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Freeing Your Hedonic Self

In Chapter 2, we discussed how a vital relationship is based on each partner's integrity. A fundamental part of this integrity is that each partner feels his/her own autonomy. You need to feel a sense of having your own separate self. If you want to accomplish this for yourself, it's not enough to merely oppose your partner. Saying "no" isn't the best way to strengthen your autonomy. If you don't have a good sense of your self in the first place, being oppositional won't help you. Knowing and expressing what you value are the best ways to generate a sense of self. That's the simple and profound truth. But how you strengthen your valuing process is far from simple.

**Knowing and expressing what you value are
the best ways to generate a strong sense of self**

In order to value something, you have to activate a reflex system that some neuroscientists call your "approach system." I call it the hedonic system because it's associated with pleasure and positive feelings. As pointed out earlier, most people associate a very negative connotation to the word "hedonism." This is because the word is most commonly associated with gluttony, debauchery and other low consciousness indulgences. However, at higher levels of consciousness, hedonic experience brings true happiness. It includes the ability to enjoy intimate love, the ability to enjoy wonder and learning, and

the ability to enjoy aesthetics and beauty. Hedonic enjoyment is necessary to appreciate what is most meaningful in life.

On a neurological level, the hedonic system involves the firing of specific dopamine circuits in the brain whenever you're in pursuit of what you want. If these circuits are free to fire often, it's my premise that you will build a strong sense of self. The problem is that when you're in a relationship, there are other inhibitory serotonin based circuits that can shut down your hedonic system. Inside your brain you also carry a mirror neuron system that makes a model of your partner's mind. Neuroscientists now consider this mirror neuron system to be central to the experience of empathy. It helps you to feel loved. The model of your partner's mind in your mirror neuron system generates the positive sense of being valued by another. But what happens if your model of your partner's mind generates disapproval or contempt? The result is that your inhibitory system shuts down your hedonic system and shame takes hold. And when you anticipate every little thing that might result in your partner's disapproval, you can chronically shut down your hedonic system without realizing it. It can become a habitual part of your marital role. When this happens, you lose your sense of self and you're on your way to "not knowing who you are anymore." I call this relationship depersonalization. You lose your sense of being your own person.

To strengthen your sense of self, you need to prevent the shut-down of your hedonic system. You need to exercise it instead.

To strengthen your sense of self, you need to prevent the shut-down of your hedonic system. You need to exercise it instead. This involves learning several skills. First you need to know how to partially deactivate the model of your partner's mind in your mirror neurons so your hedonic system can operate freely with less interference. You also need to know how to explore potential desires and then decide what you want. Finally, you need to express your desires and protect yourself from any negative reactions from others. Openly expressing your desires is critical to maintaining your sense of self. You won't feel strong if you always hide. You won't feel autonomous.

In subsequent chapters we'll discuss how to strengthen and defend your hedonic system against shame imbuing shut-downs. In the current chapter, we're going to focus on how you can locate and free

up your core hedonic self. It may already be buried under a ton of inhibition. A good way to see if this has happened is to try some hedonic brainstorming.

I'm going to ask for you to do something so that you can get the maximum benefit from this book. Please resist the temptation to skip over this next simple exercise that I'm going to ask you to perform. If you read ahead, it might ruin your chances for some beneficial self-discovery. The exercise is this:

For the next 3 minutes think about what new experiences you would like to try that might be fun. See how many ideas you can collect.

That's it! Sounds simple doesn't it? Maybe so but it's also profound. Humor me and do the exercise. We'll discuss your results in a bit. Are you ready? Go ahead and give it a try.

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

OK. How did it go? Did you come up with five ideas? Ten? Twenty? Did you get any? For too many people the answer will be close to zero. That's why the current chapter is necessary. If you came up with at least six or seven ideas, then your hedonic system is probably free of strong inhibition. That's great news! You won't have to read the rest of this chapter because it's a procedural outline for an exercise you won't need. If your hedonic system is this free, please skip forward to Chapter 8. But if you struggled to get even a few ideas about what might be fun, then you badly need to learn the exercise in the current chapter. I would recommend that you practice it during a daily meditation period for many months and perhaps even longer. It will help you where you most need to grow.

