

Healing Frustrations: Finding the Gold

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“There is a short way that becomes the long way,
and a long way that becomes the short way.”

For the chart that goes with this essay, [click here](#).

Making a great relationship takes a good while. First you have to find a partner worth building it with. Then you have to get tired of “doing things that don’t work.” Next you have to start learning: replacing skills that don’t work with ones that do.

Most of these skills everybody has to learn. Our culture is famous at teaching relationship skills that don’t work. But, finally you will find yourselves faced with the learning all about each other in depth and in healing those wounds, those hurts that have been hanging around for years and years. This is the work that takes the longest.

I believe that handling Frustrations is the most important skill in advancing toward Vintage Love. All the other skills provide the foundations, the pillars of a great partnership, of a great world. What keeps a troubled relationship moving toward success is hope – hope that things are getting better. What kills hope is lack of progress. When a partner feels stuck, with no progress, it is only a matter of time before they begin to either resign or to start looking elsewhere. This is usually NOT GOOD.

Healing Frustrations is the key. I call it the “ratchet” process because, like a ratchet wrench, it makes things move forward and you can’t back up. Every frustration healed or even addressed, is progress. Addressing frustrations builds and maintains hope. Ignoring frustrations creates hopelessness.

Actually, as you will see, the frustration really indicates where a wound is. It is the wound that is actually healed, the wound that hurts at the moment of frustration. Check out my story of the [Water Buffalo](#). But more on this later.

The following essay contains what I see as the background for dealing with frustrations. It clears up a lot of misunderstandings and can help you stop wasting time and energy in doing things that do not work. I am also warning you that this is the most complex of the skills you need to learn. So on the one hand, this might seem hard. On the other hand, I don’t think there is anything harder – so relax.

Part One: Frustration as a source of Gold

(1) Frustration (on your side)

The story starts with understanding just what a frustration is. Look at Item 1 in the chart. A frustration is a situation where you have a desire/want, and something is blocking you from getting it. A frustration is a desire, blocked. This is the simple definition. We often use the word “frustrated” to describe the feeling when a person is in a frustration. I am ok with that use of the word. I just want to get clear that when I am talking about healing a frustration, I am speaking of an event, and in the background is a desire, something you value, that is blocked by something interfering with what you want.

Examples:

I want to eat dinner at the Olive Garden. I am quite hungry. The Olive Garden has a very long line. Dammit.

I want to see where my shoes are in my closet. The light bulb just flashed and burned out. Dammit.

I want you to close the cupboard door after you take out the dishes, and you leave it open. Dammit.

I want you to let me have quiet time when I come home from work, and you come to me and start chattering. Dammit.

I want you to tell me all about your day when you come home from work, and you want to be left alone. Dammit.

I want you to listen to me. You keep interrupting. Dammit.

Note the desires (I want), the blocks (long line, bulb out, interrupting...) and the tone of frustration (dammit). Even if you are kind of unaware of your feelings, you can discover your frustration by looking at the situation. Do you want something and can’t get it – you are frustrated.

(2a) The Feeling: Anger (on your side)

When a frustration occurs, there will be a feeling/thought process (See 2a and 2b on the chart). Most often the emotion of anger appears. Anger (nor-epinephrine) is an emotion with a purpose. Anger raises your energy level to push through a block. Anger can be very useful and sometimes not helpful at all. Whatever, anger will appear in a frustration. Even if you don't feel angry, you actually are experiencing it. One way I help people get in contact with their anger is to focus on a frustration. If you are frustrated, you will be experiencing some level of anger. Generally, the bigger the desire, the more the blocking, the more the anger. A person can easily be experiencing anger and not be aware of it. If you want to study this more, look up the Frustration Aggression Hypothesis on the internet or in your psychology book.

