

RESOURCES FOR THE MAN WHO IS SERIOUS ABOUT WORKING ON CHANGE CHAPTER 1—YOUR FIRST STEPS

Becoming a responsible, kind relationship partner has some similarities to learning to play a musical instrument, or learning to speak a new language. You think at first, “I couldn’t possibly do that—you’re expecting way too much from me.” The man who has been abusing substances, or chronically mistreating his partner, or running away from his mental health problems, says, “You can’t expect me to change that much—you’re asking me to be a completely different person! I am who I am!” You’re likely to feel that your partner is making unfair demands on you, and that you’re being assigned a task that you shouldn’t be stuck with.

These are the voices in your head that don’t want you to grow; they’d rather keep making excuses and blaming the woman, which seems so much easier. But on your better days, when you are being honest with yourself, you know that your partner is right; you can’t blame your behavior on her, or your problems on her, and it’s time to get on with making changes. And learning to behave responsibly, maturely, and non-abusively doesn’t involve giving up who you “really” are—unless you’re trying to argue that you are “really” a selfish, demeaning, intimidating person! We’re confident you don’t want to make that argument. When you view the situation with clarity, there’s no excuse not to get down to the business of working on yourself. So do it.

The process of change is difficult but it’s not mysterious. You begin at the beginning and learn what you need to learn, one piece at a time, just as the aspiring musician has to do. Your first task is to examine the attitudes that you take toward your partner’s grievances. From there we will move on to overcoming denial, stopping your retaliatory behaviors, making a plan, and connecting yourself to positive influences. These steps are the beginning of the change process.

The First Steps Toward Change

1. Changing your attitude toward your partner’s complaints
2. Understanding your denial, and coming out of it
3. Stopping your retaliations against your partner for raising grievances
4. Making a plan
5. Connecting yourself to positive influences for growth and change

Step One: Changing What You Tell Yourself About the Issues She Raises

I am going to assume that the fact that you are reading this guide to change means that your partner has been complaining about certain aspects of your behavior for a long time (whether you have been hearing her or not). Her grievances may include that you spend more time with your drinking buddies than you do with her, or that you’re too rough during sex or you pressure her to do things sexually that she doesn’t find appealing, or that you stick her with all the housework and child care, or that you insult her and act like you think you’re better than she is.

So far, your internal messages about her complaints—we might call it your “self talk”—have largely been that she doesn’t know what she’s talking about, or she’s making something out of nothing, or there’s something wrong with her. If these weren’t your internal messages, you would have improved your behavior long ago. You have developed an elaborate set of internal messages that *discredit* your partner’s perspective, through which you explain to yourself why you have no need to take her complaints seriously. Observe your own thinking over the next couple of weeks; you’ll notice that you repeat these negative beliefs about her to yourself over and over, almost like a chant, as if you were trying to keep yourself convinced.

So here’s the first point to focus on: Whatever she has been raising with you, you haven’t been hearing it; and as a result, you haven’t done anything meaningful to take care of the problems your behavior has created. Fortunately, it isn’t too late.

Here are examples of the kinds of things that may go on in your “self-talk,” your inner world of recurring messages:

- *“She’s just trying to control me like a mother, that’s why she won’t stop bugging me.”*
- *“She doesn’t know how to have a good time, so she doesn’t want me to have a good time.”*
- *“She’s just determined to find something wrong with every little thing I do.”*
- *“She just doesn’t understand men. She wants me to be like a woman.”*
- *“She ignores all the good things I do, and just notices the bad things.”*
- *“She’s stupid, she doesn’t know anything.”*
- *“She’s fucking crazy, there’s no reason to listen to her.”*
- *“She just likes to get on my case because she’s a bitch.”*
- *“I’ve worked so hard on changing, and she just doesn’t appreciate it.”*

And the list could go on with similar attitudes. Discrediting her is your ticket to running away from yourself.

As you read the list above, you may find yourself in an internal argument. On one hand you may tell yourself, “I don’t have any of those attitudes,” and on the other you may think, “Of course I think that about her, because it’s true.” Both reactions will keep you from really looking. So work to drop defensive habits and look honestly at what’s been going on.

