Creating the Intimate Connection:
The Basics to Emotional Intimacy

By Daniel Beaver

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Creating the Intimate Connection

The Basics of Emotional Intimacy

Daniel Beaver, M.S. M.F.T.
In memory of my father and mother,
Richard and Edith Beaver
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Most people are not well prepared for marriage. And yet we all believe we should somehow know exactly what we need to know to be a good wife or husband, a good mother or father. Society—and that certainly includes the media—falls far short of meeting the needs of couples in today’s world. The myth is that if you “love each other enough” the marriage will work out fine. But it takes a great deal more than just being in love with your spouse to make a marriage work. It takes understanding and knowledge of how to solve problems, express anger, and still relate intimately. These are skills we never learned in school.
Everyone who is planning on entering into marriage, or who has already done so, has a mental picture, with its corresponding expectations, of what will make that experience satisfying. *Creating the Intimate Connection* explores our culture’s common marital expectations. It looks at how they developed and their effect on our daily lives. As you read this book, you will become acutely aware of the myths and behavioral patterns that can frustrate your efforts to build a rewarding marriage.

One basic marital expectation that people share in our culture is the desire to have a satisfying, long-lasting relationship. But where, within our culture, are we taught in any straightforward way how to achieve this type of relationship? The attitude in this society seems to be that “if both spouses love each other, things will just work out naturally.” There is a tremendous need for practical information about how to make and keep a marriage intimate and alive. Our divorce rate has reached a level that places an almost intolerable strain on society as a whole and, of course, on the growing number of affected individuals. Recent social and economic conditions have placed new demands on the institution of marriage. Our old marriage fantasy is no longer working for large numbers of people.

*Creating the Intimate Connection* is a guide for those who are trailblazing the new frontier that the institution of marriage is entering. It provides practical information about marriage and the marital relationship that will help people see the changes they can make in response to those new demands. The reader will receive straight–forward guidelines and tools for breaking with the old and creating a new, real intimacy in
a marriage that is vital and alive for both partners. The main vehicle for attaining this goal is intimate verbal communication, which is a major topic of the book.

I have developed the material presented in this book through an evolutionary process that has included all the lectures, marital and individual therapy sessions, and classes I have conducted. My emphasis is not on what is “right” or “wrong” in a marital relationship, but on what works. *Creating the Intimate Connection* is the synthesis of what has worked for me both personally and with hundreds of couples in the course of my professional career. I hope that through this book I can help many more people see that having a long-lasting, intimate marriage is not just a romantic fantasy.

Examples used in this book are based on actual situations I’ve encountered in counseling, but in some instances the cases described are composites of several actual cases and in all cases the names and details about each person have been changed.

—Daniel Beaver
PART ONE

Marriage in Crisis:
How We Got There
Chapter 1
The Marriage Fantasy:
A Key in the Crisis

As a marriage counselor in the San Francisco Bay Area, I have noticed a pattern among couples who come to my office seeking ways to save their marriages. In one respect, they are all very successful in their roles as husbands and wives. In fact, it is their success—a certain kind of success—that is at the center of their troubles.

More often than not, the husband and wife are succeeding at doing everything that their parents, their friends, and their culture teach are the right things to do to be a good wife or a good husband. But in spite of their well-meaning efforts, their marriages are failing. They describe the tension, frustration, and resentment they experience each day. And, as if that weren’t enough, there is disappointment, sadness, and bewilderment.

Often a couple’s disillusionment comes to the surface after about ten years of marriage. For the sake of discussion, let’s take a couple we’ll call Nick and Donna Stevens. They are thirty-two years old and have an upper middle-class income. To outsiders, the Stevensons look good. But something Nick and Donna can’t quite identify is missing from their relationship. There’s a disturbing emotional distance between them, and it is this distance, and their confusion about it, that causes the Stevensons to seek the help of a marriage counselor.

