

# evolutionary relationships

*Relationships must grow and evolve, just like you, otherwise they can become stagnant. Learn the keys to staying on your evolutionary growth edge in your relationships with ease, effortlessness and grace.*

*by shems heartwell*

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## Staying On Your Growth Edge In a Relationship

In my coaching practice I often hear couples say: “I just want this to be easier. I wish he/she would not be like that. We argue about the most trivial things.” It’s natural to want our relationship to be full of boundless love and easeful relating, and I believe the way to get there is by skillfully navigating through the thorny aspects of day-to-day intimacy.

What I have learned from 15 years of studying the art, science and spiritual purpose of intimate relationships is that it is a journey of growing and evolving. There is an underlying force in our lives that is perpetually moving and opening us to deeper understanding and love. We evolve through our relationships, or we recycle the very challenges that we desperately wish to avoid. There is no escaping from this force in relationships; it is relentless and will always reveal our limitations and push us toward our full potential.

Staying on your growth edge is about wel-

coming this force as an optimizing agent in your relationship. This is a radical shift from what Hollywood and history have demonstrated for far too long. The truth is we are ready and growing into a whole new consciousness of responsibility, and you are on the front lines of this revolution. Your willingness and ability to welcome the challenges in love as opportunities is the healing wave of the future.

Few people have learned how to relax their survival strategies when they feel even mildly insecure or threatened. Even those of us who are spiritually minded and socially adept can easily slip into reactive behaviors in our intimate relationships. It appears to be built into our emotional mechanisms to become defensive and adrenalized when our relationship security seems in danger. Whether we feel guilty, outraged, scared or hurt, we are prone to quickly dismantle the vital part of our brain that sets us apart from other mammals and default to fight, flight or freeze, the



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primary responses of a prey to a hunter.

Our partner says or does something that challenges or scares us, and we jump into protection or projection mode to minimize the anticipated damage. What's unfortunate is that most of the threats are either not as bad as we think they are, or could be negotiated were we to just take more time to relax, listen and respond before reacting. Our instant and need-to-control reactions can become a bigger problem than anything being said by our partner. And, the more repetitive the conflict, the more likely the immediate negativity will begin to fly, and the chance of real resolution will become bound up in reactivity.

The big leap that transforms relationships is shifting from habitual reactivity to *respond-ability*. Our reactivity arises from a place of needing to defend or protect oneself from harm or abuse. Reactivity has its place when it is needed, like avoiding a drunk driver or responding to an emergency situation. We want to be highly aware and responsive in those crucial moments when it is essential to

act swiftly.

Reactivity is not usually helpful in relationships though. If you are reactive, you enter into a state of fight or flight. When your nervous system is acting in a fight-or-flight response, your blood chemistry and hormone levels change toward survival. When this is occurring, it is very difficult to truly understand or empathize with your partner.

Most, if not all, reactivity originates from a past experience that has never been fully resolved or healed. Any situation that feels familiar to a past hurtful event will easily trigger an unconscious fight-or-flight response to handle the situation. Unfortunately, this does not help to resolve the past or the current situation.

Recently, I witnessed a couple interact in a way that is all too common. In this example, the woman was telling her husband that what he had said had hurt her. The pain was evident in her face, and tears were coming. His immediate response was to angrily accuse her of having done the same thing to him. She

then began defending herself, needing him to understand that she was not a person who would ever do such a thing to someone she loved and cared about.

Without responding to her claims, he moved on to his next defense/attack. If she was hurt by what he had done, it was because she was overly sensitive. Desperate now, the woman said that she was not overly sensitive—that he was being insensitive. Her reply was a good one, but he didn't hear it and couldn't hear it.

Sadly, with her original pain rejected and attacked, she now had another layer of pain and misunderstanding to contend with, a second layer of feeling unloved as a result of the interaction.

Issues like this are painfully common for many couples and are rarely fully resolved without getting support to break the unconscious cycle of reactivity. This couple could have had an entirely different experience if, at the moment when her husband claimed that she did the same thing to him, she in-

vited or encouraged his attention to stay with the present experience—right now she feels hurt and would like to have connection and resolve what just happened. He could then pause and notice what is going on for him, and why he said or did what he did. In this way, the exchange can lead to healing and connection rather than perpetuating a pattern of unresolved hurt.

At no point in the exchange did the man pause to acknowledge his partner's feelings or experience. In fact, it appeared that just acknowledging her pain, letting it be true for her, presented (in his mind) a threat to his very survival. Going back and forth in defensiveness or reactivity is like digging a hole that you cannot get out of. It only takes one person to stop the digging by dropping their defenses and presencing what is happening for them in the moment. Not out of blame, but from the place of wanting to resolve the issue and return to connection.

Presencing is a term, used in this context, to describe the act of becoming highly aware



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of what is being experienced emotionally and physically within oneself. It allows one to go deeper in a way that bypasses the mind or ego’s need to protect or distract from feeling pain. True healing, understanding and resolution can only happen when there is a willingness to allow emotions and expression to move all the way through us.

A great way to do this is to expand your attention throughout your body while breathing fully and paying attention to any sensations or feelings you notice. Become aware of how your chest and belly feel. Look for where you may be holding tension in your body and/or stopping the impulse to feel sad, mad or scared. What allows this technique to be highly effective is a sense of curiosity and a willingness to discover your deeper needs and wants. Then you have the option to name what you are noticing. This is an opportunity to connect without being distracted by mental stories or reaction.

