

## Chapter Two

### Men's Work: What It's Really All About

We turn now to examining the nuts and bolts of your work as you begin to dive down to the depths where things really count. Before taking these steps on, you need to have done serious work on all the elements covered in Chapter 1; you can't skip any of those steps and expect your work at this next level to go anywhere. We are now moving onto work that we consider in some ways more difficult, but that carries the potential for dramatically changing how your relationship goes, and how your partner feels about being close to you. The most challenging work can also be the most rewarding.

### Recognizing That Your Behavior Is a *Choice*

Men who harm their partners, whether emotionally, physically, or sexually, tend to see themselves as out of control, and as just reacting to circumstances that are beyond their control. Consider whether you have made any of the following excuses:

- *"I was so drunk I didn't know what I was doing."*
- *"I was in a rage, and I just lashed out."*
- *"There's only so much a man can take."*
- *"What you were doing reminded me of what my mom used to do to me, and I went berserk."*
- *"You can't expect me to be perfect when I'm that upset."*
- *"The stress of losing my job made me go on a binge."*
- *"I didn't realize what I was doing. I was out of my mind."*
- *"I was in a blackout."*
- *"You know how to totally push my buttons, then you blame me when I go off."*
- *"I would never have slept with that girl if you weren't being so cold to me."*

These excuses are all ways of covering up problems and placing the blame or bad behavior on someone or something else. The reality is that the behavior of human beings is not “on automatic”; people *make choices* even when they are deeply hurt, enraged, triggered, or drunk. Even in the highest-pressure situations, people’s behavior is shaped by:

- their attitudes and values about what is acceptable behavior
- their spiritual and religious beliefs
- their desire to avoid harming *themselves*
- their desire to protect belongings that they care about
- their wish to protect their reputation (how they are viewed by friends, relatives, and the wider public) and to avoid criticism
- their awareness of possible legal consequences for certain acts
- their *goals*—what they are trying to accomplish with their behavior

Here are some real-life examples from cases we’ve been involved with:

**Kyle**, who said that the pain of his terrible relationship with his wife drove him into cheating on her, and that it was the waves of intense emotion he was having about her that caused him to use such terrible judgment. Yet he also admitted that getting together secretly with his mistress required lots of advance planning, careful lying, faking sickness, and other stratagems that showed he was anything but “out of control.”

**Brian**, who said, “I don’t know what I’m doing after six or eight drinks,” yet always managed to continue selling weed no matter how drunk he was, without losing any of his skill as a businessperson, without losing his money or his merchandise, and without getting himself arrested.

**Marshall**, who came home extremely drunk and beat his wife up badly, leaving her covered with welts and bruises all over her legs and torso. He said that between the alcohol and the rage he was feeling, he went “berserk.” However, when his counselors asked him why his wife didn’t have injuries to her face or arms, he answered, “Oh, I wasn’t going to do anything that would show.”

We have seen relationship after relationship where a rageful man does one of the following: “goes crazy” smashing things around the house yet manages to avoid breaking anything that is important to him (while he breaks lots of things of hers); behaves in ways that are “out of control” but then quickly covers his tracks when police come around so that they won’t find out about the drugs or the violence or the drunk driving; is in the middle of being verbally and emotionally vicious to her when other people show up, and he switches so quickly to being kind and smiley that those people have no idea what she is so upset about, and she actually comes out looking like the nasty one.

If you are serious about changing, you have to be willing to look at the choices you are making every day, from the most trivial to the most significant. You need to accept that no one and nothing other than you is determining what you do. If you backslide into drinking, if you return to abusive behavior, if you cheat on your partner, it’s because that’s what you decided to do. In short:

Your change depends on your willingness to accept *complete responsibility* for your own actions. you have to stop blaming them on your partner, your addiction, your childhood, your feelings, or anything else.

## **What If I Have Mental Health Problems? That Messes Up My Behavior, Right?**

The truth is that only the most severe mental illnesses cause people to become truly unable to make choices or govern their own actions. If you can hold down a job, get along a lot of the time with your friends or relatives, and appear more or less normal in most situations, you are in adequate shape psychologically to be fully responsible for your actions. The kind of mental health conditions that leave a man genuinely out of control are on the level of hearing voices and having visual hallucinations that seem completely real, remembering events that never happened, believing harmless people are trying to kill you, and confusing your worst nightmares with reality. Very few people are dealing with psychological problems this severe; and even at this level of mental health crisis, the person's values and attitudes still influence their actions. The more common mental health problems, such as depression, manic depression, and personality disorder, as serious as they can be, do not make it impossible for a person to make better choices if they become motivated to do so. The first step, then, is to acknowledge that you are making choices. Unhook yourself from the idea that everyone else is causing your suffering, and that you "just couldn't help" the destructive things you have done.

