

What's Wrong With My Partner/ Our Relationship? And What Happens When I Dwell On It?
(From ACT With Love, Ch 1)

The purpose of this worksheet is to get clear about the most common judgments and criticisms you make about your partner – and the effect it has on you and your relationship when you get caught up in them, dwell on them, buy into them. Over the next few days, take note of all the thoughts you have about what is wrong with your relationship or your partner. Each day, take a few minutes to jot some of these thoughts down, and reflect on what happens to your mood, your attitude, and your relationship when you get all caught up in these thoughts?

Thoughts about what's wrong with my partner/ our relationship	How does my mood change when I get caught up in/ dwell on these thoughts?	When I buy into or dwell on these thoughts, what effect does it have on my relationship?

Identify the DRAIN In Your Relationship (From ACT With Love, Ch 2)

D – Disconnection, **R** – Reactivity, **A** – Avoidance, **I** – Inside your mind, **N** – Neglecting values

Disconnection: How do I disconnect from my partner? (E.g. do I get bored, irritable, stop listening? Do I go cold and distant? Do I close off/shut down? Am I distracted rather than present?)

How does my partner disconnect from me?

Reactivity: How do I react impulsively or automatically, without stopping to consider what I am doing? (E.g. do I yell, snap, swear, storm off, say hurtful things, criticize, blame, accuse, sneer, jeer?)

How does my partner react impulsively or automatically?

Avoidance: How do I try to avoid or get rid of my painful feelings that are related to the issues in this relationship? (E.g. do I use drugs, alcohol, food, cigarettes? Do I withdraw or stay away from my partner? Do I try to distract myself with TV, computers, books, going out? Do I avoid talking to my partner about the issue?)

How does my partner seem to avoid or get rid of his painful feelings?

Inside Your Mind: How do I get trapped inside my mind? (E.g. do I worry about the future, dwell on the past, relive old hurts, rehash old arguments, stew over everything that's wrong with my partner? Do I get caught up in judgment, blame, criticism? Do I get caught up in thoughts of rejection, betrayal, abandonment, or being controlled?)

How does my partner seem to get trapped inside his mind?

Neglecting Values: What core values do I neglect, forget about, or act inconsistently with, when I am disconnected, reactive, avoidant, or inside my mind? (E.g. do I lose touch with values such as being loving, kind, caring, generous, compassionate, supportive, fun-loving, easygoing, sensual, affectionate?)

What core values does my partner seem to neglect, forget about, or act inconsistently with?

If you're unwilling to work at your relationship

If you're not willing to work on your relationship, then you're effectively choosing to prolong your difficulties or make them worse. If this is where you're at right now, then take a few days to keep a daily record. At the end of each day, fill in the chart.

Notice the effect of "giving up" on your health and vitality.

Notice what this choice to "give up" is costing you—in terms of emotional pain, wasted time, wasted money, wasted energy, and further damage to your relationship.

Notice any actions you take that seem to improve your relationship or enhance your own well-being and vitality.

If you're unwilling to work at your relationship

Many people don't feel like working on their relationship. You might think it all seems too hard or it's pointless, or you shouldn't have to, or the fault is all with your partner. The problem is, if you're not willing to work on your relationship, then you're effectively choosing to prolong your difficulties or make them even worse. So if this is where you're at right now, then take a few days to notice what this attitude is costing you. At the end of each day, fill in the chart.

How did refusing to work on my relationship – thereby making it worse – affect my health and vitality today?	What did refusing to work on my relationship today cost me in terms of emotional pain, wasted time, wasted money, wasted energy, and further damage?	Did I do anything today that seemed to improve my relationship? What was it?

How Did You Meet Your Partner?

How did you first meet your partner?

Aside from looks, what did you find most attractive about him/her?

What personal qualities did you most admire about him/ her?

What did you enjoy doing together?

What did your partner do that made those times enjoyable?

Describe one of the most enjoyable days you've ever spent together. Where were you? What did you do? How did you interact? What sort of things did you say and do to each other? How was your body language?

What do you miss most about the early days of your relationship?

What do you see as your partner's greatest strengths, best personal qualities?

On Reflection:

Can you contact any sense of warmth or appreciation for your partner? Or do you merely see him as a burden, an obstacle, a hassle?

What happens when you take time to reflect on her strengths and positive qualities? Do you see her at all differently?

Do you find it hard to acknowledge his positive attributes because you are so focused on his flaws and weaknesses?

