

EMOTIONAL NEEDS IN

RELATIONSHIPS

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In sex, dating and relationships, words and actions are only as useful as the emotions they elicit. They don't have any intrinsic value by themselves.

When we interact with someone we're attracted to and it doesn't go as we'd hoped, we often come away thinking that if only we would have said or done something differently, things could have turned out much better. When we get dumped, we obsessively search our memories for the moments, or even *the* moment, where it all went wrong, and then we kick ourselves for the things we did or didn't do in those moments that could have saved it all.

But it's precisely this insecurity about *what* to do that backfires on us. By focusing too much on what we should say or how we should act around someone – whether it's someone we just met or someone we've been with for years – we fail to acknowledge the emotional realities that define the quality of the relationship between us.

Our relationships, then, should be viewed in terms of emotional needs rather than actions because emotional needs are the fundamental factors that determine what actually happens in each interaction. The words, actions, and behaviors can shift and change and collide, but like tectonic plates floating on a hot surface beneath, it's the emotional needs that create the results. If you feel unsure or unsafe, it will bleed through your words and actions and inhibit you from proceeding any further. If you feel lame and used, you'll find a way to flake out, no matter what

someone says or does.

If you can identify the emotional realities underlying your interactions and relationships, then you'll [truly understand where you're at with someone](#), as well as why you feel the way you do towards them.



IDENTIFYING YOUR FUNDAMENTAL EMOTIONAL NEEDS

On the surface, this sounds fairly straightforward. But the problem is that emotional processes are quite enigmatic. It's easy to obsess over what you might say to someone or to endlessly ponder the reasons why they might have done what they did when they did it — but you can't see or touch the emotions that are driving the interaction and, ultimately, your relationship with them. It's a subjective interpretation of a situation, and so pointing to specific examples can be difficult, especially to those who are woefully unaware of the needs of others (as well as their

own). Telling them to look for something that they don't even know is there can be like asking Stevie Wonder to read you a lunch menu.

The idea that humans are motivated primarily by emotions and use conscious decisions to justify their unconscious decisions is a cornerstone of psychological thought going all the way back to Freud.¹ It's the basis for the entire profession of [marketing](#), salesmanship, and public relations. Indeed, neuroscience has found that actions and impulses originate in the amygdala (a brain region associated with emotional responses) and are then processed and altered by the frontal cortex (rational thought), *not the other way around*.²

So in our interactions with each other, we experience an immediate gut reaction *and then* form a conscious opinion of the other person. Our subsequent behavior towards them, or even how we might change our opinion of them, is all based on this initial emotional reaction. Our frontal cortex may paint a colorful picture of the person and the situation, but the amygdala's initial reaction is what chooses the color palette to begin with.

For instance, someone you just met who isn't all that into you will likely come up with a benign or irrelevant reason for why they're rejecting you, which is their way of rationalizing their initial feelings towards you. So does this make them shallow and cold-hearted?

¹ Freud, S. (1915). *The unconscious*.

² Damasio, A. R. (1994). *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*. New York: Putnam.

Not necessarily. Our emotional reactions to each other are a combination of so many factors, both conscious and unconscious, that we'll never be able to pinpoint them all with certainty. And not only that, but what causes one person to have a positive reaction to you might make another feel completely different (or even indifferent).

So instead of looking at what words or even what actions work the best in your relationships, we should pay attention to what emotions we want to elicit for the best results and strongest connections. What's important is zeroing in on the emotional motivation behind another's judgments and perceptions, not the actual judgments or perceptions themselves.

This may sound difficult or complicated, but it's actually quite straightforward. There's little logic to learn. It's merely an exercise of practicing empathy and intuiting what others are feeling rather than thinking and analyzing their surface reactions. It's *removing* your mental blocks rather than erecting new models of information.

THE 3 FUNDAMENTAL EMOTIONAL NEEDS IN RELATIONSHIPS

I've zeroed in on what I consider to be the three primary emotional motivators when it comes to sex, dating, and relationships. These three motivators exist for everyone. How we meet them or don't meet them determines the quality and duration of our interactions and relationships. The three fundamental emotional needs are:

1. **Status.** Feeling important or superior; feeling challenged.
2. **Connection.** Feeling understood and appreciated; shared values and experiences.
3. **Security.** Feeling safe and reliable; feeling trust.