Anger is described by lots of words, from slight "annoyance" all the way up to "rage." (For a list of feeling words, [click here](#).) Also for most of us, when Anger comes, so does Fear. And so frequently when I ask a person who is frustrated how they feel, they may use some Fear words. (For more on feelings and feeling words, check out my essays on Emotions. [Click here](#).)

Examples:

I feel upset when I can't find my way to your office.

I get mad when you won't talk to me.

I get scared and annoyed when a cop stops me on the way home.

Still, anger appears and will be expressed or hidden, when a frustration occurs.

(2b) The Thinking: Hostility (on your side)

When our bodies produce an emotion, they also produce thought processes. These go together. And so when a frustration occurs, lots of thoughts may flood your head. These can be thoughts related to the anger: justifications for the feelings, or victimization thoughts. Blame is very common. The thoughts related to the emotion of anger are usually called Hostility.

The most common, self-serving thoughts that surface when a person is angry are thoughts that try to justify the anger already present. The foolish rule is "To express anger, a person must place the other person in the wrong."

Examples:

You are trying to hide things from me.

You are just doing that to hurt me.

Why doesn't anyone tell me what is going on?

The Trigger: What they did. (on their side)

Frustrations occur after someone else does something, or after you discover that something happened. The action that triggers your frustration can be tiny or large, but it is something that occurs. They did it. (Of course, they had a reason for doing it.) The trigger does not include your interpretation of their action. The trigger only includes that actual thing they did. The trigger is outside of you, and it is the only thing that occurs in a frustrating event that is outside of you. Everything else, including your interpretation of what they did, occurs inside you.



**The Trigger
Does not
Cause the
Frustration.**

The trigger does not cause the frustration. I think this is worth writing down on a piece of paper and putting it on your wall for 5 years. This is one of the extremely common mistakes that most of us were taught. It is also part of the confusion and an enormous waste of time. It is part of the blaming pattern that is so fruitless. The trigger (on their side) “reminds” you (on your side) of something you are really bothered about. That little trigger behavior is the signal that starts the experience of frustration in you. In my story of [The Buffalo](#), the trigger is the little stick or the hand gesture by the little boy that makes the great animal jump.

Examples: (triggers vs interpretations)

"He raised his middle finger toward me" is a trigger behavior. "He insulted me" is an interpretation.

"She said I was fat" is a trigger behavior. "She hurt my feelings" is an interpretation.

This is important. While a frustration is triggered by something outside of you, the vast majority of the components of a frustration are inside of you. I like to use a car image to explain this. The trigger is a “key”, while your part supplies the “engine.” The other person supplies this little piece of metal and you supply the 350 horsepower machine.

The trigger behavior made sense to the person doing it. That sense is in their world. Your sense is that their trigger initiated your frustration.

Examples: (your side, their side)

A joke. (You don't like it. You got really upset. But the person telling it loved it.)

A gesture. (You wanted to drive thru the intersection next and the other driver started moving first. You got really upset.)

A reminder. (You wanted the letters put in the mail and your partner said, “I forgot to drop off the mail.” And you yelled at them.)

Frustrations are so normal and common that I could write examples forever.

(3) The Reactive Behavior (on your side)

This is the thing you do when you are frustrated. There can be quite a variety of things possible. This is what a video camera would see you doing. Remember that up till now the only visible thing has been the trigger. You and other people cannot see the Desire, the Block, or the Thought Processes; and the Feelings are only visible as clues for someone looking for them – widening of eyes, deeper breathing, etc. For many people all they see is a Trigger followed by the Reactive Behavior. So much is hidden!