Donna is the one to make the initial contact with the counselor, and although I’ve heard the same words hundreds of times before, they never
cease to move me. “We need help,” Donna says. “I need more time to
be alone with Nick, just the two of us. We never do anything together
anymore. We never talk. Not really.”

With a little encouragement, she goes on to say: “We’re so typical.
Everyone thinks we’re happy, the ideal couple, because we never fight. I
mean, it isn’t as if Nick weren’t a nice guy or anything. He’s given me a
lot. I don’t mean to sound ungrateful, but …” Her voice trails off. As she
grasps for words to describe their dilemma, it becomes clear that what
puzzles her the most is the fact that she doesn’t fit the usual description
of the person who comes to a marriage counselor, nor can she find any
rational explanation for not being happy with her life.

Donna explains that from a material point of view, she can hardly
deny she has the best of everything. Furthermore, she has two beautiful
children. The family has an adequate income—though who wouldn’t like
to have just a little more? Her husband doesn’t beat her. He is not an
alcoholic. He doesn’t gamble. And as far as she knows, he has never had
an affair with another woman. When she thinks about all these things,
she feels ashamed for complaining. And that makes her feel even worse.
She fears that she is a total neurotic, or at least well on her way to becom-
ing one.

I assure Donna that she is not neurotic, nor are her complaints un-
founded. I tell her and Nick that there are real solutions to the problems
they are having. The way out for them, and for thousands of other couples
in similar circumstances, is not through the divorce courts but through
opening up the doors of their relationship. I tell them these doors could
be thrown open by exploring a concept that I call the “marriage fantasy.”

YOU’RE FINE—BUT LET’S TAKE A LOOK AT THAT FANTASY

The concept of fantasy, as I use it here, is not the same one we use when
we describe a children’s classic such as Cinderella or Snow White, or
when we daydream about a special vacation we’d like to take or a fancy
car that would be nice to own. Rather, the marriage fantasy has to do
with the myriad of ideas about marriage that each of us collects from
the day we are old enough to recognize that there is such a thing. It is, if
you will, an inner vision that each of us feel are an essential part of our personal makeup. Indeed, the marriage fantasy does play a major part in making you who you are.

Each person learns about marriage, through the culture in which he or she lives and, more directly, through observing his or her own parents. Without thinking about it, we have incorporated these teachings into our own way of thinking and feeling. One's total concept of marriage really does become a part of one's being.

The process of fantasizing is absolutely essential to life, inasmuch as the fantasy (as I use the term here) provides us with an internal guidance system for giving direction to our lives. However, we should all be alert to the fact that marriage is the most complicated relationship in the world, and most of the marriage fantasies that our culture offers just don't go far enough. Often a marriage fantasy works well for the first couple of years, but it then becomes a source of conflict and discontent as the years go by and different responsibilities confront the couple.

I have seen literally hundreds of couples discover the true power of their feelings for each other, feelings that endure past the marriage fantasy that brought them together in the first place. In a short time, for example, Nick and Donna learned that they had feelings for each other that endured beyond the marriage fantasy. They also learned that, ironically, the marriage fantasy had almost blinded them to the larger and more important part of their relationship.

If a couple is to enjoy fully the rich possibilities of marriage, both partners need to take a clear-sighted look at the thoughts and feelings that have gone into their own personal marriage fantasy. Just as though you were taking an inventory, you can examine your marriage fantasy to discover what is working well for you—most couples are amazed to find how much they do have working in their favor when they really look—and learn new skills that will add a whole new dimension to the relationship you have with your mate.

As one husband explained, it is almost as though the marriage fantasy takes on a life of its own, dictating our moves and the choices we make in relation to our mate. Furthermore, we become free of the marriage fantasy when we look at it squarely and learn to see it for both its shortcomings
and its merits. After that, perhaps it can be expanded and improved to make marriage the exciting and fulfilling experience it should be. Just as we may start out with a small house and add rooms, or move to a larger house as the family expands, so it becomes necessary to expand the marriage fantasy itself, or even leave it behind for a better one, as the relationship between husband and wife grows beyond the scope of their original vision.

