors or stayed focused on the other person.
- If you reflected on yourself, notice if this was difficult and why? Or was it easy and what made it easy?
- What are you most afraid to see about yourself?
- What do you see as the greatest potential benefit of self-reflection now?
- How much do you reflect on your words and behaviors before or after you act? Is it difficult? Worthwhile?
- What have you learned from this section that is new or different? What would you most like to incorporate into your relationships? Be specific. Commit to one action of self-reflection. Write down what happened.
- Share your results with a trusted friend.

The Truth Is Always Your Friend

Carl Rogers once said, "The truth is always your friend." I have found this to be true–very difficult at times– but true.

Self-reflection opens the door to insight into and freedom from our the attitudes and behaviors that don't work in relationships, and therefore, from all the ways we unconsciously keep ourselves from the love and belonging we actually want

And as I've said so often now, as we become free from our most self-sabotaging coping strategies, we pave the way for others to do the same. This is the *Win/Win.*

Give Yourself Credit!

Be sure to give yourself credit for any new behaviors or attitudes you practice, even if not perfect, even if you lose it and have to find your way back. Any and all efforts at reflection help open the door to safe, deep communication. If I can take a deep breath and look inside and if I see one new thing about myself (or something I already knew but need to be reminded of), it is a *Win* for both of us! The more I reflect on myself, the more you are likely to do the same. Together we learn to open the door wider to Repair. Reflection makes it possible to move more easily into #3 of The 6 Secrets to Repairing Relationships– responsibility.

If you would like more information on how to make use of this series in your personal or professional life, please Contact Me to book a call, or purchase *America in Therapy* for an even bigger perspective on The 6 Secrets To Repairing Relationships.

Contact Me

Buy 'America in Therapy' Here

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THE 6 SECRETS TO REPAIRING RELATIONSHIPS

Secret #3. Responsibility

Keeping the Focus on Ourselves

One of the hardest things to do in any conflict is to listen, take in the other person's point of view, and find one thing we can validate for them. Unless one of us is being totally unreasonable or abusive, both parties have something valid that needs to be heard. With my husband, this is still sometimes very hard for me to do. It is the nature of intimate relationships that we will trigger each other's deepest wounds, and therefore our deepest unconscious reactions, coping strategies, and defenses. That is precisely why we need The 6 Secrets of Repair! In the glass jar incident, my husband and I weren't really arguing about the jars even though it looked that way. We had both been terribly overpowered as children and that silly disagreement brought all the genuine injury to our personal power to the surface. Once we were able to laugh at ourselves (created safety through restraint), we could explore the issues underneath together.

Giving Others What We Didn't Get

What most of us who have been hurt by others did not get was the experience of the raging, critical, unavailable, abandoning, addicted, or abusive parent (or other) taking responsibility for what they did. We long for that now and we want it from our partners and others. But we are adults now, and so Repair often means we learn to give the other what we (and likely they) did not get, as well as ask for what we want from them. The bridge back to one another, forged by taking responsibility for our own part (their valid complaint), is what heals us both. Even if it's after the fact! Even if the argument wasn't really about what it appeared to be, and even if we yelled and the plastic bucket got thrown. It's never too late to take responsibility for ourselves.

What does that mean?

Avoiding Blame

Part of taking responsibility in this model of Repair is that *we talk about our upsets with each other in terms of their impact on us, not in terms of judgment of the other.* This is a major distinction in communication skills that goes a long way to promote Repair of the relationship, as opposed to one person pointing a finger or fixated on winning an argument. It's one thing to say, " You're a hoarder and I can't deal with it! What's wrong with you that you can't let go of all these jars you never use?" and quite another to say, "I have a problem with clutter. It makes me feel chaotic. Please think about what you use and what you don't and start giving some things away." Or, maybe being responsible for myself looks like I simply learn to tolerate my own distress at his desire to save things that I want to get rid of and I don't ask for anything. There are endless ways to be responsible for what I communicate to another person, but most often responsibility takes the form of making "I" statements instead of "you" statements (which can come across as blaming). I think, I feel, what I would like is… and what I am willing to take responsibility for and do differently is…