Steps to Freedom

The following steps describe a way to strengthen your autonomous self in a relationship. Many people intuitively perform these steps without much conscious deliberation. You may not be as lucky, especially if you carry hedonic inhibition from a frustrating childhood. You may need to arduously train before you can perform these steps competently. It's much like learning a dance. First you focus on getting each step right. Then you practice, practice, and practice some more. It's only after a lot of practice that the overall process becomes intuitive, fluid and natural.

Here are the steps all together so you can see the whole process at once. Then we'll discuss each step separately.

- 1. Be aware when you're depending on some one else's mind instead of your own.**
- 2. Imagine distancing or separating the other person from you.**
- 3. Begin to fantasize about what might be enjoyable.**
- 4. "Taste" the emotional experience of the fantasized activity.**
- 5. Make a decision about whether you would want the experience if it were really possible.**
- 6. Decide whether or not to disclose your desire to your partner.**

Now we'll discuss each step separately. When we're through, we'll package the process into an exercise you can practice.

Step 1 - Be aware of when you're depending on some one else's mind instead of your own.

This initial step involves becoming more aware of what you're thinking and feeling. It's the experience of observing yourself. Neuroscientists call it "metacognition," and it involves activating certain regions of the brain that allow flexible and creative thinking. If you don't take this step, then you will just go on with your usual automatic way of thinking and feeling. Metacognition allows you to make a conscious choice instead of merely repeating a habit. In order to start this process, you need to decide that you're going to self-reflect right now. Once you've decided to observe yourself in the moment, then you can become curious about what may be your source of motivation in the moment.

A good way to strengthen metacognition is to ask yourself questions. Verbalizing questions about yourself can heighten your curiosity so that you can become even more mindful and self-observant. My suggestion is for you to ask yourself the following two questions:

- 1. If my feelings could talk right now, what would they say?**
- 2. Whose mind has my attention right now?**

These two questions can lead you into a profound self-awareness. I would suggest you become proficient at asking them regularly. The first question kicks you out of automatic mode and starts up your

metacognition. You start to observe your own thinking. You can usually put your feelings into words that make sense but also give your clues about whether you're thinking autonomously. The second question about whose mind has your attention may lead you to observe one of several possibilities. One possibility is that you're focused on your own concerns and not focused on anyone else's mind. That's fine. You're still in the driver's seat. Another possibility is that you're momentarily focused on your partner's or parent's mind and thinking about what they want and how you can help them. That's fine too as long as you eventually get back to your own mind and concerns. You will then need to weigh out any conflicts between what your partner wants and what you want. A third possibility is that you're not thinking of your partner's mind but rather the mind of some abstract judge. It may also be as if you're being evaluated by that judge, a common phenomenon that may or may not be problematic, depending on how severely you're judged and how easily you can leave this mindset to have some healthy fun. The "abstract judge" is usually the collective imprint from minds of parents and intimate friends.

A fourth possibility is that you're focused on your partner's mind with a desire to please him. You may be thinking about how happy he'll be when you do something for him. This kind of thinking can bring you great pleasure when you vicariously identify with your partner's happiness. There's no problem as long as you can and do easily switch back to directly serving your own desires. However, you will be in trouble if you can only obsessively think about your partner's welfare and you exclude your own. This type of enmeshing self-sacrifice will eventually lead you to feel like you're just a footnote in your partner's life. Let's flag this as a problem if it sounds familiar.



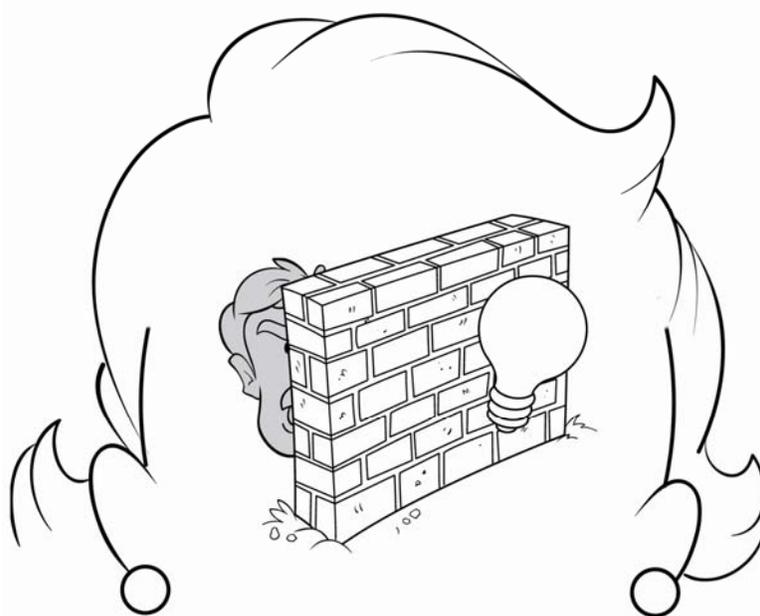
Using your partner's mind to give you "should's" like a parent

