

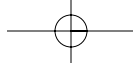
## Introduction

*“Doctor,” the patient said, raising and lowering his left shoulder several times, “it hurts when I do this.”*

*“Well, for heaven’s sake,” replied the helpful physician. “Stop doing that!”*

There is a lot of good advice available on how to solve couples issues. The hard part is taking that advice. Often couples try to change things for the better, only to fail repeatedly. With each failure they feel more helpless and betrayed, reducing their chances for an improved relationship. As in the old joke here, couples receive advice on how to improve their communication and stop injuring each other; what clinicians and writers fail to explain is why troubled but well-intentioned couples sometimes just can't *stop doing that*. When two caring and essentially good people simply cannot stop hurting each other, what's wrong—and what are they supposed to do?

Are you sometimes stunned at the sight of a once happy couple dissolving into bitter rage or quiet despair? Do you wonder why so many attempts at improving relationships end poorly? Or why so many partners commit embarrassing and harmful acts against one another? Are you puzzled by how often love turns to injury and anger? It turns out that the answers to these questions are found in



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the basic biology of human beings and their *normal* reactions to being threatened.

All human beings have what is called the *fight-or-flight* response. It is ruled by the primitive part of the brain, which is composed of the brain stem, and the limbic system including the amygdala—those areas of the brain that control emotional responses as well as such functions as eating, sleeping, sexual arousal, fighting, and running away from danger. This is what I will be calling the Reptilian Brain. It is not creative, it cannot learn complex data, and it is unable to consider the consequences of its actions. A person who is stressed or threatened will respond in a reptilian fashion and will attempt either to defeat or escape from the perceived threat. The reptile doesn't soothe; it either kills and eats, or runs away.

When our relationships are not as picture-perfect as we would like them to be, when we are threatened in any way—by internal or external forces—we react instinctively with the Reptilian Brain. That's why this book is called *Reptiles in Love*, and my purpose is to help couples in trouble move their responses up the evolutionary ladder to more rational, creative, and loving interactions.

This book is not a treatise on how to have a perfect relationship. I'm not trying to tell you how to live, or to intrude on the good things that you and your partner may already have together. The special and diverse qualities of relationships should at all times be respected. I've worked with couples for many years, but I would never claim to understand all that occurs between two people—because the truth is that we're not easily understood, analyzed, or explained. Relationships are complex blends of events, genetics, cultures, histories, and needs. No relationship is exactly like any other relationship; each one is unique and presents its own joys, strengths, and challenges.

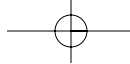
But what all relationships have in common is that they happen between human beings, all of whom come with the same standard equipment: bodies, brains, and emotions. In all kinds of unions, including marriages, heterosexual and gay relationships, parent-child

bonds, and business relationships, primary physical processes (like the fight-or-flight reflex) exist that affect all interactions. Beginning then at a place where there is commonality—our bodies—makes sense, and understanding normal human interactions under conditions of challenge or stress is the most useful starting point.

### **The Business of Romance**

Many couples fail in their attempts to improve their relationship because they place too much pressure on themselves. They try to speak differently with their partner, yell less, be more polite or more helpful, or enter therapy. Their aim is to recapture the romance they once had. In my seminars I explain that I do not take a romantic approach to my work. “But,” you might say, “you’re working with intimate partners. How can you *not* take a romantic approach?” I’m glad you asked. Some therapists, encouraging couples’ romantic aims, push for increased intimacy too quickly. If you and your partner have experienced defeats in your relationship, you’ll need to remove various obstacles (which will be discussed later) before you feel sufficiently safe to become intimate. Attempting too early to gaze into each other’s eyes or spend too much time together will only increase the tension between the two of you.

