

# Understanding & Overcoming Relationship Anxiety

with Dr. Lisa Firestone

# ABOUT LISA FIRESTONE



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# Health Effects of Relationship Anxiety

In a study of more than 5,600 people between the ages of 18 to 60, researchers found that those who said they felt insecure in relationships were more likely to suffer from chronic diseases — and heart disease in particular.

## 3 Topics of This Webinar

1. What is relationship anxiety?
2. Where does relationship anxiety come from?
3. How to overcome relationship anxiety

## 3 Key Concepts

1. Fear of Intimacy
2. Critical Inner Voice
3. Attachment Theory

Part 1:

What is relationship  
anxiety?

# Relationships Stir Up a Lot of Emotions

Fear of  
rejection

Insecurity

Fear of  
closeness

Distrust

## Anxiety over being in a relationship

- Avoid or are afraid of intimacy and relationships

Anxiety over not being in a relationship

- Feel insecure, desperate or overly focused on intimacy and relationships



# Fear of Intimacy

Interpersonal relationships are the ultimate source of happiness or misery. Love has the potential to generate intense pleasure and fulfillment or produce considerable pain and suffering.

- From Sex & Love in Intimate Relationships



# What is the Fear of Intimacy?

Most people say that they are seeking love, yet they often find it difficult to accept being loved and acknowledged for who they really are.

We may be tolerant of realizing our dreams and desires in fantasy, but very often we are intolerant of having them fulfilled in reality.

# What is the Fear of Intimacy?

“Love—kindness, affection, sensitive attunement, respect, companionship—is not only difficult to find, but is even more challenging for many people to accept and tolerate. ”

The degree of fear we  
have comes from our past.

# From The Fantasy Bond

*Most people have a fear of intimacy and at the same time are terrified of being alone. Their solution is to form a fantasy bond – an illusion of connection and closeness – that allows them to maintain emotional distance while assuaging loneliness and, in the process, meeting society's expectations regarding marriage and family.*

# The Fantasy Bond

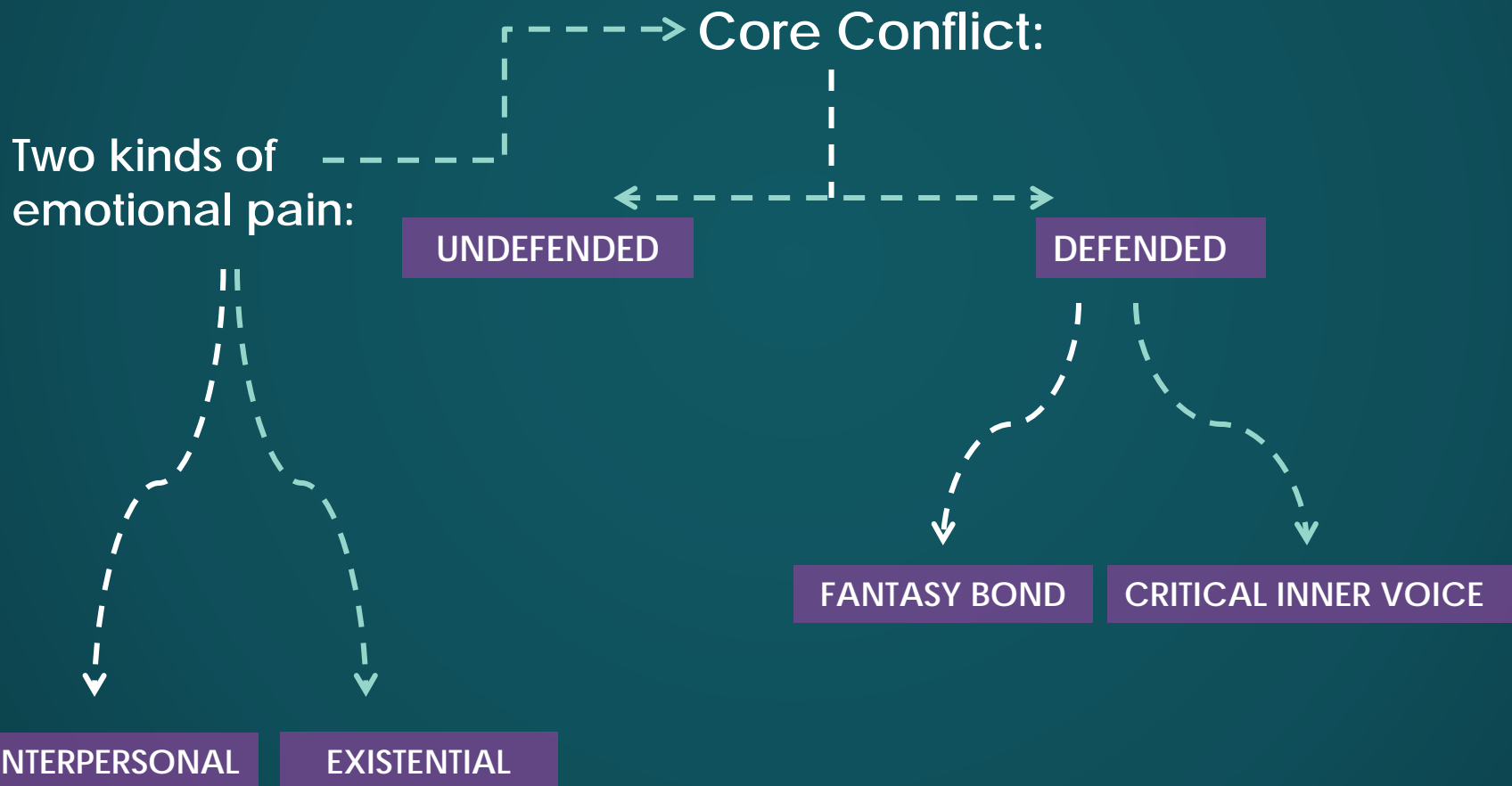
It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy that we recreate relationships from our past.