A fifth possibility is that you're using your partner's mind to give you "should's" like a parent. If you let this automatically happen without any cognitive self-awareness, then you're on your way to losing your autonomous self.

If you notice that you're reacting to an internal model of your partner's desires or "should's" in an automatic way, that's where you have an opportunity to strengthen your autonomy. However, the objective isn't to necessarily oppose your partner. The objective is rather to have a conscious choice that includes your own desires in the process. In order to have this kind of choice, you need to first reconnect to your core self. The sequencing is critically important. Some readers may have the misconception that I'm advocating narcissistic selfishness. Not at all! I'm advocating for you to have a heterocentric choice in which love for your self and love for your partner are jointly considered. The enemy isn't your partner. The enemy is automatic defensive thinking that excludes your own needs and slowly strangles your self.

Step 2 - Imagine distancing or separating your partner from you.

It's at this step that many people hang up. You may feel guilty or disloyal when you imagine separation from their partner. However, we're not talking divorce or permanent separation. You're only going to get some privacy (and safety) from your model of their mind so that you can focus on your own. There will be plenty of time to reconnect in the future.

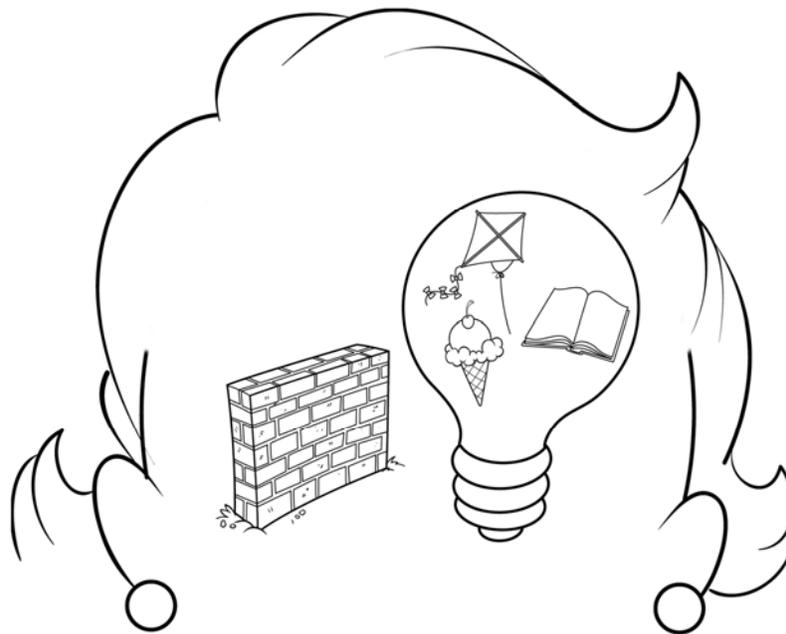


Imagine separating your partner from you.

If you feel a guilt reaction at this stage, then recognize it for what it is. It's your enmeshment talking. It's whispering in your ear: "You shouldn't be so selfish as to have your own wants and needs." I have seen clients who couldn't bring up an imaginary intervening wall higher than their waist.

Step 3 - Fantasize about what might be fun or enjoyable.

