

Bryce Kaye, PhD
Allied Psychological Services
875 Walnut Street, Suite 220
Cary, NC 27511
www.carycounseling.com
carycounseling@mindspring.com

Meaning Matters !

Your partner's nostrils flare as veins begin to bulge on his or her temples. Daggers fly at you from your partner's eyes. Your partner's voice takes on an "I hate you" tone while sarcastic insults are thrown. The person who was once your darling now resembles an evil demon. It's as if your partner is a different person. What escapes you is that you appear the same as you respond in kind. What's going on?

Let's start with a question I like to ask couples: What's the most common fear that's most destructive in relationships? Most people will guess that it's rejection or abandonment. I usually tell them that rejection is probably number two but that there's another fear that's far greater: It's the subtle fear that one will become subjugated and less important in the relationship than his or her partner; that one's will will be crushed by the other partner's will. Partners fear that they will become a mere footnote to the other partner's life. For men, it often involves being afraid of being unimportant because of weakness. For women, it's often the fear of being unimportant due to being unlovable. Either way it's the fear of shame. One might reasonably argue that the greatest fear in a relationship is of disapproval. But I would argue that the two fears are joined. Most couples fear disapproval that threatens to place him or her in an inferior subjugated role. Think about it. I find few couples who disagree after an in-depth discussion.

When you're facing your partner's angry disapproval you may react in one of several ways. You might experience a mental freeze and a desire to escape as quickly as possible. Or you may experience a surge of rage to strike back and establish yourself in the righteously correct (and dominant) position. A third possibility is that you focus on the future welfare of the relationship and the possible actions that might get you there. There's even a fourth possibility but we'll discuss that later. All of these possible reactions will depend on what you make most important in your mind. And what you make most important in your mind will determine whether you make a mess of things or whether you have a growth experience.

The current world will sometimes feed you bull. In the 1950's it was cool to smoke. In the 1990's we learned how terrible it was to eat cholesterol packed butter so we all switched to corn oil margarine. Cardiologists have only recently learned that the latter is far worse at inflaming and packing cholesterol into the arteries. Relationship counselors have only recently realized that mindfulness is a more important focus than simple behavior. Teaching behavioral techniques for conflict management in couples has had a poor history of success. When you're hot your mind takes a hike ! Those techniques taught by your relationship counselor don't exist in your angry mind. That's because your brain has changed its state.

In a threatened fear state profound changes occur in our brains. Blood drains from the most advanced parts of our brain such as the upper anterior cingulate and the dorso-lateral prefrontal regions as those regions lose metabolism. Blood flows instead into your muscles for either fight or flight. A third more primitive reaction is known as a dorsal vagal freeze response. None of these allow for

flexible thinking. It's as if your mental computer goes from 10 gig to 64 K and you start running your Personality 1.0 program. Your intuitive representation of future world goes off line and you care far less about future consequences. So what are you afraid of? You're afraid of going into that terribly painful shame state. Unfortunately, many people unconsciously learn to avoid this state by coloring in between the lines. They hide from doing anything that might unpredictably provoke conflict with their partner. These people hide in their routine responsibilities to avoid conflict. They're not curious about what their partners are thinking or feeling because who knows where that might lead. This kind of subtle hiding has a terrible effect on the fate of a relationship. It may take many years but the person will likely become numb or have an affair. How many people have you heard say "I feel numb in my marriage." "I don't know who I am anymore." "I feel like I'm suffocating....like I'm drowning." I call this relationship depersonalization and it kills more relationships than most people realize. The takeaway is that habitual avoidant defenses will usually lead to a numbing loss of attraction.

Avoidant defenses usually lead to a numbing loss of attraction.

Many people think that there's only one other solution: to "stand up for themselves." How well does that work? You know. It often leads to an escalating fight. If this is you then it's as if you and your partner are two cats drowning in the middle of a swimming pool, each one trying to gain purchase on the other. Future consequences are still momentarily off-line in the brain.



Mr. and Mrs. Bartlett review the status of their monthly household budget.

So what's the antidote to our fear of shame and subjugation? Sucking it in won't work and neither will raging. Clarity about the third alternative requires that you know the true nature of boundaries. Here's where misinformation will come at you from other counselor types. You've

probably heard that boundaries are behaviors that you set to stop people from abusing you. If you buy that then you're primed to act out like an oppositional adolescent. After all you want strong boundaries, right? And therefore it follows that the more striking and exaggerated your behavior is then the stronger your boundaries will be. Unfortunately that's a prescription for rage. Let me offer a different definition. Boundaries are really internal frames of meaning that stabilize you.

