

Growing Healthy Relationships

(a synergia psychhealth resource)

Please note: the information contained in this handout is of a general nature, and may not offer specific information for your situation.

When a person reaches the end of their life, it is rare that they will say 'I wish I had spent more time at the office!' Instead, typical 'deathbed regrets' we will often hear are:

1. I wish I had spent more time with my loved ones & loved them better, and
2. I wish I had taken more risks!

Loving our loved ones better is reminiscent of something that has often been said - that our deepest needs are to know and be known, and to love and be loved. If that is so, understanding ourselves and developing relationship microskills has to be a priority. As risky as loving is, *not* learning to love others may be the height of risky behaviour! This handout seeks to explore these two issues of knowing and loving.

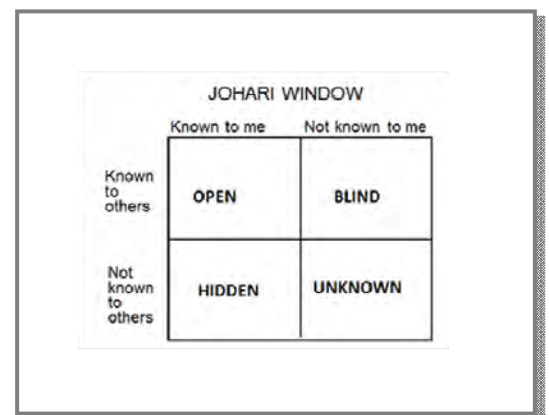
We start with knowing ourselves. To have healthy relationships with others, we need to have a good understanding of, and healthy relationship with, the *self*. Who am I, really? Who is this *me* that I bring to the table in relationships?

The real me?

How can I know the real me?

The **Johari Window** (developed by two blokes named Joe & Harry!¹) is a great tool that helps us to look at how self-aware I am, how well I trust, how open I am in relationships, and issues around self esteem. It plots two variables:

- what *I* know and don't know about myself, and
- what *others* know and don't know about me.



People who have healthy self esteem and who are emotionally healthy tend to have a large **open** quadrant. They have a good relationship with the *self* and they know themselves reasonably well (so, few blind spots). They are not struggling with false guilt or excessive issues of shame about things that have happened in their past (so a smaller hidden quadrant). All of this provides them with a great springboard into effective relationships with others.

A large **blind** quadrant suggests that we don't know ourselves very well. There are blocks in our self awareness. We could have habits or prejudices or biases – which we are oblivious to - that grate on others or alienate them or push them away. It is easy to see how these things would get in the way of developing and maintaining healthy relationships.

A large **hidden** quadrant in our Johari Window is common when we are uncomfortable with *self-disclosure* – sharing honestly with another. It could be that I might be a very private person (as introverts

¹ Joe Luft & Harry Ingham (Luft, 1969).

tend to be) and am not comfortable with revealing information about myself. Alternatively, we may have developed difficulties trusting others during the formative years in our family of origin. Was your upbringing healthy or unhealthy? Could you talk freely about what was happening for you, or was that risky? Were you encouraged to speak your mind, or was the family culture such that there were issues that could never be openly discussed – ‘no go’ zones? Was articulating your views permitted or frowned upon? The Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy wrote that all *happy* families resemble one another, but each *unhappy* family is unhappy in its own way. Some basic rules that tend to be present in most unhappy families, however, are: *don't talk, don't trust, and don't feel*. It's easy to see how growing up in this sort of environment does not prepare us well for being open and vulnerable with others.

A relatively large **unknown** quadrant – what I don't know about myself and what others don't know about me – is mostly about future potential – skills, abilities, gifts and capacities that I am yet to realise I possess. Painful, un-processed experiences, buried deep in the unconscious, could also be stored here.

If you were to plot your own Johari Window, what would it look like? What would be the relative sizes of the four quadrants? What might be some implications for your primary relationships?

When do you find it
hardest & easiest to
show the real you?



Expanding the open quadrant

We increase the size of our **open** quadrant when we reduce the size of our blind and hidden quadrants.

