PART THREE

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE APPLIED

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Intimate Enemies

To love and to work, Sigmund Freud once remarked to his disciple Erik Erikson, are the twin capacities that mark full maturity. If that is the case, then maturity may be an endangered way station in life—and current trends in marriage and divorce make emotional intelligence more crucial than ever.

Consider divorce rates. The rate *per year* of divorces has more or less leveled off. But there is another way of calculating divorce rates, one that suggests a perilous climb: looking at the odds that a given newly married couple will have their marriage *eventually* end in divorce. Although the overall rate of divorce has stopped climbing, the *risk* of divorce has been shifting to newlyweds.

The shift gets clearer in comparing divorce rates for couples wed in a given year. For American marriages that began in 1890, about 10 percent ended in divorce. For those wed in 1920, the rate was about 18 percent; for couples married in 1950, 30 percent. Couples that were newly wed in 1970 had a fifty-fifty chance of splitting up or staying together. And for married couples starting out in 1990, the likelihood that the marriage would end in divorce was projected to be close to a staggering 67 percent![1] If the estimate holds, just three in ten of recent newlyweds can count on staying married to their new partner.

It can be argued that much of this rise is due not so much to a decline in emotional intelligence as to the steady erosion of social pressures—the stigma surrounding divorce, or the economic dependence of wives on their husbands—that used to keep couples together in even the most miserable of matches. But if social pressures are no longer the glue that holds a marriage together, then the emotional forces between wife and husband are that much more crucial if their union is to survive.

These ties between husband and wife—and the emotional fault lines that can break them apart—have been assayed in recent years with a precision never seen before. Perhaps the biggest breakthrough in

understanding what holds a marriage together or tears it apart has come from the use of sophisticated physiological measures that allow the moment-to-moment tracking of the emotional nuances of a couple's encounter. Scientists are now able to detect a husband's otherwise invisible adrenaline surges and jumps in blood pressure, and to observe fleeting but telling microemotions as they flit across a wife's face. These physiological measures reveal a hidden biological subtext to a couple's difficulties, a critical level of emotional reality that is typically imperceptible to or disregarded by the couple themselves. These measures lay bare the emotional forces that hold a relationship together or destroy it. The fault lines have their earliest beginnings in the differences between the emotional worlds of girls and boys.

HIS MARRIAGE AND HERS: CHILDHOOD ROOTS

As I was entering a restaurant on a recent evening, a young man stalked out the door, his face set in an expression both stony and sullen. Close on his heels a young woman came running, her fists desperately pummeling his back while she yelled, "Goddamn you! Come back here and be nice to me!" That poignant, impossibly self-contradictory plea aimed at a retreating back epitomizes the pattern most commonly seen in couples whose relationship is distressed: She seeks to engage, he withdraws. Marital therapists have long noted that by the time a couple finds their way to the therapy office they are in this pattern of engage-withdraw, with his complaint about her "unreasonable" demands and outbursts, and her lamenting his indifference to what she is saying.

This marital endgame reflects the fact that there are, in effect, two emotional realities in a couple, his and hers. The roots of these emotional differences, while they may be partly biological, also can be traced back to childhood, and to the separate emotional worlds boys and girls inhabit while growing up. There is a vast amount of research on these separate worlds, their barriers reinforced not just by the different games boys and girls prefer, but by young children's fear of being teased for having a "girlfriend" or "boyfriend."[2] One study of children's friendships found that three-year-olds say about half their friends are of the opposite sex; for five-year-olds it's about 20 percent, and by age seven almost no boys or girls say they have a best friend of

the opposite sex.[3] These separate social universes intersect little until teenagers start dating.

Meanwhile, boys and girls are taught very different lessons about handling emotions. Parents, in general, discuss emotions—with the exception of anger—more with their daughters than their sons.[4] Girls are exposed to more information about emotions than are boys: when parents make up stories to tell their preschool children, they use more emotion words when talking to daughters than to sons; when mothers play with their infants, they display a wider range of emotions to daughters than to sons; when mothers talk to daughters about feelings, they discuss in more detail the emotional state itself than they do with their sons—though with the sons they go into more detail about the causes and consequences of emotions like anger (probably as a cautionary tale).