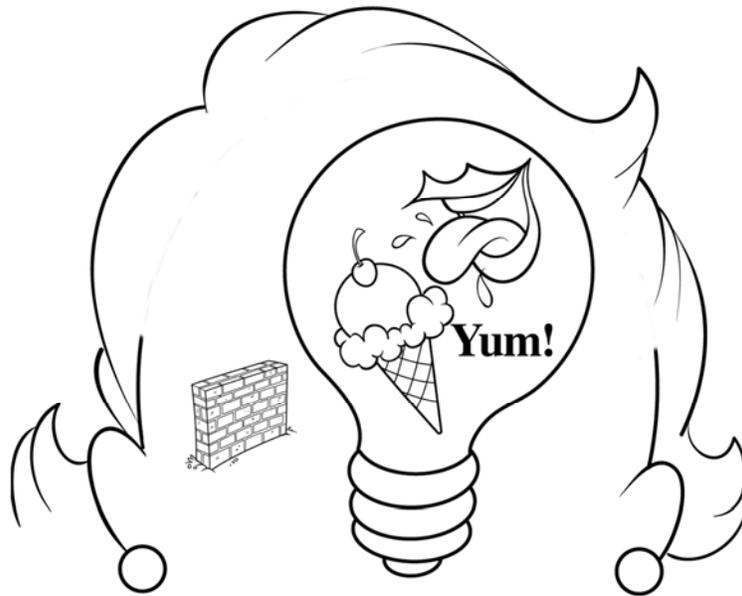
This is the brainstorming stage. It requires that your mind is free enough from anxiety so that your unconscious can communicate to your consciousness. Weak associations in your unconscious are put together in novel combinations and then raised up to consciousness. Unfortunately, this delicate process can be easily disrupted by anxious inhibition or guilt-generating "should's." That's why imagining separation from your partner's mind is a useful preliminary step. Enmeshment can suppress creativity but dis-enmeshment can free it up.



Fantasize about what might be enjoyable.

At this brainstorming stage, it's important to withhold any evaluations about practicality. Evaluation needs to come at a later stage. You need to give yourself permission to entertain "silly" ideas as being perfectly OK. Fear of being "silly" is actually your inhibitory system squashing your creativity. It's ideal if many of your wants and desires to seem "silly" to others but fine to yourself.

Step 4 - “Taste” the emotional experience of the fantasized activity.

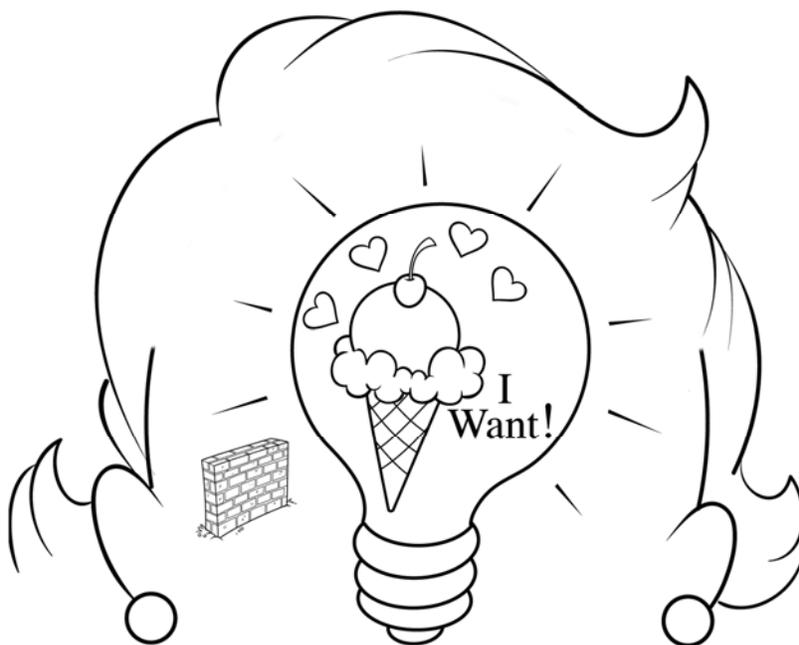


Savor the emotional experience of the fantasy.

In your fantasy, notice how the activity feels. Does it seem pleasurable? Is it interesting? Is it boring? Notice the feelings. This is important information. It’s useful data that can help you make future decisions. “Tasting” the emotional experience is just a metaphor for how you can notice the quality of pleasure you get from it. Most people can do this rather easily. However, it’s a mistake to think that everyone can. Some people carry so much unconscious inhibition of enjoyment that they can’t detect pleasure.