These three emotional triggers are universal. We all have them and our willingness to become sexual or intimate with someone is based on these three triggers and *how we prioritize them*. Some of us prioritize the search for status and challenge far more than security and trust. Others seek out connection and appreciation and aren't as interested in status.³

It's common in relationships to feel ambivalent or slightly torn with the person you're with. You kind of like them, but you wonder if there's someone else you'll like more that you haven't met yet. Maybe you really like being alone with them, but around your friends, they're cold and distant and seemingly a different person. In fact, this sort of ambivalence is often the rule with people we date, not the exception, and it's driven by the emotional needs that either are or aren't being met.

For instance, let's say you're seeing someone who is well liked and considered attractive by all of your friends (triggers your motivation for status), but you find them self-centered at times (negatively triggers your need for connection) and they can be flaky and opaque (negatively triggers your need for security). Do you tolerate their behavior? There may not seem to be a whole lot

³ Marston, P. J., Hecht, M. L., Manke, M. L., Mcdaniel, S., & Reeder, H. (1998). [The subjective experience of intimacy, passion, and commitment in heterosexual loving relationships](#). *Personal Relationships*, 5(1), 15-30.

of depth in your relationship, but you have a great time socializing with other people together. You cut them a lot of slack and keep giving them second chances. After all, your friends always talk about how great you are together, and your friends are good people, right?



EMOTIONAL NEEDS IN RELATIONSHIPS

All of us have three fundamental needs to meet in our relationships.



STATUS

Feeling important or superior; feeling challenged. **Status** is often achieved via more superficial, material qualities like looks or money and is, therefore, the easiest/quickest need to meet.

Feeling understood and appreciated. **Connection** involves shared values and experiences and some form of it is typically experienced very early on in a relationship.



CONNECTION



SECURITY

Feeling safe and reliable; feeling trust. **Security** is often felt through reassuring words/actions by a partner and typically develops over longer periods of time.

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Or perhaps you meet someone who is a bit unstable and erratic,

but when you two are alone together, you have the [most amazing chemistry and connection](#) – it's just that those moments are few and far between. The lack of security you feel will be in constant tension with the feeling of connection and appreciation you feel for one another and you'll struggle to figure out what to do, often moving back and forth between [cutting them off and moving on](#), or going back and trying things again.

WHICH EMOTIONAL NEED(S) DO YOU PRIORITIZE?

While we all share these same emotional needs, we each differ in the ways we prioritize some needs over others.⁴ Some people have a high need for security. Others are looking for connection first. And what's more is that our needs often interact and feedback onto one another. So for instance, the lack of security you provide might actually create a sense of status and challenge for some.

Emotional motivators can also manifest in [healthy](#) and [unhealthy](#) forms. The normal and healthy emotional need for status and importance can become an unhealthy vanity and superficiality. We might seek out people based on their looks, or their money, or their fame, or their prestige, or what our friends think of them. When too much emphasis is placed on these things, the need for status begins to crowd and suppress our needs for connection and security. Pursuing these superficial traits at the expense of our other emotional needs will often leave us feeling lonely and

⁴ Acker, M., & Davis, M. H. (1992). Intimacy, passion and commitment in adult romantic relationships: A test of the triangular theory of love. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 9(1), 21–50.

depressed.

Healthy vs unhealthy expressions of

EMOTIONAL NEEDS IN RELATIONSHIPS

by MARK MANSON

STATUS	
Pursuing status in a healthy way allows us to feel pride in our partners	Unhealthy status seeking based on money, looks, and prestige leaves us empty and lonely
CONNECTION	
Healthy needs for connection make us feel appreciated and understood	Unhealthy reliance on connection causes clinginess, dependency, and neediness
SECURITY	
Finding healthy security provides feelings of safety and dependability	Unhealthy obsession with security leads to possessiveness and extreme jealousy
PRIORITIES IN EMOTIONAL NEEDS	
We all prioritize needs differently based on our past experiences and current life situations. Conflict arises when we don't express our needs effectively and/or we don't recognize someone else's needs.	

The normal and healthy need for connection and appreciation can morph into unhealthy dependency and neediness. The clingy boyfriend/girlfriend, or the person who incessantly calls and texts, desperately asking for a date. This overwhelming need for acceptance and affection can crowd out the normal and healthy needs for security and status. A desperate person will overlook their partner's flaws or infidelities, settling on anyone who will accept them and show them just a little attention.

The normal and healthy need for security and commitment can become an unhealthy form of possessiveness, obsession, and jealousy. This unhealthy drive can crowd out normal and healthy forms of connection and importance. It's seen in the fits of jealous outrage when someone

thinks their partner is engaging in even the slightest hint of flirting with another person. It's the couple that stays together because their comfortable lifestyle is dependent on each other's income.