# Separation Theory

Robert Firestone, Ph.D.

Integrates psychoanalytic and existential systems of thought



# Critical Inner Voice

We all have a “critical inner voice,” which acts like a cruel coach inside our heads that questions, criticizes, and undermines our relationships.

# What is the Critical Inner Voice?

- § The critical inner voice refers to a well-integrated pattern of destructive thoughts toward our selves and others. The “voices” that make up this internalized dialogue are at the root of much of our maladaptive behavior.
- § This internal enemy fosters inwardness, distrust, self-criticism, self-denial, addictions and a retreat from goal-directed activities.
- § The critical inner voice effects every aspect of our lives: our self-esteem and confidence, and most importantly, our personal and intimate relationships.



# Common “Voices” in Relationships

## Voices About Yourself:

- You'll never find someone who understands you.
- Don't get too hooked on her.
- He doesn't really care about you.
- She is too good for you.
- You've got to keep him interested.
- As soon as she gets to know you, she'll reject you.
- You've got to be in control.
- It's your fault if he gets upset.
- Don't be too vulnerable, or you'll just wind up getting hurt.



**You're  
better off  
on your  
own.**

# Common “Voices” in Relationships

## Voices About Your Partner:

- Men are so insensitive, unreliable, selfish.
- Women are so fragile, needy, indirect.
- He only cares about being with his friends.
- Why get so excited? What’s so great about her anyway?
- He’s probably cheating on you.
- He just can’t get anything right.



You  
can't  
trust him.



She's so  
dramatic!

# Voices about Relationships:



Relationships never work out.  
People always just wind up  
getting hurt.

# How the Voice Process Impacts Relationships

## Self-Punishing Voice Process in Relationships:

EXAMPLE:

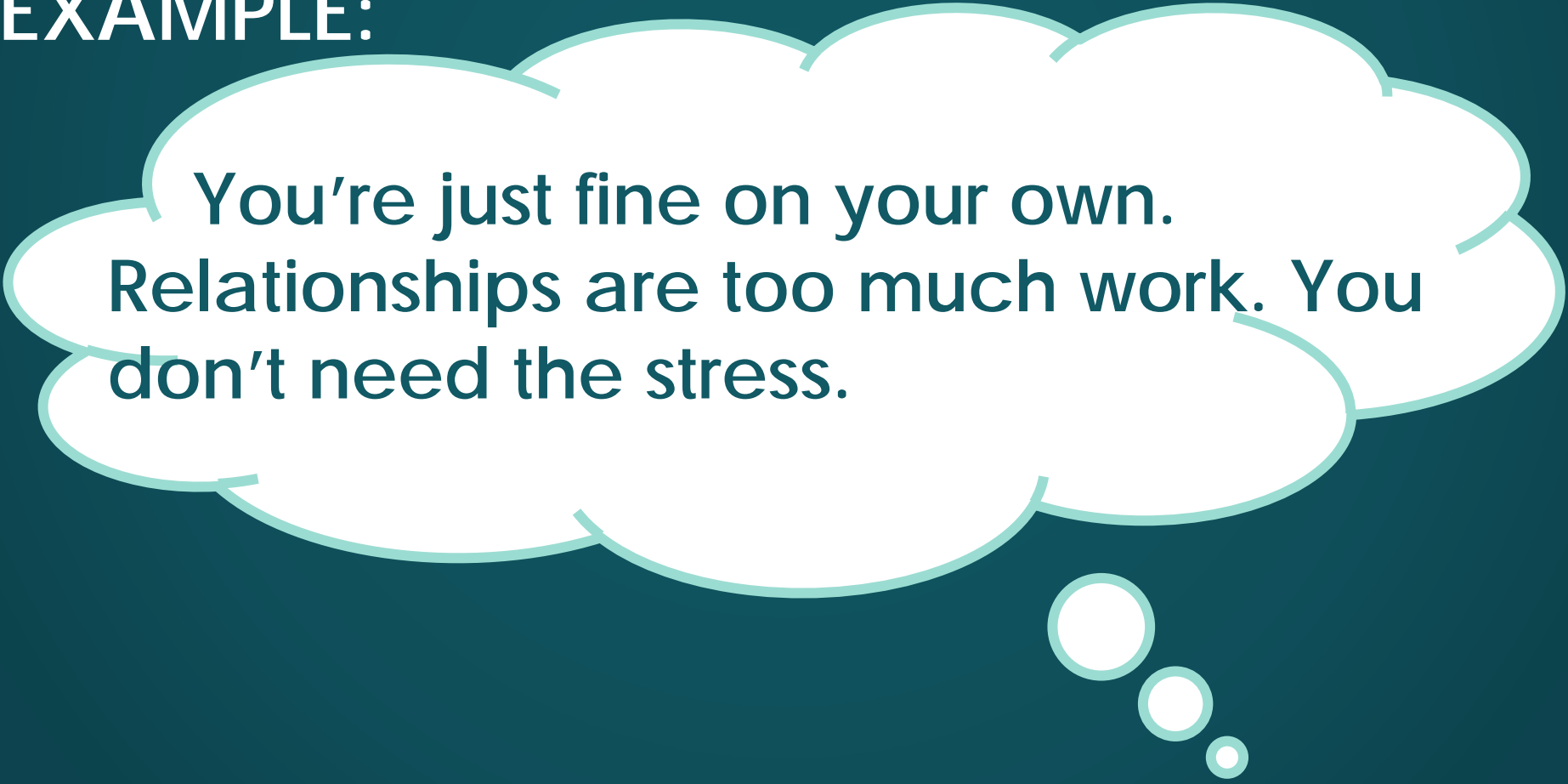


No one will ever love you. He/She will  
never care about you

# How the Voice Process Impacts Relationships

## Self-Soothing Voice Process in Relationships:

### EXAMPLE:



You're just fine on your own.  
Relationships are too much work. You  
don't need the stress.

# Why do we listen to our inner critic?

- While these attitudes can make us anxious, often they're very engrained in us.
- As adults, we may fail to see them as an enemy.
- The thoughts are unpleasant but comfortable in their familiarity.
- When another person sees us differently from our voices, we may actually start to feel uncomfortable and defensive, as it challenges these long-held points of identification.

# Reasons We Defend Against Love

## What are we afraid of?



Arouses  
anxiety and  
makes us feel  
vulnerable



Arouses  
sadness and  
painful feelings  
from the past



Provokes a  
painful identity  
crisis



Disconnects  
people from a  
“fantasy bond”  
with their  
parents



Arouses guilt in  
relation to  
surpassing a  
parent



Stirs up painful  
existential  
issues

# Real love makes us feel anxious and vulnerable

Love threatens longstanding psychological defenses formed early in life in relation to emotional pain and rejection, leaving a person feeling more vulnerable.



# Real love makes us feel anxious and vulnerable

- Letting ourselves fall in love means taking a risk.
- A new relationship is uncharted territory, and most of us have natural fears of the unknown.
- We're trusting another person, which makes us feel exposed and vulnerable.
- We tend to believe that the more we care, the more we can get hurt.

# How does relationship anxiety affect us?

- Cling
- Control
- Reject
- Withhold
- Punish
- Play the victim
- Retreat
- Avoid

# Psychological Defenses

- § Being loved by someone we love and admire threatens our defenses.
- § Habits we've long had that allow us to feel safe, self-focused or self-contained
- § Adaptations to our early environment that aren't adaptive in our adult lives

# Real love stirs arouses sadness from the past

- The ways we were hurt in previous relationships, starting from our childhood, have a strong influence on:
  - Why we choose the partners we do
  - How we perceive the people we get close to
  - How we act in our romantic relationships
- Old, negative dynamics may make us wary of opening ourselves up to someone new.
- We may steer away from intimacy, because it stirs up feelings of hurt, loss, anger or rejection.



# Love stirs up past pain



“When you long for something, like love, it becomes associated with pain,” the pain you felt at not having it in the past.

. - Pat Love, Ph.D., Author [The Truth About Love](#)

## Part 2:

Where does  
relationship anxiety  
come from?

# Attachment Theory

# What is Attachment Theory?



How do I get  
these people to  
take care of me?



# What is Attachment Theory?

- Our attachment system is activated when we are distressed.
- The way our parents interact with us (particularly during times of distress) forms the basis of our attachment style.



Attachment  
System  
Activating!

# Understanding Attachment

- Attachment patterns are formed in infancy, during the first two years of life.
- Once established, it is a pattern that affects us throughout our lives, particularly in how we relate in intimate relationships and with our children.