Brett, who has gone through two years of Dialectical Behavioral Therapy to deal with his borderline personality disorder, puts it this way: "I realize that I have never acted in any way that would seriously hurt my reputation at work. If I acted on all of the thoughts that went through my head, I would not only have lost my relationship, but also my job and everything I have. I would be homeless. I have a 'switch'—it's my ability to choose. I throw on that switch before I go to work and I can function really well. I finally realized that if I want to keep this relationship, I have to throw on that switch *at home*."

### **Exercise 2-1:**

Write down the story of a time when you told yourself that you "lost control of yourself" and did something destructive. Looking back at that event, how can you tell now that you were actually making choices at the time? Why did you make the choices that you did?

# Taking In The Harm That You Have Done

Meaningful behavioral change doesn't occur in people who lack the strength or the integrity to look squarely at the damage their actions have wrought. The pop philosophy that says, "Forget the past, just focus on doing better in the future" may work well for the baseball player who just missed a catch, but it fails disastrously in the hands of a destructive man. Why?

Because your failure to consider, value, and understand your partner's feelings is a central reason for why you behaved in such hurtful ways in the first place. You can't possibly move beyond selfishness and insensitivity unless you are willing to spend a long time – quite likely years – developing your understanding of how you have hurt your partner, and learning to care about that harm and repair it.

Another mistake in pop philosophy says, "Guilt is a pointless emotion, and nothing is accomplished by feeling guilty about something you've done." In reality, guilt is a critical aspect of healthy human functioning. Our guilt feelings exist to alert us to times when we have wronged other people and to motivate us not to repeat those unethical or uncaring acts. The definition of a psychopath is a person who lacks a conscience; in other words, a person who feels no guilt about having harmed another. *The absence of guilt is a sign that something is deeply wrong.* While it may be true that our guilt feelings about eating too many doughnuts or skipping our exercise programs—in other words, guilt feelings we have toward *ourselves*—don't usually lead to any positive outcome, the nagging conscience we feel toward others is there for a good reason.

Do we want a man to feel guilty about embarrassing his wife because he got stumbling drunk in front of her relatives? About how humiliated she felt when he called her a "fat bitch"? About the years when he was stealing her money to buy cocaine? About bringing home a sexually transmitted disease because he was cheating on her?

Yes, we do. Guilt is not an end in itself, but the only way for a man *not* to feel guilty about these kinds of behaviors is to not really look at them. He has to force them out of his mind, minimize them, blame them on his partner, or blame them on women in general. And if he is going to change, we need him to look.

Part of why the alcoholic drinks is, ironically, to escape the pain of the damage that his drinking has already done. Part of why the abuser keeps abusing is to punish his partner for daring to point out how his abuse has hurt her. Part of why the man with narcissistic personality disorder behaves so selfishly is to try to fill a huge internal void he feels, which in turn is caused by the fact that he has driven so many people away over the years. All that effort he pours into not seeing himself is cement being poured into the foundation of his problem.

You don't have to take our word for it. Twelve-step programs for recovery from addiction place emphasis on the importance of "taking a fearless moral inventory" of one's own acts, and doing the extended work of "making amends." Programs for men who abuse women focus on requiring the men to grasp the effects of their violence and to learn to *feel bad* about treating a woman that way. Dialectical Behavioral Therapy, the state-of-the-art approach to overcoming personality disorders, demands that participants immediately stop behaving in ways that make things worse; then they work on the skills of preserving relationships by learning to consider the implications of their choices. As Brett says, "When she's mad at me, I have to stop and think about my skills. I take a moment and ask myself, 'How do I want her to feel about me in twenty minutes? How do *I* want to feel later about this interaction? She's got

every right to be pissed off at me. I have to remember everything I put her through.’ Thinking in that way goes against all the negative voices in my head—but those voices are going to get me divorced. And I want to be with her. I want her to trust me.”