Step 5 - Make a decision about whether you would want the experience if it were really possible.

Notice that we’re still dealing with a hypothetical situation and not reality. “If it were really possible” still involves a hypothetical ideal world fantasy. This is where your hedonic self thrives. At this stage you may decide that you want something even though practical concerns later dissuade you from seeking it. The important thing is that you’re allowed to form a relationship bond with what you want. It’s less important that you actually get it. If you can let yourself know what you want, then you’re hedonic core self is free! You will know who you are and you won’t depersonalize.



Make the decision to want it.

Step 6 - Decide whether or not to disclose your desire to your partner.

You have a right to privacy. If you feel too vulnerable or unsafe to disclose what you want, at least you've communicated with yourself. If you decide to tell your partner about your desires, then you need to decide on how to do it. You basically have two options. The first option is to share them as mere fantasies. This could be an intimate sharing much like we discussed in the Chapter 4. The second option is to negotiate with your partner to try to satisfy one of your desires. Of course negotiation would be risking conflict so you might not want to practice this option right out of the gate. If you do, you need to accept and to prepare for the possibility of conflict and disapproval.



Taking the risk to negotiate

The Hedonic Strengthening Exercise

Part 1: Connecting to Your Self

The following exercise is designed to help you free yourself from hedonic inhibition if it has built up within your marital role. It's not a one-time miracle cure but can be a useful tool if you practice it diligently. Consider it like a physical exercise. One work out won't bring observable results. It takes many repetitions to build up strength. Be aware that you're also working against the opposing force of your unconscious inhibition. In fact, there's a real limitation to this level of intervention. If you had severe attachment traumas in your early childhood relationship with your parents, then it's possible that the following exercise won't work. Therapy would be the logical alternative. However, if your hedonic

inhibition has been built up only by recent relationship shame, then it won't be buried so deep. You can probably make some headway.

The exercise is presented in two phases. The first phase involves your mentally separating from your partner and others so that you can more easily connect to your core hedonic self. The second phase involves sharing with your partner what you've discovered. It involves your mentally coming back into the relationship. Taken together, these two phases comprise the more complete picture of healthy balance in a relationship. The mental switching back and forth between autonomy and attachment is a necessary skill for maintaining a robust relationship.

Here are all the steps of the first phase of the exercise so that you can see the whole process. Then we'll discuss each step in more detail. You may want to copy this list of steps so you can lay them on your lap to use as a guide when you're first trying the exercise.

- 1. Find a comfortable position and close your eyes. Take a deep breath. Relax and clear your mind for a minute.**
- 2. Find the other mind(s) in your mind that are generating any "should's."**
- 3. Visualize a very strong and thick wall in front of you so that other minds are not in view.**
- 4. Find 5 joyful memories not involving achievement and pride. One memory for each of the senses: sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch. Spend at least a minute in each one.**
- 5. Draw the memories close together.**
- 6. Meld the memories until you can visualize them as a bright orb of light.**
- 7. Let the joyful light float "forward" into the future of infinite possibilities.**
- 8. Wait patiently to see what possible fun experiences begin to resonate to the light and begin to rise up to join it.**
- 9. When a fun fantasy floats up, let it become clear to you what's happening.**
- 10. "Taste" the experience. Notice how it feels. Is it all sweet and joyful? Does it have some sour negatives to it?**
- 11. Allow the fantasy to position itself close to the joyful light.**
- 12. Repeat steps 8 through 11 until you have a decent collection of fantasies (ideally 5 or 6).**
- 13. Consider the taste of your fantasies and choose only the sweetest tasting ones.**
- 14. Ask yourself if you're willing to commit to form a relationship with the fantasy that we can refer to as "wanting." This doesn't require any external behavior. It does require that you're willing to love the fantasy a little bit in your mind.**

OK. Now we'll go into each step and detail it out.

Step 1 - Find a comfortable position and close your eyes. Take a deep breath. Relax and clear your mind for a minute. It's best if you do this exercise in private and not at work. You may need even a few minutes of letting go of the day's concerns before you're ready to focus.