Reactive behaviors also are used over and over. If you list your reactive habits, the skills you use to protect yourself, you will probably find a collection of half a dozen or less – your patterns. The same is true of your partner. These patterns could become familiar, as they are a tried and true set of Reactive Behaviors. Examples:

sulk	sleep	dramatize
scream	do drugs	silence
leave	drink alcohol	withdraw
pout	have an affair	ignore
busy-ness	TV	focus on kids
change subject	avoid	stay hating
exercise	fight	analyze
overeat	hit	rationalize
get sick	attack	equalize
get tired	manipulate	revenge
argue	criticize	passive aggressive
blame	provoke	

Reactive behaviors have strength or drama to them. I bet you have noticed that sometimes you react much larger than you intended. Sometimes the reaction seems almost invisible to a pretty large trigger. Some people react hugely to a very tiny trigger. I like to think that a trigger may supply 5 watts of power, while the reaction may contain 5000 watts. So far this week I have heard the following reactive behaviors.

Examples from this week:

A mother criticized a grown daughter in public very loudly. The crowd looked at the daughter. The daughter's reaction was to be silent and smile. Inside she was seething.

A man drove past a slow driver, slowed down in front, blocked the road and made strong, angry gestures at the other.

A boy threw the toaster from the breakfast area across the kitchen, when his dad said, "You're grounded!"

A woman yelled at her boyfriend when he said he would be late.

A man drove his car over a bunch of small white crosses alongside a road in Texas.

(4) The Hidden Fear (on your side)

Now this can seem confusing. But here is what is going on – the secret. The Trigger, Feeling, Frustration, Blocked Desire, and the Thoughts, do not lead to the reaction. Sure, the Reactive Behavior comes after all those components, but is not caused by them.

Hidden Fears are the cause of the Reactive Behavior. In each of us are a relatively small collection of secret (until now) fears. How can you find out what your fear is? Ask yourself, "In this situation, what do I fear would happen if I didn't do the reactive behavior that is common for me to do?" The reactive pattern is protecting you from that thing you fear.

Up until now, you may have been thinking about the trigger as a pain in the neck. But that is only one view, View A, of the trigger. This is what your conscious mind sees. I would like to introduce you to the source of the hidden fear. It is your reptilian brain – your lizard. (For more about your reptilian brain and its importance, see my paper on Safety. [Click Here.](#)) This super fast mechanism, recognizes the situation, recalls past trouble, and quickly moves to avoid the trouble. While your conscious mind is observing View A, your reptilian brain is looking at View B. And it moves fast to protect you. The Reactive Behavior is the protective action of your reptilian brain. The frustrating situation (trigger + desire + block + feelings + thoughts) evoked this protective action. From the point of view of your Lizard, this situation is familiar, has happened many, many times and thus your Lizard's selected reaction is familiar as well.

The strength of your Lizard's reactions is awesome. You cannot defeat your lizard. It can misunderstand reality very easily, but it cannot be successfully ignored. Thus, it is the Hidden Fear that needs to be addressed when you are frustrated.

Most of us focus on the Trigger.

Examples from this week (above):

The daughter later focused on stopping her mother's public behavior.

The man spoke loudly about lousy Idaho drivers.

The boy focused on his dad's unfairness.

The woman wanted her boyfriend to be more responsible.

The man complained about commie pinkos.

I think this is pretty foolish, and doesn't solve the problem. For if you stop the triggering behavior, the Hidden Fear is still unaddressed and is waiting for the next triggering event. If you solve the Hidden Fear, the trigger will evoke no or little reaction. Go for the Hidden Fear! And each time you address or resolve a Hidden Fear, your relationship moves ahead toward the relationship of your dreams, and you will feel hope. In my paper on [The Water Buffalo](#), I focus on this foolishness. Don't get rid of all sticks in the world. Heal the wounds!

So what are your hidden fears? What are the sore spots for your Lizard, the wounds on your tough hide, your "buttons", the things you are on guard for? Here's a list.