### **The Elements of Facing What You Have Done**

- Be able to describe, in detail, the wrongs you have done
- Be able to say a lot about how your behavior has affected your partner without making her sound hypersensitive, fragile, or overreactive
- Put these thoughts in writing and allow your partner to keep copies of what you have written
- Give her as much space as she wants, for as long as she wants, to express her hurt, anger, frustration, and other feelings about your conduct, and to let you know what the other specific effects have been on her life (such as financial harm you have brought her, opportunities you have caused her to miss, ways you have harmed the children, physical injuries you have caused, lasting damage you have brought to her trust in you or to her sense of safety in the world)
- Do everything in your power to take care of the harm you have done (such as paying her medical or therapy bills, going back now to anyone you have lied to about her in the past and tell the truth, fixing harm you’ve done to the home, helping the children cope with emotional difficulties your behavior has sown in them, paying her back money you owe her or that you stole from her, getting a job and holding it down)
- Accept that there will be aspects of the harm you did that you *can’t* fix, and that your partner has a right to express anger and bitterness for a long time about those effects

The list in the box is useful to you when you are sinking into feeling like, given all the damage you have done, it is too late to do anything good. But whether your relationship works out or not, you have the responsibility to do everything constructive that you can to make up for harm you have done. The list above gives you several ideas of what you can do. Taking every step you possibly can may not bring your partner back to you, but it will help her to heal emotionally, and will help you to regain your sense of decency and dignity in who you are.

### **Exercise 2–2:**

Do some extended writing (filling a few pages) about how your partner has been affected by your unhealthy behavior in the past. Make it honest, and face your actions bravely. Let her read it when you are finished *if she wishes to*. If she does read it, be prepared to listen nondefensively to any reactions and additions she may have, or new pieces she wants you to write about.

# Giving Up the Bargaining Habit

Anyone who has unhealthy behavior patterns, whether it be alcohol abuse, cheating or other mistreatment of your partner, or chronic irresponsibility, gets attached to those behaviors. So when you start to work on change, you will inevitably face some internal battles, where part of you wants to stay on the new road and another part of you keeps an eye open for opportunities to go back to your familiar ways. One way you may do this is by trying to *cut deals* regarding your change, which might look like any of the following:

- telling your partner that you have made big changes, and that it's unreasonable for her to expect you to change even more
- saying that your partner doesn't appreciate how hard you have been working on yourself
- acting as if a period of behaving appropriately gives you license to behave badly now (for example, you get drunk and then says to her, "But I've been on the wagon for a long time, you partner shouldn't be so mad, you don't appreciate how well I've been doing")
- using your change as a bargaining chip to force your partner to do more to please you, such as, "I quit smoking weed like you wanted me to, so now you should quit hanging around with your sister so much, like I've wanted," or, "Okay, I'll stop yelling and calling you names about how messy the house is, but then you've got to keep it cleaner"
- managing your alcohol or drug problem by *bingeing*, where you don't use for weeks at a time but then you get yourself hammered enough in a weekend to make up for all the time of not partying

Each of these bargains deserves a response. First of all, there is nothing unreasonable about your partner expecting you to completely stop your destructive behavior. In fact, you are the one being unreasonable by suggesting that your partner should be willing to endure any more of it. Does it make sense to say to her (in effect), "Because I treated you so badly in the past, you should accept some mistreatment now, as long as it's less than it used to be"? Or, to put it even more starkly: "You can't complain if I steal a little of your money today, because I used to steal *a lot* of it"? Of course not.

We would, in fact, argue the opposite; we believe that the fact that you have behaved badly in the past gives you even *less* license to do so in the present, because your partner is already emotionally injured by you and you have no right to poke her in the wounded places.

Similarly, your partner doesn't owe you gratitude for treating her the way you should have treated her all along. If you want to congratulate yourself for how much you have changed, or if your friends want to give you a prize, that's great, but don't look for, or demand, credit from the person you have hurt. If someone is holding you on the ground with a foot on your neck—speaking metaphorically—you aren't going to thank them when they step off and let you get up.

Men with histories of irresponsible relationship behavior share this tendency to try to make bargains. The immature guy thinks he should be admired for finally working a steady job. The partier thinks we should be impressed that he finally stopped snorting coke and smoking weed. The abusive man

wants us to shake his hand for not threatening his wife and calling her disgusting names. But good behavior, even if it continues for weeks or months, does not earn a man a gift certificate that he can then redeem for a day of acting like a selfish or scary jerk.