Step 2 - Find the other mind(s) in your mind that are generating any "should's." This is the point where it's useful to ask yourself "If my feelings could talk right now, what would they say?" Notice if you're feeling a mandate from any one else's preferences or opinion. Then sharpen your imagery so that you can clearly visualize and "hear" the other person telling you their mandate. It may be your partner or it could be a parent. Whoever. If there's no one else giving you any "should's" then you can skip step 3 and go right to step 4.

Step 3 - Visualize a very strong and thick wall in front of you so that other minds are blocked. Here is where you do a very important shift in your thinking. You're going to use a visual image to help you momentarily free yourself from the other person's mind. Visualize a very strong and thick wall sliding between you and the other person. This is a powerful metaphor for your own personal boundary. It can come up from the ground or come down from the sky or ceiling. It could even slide across the scene from the side or perhaps come together in the center like two sliding doors slamming shut. You choose. But however it comes, let yourself hear the sound and feel the vibration from the heavy weight of the wall sliding into place. Details are important here because they help you to web the imagery down into your unconscious memory. I recommend that when you first practice this wall for the first half dozen times, spend some time interacting with it on a sensory level. Get up close to it and look at its texture. Notice any colors and irregularities. Then place your mental hand up flat on its surface. Notice its temperature. Take your fingertips and brush lightly across the wall's surface. What do you feel in its texture? Next, rap your knuckles against the wall and notice what you hear. Then ball your hand into a fist and use the edge of your fist to bang against the wall. What do you get? Notice all the details. You're imbedding a powerful tool into your memory banks.

After you practice your wall the first time, you can start adding one more important element. Feel yourself shouting out a loud emphatic "**NO !**" with your mental voice at the same time that you erect the wall. This is all done with imagery, not in the physical world. Let yourself hear the "No !" in your own voice as you feel yourself sub-vocalizing it. When you have all the imagery together, your loud internal "No!" will coincide with your strong boundary wall rumbling into place, complete with vibrations felt

through your feet. All of these sensory details will speak to your unconscious that you're safe to be your own person.

Step 4 - Find 5 joyful memories not involving achievement and pride. One memory for each of the senses: sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch. Spend at least a minute in each one. This step may require a lot of work the first time. You need to find enjoyment and fun in your past. Sift through all these memories until you find one good one for each sense. It's a good one if it brings back the sense of pleasure you once had. It might have been the smell of lavender on a spring day, the sensation of a full body massage, the sound of some great music, etc. Some people can't find a memory for each sense. That's OK. If you can just find two or three, you can still proceed with the exercise. Once you have your final set of memories, you don't need to reinvent them each time you do the exercise. You can use them again and again. The technical word is "priming." You're going to use these memories to help prime associations to possible future enjoyment.

Step 5 - Draw the memories close together. This is just a matter of holding them in your mind at the same time and willing them to be associated together. You may first visit each memory one after the other in rapid succession and then imagine several picture screens coming close together.

Step 6 - Meld the memories until you can visualize them as a bright orb of light. Let yourself see the screens start merging into one screen and the image become brighter and brighter. Let the screen coalesce into an orb of very bright light. You're creating a visual metaphor with the joyful memories in close association, even though you don't see them distinctly any more. If they don't all merge into an orb, that's still OK. Just let them come very close together

Step 7 - Let the joyful light float "forward" into the future of infinite possibilities. We're floating forward in time to imagined future possibilities. The joyful light is a metaphor that stimulates positive associations. These associations prime the brain to come up with similar positive ideas. They help free you up from inhibition.

Step 8 - Wait patiently to see what possible fun experiences begin to resonate to the light and begin to rise up to join it. As you float your joyful light into the future, you need to give the process time to work. Be patient and allow yourself to get curious. Curiosity helps open your mind so that your unconscious can begin to speak to your conscious mind.

Step 9 - When a fun fantasy floats up, let it become clear to you what's happening. Spend some time to allow the visual and sensory images to become vivid and clear.

Step 10 - "Taste" the experience. Notice how it feels. Is it all sweet and joyful? Does it have some sour negatives to it? Here is where you tune into your feelings. Does the imagined experience bring you pleasure or discomfort? My reference to "taste" is a metaphor for your noticing your pleasure when you imagine the experience.

Step 11 - Allow the fantasy to position itself close to the joyful light. You may want to reduce the fantasy scene to a small thumbnail image and finally into a small light that hovers right next to your main flowing orb.