Taking Responsibility For Myself Means Dropping My Defenses

Taking responsibility for myself– for my words, attitudes, actions, facial expression, and body posture– *means I am doing my best to drop my defenses because our defenses are exactly what keep us in conflict, ignite defensiveness in others, and close the door to Repair.* That being said, staying focused on my part in an upset can feel vulnerable, exposed, and scary. This is where distress tolerance comes back in. I learn to tolerate the distress of feeling vulnerable with others. I look at it this way– when someone is upset with me, I would much rather they allow themselves to become vulnerable than intensify their defenses. Therefore, *the more I do that myself*– and believe me it can be so very difficult– the more likely it is that my partner will hear me, and even if he/she doesn't, I will still feel good about how I am handling myself.

Notice how you feel and behave when you get defensive. Think of a time when you got defensive. What was the effect on the communication? How did it end?

Try using “I” statements instead of “you” statements when telling someone you are upset with them. Notice the difference in how you feel and how they react.

Many of us know the principle of using “I” statements, but we don’t always use them when we need them most!

When I Am The One Hurt, Or The One Who Hurt You

Standing up for ourselves and for healthy dynamics in a relationship is critically important. It may be the *self-responsibility* I need to take in a given interaction. But can I take responsibility for how I communicate that to another? Can I restrain my aggression, lower my voice, make “I” statements, and hold my complaint within the sacred container of a commitment to Repair?

Are you likely to advocate for yourself in relationships? What makes it easy or difficult? What would you change and how?

How responsible for your reactions are you when others advocate for themselves with you?

The focus is on being courageous enough to own our missteps, feel the impact we have had on others, and begin to formulate and commit to what we will do differently.

One small step at a time now, we come back into our adult selves and learn to communicate safely, end the tug of war, and grow our empathy for ourselves and each other. Through trial and error, we discover that *reconnecting is what matters most.*

Obviously not all conflict is over issues as seemingly trivial as how to keep a pantry (seemingly being the operative word!). But whether we are at odds over glass jars, vastly differing parenting styles, stress over our budget, infidelity or addiction, the principle of self-responsibility remains the same. *I am responsible for how I handle my half of the relationship and I cannot blame you if I yell or wall you out.* I may have come by these defense mechanisms honestly, but if they are hurting our relationship, it is my job to heal and change.

What do you think about this statement? What would 100% responsibility look like in your life?

An Exception To The Principle Of Responsibility

In the case of an abused spouse or child, the focus is not on their taking responsibility for what was done to them. The focus is on creating safety and support for them to tell the full truth of what they suffered, share the depths of pain and violation, and express (and hopefully receive) what they need now

We can't change the past, but we can heal it. I can't change the fact that I yelled at you when I should have been listening more empathically. But I can reflect on myself and take responsibility now. *Reflection and responsibility go hand in hand. In fact, they are nearly inseparable.* Taking responsibility for our part in conflictual or ruptured relationships and being willing to listen to the impact we have had on others without defense is not– "I'm sorry, *but you*…" It is, "I'm sorry that I…" Self-reflection and responsibility are some of our greatest challenges as individuals. It takes strength and courage to face our own not-so-stellar behaviors and attitudes. Doing so is a sign of what we call in psychology a healthy ego.

Healthy ego tolerates the distress of self reflection and LEARNS from whatever happened rather than blames– learns what didn't work, why it might have happened (history of unhealed wounds, conditioning etc.), and what can be done differently now and in the future.

Taking responsibility means I am willing to be fully accountable for my impact on others the way I want them to be accountable for their impact on me.

Questions to Ask Yourself (and share with a partner):

- What did you learn about personal responsibility in relationships growing up? How
- do you feel about that now?
- What does taking responsibility for yourself in relationships mean to you now?
- What has been your experience taking responsibility for your part in an upset?
- What has been your experience with others taking responsibility for how they have
- been with you?

- What do you think about this statement? What would 100% responsibility look like in your life?

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Taking responsibility means I am willing to be fully accountable for my impact on others the way I want them to be accountable for their impact on me.

Questions to Ask Yourself (and share with a partner):

- What did you learn about personal responsibility in relationships growing up? How do you feel about that now?
- What does taking responsibility for yourself in relationships mean to you now?
- What has been your experience taking responsibility for your part in an upset?
- What has been your experience with others taking responsibility for how they have been with you?

