

An Introduction to Imago

By Imago couples therapy co-founder Harville Hendrix, PhD who developed Imago with his partner Helen LaKelly Hunt, PhD

From Conflict to Hope

At some point in their relationship, couples often find themselves struggling with anger and shock, despair and sadness. Some are newlyweds, and can't understand how they have plummeted from the heights of love and glory into a swamp of hopelessness and conflict. Others have been married for many years, and though they have been slogging along – in calm or storm – their days of wine and roses are a dim memory. Even if life at home is relatively peaceful, couples lament that they have “nothing in common anymore.” And so they lead a disappointed or angry co-existence, each with their own friends and interests, in a marriage of convenience, or an arrangement they endure “for the sake of the children.”

Shattered dreams, whatever form they take, are painful. But there is hope. In fact, the pain and conflict of committed relationships arise not out of lack of love for our partners, but from a misunderstanding of what love relationships are about. Your conflict can be the very fuel for the fulfillment you seek.

Why do we fall in love?

What is really happening when we fall in--and out of--love?

What's really going on when couples fight?

To gain insight into the hidden agenda of a relationship, we need to look at the complex process of human growth and development, and at how we human beings fit into the larger scheme of things.

I believe that we are creatures of nature, with the evolutionary program of our species encoded in our genes, and that we all begin life in a state of relaxed and joyful bliss. If our caretakers are attuned to our wants and needs, ready and able to

provide warmth safety and sustenance, our feelings of aliveness and well-being are sustained. We remain whole.

But even in the best of circumstances, our parents are not able to maintain perfect standards, to be available every minute, to always understand exactly what is needed or to meet every demand. Tired, angry, depressed, busy, ill, distracted, afraid--our parents fail to sustain our feelings of security and comfort.

Every unmet need causes fear and pain and, in our infantile ignorance, we have no idea how to stop it and restore our feeling of safety. As a response, we adopt primitive coping mechanisms ranging from constant crying to get attention to withdrawing inward and denying that we even have needs. Meanwhile, throughout our childhood, we are also being socialized, molded by our caretakers and communities to fit into society. Observant and malleable, we learn what to do to gain love and acceptance. We repress or disown parts of ourselves that society finds unacceptable or unlovable. Our sense of "alrightness" diminishes, and we end up as shadows of our whole, true selves.

Most of us had "good enough" caretakers; we do all right. Some of us didn't fare so well, and our lives are handicapped by deep hurts. All of us were wounded in childhood to some extent. We are now coping as well as we can with the world and our relationships, but parts of our true nature were suppressed in the unconscious. We look grown up--we have jobs and responsibilities--but we are walking wounded, trying to live life fully while unconsciously hoping to somehow restore the sense of joyful aliveness we began with.

When we fall in love, we believe we've found that sense of joyful aliveness! Suddenly, we see life in technicolor. We nibble each others' ears and tell each other everything; our limitations and rigidities melt away. We're sexier, smarter, funnier, more giving. We feel whole, we feel like ourselves. Finally we feel safe, and breathe a sigh of relieved deliverance. It looks like everything is going to turn out all right, after all.

Why does falling in love go wrong?

But inevitably--often when we marry or move in together--things just start to go wrong. In some cases, all hell breaks loose. The veil of illusion falls away, and it seems that our partners are different than we thought they were. It turns out they have qualities that we can't bear. Even qualities we once admired grate on us. Old hurts are reactivated as we realize that our partners cannot or will not love and care for us as they promised. Our dream shatters.

Disillusionment turns to anger, fueled by fear that we won't survive without the love and safety that was within our grasp. Since our partner is no longer willingly giving us what we need, we change tactics, trying to maneuver our partners into caring--through anger, crying, withdrawal, shame, intimidation, criticism--whatever works. We will make them love us. Or we may negotiate for time, love, chores, gifts.

The power struggle has begun, and may go on for many years, until we split. Or we settle into an uneasy truce.

What is going on here? Apparently you have found an Imago partner. Someone, I'm afraid, who is uniquely unqualified (at the moment), to give you the love you want.

Furthermore, this is what's supposed to happen!

Let me explain. We all think that we have freedom of choice when it comes to selecting our partners. But regardless of what it is we think we're looking for in a mate, our unconscious has its own agenda.

Our primitive "old" brain has a compelling, non-negotiable drive to restore the feeling of aliveness and wholeness that we came into the world with. To accomplish that, it must repair the damage done in childhood as a result of unmet needs, and the way it does that is to find a partner who can give us what our caretakers failed to provide.

You'd think, then, that we would choose someone who has what our caretakers lacked. If only that were so! But the old brain has a mind of its own, with its own checklist of desired qualities. It is carrying around its own image of the perfect

partner, a complex synthesis of qualities formed in reaction to the way our caretakers responded to our needs. Every pleasure or pain, every transaction of childhood, has left its mark on us, and these collective impressions form an unconscious picture we're always trying to replicate as we scan our environment for a suitable mate.

This image of "the person who can make me whole again" I call the Imago.

Though we consciously seek only the positive traits, the negative traits of our caretakers are more indelibly imprinted in our Imago picture, because those are the traits which caused the painful experiences we now seek to heal. Our unconscious need is to have our feelings of aliveness and wholeness restored by someone who reminds us of our caretakers. In other words, we look for someone with the same deficits of care and attention that hurt us in the first place.