OUR SHIFTING EMOTIONAL NEEDS

Everyone exhibits different levels of these emotional needs, and one's emotional needs can change over time. Many [in their early 20's](#) seek status and fun and partying. In [their 30's](#), they might prioritize [connection](#) and acceptance, and by the time they're 40, they may have a strong desire for [commitment and security](#). Along the way, they may be willing to compromise on one or more needs in order to satisfy another as their priorities shift.

It's therefore important to understand our own needs and to acknowledge which ones are driving our motivations. Someone might enter a relationship as a means to gain status, but if connection is what they truly seek, they'll be left disappointed and torn between seeking connection with someone else and staying in a relationship that provides them with status.

What they planned consciously doesn't really matter if their biggest emotional motivator is for connection and appreciation. They just didn't know it. Lennon had the famous quip about life happening while you're making other plans. You could easily amend that to say, "Emotions are what happen while you're making other plans."

But understanding emotional needs is also important on an interaction-by-interaction basis. It's a good way to understand that not every rejection is the same. Someone who responds

rudely to your efforts to have a conversation with them could be rejecting you based on you not meeting their need for status. A partner you get along great with, but he or she is hesitant to open up or get closer to you, could be seen as not having their needs for connection and appreciation met by you. Someone who is uncomfortable around you and finds an excuse to leave might not feel their need for security is being met.

Now that you understand the needs that drive interactions and relationships, the next step is identify *how* to trigger these needs in others and in yourself. How do you make someone feel appreciated? How do you generate trust? How do you convey status and importance?

INTERPRETING THE EMOTIONAL NEEDS OF OTHERS

The key to deciphering emotional needs in others and in yourself is to not look at people's words and actions but instead, look at their motivations. Someone may make fun of your shirt, but it could be for a variety of reasons. Maybe they feel intimidated by you and seek to bring you down a notch. They may do it as a form of bonding and playful teasing and flirting. Maybe they get a rush from feeling superior to others in social interactions.

Knowing how to respond is impossible without knowing what's motivating someone. And this is where the vast majority of dating and relationship advice falls flat. They give you a one-size-fits-all call and response to social situations. These formulaic responses only address surface phenomena, bubbles on an entire sea of emotional resonances and currents. They

ignore what's below.

Recognizing motivations in others is not a simple task, particularly for those who spent much of their lives being anti-social. The first key is to be able to read the emotions of others through their movements, body language and tonality. This is something that can be deliberately practiced, although the specifics are beyond the scope of this article.

Learning to read body language, movements, and tonalities is an absolutely necessary life skill. It will affect all of your relationships – professional, familial, romantic, and otherwise – in a positive way.

So back to the example at hand: someone makes fun of your shirt. Are they smiling while they do it? Is it a mischievous smile? An evil smile? Or do they seem disgusted or nervous when they say it? Are they showing off to others or are you alone when it happens? What is their body language telling you? Are they leaning back with their arms crossed? Or are they leaning into you and play hitting you as they say it?

The answers to these questions all matter. Start asking them.

The second way to read the motivations of others is through sub-communication. When I was in high school, my English teacher used to scream over and over, “Writers make choices!” no matter what book we were reading. The point being that writers don’t just plaster random words across the page. They consciously describe their characters in certain ways. They sit there and agonize over mundane details and what seems to us

like trivial dialogue.

The implication is that whenever we say something or write something, there's always an opportunity cost involved. I'm writing about emotional dynamics in relationships right now. I'm not writing about football, or presidential politics, or the ethnographic origins of Cuba. But I could. But since I'm not, that in and of itself tells you something: I care about this stuff. This stuff is important enough to me that I'm willing to sit down and spend however much time it takes to write it. That says something about me, my life, my values, my knowledge, my priorities, and my passions.