- What has been your experience with others taking responsibility for how they have been with you?
- What do you think could be gained by taking more responsibility for yourself?
- What would that look like? Be specific.
- What would be the challenges and benefits of making that shift?
- With whom would you want to take more responsibility for the relationship now?
- What would you do differently? Commit to one specific action.
- Share your results with another person.

Be sure to give yourself credit for any new behaviors or attitudes you practice, even if not perfect, even if you lose it and have to find your way back. Any and all efforts at responsibility help open the door to wider to safe, deep communication. If I can take a deep breath and look inside and if I see one new way I can be responsible for my attitudes and behaviors, it is a *Win* for both of us! The more I take responsibility for myself, the more you are likely to do the same. Together we learn to open the door wider to Repair. Responsibility makes it possible to move more easily into the next of The 6 Secrets to Repairing Relationships– what I call Rehabilitation of myself!, the subject of Secret #4.

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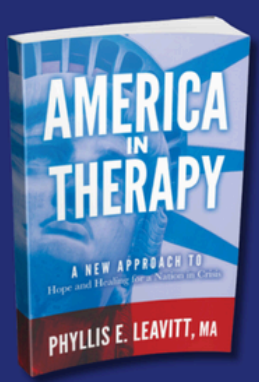

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Phyllis Leavitt

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THE 6 SECRETS TO REPAIRING RELATIONSHIPS

Secret #4. Rehabilitation and Reparation, Making Amends

Rehabilitating Ourselves!

We tend to think of rehabilitation (restoring someone to health and normal life through training and therapy) as something others need– those who have suffered illness or injury requiring medical rehab, or criminals, abusers, addicts, thieves or other noticeably impaired or socially maladapted people who are in need of help to reenter society safely. But let's not draw a sharp line between "us and them." We all can be rehabilitated– from the deficits in our conditioning and our dysfunctional coping mechanisms, from our prejudices and judgments, from our preoccupation with ourselves and our beliefs, needs and biases. We can all be rehabilitated from (understandable) ignorance of our own psychological makeup and that of others, and our blindness to what harms and heals in human relations.

In fact, it is by *making the idea of rehabilitation a common theme* that we can begin to eliminate the line between "us and them" and understand that we are all in this human boat together– some of us vastly more injured and dysfunctional than others, but most of us in need of relational upgrades.

Rehabilitating Ourselves is Part of the Best Prevention for Future Ruptures

What I am calling rehabilitation is not only part of the best healing of ruptured human relations but it is also part of the best prevention of future ruptures. Every one of us can be a part of it by being willing to look at our own role in perpetuating a psychology of blame, shame, and judgment, and educating ourselves to take a more psychologically sound, compassionate, and healing attitude toward ourselves and others.

I cannot imagine there is one among us who does not have something we could take greater responsibility for, and that we don't all have someone we could make amends to. *And what joy it would be if we could celebrate making amends instead of feeling shame or defensiveness around what we have done*. What if making amends as individuals could become a goal, an investment, and a source of healthy pride?

What Does Rehabilitating Ourselves Look Like?

Rehabilitation or making amends can take many forms. It could mean a sincere apology, an act of kindness for someone we have hurt, paying back money or returning something that was stolen or damaged. It can take the form of a commitment to behave differently right now and in the future, like committing not to walk out or slam the door when upset, put down our phone and listen when the other is talking, or do more around the house. Or it can be a commitment to get a job or go to therapy, and *be accountable for the impact on others for not having done these things before*.

There are two elements to rehabilitation that are important. One is the action itself—returning the money or calling for a therapy appointment. The second is the emotional communication of accountability, remorse, and a desire for emotional Repair. I let you know I am truly sorry. I feel the pain I caused, I am willing to reflect on my behavior, I want to take responsibility for it, and *do what it takes* to have resolution with you so that we can reconnect. This can happen in an instant of genuine apology, or it may take time to navigate the steps. If I only pay you back but don't communicate sorrow for avoiding repaying a loan, or be willing to hear my impact on you, it's perhaps better than nothing. But it doesn't get us fully to Repair. If I only laugh with my husband about the pantry incident but don't apologize for raising my voice or commit to examining my control issues, I have only gone part way to rehabilitating *myself*.