Nor does it earn you the right to control or change something you don't like about her, or to demand that she cater to you more, King of the Castle style. This style of bargaining is called "quid pro quo," which means that you are setting it up so that if your partner wants you to do something for her (such as meet your responsibilities), then she has to do something for you. It's important for you to gain clarity on this point:

**When she insists that you be a good relationship partner, she's not asking you for a *favor*; she's asking for her *due*. You don't get to demand anything back from her in return for you being a decent and responsible human being.**

Untangling this bargain leads us to another critical point to highlight:

**You have to make your changes *unconditionally* or they absolutely will not last. You are changing *because it is the right thing to do*, and therefore it cannot be done with the expectation that she will do anything in return.**

In fact, you may make what feel like big changes to you, and she may still decide to end the relationship. Again, the fact that you are doing better than you used to do does not confer any obligation on her – you should have been behaving right all along.

Bargaining is a warning sign of change that isn't happening. If you stop drinking because you think that will get your partner to go on a diet for you; or you stop calling your partner a slut but expect that in return she'll stop talking to her male friends; or you stop stealing her money but you feel that in return she should "help you out" by giving you money voluntarily, then your thinking isn't changing.

## **Making Meaningful Apologies**

*"Why do I still have to be hearing about this? I already told you I was sorry! What more do you want from me, a pound of flesh??"*

Does the person who makes the above statement sound like he's sorry? Not a bit. In fact, he is communicating the message that, whatever he's saying he apologized about, he actually doesn't at all see what was wrong with what he did. He just used that apology to placate his partner and get her to leave him alone.

Look through the following box:

### **The Characteristics of a Meaningful Apology**

- You sound like you really mean it when you say it.
- You make a serious commitment not to repeat the behavior.
- Even after you apologize, you give your partner the time she needs to explain to you what was wrong with what you did and how your actions affected her.
- You show signs over time of making a serious effort to grasp why your partner didn't like what you did.
- You respect her right to have additional bad feelings about the event that come up later, especially when something triggers the experience for her.
- You respect her right to demand that you *do something* about what you did.

### **The Characteristics of a Useless Apology**

- You insist that your apology should be all your partner need from you .
- You blame her for not feeling finished with the event, insisting that it's her job to put it all behind her.
- You don't back up the apology with much action.
- You keep doing the same things over and over again and then apologizing again.
- You switch into the victim role if your partner remains angry or mistrustful about something you did, and you make it sound like she's being mean or unfair to you about it.
- You act annoyed if she points out that your apology didn't sound heartfelt.
- You make a hurried or unfeeling apology, or you retract it later.

Let's consider an example. Maryellen is having a difficult pregnancy and the doctor tells her that it's essential that she get some exercise. She and her husband, Luke, agree that three days a week he is going to hurry home from work to look after their two children while she goes to the gym. But only the second day into this agreement, Luke gets offered some high-paying overtime and accepts it (without asking Maryellen), so she remains trapped in the house all evening. Maryellen expresses her fury to Luke when he finally gets home, and he ends up apologizing before they go to bed. Two weeks later Maryellen says something to Luke about feeling under stress about their financial situation, and he snarls, "Well, we wouldn't be in this position if you wouldn't have a fit about me getting in some overtime!"

Luke's comment is a *retraction* of his earlier apology (though he may deny that); he's now saying she shouldn't have been upset by what he did. He has just demonstrated, also, that he never did bother to think carefully about her needs and feelings (or the needs of their growing baby), and instead stayed mentally locked onto himself. Luke has switched the issue from being about Maryellen's need to exercise,

and his need to honor his agreements, to being about her “having a fit.” He has revealed that his original apology had nothing behind it.

## **Accepting Her Anger**

A succinct way to summarize Luke’s thinking is: “Maryellen has no right to be angry at me. Her anger is ridiculous. I’m going to put her down about it.” One of the most consistent characteristics of men with unhealthy relationship patterns is that they dismiss and discredit the anger that their actions have caused. This discrediting tendency is sometimes worsened by a man’s negative attitude toward women’s anger in general; he may be contemptuous of women when they are angry, perhaps doing demeaning imitations of them or making them sound irrational and hysterical.

Therefore, one of the central pieces of work you have to do is to learn to respect, reflect upon, and respond appropriately to your partner’s anger, and to women’s anger in general.

