

V - Love's Hidden Assassin

Question: What's the best way to kill love?

Answer: You strangle it in the dark where no one's looking.

The reasons why some of us lose love are not obvious. Most of us think of concrete or external causes. Our partner became too preoccupied with his or her job. Our partner became a nag and stopped caring. We grew apart in our interests. Love just up and left for some magical reason. We rarely think of love's destruction as seeded within ourselves. In this chapter we will explore an insidious syndrome that covertly strangles affection. Strangulation may seem to be a harsh word but it's very apt for what happens when love dies. To segue into this discussion, you're invited to first participate in a little self-evaluation test that I often give couples. For some, the results may be surprising and illuminating.

The "I Want...Will You" Test

This is a self-administered test where you can evaluate the results yourself. It's a self-observation experience where you notice how you feel when expressing certain words together. The test involves the following steps:

1. Familiarize yourself with the following scales. You're going to be rating your feelings about saying some phrases out loud. As you go through the test, you're going to be figuring out how you feel about the phrases on three scales: Comfortable – Uncomfortable, Negative – Positive, and Unfamiliar – Familiar. You want to come up with a number or score on each of the scales. You can visualize the scales and corresponding scores as follows:

0	1	2	3
Totally Comfortable	Slightly Uncomfortable	Moderately Uncomfortable	Extremely Uncomfortable

-AND-

0	1	2	3
Totally Positive	Slightly Negative	Moderately Negative	Extremely Negative

-AND-

0	1	2	3
Totally Familiar	Slightly Unfamiliar	Moderately Unfamiliar	Extremely Unfamiliar

2. First find a quiet place where you won't be bothered or be self-conscious about saying something out loud to yourself.
3. Close your eyes and say the following two phrases out loud with at least three seconds separating the two. The phrases are: "**I want**"(pause)...."**Will you?**" Just like that. It's important to bring your intonation up at the end of the second phrase because it's both a question and a request. The elevation of intonation at the end of a question is the way that we acknowledge uncertainty. The uncertainty of the request is an important element in this exercise. It's as if you're expressing the core syntax from the two sentences "I want (something)...Will you (give it to me)?" You're leaving out the content and less important parts of the request.
4. Let the sense of silliness pass through you from doing this unusual task. Your first reaction will probably be one of feeling slightly ridiculous. Don't worry. That's a common reaction because you're breaking out of your usual role structure. It may take a minute, but let the silliness do its thing until it processes through and out.
5. Once again repeat the two phrases out loud while still keeping your eyes closed. This time, focus inward to notice your emotional reaction. Pay attention to your body. If your emotional reaction could talk, what would it say? Does the syntax feel comfortable or uncomfortable, positive or negative, familiar or alien? Let yourself go with the feel of the words instead of being logical. Once you've noticed your emotional reaction, then ask yourself whether or not this kind of expression would normally show up in your usual syntax. Make sure you come up with a number for each of the three scales we listed in step 1.
6. Don't stop yet. Repeat the previous step another five times, each time allowing yourself to "taste" the lingering connotation of the syntax. Each time you repeat the phrases out loud, notice if it feels comfortable or uncomfortable, positive or negative, familiar or unfamiliar. Work out a final number for each of the three scales listed in step #1.

When finished with the exercise, you should wind up with three final numbers corresponding to the three rating scales. Strive to be completely honest about what you've observed. You may be a little bit challenged to be completely honest with yourself. This little test may take some people where their minds don't want them to go.

Now, go ahead and do the exercise before you read any more. If you read the next part of the discussion before doing the test, it could interfere with your observations during the exercise.

- Stop here and perform the exercise before reading further. -

Roger was a middle-aged stock broker and one of the earliest clients to take the "I Want...Will You" test. He had come from a dysfunctional family with an uninvolved father and a critical, sarcastic mother. He had suffered a lot of humiliation under their care. He and his wife had initially come to me for marriage counseling. He had been extremely avoidant of any closeness in his marriage. I had both he and his wife do the "I Want - Will You" test, one after the other. While doing the test, his discomfort was made obvious by the grimace on his face. "I have pain right in the middle of my chest! It hurts right here," he said, pointing to his heart region. It was the strongest negative reaction I'd seen up to then.

After reviewing social histories and plotting an intervention strategy, I decided to treat Roger separately because of apparent attachment traumas.

Two months after I gave Roger the first test, I decided to try giving him another variation of the same genre. This time, I asked Roger to state the words, “I want fun and pleasure!” With his eyes closed, Roger attempted it for the first time.

“I ...I ...I want....” His breathing became heavier, his face more strained.

“I want....” His breathing became more rapid and his voice became louder.

Roger finally pushed himself through the obvious resistance to complete the full statement.

“I want...fun and pleasure!” He finally blurted the last words with bulging eyes and a look of panic in his face. His body started trembling and his right arm cinched up close to his chest in a crooked position. Roger stared down at his arm, now in spasm.