The goal of every step of the Repair process is reconnection, a felt sense of our relatedness, because that is both what heals and what creates the foundation for greater relatedness and peaceful conflict resolution in the future.

Making amends without emotional repair is partial amends, and sometimes that is as good as it gets. But we need to know that emotional repair is part of what truly heals relationships, and without it the foundation for safety, peace and love remains shaky.

Rehabilitating Ourselves Is Something to Celebrate

Making amends in the context of The 6 Secrets of Repairing Relationships does not mean we should plunge into self-flagellation or shame. In fact, rehabilitating ourselves and making amends shows strength of character and should be appreciated as such. Even so, my experience has shown me that accepting responsibility for ourselves and making sincere amends to others can be extremely difficult. And I believe that is partially because of our pride and not wanting to admit fault, but the larger reason is that, in our culture, we have associated admission of responsibility with guilt, shame, blame and punishment, when in fact it is human to err. In the context of the 6 Secrets for Repairing Relationships outlined here, rehabilitation of self and making amends when needed is something to be proud of giving and joyous to receive… because it is one more step in bringing us back together.

The Best Amends We Can Make

The very best amends we can make to anyone is to treat them differently now. Stop yelling. Tell them what we love and appreciate about them instead of picking them apart. Call more often. Be more patient with the kids, pay the bills more promptly, turn off our phone and talk, get therapy if we need it.

We need a safe forum in which to speak, listen, and be heard about the pain we have endured *and the pain we have caused.* The goal of the best rehabilitation is to shift away from a mindset of blame and retaliation to one of seeing the hurt one inside the part of us that hurts others and help that part as well by shifting our mindset from "I am a bad person because I did a hurtful thing," to "I am a good person who did something injurious to another," and *I can begin now to repair the damage by doing x, y or z.* This is a massive paradigm shift in human relations and a critical element to **The 6 Secrets of Repair.**

Imagine making sincere amends to someone with a spirit of celebrating the strength and courage it takes to do so. How does that feel?

Accountability Builds Trust

My husband and I still work with this step (and all the steps). We have become better over time at admitting our part in an upset, apologizing, and making continual efforts to change our behaviors and trust.

Over time and with practice, we have come to trust that we will both return to a place of self-responsibility in service of reconnection. We can count on each other to reflect on ourselves and our own behaviors. Do we still have control issues, leftover wounds from past conditioning and relationships? Yes. But over time we have also come to see.

The "good person" inside our less than wonderful behaviors, and we can now count on that person to re- emerge. *And we help each other get there by rehabilitating ourselves*!

The Takeaway:

In a way, you could say that the heart of the rehabilitation process is that we believe in, focus on, and feed our own ability and the ability of others to change, instead of condemning ourselves and others to blame and judgment.

Rehabilitation of ourselves puts the focus on what we can *learn* from and how we can grow from our missteps, and on *taking direct action* to implement that learning.

Questions to Ask Yourself (and share with a partner or friend):

- What were your role models growing up for people apologizing, making amends without blaming those they hurt? What was that like for you?
- Have you repeated what you learned about amends and reparation (or the lack thereof)?
- Have you experienced others making genuine amends to you? What was that like? Have you experienced yourself making genuine amends to others? What was that like?
- If it has been difficult, what was the hardest part for you?
- What do you think would be possible for you if you were committed to reflection, responsibility and your own rehabilitation?
- Where would you start in your life now?
- What is one action (or more) you can commit to? Be specific about who, what, where, when and how.
- What would be the benefit to you?
- Share what you do and the result with one trusted person.

Give Yourself Credit!

Be sure to give yourself credit for any new behaviors or attitudes you practice, even if not perfect, even if you lose it and have to find your way back. Any and all efforts at rehabilitation help open the door to safe, deep connection. If I can take a deep breath and look inside and if I see one thing I can make amends for, it is a *Win* for both of us! And, the more you are likely to do the same. Together we learn to open the door wider to Repair. Making amends makes it possible to move more easily into Secret #5 of The 6 Secrets to Repairing Relationships– Resolution.