# Attachment Theory

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Humans rely on attachment figures for:

- Protection (*safe*)
- Support (*seen*)
- Emotion regulation (*soothed*)

# Attachment Theory

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- The attachment behavioral system is an evolved, innate regulator of proximity
  - § Safety
  - § Safe exploration
- When threats abate, behavioral systems other than attachment (e.g., exploration, caregiving) can be activated, allowing a person to become more competent/autonomous
- The theory applies from “the cradle to the grave” (Bowlby)

# Patterns of Attachment in Children

## Category of Attachment

- Secure
- Insecure – avoidant
- Insecure- anxious/ambivalent
- Insecure - disorganized

## Parental Interactive Pattern

- Emotionally available, perceptive, responsive
- Emotionally unavailable, imperceptive, unresponsive and rejecting
- Inconsistently available, perceptive and responsive and intrusive
- Frightening, frightened, disorienting, alarming

We have different attachments to different people.

Mother

Father

Grandparent

Aunt or Uncle

# Internal Working Models

- In many ways the attachment style we formed early on impacts how we behave in relationships and how we expect others to behave.
- People tend to repeat or recreate their early attachment patterns throughout their lives.

# Patterns of Attachment

## Patterns in Childhood

- Secure
- Insecure - avoidant
- Insecure - anxious/ambivalent
- Insecure - disorganized

## Patterns in Adulthood

- Secure
- Dismissive
- Preoccupied
- Fearful-Avoidant



# Attachment Theory and Research

“Attachment underlies later capacity to make effectual bonds,” particularly with marital bonds and trouble parenting.

# Secure Attachment Promotes:

- Flexible self-regulation
- Prosocial behavior
- Empathy
- Positive sense of emotional well-being and self-esteem
- Coherent life-story

# Is Your Attachment Style Affecting Your Relationship?

- **Secure Attachment:** Tend to be more satisfied in their relationships
- **Preoccupied Attachment:** Tend to be desperate to form a fantasy bond. Instead of feeling real love or trust toward their partner, they often feel emotional hunger
- **Dismissive Attachment:**
  - Have the tendency to emotionally distance themselves from their partner
- **Fearful-Avoidant Attachment:**
  - Live in an ambivalent state in which they're afraid of being too close to or too distant from others

# Attachment and Relationships

Many studies have shown that attachment anxiety and avoidance are related to deficits in caring for relationship partners and engaging in altruistic behavior more generally (e.g., Kuncle & Shaver, 1994; Gillath et al., 2005).

Preoccupied people tend to be self-focused when engaged in supposedly caring/altruistic actions, leading to intrusiveness, poor assessment of others' actual needs, and personal distress.

Dismissive people tend to be less interested in helping others and to derogate needy others. They are relatively deficient in the domain of compassion and love.

# Preoccupied Attachment

- Self-critical and insecure
- Seek approval and reassurance from others
- Anticipate rejection, loss of interest, and abandonment
- Worried and not trusting
- Clingy and overly dependent with their partner
- Feel resentful and angry when partner doesn't provide attention and reassurance

# Dismissive Attachment

- Resist a depth of emotional closeness and intimacy
- Feel intruded on by too much physical contact
- Disconnected from own wants
- Use indirect strategies such as hinting, complaining, sulking
- Tend to be overly focused on themselves
- Often appear distant and aloof
- Denigrate needs of others
- Find it unnecessary to disclose their thoughts and feelings
- Tend to withdraw when partner approaches them

Part 3:

How to overcome  
relationship anxiety

The fantastic news is that if you can make sense of your childhood experiences—especially your relationships with your parents—you can transform your attachment models toward security. The reason this is important is that relationships— with friends, with romantic partners, with present or possible future offspring—will be profoundly enhanced. And you'll feel better with yourself, too!

~ Dr. Dan Siegel



# Our Definition of Love

- *Defining love in behavioral terms is a challenging undertaking.*
- *In our view, actions that fit the description of a loving relationship are expressions of affection, both physical and emotional; a wish to offer pleasure and satisfaction to one's mate; tenderness, compassion, and sensitivity to the needs of the other; a desire for shared activities and pursuits; an appropriate level of sharing of one's possessions; an ongoing, honest exchange of personal feelings; and the process of offering concern, comfort, and outward assistance for the loved one's aspirations.*
- *Love includes feeling for the other that goes beyond a selfish or self-centered interest in the loved one. As such, love nurtures and has a positive effect on each person's self-esteem and sense of well-being. Love is truth and never involves deception, because misleading another person fractures his or her sense of reality and is therefore a serious human rights violation that adversely affects mental health.*

# The Importance of Connection

Studies show that love and relationships lead to:

1. Faster healing
2. Reduced pain
3. A sharper mind
4. More success
5. Decreased stress
6. Increased happiness
7. Longer lives