So when we fall in love, when bells ring and the world seems altogether a better place, our old brain is telling us that we've found someone with whom we can finally get our needs met. Unfortunately, since we don't understand what's going on, we're shocked when the awful truth of our beloved surfaces, and our first impulse is to run screaming in the opposite direction.

But that's not all the bad news. Another powerful component of our Imago is that we seek the qualities missing in ourselves that got lost in the shuffle of socialization. If we are shy, we seek someone outgoing; if we're disorganized, we're attracted to someone cool and rational. But eventually, when our own feelings—our repressed exuberance or anger—are stirred, we are uncomfortable, and criticize our partners for being too outgoing, too coldly rational, too temperamental.

Why is conflict good!?

Being aware of ourselves is the key; it changes everything.

When we understand that we have chosen our partners to heal certain painful experiences, and that the healing of those experiences is the key to the end of longing, we have taken the first step on the journey to real love.

What we need to understand and accept is that conflict is supposed to happen. This is as nature intended it: Everything in nature is in conflict. Conflict is a sign that the psyche is trying to survive, to get its needs met and become whole. It's only without this knowledge that conflict is destructive.

Divorce does not solve the problems of relationship. We may get rid of our partners, but we keep our problems, carting them into the next relationship. Divorce is incompatible with the intentions of nature.

Romantic love is supposed to end. It is the glue that initially bonds two incompatible people together so that they will do what needs to be done to heal themselves.

The good news is that although many couples become hopelessly locked in the power struggle, it too is supposed to end.

Regardless of what we may believe, relationships are not born of love, but of need; real love is born in relationships, as a result of understanding what they are about and doing what is necessary to have them.

You may already be with your dream partner, but at the moment, he or she is in disguise--and, like you, in pain. A Conscious Relationship itself is the practice you need to restore your sense of aliveness. The goal of Imago Practice is to change the power struggle and set you on the path of real love.

How to make conflict bring us closer

Many couples' problems are rooted in misunderstood, manipulated, or avoided communications. To correct this, we have created the Imago Dialogue, the core skill of Imago Practice.

Using this effective communications technique, you can restructure the way you talk to each other, so that what you say to each other is mirrored back to you, is validated, and empathized with. You can use the Imago Dialogue to tell each other all about your childhoods, to state your frustrations clearly, and to articulate exactly what you need from each other in order to heal.

Clear communication is a window into the world of your partner; truly being heard is a powerful aphrodisiac.

Over time, we move from a staring at exteriors to a sharing of interiors, as we learn to participate in the emotional realm of the other, while holding onto our own, separate experience.

Initially, Dialogue may feel artificial. With practice, it will become seamless and connecting.

In the Dialogue, both partners cross a bridge into each other's worlds, motivated not only by the Receiver's desire to be "hear and understand" but also to meet the Sender's need to be "heard and understood." The Dialogue fosters intentionality, a commitment to slow down our lives and devote specific uninterrupted time to our relationships. The Dialogue ultimately says to the other, "I respect your otherness; I want to learn from it. And I want to share mine with you."

One of the greatest learnings of Dialogue is the discovery of two distinct worlds. Whenever two people are involved, there are always two realities. These realities will always be different in small and large ways, no matter what. And the reality of the other person can be understood, accepted, valued, and even loved but not made to be identical to our own.

Finding true love

The Dialogue must also be turned into action: we give our partners what they need, and not just what is easy to give. Now we come to the heart of the matter: in a Conscious relationship we agree to change in order to give our partner what s/he needs. This is a radical idea. Conventional wisdom says that people don't change, that we should simply learn to accept each other as we are. But without change, there is no growth; we are confined to the fate, to remaining stuck in our unhappiness.

Change is the catalyst for healing. In changing to give our partners what they need, we heal our own painful experiences. Our own behavior was born in response to our particular deprivations; it is our adaptation to loss. In giving our partners what is hardest for us to give, we have to bring our hidden selves out into the light, owning and enlivening parts of ourselves. When we change our behavior in response to our mate, we heal our partner and ourselves.

I call the process by which we alter our entrenched behaviors to give our partners what they need stretching, for it requires that we conquer our fears and do what comes unnaturally. Our resistance reflects our defenses. Often we may feel that we're losing ourselves but we are not ourselves now; it is in the crucible of change that we regain ourselves.

Over the course of time, as our partners demonstrate their love for us, as they learn about and accept our hidden selves, and as we stretch to love our partners, our pain and self-absorption diminishes. We restore our empathic feelings for our partners, and our feelings of connection to the other that were lost in the pain of our childhood. Finally we learn to see our partners for themselves, with their own private world of personal meaning, their own ideas and dreams, and not merely as extensions of ourselves, or as we wish they were. We no longer say, "You liked that awful movie?", but rather "Tell me why you liked that movie. I want to know how you think."

Finally, we can relax; everything is all right.

A conscious relationship is a spiritual path which leads us home again, to joy and aliveness, to the feeling of oneness we started out with. All through the course of Imago Practice, we learn to express love as a behavior daily, in large and small ways: in other words, in stretching to give our partner what they need, we learn to love. The transformation of our relationships may not be accomplished easily or quickly; we are setting off on a lifelong journey.