In a committed relationship, we are creating a strong bond of loyalty through trust, intimacy and friendship. Responding with

presence gives us an opportunity to establish a strong relational bond. Inevitably, we will face our biggest shadows under the light of our greatest love. Our deepest fears, self-judgments or past hurts will come to the surface with the ones we love most. It is through these intense moments of vulnerability that we have the potential to heal our past and powerfully create our futures.

Respond-ability is a practice that must be cultivated in order to grow through the rough passages of our relationships. Below are four essential practices for staying on your growth edge and meeting each moment from respond-ability.

## **Choose Curiosity and Wonder**

Studies have shown that children learn much faster when they feel spacious and curious rather than being under scrutiny and pressure. Having a good time leads to a relaxed and aware state of being that is highly receptive and intuitive. The tension of an argument or stressful situation so easily narrows our vision and stops the easeful flow of connection.





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Many fights are rooted in two people believing that they are right and the other is not! Curiosity and wonder can end fights by getting one out of a fixed position of being right. If your partner is upset and you are willing to listen to them with a genuine quality of curiosity and wonder about what they may be wanting or needing, you are opening a doorway for resolution and deeper connection.

Wonder is a state of being that can be accessed by slowing down your breathing and widening your perspective to see the whole picture. Curiosity allows you to understand your partner’s feelings and needs and to experience empathy. Choosing to be curious and opening to wonder is a valuable move that can be used anytime if you choose to.

### **Avoid Overthinking: Let Your Body Talk**

When problems or challenges arise there is a strong temptation to figure it out in the mind, to understand what happened, to analyze it, to think about it, to see who was right and

who was wrong. On and on it goes.

This is how most couples have learned to navigate the hardships in relationship. Yet, there is no resolve in the busy mind. There is no peace in overanalyzing the situation. There is no relief in focusing on the problem or the hurt over and over again.

The healing and relief come when you let go of thinking about it. There is a wholeness and peace available if you can shift your attention to the feeling and experience within you.

One of the simplest ways to get out of the busy mind is to breathe deeply, sense your body and listen to that deeper voice inside of you. This is the voice of wholeness that speaks from a wider vantage point. This voice is like a deeper knowing that speaks from the ocean of your being and not just the ever-changing surface of the sea.

This voice may ask: What is this situation teaching you? What is the gift it is giving you? What is it helping you let go of? What is it helping you grow into?

So the next time you are facing a challenging situation with your partner, slow down, breathe deeper and listen to the language of your body. Break the cycle of how the mind wants to solve the problem and receive the deeper wisdom of what is most wanted or needed in this moment to create connection or resolve the issue.

### **Face The Fire**

One of my favorite poems, by the amazing Persian poet Rumi, speaks to our willingness to face the fire and what happens when we don’t. In the poem he points out that those who turn toward the water, resisting the intensity of the fire, somehow end up in the fire and those who step into the heat of the fire miraculously end up in the water.

So often I see people who have held back their truth or avoided conflict only to end up in the most difficult and painful relationship entanglements. Many fights happen when a truth was avoided because it was too uncomfortable or scary to share.

Authenticity and transparency are the fire of which Rumi speaks. Our willingness to stand in it usually leads to more connection and deeper intimacy. On the other hand, avoiding conflict or withholding expression is an attempt to keep things cool like flowing water. That cool water will either put out the fire of passion or lead you to a mess of rapids down the next river bend.

So how do you face the fire in your relationship? You speak your truth. You reveal your feelings and your thoughts, especially when withholding them has you feel any sense of disconnection with your partner.

My mentors, Gay and Katie Hendricks, say that revealing is the most potent aphrodisiac that they know of! And concealing is the main way that couples lose their sexual fire and intimacy.

Transparency and authenticity do require responsibility. If being transparent leads to expressing your anger, then you must do that in a responsible way. Anger is a strong force that is often misdirected as aggression or







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blame. Being responsible with anger means feeling it and directing it through you in a way that does not hurt you or another.

### **Claim Responsibility**

Claiming responsibility is acknowledging and accepting the choices you have made, the actions you have taken and the results they have led to. Responsibility is an essential element of integrity; it is the congruence of what you think, what you say and what you do.

In challenging situations, many people have learned to feel like something is happening to them. This way of relating to life can be called taking a victim position. Experiencing life as if things keep happening *to you* leads to seeing the people or challenges as problems that need to be solved or avoided.

The opposite of the victim position is seeing that life is happening *for you*. The challenges and people in your life are showing up to serve your growth and healing. Even the people who are hurtful or abusive are in some way giving you an opportunity to stand up

more powerfully for yourself by creating clear boundaries or expressing your truth with the full force of your being.

When you claim responsibility in any situation, you step out of the cycle of blame, shame, justifying or rationalizing. You enter into the realm of possibility and co-creativity. This is where we grow—in the realm of possibility and co-creativity.

We are on our growth edge when every moment is an opportunity to expand our capacity to love and play in the big waves of relationship.

**Shems Heartwell** is a certified relationship coach and author of the book [\*Empowered Loving: A Guide to Learning and Growing through Relationships\*](#). Shems specializes in guiding couples into new territories of deeper connection, intimacy and fulfillment together. He leads private couples retreats and intensives on the beautiful island of Maui. Visit his website: [shemsheartwell.com](http://shemsheartwell.com)