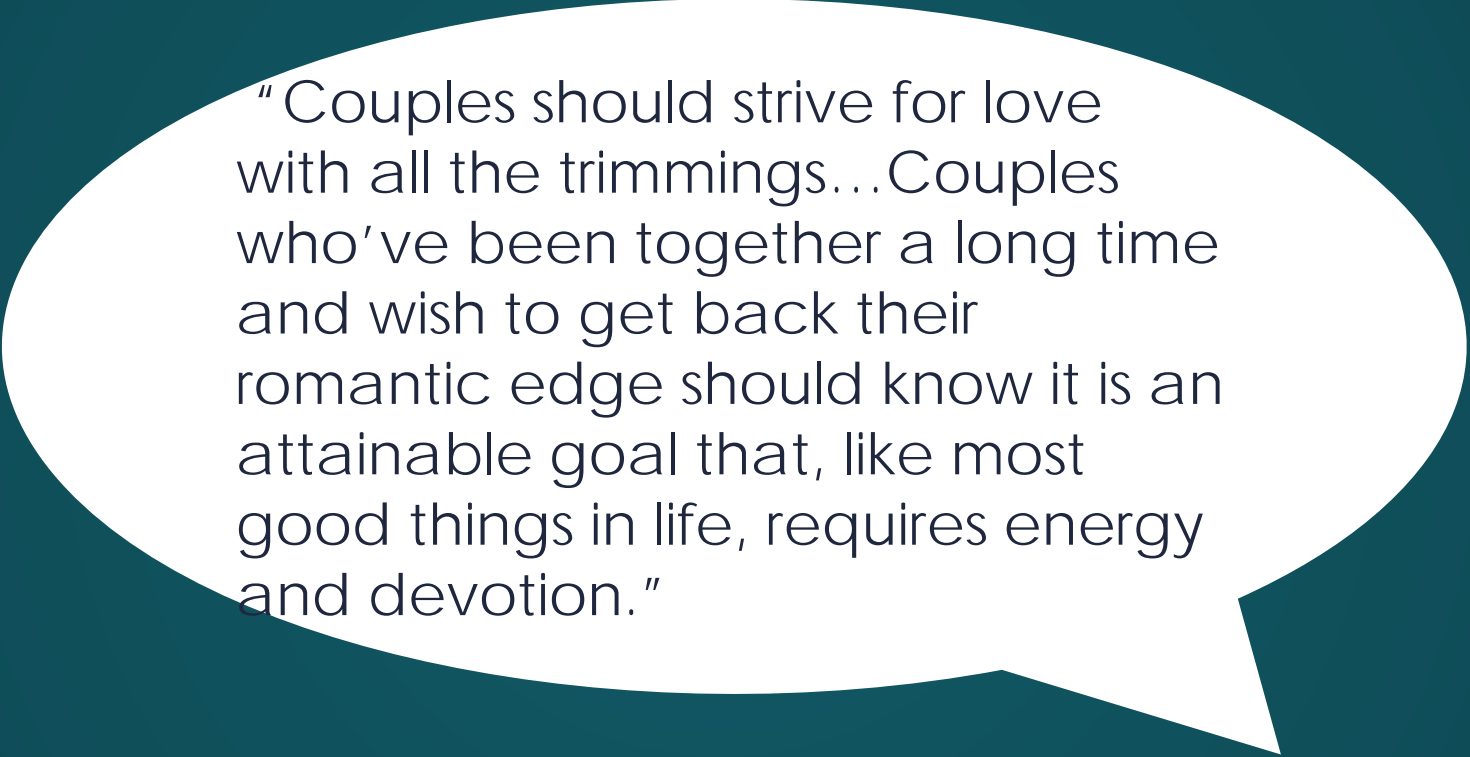
# Romantic Love

## vs. Passionate or Companion-like Love

- “Romantic love,” characterized by “intensity, engagement and sexual interest,” is associated with marital satisfaction, well-being, high self-esteem and relationship longevity.
- “Passionate” or “obsessive love” has the same features as romantic love but also includes feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. Passionate/obsessive love works well in short-term relationships, but it hurts long-term relationships.
- “Companion-like love” leads to only moderate satisfaction in both short-term and long-term relationships.
- Romantic love can last in a long-term relationship and keep both people happy.