“Look at me! I’m starting to spasm!” he yelled. Roger was experiencing an abreaction, a psychological phenomenon in which a patient emotionally reacts and relives a prior trauma as if it were once again occurring.



Look at me! I’m starting to spasm!

Roger and I had a lot of hard therapeutic work ahead of us. From that day forward, we worked in a kind of therapy I call “hedonic disinhibition.” The therapy focused on freeing his pleasure circuits from the shame and inhibition his early traumas had generated.

Since I started giving the “I Want...Will You” test, I’ve observed the reactions of several hundred clients. Roger’s reaction was by far the most extreme. About four out of five people claimed relative comfort during the test. If you are one of the ones who felt comfortable during the test, consider yourself to be lucky. You just dodged a big one. Your summed score on the test is a good indicator of how much hedonic inhibition is working against you. You ideally have a summed score of zero and you’re totally comfortable and familiar with expressing “I Want...Will you...” Approximately one quarter of the people coming to see me have not felt comfortable during the test. Many people reported feeling “uncomfortable” while others reported stronger reactions such as anxiety, nausea, or even chest pains.

Over the years I have also found differences in how people reacted to each phrase in the test. For some, “I want” was what felt uncomfortable because it felt too “pushy” or “selfish.” For others, it was the phrase “will you” that generated the anxiety. The single thing that all these people had in common was that they were all having difficulty maintaining closeness with their partner. What’s also interesting is that certain themes of family background were likely to be associated with discomfort on the test. These backgrounds usually involved how parents interacted with the clients when they were small children. The different themes were as follows:

- Both parents didn’t play with the client, didn’t ask them about their day, and didn’t seek time with them one-on-one.
- The client was one of six or more siblings where parents struggled to maintain the family.
- The client was given a lot of parent-like responsibilities for younger siblings.
- The client took on the responsibility for protecting one parent against the other. This usually occurred when one parent raged and was verbally abusive against the other. Alcoholism was frequently, but not always involved.
- The family of origin had a culture of self-sacrifice. Parents can model missionary like selflessness in a way that’s absorbed by their children through a process called introjection.

A frequent commonality through all of the above themes was that the client usually claimed that they had held back from expressing their wants and desires to both parents. The patterning in their current marriage was less obvious. For some, they were the pushy, dominant partner. Others were avoidant and withdrawn. In fact, the distribution was fairly bimodal. The partners who were comfortable with “I want,” but not with “Will you” tended to be dominant in the relationship. They could tell their partners what they wanted just fine. “I want you to do this! I want you to do that!” You get the drift. I refer to these partners as being “dominant intruders.” In contrast, the clients who were uncomfortable with both phrases tended to be avoidant. They didn’t speak up much and often sought refuge in work, child care, or some other covering responsibility. I refer to these partners as “submissive avoiders.” It seems as though emotional deprivation in childhood can be associated with either of these two styles.

One more interesting observation about the “I Want...Will You” test has recently emerged. I’ve had several couples come back to me and report a common phenomenon. The first time it happened, the conversation went something like this:

One partner reported, “We’ve been practicing your exercise and we’ve been doing a lot better.”

“Which exercise?” I asked, quite puzzled and suspecting my own fairly incompetent memory.
“Did I give you one?”

“You know... the ‘I Want...Will You’ thing.”

I was still puzzled and a bit slow on the uptake. “But that wasn’t an exercise and I didn’t tell you to do anything with it.”

“Well anyway, we’ve been practicing it when we talk to each other....and we’re getting along a lot better!”

Since that couple’s report, I’ve had several more couples tell me the same thing. So, not to be totally dense, I now relay to new couples what some of the earlier couples have told me. Weaving “I want...will you” into their speech seems to go along with better relations.

So what’s going on? What does it all mean? And how do all these observations relate to love being strangled in the dark? One interpretation is that “dominant intruders” and “submissive avoiders” are **both** avoiding the anxiety of closeness and intimacy by adopting different strategies. It may be that they want closeness, but there’s something that gets in the way that’s subtly frightening. Most of the time, this fear isn’t conscious. The mind is so efficient that it automatically routes the person away from risk without the person even knowing it. For the “submissive avoider,” it’s less frightening to be under-expressive and to hide in responsibilities. For the “dominant intruder,” it’s less frightening to be commanding and treat the person as an object instead of facing the uncertainty of their having a choice. For these people, the use of “will you” implies uncertainty and the possibility of disappointment. According to my interpretation, **both** styles involve a subtle unconscious fear. And it’s also my premise that this fear can strangle affection from below where most people don’t want to look. Of course, we’ve come full circle back to “The Great No-No” of shame and inhibition. But to see how these dynamics work below the surface, we’re going to take an unusual detour in this next part of our discussion.