So, to reduce our **blindspots**, we need to:

- invite feedback from trusted others;
- access material about relational issues, particularly focussing on habits and traits that I might possess which could be getting in the way of developing & maintaining healthy relationships, &
- observe and reflect upon other's responses to our behaviour and words.

We reduce our **hidden** quadrant by:

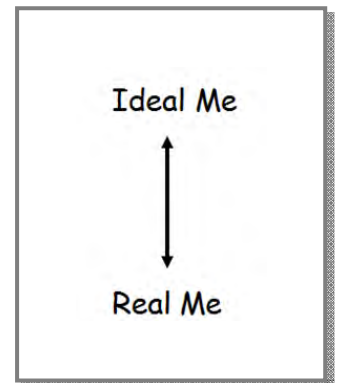
- resisting the need for others and ourselves to be perfect – nobody is;
- being part of accountability relationships where trust is high;
- dealing with past issues that are causing us to feel shame or false guilt, and
- learning to self-disclose bit by bit with trusted others.

However, for some of us, this issue of self-disclosure might be a problem for a totally different reason: I disclose too much about myself through over-sharing or over-talking. This is particularly a challenge for extraverts, who travel through life with the belief that the world is waiting for them to say something! Clearly this tendency may in fact be a blind spot.

What about self-image?

The ability to push out our **open** quadrant by receiving feedback without being wounded and, at the same time, being appropriately vulnerable with others is largely dependent on having a healthy sense of self. I can only do these things if I esteem or value myself. I need to have positive self-regard.

We can measure our self-esteem by looking at the gap between how we see ourselves - our *real me*, and how we would like to be – our *ideal me*. The greater the gap; the lower the self-esteem. A big gap between the two makes us feel that reaching the ideal is impossible. A small gap between the two indicates healthy self-esteem: the need for on-going growth and improvement is recognised and acknowledged, but it isn't a source of distress or make me view myself through a negative lens.



We work on building an appropriate, healthy self-image by:

- Examining our *ideal me*: is it realistic and achievable; am I expecting too much of myself; am I being perfectionistic? And,
- Examining our *real me*: am I really as bad as I think I am; what is going on that I view myself in such a negative light; what are trusted others saying about me? Is the view I have of myself distorted or true?

Healthy self-esteem is the ability to *know* yourself, *accept* yourself, and then to *forget* yourself.

Am I really listening or just waiting for a chance to talk?

How can we make it easier for others to open themselves up to us? We demonstrate interest and an others-focus by developing our attending (intentional listening) skills. Listening is hard work. Our body temperature, pulse, and blood pressure all go up when we are listening to another person properly.

Think about your last meaningful conversation with someone, and try to recall if you did anything mentioned on the list below. Try and notice if you're doing any of these things next time you're having a conversation:

- Do you look at your watch while talking to someone?
- Do you tend to interrupt people while they are speaking?
- Do you tend to look around you, or look at other people, while someone is speaking to you?
- Do you tend to think of an answer while someone is speaking to you?
- Do you make listening noises without really listening to people?
- Do you change the topic of conversation before the other person is ready?
- Do you normally look at the other person while talking with them?
- Do you usually ask meaningful, relevant questions, & follow up questions?
- Do you bring the conversation to an end before the other person is ready?
- Do you make assumptions about why people say certain things?

Getting the complete message
Non-verbal body language: **55%**
Tone of voice: **38%**
Words: **7%**

When we are doing things like checking your watch, interrupting or changing the topic before the other person is ready, it can send the message to the other person that they are unimportant, or that you believe your story matters more.

Pay attention to your own, and the other person's, tone of voice and body language. Only 7% of a person's message is conveyed by their words (that's why email is fraught with danger – 93% of the message is absent!). By not actually looking at the person speaking (in western cultures we are comfortable with having direct eye contact in 70-80% of the conversation) we are actually missing out on more than half the message.

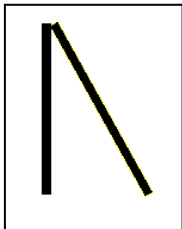
Attending (showing up!)