# Romantic Love

vs. Passionate or Companion-like Love

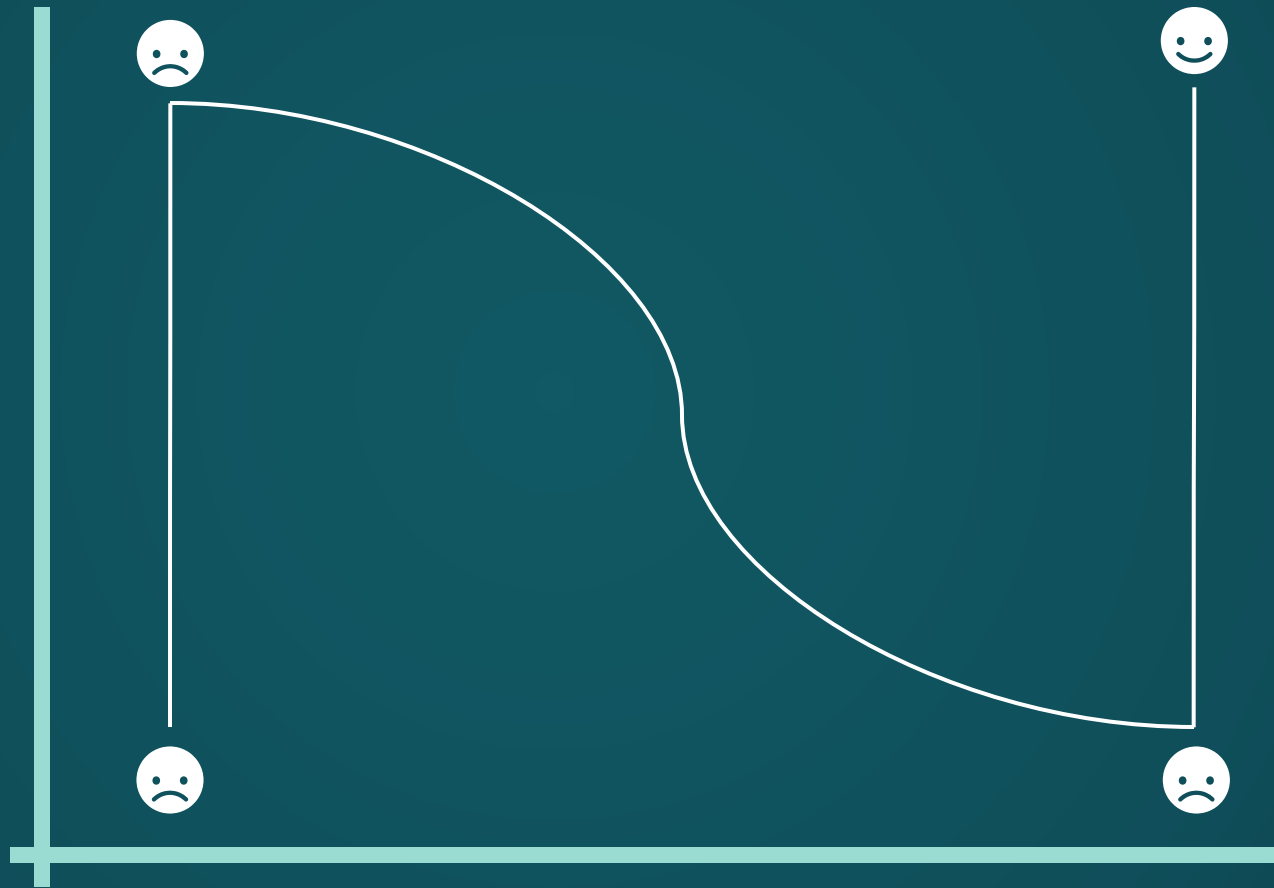


"Couples should strive for love with all the trimmings... Couples who've been together a long time and wish to get back their romantic edge should know it is an attainable goal that, like most good things in life, requires energy and devotion."

- Researcher Bianca P. Acevedo, Ph.D.

# Differentiation and Linkage

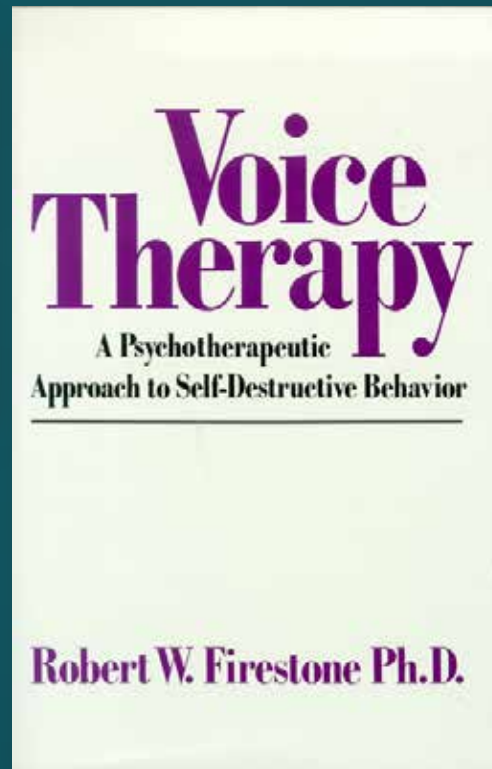
Linkage  
(emotional  
closeness)



Differentiation  
(individuation as an individual)

# Voice Therapy

Cognitive/ Affective/ Behavioral/ Approach



# The Therapeutic Process in Voice Therapy

## Step I

The person articulates his or her self-attacks in the second person and expresses any feelings that arise.