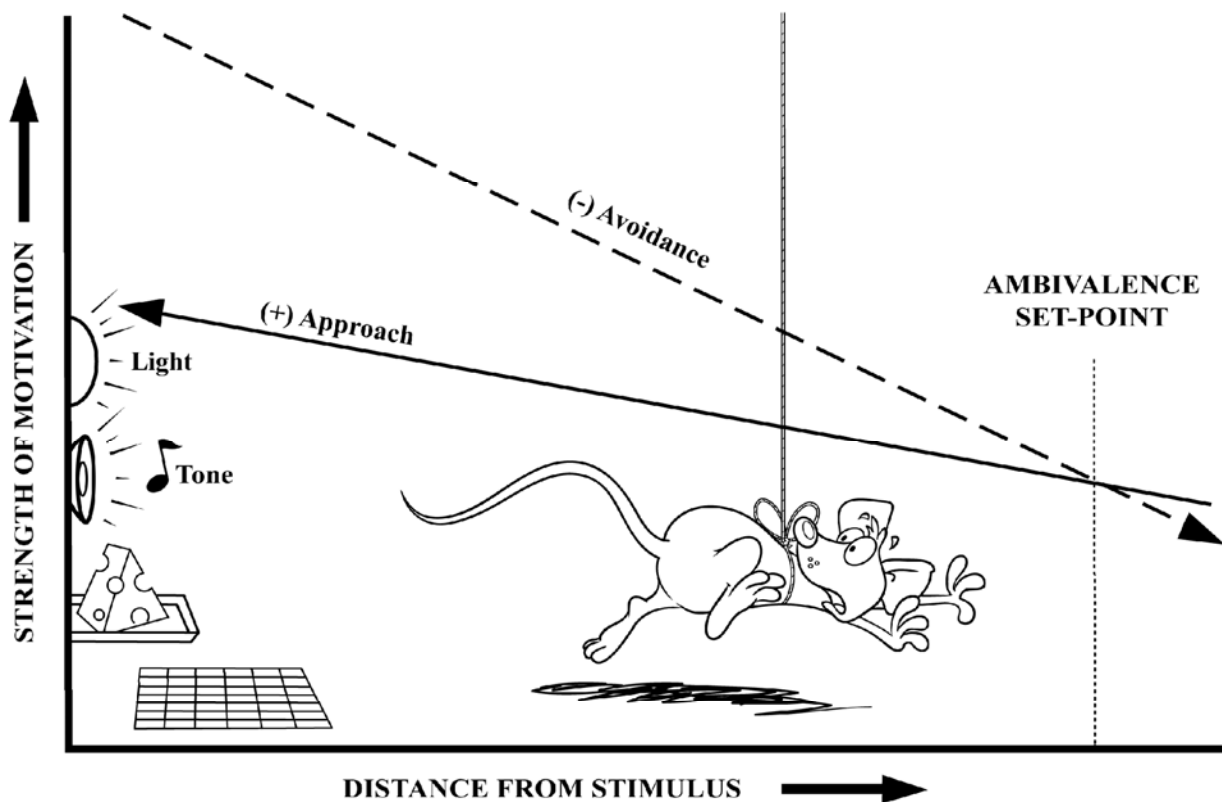
The Heart is a Rat

In college, Psych 101 was the first course I had to take to be a psychology major. Later, in graduate school, I had to teach the course. I remember one particular experiment that I found fascinating. It was a rat study that demonstrated the dynamics of motivational ambivalence.

You take a rat and tether him to a device that measures how hard he pulls. Then you put him in an alley way that leads straight to a wall that has a light and a small speaker mounted. Below the light and a speaker is a food tray and on the floor is an electrical grid. In the first part of the experiment, you train the rat to associate food with a tone emitted by the speaker. When the tone comes on, a tasty piece of food drops into the tray a second later. Eventually, the rat learns to pull towards the food tray when he hears the tone. How hard he pulls is a good indicator of his motivation to approach at any given distance that he’s away from the tray. What’s interesting is that his pull isn’t constant. He’ll usually pull harder as he gets closer to the food. The grams of pulling force can be plotted as a function of distance as shown in this section’s first illustration.

The next phase of the experiment involves training the rat to fear the light. With the tone kept off, the light is turned on to signal that a shock is coming through the grid. It doesn't take long before the rat learns to fear the light and runs away when it's turned on. You can plot his avoidance motivation by how hard he pulls to get away when the light turns on. He will pull very hard when close to the light, as shown in the illustration. As he gets further away from the light, his motivation quickly falls off. What's especially important is that the slope of his avoidance motivation is much steeper than his motivation to approach. We'll soon see why this is important.