Exercise 1–1:

For the next few weeks, pay close attention to the negative messages you collect about your partner. When she brings up a complaint, a criticism, or a step that she is asking you to take, listen carefully to the grievance or request *and do not discredit it*. When you are alone, write down the points she was making, and spend some time trying to take them in. Notice the messages that go through your head about why her issue does not have to be taken seriously.

In order to break your habit of self-talk that discredits your partner, start replacing the negative messages with appropriate ones, chanting (internally) the good ones rather than the bad ones as you try to reexamine your perspective. Examples of appropriate self-talk include:

- *“She has the right to bring grievances.”*
- *“She has the right to be angry with me.”*
- *“She has built up a lot of bad feeling because of things I’ve done in the past.”*

- “*She is trying to make our relationship work better.*”
- “*She needs me to make changes so that I stop hurting her (and the kids).*”
- “*Her complaints are just as valid as mine.*”
- “*I can deal with this issue instead of shooting her down.*”
- “*She’s a good person, and she knows what she’s talking about.*”
- “*How do I want her to feel about me twenty minutes from now? What do I need to do differently to bring that about?*”

Work daily on changing your self-talk habits, replacing your destructive attitudes with constructive, respectful ones.

REALLY HEARING HER GRIEVANCES

Deciding to take in her side of arguments, and deciding to actually digest what her complaints have been, requires that you not only listen well but that you stop making yourself into the victim. For example, you have to stop acting like it’s such a burden to take her opinion seriously; after all, you certainly expect her to take *your* opinions seriously, including your complaints. So why do you start to act so victimized when she had a grievance? Because playing “poor me” is a lot easier than looking at how bad your partner feels and what you need to do differently.

So when she is expressing her feelings, including her hurt or outrage, here’s what to do:

- Make a serious, careful effort to understand what she is saying, *even if you think you already know*. You have a history in this relationship of listening poorly and assuming the worst, which you can only correct by shutting your mouth and opening your mind.
- Respond in a thoughtful, fair way that does not include any insults or put-downs, does not accuse her of bad motives, and does not exaggerate or twist what she has just said. Your response, even if you disagree with her, has to demonstrate that you are actually engaging seriously with the points she is making. Sentences that begin with “*Oh, so what you’re really saying is . . .*” are off-limits. So are:
 - “*You’re just bringing this up because . . .*”
 - “*You’re just mad because . . .*”
 - “*What this is really about is . . .*”
- Do more good thinking on your own about what she has said, after the argument or discussion is over. The digestion process should continue for hours or even days. You should be coming back to her later saying things like:
 - “*I’ve been thinking over what you were saying and I realize you were really making sense.*”
 - “*I’m sorry I was so defensive, and I’m ready now to take in what you were trying to tell me.*”
 - “*I’ve thought about it and I can see why my actions weren’t fair, and I’m sorry. I’ll make a concerted effort not to do that again.*” (in reference to whatever her grievance was)
- Don’t bring up your complaints about her when she is in the midst of trying to raise issues about you. If you want to talk about your grievances, you need to bring them up on your own

time. Another way of stating this point is that you need to stop deflecting the discussion away from her concerns onto yours, which is an evasive tactic and often becomes an excuse to be nasty.

- Don't require her to bring up her grievances in a perfect way. If you don't like the way she is talking to you, you can bring that up with her later, but you can't use it in the middle of an argument as an excuse to shut her off and not deal with what she is raising.

Look back up this list and ask yourself, "Is this an unreasonable set of demands? Is this a huge, unfair burden to put on a person? Do these requirements tie your hands so that you can't stand up for yourself?" The answer is clearly no; attachment to the above behaviors is about being attached to silencing her.

Exercise 1-2:

Write down a few examples of ways in which you have retaliated against your partner or put up roadblocks when she was trying to raise concerns or express her anger to you. Then write down alternate ways you could have responded, drawing from the list above.

Next, write some examples of disrespectful messages you have been running inside your head to excuse blowing her off when she's mad at you. Then write down a couple of positive attitudes toward her, and toward conflict, that you will work to keep in your mind instead, drawing from the list of positive messages above.