Leslie Brody and Judith Hall, who have summarized the research on differences in emotions between the sexes, propose that because girls develop facility with language more quickly than do boys, this leads them to be more experienced at articulating their feelings and more skilled than boys at using words to explore and substitute for emotional reactions such as physical fights; in contrast, they note, "boys, for whom the verbalization of affects is de-emphasized, may become largely unconscious of their emotional states, both in themselves and in others."[5]

At age ten, roughly the same percent of girls as boys are overtly aggressive, given to open confrontation when angered. But by age thirteen, a telling difference between the sexes emerges: Girls become more adept than boys at artful aggressive tactics like ostracism, vicious gossip, and indirect vendettas. Boys, by and large, simply continue being confrontational when angered, oblivious to these more covert strategies.[6] This is just one of many ways that boys—and later, men—are less sophisticated than the opposite sex in the byways of emotional life.

When girls play together, they do so in small, intimate groups, with an emphasis on minimizing hostility and maximizing cooperation, while boys' games are in larger groups, with an emphasis on competition. One key difference can be seen in what happens when games boys or girls are playing get disrupted by someone getting hurt. If a boy who has gotten hurt gets upset, he is expected to get out of the way and stop crying so the game can go on. If the same happens among a group of girls who are playing, the *game stops* while everyone

gathers around to help the girl who is crying. This difference between boys and girls at play epitomizes what Harvard's Carol Gilligan points to as a key disparity between the sexes: boys take pride in a lone, tough-minded independence and autonomy, while girls see themselves as part of a web of connectedness. Thus boys are threatened by anything that might challenge their independence, while girls are more threatened by a rupture in their relationships. And, as Deborah Tannen has pointed out in her book *You Just Don't Understand*, these differing perspectives mean that men and women want and expect very different things out of a conversation, with men content to talk about "things," while women seek emotional connection.

In short, these contrasts in schooling in the emotions foster very different skills, with girls becoming "adept at reading both verbal and nonverbal emotional signals, at expressing and communicating their feelings," and boys becoming adept at "minimizing emotions having to do with vulnerability, guilt, fear and hurt".[7] Evidence for these different stances is very strong in the scientific literature. Hundreds of studies have found, for example, that on average women are more empathic than men, at least as measured by the ability to read someone else's unstated feelings from facial expression, tone of voice, and other nonverbal cues. Likewise, it is generally easier to read feelings from a woman's face than a man's; while there is no difference in facial expressiveness among very young boys and girls, as they go through the elementary-school grades boys become less expressive, girls more so. This may partly reflect another key difference: women, on average, experience the entire range of emotions with greater intensity and more volatility than men—in this sense, women *are* more "emotional" than men.[8]

All of this means that, in general, women come into a marriage groomed for the role of emotional manager, while men arrive with much less appreciation of the importance of this task for helping a relationship survive. Indeed, the most important element for women—but not for men—in satisfaction with their relationship reported in a study of 264 couples was the sense that the couple has "good communication."[9] Ted Huston, a psychologist at the University of Texas who has studied couples in depth, observes, "For the wives, intimacy means talking things over, especially talking about the relationship itself. The men, by and large, don't understand what the wives want from them. They say, 'I want to do things with her, and all she wants to do is talk.' " During courtship, Huston found, men were

much more willing to spend time talking in ways that suited the wish for intimacy of their wives-to-be. But once married, as time went on the men—especially in more traditional couples—spent less and less time talking in this way with their wives, finding a sense of closeness simply in doing things like gardening together rather than talking things over.

This growing silence on the part of husbands may be partly due to the fact that, if anything, men are a bit Pollyannaish about the state of their marriage, while their wives are attuned to the trouble spots: in one study of marriages, men had a rosier view than their wives of just about everything in their relationship—lovemaking, finances, ties with in-laws, how well they listened to each other, how much their flaws mattered.[10] Wives, in general, are more vocal about their complaints than are their husbands, particularly among unhappy couples. Combine men's rosy view of marriage with their aversion to emotional confrontations, and it is clear why wives so often complain that their husbands try to wiggle out of discussing the troubling things about their relationship. (Of course this gender difference is a generalization, and is not true in every case; a psychiatrist friend complained that in his marriage his wife is reluctant to discuss emotional matters between them, and he is the one who is left to bring them up.)

The slowness of men to bring up problems in a relationship is no doubt compounded by their relative lack of skill when it comes to reading facial expressions of emotions. Women, for example, are more sensitive to a sad expression on a man's face than are men in detecting sadness from a woman's expression.[11] Thus a woman has to be all the sadder for a man to notice her feelings in the first place, let alone for him to raise the question of what is making her so sad.