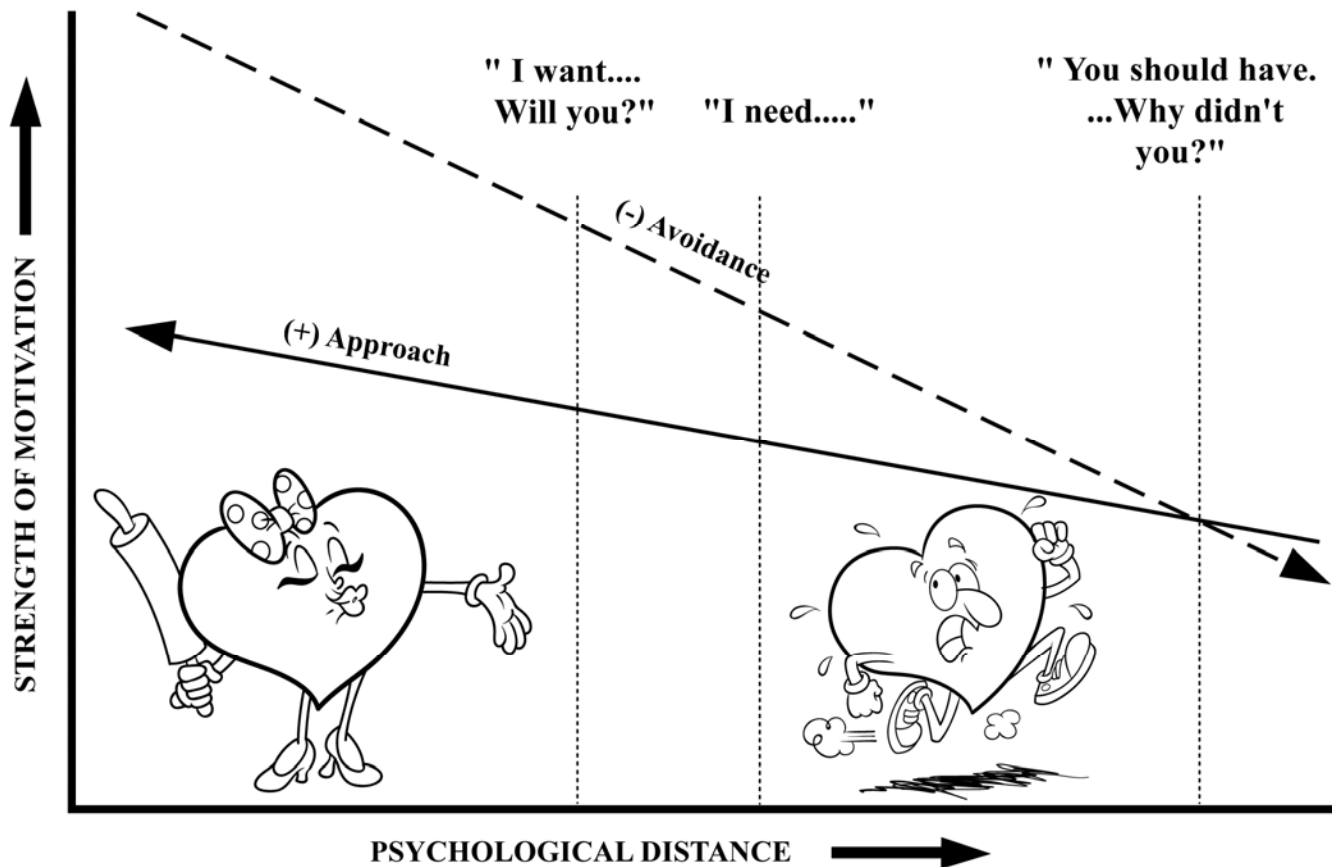
Now we get mean. We turn on both the light and the tone at the same time. I can imagine some of you thinking "poor thing!" Many of us can empathize from our life's conflicts and tough choices. But the relevant question is: Where's the rat going to be? The answer to this question is predicted from our previous measurements. The rat will spend most of his time where his motivation to avoid equals his motivation to approach. Where the two gradients cross will be where he spends most of his time. He may not be frozen but may vacillate back and forth around that set point. I can't help but think of many relationships where the couple vacillates back and forth between breaking up and getting back together.



Experimentally induced approach - avoidance conflict

So how's all of this relevant to love? It's relevant when you realize that we humans have similar approach avoidance conflicts but on a different scale. Instead of physical distance as in the rat experiment, we humans react to psychological proximity. This proximity involves either temporal