NO MORE GOING BALLISTIC

If there are certain subjects that you are extremely "touchy" about, so that you explode angrily or storm out if she attempts to bring them up, that behavior has to stop. (And yes, going ballistic is a *choice*; you are not forced to "lose it" because she brings up a difficult topic, you are choosing to do so.) She gets to raise whatever issues she believes need to be addressed, and you are perfectly capable of dealing with it even if the subject is an upsetting one for you. So these are the new rules if you are serious about changing your behavior:

- You can't make any subjects out-of-bounds for her anymore. She is permitted to raise *any* subject she wants to, and you can't scream, tell her to shut up, or get her back for it later. You don't get to tell her that she can't talk about issues that may have a big impact on her life; that is a denial of her basic rights. So it's time to deal.
- The very fact that certain subjects are that volatile for you is a warning sign that you are running away from yourself, whether it's an addiction, a mental health problem, or some other issue you are avoiding confronting.

Let's say, for example, that Justin's mother was an alcoholic, the kind that drank until she passed out on the floor of the hallway. When his partner tries to bring up how upset she is by how much *he* drinks, Justin comes unglued and starts to yell things like, "You don't know anything about alcohol abuse! I handle my alcohol just fine! I'm not passing out, I'm not driving drunk, I'm holding down a job! You should have been there when my mom was throwing up drunk and calling me a stinking little shit! I can't believe you are telling me I drink too much, you know how that makes me feel! Leave me the hell alone!!"

What Justin is refusing to look at (among other things) is that his drinking is having a bad impact on his partner and on his children; he is acting as though this issue is just about him, but it isn't. (He's also ignoring the reality that drinking problems take different forms, and that the fact that he doesn't drink the way his mother did proves nothing.) It is undoubtedly true that his memories of his mother's alcoholism are a great source of pain for him. It is also obvious, though, that another part of why the subject sets him off so much is that he realizes on some level that he is getting sucked down the same awful road that his mother went down, but he wants to pretend it isn't happening.

The overarching point is that Justin has to come out of the self-centered place that he has locked himself into and start considering his partner's feelings. And you need to do the same.

Step Two: Owning Up That You Have a Problem

It's been said a million times but we're going to say it again: people can't solve problems that they don't believe they have. As long as you keeps insisting that your partner is exaggerating the problem, or she's too sensitive, or she just likes to get on your case, or she's actually the one "who is messed up," you can't progress.

What comes up for you when you try to make room for the possibility that you really do need to get help, and do need to change? Perhaps first you feel ashamed to admit that she has been right all along, given that you have been so hotly and disparagingly telling her how wrong she is. You may feel that you're a bad person for having this problem. At the same time, you may look around and see many people who behave even worse than you do—they drink even more heavily, or they cheat more, or they hit their wives and girlfriends with their fists, or they are even more prone to bizarre outbursts; so you tells himself, "How serious could my problem really be?"

Lastly, part of you may feel like life will be over if you accept having the issues she says you have; it might seem, for example, as if all of your enjoyment will disappear if you have to give up your destructive behaviors. From here on, life looks like drudgery and darkness. The substance abuser thinks, "How could life ever feel good if I can't drink and drug?" The person with mental health issues thinks, "How could life be exciting or satisfying without this wild roller-coaster ride of highs and lows that I live on?" The abusive man thinks, "How could I be a happy man if I have to allow my wife to stand up to me and make decisions on equal terms?" The player may feel, "Life is ruined if I can't keep several women going at a time."

The reality is that you will get to a much more fulfilling life by turning yourself around. Ask an alcoholic who has been sober for several years whether they miss their old partying days, and he or she will usually say, "Oh, yeah, I miss the drama and the fun sometimes, but I wouldn't want to go back to that for anything." They have discovered satisfaction on a deeper level. Ask a reformed abuser whether he would like to get his old life back, and he'll say, "Sure, there's times when I wish I could just shut my wife up the way I used to, but I wouldn't want to go back to seeing her so hurt, and to having my kids not trust me, and to feeling like such a jerk." Ask someone who has overcome a personality disorder or a trauma history, and he or she will tell you, "I can find plenty of excitement in life without those wild swings I used to go through, and now I don't have to be living with a problem I'm trying to hide from everyone." Ask a man who finally grew up whether he wants to go back to being a thirty-three-year-old adolescent, and he'll say, "Actually, it turns out the adult world isn't so bad."