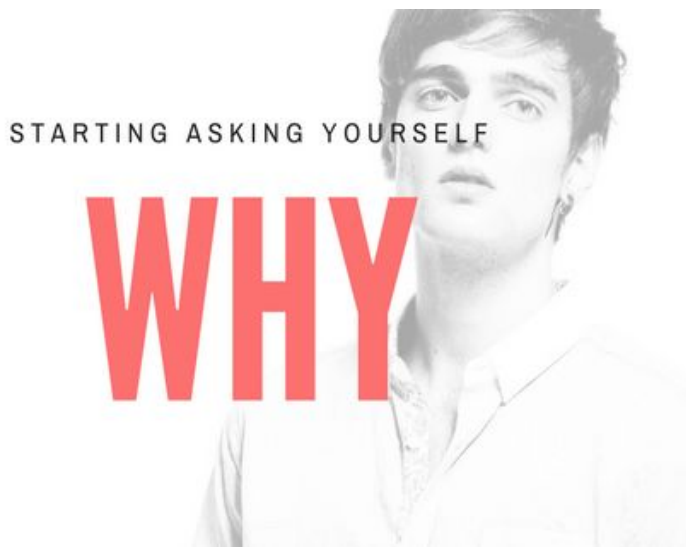
What I'm getting at is that nothing is ever said or done in a vacuum. We're always consciously choosing our words, and the fact that we're choosing those words or topics over other ones signifies something. Back in 2006 when I began to obsess about this stuff, I began to notice that every conversation I had with someone would find its way to my sex life. Acquaintances, friends, strangers at parties. Even conversations with my parents (it got weird).

Consciously and unconsciously, I was directing my conversations in that direction. I had some obvious hang-ups and obsessions going on and my need to resolve them was bubbling up to the surface in the forms of my words and conversational topics.

If I'm on a date with a woman and she regularly references her mother — what her mother thinks about this, what her mother did with her in high school, what her mother said on the phone the other day — I can gather a lot of information from that. That's not happening by chance. The woman obviously has a

close relationship with her mother. Her mother factors heavily into her life and worldview. She's probably quite emotionally attached to her. She also probably shares very strong family values. Security is likely important to her.

Begin asking "Why?" in response to the behaviors and actions of others. Challenge yourself to find the underlying cause motivating people. Most people only do this in situations where shit hits the fan, or when someone stops calling them back or something. But you should be doing this constantly, for your successes and failures. For the exciting moments and the mundane.



Why does that girl seem so unhappy despite those guys flirting with her and buying her drinks? Why does my friend always make fun of other guys who are shorter than him? Why does my ex-girlfriend call to tell me about her

new job? Why does the bartender talk to the guys watching the game, but ignore the older woman sitting by herself? Why can't the girl at the checkout counter look customers in the eye?

Then take those answers, and ask "Why?" Why does she feel uncomfortable with overt male attention? Why does he feel a need to validate himself around others? Why does she want to

prove to me that she's successful? Why does he feel more comfortable around other guys than women? Why does she feel so self-conscious dealing with others?

Obviously this all becomes conjecture. But it's a good exercise. And once you get to know some of these people, their behaviors will begin to answer your questions for you.

It's gotten scary sometimes. I can spend an hour with someone and know they have a horrible relationship with their father. I can just tell. And usually I'm right. Family-oriented people are easy for me to pick out as well. And of course, the [attention whores](#) are obvious within about 30 seconds.

Am I often wrong? Yeah, [quite a bit](#). But it's fun guessing. And it's even more fun finding out. But most importantly, you train yourself to operate on motivations and feelings of others. The words you choose and say become a side effect of that. And as a result, you become a much more powerful communicator and are able to connect with people on a much deeper level more quickly.

But what about *you*? What are *your* emotional needs and how should you respond to the needs of others?

EXPRESSING YOUR EMOTIONAL NEEDS IN HEALTHY WAYS

A lot of people, and especially a lot of men, are oblivious to their own emotional urges and what motivates them to behave in certain ways, particularly in emotionally charged situations such as dating. People who are unaware of their feelings will often feel out-of-control or helpless in these emotional situations, and

those who face [chronic failure in their dating lives](#) usually do so because they're entirely out of touch with their emotional realities.



As I mentioned above, the brain functions in such a way that we make decisions based on emotions *and then* consciously rationalize these decisions and look for evidence to support them.

So if you feel like people are generally untrustworthy, and you feel like you find evidence for this in all of your interactions and everywhere you look, then chances are you have some deeper anger issues as well as fear of intimacy. Meanwhile your brain is consciously looking for and finding reasons to justify this anger in the real world.

This isn't to say there *aren't* untrustworthy people in the world. There are. But most people are generally trustworthy and well intentioned. If you're constantly looking for evidence of

untrustworthiness in people, then you're never going to find the trustworthy people. If you look for evidence of trustworthiness, then you'll successfully avoid the untrustworthy.

People talk about “limiting beliefs” in self-help all the time. Limiting beliefs such as the one mentioned above — or even simple ones such as the idea that you can't call someone the day after you meet them — are extremely hard to notice in ourselves. And even when we do notice them, it's hard to talk ourselves out of them and un-rationalize what we've [spent a lifetime rationalizing and reinforcing](#).