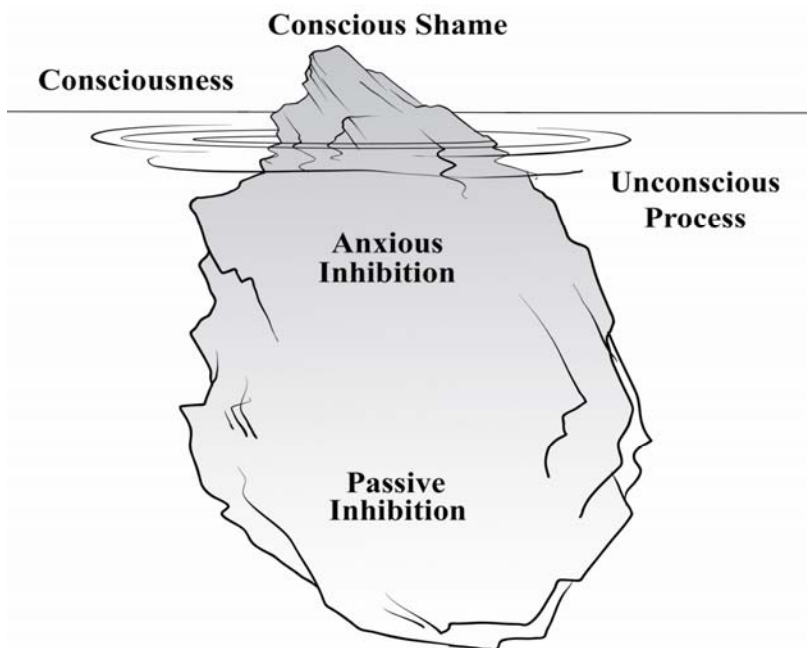
distance or degree of similarity. If a situation is in some way similar to a previous painful situation, our anxiety can kick up without our knowing why. And here's a really important point. The origin of our emotional reaction doesn't have to be consciously remembered. Ambivalence can be triggered in what is called implicit memory. Think of conscious memory as the tip of an iceberg. In contrast, implicit memory extends far below the surface of consciousness. Some of our most powerful emotions can be triggered by this unconscious memory, just as if we're a dumb rat. And one of these emotions is our fear of shame. It's the anxiety we can feel when we're vulnerable. Our brains fear the shock of shame just like the rat fears the electric shock. For many of us, getting very intimate or exposed is like the red light coming on.



Shame is really the conscious tip of a much larger inhibitory system, most of which operates unconsciously. This inhibitory system acts like a braking system in our personalities much like how a regulator inhibits the speed of a car. Now I'm going to impart some neurological details for the more technophile geeks like myself. I promise it will be brief. The inhibitory system reacts to shaming, traumatizing, or repetitively frustrating experiences. It involves activation of the monoaminergic serotonin tract that originates in the raphe nuclei of the brain stem and courses throughout the cortex. When this serotonin circuit fires, it's associated with other reactions that eventually bring about the suppression of the main ventral tegmental dopamine circuits. These latter dopamine circuits control both the approach system and attachment as its subset. The result is a parasympathetic shut-down experience that is quite painful. When fully activated, this parasympathetic shut-down is the experience of acute shame. People associate curling of their body away from their usually straight posture. They may have a sense of shrinking or a sense of wanting to hide. Others associate a feeling of starting to vanish. These are all conscious reactions to the inhibitory system being in full shut-down mode. However, the mind is also capable of anticipating experiences that **MIGHT** even lead to the shutdown. The mind inhibits

associations even before troublesome behavior occurs or is even consciously contemplated. This is how words and phrases such as “I want...Will you” can be conditioned to provoke anxiety. The inhibitory system is at work in the unconscious, generating anxiety to ward the person away from situations that are unconsciously associated with potential shame.

The following figure is a good way to conceptualize our inhibitory system. Think of it like an iceberg with only the tip showing. What shows above the surface of consciousness is what we experience as shame. It's extremely painful. When inhibited circuits are kept totally inactive, we're relatively comfortable. When something starts to trigger activation of those inhibited circuits, our unconscious begins to fear the possible onset of acute shame. That's when we experience anxiety. When the inhibited circuits activate further and break the surface of consciousness, we painfully experience conscious shame.



Iceberg Metaphor of the Inhibitory System

Our inhibition in a relationship can come from two sources. First, it can come from early shaming experiences with caregivers. I call this core shame. There's extensive research on how different attachment styles are instilled into children. Some children demonstrate anxious or avoidant attachment styles very early in life. They tend to perpetuate these styles later in adult life, quite consistently with our description of core shame. There's also research demonstrating how marital satisfaction is usually most positive for couples who both have secure attachment styles. This same research also shows how marital dissatisfaction is strongest for partners who both have insecure avoidant styles. With all this available research, it would seem reasonable to base all of our discussions on attachment theory. However, one reason why we're using the concept of core shame instead is that it's more useful for discussing how relationship dynamics can change over time. When a person carries core shame, there's a lot more that can be affected than mere attachment to people. A person with strong core shame might also experience generalized inhibition from attaching to enjoyment, meaning, and possibly even hope. Some of our most important attachments involve more than people.

Core shame turbo-charges the conditioning of relationship shame.

The other reason why we're using the core shame concept is that it's useful for describing how shame and inhibition can evolve during a relationship. Inhibition can accumulate from adult events that condition shame into the relationship, not just from childhood. For want of a better term I call this relationship shame. Core shame and relationship shame are not merely additive. Core shame can actually potentiate more rapid conditioning of relationship shame as a person experiences the inevitable friction inherent in an adult relationship. One could say that core shame turbo-charges the conditioning of relationship shame. Here are just a few examples to illustrate how each type of shame can be generated.