So the rewards will come, though they won't come quickly. First you will have to do a lot of hard work, work that won't seem to pay off much in the short term; that's why so many men start making changes but then fail to carry them through. You will have to stop demanding instant gratification and stop insisting that the world owes you gratitude and rewards for doing what you should have been doing all along.

On the way—soon, in fact—you're going to need new friends. If you keep hanging out with your party pals you'll be back to partying very soon, and you'll keep convincing yourself that addictive behavior is normal since your friends all do the same things. If you keep spending your free time with men who speak contemptuously about women, you aren't going to break your own habits of looking down at females as second class. You won't get away from the land of denial if you're still surrounded by people who live there.

Exercise 1–3:

Write a couple of paragraphs about what is scary or upsetting to you about admitting that you have a problem that has to be overcome. Then put down some of the reasons for believing that your partner is right (even if you aren't really ready to agree with her overall yet—just put the points that you do see down on paper). Third, put down a couple of thoughts about how you would enjoy your life more if you accepted the problem and changed the behavior. Last, go out for about a ten-minute walk by yourself, and let these thoughts and feelings roll around inside you.

Step Three: Saying Good-Bye to Payback

Is revenge really as sweet as they say it is? Or is it actually a highly dysfunctional drive, one that keeps spreading more misery around the world and encourages people to find scapegoats for their own unhappiness?

In the context of intimate relationships, the answer is clear: the payback habit is a cancerous one, guaranteed to spread a deeper and deeper level of mistrust, resentment, and ultimately hatred into the connection between two people. It has to go.

If, for example, you deliberately make your partner feel bad because you're feeling bad, that absolutely will not "make her see what it's like," or "teach her a lesson," regardless of what you may tell yourself. She will learn only one thing: that she has to obey you and keep you happy, or you will hurt her. Your relationship with her then stops being one between intimate partners, and becomes one between master and servant, between dominator and dominated. Is this the impact you want to have on the world, to turn women into servants?

Even if you have only the narrowest, most self-serving goal of trying to make yourself feel better when you're upset, revenge still won't get you what you want. It brings only the most fleeting and superficial pleasure and, like an addiction, leaves the person craving more rather than feeling satisfied. As you may notice, payback-oriented people tend to be miserable anytime they aren't actively gloating—and that means most of the time they're miserable.

Here are some typical examples of retaliatory behavior:

- You and your partner are at a party and she complains that you are drinking too much, so you

- respond angrily by deliberately getting yourself completely (and embarrassingly) hammered.
- You are sick of your partner pressing you to carry your weight around the house, so you agree to do the dishes and then “accidentally” breaks two glasses, plus leave water spilled all over the kitchen floor, plus don’t really get the dishes very clean, to make sure she won’t ask you again.
 - You are angry that she is confronting you about the demeaning way in which you speak to her, so you take off in the car and don’t come back until after midnight, thereby causing her to worry about you and sticking her with all the work of getting the children ready for bed and tidying the house.

Do any of these behaviors sound familiar when you think back on how you’ve acted? These are all payback, pure and simple, and they have no place in the behavior of a mature and responsible person.

The alternative to payback is that you have to actually live with the uncomfortable feelings that are coming up for you in your conflicts with your partner. You also have to accept her right to disagree with you, to have her own thoughts and perceptions.

There are positive steps you can take to help you resist the temptation to punish her:

- Begin with *deep, slow breaths*, working on calming your heart rate and coming out of agitation.
- Self-impose a *twenty-four-hour waiting period* between the time that your partner does something that makes you angry and the time when you responds in words or actions; this will give you time to cool down and make sure that you make choices that are not retaliatory.
- Each time that you are very upset with her, you need to *talk as soon as possible with someone who is a good influence on you*; this person has to be someone who will settle you down rather than further fire you up against your partner, who will press you to think, and who will help you see the conflict through your partner’s eyes.
- If you remain agitated, you should *sit and write* about what happened to help process your feelings. This writing should include some points that are positive about your partner’s perspective even if you don’t agree with her; you could write, for example, “I believe I’m doing my share with the kids, but I can see why it wouldn’t seem that way to her.”