If you would like more information on how to make use of this series in your personal or professional life, please Contact Me to book a call, or purchase *America in Therapy* for an even bigger perspective on The 6 Secrets To Repairing Relationships.

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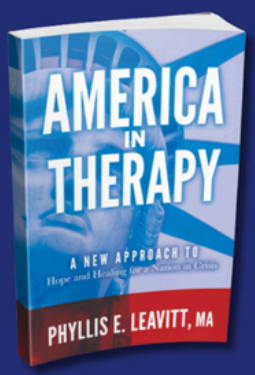

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There may be intense emotions that need time to be expressed and healed. But by continuing to use the elements of Repair, and returning to them when we lose them (which we will), we grow our ability to have these challenging conversations and we build a foundation of trust with one another. I begin to trust that you will reflect on your behavior– if not in the moment, eventually. My trust grows that you will make amends if they are needed, and that you will restrain your most upset responses and do your best to listen to me the way you want me to listen to you. I begin to trust that you will find your way back when you get off track. *And,* you have the same growing confidence that I will do the same. We begin to feel safer with each other, and conflict, even when we have it, becomes less threatening, *because our growing trust makes resolution more possible and more reliable*.

The Emotional Component of Resolution

Resolution means the conflict is over or mitigated and the rupture no longer fuels distance or animosity. Resolution has an emotional as well as structural component. If there is still a begrudging tone, the issue might be somewhat resolved but the feelings are not fully repaired. Sometimes hurt and angry feelings take longer to resolve than the issues themselves. Full resolve means the injured or upset feelings are resolved too. *The feeling of resolution is most easily obtained when the previous elements of Repair have been adequately addressed.* But just to remember– some resolution is better than none! Allowing for imperfection and giving ourselves and others credit for the efforts we make to reach resolution, however imperfect, is part of Repair. *The focus is always on making the most sincere efforts ourselves*. Sometimes we say, "I'm sorry, I will commit to X," even when our heart isn't fully in it because we know that is the direction we want to go, and we know speaking it helps clear the way for our hearts to follow.

The Go First Principle

It's not uncommon that we may not want to let go of anger or hurt or offer resolution until the other person steps up.

How many times have you held onto your upset waiting for the other person to make amends before you are willing to reconnect?

I certainly have. *But someone has to go first if we're going to make any change at all,* and the sooner one of us does, the better. Even so, I can tell you from experience that this can be very hard to do. If the upset is deep, it can take great strength to drop our defenses and actively shift the emotional tone or direction of a difficult conversation.

But the more we choose to be the person who goes first, *the easier it gets and the more the other person is likely to meet us there*. The Go First Principle actually applies to every element of the Repair process– being the one to *go first* to restrain my angry voice or my desire to walk out, to reflect on myself, take responsibility, make amends or offer resolution. And I can tell you, when I see my husband do it, it feels like such a welcome relief: I want to meet him there and I want to be the one to go first next time.

Be Generous

Give it all you have. Give more than you thought possible. You really want me to make more time for you? Okay, I've been so caught up in this project but. I'll quit at 5:00 and put my phone away. What? You're willing after all to help me make a garden, even though you have so much to do? Amazing. Thank you. Turn your body toward, not away. Lean in, make loving eye contact. Offer the hug you wanted him or her to give you first, or be a yes! to the hug that is offered and hug back. There are so many ways to be generous. The more you give, the more you are likely to receive exactly what you want.

Resolution can be an agreement, a compromise, a cautious trial, OR it can be a kiss and a kind word. Experiment with generosity. Grow that muscle.

The Takeaway:

Resolution is the act of making a peace offering that helps us cross the bridge to the last secret of the Repair process, reconnection.

Questions to Ask Yourself (and share with a partner or friend):

- What were your role models for resolution growing up? Was conflict resolved or brushed under the carpet? Did you learn to fight, wall off, retaliate, or talk it through?
- How does your conditioning influence you now?
- Do you feel you are more domineering in conflict or more submissive?