You're Both Hurting

Take a few minutes to write about the major issues in your relationship. Do this with nonjudgmental description rather than with harsh judgment and criticism. For example, write, "Greg does not often help out with the housework" instead of "Greg is a lazy bastard." If you notice a harsh judgment slipped past you, just make a mental note of it. Silently say to yourself, "Aha! There goes a judgment!" or "There's judging!" Then cross it out and write something nonjudgmental instead.

Write about the painful emotions you have experienced as a result of these issues. What painful thoughts and feelings have you struggled with? If the main feelings you notice are anger, fury, resentment, rage, or frustration, then see if you can "go deeper." These are typically surface emotions. Beneath the angry exterior, you will usually find something like hurt, sadness, guilt, shame, fear, rejection, loneliness,

Acknowledge, openly and honestly, that this relationship has been painful. You have suffered. It has not been easy. Given what you have been through, it's completely natural to feel the way you do.

Now this is the most challenging part: take a few minutes to reflect on how your partner has also suffered. He or she may never have spoken about this to you, so you may have to use your imagination here. Think about what it must be like for your partner to be on the receiving end of your complaints and criticisms. If she tends to cut off, go quiet, and withdraw, then what must that be like for her—hiding away and closing down in order to cope? If she tends to brood, dwell, and rehash the past, how painful must that be for her—suffering again and again by replaying old events that can never be undone? If he gets angry and yells, then how unpleasant must that feel for him to be eaten up with anger and resentment? Surely there is no joy or pleasure involved; how much must he suffer, lost in his rage?

How I try to control my partner

Spend some time reflecting on everything you have ever tried doing to control your partner—then assess how effective it was in the short run and what it cost you in the long run.

What my partner says or does that I don't like	What I have said or done to stop or change my partner's behavior	Did my actions change my partner's behavior in the long term?	Did my actions enhance and enrich our relationship in the long term? If not, what has this cost in terms of health, vitality, pain, wasted time, bitterness, anger, regret etc.

Who do I want to be in this relationship?

Imagine that it's ten years from now, and you have gathered together your closest friends and relatives to celebrate the last ten years of your relationship. This could be a small intimate affair in your family home or a plush affair in a fancy restaurant. It's your imagination, so make it look how you want.

Imagine that your partner stands up to make a speech about the last ten years of your life together—about what you stand for, what you mean to him/her, and the role that you have played in his/her life. Imagine your partner saying whatever it is, deep in your heart, you would most like to hear. (This is not about what they would realistically say—it's about what, in an ideal world, you would love to hear them say.) Imagine them describing your character, your strengths, and the ways in which you have contributed to the relationship.

Close your eyes now and take a couple of minutes to imagine this as vividly as possible, then write answers to the questions below.

What sort of personal qualities do you want to bring into play in your relationship?

What character strengths do you wish to employ or develop?

How do you want to behave or act on an ongoing basis?

What do you want to stand for as a partner?

Suppose we asked your partner to describe the ten things he or she most appreciates about your character or personality. In the ideal world, what would you most love your partner to say?

Values-Guided Actions

Write about little things you could do – simple, easy values-guided actions -- to enhance your relationship. Following are a few ideas to get you started. Although we're focusing here on the three core values of connecting, caring, and contribution, obviously these are not the only important values in a relationship, so please add others of your own.

Words: What can you say to your partner that promotes a deeper sense of connection or shows him that you care? How about "I love you," "I'm here for you," "Let me know how I can be of support," or "I appreciate having you in my life"? Even simple phrases such as "Thank you," "I'm sorry," or "Please forgive me" can go a long way if said genuinely. Consider text messages, cards, and e-mails as well as the spoken word.

Gestures: What actions can you take that contribute to your partner's health, well-being, and vitality? This might include anything from cooking dinner, fixing the car, or organizing a night out, to helping your partner with her chores or tasks, or giving small gifts such as flowers or CDs.

Physicality: How can you facilitate connection and caring physically? Consider hugging, kissing, holding hands, stroking hair, back rubs, sitting together on the couch, and so on.

How To Create Psychological Smog

This exercise shows you what happens when you hold on tightly to your thoughts, turning them into a thick “psychological smog”. Pull your journal or worksheet out once again, and using the examples in chapter 8 as a guide, write down as many “smoggy” thoughts as you can identify:

Shoulds

No Point Trying

If Only

Painful Past

Scary Future

Reason Giving

Judgments

I Know Why

Deep-Seated Fears

Okay, so now you’ve got a long list of “smoggy thoughts.” The next step is to read them through and buy into them as much as you can. Give them all your attention, dwell on them, believe them, get totally absorbed in them. The aim is to make the psychological smog as thick as it can possibly be, to get so absorbed in these thoughts that you basically lose touch with everything else. Do this for at least a minute, then answer the questions below.