This process we are recommending leads us to the following central point in your work: You will need, throughout the coming months and years, to be working all the time on improving your ability to take in, understand, and respect your partner’s perspective on conflicts, including her ways of viewing you.

Exercise 1–4:

Write descriptions of at least two incidents in which you were mad because you were sure that your partner was wrong about something, and it turned out that she was right. Next, write what is hard for you about giving up the payback habit. Last, write at least two examples of times you have gotten her back for things, and put some thoughts down about why your actions were harmful.

The Crucial Distinction Between Aggression and Self-Defense

To make serious progress on your behavior, you will have to learn to make the absolutely critical separation between *aggression* (actions designed to harm the other person) and *self-defense* (actions designed to protect yourself). Destructive people get these two all wrapped up together, and tremendous harm follows. Specifically, you need to sort out clearly the difference between *standing up for yourself* and *getting revenge*. (See box.) It is simply unacceptable to use behaviors from the “Retaliation” list and then say, “I was just standing up for myself.” You have to own the choices you have made in the past to use payback, and from here on out make different choices.

Standing Up for Yourself

- naming what you do not like
- speaking angrily (but respectfully)
- explaining how her actions are making you feel
- taking time to yourself, pulling away (but still meeting your responsibilities)
- asking for what you want her to do differently
- withdrawing favors (not responsibilities)

Retaliation

- saying things that you know will hurt her feelings
- withdrawing in a way that sticks her with work to do, ruins plans, or uses the silent treatment
- not letting her talk
- getting intimidating or scary
- saying bad things about her to other people
- withdrawing your contribution to responsibilities
- trying to “make her feel” what you are feeling, trying to “do the same thing to her that she did to me”

Trying to hurt the other person is not self-defense, *even if you think you are just repeating the same thing that you feel she did to you*. Remember “two wrongs don’t make a right”? Those ethics apply just as much to adults as to children.

Here’s one way to summarize this section:

From now on you have to choose something constructive that you can do with yourself when you are mad at her, instead of opting to do harm.

Step Four: Making a Plan for Dealing with your Issues

Deeply ingrained habits—meaning habits that a person has been acting out for years—carry a tremendous force that keeps them going. This force can seem as powerful and tenacious as a human being’s will to live. Unless you make a clear plan for long-term change, you will never break your habits for very long; you will be stuck in a repeating pattern of:

- apologies and promises to change
- next, a stage when your treatment of her gets a little better and you meet some of your responsibilities
- and last, a stage where it all slides backward into your ruts of destructive living and blaming your partner for your own actions

Now, you have probably promised her before—perhaps several times—that you would turn over a new leaf, and you probably meant it when you said it. So the promises, no matter how sincere they may be, just don't work. What has to be different now is that you will commit not only to *what* you are going to change, but also to *how* you are going to do it, with a written plan that you will share with your partner.

Your plan needs to include the specific elements listed in the box below (which we will explain in detail):

The Elements of your Plan for Change

1. The specific behavioral changes you are going to make
2. The specific destructive attitudes that you are going to let go of, and the constructive ones that will take their place
3. The types of outside assistance you are going to get, including the specifics of how often you will go for help, how much of your past behavior you will truthfully reveal, how you will pay for services, and how much right your partner will have to know the details of what goes on in your work
4. The types of day-to-day work you are going to do on your issues
5. What you are committing to do if you break any element of your plan (this one is tricky, but it will make sense to you when we go over it)
6. How you will keep your partner informed about your work, which depends on how much she wants to hear about it
7. How you will get continued feedback from her about your actions and your progress, if she is open to giving it

Let's look at a sample plan, and then we'll discuss each element and how it works. The numbers in the plan correspond to the numbered elements that we just described above.

