

Power-Less Relationships: The Foundation For Healthy Intimacy

Power is at the center of our culture. We classify ourselves as more or less powerful, and exercise power in a variety of ways. The exercise of power is virtually an unconscious reflex.

Everywhere we go we unconsciously classify and give credibility to people based on the cars they drive, the homes they own, the clothes and jewelry they wear, the ways they move and carry themselves, their height and weight, the vocabulary they use, the degrees they have earned, the titles they have after their names, where they attend church, the part of town in which they live. On and on, the list is virtually unending. Without even thinking or recognizing what we are doing, we think of people as more or less powerful.

When we leave the external world and enter our homes, it is not surprising that power is still at play. Money, for example, becomes a currency of power. People use money to manipulate each other. Financial disputes not only destroy marriages, they can continue unrelentingly through the painful process of separation and divorce. But power also evidences itself in far more subtle ways. Suffice it to say for now that we are thoroughly programmed to *automatically, without thought, relate to each other through power.*

Exactly What Do We Mean By *Power*?

Dictionaries define *power* as the capacity to exercise control or authority. Thus, we could interchangeably use the words control and power in our discussion. Essentially, when we are talking about power and intimate relationships, **we are talking about the use of various types of control to get what we want.**

Exactly What Do We Mean By *Intimacy*?

Dictionaries variously describe intimate relationships as close, private, familiar, personal, knowledgeable (characterized by knowledge of one's deepest nature), and sexual. For our purpose, *we will think of intimate relationships as sexual relationships characterized by a deep sharing and understanding of each other's thoughts and feelings.*

Consider the following two dilemmas as examples of how power undermines intimacy. Think about your own relationship as you consider these two dilemmas.

Dilemma Number One: *When I reveal my deepest thoughts and feelings I feel unsafe.*

When we reveal our deepest thoughts and feelings, we are vulnerable to the use of power or control by our partner. If we sense that we are unsafe, intense and deep feelings of insecurity are activated. In other words, if we are afraid our partner will use what we say against us, we're not likely to reveal our true selves.

The important point here is that if we feel unsafe we will protect ourselves. It is a natural and instinctive response. In this state we will not share our deepest thoughts and feelings.

The fear that we are unsafe can come from inside. Many of us have had experiences in our families of origin, in previous intimate relationships, and/or in the workplace, where we have felt unsafe because others were using tactics of power or control. Because of this history, we automatically assume, from the inside, regardless of our partner's behavior, that we need to protect ourselves. In order to experience deep intimacy we must first overcome defenses that originate from inside ourselves and from previous relationships.

The fear that we are unsafe can come from our partner. Overcoming internal defenses is especially difficult, if not impossible, when strategies and assumptions of power are built into our current relationships. *When this is the case, we hide and protect ourselves.*

In sum, power differentials make us feel unsafe, internally and externally. When we feel unsafe, we defend ourselves in any of the ways that we have learned in previous relationships. Defensiveness, which results from power differentials, thwarts and prevents intimacy because it triggers our natural instincts for self-defense. In this state, we will not reveal our deepest thoughts and feelings.

Dilemma Number Two: *If I act like my mate wants me to act in the bedroom, it will come back to haunt me outside the bedroom.*

When we "go into the bedroom" we enter a very different realm. In this realm opposites attract.

Women prefer dominant male sexual partners. That is, women express preferences for aggressive or dominant men, and men enjoy being aggressive or dominant in sexual relationships. On the other hand, women want men to be sensitive (in touch with and able to communicate feelings). These seemingly contradictory expectations are confusing to men.

Men prefer submissive sexual partners. Men express preferences for women who exhibit submissive sexual behaviors, and women enjoy being sexually submissive.

On the other hand, men want women to be assertive (think for themselves, express their opinions). These seemingly contradictory expectations are confusing to women.

This is not to say that men and women do not compatibly enjoy switching gender roles, or that gender roles cannot play out in opposition to the stereotypes. However, even same sex partners frequently select mates who display opposite gender patterns.

Like it or not, gender neutrality really does not exist very much in our real-world sexual relationships. In these relationships, dominant and submissive patterns are at play, and represent natural ways in which we attract and satisfy our partners' sexual needs.

Importantly, since the worlds outside our homes reinforce relationships based on power, and since our relationships in the bedroom also reinforce dominant and submissive patterns that reflect power differentials, we face a big challenge in neutralizing all of these influences toward power in intimate relationships.