You can demonstrate that you are really listening by using effective attending micro-skills:

- **S** - sit or stand square
- **O** - have an open posture
- **L** - lean towards the other
- **E** - have appropriate eye contact
- **R** - adopt a relaxed pose

Being Whole in Whole Relationships

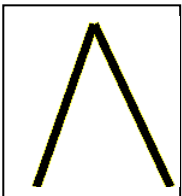
David Jansen and Margaret Newman have developed a simple but powerful way to understand the health or otherwise of our relationships.



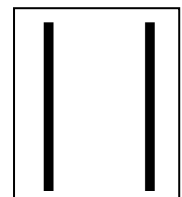
In this relationship one party - represented by the upright line - is dominant. They make most of the decisions and hold most of the power. The 'leaning' person has been (knowingly or unknowingly disempowered) but goes along with the arrangement for all sorts of reasons, e.g.

- They may see themselves as weak or fragile and are happy to be led;
- They may be wanting to avoid confrontation and possible conflict, so they give in.

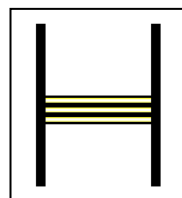
An abusive relationship usually looks like this, although not all relationships in this first model are abusive. If we think of the relationship as a single unit, the breakdown here is $\frac{3}{4} + \frac{1}{4} = 1$ - it lacks equality. At some level, one party does not possess or act on their relational power.



This relationship is healthier than the first option. It is $\frac{1}{2} + \frac{1}{2} = 1$, but what looks like equality is actually dependence. These two people lean on each other in co-dependent ways. One cannot make decisions without the other. There is no *me*, only *we*. If one moves, the other will fall over. Unfortunately, this is often incorrectly portrayed as the way healthy relationships should be.



This is not really a relationship. Rather it represents two individuals who may be sharing the same space but not connecting. If this is a married couple, we would call them married singles. There is high independence but no intimacy; there is actually no wholeness or oneness here, but $1 + 1 = 2$. Over time we would expect the lines to move further away from each other and eventually the relationship would be just a memory of something that once was.



This is the most healthy model. (Ladies think of the letter **H**; blokes see it as a set of goal posts.) Here, each party brings a healthy sense of self and independence - the upright lines - to the relationship, but each also works willingly and intentionally on effective connections - the horizontal lines. There are: my interests, your interests, and our interests; my friends, your friends, and our friends. The formula? $1 \times 1 = 1$. One healthy person times another healthy person equals one healthy relationship.

An instructive but scary exercise is to list all of our primary relationships under one or other of these models. What might that tell you about yourself and the health of these relationships? Who are you over- or under-connected to? How much equality is present? How much or how little dependence or independence does it suggest? Where are connection and intimacy needs being met?

But how do we move to this healthy balance of connection and independence?

Bonding & Boundaries

Henry Cloud and John Townsend have helped us understand the two primary components in healthy relationships:

There must be:

- **Bonding** – a sense of being together on something of a shared journey; good connections leading to *relational* growth, appropriate intimacy (the **we** of relationship), and
- **Boundaries** – room for diversity and *personal* growth, space for being separate, an acceptance and honouring of each party's individuality (the **me** in the *we*).

As a *me* in relationship, each of us needs to be committed to a growing sense of *we* – the relationship. However, we both also need to ensure that the *we* is not stifling or obliterating the *me*.

How does this play out in parenting?

- **Bonding** – we want our children to have a healthy sense of belonging to the family, to have a strong sense of being part of the family identity, to feel part of and contribute to the family closeness and togetherness.
- **Boundaries** – we want them to know they are different, they are not their brother or sister, they have their own identity and are free to pursue and fulfil their own dreams.