<u>neglect</u>	<u>chaos</u>	<u>excluded</u>	<u>suppressed</u>
<u>abandonment</u>	<u>shamed</u>	<u>ostracized</u>	<u>disapproved</u>
<u>rejection</u>	<u>guilted</u>	<u>used</u>	<u>dominated</u>
<u>being absorbed</u>	<u>invisible</u>	<u>ignored</u>	<u>devalued</u>
<u>disliked</u>	<u>controlled</u>	<u>inferior</u>	<u>separation</u>
<u>hurt</u>	<u>punished</u>	<u>crushed</u>	<u>invisible</u>

Now, it might be useful to see how this works. Remember the principle that “All people make sense, all the time.” Well, when a person is reacting, they are responding to a real fear, one their lizard is familiar with, that their partner’s action or trigger reminded them of. When I say a “real fear,” I only mean that their survival mechanism, that little reptilian part of their brain, believes it is real.

Examples:

A person is quiet as they fear drawing attention to themselves and getting hurt. They fear chaos.

A person yells because they fear being ignored or being invisible.

A person speaks politely because they fear being shamed.

A person gets drunk as they fear shaming and blaming.

A person storms off as they fear being dominated.

A person, placates or begs for the “right thing to do” as they fear being disapproved of.

These are some examples. Remember, your Hidden Fears were developed in your past. Most frequently those fears have been around since you were a little kid. Today is the day, and this is the situation in which to address and repair these fears. If you want to make progress when your partner is frustrated, cooperate in addressing their hidden fears. If you want to make progress in your relationship, when you are frustrated, collect your partner’s cooperation in addressing your hidden fears. This is very efficient. It works.

(5) Deep Desire (on your side)

In any frustration there is some desire that is being blocked. But much more deeply, there is a Deep Hidden Desire that surrounds the Hidden Fear. If you look at your Hidden Fear you can often see what it is that your inner self is dreaming of. Addressing the Deep Desire is a gold mine of efficiency. Typically your Deep Desire may be easier to express as magical wishes, as global requests.

Examples

I want to be free from pain.

I want to feel understood.

I want to be loved.

I want to always have time.

I want peace.

I want approval.

I want attention.

These large wishes are a wonderful start. If you fear chaos, and I guarantee calm order for you, then when I happen to do a chaotic thing and you won’t react so hugely. If you fear being pushed, and I guarantee that you can always go at your pace, then when I happen to do a pushy thing you won’t have to react so strongly. If you fear being abandoned, and I guarantee that I will always come back, then when I happen to pull away, you will remain more relaxed.

Part Two: Healing is a two person activity

The FIX – The Ratchet

I am sorry to say that magic alone doesn't seem to work most of the time. Those wonderful global requests are colorful but not as useful as they can be. The real fix is in the process I call BCRs or Behavior Change Requests. This is a process adapted from the work of Harville Hendrix. The process, while not magic, sure seems to work like magic.

Healing = Right Person + Doing the Right Thing

This starts with a simple, but profound, learning. A wound will go away when the Right Person does the Right Thing. I believe that almost all wounds that we carry are wounds of relationship. They occurred in relationship originally and they can only be fixed in relationship. That is why I believe that no matter how much work you do with a therapist, counselor, psychaitrist, and the like, your deep wounds will not get healed unless you do some profound work with a partner. Those deep wounds require the attention of the right person. So Right Person and Right Thing.

Find the Right Person

The principle is that the Right Person is the original person. For us humans, this means that our primitive brain, our Lizard, is seeking out the original wound-causing person and wanting healing from them. If I have a wound of abandonment, I will find myself seeking out the person who abandoned me originally. If I have a wound of chaos, I will find myself seeking my original chaotic parent. If I have a wound of invisibility, I will find myself seeking that original person who ignored me when I needed attention. Pretty straightforward.

Example Story: In a group of mountain apes, Big Bobo hits little Joey. Joey roles away, yelping. Then Joey goes to Martha for comforting. Then he goes to Mary. Then he goes to Francine. He keeps going for attention and comforting, until he comes back to Big Bobo. If Bobo ignores Joey, then Joey continues to go around the group seeking comforting. But if Big Bobo comforts Joey, he stops. The Right Person is Big Bobo – the person who caused the original hurt.