Attacking the underlying emotion itself can often be a more efficient means to changing these behaviors. Instead of obsessing and struggling in arguments against yourself for weeks or months over something you don't truly believe or feel in your gut, attacking the underlying emotion head on will cause the behaviors to resolve themselves naturally.

For instance, in the example above of thinking people can't be trusted, if you remove the underlying anger and trust issues, then you'll naturally stop rationalizing reasons to distrust everyone and stop finding evidence to support it. Your beliefs will change and your behavior will follow. When you're unsure or even afraid to call or text someone the day after meeting them, if you remove the anxiety to connect, then you'll feel free to contact them whenever and however you feel is appropriate.

Again, it's worth mentioning that there will still be untrustworthy people in the world. And there will still be people who don't want you to call the next day. But the point is that these beliefs will no longer hinder your behavior and actions. You'll be free to pursue

your desires without qualms or hang-ups.

DEALING WITH YOUR EMOTIONAL NEEDS

The reason so much emphasis is put on logically dismantling limiting beliefs rather than dealing with the underlying emotions is that the latter can be quite complicated. But, as I said previously, dealing with these emotions is perhaps the best way to change your attitudes and behavior for the better.

But before we jump into how to become more aware of your own emotions, we need to also talk about projection. Projection is a popular psychological concept that came from Freud. From the [Wikipedia article](#) on projection:

“Psychological projection or projection bias is a psychological defense mechanism where a person subconsciously denies his or her own attributes, thoughts, and emotions, which are then ascribed to the outside world, usually to other people. Thus, projection involves imagining or projecting the belief that others originate those feelings.”

Projection reduces your anxiety by allowing you to express unwanted, unconscious impulses or desires without letting your conscious mind recognize them.⁵

⁵ Baumeister, R. F., Dale, K., & Sommer, K. L. (1998). Freudian defense mechanisms and empirical findings in modern social psychology: Reaction formation, projection, displacement, undoing, isolation, sublimation, and denial. *Journal of Personality*, 66(6), 1081–1124.

pro·jec·tion

prə'jekSH(ə)n/

noun - Displacing (or "projecting") undesirable feelings or emotions onto someone else rather than admitting to or dealing with the unwanted feelings

An example of this behavior might be blaming another for self-failure. The mind may avoid the discomfort of consciously admitting personal faults by keeping those feelings unconscious, and by redirecting, or “projecting,” those same faults onto another person or object.

We'll often project our own emotional needs and feelings onto those we interact with as well. You might have a high need for status and validation and you might seek to meet that need by dating a certain type of person – good looking, rich, popular, whatever. You'll likely project your beliefs onto the people around you and assume that everyone wants to be with the same kind of people that you do. So, you think that people *only* want to date others that are good looking, rich, or popular. You'll try to attract others by developing and showcasing these qualities in yourself, and if someone doesn't find you attractive, you assume it's because you weren't good looking enough, rich enough, or popular enough for them.

Or maybe instead, you might have a high need for connection in your relationships, and so you'll likely project that need onto the person you're with by assuming they too have a high need for connection. If they don't seem eager to open up to you or they get uncomfortable when you want them to share something personal about themselves, you assume it's because they don't like you all that much.

The truth is, we all have varying needs for status, connection, and security, and we all develop strategies to [get these needs met in different ways](#). But it's when we're disconnected from these needs and unaware of them that our neurotic and needy behavior flares up. The solution is to increase one's own awareness of their emotional make-up, accept that emotional make-up and then consciously express it in a healthy manner.

To use an example from my own life, I used to be quite disconnected from my desire for connection. I've since learned that my need for connection outweighs my need for status and heavily outweighs my need for security. But years ago, I was unaware of this. I was more status-centric, focusing on having lots of casual sex and shallow relationships with women.

What began to happen was a lot of the women I was sleeping with would demonstrate some sort of act of intimacy towards me and I would freak out. I unfairly dropped and nexted many women because I felt they were becoming "too clingy" and expected too much from me. In hindsight, their behavior was totally normal and expected. I was in denial of my need for connection and intimacy and I projected that need onto all of the women I was seeing. *I was the clingy one. I was the needy one.*

Yet I projected that onto any woman who tried to get near me. As a result, I unfairly resented and dumped a number of women who were making totally reasonable attempts to get to know me better.