## Step II

- The person discusses reactions to saying their voices.
- The person tries to understand the relationship between these attacks and early life experiences.

## Step III

- The person answers back to the voice attacks.
- The person makes a rational statement about how he or she really is.

# The Therapeutic Process in Voice Therapy

## Step IV

The person develops insight about how the voice attacks are influencing his or her present-day behaviors.

## Step V

- The person collaborates with the therapist to plan changes in these behaviors.
- The person is encouraged to not engage in self-destructive behaviors and to increase the positive behaviors these negative thoughts discourage.

If you are interested in attending a voice therapy training or in getting training materials please contact [jina@glendon.org](mailto:jina@glendon.org) or visit [www.glendon.org](http://www.glendon.org).



Self



Anti-Self



# The Firestone Voice Scale for Couples

## FVSC

### Instructions

All people experience thoughts that are critical towards themselves and others. For example, when a person is worried about his (her) relationship, he (she) might think:  
"You'd better hang onto him (her). This may be your last chance. You may never get anybody again."

Or a person might have critical thoughts about a potential partner:  
"Don't get involved. You might get hurt because he (she) is so unreliable."

Negative thoughts are a part of everyone's thinking process. Please indicate the frequency with which you experience the following thoughts by circling the corresponding number.

**1 – NEVER 2 – RARELY 3 – ONCE IN A WHILE 4 – FREQUENTLY 5 – MOST OF THE TIME**

For example, you think or say to yourself:

1 2 **3** 4 5      "You're unattractive. Why should she (he) want to go out with you?"

- |    |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|----|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | You'd better put on a good front. Put your best foot forward or he (she) won't be interested. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2. | You'd be better off on your own.  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3. | He (She) doesn't give a damn about you.   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4. | He (She) never spends time with you. He (She) is always with his (her) friends/family.        | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5. | He (She) doesn't want to hear your opinions, so keep them to yourself.                        | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

# You in Your Relationship: Your Critical Inner Voice/The Real You

| What my critical  
inner voice says  
about me in my  
relationship

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| What I realistically  
think about myself  
in my relationship

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# Your Partner in Your Relationship: Your Critical Inner Voice/The Real You

| What my critical  
inner voice says  
about my partner  
in my relationship

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| What I realistically  
think about my  
partner in my  
relationship

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# Relationships:

## Your Critical Inner Voice/The Real You

| What my critical  
inner voice says  
about relationships

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| What I realistically  
think about  
relationships

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Curious

Open

Accepting

Loving

# Self Compassion

*'Being touched by and not avoiding your suffering'*

From Kristin Neff:

*Self-compassion is not based on self-evaluation. It is not a way of judging ourselves positively; it is a way of relating to ourselves kindly.*

## Three Elements:

1. Self-kindness Vs. Self-judgment
2. Mindfulness Vs. Over-identification with thoughts
3. Common humanity Vs. Isolation

# Developing a Secure Attachment

- Feel the full pain of your childhood and make sense of it.
- Create a coherent narrative.
- Because our attachment ability is broken in a relationship, it can be fixed in a relationship. This can be with a romantic partner, a close friend or a good therapist. It takes time to develop an Earned Secure Attachment in a relationship. Stick with it!



# Developing Security in Relationships

- To develop security in a relationship, it is important to look for a partner who is secure themselves, someone who makes you feel safe, seen, and soothed.
- You can also develop security in relationships by developing more security in yourself.

# Writing a Coherent Narrative

- “It’s never too late to bring both hemispheres [of your brain] into development and activity.” ~Dr. Dan Siegel
- Writing a coherent narrative integrates your brain by drawing upon the right side of your brain for autobiographical memories and deep emotions, as well as the left side of your brain for language, logic and linear storytelling.
- Make sense of the nonsense.

# Tips for Writing a Coherent Narrative

- ü Write as an adult.
- ü Write rationally
- ü Write autobiographically.
- ü Write intuitively.
- ü Write with feeling.
- ü Write about how the past influences your present.
- ü Write with balance.
- ü Write with self-compassion.

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& Lisa Firestone

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# What to Calm Yourself Down When You Feel Anxious

# Toolkit

- ü Name It to Tame It
- ü Wheel of Awareness
- ü RAIN Approach
- ü Balancing the Mind
- ü Strengthen Your Internal Observer

Recognize

Acknowledge (Accept  
Allow)