This fits in childhood when your caretakers are still around. But in adulthood the original person is frequently no longer available. Besides we are designed to go out away from our caretakers and live with others. Sometimes the original wounding caretaker is dead. Fortunately this is not a problem. Our reptilian brain, a little bit like Mr. Magoo, will accept someone similar as the Right Person. We can do the work with a “reasonable facsimile.” Who is a reasonable facsimile? Here's the really good news. Our partner is – the one we fell in love with. The wonderful process of falling-in-love guarantees that we will pick a partner who can easily fit the role of the original wounder.

When I introduce this idea to couples, usually in a process called Parent/Child Dialogue, I invite them to reflect on the question, “If I were to create a play, who in this room do you think could best fill the part of your difficult parent?” It is almost never me that they choose. After all, I believe they have already chosen their partner for that part. In a profound way, falling in love is a lot like casting a part in a drama. And because of this, the one you fall in love with is a good one to heal your wounds – Right Person.

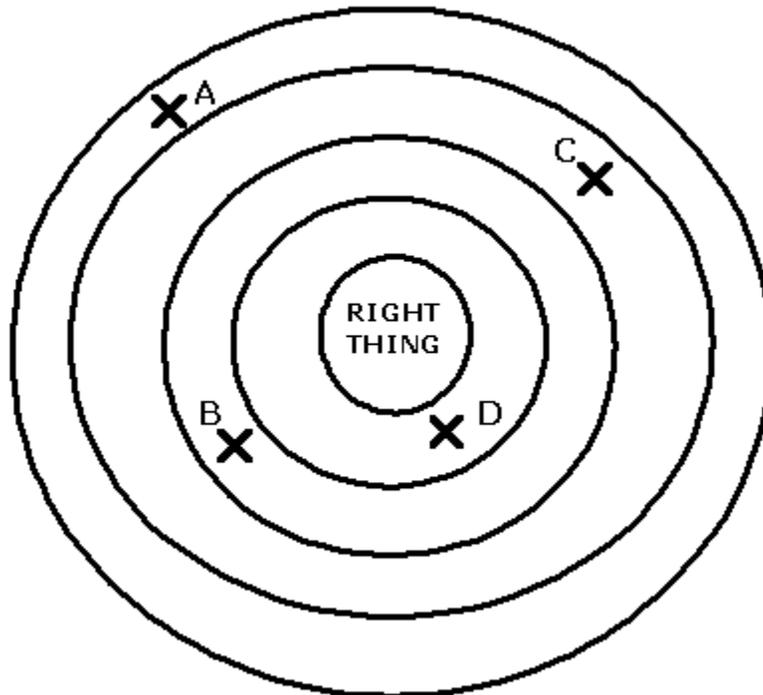
Find the Right Thing to Do

And so, for the healing process, you already have the correct partner, or at least one close enough. Now, how about finding the Right Thing for them to do.

Well this is a bit more difficult – not at all impossible, just difficult. It requires trial and error. It requires trying, failing, noticing, and trying again. When I was in the Navy, and doing Naval Gunfire Support during the early Vietnam conflict, we would shoot 80 lbs of steel and explosives 12 miles inland. Our first shot would not hit. These were called a series of ranging shots. Take a shot, and an observer on the ground or in a small plane (risky job) would radio back, “200 yards down, 60 yards left,” and we'd try again. Sometimes this is called successive

approximations. Whatever, it means doing something several times and then seeing what the effect is, and then correcting what you are doing and trying again.

Look at the figure below. First shot (A) was high, to the left, pretty far off center, but at least on the target. Second shot (B) was low, still left, closer to the center. Third shot (C) was high, to the right, and a bit further out than (B) was. The fourth shot (D) was really close, but a bit low and to the right. The fifth shot hits the target.