When I work with a couple, my first goal is to reduce the intensity and fear that keeps the couple separated, distant, or angry. I take a rather businesslike approach so that we can work toward partnership—a businesslike relationship emphasizing trust and safety. If the individuals can develop enough trust between them to act as good partners, then they can move on to friendship. If they begin to relax and enjoy each other as friends, they will move forward, once again, to intimacy. Such an approach may seem like a slow process, but it isn’t. With reduced tension and threat, partners quickly become more creative and playful with each other. When partners are functioning at their best, they can not merely tolerate but also respect and celebrate each other’s individual differences. This acceptance of each other is critical to building intimacy.



## **What the Hell Happened to Us? The Death of Humor and Joy**

You've probably already noticed that as stress and tension increase, your ability to stand back and look at your situation humorously deteriorates. A witty comment or joke, which might have made your partner laugh when you first met, is now met with only an icy stare. This time your partner hears the joke as an attack or as a show of disdain. Did you mean it that way or was your partner stressed and prepared to hear the worst possible meaning? Or is it possible that in the midst of your own stress, your attempt at humor did indeed have a trace of bitterness and threat in it?

For most of us, humor performs a necessary service to our health and well-being. The role of humor in health is well documented. Humor places a boundary around difficult things so that they become more manageable. Humor lightens heavy feelings and thoughts that might otherwise be perceived as frightening and overwhelming. This may be why many of us are driven to joke about terrible things.

Early in their relationship, two individuals become intoxicated by one another, just as surely as by alcohol or marijuana. They find delight, humor, and endearment in almost everything they experience together. They can laugh over minor disagreements. They may experience worry and tension over whether they are truly loved enough, but they haven't yet experienced injury and betrayal. Without such injury, their bodies do not go on full alert in response to minor disagreements or threats. They're not yet paranoid. Life is, well, good.

### **And Now, on a Personal Note . . .**

When people come to see me for couples therapy, they're in for a lot of hard work. But we also usually laugh together. I love comedy. My office, in a medical center, is the size of a standard examining room. My walls are crowded with "professional wallpaper": the certificates that suggest that the University of Kansas, the State of Wisconsin,

and other organizations approve of me as a psychologist. There is also a selection of pictures of old-time comedians like Laurel and Hardy, Charlie Chaplin, and the Three Stooges—comic masters who will always have a place in my practice. I watch for humor taking place between my patients, and when bitterness and sarcasm move toward warm, shared amusement, I rejoice.

Later on in the book, I'll be describing such things as the physical process by which partners anticipate injury and prepare to defend themselves, often self-destructively. This is serious stuff. That's why I have interspersed jokes throughout the book—as a means of bringing your brain to a playful position, which is its highest level of functioning for personal communication. I hope you recognize many of the old jokes, because to me, old jokes are like old friends. The recognition and security of knowing them is part of the fun.

Humor should also shake things up a bit. Some of the best comedy works because it takes something you think you understand well in a direction that you never would have expected. This breaks up the primitive thinking patterns described throughout the book. Obviously, humor doesn't work for everyone, nor for anyone all the time, but if you find yourself chuckling now and again as you go through this difficult process, I've done a large part of my job.

Case studies appear throughout the book as well. I've tried to show them in a slightly exaggerated, amusing, yet instructive light. They're meant to be entertaining but also to show common relationship behaviors, some probably familiar. You may recognize your own behavior in them. None of the case studies is an exact description of any couple I have treated; they're only snapshots of behaviors I've seen during treatment. More exact descriptions of specific couples would not be fair.

### **How the Book Works**

This book is divided into three parts. Part One, "Understanding the Reptile in Us," builds a case for how and why couples push each other away. This section describes the origins and development of

relationship problems, as well as the need for safety in approaching changes or increased intimacy. We'll also explore specific relationship problems and difficulties in renewing your connection. You will already be gathering hints on how to recognize and lessen the impact of negative behaviors.

Part Two, "Five Steps to Ending Destructive Fights and Evolving Toward More Loving Relationships," provides specific recommendations for changing negative patterns of behavior and practicing higher-level interactions with one another. The five steps begin with slowing everything down and evaluating yourself and your relationship, and then developing more organized approaches to needs and problems. As you progress through this discussion, from developing partnership skills through building intimacy, you will be applying some general rules to a variety of special circumstances.