When we get lost in the smog, we soon stumble into the quicksand of painful emotions; so what are you feeling right now?

How do you feel toward your partner right now?

Does dwelling on these thoughts help to improve your relationship – or make it worse?

Right now, do you feel like you want to act on your values—to care for and connect with your partner? Or do you feel more like giving up, running away, or lashing out?

The Values Gap

Suppose a miracle happened and your partner suddenly turned into your perfect “soul mate”: no faults at all, no annoying habits, always there for you, able to meet your every need, want, and desire If that happened, then how would *you* change? Please take your time to seriously consider this and write your answers below.

What would you stop, start, do more of and less of?

What sort of partner would you try to become? What sort of personal qualities would you develop?

What attitude would you cultivate toward your partner?

How would you speak to him/her when you wanted something?

How would you respond to him/her when they were in pain?

How would you treat him/her when they made a mistake or screwed up?

Is there a gap between the way you’d ideally like to behave as a partner – the values you’d like to live by -- and the way that you actually are behaving?

What is stopping you from living by your values right now?

What do you fear might happen if you did start to live more by your values?

What do you think needs to happen first before you can start living more by your values?

Do you believe your partner should change before you do? If so, what do you expect your partner to do?

The judgmental mind—part 1

So what does your mind say to you when it really wants to beat you up? When your mind turns into judge, jury, and executioner—when it lays out all the evidence about what’s wrong with you, judges you as not good enough, and sentences you to suffer—what does that sound like? If someone could listen in to your thoughts, what would they hear your mind saying?

Take a moment to jot down some of the things your mind says. Complete each sentence with as many words or phrases as you can think of.

When my mind wants to judge me as “not good enough,” this is what it says:

My mind tells me that I am a ...

My mind tells me that I am too ...

My mind tells me that I am not enough of a ...

My mind tells me that I do too much of the following:

My mind tells me that I don’t do enough of the following:

My mind tells me that I lack the following:

Once you’ve done that, read through the list, pick the self-judgment that bothers you the most, and shorten it to a simple phrase of no more than five or six words—for example, I’m a loser, I’m too selfish, or I’m not witty enough. Then either work through the exercises in chapter 9 of ACT With Love, or run through similar exercises with your coach/therapist

The judgmental mind—part 2

When my mind wants to hook me into the “bad partner” story, this is what it says:

It tells me that my partner is a ...

It tells me that my partner is too ...

It tells me that my partner is not enough of a ...

It tells me that my partner does too much of the following:

It tells me that my partner doesn't do enough of the following:

It tells me that my partner lacks the following:

When I get hooked by this story, here is how it affects me: (describe changes in your feelings and your attitude towards your partner, and the way you treat him/her)

When I get hooked by this story, here is how it affects our relationship:

Once you've done this, either work through the defusion exercises in chapter 9 of ACT With Love, or run through similar exercises with your coach/therapist

Fighting Tactics You Use

Write down the tactics you both use in fighting. Start by acknowledging your own tactics (both the fair and the dirty tactics):

“When I want to win a fight, this is what I do ...”

“When my partner wants to win a fight, this is what he/she does ...”

Preferred Tactics And Ground Rules

Complete the following sentences, and then share your answers with your partner.

When we're having a fight --

I'd like you to accept me doing this:

I want to stop myself from doing this:

I'm willing to accept you doing this:

I want you to stop doing this:

Chasing And Running

Discuss chasing and running (as described in chapter 15 of ACT With Love). Share your answers with your partner.

Runners: When do you run? How do you feel immediately before you run? Why do you run? How do you feel when your partner chases you?

Chasers: When do you chase? How do you feel if your partner runs away? Why do you pursue? How do you feel when you're chasing?

Now put yourself in your partner's shoes. Think hard about what that would feel like. Write down what you imagine it must be like for them when they're running away or chasing after you:

Appreciating Your Partner

Fill in this form each day. It's okay if there's overlap and repetition between columns. Notice (at least) three things you appreciate about your partner. They don't have to be big things; they can be tiny. It might be the way he smiles, or the sound of her laughter.