**Boundaries are internal connections to meaning.
Limits are behaviors to protect boundaries.**

It's more useful to think this way so that you can evolve yourself beyond a raging adolescent. Behavior is important but the real action is inside you. I refer to the behavior as "limit setting." When you say "no" and you "refuse" then you are setting limits. Limit setting is very important in clearing out inhibition and keeping your boundaries strong. But your strongest boundaries are actually grown by a form of internal love. Let me tell you a story.

When I was 39 years old I had to telephone my father to tell him that my wife and I were adopting a little girl from Korea. He had been the most nurturing father one could want during my childhood. But when I told him the surprising news he was completely overwhelmed with disappointment. He was then an old man wrestling with his own mortality fears and was no doubt wishing for us to give him a biological grandchild. He regressed and sarcastically expressed a racial slur instead of a congratulation. Most people think I would have felt hurt. I didn't. It was amazing that I felt wonder instead. It was as if an airbag of intuitive meaning instantaneously deployed. It wasn't linear thinking. It was a perspective anchored in several dimensions:

- My wife and I were following our spiritual responsibility to contribute to the world beyond ourselves. We were connected to a meaning that was sacred.
- I could see my father's existential struggle and his pain. I felt compassion for him.
- I felt wonder that I was maturing beyond my father's understanding of the world. I could see his limitation.
- I felt wonder at the fact that I had in some way grown beyond my father. However, there was a sweet and sad awareness that this is the way life is supposed to evolve.

My reaction to my father's attack exemplifies the true nature of boundaries. If you're sufficiently hooked into your own personal meaning then it's difficult for someone else to shut down your brain with shaming disapproval. This is particularly important because if you can keep your brain then you can behave more constructively. What makes all this dicey is that meaning takes place mostly in our unconscious. It's not easy to grow.

In high functioning relationships partners feel responsible to protect and promote certain principles. These principles are intuitive meanings that guide the couples' behavior. Here's a list of the most constructive ones I've found:

Inviolacy – Personal boundaries are protected against the urge for physical or emotional violence. There's a restraint from hitting, blocking, undesired grabbing, mocking, sarcasm, or other emotional manipulations that are designed to shame the other.

Respect – Preferences and beliefs are not imposed on others. Respect is an appreciation of people's differences. One's own perspective is not divine and should not set rules on others. There's also a valuing of other people's choices that are different and may be at odds with one's own.

Honesty – Both internal and external truths are held in high regard and are not misrepresented. External truths pertain to the external world (e.g. JFK got shot, Armstrong walked on the moon). Internal truths pertain to personal experience (e.g. a person prefers a certain color or a partner is afraid that if he/she asks for what he/she really wants that his/her partner will painfully disappoint him/her). Honesty doesn't mean that a partner must disclose. It would be honest if a partner declares “I'm going to keep this private and I don't want to talk with you about it just now.”

Fidelity – Agreements (contracts) are faithfully kept. The person has a sense of honor in being consistent and fulfilling responsibilities. When he/she forgets to fulfill an obligation he/she follows due-diligence to repair and plan for corrections.

Equity - Intimate partners are viewed as being equally deserving of benefits from the relationship. This principle of equality also extends to equalizing sacrifice. Division of labor, equalizing of leisure time, turn-taking in choices for fun may also be managed with the principle that one partner doesn't deserve more than another.

Accountability - This principle involves the valuing of objective truth about one's actions. A person who is willing to be accountable is willing to have his/her behavior measured against objective evidence that he/she is being responsible. Making available phone records, bank statements or even expert consultations are all examples of applied accountability. One's ego and secrecy don't rule.

Fostering Closeness – In order to maintain affection and love, you need to keep reinforcing it with a certain kind of experience. It's the feeling of being “close” in the here and now.” This is not done when you and your partner engage in tasks and responsibilities. Affection and “closeness” are reinforced when you listen intently to each others' thoughts and feelings. It's also reinforced when you both voluntarily share touch.