**HOW A MARRIAGE FANTASY IS BUILT**

Let’s go back, for a moment, to Nick and Donna Stevens. What happened to them is similar to what happens to thousands of couples every year. They played out their marriage fantasies to the letter, but finally discovered that they could not make those fantasies become realities, no matter how hard they tried. In order to discover why this happens, let’s take a look at how marriage fantasies develop. How is marriage taught in our culture and from what sources do we learn?

One major source of marriage information is our own family of origin, our parents. How did Mom and Dad get along? How did they handle conflicts, express feelings? How did they make their marriage what it is or what it was? Every day, from birth until we set out on our own, our parents are models for us, contributing to the construction of our own marriage fantasies, fantasies that eventually guide our actions in our own marriages. Do our parents teach us in any direct way? Although most of us can remember favorite sayings by a family member, I often recall my own grandmother’s observation that “marriage is a give-and-take situation.”

One problem many people have with learning from their parents’ marriage is that the marriage may have been a poor one. The parents may have had destructive fights or the children may have had incomplete pictures of their parents’ relationship because the parents communicated their feelings for each other only behind closed doors. Even their affection for each other may have been expressed guardedly. When children fail to find satisfying models in their parents’ relationship, they may seek models in society—often in movies or television shows. One problem
with society’s fantasy of marriage is that it is stereotypically rigid and not very responsive to change. People who act out this model of marriage take on a set of expectations that are destined to lead them to frustration and disappointment.

Another thing that can occur when people grow up with unsatisfying parental models of marriage is that they make an effort to compensate for the poor modeling by developing a concept of marriage that is the extreme opposite of what they witnessed as children. If the parents were always fighting and yelling at each other, their children may decide that when they get married, they won’t fight and yell no matter what. They make a rule that any conflicts with their partner will be avoided at all costs. This concept of marriage may actually result in a less satisfying relationship than even their bickering parents had. The young couple has gone from one extreme to another, rather than seeking a middle ground where they could have a workable, realistic model for their marital relationship.

Even when our parents’ marriage seemed “okay” this may have meant no more than the fact that they “got along” and stayed together to “the bitter end.” Although this kind of stoic perseverance may have been a good model at one time, it is an outdated model. Men and women demand deeper personal satisfaction in their lives today.

An important source of ideas for building our marriage fantasies is the media, particularly television. With the advent of television in the 1950s, television programs have portrayed Hollywood’s notion of what family and marriage is supposed to be. I can still remember how avidly I watched shows like “Ozzie and Harriet,” “Father Knows Best,” and “The Donna Reed Show.” Everything I saw went into my memory banks, building my marriage fantasy. At the time, I wasn’t aware of the lessons I was learning from watching these programs. My experience is probably shared by most people growing up in the 1950s—and the process is still going on for our own children. Most television shows of that era portrayed stereotypical and traditional views of how husbands and wives should relate to each other. Usually the woman stayed at home, taking care of the children. The man went off to work, but even during his absence maintained his position as “head of the household.” Admittedly, there have been some changes in television programming since that time,
but for the most part television continues to perpetuate traditional roles in marriage—most of which provide very inadequate models.

Most people are not well prepared for marriage. And yet we all believe we should somehow know exactly what we need to know to be a good wife or husband, a good mother or father. Society—and that certainly includes the media—falls far short of meeting the needs of couples in today’s world. The myth is that if you “love each other enough,” the marriage will work out fine. But this doesn’t seem to be the case for most couples. It takes a great deal more than just being in love with your spouse to make a marriage work. It takes understanding and knowledge of how to solve problems, express anger, and still relate intimately. These are skills we never learned in school.