### **Exercise 2–3:**

Write your partner a thoughtful, detailed letter of apology about one of the hurts you have done to her that she has complained about the most. Follow the elements above of what makes a meaningful apology, including writing out your commitments regarding what you will do differently in the future. Then, follow through on this commitment in the months and years to come. Give her the letter *if she is interested in having it*. Accept any reactions she has to the letter, including accepting her right not to react at all.

## **What Is a *Real* Man Like?**

Sooner or later, a man who is interested in becoming a responsible, kind, sober partner is going to find himself struggling with insecurities about his manhood. As part of that process, he is going to have to come to terms with the mixed messages he has absorbed about masculinity over the course of his life, beginning when he was very young. We find that men’s unhealthy behavior patterns are highly connected to their gender identity, whether that plays out in obvious ways—as with men who batter their partners because they don’t believe women have any rights—or plays out in much subtler ways, as with the man who won’t stop drinking because he feels that without partying with his buddies he will lose his status as “one of the guys.”

Our society’s messages about manhood include some powerful binds that leave almost every man feeling that he isn’t man enough:

- He is taught that he should be a good provider and a responsible family man BUT he also learns that he should value your male friends more than women and children, and spend his free time with them.
- He knows that he is supposed to be the strongest and the bravest BUT in reality only one man can be the strongest and the bravest, so that leaves all other men not quite up to snuff.
- He hears that he should be able to “handle his liquor” (which means he should be able to drink a lot) BUT he also gets the message that he shouldn’t drink too much and especially that he should avoid the shame of being an alcoholic.
- He learns that he should not open up about his feelings or “show weakness” emotionally BUT his pain sometimes (or frequently) becomes more than he can endure.
- He learns that a man should never back down from a fight BUT he also learns that he’s supposed to keep his family safe, and his aggressive behavior can endanger his whole family.
- He learns that a real man has to have lots of money, power, and women BUT his efforts in that direction are leading him to hypertension, drug or alcohol addiction, illegal behavior (such as drug dealing, embezzlement, or taking bribes), and cheating on his partner.
- He learns that men are intellectually superior to women and shouldn’t take women seriously BUT without accepting substantial leadership and guidance from women—including his partner—he’s never going to turn his life around.

Many positive, constructive messages about what it means to be a man are also part of a male’s socialization, but they get interwoven with pro-violence and antifemale training (see the box below). Your capacity for change will expand greatly if you take on the project of untangling this knot inside of yourself.

### MESSAGES ABOUT MASCULINITY

Healthy	Unhealthy
Men should be courageous. They should fight for what they believe in, and fight to protect those whom they love.	Men should never be afraid. They should never back down from a threat or challenge.
Men should be tough, and be prepared to endure hardship for the good of their loved ones and communities.	Men should be unfeeling and unemotional, and especially should not cry.
Men should be protective of those they love.	Men should view women as weak and incapable of protecting themselves.

Men should be good providers for their families.	Men should have the privileged position, so the best things (best food, best leisure, best “toys”) should be reserved for them.
Men should treat women with respect.	Men should control women, look upon them as lesser, and use them for sex.
Men should be good, loving fathers.	Men should be the disciplinarians and should toughen up their children.
Men should be proud.	Men should ruin their own pride with shameful or dictatorial behavior (e.g. drunkenness, violence toward women and children), undermining their own dignity.
Men should be prepared to make sacrifices so that their families and communities can be well.	Men should be focused on what they can get for themselves.

Looking at the surface, you might think, “What do a man’s internal conflicts about masculinity have to do with smoking weed, or calling names in an argument, or having a mental health problem?” But closer examination inevitably reveals that the contradictions above are playing a role. In order to come through as a loving and responsible partner, it is necessary to work through these societal pressures and build a healthy definition of what it means to be a “real man”.

### **Exercise 2–4:**

Spend some time writing about what you think a “real man” is like, and how such a man should live. Which messages have you been taught about manhood that you believe are good ones to follow? What unhealthy messages have you been taught? Which men in your life should you spend less time with because they promote an unhealthy version of masculinity? What men are better role models for you? What women in your life should you open yourself up to accept more influence from?

Next, look back through the box above. You will find that you were taught each of these beliefs, even though the ones on the right contradict the ones on the left. Consider where each of these messages, both the good ones and the bad ones, came into your life from. Your father or stepfather? Male relatives? Your friends? Your faith community? Television shows? Popular songs? Sayings?