Kelly's Plan

1. I will stop drinking and smoking weed. I will stop all secret communications with women I meet, and stop doing anything that implies to a woman that I'm interested in her or attracted to her. I will treat Renee like she's a valuable person and a high priority in my life all the time. I will commit myself fully to this relationship, and stop acting annoyed when Renee says we need to spend more time together and be more sexual.
2. I'm going to stop my self-talk about Renee being too needy and demanding, because what she is asking for is totally normal and is not that much. I'm going to focus on how the rewards of being in a close relationship outweigh the sacrifices. I'm going to remind myself that I'm responsible for my own actions.
3. (a) I will attend an AA meeting every day for the next three months. After that I will go to at least four meetings per week for a year, and then we'll discuss it again. I will get a sponsor by three weeks from now, which is February 15. (b) I will reveal my problem with alcohol and weed to my parents and my siblings, and keep in touch with them about what I'm doing about it. (c) I will talk to a counselor at my EAP program at work about the way I've used flirtations and affairs to get back at Renee for complaining about my drinking and to avoid committing to my relationship. I will make a plan with that counselor for staying away from those behaviors.
4. I will write in my journal every day about my temptations and about any self-talk that is negative about Renee or blames her for what a hard time I'm having. I will write for at least twenty minutes. I will not use my AA meetings and journal writing as an excuse to not help with the cooking and cleaning or for not being sexually intimate with Renee (e.g., "I'm too busy, I'm too tired from my meeting, etc."). I will e-mail my sister at least twice a week about what is going on with me.
5. If I drink or drug again, I agree that I will go to an inpatient detox. If I have any flirtations or intimate contacts with women, I will move out of the house until (and unless) Renee says I can come back, and not try to take any of the furniture or other stuff that belongs to both of us. If I skip any meetings or counseling appointments, I agree to move out for at least a month.
6. My journal is private, but Renee can read the e-mails between me and my sister if she wants to. (My sister agreed to this.) At least once a week I will tell Renee about what I'm learning in my meetings, and read her some sections aloud from my journal that I'm okay with sharing.
7. Renee does not want to have a regularly scheduled "feedback time" for now, but I agree to listen without interrupting whenever she has comments about my attitudes, my behavior, or how well I'm sticking to my plan. When this happens, I agree to give her a thoughtful, nondefensive response that day, or by the next morning at the latest.

This sample plan may give you enough of an idea about how to construct a plan, but here are some guidelines. First, you make the plan; your partner doesn't make it for you, and you don't expect her to. Don't make a half-baked plan; put in a serious effort and cover all the bases or don't do it at all.

Detailed, specific descriptions of behavioral and attitudinal changes are crucial. If you write vague goals such as "I'll be nicer to her," the plan won't help, because the side of you that wants to stay stuck (let's face it, that side is there) will keep insisting that you've been nice enough, and your behavior won't really change. Similarly unsuccessful will be such agreements as "I'll help around the house more," or "I'll keep a better attitude," or "I'll cut down on my drinking." These need to be replaced with such statements as, "I will change at least four diapers a day and vacuum twice a week,"

“I won’t snarl when you ask me to take care of something,” and “I won’t have more than two beers a week, and no other alcohol or weed.”

The part where you agree to additional steps you will take if you fall off your program is indispensable. The first reason is that if you’ve agreed ahead of time to accept specific consequences for breaking your plan, you lose some of the temptation to behave in unacceptable ways and then say, “Sorry, I couldn’t help it,” because you know the apology is going to have to be followed up with action. Second, there is obviously a battle going on between two sides of your character, the side that wants to change and the side that wants to stay the same; and by committing ahead of time to respecting consequences, you can help the Good Side win.

Bear in mind that if you do break your plan, and then you also break your commitment about what your consequences would be for doing so, you send your partner an unmistakable message that you don’t plan to ever deal seriously with your issues. So it’s worth it to stick by your word, even when it leads to hard times for you. You don’t want the old life anymore, so hang in there through the challenges of moving along the road to the new life.

GETTING PROPER HELP

Outside help is indispensable. It does not necessarily have to be professional help if you can’t afford that or it isn’t available to you. You might agree, for example, to speak three times a week with a friend or relative who you will not get sucked into your excuses and will hold you accountable. If you have someone in your life who has recovered from addiction, or you know a man who insists on proper respectful treatment for females, or anyone else who cares about you enough to call you on your excuses and negative thinking, that person can be a resource for you. You might also use self-help groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous or Rational Recovery.