Core Shame:

Child

Mommy, **will you** play with me?

Daddy, can we go to the fair?

Can I go play at Jennie's house?

Mommy, do we have to pay taxes? Jenny says her dad is mad about having to pay taxes.

It's unfair! You let Bobby go ice skating.

(Crying in response to some previous harsh words from the parent)

(Playing with toy car in the corner of the room)
Brrrrrrrr!

(Crying in response to both parents fighting)

Parental Response

(no response)

(exasperated breath) We've got way too much on our plate right now. Maybe next year.

You have to do your share and watch your brother. You can't just always think of yourself.

(Mother doesn't respond but turns and discusses an unrelated topic with the father.)

(Furious expression on face) One more word out of you and I'll smack your face! I won't tolerate your disrespect!

If you don't stop crying, I'll give you something to cry about!

(Father swears under his breath) Damn kids!

(Parents ignore and keep increasing their volume.)

Relationship Shame:

Partner A

We haven't done anything fun lately. Do you want to go down to the flea market with me tomorrow morning?

I don't think it's fair to me that you expect us to visit your parents three times in....

Can I tell you how I really feel about this?

(Partner A is busy doing something.)

I see it differently than you. I don't agree.

I really regret what I did. I think it was wrong and I'll do it differently next time.

Can we put new carpeting downstairs? We could get the money by holding off on the 401-K.

I don't want to talk about it right now. I'm too upset. I just need to be left alone.

Partner B

(eye roll) Don't you see how much pressure I've been under! Somebody's got to earn the money around here.

(interrupting the husband's speech) But it is fair and we've been over it time and time again, etc.

I already know how you feel! I don't believe you when you say you don't feel what I already know you feel.

I **need** you to do this. (Implied command to subjugate)

But that's the **right** way you **should** do it. The other way is stupid! (Parent to child communication implying defectiveness for non-compliance)

Then say you're sorry! You should apologize and make it up to me. (Demand for subjugation instead of accepting that their partner is already taking responsibility)

Don't tell me what to do with my paycheck. You don't make the money around here. I do. (Implied inferior status of the homemaker)

(Ignoring the refusal and request for privacy) You're not going to put me off! We're going to talk about it right now!

In the preceding examples of shaming experiences, the dynamics are sometimes subtle. Even so, the painful shock of shame is generated when a need is in the process of being expressed but then gets unexpectedly disrupted. Once a bit of shame is layered into memory, it's like a splinter that the brain unconsciously tries to protect from being irritated. Any behavior that threatens to irritate that splinter becomes like the red light in our rat experiment.

Several days before writing this section, I was sitting with a client in my office. She and her husband had both come from tumultuous family backgrounds. She reported an interesting observation:

“When Rick and I go out for dinner, I notice that we're both really anxious until the food arrives. Then, when the food arrives, we're OK. If we're eating dinner, we relax and then we're OK. It's like it's too intense until the food arrives.”

I suggested that perhaps she and her husband were uncomfortable with receiving full attention from each other. Once their food arrived, their eyes were probably focusing more on the food instead of each other. With only partial attention from each other, each could be more comfortable; like the rat that is more comfortable at its distant set-point in the alley-way. They want closeness and attachment with each other. However, their core shame creates too much anxiety when they're close. Their set-point is when they're distantly affiliating while they're partially preoccupied with doing something else. Full attention would generate too much anxiety by bringing them too close to the unconscious splinters of their core shame.

This type of dynamic is played out in many relationships. It's subtle enough to even influence the language that people use. When attachment anxiety is low, a person will have little ambivalence about openly communicating their needs. They can use respectful requests like "I want....Will you?" When attachment anxiety is moderate, they'll be more ambivalent about exposure. They may tell their partner that they "need" something but never actually ask for it. Asking would imply uncertainty about getting what they want. It would imply their dependence on their partner's choice. That would evoke too much anxiety. So, the unconscious works out the solution of implying a command: "I need...."

When attachment anxiety is high, the unconscious is likely to work out an even more defended position. Instead of "I want...Will you?" or "I need..." the unconscious solution may be critical: "You should have....Why didn't you?" With this posture, exposure of need can be completely avoided. If one can bully his or her partner into a rigid role of responsibility, then any hint of dependence can be avoided. The second illustration in this section represents how each of these solutions represents a different position in the psychological proximity to attachment.

Where we are with our attachment ambivalence will partially determine how out of balance our relationship will get. It's hard to maintain an integrity-based relationship if we're reacting to our own fear of shame. For example, if we're using the "I need..." or "You should have...Why didn't you?" solutions, we're likely to be injecting little splinters of shame into our partner. There's a risk that they'll depersonalize and withdraw. If we're so filled with our own core shame that we can't ask for what we want, we may allow our partner to structure the common agenda. If we let this happen, then we'll be the ones who will depersonalize and withdraw. Either way, the crucial balance is lost.