# Developing Skills For Regulating Your Emotional

## States

It's typical for people with mental health difficulties or a history of trauma commonly to have large difficulties with managing the emotional stresses of daily life. Small frustrations or setbacks can feel huge and unbearable. They may cycle, within a period of just a few hours, between elation, depression, rage, withdrawal, and hysterical laughter. If you live in the center of this kind of emotional tempest, you are no doubt exhausting both yourself and your partner. Moreover, in this kind of whirlwind you can't achieve the kind of internal calm necessary to do the hard work involved in transforming behavioral patterns.

Mental health problems also often cause internal splits, so that the different parts of a person are not integrated. The sense of internal division can contribute to erratic behavior, self-hatred, and high anxiety.

Given these challenges, learning better emotional self-regulation is key; it helps you reduce stress and anxiety, clear your head so you make better choices, and form a consistent center to yourself.

You are much more likely to make significant progress in this arena if you seek out high-quality professional help. If possible, find a therapist trained in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, "emotional regulation," or "distress tolerance." If you have no way to pay for this kind of assistance, or it is not available close enough to where you live, work with the book *Don't Let Your Emotions Run Your Life* by Scott Spradlin.

The skills that you need to work on developing include:

- mindfulness (the ability to stay present and aware of what is going on around you even when you are upset)
- ways to calm yourself (for example, to go off alone for a few minutes and settle yourself back down) rather than cranking yourself up more and more when you are upset
- how to better focus on the other person's perspective in an argument (rather than just "freaking out" and trying to rip their perspective to shreds)
- meditation
- body awareness and integration techniques (such as yoga, watching your own breathing, and many others) to help you tune into your physiological processes and reactions
  
- healthy emotional releases, such as deep and prolonged crying

A key point here is that your complaints about your partner can't be excuses for you to fly off the handle. Even at times when you have a justifiable reason to be angry at her or hurt by something she has done, you still must take the proper steps of:

1. bringing yourself back to center emotionally, and then,
2. raising your complaint with your partner in a reasonable way that doesn't involve screaming and doesn't communicate hatred or contempt.

If your partner is willing, establish an agreement with her regarding how you two are going to proceed when you “lose it” emotionally. For example, you might have an agreement that anytime she can see that you are turning disregulated and irrational, you will walk off and be alone for ten minutes, and come back when you have pulled yourself together. (Remember, as we discussed in Chapter 1, that an agreement of this kind should also include an agreement about what you will do if you break the agreement, such as refuse to leave the room when she tells you that you are going off the deep end and need to take a break.)

## Replacing Destructive Attitudes with Positive Ones

Since emotional difficulty does not automatically lead to bad behavior—many people with mental health problems or trauma histories nonetheless treat other people with kindness, avoid abusing substances, and maintain a honest, ethical behavior—it also follows that emotional healing does not lead directly to good behavior. Attitudes play an important role in contributing to men’s problems with alcohol or drugs, immaturity, and mental health problems, and are the outstanding cause in men who are abusiveness.

When your partner puts you under pressure to deal with your issues, you may give in and say, “Okay, I’ll open up more about my emotions and inner struggles.” This is a promising step. However, this step won’t help if you use it as an excuse to focus exclusively on your feelings and avoid looking at, and reforming, your ways of *thinking*. You will need to keep turning your energy toward changing your values and beliefs, including your way of viewing your partner. **Attitudinal change is indispensable; without it, no other improvements will last.**

Refer to the following list to guide you in transforming your internal messages:

“I lose control of myself, I’m helpless.”

NEEDS TO BECOME

“My behavior is a choice that I make.”

“My partner is a bitch.”

NEEDS TO BECOME

“My partner is a human being worthy of respect 24/7.”

“She expects too much from me.”

NEEDS TO BECOME

“I need to meet my responsibilities.”

“I can’t stand this.”

NEEDS TO BECOME

“These are the kinds of challenges everybody has to deal with.”

“Looking after the kids is a burden.”

NEEDS TO BECOME

“I’m so lucky to have this time with our children.”

“Look at all my partner’s faults.”

NEEDS TO BECOME

“I’m going to focus on what I appreciate about her.”

“She owes it to me to have sex with me.”

NEEDS TO BECOME

“Intimacy is never her obligation” and “My history of behavior hasn’t exactly been a turn-on for her.”

“She shouldn’t be so upset with me.”

NEEDS TO BECOME

“I’m lucky she’s still willing to give this relationship a chance, given how I’ve been.”