If professional help is available, stop making excuses and use it. If you’re saying you don’t have the money to pay for counseling, but you do have it for beer and cigarettes, ball-game tickets, spiffier parts for your car, or new golf clubs, then the real issue is that you’re afraid a counselor is going to see into you too well. But that’s exactly why they might be able to help.

What Is the Right Kind of Professional Help?

It has become popular in our society to tell one another, “You should go to therapy,” as the solution to all personal problems. However, the research on the effectiveness of counseling indicates that a successful outcome tends to come about only when the following conditions are met: (1) there is a particularly good fit between counselor and client; (2) there are clear goals set for the counseling process and a plan for how those goals will be achieved; (3) the type of counseling being used—and there are many, many different kinds—is appropriate for the client’s personal style and the specific problems that you or she is having.

Choosing a counselor or group therefore depends on what your primary problem is, using the following guidelines:

If your partner complains of abuse by you: The appropriate service for a man who abuses his partner

is called an “abuser intervention program” or a “batterer intervention program,” where most of the work is done in groups. (In a few states, it is referred to as “batterer treatment,” but that term has mostly gone out of use.) This is the right program for you *even if you have never physically assaulted, sexually assaulted, or threatened her*; in other words, even if your abuse does not include violence. If you say, “I’m not going to go sit in a room with a bunch of *batterers*”—a common excuse used by abusive men to not go to a program—you’re just making a new excuse.

If you abuse substances: If you have a problem with alcohol or drugs, you will need to participate in a specialized substance abuse program. The options include: (1) self-help groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous or Rational Recovery; (2) outpatient substance abuse treatment, where you continue to stay at your home at night but get intensive group and/or individual counseling by day through a hospital, substance abuse clinic, or outpatient counseling service; (3) programs where you stay at the facility for a period of time, known as “detoxes” or “inpatient substance abuse treatment.” These options can be thought of as *levels of intervention*, so that a person who does not manage to stop drinking through AA might need to try formal substance abuse treatment, and a person who fails in an outpatient program may need to go inpatient.

If you have mental health problems, including effects from trauma: Most mental health counseling is known as “therapy” and is carried out by professionals known as “licensed clinicians.” The most common forms are variations on “talk therapy,” where the client sits in the therapist’s office and discusses issues. Less common, but growing in popularity, are the “body-centered therapies,” which still include some time spent talking but also involve elements of movement, massage, reexperiencing of deep emotions from the past, and other visceral experiences. Some body-centered approaches, such as Sensorimotor Psychotherapy (which has been found to be especially effective for trauma survivors), do not involve any actual touching of the client by the therapist. For people whose mental health problems appear to be rooted in traumatic experiences, such as child abuse, war, sexual assault, imprisonment, and countless other examples, there are the “trauma therapies”; these are new but promising approaches that are not widely available but worth looking for. Finally, there are intensive programs that involve more than one meeting per week and a long-term commitment of as much as two years, the best-known (and most promising) one being “Dialectical Behavioral Therapy” or “DBT”. DBT is commonly described as a treatment for Borderline Personality Disorder, but has promise as a therapy for anyone who has recurring patterns of behaving destructively toward themselves and of destroying close relationships. DBT is also a good choice for you if, 1) You keep wishing your own behavior would improve but it doesn’t, because you keep “losing it”, or, 2) You keep feeling like the problem is actually that everyone around you is messed up and that you’re fine, but your partner and/or other people are pointing out to you that you’ve got serious issues in your behavior and your distorted thinking.

Medical interventions are also present as an option, including psychiatric care and medication. Hospitalization in a psychiatric facility is available for severe mental health crises. Inform yourself carefully about psychiatric medication before using it; the long-term side effects can be much more serious than doctors will tell you (see *Anatomy of an Epidemic* by Robert Whitaker).