In order to maintain vital intimate relationships we have to do two seemingly contradictory things. First, we have to respect and allow the play of opposites in our sexual relationships. Second, we have to maintain a sense of equality in the way we communicate outside of our sexual relationships. This is a lot to ask of each other in the midst of our complicated and stressful lives. But, we must learn to accomplish both tasks if we expect to keep our intimate relationships strong and vital.

Power Is Both Overt and Covert

The English language has only one word for power. The German language has two words for power. One word denotes overt power and another denotes covert power.

Overt Power

Overt power is power that *can* easily be seen and observed. Men more often display overt power. For instance, men tend to dominate conversations, speaking louder than women, seizing and holding the floor. Men tend to be physically stronger than women, and may use threatening physical behavior to intimidate. Men often have more money than women, and may threaten financial consequences if women do not comply with their demands.

Covert Power

Covert power is power that *cannot* easily be seen and observed. Women more often display covert forms of power. For instance, women maintain sexual boundaries as favors or consequences when men comply or fail to comply with their desires. Women cut off nurturing behaviors and become insensitive in response to lack of compliance by their mates. Women can make subtle and cutting remarks, and tend to be much more adept at this than men. Women are more adept at reading nonverbal behaviors, and know intuitively how to manipulate men. Witness the wonderful line in My Great Big Fat Greek Wedding. "The man is the head of the house, but the woman is the neck, and she can turn the head any way she wants."

Uses of Power in Intimate Relationships Are Toxic To The Relationship

Whether overt or covert, the use of power in intimate relationships establishes an unequal playing field, puts people on the defensive, and creates disconnection, confusion and emotional cut-off. When this happens, and happens frequently over time, dysfunctional patterns are repeatedly reinforced, becoming normal and reflexive in the way mates interact with each other. In these relationships, couples are busy building walls rather than bridges between each other. These walls become thicker and higher over the years, making intimacy virtually impossible without a great deal of professional help and commitment on the part of the disconnected partners.

What Is A Couple To Do?

How can we overcome the influences of power on our intimate relationships? The answer is deceptively simple, but like many simple solutions, is extremely difficult to put into action on a daily basis.

We can only overcome the temptation to power by promising each other the following:

We promise to try to treat each other as equals.

Together, we will honestly and faithfully attempt, on a daily basis, to root out and confront all assumptions and actions based on power whenever and wherever they occur.

If you doubt your ability to achieve a power-less intimate relationship, take heart. The experience of many, many couples already confirms that the ability of the human mind and will to overcome power is more than adequate to the task. While some find help in therapy, others in the spiritual realm, and others in a simple adherence to ethics, take heart in the now known fact that conscious, deliberate attention to the tendency to use power to get our way, along with a daily resolution to root it out and dispel it in our intimate relationships brings rich and abiding rewards to couples and to families. As we achieve success, we are more than compensated for the losses of power given up. In the end, we are freed from the shackles of isolation and loneliness caused by power in intimate relationships. In this state of freedom we can enjoy the security that comes from deep and abiding connections with our intimate partner.

Of course, “the devil is in the details”. In order to find and root out power in our relationships, we have to know how to recognize defensiveness when it occurs, and to substitute alternate healthy ways of communicating. In order to learn how to do this, you need to master the skills and techniques presented in the remaining chapters.

Power Exercises

While this chapter may strike some resonant chords with you, no change will take place unless you apply it in your relationship. The exercise of power, albeit toxic in nature, takes place reflexively. Most of the time we are not even aware that it is happening. Thus, we must bring it to a conscious level, and talk about it with each other, in order to stop it in its tracks. Take the time to do these two simple exercises with your mate. They will lead to an ongoing conversation between the two of you that will help you gradually root out the use of power and allow you to discover real intimacy, with all of its benefits.

Exercise One

1. Reflect on previous relationships. Write down how power or control was used in these relationships. Remember your own behavior as well as that of the other. Do this separately from your mate, taking as long as you need.
2. Get together and read or tell your partner what you wrote down. Ask questions of each other until you are sure you understand how power operated in your previous relationships.

Exercise Two

1. Again, separately write down how you think power is used in your relationship.
2. Get together again. Read or tell your partner what you wrote down. Again, ask questions until you are sure you understand what your partner is saying. **Do not** take issue with each other. Simply listen and ask questions until you understand your partner. Remember, neither of you is right or wrong. What is important is that you both understand how you perceive power operating in your relationship.
3. Promise your partner the following:
 - a. I will tell you whenever I feel you are trying to control me.
 - b. I will do my best not to try to manipulate or control you. If you feel I am doing this, I will do my best to stop the behavior you feel is controlling.
 - c. If we are unable to stop trying to control each other, we agree to seek help with a therapist. [Less](#)