Assassin #1: Hedonic Inhibition

"Hedonic inhibition" is an uncommon expression. It's related to the word "hedonism" which commonly carries a negative connotation. Think of hedonism and you associate gluttony, orgies, sleazy sexual indulgences, etc. But healthy hedonic enjoyment includes feeling wonder, play, joy, and even love. The inability to feel pleasure, referred to as anhedonia, is a primary marker of clinical depression. Having the ability to feel pleasure is an important part of being human and being able to connect with others. However, when a person's inhibitory system forbids certain types of pleasure, hedonic inhibition is taking place. This usually occurs quite unconsciously as with a workaholic who never seems to have free time to share with his family. The person doesn't notice himself or herself being inhibited. It's just that fun or pleasurable activities seem unimportant or even silly.

Hedonic inhibition is a "sleeper" assassin. It usually doesn't show up when a person is in love. This is because inhibitions are suppressed by disinhibiting neurohormones in the brain when a person falls in love. Nature has its way of making sure that we get together and make our contributions to the gene pool. However, the disinhibiting neurohormones typically decline after the in-love stage has completed its run. If partners are living together, tripping over each other and bumping up against each other when

making their daily decisions, then the in-love stage will usually last at most two to three years. After that, the bruising effects of life together can trigger old shame and/or build up new inhibition. It's the challenge of sentimental loving for partners to either prevent or reverse this trend.

In the previous section, we discussed how core shame results from emotional bruising during childhood and relationship shame is generated later in the person's adult relationships. Both of these classes of shame are derived from relationships, but at different times in a person's life. It's useful to distinguish core shame from relationship shame because the effects of core shame are so profound. As implied by the term "core," core shame becomes embedded deep in the core of a person's psyche. It's extremely difficult to overcome. When a person has a lot of core shame then relationship shame will develop more quickly and result in stronger inhibition. The reason is that every time the person experiences disapproval from their partner then the core shame from childhood also rings on the line. This reactivation of old shame makes any disapproval from their partner much more toxic. If a person has very little core shame then disapproval may seem like only a mild 12-volt shock. If a person carries a lot of core shame then it may feel more like 220-volt main current. We all vary in our vulnerability to disapproval and criticism, but people with a lot of core shame have it the worst.

Samantha and Nate wanted counseling to revive Samantha's dormant interest in sex. Both had been very sexual during the early years of their relationship. However, the last two years had seen a gradual decline in sexual relations as Samantha had become more and more disinterested. Nate was a successful executive coach whose presentation was both assertive and dominant. Despite his assertiveness, he listened carefully and showed genuine concern for Samantha's feelings. He genuinely wanted her emotional involvement and not just sexual gratification with her body. Samantha was quite affable with a definite feminine softness to her demeanor. She seemed to compliment Nate's character by having no hard assertive edges to her own.

As sessions progressed, several important facts emerged. First, Samantha disclosed how she would frequently dissociate to the corner of the room while having sex. She would often imagine seeing herself having sex instead of allowing herself to directly experience the sensations. Second, she revealed how she had been sexually molested by her father during early childhood. She was working on that early traumatic memory with another therapist in private sessions. Third, she complained that Nate treated her as if she were the less important partner. When I asked Samantha for some examples of this latter kind of disrespect, she could only reference somewhat ambiguous examples of Nate behaving insensitively. In other words, there was no overt domination or abuse.

As a matter of course, I usually ask couples about how they derive plans for having fun and recreation. Here, Samantha provided an important clue. She reported that since it wasn't easy for her to know what she wants, she usually let Nate schedule their common agenda. I found this very significant. It was as if one side of her mind complained that she was a footnote in Nate's world, while the other side of her mind wanted Nate to organize all of her enjoyment. It seemed that the two parts of her mind couldn't make the connection. By now, I strongly suspected severe hedonic inhibition so I decided to assign her an exploratory exercise. She enthusiastically agreed to meditate several times each day, each time fantasizing about what might be some fun activities she could conceivably explore. She didn't have to actually explore anything. All she had to do was fantasize possibilities. She agreed to write down her most attractive fantasized possibilities. I wanted to reduce her performance anxiety by lowering her expectations. Therefore, I gave her some simple examples of what I might fantasize as fun if I were to perform the exercise.

Samantha telephoned me halfway through the week. She wanted help. She wondered that perhaps she wasn't doing the exercise correctly because she couldn't come up with anything. Each time

she meditated to fantasize, no ideas would come. I told her to stop the assignment until we could revise it at our next session. When we next met, I recommended that she change the exercise to include a priming technique. I told her to start each meditative session by first revisiting five of her most “fun” past experiences. I figured that this might encourage her to more freely fantasize. Unfortunately, it didn’t work. Samantha returned the following week with no reported ideas. It was by now apparent that Samantha’s ability to express her needs was caught in the grip of a very powerful inhibition. She would require a lot of integrative therapy to recover from the core shame of her early sexual trauma. She would also need additional work to become comfortable with the pursuit of healthy pleasure.