Contemplate what your partner adds to your life. If you're stuck for ideas, consider these questions: If my partner were on his deathbed, what would I tell him I appreciated most about him? If my partner died, what would I find hardest about living alone? Each day notice (at least) three ways in which your partner contributes to your life. Again, they don't have to be big things. It might be the simple fact that she goes to work to earn money to help pay for some of the things you enjoy having. Or the simple pleasure of having someone to talk to over dinner. Or the feeling of added security you have when you're not alone.

Think back to when you first met your partner: what personal qualities and strengths did she have? What did he say or do that made him attractive? In all likelihood, those strengths and qualities are still there today. Each day notice (at least) three things your partner says or does that are representative of her personal strengths and qualities.

3 Things I Noticed Today That I Appreciate About My Partner	3 Ways My Partner Contributed To My Life Today	3 Things My Partner Said or Did Today That Represent Their Best Strengths and Qualities

Creating A Forgiveness Ritual

Many couples find it is very healing to create their own forgiveness ritual. You can use your own creativity to adapt this worksheet into something more personal.

Step 1: Complete these three sentences:

The thoughts, feelings, and memories I've been holding on to are:

Holding on to all this has hurt our relationship in the following ways:

I want to build a better relationship, based on the following values:

Step 2: Write, in your own words, a commitment to let all these painful thoughts and feelings come and go, again and again and again, no matter how many times they come back, without holding on to them or getting caught up in them:

My commitment is to ...

Step 3: Choose a special place and read your answers aloud to each other. This could be anywhere from a special room in your house, to a park or a beach. As one partner reads, the other listens mindfully and compassionately. Discuss this in advance, and write down what you will do:

Step 4: Do something that symbolizes starting over—for example, burn the letters and scatter the ashes. Discuss this in advance, and write down what you will do:

Step 5: Do something to connect lovingly—for example, kiss, hug, go out to dinner, or have a bath together. Discuss this in advance, and write down what you will do:

Screwing Up

Human beings screw up so often, it's important to consider these three questions:

When your partner screws up, how would you ideally respond?

When you screw up, how would you ideally like your partner to respond?

When either one of you screws up, what would you ideally say or do to handle it effectively and make amends?

Before answering these questions, get in touch with your values; reflect on the sort of partner you want to be. If you could respond mindfully, acting on your deepest values, then what would you say and do when one of you screws up? Are you willing to forgive, let go, and move on? Are you willing to make room for your painful feelings, let go of unhelpful thoughts, and discuss the issue in a way that allows for repairs? Are you willing to apply the principles of positive reinforcement (as described in chapter 18 of ACT With Love) to catch your partner doing it right and thank them, rather than come down hard when they do it wrong? And if not, what will your lack of willingness cost you in the long run? Now write your answers, below.

When your partner screws up, how would you ideally respond? What would you ideally say and do, with what sort of attitude?

When you screw up, how would you ideally like your partner to respond? What would they ideally say and do, with what sort of attitude?

When either you or your partner screws up, what would you ideally say or do to handle it effectively and/or make amends?

When either you or your partner screws up, what would you ideally like your partner to say or do, to handle it effectively and/or make amends?

Your Relationship: Looking Backwards

You can do this exercise for the last day, week or month, whichever you prefer. Look back over the last 24 hours (or last week or month), and reflect a) on the values-guided actions you have taken and b) actions you have taken that were inconsistent with those values. Which actions enhanced and enriched your relationship? Which actions had the opposite effect? (Note: there is no such thing as a “right” or “wrong” value. The left hand column contains common values that many couples share, but these may not be your values, so rewrite them as you wish.)

Relationship Values	Values- guided actions	Values-inconsistent actions
Connection		
Caring		
Contribution		
Respect		
Fairness		
Acceptance		
Assertiveness		
Sensuality		
Sexuality		
Having fun		
Kindness		
Teamwork		
Support/encouragement		
Trust		
Honesty		

Your Relationship: Moving Forwards

You can do this exercise for the last day, week or month, whichever you prefer. Look ahead to the next 24 hours (or week or month), and reflect a) on the values-guided actions you could take and b) actions that you could take that would be inconsistent with those values. Which actions would be likely to enhance and enrich your relationship? Which actions would be likely to have the opposite effect? (Note: there is no such thing as a “right” or “wrong” value. The left hand column contains common values that many couples share, but if these are not your values, please rewrite them.)

Relationship Values	Values- guided actions	Values-inconsistent actions
Connection		
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Sexuality		
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Trust		
Honesty		