SELF-AWARENESS AROUND YOUR EMOTIONAL NEEDS

So how do we go about becoming more aware of our emotions and motivations in our relationships? Here are a few places to start:

- **Ask Yourself “Why?”** – I talked previously about asking “Why?” when observing other people’s behavior. Well, the same rule applies to you. And again, most people are terrible at doing this. Our egos get in the way. We always assume we’re correct. What I’ve found with questioning yourself is that the first few answers to the “Why?” question are usually the incorrect ones. It’s the rationalization. So you must continue to ask beyond that. A couple examples:

“Why did I get so upset when my girlfriend was talking to that guy at a party last night?”

“Because she was being a bitch and flirting with him right in front of me. I felt disrespected.”

“Why do I think she was being a bitch? Why do I think that’s disrespectful?”

“Because I love my girlfriend and it hurts to think about her not loving me back.”

“Why does it hurt so much? Why am I so upset?”

“Because I want to feel loved and appreciated and I’m afraid of being abandoned and alone.”

Obviously, these answers are not arrived at easily. You may even find yourself asking the same question for days or weeks before an answer comes to you. But pay attention to your emotions. Pay attention to what feels right. Keep asking. Keep questioning yourself. You’ll be surprised at what uncomfortable truths come up. And the more uncomfortable, the truer they probably are.

- **Meditation** – I’m not going to go way into [meditation](#) here, but it’s a fantastic way to build greater emotional awareness in yourself. The act of meditating is very much the simple act of observing oneself. As you sit in silence, focusing on your breath, thoughts and feelings creep into your mind constantly. Learning how to control that flow, observe that flow and accept many of those thoughts and feelings is an important skill that transfers over to many parts of your life. What you’re doing is training your mind to be aware of your thoughts and emotions. So in situations where you may have acted out unconsciously (thrown a temper tantrum, became really nervous and supplicated, made up excuses to stay at home), meditation trains your mind to see the thoughts and feelings occur in the moment, and trains you to recognize stuff like, “You know, when my friends invite me out, I feel nervous and begin thinking of reasons to stay in. I never noticed that before.” Or “Whenever my girlfriend tells me about her ex-boyfriend, I find ways to get angry at her. I

never put those two things together before.”

- **Therapy** – Therapy with the right therapist can be incredibly beneficial to your emotional well-being. A [good therapist](#) plays the role of the “Why?” question above. They will lead you into lines of questioning about yourself that you may not have considered before. They will also give you an objective, third-person perspective on a lot of situations, showing you that something you had always assumed to be true, was actually an emotional knee-jerk reaction of yours. For instance, a particularly socially traumatic event happened to me when I was 13 years old. It sucked, but I never thought that much of it... until I got to therapy. When I told my therapist about it, his reaction was, “Holy shit, no wonder you have so much anxiety in that area.” It never even occurred to me that I had lived through a particularly unique situation that affected my emotions in such a drastic way. But once he helped me become aware of it, both the severity and the way it had affected me, it allowed me to begin working past those issues.

What you’ll notice as you become more emotionally aware is that it won’t all happen in one step. You won’t suddenly one day realize, “Oh, I have a big need for connection!” The process usually plays out slowly over a longer period of time. And the realizations come in the form of many minor epiphanies that build on one another. It’s very much like pulling back layers of an onion, each one not getting you particularly far, but each layer reveals another slightly deeper layer below it.

The final step in realizing your emotional needs is successfully

negotiating your needs in your relationships. Most people who are unaware of their emotional needs will try to make any and every person they're with fit into their specific mold of what they want and need in a relationship. Someone who desperately needs status will try to find ways to fulfill that need even if they're with someone who doesn't care about status at all.

Once you become more aware of what your needs are, then you're able to make quick and easy decisions about which people you're willing to pursue and which ones you're not. If I meet a woman who has a high need for security and stability (my lowest need), then I'll usually not bother anymore. I have little need for security and it seems silly to spend so much time and energy to fulfill her need in the short-term when I know I'm going to be unable to fulfill it in the long-term. And not to mention, she's unlikely going to be able to fulfill my needs well either.

EMOTIONAL NEEDS AND RESOLVING CONFLICT

Finally, let's talk about how we can use an understanding of our needs to resolve conflict.

We're all insecure and ignorant at times and we all act out on our insecurities and ignorance in ways that hurt other people. This is called "being an asshole."

Some of us are especially experienced at being assholes in our relationships. It's perplexing when you think about it – being an asshole to the person you supposedly adore – but that's what we

do. And we all do it, even if some of us do it more than others.