Step 12 - Repeat steps 8 through 11 until you have a decent collection of fantasies (ideally 5 or 6).

Step 13 - Consider the taste of your fantasies and choose only the sweetest tasting ones. Go back over your collected fantasies and decide which ones gave you the most obvious pleasure. Consider these to be like collected gems.

Step 14 - Ask yourself if you're willing to commit to form a relationship with the fantasy that we can refer to as "wanting." This doesn't require any external behavior. It does require that you're willing to love the fantasy a little bit in your mind. This is a really important step. It may seem strange to talk about forming a relationship within your own mind. However, this is exactly what needs to happen. You need to decide to "own" the relationship between yourself and what you can want. You're overcoming a little bit of dissociation in your mind. It doesn't mean that you have to actually get what you want. Rather, it means that you're willing to tolerate the mild frustration of not getting immediate gratification. When you're really good at this process, most of your wants are going to go unfulfilled. Even so, you're going to be getting more enjoyment than you would otherwise. You will also have a greater sense of who you are.

Part 2: Communicating With Your Partner

When you've effectively separated your own desires from your partner's mind, then you're ready to go beyond thinking only about yourself. You will be ready to consider your partner's needs along with your own. This way you can have balance. If you let your partner's mind inhibit your own needs then you're in trouble. On the other extreme, considering only your self interests will similarly spin your relationship into the abyss. You have to get both your partner's needs and your own out on the table if you want to have a balanced relationship.

You might be asking "Why share my desires at all?" The answer would be the same reason that you add weights to barbells when you work out at the gym. You need to push against the resistance in order to strengthen yourself. Another relevant metaphor was expressed by one of my male clients who regularly came to heroically detoxify his terrible childhood abuse traumas. He had a military background and phenomenal self-discipline. When I asked him how he was able to face his humiliating memories, I'll never forget his answer: "If you want a diamond, you need heat and pressure. Otherwise you just get a lump of coal." Although he didn't understand all of the relevant neuroscience, he intuitively understood that some struggle is necessary for developing emotional strength. Since our conversation, I've started using the term "catalysis" to refer to the method of stimulating emotional growth. Emotional growth is similar to physical growth in that some catalysis is necessary if you want to grow stronger. If you lie in bed for months after an operation and you get no exercise, your body will degenerate and atrophy. You need to moderately stress muscle tissue in order to switch on the genetic machinery for new tissue growth. Similarly, you need to moderately stress neuronal reflexes in the brain to stimulate the growth of neural pathways.

**If you want a diamond, you need heat and pressure.
Otherwise you just get a lump of coal.**

Expressing your hedonic desires will be necessary if you want to prevent yourself from calcifying into a subjugated marital role like an unused arthritic joint. I recommend that you start regularly sharing your hedonic fantasies before you begin negotiating to implement them. In order to practice sharing your fantasies, follow these basic steps.

1. Make sure both you and your partner are each in a paratelic state. You both need to be curious and relatively free of worry. Don't start sharing fantasies if your partner is in work mode. You can use the suggestions made in Chapter 4 for how to plan for intimate exercises.
2. Tell your partner that you'd like to share some fantasies you've been having. Make sure that your partner understands that you're not trying to negotiate any solid plans.
3. When you start to share a specific fantasy, start each fantasy with a disclaimer that again reassures your partner that there's no expectation to actually implement the idea. This strategy helps reduce her anxiety so that she can be more receptive. The following are some examples.

Someday, if we ever had enough money, I'd love to.....

If a miracle occurred and circumstances would allow, I'd love to.....

If it were ever possible without disrupting our other plans, I'd love to.....

It would be great if someday we could.....

If I could have anything I wanted, one of the things I would want would be.....

4. If your partner asks for more information about your fantasy, that's great! Go with it and share more. If your partner doesn't ask for more, then you can ask her if she has some fantasies she might like to share with you. Either way, your main mission has been accomplished for the day. You've catalyzed some strength into your hedonic self by practicing its expression.