Consider the implications of this emotional gender gap for how couples handle the grievances and disagreements that any intimate relationship inevitably spawns. In fact, specific issues such as how often a couple has sex, how to discipline the children, or how much debt and savings a couple feels comfortable with are not what make or break a marriage. Rather, it is *how* a couple discusses such sore points that matters more for the fate of their marriage. Simply having reached an agreement about *how to* disagree is key to marital survival; men and women have to overcome the innate gender differences in approaching rocky emotions. Failing this, couples are vulnerable to emotional rifts that eventually can tear their relationship apart. As we

shall see, these rifts are far more likely to develop if one or both partners have certain deficits in emotional intelligence.

MARITAL FAULT LINE

Fred: Did you pick up my dry cleaning?

Ingrid: (In a mocking tone) "Did you pick up my dry cleaning." Pick up your own damn dry cleaning. What am I, your maid?

Fred: Hardly. If you were a maid, at least you'd know how to clean.

If this were dialogue from a sitcom, it might be amusing. But this painfully caustic interchange was between a couple who (perhaps not surprisingly) divorced within the next few years.[12] Their encounter took place in a laboratory run by John Gottman, a University of Washington psychologist who has done perhaps the most detailed analysis ever of the emotional glue that binds couples together and the corrosive feelings that can destroy marriages.[13] In his laboratory, couples' conversations are videotaped and then subjected to hours of microanalysis designed to reveal the subterranean emotional currents at play. This mapping of the fault lines that may lead a couple to divorce makes a convincing case for the crucial role of emotional intelligence in the survival of a marriage.

During the last two decades Gottman has tracked the ups and downs of more than two hundred couples, some just newlyweds, others married for decades. Gottman has charted the emotional ecology of marriage with such precision that, in one study, he was able to predict which couples seen in his lab (like Fred and Ingrid, whose discussion of getting the dry cleaning was so acrimonious) would divorce within three years with *94 percent accuracy*, a precision unheard of in marital studies!

The power of Gottman's analysis comes from his painstaking method and the thoroughness of his probes. While the couples talk, sensors record the slightest flux in their physiology; a second-by-second analysis of their facial expressions (using the system for reading emotions developed by Paul Ekman) detects the most fleeting and subtle nuance of feeling. After their session, each partner comes separately to the lab and watches a videotape of the conversation, and narrates his or her secret thoughts during the heated moments of the exchange. The result is akin to an emotional X-ray of the marriage.

An early warning signal that a marriage is in danger, Gottman finds, is harsh criticism. In a healthy marriage husband and wife feel free to voice a complaint. But too often in the heat of anger complaints are expressed in a destructive fashion, as an attack on the spouse's character. For example, Pamela and her daughter went shoe shopping while her husband, Tom, went to a bookstore. They agreed to meet in front of the post office in an hour, and then go to a matinee. Pamela was prompt, but there was no sign of Tom. "Where is he? The movie starts in ten minutes," Pamela complained to her daughter. "If there's a way for your father to screw something up, he will."

When Tom showed up ten minutes later, happy about having run into a friend and apologizing for being late, Pamela lashed out with sarcasm: "That's okay—it gave us a chance to discuss your amazing ability to screw up every single plan we make. You're so thoughtless and self-centered!"

Pamela's complaint is more than that: it is a character assassination, a critique of the person, not the deed. In fact, Tom had apologized. But for this lapse Pamela brands him as "thoughtless and self-centered." Most couples have moments like this from time to time, where a complaint about something a partner has done is voiced as an attack against the person rather than the deed. But these harsh personal criticisms have a far more corrosive emotional impact than do more reasoned complaints. And such attacks, perhaps understandably, become more likely the more a husband or wife feels their complaints go unheard or ignored.

The differences between complaints and personal criticisms are simple. In a complaint, a wife states specifically what is upsetting her, and criticizes her husband's *action*, not her husband, saying how it made her feel: "When you forgot to pick up my clothes at the cleaner's it made me feel like you don't care about me." It is an expression of basic emotional intelligence: assertive, not belligerent or passive. But in a personal criticism she uses the specific grievance to launch a global attack on her husband: "You're always so selfish and uncaring. It just proves I can't trust you to do anything right." This kind of criticism leaves the person on the receiving end feeling ashamed, disliked, blamed, and defective—all of which are more likely to lead to a defensive response than to steps to improve things.