While Samantha’s case was extreme, it illustrates how generalized hedonic inhibition can become. It isn’t just about sex. Samantha’s inability to fantasize pleasure meant that she couldn’t negotiate any agenda for enjoyment as an equal. She couldn’t fantasize about pleasure so, of course, she couldn’t propose her own ideas for fun. Samantha was projecting blame onto Nate for her own incapacity. She didn’t see that she had already lost so much of her separate self that she naturally didn’t want to sexually merge and lose more separateness. And that’s how it works. Hedonic inhibition robs people of their sense of identity. If you don’t express what you want and defend your separateness, you will lose attraction for your partner.

The inherent bruising that takes place when partners live together will naturally promote hedonic inhibition as a companion to relationship shame. However, when core shame pre-exists the relationship, the compounding of shame and inhibition can be much more severe. Even so, the deterioration of a relationship isn’t inevitable. There are ways that a person can service their autonomy and roll back hedonic inhibition. We’ll be discussing these strategies later in much detail. For now, it’s important to realize that hedonic inhibition is like a slowly accumulating odorless and colorless gas. It’s not obvious but it’s highly lethal. I’m reminded of a popular parable. If we put a frog in a pot of hot water, he’ll immediately jump out. If we put a frog in a pot of cold water and raise the temperature one degree every minute, he’ll stay there until he boils. If you unknowingly habituate to your accumulating inhibition then your relationship will eventually become parboiled. You can do this just by making sure you always play it safe. Never ask for anything that’s fun. Never do anything that’s unnecessary. Never disagree with your partner. Never express anger. Never do anything of which your partner might disapprove. Always make other people’s needs more important than your own. Play it safe. That’s what hedonic inhibition is all about. If we don’t expose what we really want by asking or hoping for it, then we won’t get as badly smacked by shame when we’re met with disapproval or disappointment. Of course we’ll also lose the sense of our separate identity and we’ll lose attraction for our partner in the process.

A Self-Exam for Hedonic Inhibition

By now you're aware of how subtle hedonic inhibition can be. Our minds are fully capable of dissociating shame and resulting inhibition from our awareness. Any self-exam must take this subtlety into account. We must detect it by its footprint and its shadow, not by our conscious recognition. First, ask yourself how you did on the "I Want – Will You" test. Did the "I want" part feel too selfish or pushy? Did the uncertainty implied with "Will you" stir up any discomfort? Do you avoid these words? Your answers to these questions start off the first part of this self-exam. Additional items will help you to locate some tell-tale signs that hedonic inhibition may already be at work.

Answer True or False to each of the following. It's best if you give your initial quick response. You might want to ask your partner to also take this exam so that you can both discuss your results.

1. _____ I felt some discomfort while performing the "I Want – Will You" test.
2. _____ I rarely suggest new ideas to my partner for how we might have fun together.
3. _____ I rarely negotiate for my own enjoyment if I think it might conflict with my partner's desires.
4. _____ I almost always feel as if I'm wasting time if I take some time for myself to relax.
5. _____ I feel that my needs are not as important as my partner's needs even though I know they really are.
6. _____ I feel uncomfortable with free time when I'm not working or doing chores. It's as if I don't know what to do with myself.
7. _____ I almost always think of what I should be doing, not what I want to be doing.
8. _____ It's much easier for me to know what I don't want than to know what I do want.
9. _____ I feel guilty or anxious if I start enjoying myself too much.
10. _____ I usually feel that other people's needs are more important than mine.

If you answered true to any of the above items, you would do well to contemplate why. If you answered "True" to several items, then your hedonic inhibition is probably fairly strong. Now we'll go to the other end of the scale. The following questions will help you determine how free you are from hedonic inhibition. Again, answer True or False.

1. _____ I felt totally comfortable with the "I Want – Will You" test.
2. _____ I'm proud that I have a sensual and fun-loving side to my personality.
3. _____ I'm almost always looking forward to some fun and enjoyment that I've helped plan out.
4. _____ I'll usually negotiate for my fare share in the relationship.
5. _____ I love to relax and have a good time without having to attend to responsibilities.
6. _____ I feel comfortable when someone gives me a present.
7. _____ I enjoy sex for the fun of it. I even look forward to it.
8. _____ I enjoy exploring new places and activities, even if just by myself.
9. _____ I'm comfortable asking my partner to share intimate time with me.
10. _____ I enjoy talking about what I want and what I love.

By now you should have some idea of how much you may be limited by hedonic inhibition. In later chapters we'll be discussing what you can do to free yourself if you think it's a significant problem in your relationship.