A NEW VIEW OF DOMESTIC CRISES

Many people ask why the institution of marriage is in crisis now. What is causing the apparent breakdown of so many marriages? The fact that this institution is in crisis is not necessarily bad. A crisis is sometimes the catalyst required to bring about positive change. It is my observation that out of today’s crises is evolving a new set of human skills that will eventually help married people meet the difficult challenges of modern society.

A major pressure on today’s nuclear family has been inflation in the world’s economy. Anyone trying to support a family knows only too well what I’m talking about. Every week the cost of food at the supermarket rises. Every time you buy your child a new pair of shoes she price has taken a hike. Gasoline prices are skyrocketing … and the list goes on. Inflation was once just a problem of juggling the family budget a little to meet the demands, but it’s gone much farther than that.

Inflation has forced more and more women into the work force. Some, of course go to work out of choice—that is, to satisfy personal needs not met by traditional roles. But many who want to stay at home can’t do so because the second salaries they can earn are needed to maintain their families’ living standard. This creates new pressures on the marriage because the wife working full-time outside the home is not covered by the traditional marriage fantasy most of us learned. When she works
full-time at a job outside her home, the woman no longer has the time or energy to devote to being a wife and a mother. She is literally being expected to hold down two full-time jobs. The pressure is too much for any one person, and the stress she is under takes its toll.

There are no clear-cut social roles or patterns to tell a woman how to be a working mother. If her own mother worked, she may have resented that her mother was gone so much, and she may have decided that when she had children, she would stay at home with them until they reached a certain age. But with the current inflation rate, that decision must often be sacrificed. In either case—whether she did not have a model or whether she has to make a sacrifice—the woman is set up for a great deal of frustration, tension, and anxiety.

The man, too, may experience problems because of the changing roles of the woman. He has learned that the man should be the “bread-winner” in the family. His wife should not have to work, but should be able to stay home and take care of the domestic responsibilities. Regardless of why his wife goes to work—be it out of choice or to meet the financial needs of the family—the man described here will not have his expectations fulfilled. He may not have the vaguest idea of how to relate to this new arrangement and it is not unusual for men in this situation to feel emotionally threatened and to become defensive around the issue of their wives working. On the surface, the man may support the idea of his wife working and sharing the financial responsibilities, but he still expects his wife to take care of most of the domestic responsibilities. Of course, that’s not a reasonable demand, but his expectations sprout from an emotional rather than an intellectual source within him. Inflation demands that adjustments be made in the basic structure of the American nuclear family, but lack of knowledge regarding these new demands upon the family, in combination with a rather human tendency to resist change, can cause a marital crisis to boil to the surface.
Another major factor that contributes to crises in many marriages is the development of the Women’s Liberation Movement. Even women who don’t identify themselves as feminists are questioning and, in many cases, no longer feel satisfied with “doing things the way mother did.” This new consciousness for women has spread through all levels of society. Not all people agree with what the leaders of the women’s movement advocate, but whether they agree or disagree is not the issue I’m concerned with here. Regardless of one’s political convictions, the reality we must face is that there are now viable alternatives to the traditional wife/mother role for women. For the woman who experiences frustration in more traditional lifestyles, recognizing these alternatives is like finding a way out of a dark tunnel. The alternatives that the women’s movement has created offer hope to the housewife and gain a following for the movement among women who were once alienated by the “bra burning” image. Suddenly many women see it as a source of knowledge, a way to learn new skills to meet their needs.

But the alternatives offered require change, and with the prospect of change comes crisis. A woman is thrown into a state of conflict between what she should do and what she wants to do. This conflict is threatening to her husband who may—consciously or unconsciously—want a wife “just like Mom.” When the feeling of tension within the wife combines with pressure from her husband, conflict and instability within the family is inevitable. That conflict may well lead to positive change, but the process of getting to that point may require great patience and inner strength from everyone.