- How much do you attend to the emotional part of resolving upset?
- Where would you like the commitment to resolution to be stronger in your relationships? What would it afford you? What role would you like to play?
- Who is someone (or more than one person) you would like to have greater resolution with now?
- How willing are you to go first? Be specific.
- What action can you commit to? How generous can you be?
- Share your results with a partner or friend.

Give Yourself Credit!

Be sure to give yourself credit for any new behaviors or attitudes you practice, even if not perfect, even if you lose it and have to find your way back. Any and all efforts at resolution count. If I go first, and be even more generous in offering resolution, it is a *Win* for both of us! The more I am committed to resolution in my actions and attitudes, the more you are likely to meet me there. Together we learn to open the door wider to Repair. Resolution makes it possible to move more easily into the last of The 6 Secrets to Repairing Relationships– Reconnection.

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THE 6 SECRETS TO REPAIRING RELATIONSHIPS

Secret #6. Reconnection

Reconnection Is The Goal of Repair

Full Repair depends on the restoration of caring connection. Loss of connection is the source of our deepest pain.

It only makes sense then, that the restoration of love and belonging are what enable us to Repair relationships and heal.

With reconnection, we begin to live in a new paradigm, the *Win/Win* model of relationships. I don't "win" the argument; *we "win" back the relationship!* The first steps of Repair make it safe, desirable, and possible to reconnect to one another, which is the goal and the prize of the hard work of Repair. When we have created the safety to be heard and to listen, to reflect on ourselves, take responsibility, make amends and/or receive them, and offer resolution, we have the greatest possibility of experiencing our connectedness. We start to feel we belong to each other again. The desire to cooperate and support each other's welfare grows, and it becomes easier to navigate upsets and disagreements in the future.

This may sound idealistic or unrealistic. Most of us still have one foot in the belief that the other person is the one who needs to change and we believe we should hold out or fight it out until they do. Staying present to myself– my impulses, conditioning, reactions and strategies for coping with upset, is the key to getting out of that power struggle. It requires a huge 180 degree turn in my attention and my behavior that The 6 Secrets to Repair illustrate.

My husband will sometimes be critical of something I do or say that I think is completely innocuous (I can be the same way).

When I am in a place where the Secrets of Repair are more or less internalized, I can ignore it, point it out with humor in such a way that we both laugh, or address it calmly without taking it on. Any of these responses *on my part*, will have everything to do with how the interaction goes. If I am highly reactive, I am much more likely to evoke a defense. Is he responsible for what he says to me? Of course. But when my focus is *on myself*, I make very different choices of how I respond than when my focus is on him, and I see the results immediately.

One person can transform an interaction and a relationship.

We are wired for love and connection, and there may be no greater pain than when the bonds of human connection are broken. *Reconnection heals all wounds.* There is nothing like the feeling of coming back together after anger, hurt and disagreement have torn us apart, nothing like the feeling of safety, peacefulness, and love when anger has subsided, hurt is addressed, and we can feel our belonging to one another again. I hope you have experienced this often in your life, but if you haven't, you deserve to. We all need and deserve to live with others who are committed to reconnection. We are not made to be islands or live behind barricades, and the adaptations we make when unresolved hostility tear us apart create some of our most dysfunctional symptoms. *We can be the people who are committed to reconnection.*

Reconnection Heals Our Wounds

As I said at the start, love and belonging are the best food for human beings, while sustained, unaddressed or actively fueled discord and disconnection can make us emotionally ill. The hope is that we understand and can have compassion for ourselves and all others who don't yet know how to Repair their hurting and broken relationships, and that nothing can stop us from playing the part we know is most healing.

What we really want to reconnect to is love, and we can learn to Go First.

What Does Reconnection Look Like?

You probably know many of the answers to this question already. The tension goes out of our bodies. We say kind and reassuring things to each other. We may repeat an apology. Our gaze, facial expression, and tone of voice soften. We move closer, hug or kiss. We reiterate our commitment to Repair. We re-presence our bond to one another. We have dropped our defenses and the space between us both opens up and draws us closer. We belong to one another again. But in the best of all possible worlds, we don't stop there.

What does reconnection look like for you? What would you add, change or enhance?

Reinforcing Reconnection–Don't Take Anything for Granted!