The steps are presented to you as guidelines, as positive suggestions that you and your partner may find helpful when you're trying to sort things out. The two of you will want to cycle through these steps and select the practices that are most useful to your relationship.

As you and your partner attempt to implement this process, however, one or both of you may experience some discomfort. It may be that some component of the behavior feels embarrassing, or you simply are not ready for it. Does that mean that you've failed? Absolutely not!

*Everything you do in working on your relationship is merely an experiment.* I will say this again later, so you don't have to write it down yet. The point is extremely important, however. If you don't achieve what you consider acceptable improvement in your relationship after completing the three, four, or five steps, it doesn't mean that your relationship is doomed or that your partner doesn't care enough. It means that the particular process you tried was not right for you at this time, and it's time for a new experiment!

Part Three, "Special Issues for Evolving Reptiles," examines betrayal, couples therapy, and divorce through the understanding

of the Reptilian Brain and the methods described in Part Two. Keep the book handy. You may wish to go back and look at specific applications, particularly from Part Two. Finally, there is a Resources section at the end of this book that provides guidance to excellent references in specific areas of concern.

*Reptiles in Love* is about normal human functioning under stress. If partners in a relationship can understand their most basic physical reactions to each other, they can also learn ways to manage challenges to intimacy more effectively. If you begin this process by thinking that you'll find out what's wrong with your partner, then this is not the book for you. To improve a relationship, you must be willing to examine closely your own behavior, emotions, traditions, and methods of defending yourself. All couples therapy is also individual therapy. If you're willing to look at what you bring to the relationship, then we can work together effectively. If you're willing to reexamine yourself, your partner, and the reasons you're with him or her, you'll be able to relax and have some fun. I'm not trying to direct your relationship or convince you to stay with your partner, even though there is strong evidence that vital and lasting relationships are good for people. Although some of the reasons partners fight and leave each other are lame at best, no one can tell anyone else how to live.

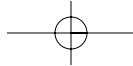
### **Lowering Intensity and Healing**

Establishing safety is serious business and needs to be the first consideration in beginning to improve your relationship. Your initial goal is not to solve problems but to reduce tension and pain. As you work through this book, and practice reducing tension and soothing one another, follow the points listed here. You will then be able to reestablish a sense of safety and cooperation and to move on toward reigniting intimacy.

- Understand the biological nature of stress and anxiety.
- Recognize that most of what you argue about is just business, and all business is negotiable.
- Recognize the patterns in which you and your partner raise each other's anxiety and anger.
- Encourage your brain to use organizational and reasoning skills to clarify your needs.
- Examine what you most need in moments of stress and anxiety and ask for help from your partner.
- Develop structures, rules, and methods for soothing each other when exhausted, angry, or anxious.
- Recognize that your partner's anxiety is not necessarily about you being bad, stupid, or incompetent; doing so will allow you to settle down and be helpful, even *playful*.

Playfulness is an important form of intimacy. When you can enjoy humor and creativity with your partner, you will most likely feel closer. Working on your relationship should be an adventure, and this book is an invitation to explore yourself and each other. If you discover new information about one another and new skills for interacting in a cooperative and loving fashion, then you are well advised to work on redeveloping your intimacy. Your new skills will lay the groundwork for exploring a deeper connection between you.

Finally, I should mention that the description of the Reptilian Brain in this book is admittedly oversimplified. The sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems and many other aspects of the human body influence our emotional reactions. I've included some additional references in the Resources section for those interested



in greater detail on this physiological marvel. The metaphor of the Reptilian Brain is, however, an easy way to remind ourselves of what's really happening when we feel hurt, angry, fearful, or overwhelmed—and that we can, by deliberately reverting to our higher-level, rational brain functions, reconnect as communicating, caring, human couples.