With inflation and the women’s movement upsetting the traditional marriage fantasy, most couples find themselves in crisis. Having been programmed with a highly unrealistic model of marriage, these people cannot help but feel a great amount of frustration and disappointment. They have all these emotions, but they have no place to go, no model, no new program to guide their decisions. Many choose to leave their present
marriages and go out to try the whole thing all over again with someone else. It might be better the second time around, they tell themselves. All too often it's not.

What the young couple today must face is that there are no adequate guidelines to define their roles as “good husbands” and “good wives.” They are on their own, and like it or not, they must blaze their own trails and develop their own maps for this new territory. In time, these pioneers will bring mature change and stability to the institution of marriage—but those changes will demand as much from the young man and woman of today as the Wild West once demanded of our ancestors.

TRYING HARDER CAN DEEPEN THE HURT
Some believe that with the easy accessibility of divorce, many couples don’t try hard enough to make their marriages work. In my experience as a marriage counselor, this doesn’t seem to be the case. On the contrary, couples generally do not give up easily, especially when they have invested several years together. Our typical couple, Nick and Donna, gives us an insight here. They have two nice children, a large amount of property, and they really don’t hate each other in spite of their tensions. They do the opposite of quitting. They try even harder to play out the husband/wife roles that they learned as children, for they don’t know what else to do. Sometimes I think all the couples I see share this common motto: “If you have a problem, work harder at it and that problem will be overcome.” This is a variation of the Protestant Ethic. There seems to be a belief that there must be a way to achieve the standards of the traditional marriage fantasy they hold in their minds: “Somehow, we’ll find it. We are just not trying hard enough.” Struggling under this self-imposed pressure, the people in these relationships begin to feel inadequate. They get angry with themselves and angry with their partners for failing to make the marriage what it should be or what they had hoped it would be.

Despite the anger and hurt, and despite the tradition-bound remedies that couples try to apply to their marriage problems, the disappointment
often remains and may even deepen. Time and again, men and women
tell me that the harder they try to make their relationships works the
worse things seem to get. It’s like spinning your car wheels in the sand.
The faster you spin, the deeper you sink. However, the failure lies not in
the effort, but in the method applied. It is as though today’s couples are
expecting to solve their problems by applying methods that only worked
for problems that are now ancient history. For example: The woman of
today isn’t unwinding from her job at the end of the day when she rushes
home to pick up the children at the babysitter, stop at the supermarket,
and then iron her husband’s shirts. No matter how well she does these
things, she’s not going to be relaxed and ready to enjoy her husband’s
company when he gets home. Nor is the husband going to make things
better for himself by demanding that his wife rush home from work to
clean house and have dinner ready when he arrives—regardless of how
much he may want those things.

What I hope to show in the following chapters is why the marriage
fantasy that most of us have learned won’t work within the context of
today’s problems. But more important than this, I’ll be suggesting some
tried-and-true methods that meet the needs of today’s couples. The first
step toward solving our marriage problems is to become more aware of
our marriage fantasies-, of the roles that society has laid upon us, and
of how we are supposed to go about fulfilling OUR own expectations
of how marriage should be. Once two people have become aware of
how they have been brought up or how they have been taught to think
about marriage, they can begin to bring about constructive changes in
themselves. Without this awareness, the couple is. on automatic pilot set
for a rendezvous with crisis. They just act out the roles of what a good
wife and. a good husband are supposed to be, blind to the fact that they
are setting the stage for major problems.

My purpose here is not to describe what a “right” marriage is supposed
to be or to present another set of rules for people to follow. It is to give
couples the knowledge to free themselves from their marriage fantasies
and to develop methods designed to meet the real needs of their own
individual circumstances. The tools you will find here will take you to
greater levels of intimacy with your mate while shrinking the dimensions
of everyday problems. I have seen these tools work time and time again in my professional practice, bringing couples together with the least amount of struggle.

Be prepared to give up your notions about what “should be”; discover, instead, what works.