All the more so when the criticism comes laden with contempt, a particularly destructive emotion. Contempt comes easily with anger; it is usually expressed not just in the words used, but also in a tone of

voice and an angry expression. Its most obvious form, of course, is mockery or insult—"jerk," "bitch," "wimp." But just as hurtful is the body language that conveys contempt, particularly the sneer or curled lip that are the universal facial signals for disgust, or a rolling of the eyes, as if to say, "Oh, brother!"

Contempt's facial signature is a contraction of the "dimpler," the muscle that pulls the corners of the mouth to the side (usually the left) while the eyes roll upward. When one spouse flashes this expression, the other, in a tacit emotional exchange, registers a jump in heart rate of two or three beats per minute. This hidden conversation takes its toll; if a husband shows contempt regularly, Gottman found, his wife will be more prone to a range of health problems, from frequent colds and flus to bladder and yeast infections, as well as gastrointestinal symptoms. And when a wife's face shows disgust, a near cousin of contempt, four or more times within a fifteen-minute conversation, it is a silent sign that the couple is likely to separate within four years.

Of course, an occasional show of contempt or disgust will not undo a marriage. Rather, such emotional volleys are akin to smoking and high cholesterol as risk factors for heart disease—the more intense and prolonged, the greater the danger. On the road to divorce, one of these factors predicts the next, in an escalating scale of misery. Habitual criticism and contempt or disgust are danger signs because they indicate that a husband or wife has made a silent judgment for the worse about their partner. In his or her thoughts, the spouse is the subject of constant condemnation. Such negative and hostile thinking leads naturally to attacks that make the partner on the receiving end defensive—or ready to counterattack in return.

The two arms of the fight-or-flight response each represent ways a spouse can respond to an attack. The most obvious is to fight back, lashing out in anger. That route typically ends in a fruitless shouting match. But the alternative response, fleeing, can be more pernicious, particularly when the "flight" is a retreat into stony silence.

Stonewalling is the ultimate defense. The stonewaller just goes blank, in effect withdrawing from the conversation by responding with a stony expression and silence. Stonewalling sends a powerful, unnerving message, something like a combination of icy distance, superiority, and distaste. Stonewalling showed up mainly in marriages that were heading for trouble; in 85 percent of these cases it was the husband who stonewalled in response to a wife who attacked with

criticism and contempt.[14] As a habitual response stonewalling is devastating to the health of a relationship: it cuts off all possibility of working out disagreements.

TOXIC THOUGHTS

The children are being rambunctious, and Martin, their father, is getting annoyed. He turns to his wife, Melanie, and says in a sharp tone, “Dear, don’t you think the kids could quiet down?”

His actual thought: “She’s too easy on the kids.”

Melanie, responding to his ire, feels a surge of anger. Her face grows taut, her brows knit in a frown, and she replies, “The kids are having a good time. Anyhow, they’ll be going up to bed soon.”

Her thought: “There he goes again, complaining all the time.”

Martin now is visibly enraged. He leans forward menacingly, his fists clenched, as he says in an annoyed tone, “Should I put them to bed now?”

His thought: “She opposes me in everything. I’d better take over.”

Melanie, suddenly frightened by Martin’s wrath, says meekly, “No, I’ll put them to bed right away.”

Her thought: “He’s getting out of control—he could hurt the kids. I’d better give in.”

These parallel conversations—the spoken and the silent—are reported by Aaron Beck, the founder of cognitive therapy, as an example of the kinds of thinking that can poison a marriage.[15] The real emotional exchange between Melanie and Martin is shaped by their thoughts, and those thoughts, in turn, are determined by another, deeper layer, which Beck calls “automatic thoughts”—fleeting, background assumptions about oneself and the people in one’s life that reflect our deepest emotional attitudes. For Melanie the background thought is something like, “He’s always bullying me with his anger.” For Martin, the key thought is, “She has no right to treat me like this.” Melanie feels like an innocent victim in their marriage, and Martin feels righteous indignation at what he feels is unjust treatment.

Thoughts of being an innocent victim or of righteous indignation are typical of partners in troubled marriages, continually fueling anger and hurt.[16] Once distressing thoughts such as righteous indignation become automatic, they are self-confirming: the partner who feels