Investigate

Non-identification

Sensations

Images

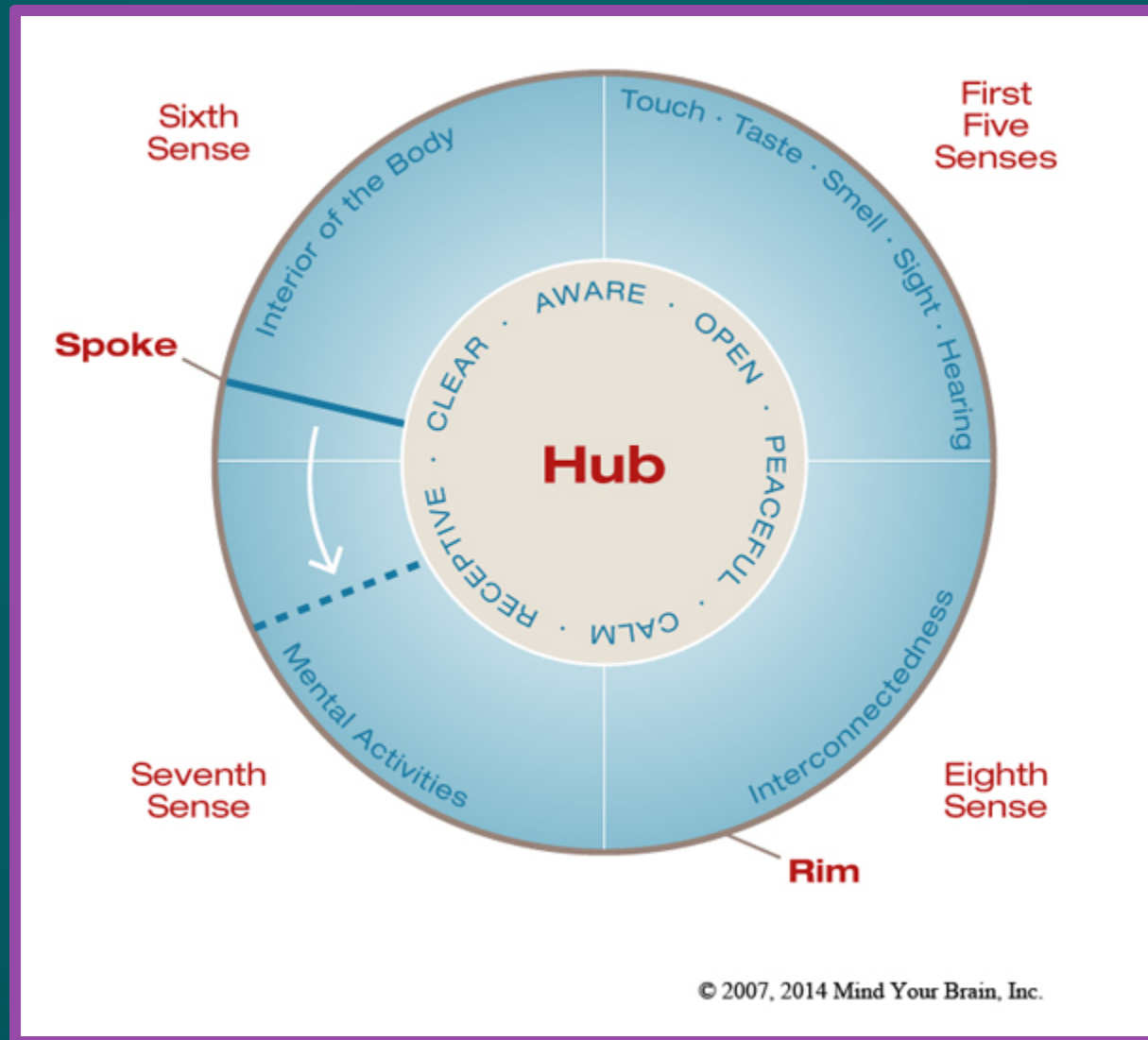
Feelings

Thoughts



# Mindfulness

# Wheel of Awareness



# Tips Based on Your Attachment Patterns



# Exercises for Preoccupied Attachment

- Name it to tame it
- Wheel of Awareness
- Handling emotions
- Strengthen your internal observer

# Exercises for Dismissive Attachment

- Wheel of Awareness
- Non-verbal television exercise
- Autobiographical journaling
- Emotional intelligence quiz
- Notice any feelings of wanting closeness

# Exercises for Disorganized Attachment

- Journaling
- SIFT through your writing
- RAIN
- Balancing the mind

# EIGHT

## Ways to Overcome Your Fear of Love

1. Recognize your fear.
2. Look at your history.
3. Challenge your critical inner voice.
4. Challenge your defenses.
5. Feel your feelings, but do the right thing.
6. Be vulnerable.
7. Date outside your comfort zone.
8. Focus on what you give over what you get.



# The Value of Vulnerability



There can be no intimacy—emotional intimacy, spiritual intimacy, physical intimacy—without vulnerability. One of the reasons there is such an intimacy deficit today is because we don't know how to be vulnerable. It's about being honest with how we feel, about our fears, about what we need, and, asking for what we need. Vulnerability is a glue that holds intimate relationships together.

- Brene Brown, Ph.D., Author [The Power of Vulnerability](#)



We love, because it's the

ONLY TRUE

ADVENTURE

- Nikki Giovanni

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# THANKS

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