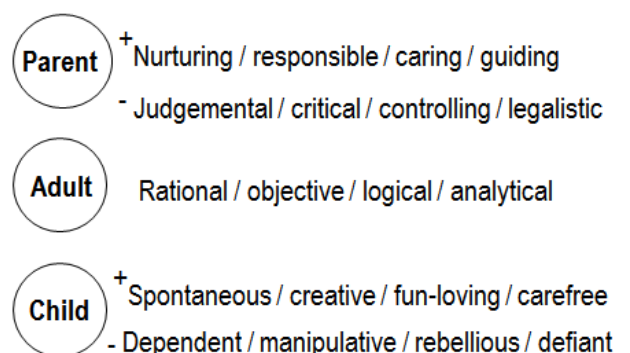
Instilling these two principles in our children will go a long way towards preparing them for life and for their own health-filled relationships.

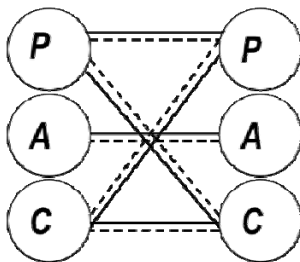
If marriage is about leaving the family of origin and cleaving to their partner,

- our children will cleave to that partner if they have learned about cleaving in our own family, and
- the quality of their cleaving will be dependent on the quality of their really leaving us.

Transactional Analysis (TA)

TA is another model which describes healthy and unhealthy patterns of relating. It was popularised in Eric Berne's book *Games People Play*. **TA** defines an interaction between two people as a *transaction*, and seeks to examine, or *analyse*, that interaction. Berne taught that, at any one time, we can be operating or interacting out of one of three primary *ego states*, two of which have both negative and positive aspects to them.



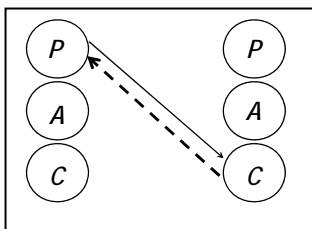


Berne suggested that a mark of emotional health is the capacity to move freely between the three modes - the positive Parent, the Adult, and the positive Child - with the Adult determining which mode is the most appropriate for the context.

People who enjoy a health-filled relationship move – usually unconsciously - with a reasonable degree of fluidity between the positive Parent, the Adult, and the positive Child. They ‘parent’ each other by nurturing and supporting each other and jointly taking responsibility for the quality of the relationship. They activate the adult effectively by making good decisions together without manifesting excessive negative emotions. They let the positive child out by relaxing, by enjoying restorative activities.

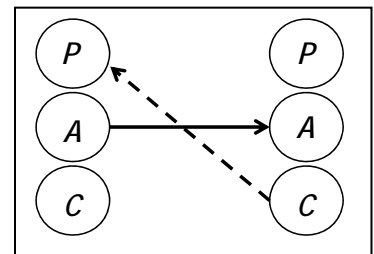
- Which of these ego states do you identify with the most or the least?
- What have been the consequences for your relationships?

Unhealthy relationships, on the other hand, tend to be *stuck* in a dance which both increases relational dissatisfaction and decreases relational growth.



A *parallel transaction* is when both parties fit into their expected roles. Each individual plays the game, so there is usually no conflict. Note though, that this may not be healthy if it is a consistent pattern. In the example on the left, one is playing the *Parent*; the other the *Child*. We can assume therefore that this relationship lacks authentic equality. It will take courage for both parties to break out of this well-entrenched dance.

A *crossed transaction* is when one (or both) of the individuals in the relationship doesn't stay with their assigned role. They break the (usually unspoken) rules. The *Parent* may decide they want a relationship with an *Adult* not a *Child*, or the *Child* may decide to assert themselves and want to relate as *Adult* to *Adult*. They want to re-configure the relationship, so that usually leads to conflict. However, well-managed conflict could actually take this relationship to a new, healthier level.



Conclusion

*Many people will walk in and out of your life.
But some will leave footprints in your heart.*

What sort of footprints are you leaving in the hearts of those you care about?



Resources

Boundaries, H Cloud, & J Townsend, Zondervan (1992)
Games People Play, E Berne, Penguin (1967)
Really Relating, D Jansen & M Newman, Random House (1994)