If you want to start negotiating for what you want, then you're moving into the realm of possible conflict. Your partner may feel threatened because your idea may conflict with something that she may want. She may like saving money or time for something else. That's not to say you're doing anything wrong by negotiating. It's just that you need to accept that there is often some friction involved. You have to be ready for possible disapproval. This comes with the territory and it's hard for many people. We'll be discussing different strategies for conflict management later in this book.

If you want to negotiate, it's best to come out and be very open about your agenda. One of the best ways is to approach your partner with an "I want...will you..." approach. For example: "I want to

negotiate an agreement with you about something. Will you listen to my request?” In this example, you’re negotiating for your partner’s attention. Assuming you get it, you can then elaborate more specifically what you want and ask for their help to get it: “I really want (XXXX). Will you agree that we can do this?” or perhaps “I want (XXXX). Would you do (YYYY) so I could have it?” This part of our discussion may seem unnecessarily simple to many readers. However, it may be surprising for you to know how many people can’t face the anxiety of negotiating directly. For example, I frequently see one partner throw a statement of desire at the other partner while avoiding an actual request for agreement. They merely assume they have an agreement when the partner doesn’t object. “We should do (XXXXX)” or “Let’s do (XXXXX)” are often unconscious strategies for avoiding the risk of open negotiation. It’s as if the mind resorts to guerilla tactics in lieu of open exposure. You need to express yourself more directly if you want to grow stronger.

There’s a final point I should make about negotiation. Once you clearly have your hedonic interests in mind, you need to additionally consider your partner’s interests. In the preceding exercise, we’ve emphasized the importance of first getting in touch with your hedonic core. That’s because all too many of us never get around to considering our own desires once we’ve focused on our partner. If you want to grow a really vital relationship, you can’t just separately consider either your partner or yourself. You need to be able to first connect with your core, but you need to subsequently consider your partner’s desires along with your own. When you can hold both sets of desires in your mind along with the future welfare of the relationship, then you’re well into the higher consciousness of heterocentric thinking. This kind of thinking helps to keep the relationship in balance. Remember. It’s not always just about you.

Catalyzing Strength

The exercise in this chapter is designed to help you get started. It would be dishonest for me to give you the impression that all will be well if you just practice this exercises a few times. That would be like saying you merely need to go the gym a couple of times and then you’re set for life. In truth, you need to get yourself to the point that you’re expressing your hedonic desires on a daily basis. To do so requires that the process is intuitive. You don’t want to perpetually stay at the level of methodically executing each of the fourteen steps of this chapter’s exercise. You want to develop your autonomy to the point that you can intuitively free yourself from your partner’s mind, distill your desires into

consciousness, and then give them some expression out in the open. You also want to get to the point that you can toughen your hedonic core by regularly expressing it when expression is totally unnecessary. That's the best way. For example, I still make a regular habit of pushing myself to ask for hugs and say "I love you" when there's no situational provocation for it. Don't wait for a Hallmark sanctioned Valentine's Day to legitimize your expression of affection. If you want to catalyze some real emotional growth, try this idea. Make a commitment to yourself to always purchase blank greeting cards. Practice expressing your sentiment openly and honestly.

**We must learn to tolerate uncertainty if we
want to toughen our hedonic core.**

One principle is especially important if you want to toughen your hedonic core. You must learn to tolerate uncertainty. Uncertainty is what partners avoid when they throw expectations at each other instead of asking for a choice. That's why the "will you...?" part of the "I want...will you" exercise is so important. We need to suffer the anxiety that our partner may refuse us if we're going to practice real autonomy. "Will you do this for me?" "Would you be willing to share this with me?" "Can we have an agreement about this?" These requests are all like weights on a barbell that we're using to exercise our emotional fitness. Waiting for our partner's answer and tolerating the anxiety is like doing an exercise with good form so we can get maximum benefit. And when we're inevitably refused for some of our requests, we need to catch ourselves before we freefall into shame. We have another opportunity for growth even when we experience rejection of our requests. We can actually strengthen our autonomy by validating our own desires in the face of disappointment. So here's a novel idea. Instead of minimizing disappointments, you can express and emphasize them. "I would have really enjoyed that!" "I'm really disappointed!" "I'm still going to hope for that sometime in the future." These are all examples of growth-inducing expression. Practice loving what you've lost. Even in disappointment, you can strengthen your autonomy and your hedonic self if you refuse to hide from the truth in your core.