When resolving a conflict in a relationship, there are four questions you must ask.

1. Is resolving the conflict even worth it?
2. What needs was the offender trying to meet?
3. Is the other person on board?
4. How can we fix this?

While you're reading through this, it may be useful to think of a couple ongoing personal conflicts you have or have had in your relationships. We'll take the questions one at a time.

1. IS RESOLVING THE CONFLICT EVEN WORTH IT?

Good question. Petty arguments in your relationship are probably not worth the hassle. The way your girlfriend complains about work all the time or the way your boyfriend talks really loud when he's had a few drinks and it annoys you. At worst, these situations call for simply confronting someone and asking them to stop.

But your ability to handle even simple conflicts will be determined by how secure you are as well as how sturdy your [boundaries](#) are. If you're insecure, then every other fart in the wind will become a crisis. And if your boundaries suck, then you'll be blaming yourself for everything and scared to death of confrontation.

There's a lot to be said about being able to let things go and knowing when to pick your battles.

As the problems get more serious, choosing whether to engage in

conflict resolution or not is a more legitimate question, especially if the issue at hand seriously compromises your values in an inalterable way. In some cases, someone does something so horrible that you will never be able to resolve it. For instance, your spouse slept with your best friend or you find out about something your partner has been keeping from you for a long time that they should have told you. No matter how much work you put into fixing the relationship, it's unlikely to ever be enough.

Broken trust issues are similar. With trust issues, I always use the analogy of a china plate. A relationship is like a piece of fine china. Breaking that trust means breaking the plate. With a lot of care and effort, the plate can be restored, but if it gets broken again, it becomes that much harder to put back together. Eventually, if the plate is broken enough times, it can never be made whole again. It's lost forever.

In a situation where someone has broken your trust, you must ask yourself if you can see it ever being possible to trust that person again. If not, then you're better off simply moving on.

As a bit of a side note, there are familial relationships where it's basically impossible to *not* engage in conflict resolution with them. You only get one family, and even if you wish you could ditch them sometimes, you can't. One way or another, you always end up back with them, problems front and center. So you may as well make the best of it and try to resolve some of your issues together.

2. WHAT NEEDS WAS THE OFFENDER TRYING TO MEET?

So you've decided you do, in fact, want to resolve a conflict in your relationship. Congratulations, this is the first step to becoming less of an asshole.

The key to resolving conflicts in your relationship – or any personal conflict for that matter – is compassion.

And by compassion I mean seeing past the individual offensive behaviors and looking at the emotional needs that are motivating those behaviors.

The wife who tries to make you jealous is doing it because she's not feeling loved or validated enough. The overbearing and controlling boyfriend is afraid of being left and is trying to meet his need for security. The girlfriend who calls you an insensitive prick is frustrated that her need for connection is being ignored.

Seeing another person's needs behind their annoying behavior is not easy. It takes practice. This is especially true in our relationships when the object of our affection disappoints us with their behavior. Our relationships are steeped in complex emotions (not to mention our own emotional baggage), and so we're terrible at seeing the situation objectively.

But the best method I've ever come across to develop compassion for another person's needs is an exercise I actually learned at an Integral workshop put on by the people who work for [Ken Wilber](#). In the workshop, they referred to it as the "1-2-3 Shadow Exercise", which is a fancy reference to Jungian Psychology. You can call it whatever you want. I call it practical.

1. **Write a letter to the person being 100% honest while describing how you feel.** Write down everything you would like to tell this person if you could. Don't hold anything back. Let all the anger, hatred, and pain come out.

Ex.: Dear John, I've never told you this, but you change when we're around other people. You go from being a kind and compassionate man to being a dick and looking down on me. Remember that time you made fun of me in front of Kim just to make yourself look good? It's so fucking weak. You're obviously insecure around people...

You don't have to spend more than five or ten minutes on it. The important part is that you get all of your primary complaints out and make sure you put your genuine feelings into it.

2. **Write a response letter to yourself from their perspective about the issue.** This is where things get a little tricky. Now, take out a new piece of paper (or open up a clean document) and write another letter. This time it's from them and to you. In this letter, try to take their perspective in defending themselves against your complaints. Make their defense as reasonable and plausible as possible.

Ex.: Dear Rachel, I'm sorry you feel like I'm arrogant in social situations. You're right that I probably feel insecure at times, but I feel a need to cut you down because you dominate every social interaction we're in. You know I'm a quiet guy. So why don't you ever ask me for my input or

encourage me to be a part of the conversation more? ...