What seems really helpful is that the wound knows exactly what it needs. I've learned that all wounds are wrapped in hidden fears of being repeated — and contain the seeds of their own fix. The french word for wound is “blessure” from which we get the english word “blessing.” A wound carries its own blessing. (A bit of useless information, there.) The only person who possibly knows the specifics of this is the frustrated person, the one with the hidden fear. And the only one who knows if it works — if the wound is touched, if the Right Thing is done — is the frustrated person. Thus we create a situation where the frustrated person asks for, “directs” some action by the “triggering,” and supporting, partner to help heal the wound that was stirred up. All the partner, who supplied the trigger, has to do is cooperate. This is a really good deal.

As the supporting partner, I may trigger my partner's frustration. I didn't mean to. I care for my partner. I didn't intend to. I did the thing that stirred up their frustration. And I get to be the one who helps fix it. Partnership. Cooperation. Taking turns healing each other. Very dialogical.

Here are the general steps to follow:

1. A Frustration occurs and is noted. The team goes to work.
2. The team validates the frustration, and finds the Hidden Fear, validates it, and then identifies the Hidden Desire – a first guess at the Right Thing.
3. The frustrated one creates one or more specific, repeatable, healing actions (BCRs) that their partner can do over the next week(s). This is a trial of a specific action to see if it is the Right Thing.
4. The partner agrees and does the specific actions (BCRs). The ideal attitude in doing this is best described as generous – “giving a gift to their partner in behalf of the growth of the relationship.” The actions (BCRs) have an ending time in order to make room for another attempt at finding the Right Thing.
5. The frustrated one notes the effect upon themselves of the gifted action (BCR), and rates it (good, on-target, no-effect) for future reference.

6. The cycle stops. The team waits for the next opportunity – the next frustration.

This repetitive process focuses, closes in, on the Right Thing. In the chart above, the first BCR(a) may be fairly far off target. The second BCR(b) two weeks later may be closer, but still off. The third BCR(c) could be much further off. But being off is good information. The fourth BCR(d) is really close and prepares the way for the fifth BCR is the Right Thing.

“There is a short way that becomes the long way, and a long way that becomes the short way.” This may seem like a long process, but it works and is sure and is hope building.

I will lay out the details of the process in another article to follow. I also will lay out the specifics of BCRs.

The Result

As Sandra and I became better at this process we found it extremely valuable. Here are two stories that might amuse you.

Story: Horses

One very early spring she and I went riding our horses. There was quite a bit of snow around and the roads had become icy as well. As we came back to the home area we had to pass through quite a stretch of ice. My horse was quite skittish. So I got down and led her along the last bit. Sandra seemed to be laughing at my behavior. I felt mocked. I got angrier and angrier. In the meantime, Sandra had become quite distressed by the ride altogether and in response to my pushing to keep going. When she gets stressed, she can laugh in order to defuse the tension. Both of us were thoroughly frustrated.

As we both arrived in the yard, we both exploded with tension. We stopped, paused. And the team went to work. I flipped a coin and I won. We did the Frustrations process on me and got a BCR for me. Then we did the same process on her and got a BCR for her. Then we put the horses away and had a nice evening dinner out. 40 minutes, to make progress.

Story: Breakfast on the Road

Some time later, we were driving over to Chelan (120 miles) to visit family. I stopped for a cup of coffee at a quick stop place. I ordered a breakfast sandwich. Sandra got a cup of tea, and went back to the car. I waited. Apparently the quick stop had to get their sausage from Denmark, because it took a long time. As I was standing, impatiently, someone tapped me on the shoulder. It was a policeman, whom I had noted was having coffee at a booth by a window with his buddy. He said, “Is that your wife in the parking lot? She might be pretty mad!” I thanked him, got my breakfast sandwich, went to the car fully ready to do a Frustrations process with my wife who had every reason to feel frustrated. We did the process, got a BCR for her, and had a nice rest-of-the drive to Chelan. 20 minutes spent and it worked.

Confidence in this skill is worth a lot.