It always serves to reinforce anything our partner does that serves Repair. If we see our partner making even the slightest effort to restrain themself, reflect and take responsibility, make amends, propose a resolution or reach out to reconnect, *the very best thing we can do is acknowledge them for the gift they have given to you and to the relationship*. You can even reiterate it the next day, and say something like "Hey, you know when you dropped your anger yesterday and talked to me sweetly, it felt so good. I saw how hard that was for you and yet you did it anyway. And it helped me drop my defenses, too." Or, "You know, honey, when you got up to leave but you turned around and came back, your whole presence seemed more open. And when you said you wanted to hear my point of view, it was such a gift. I loved you so much at that moment." And you will be so much more likely to hear a heartfelt acknowledgment in return.

Reconnection and acknowledgement make a powerful pair! Reconnection generates the desire to acknowledge, and acknowledgment reinforces connection.

Think of a time you were acknowledged for an effort you made to enhance a relationship in any way? How did it feel? Did you want more of that?

Practice acknowledging the important people in your life every day? Notice how you feel and how they respond.

What We Need More Than Anything Is The Desire and the Commitment For Repair

We have the tools we need to resolve our deepest divisions and the suffering we have both created and endured. When we understand what is needed, and how much power each one of us has to initiate Repair and sustain it, relationships become less a tightrope and more a possibility for fulfillment and joy.

What we need more than ever is the desire for Repair and the commitment to Repair. We must want it, and sometimes we must want it badly, to find the motivation to shift our own way of being.

And the subtle or not-so-subtle shift that begins to occur is that Repair becomes less about moving away from pain and more about moving toward love.

When our bond of love and care is re-ignited, we have more empathy for each other, we want to get along, and we want to bring these Repair skills to our next upset. *Reconnection brings emotional safety and emotional safety heals our wounds.* (Broken bonds of connection and care created the wounds). Reconnection helps us grow our desire to reconnect more quickly when we experience rupture. Reconnection re-establishes a sense of belonging– one of our greatest human needs and the absence of which causes immeasurable suffering. And when love and belonging are restored, we want more of that. We have the incentive to do the work of Repair over and over again, and our skill in doing so grows.

Questions To Ask Yourself (and share with a partner):

- Did the people in your family reconnect after an upset? If so, what did it look like and what made it possible? If not, what was that like?
- Have you repeated those patterns yourself (most of us do or else we try to do the opposite)? How has that worked?
- How much did your family and or close others value connection and repair of connection? How much do you value it now?
- What would support you to make reconnection the goal in your relationships?
- What might stand in the way?
- Have you had the experience of reconnecting successfully with another (s) after a falling out? What was that like for you? What made it possible? Was it sustained? How much of a part did you play in reconnecting? How much did the other play a part?
- Who would you like to have greater connection or reconnection with now? What would be required for Repair as you understand it now?
- What action are you willing to take to reconnect? Be specific.
- Share your results with someone.

In Conclusion: One Person Can Change A Relationship

Relationships, as my very first therapist said, are messy. We can make the neatest outlines of what to do when, and still we will sometimes fall into our very human reactions, limitations and blind spots. That said, it is never too late to come back to the table with our best intentions and tools for Repair. *And*, we can learn to give that leeway to others and accept their advances whenever they are able to offer them.

The goal is that we practice and practice again, because what you will find is that The 6 Secrets of Repair overlap, and the goal is that they merge within us as a way of being even more than an outline of steps to take. I cannot stress enough that *one of the most powerful elements in healing a relationship is to stay focused on my part and my willingness to change my own behavior–* and I believe it is one of the most difficult things for us humans to do. But if I have stopped blaming you, and I am becoming accountable for myself, I am much more likely to seek and find resolution and hold to that even if the other is not ready… and the beauty is that the more I hold to that, the more the other person becomes ready faster! You will discover this as you embody these healing principles.

One day my husband and I had the silliest little spat in the grocery store. I don't remember now what it was about. I walked away and roamed the aisles by myself. Suddenly he appeared and, with a big smile on his face, he looked me in the eye and said, "I love you." Repair happened that quickly and that easily. He changed our relationship at that moment, and that's the moment I remember. We do that for each other now, and when we don't, we come back and try again until we do.