If your partner is telling you that you are immature or selfish: Specific services have not yet been designed for men who don’t want to grow up, and who are reluctant to think about anyone other than themselves. So even though immaturity is not exactly a mental health problem, you will probably need to pursue therapy, for want of another option. A therapist can help you explore why you are still attached to having someone else look after you, and why you feel overwhelmed by the prospect of running your own life. Remember, though, to keep the focus on *action*; endless exploration of how you got that way can become another way to stay stuck.

“I Can Only Stand to Go to Counseling If She Comes With Me”

Going together with her is not going to help. Meaningful change comes when you stop conditioning your behavior on what your partner does, and agree to own responsibility for your own life and your own actions. If you go to counseling together, you will keep bringing up what you feel she does wrong, which will leave you in the same rut you're in. It's time to stop using her as a crutch, or as a scratching post, and go do your own work.

We understand that you may feel that therapy is a mysterious and frightening process—many people feel this way—and so you want your partner to hold your hand through it. But your first step is the most crucial one, and that's the step you take when you shoulder the responsibility to schedule your session and courageously take yourself off to it. The support you need will come from the therapist, not from your partner.

Step Five: Connecting Yourself to Positive Influences

What we think of as individual behavior is not really as “individual” as it seems. People look to one another for guidance on how to behave, and they tune in to approval or disapproval that they receive from their society and social network. Judgment is passed on our behavior at high levels—laws and police and courts—and at low levels, such as a friend frowning while we tell him or her about something we did. Individuals who have chronically unhealthy behaviors appear not to care what society thinks of them, but if you look more closely, you find that they have at least a few people around them whose approval they are winning. This need for social acceptance is part of why drunks tend to hang out with other drunks and why men who abuse women tend to pick friends who are mistreating their own wives and girlfriends (as research has shown). Similarly, men who are chronic cheaters hang out with men who won't call them on their infidelity and will collude with them in keeping the secret from their partners.

So part of your growth process is to change the influences you are surrounding yourself with. First, you need to stop hanging out with, or even talking on the phone much with, friends and relatives of yours who do any of the following:

- avoid responsibility for their own actions, making lots of excuses themselves
- laugh at your stories about your bad behavior, or are amused by your self-caused dramas
- join with you in blaming your partner or in dismissing her feelings and concerns
- have the same behavioral problems that you have

Look also at what kinds of messages you are getting from Internet sites you hang out on, books you read, and videos you watch. If you are into pornography, for example, you are absorbing a constant set of messages that support your disrespectful and immature attitudes. You can get a similar negative effect from other websites that are made up of writings by men who blame women for all their problems and for everything that's wrong with the world.

So where can you look for people, and for values, that will push you toward growth instead of toward harm? You can:

- make a point of spending more time talking to, or hanging out with, men who have good relationships with their partners and don't speak badly about them
- connect with female relatives of yours who are living lives that command respect
- get more involved with your church, temple, or other faith community—if it is a community that promotes respect and equality for women, and if it's a place where people see your issues rather than being fooled by the side of you that is in denial
- find a mature, responsible sponsor in a twelve-step program
- open yourself to more guidance and influence from your partner (without leaning on her like a mother)
- open yourself to more suggestions from her about people or groups you could be spending time around—and about which people to stay away from

In short, you need to unplug your brain from the values, attitudes, and excuses that you have been absorbing on a daily basis and choose an entirely new mental diet to nourish yourself with.

One caution here: It's crucial to fight the temptation to flip these concepts around to use against your partner. For example, you might start claiming that she should be more open to your influence about who she hangs around with. This is a dead end for multiple reasons: 1) You can't change if you're continuing to focus on her; 2) You need to accept that you have a serious behavioral problem, and stop making it sound like that means your partner does too; 3) Influence and control are two very different things; we are recommending that you stop *controlling* her while opening yourself for her to *influence* you more.

We have covered a great deal of territory in this chapter, so let's recap the key beginning steps again: (1) changing your attitude toward your partner's complaints; (2) understanding your denial, and coming out of it; (3) stopping your retaliations against your partner for raising grievances; (4) making a plan; and (5) connecting yourself to positive influences for growth and change.

These are all manageable steps, and the sooner you get down to business on taking them the less painful they will be. They are a crucial beginning to turning your life around. If you take the leap and make these straightforward efforts, you can bring yourself to the level where deep growth starts to occur.