Try to empathize with them as much as possible as you write. If you find yourself continuing to blame them or make them look like an asshole in the second letter, then you're doing it wrong. Start over and honestly try to inhabit their perspective.

What you may find when doing the second letter is that you actually uncover legitimate criticisms of yourself that you were not aware of before. If this happens, then you're definitely on the right track because not only are you beginning to see their perspective, you're also beginning to get a more objective perspective on your own behavior that you didn't have before.

- 3. Write a third letter, this time from an objective third-person perspective.** The final letter is from an anonymous outside observer. Now that you've written an angry letter from your perspective and a defensive letter from the other person's perspective, it's time to inhabit an objective third-person perspective and put the whole conflict in proper context.

Ex.: Dear Rachel and John, it seems that the two of you are both insecure in larger social situations. You're both choosing to deal with your discomfort in different ways that are not helping the other person...

The whole exercise takes maybe 30 minutes and the results are great. Not only do you feel less attached to the hurt and pain afterward, but you've also forced yourself to empathize

with the other person's needs and taken a more objective perspective on the conflict yourself.

3. IS THE OTHER PERSON ON BOARD?

At some point you have to confront your partner about the issue. Sometimes the issue will force itself, but usually one of you needs to speak up about what's going on. This isn't easy, or fun. In fact, it's downright uncomfortable.

People who are codependent have particular difficulties with personal confrontation and will go to great lengths to avoid it or pretend the problem doesn't exist. But you must open up a dialogue about the issue. Even if you're afraid that the conflict might lead to your relationship's demise, it's the only way forward. You have to address the problems that are causing your pain if you want to have any chance at a [solid relationship](#), not just a mediocre one where you sweep everything under the rug.

Another cold, hard truth: just as you can't force somebody to change, you can't force somebody to resolve a conflict no matter what kind of relationship you have. And any attempts to coerce or bribe your partner into it will only piss them off and push them away more.

The reason is that coercion negates the person's autonomy and personal choice. Conflict resolution is worthless unless it's based on the free will of both parties. So even if you do decide that a relationship matters enough for you to change it, and even if you've gone through the work to widen your perspective and understand the other person's needs, you still can't force the other person to do the same. They have to reach the same point

on their own accord, or not at all.

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Emotional needs and RESOLVING CONFLICT

HOW TO NOT BE SUCH AN ASSHOLE

1. IS THE CONFLICT EVEN WORTH RESOLVING?

Petty arguments and issues that can be addressed directly probably aren't worth making a big deal out of. More serious offenses, on the other hand, should be approached intentionally and, as we'll see, compassionately.

2. WHAT NEEDS IS THE OFFENDER TRYING TO MEET?

The key to resolving conflicts in your relationship is compassion. You exercise compassion by seeing past the behavior and identifying the emotional needs motivating the behavior.



3. IS THE OTHER PERSON ON BOARD?

You can't force somebody to resolve a conflict no matter what kind of relationship you have. Attempts to coerce or bribe them into it will only piss them off and push them away more. Don't do it.

4. HOW CAN WE FIX THIS?

Again, focus less on specific behaviors and more on emotional needs. Try to come up with solutions together that address each others' needs compassionately and practically.



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If the other person is *not* on board, there's nothing you can do other than to wait silently, or move on.

4. HOW CAN WE FIX THIS?

Once you and your partner are openly communicating about the problem, it's time to find a resolution. The key here is to focus less on specific behavior and instead focus on needs.

For instance, if your boyfriend is always criticizing you, don't blame him or tell him to stop being critical. Tell him that it's important for you to feel that he supports you and approves of you and when he criticizes you, especially in front of other people, you don't feel that way. From there, he's likely to tell you that, in his mind, his criticisms are his way of supporting you.

From there, you two can agree to find a new behavior that you're both comfortable with.

For some of you, I'm sure the thought of speaking about this stuff to the people you love strikes you as weird or uncomfortable. You may think your partner will get really uncomfortable and brush you off.

I thought the same thing. And sometimes, you will be brushed off. But it's been surprising how universal this method is. Speaking to people's emotional needs is not only universal, but I've found that people jump on the opportunity when presented because it's presented to them so seldom.

But the best part is that the process itself validates the important feelings underlying the problems — your boyfriend is critical of you because he cares, your girlfriend is arrogant only because she feels insecure around you, and you get angry because you're afraid she won't like you anymore.

On and on.

This is [vulnerability in action](#). And it's the glue that binds our relationships together and holds us close.

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