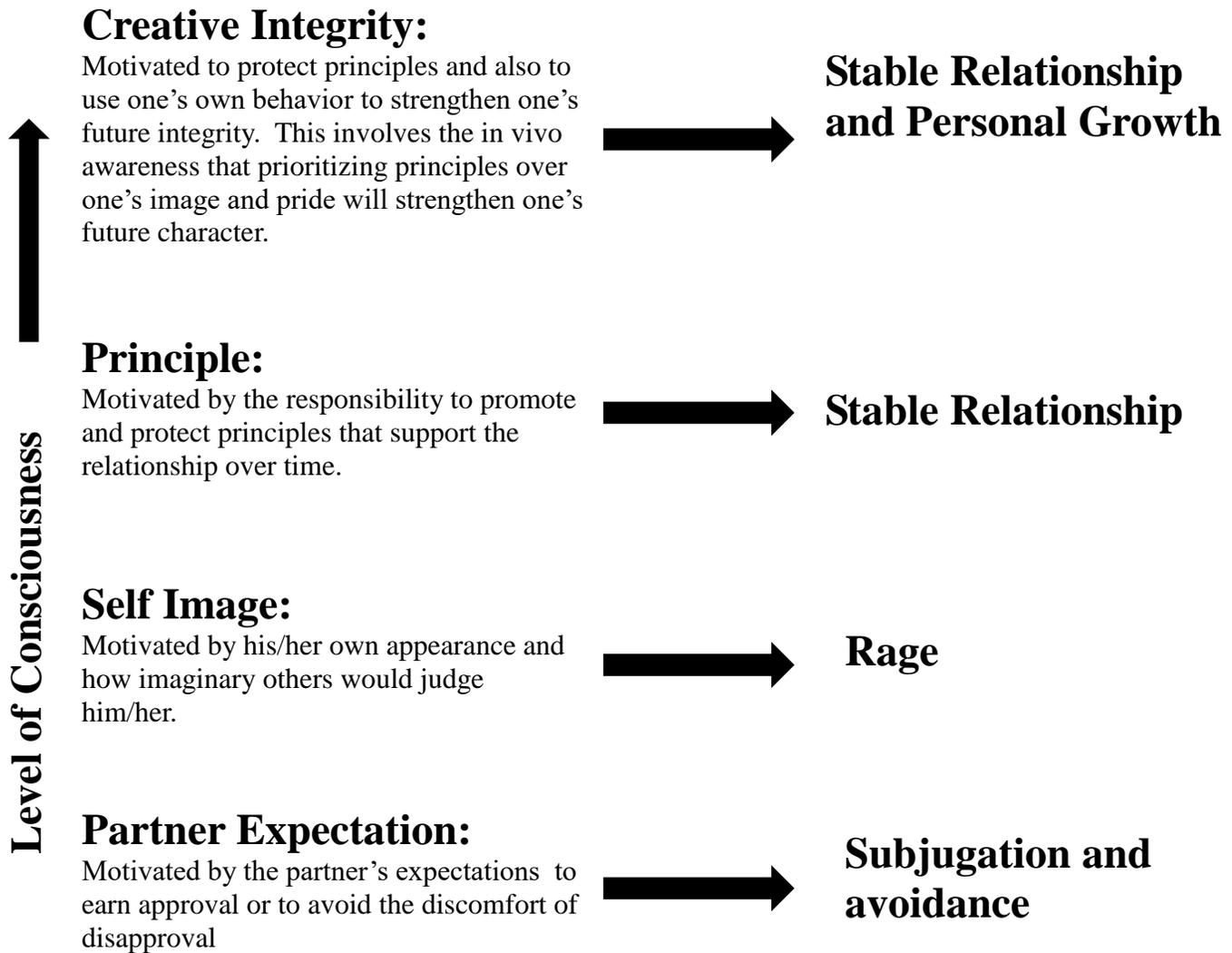
Creative Contribution – In an intimate relationship, there's a responsibility to both nurture closeness and contribute meaning. It doesn't work if one partner merely depends on the other partner's authority. Being close doesn't enrich a relationship if a partner only shares his/her dependence. It's not enough to be a rule follower and only comply with what's expected. There's a responsibility to think up new ideas of what to share together. This reinforces respect and attraction to each other.

Self Maintenance – Your relationship depends on two people maintaining their separate identities and their own separate integrity. This sometimes requires servicing a separate interest that's too important to the person to ignore or sacrifice. Not all needs are joint. It's a responsibility to maintain your own separate identity by maintaining and expressing your own separate interests. Of course this is true as long as other principles are not being violated at the same time. If you don't maintain your separate identity then you will lose attraction and affection for your partner.

Dynamic Balancing - This principle means that a relationship is like an organic being. Its needs are constantly changing and will require different servicing at different times. At one time it's important to do business, to engage in methodical conflict and to allow emotional separation. At another time it's important to share leisurely relaxation and connection. At one time one partner may take care of the other. At another time the other partner becomes the care-taker. Both partners have a responsibility to monitor both their own and each others' states to determine what's needed for the relationship's welfare at that particular point in time.

Complex stuff! But couples that have these principles highly valued in their intuitive wisdom can usually resist their impulses to hide, run away or rage. That's because intuitive meanings have a profound effect on metabolism in the most advanced parts of the brain. Researchers call this "level of consciousness" which usually correlates with brain metabolism and adaptive behavior. It's measured as the dominance of certain values over others. For example, a partner who prioritizes pride, appearance, comfort or pleasure over truth or responsibility will be said to have a low level of consciousness. A person who is guided by a sense of responsibility to protect the relationship will have a higher level of consciousness.