If your partner feels motivated to write a list for you of what she feels your most chronically unhealthy attitudes have been, accept it, and consider it a gift she's giving you toward turning your life around. If she's willing to provide you with such a list, you should work with it by looking at each attitude she wrote for you, and then write down next to it what the corresponding proper outlook would be for each of the items your partner gave you (drawing some ideas from the "Needs to Become" list above).

Then go on to the exercise below.

## **Exercise 2–5:**

First, make a list of the destructive attitudes you have had in the following categories:

1. Reasons you tell yourself why you are helpless about your own behavior
2. Reasons why you have to drink or drug, or why no one should ask you not to
3. Negative views of your partner, including unfair demands and expectations you have had about her
4. Reasons why the world is responsible for your difficulties

Next to each item you write down, put a new, positive attitude to take instead.

Second, monitor your own thinking over the weeks ahead, and when you notice a destructive attitude, write it down, and put the corresponding healthy attitude next to it.

Note well that this exercise will rapidly become counterproductive if you use it as an excuse to catalog your partner's faults, feel sorry for yourself, or be sarcastic. Do this exercise as a sincere effort to look at yourself or don't do it at all.

## **Following Through on Your Plan for Outside Help**

Honoring your promises and commitments is a centerpiece of building the new you. So if you told your partner you were going to take important steps, but now you are coming up with excuses not to go through with them, notice that and get back to work, with no whining allowed. Are you slipping into any of the following indications of backsliding?

- Did you say you were willing to go to therapy, but over time you have started to make more and more excuses for skipping, such as complaining about the money or saying the therapist isn't that good?
- Did you say you would get a sponsor in AA but you haven't, or you did get one but you aren't carrying the ball on speaking regularly with him or her?

- Did you agree initially to sign up for an abuser intervention program, but now you're starting to say that you don't really have time for that, or that you think you can manage your behavior without the program?
- Were you looking into using trauma services, but now you're saying you can heal on your own?

Our message here is simple: you have to follow through on getting proper help for yourself, and without your partner dragging you kicking and screaming each step of the way. If you could grow on your own, you would have done so years ago. Learning how to find and accept appropriate help is part of maturing (and it differs from whining and demanding help from your partner). *No one* changes from chronic unhealthy behaviors, or heals from serious trauma, alone. If you have shame about needing assistance, that is a normal reaction, but you can't let it stop you. Promises that aren't backed up by concrete action go nowhere.

And if it happens that you need to switch therapists, or change sponsors, or make some other adjustment to the plan you made (back in Chapter 1), it is critical to follow these steps:

1. Work out a new plan that your partner is comfortable with, and
2. *Follow your old plan until the new one is in place.* In other words, you can't quit therapy while you find a new therapist, and you can't skip talking to your sponsor while you choose another sponsor.

We have many times watched a man with destructive patterns backs off from his plan for outside help, then start to not keep certain other aspects of his agreements, and then fall back completely into his unhealthy – and often self-destructive – behavior. This is the most slippery of slopes. Any time you catch yourself doing this kind of “I can handle this alone” thinking, recognize that as one of the symptoms of your problem and snap out of it.

## Developing, and Keeping to, a Daily Practice

Because your unhealthy habits have come to feel familiar and natural to you, your change process is akin to turning someone who rarely exercises into a fit competitive athlete; you will have to work at change and growth *every day of the week* or you will not progress. Your recovery program should be in writing and be posted on the wall in a place where you can see it easily, and should specify which actions you will take on which day of the week. Depending on what your patterns have been, the program will include such elements as:

- making the decision each morning that you will not drink that day
- reading a set number of pages from a book you are working through, and writing some thoughts about what you read
- calling your sponsor
- attending a meeting
- giving your partner at least three thoughtful appreciations during the day
- meeting specific household and child-care responsibilities

- thinking each morning about how you will, for that day, replace abusive attitudes you have had toward your partner with respectful ones
- attending an individual or group therapy session
- meditating
- attending your abuser program

There are other daily commitments that your plan might include, based on what your core issues and chronic behaviors have been. Some items might appear on your schedule every day of the week, while others (such as attending therapy or a support group) might be one or more times per week on specified days.

Brett describes his practice in this way: “Every day before I get out of bed I say to myself, ‘I have a personality disorder.’ I’m not putting myself down; I’m just getting it straight. Otherwise, I get back into really distorted thinking. I know it isn’t my fault that I got this way, but it’s my responsibility to keep my head clear and not keep being selfish or mean.”