In my work with couples, I have found four levels of consciousness that can be described for most partners. The following illustration depicts their hierarchy in terms of their background frames of meaning:



Background frames of meta-motivational meaning that direct relationship behaviors

If the above illustration doesn't make sense, then think of it this way. The most primitive frame of partner expectation is to adopt the rule: "I must show my partner that I'm following his/her expectations and I must avoid his/her disapproval (because I absolutely can't handle the disapproval). The short version is "I must show..."

A step up to a slightly less primitive level of consciousness involves the rule: "I must prove that I'm (strong, important, lovable, etc) because I absolutely refuse to appear (weak, unimportant, unlovable, etc). The short version is "I must prove (to an imagined judge)". The emphasis is on appearance. This level image seeking often alternates with the level of partner expectation. One of the

most common patterns is for a partner to suck in, suck in, suck in, suck in, suck in.....and then blow ! Subjugation at the partner expectation level often alternates with rebellion at the self-image level. Neither level of consciousness is working on the level of principle.

When a partner is motivated on the level of principle, there's more prefrontal cortex cooking along with what some people refer to as "future sight." The rule that's followed is "I must be responsible to protect my own future integrity as well as the integrity of the relationship." There may be an intuitive understanding that the integrity of both the self and the relationship depend on protecting the previously listed principles. What's important is that this kind of motivation doesn't depend on the behavior or emotion of the other partner. You don't have to be loved or appreciated when you're motivated by integrity. Your partner can be hating you and you still want to protect principles. That's because you love the principles even when you momentarily stop loving your partner. This elevated frame of meaning keeps you from acting out destructively or sucking in your truth in subjugation.

But we're not going to stop here. There's yet even a higher level of consciousness that most people never reach. In addition to being focused on principles, one can also be aware that one's actions and thought form are constantly sculpting one's future self. If you're not aware of this, you keep creating the same old future self by repeating the same thought form you've had before. It's called "recursivity." But.....if you mindfully pair a new frame of motivation with your actions then your behavior will drive the meaning down deep into your unconscious. I call this principle "reciprocal consolidation" because I couldn't find any existing definition for it. Millions of people use it ! In 12-step programs such as AA, most of those steps are like work-out stations. On each step, the participant struggles to prioritize the principles of truth, responsibility and involvement over their own shame and self images. The result is a more responsible character that's strong enough to successfully compete with the addicted side of their personality.

There's another example of how reciprocal consolidation works. Studies have shown that workers who put more effort into producing a product will value that product more. The takeaway from all this is that "Whatever we fight for we grow to love." In relationships that translates to "whatever principles we fight for we grow to love." And you can add onto that "The principles we grow strong will protect us and keep us stable in the face of challenge." What can be more challenging than those daggers coming out of the eyes of our partner while disapproval is being thrown in our face.

Whatever we fight for we grow to love

So how is this reciprocal consolidation thing done? What's the simple practical method? It has to do with mindfully directing your attention. Before you engage your partner in some form of effortful exchange, put into your mind the thought that you're going to do this or that to strengthen a particular value in your character. It's not going to be for his or her approval. It's for your future self! Then when you act, your behavior will drive the meaning deep into your unconscious like a sledge hammer driving a stake into the ground. Your behavior is the sledge hammer. Your thought form is the stake. Here's an example:

I once had a brief counseling session with a man who was a chronic liar. His alcoholic father had taught him the value of lying in order to avoid being beaten. Unfortunately, this had trained him to stay at the level of being focused on partner expectation. He was repeating his old pattern by lying to

his fiance when he was afraid of her possible disapproval. His internal boundaries were mush. It only took me an hour to really get him to understand what he needed to do. Whenever he was afraid of disapproval and felt the urge to lie, he could draw attention to his truth by labeling it. He could say "This is my truth". Then the next thing he had to do was put the thought into his mind "I'm fighting to strengthen my love of truth and my integrity." As he would then tell his truth he would try to keep that frame of meaning in the back of his mind. The emails from his fiance showed that he was still practicing the method two months after our meeting. At five months, the fiance reported remarkable lessening in the man's anxiety as he reported he could no longer stand lying. His boundaries were also stronger as indicated by the fact that his ex-wife's attacks could no longer hurt him. His frame of new meaning had strengthened to the point that it now protected him.

The level of creative integrity takes mindful effort. Mindfulness is the ability to be aware of your urges and motives before you act. If you don't have this then you will never be able to reach this level of consciousness in a relationship. Few people do. However, if you do have this mindfulness then you have the choice of applying reciprocal consolidation to back-program your own mind. Just decide what principle or value you want to strengthen in the relationship but also in your future self. Then hold that frame of thought as your primary frame of meaning while you take action. You'll be cooking with gas as your frame of meaning strengthens both your internal boundaries and your relationship!