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## REMOVING RESENTMENTS

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### Introduction

This paper discusses the issue of Resentment that from time to time becomes an important issue in couples or between groups of people. ([For a discussion of removing resentments in a long-term relationship after developing good relationship skills, click here.](#))

This article includes suggestions on how to go about removing the resentment – all resentments. I believe this cannot be done, passively, by waiting. Resentment does not seem to go away by letting time pass. By ignoring resentment, it just seems to put it off until it pops up later. I believe resentment only goes away through the use of real [Validation](#), and Dialogue.

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### Background Story

Some time ago, in 1996, I worked with a couple for over two years. They were in their upper 60s. No matter what I did, they would not try to use [dialogical communication tools](#) at home. They were nice people, and for some time I believed that I was failing them as a relationship therapist. As the months went by, I worried more and more. I recall consulting a several Imago Clinical Instructors, who told me just to keep at it.

I kept the couple in dialogical space while in my office using mirroring, validation and positive triangulation. Eventually they helped me develop what I call the [Solit Board Technique](#). I reduced their session lengths to one hour, and reduced my charges as long as they paid ahead. I simply maintained dialogical space in the office, serving almost as a “traffic cop.” They were both validated continually by me, if not by each other.

Eventually I came up with, and tested, a theory that explained what was happening. They had been married so long, and had done many “awful things” to each other during their marriage. The [resentment](#) and shame that they each carried was enormous. Both were terrified of dialogue (particularly alone, without me) because it might open up “the flood gates” that kept all that resentment held in check – and yet unrelieved. Every subject of dialogue touched on either one or the other or both person’s resentment. I checked this theory out with them. They looked relieved and said that was exactly what they thought was going on.

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## Resentment, a Definition

After years of working on this, I have settled on a good working definition of Resentment that seems comfortably dialogical: A Resentment is a memory of past in-validation.

Thus, I believe that what we call "resentment" is centered around a memory of an event in time, when a person felt invalidated – where the person needed/expected validation and was unable to obtain it. I think resentments carry with them a specific memory (sometimes deeply buried) of a specific "focus-person," the one from whom validation was needed or expected and from whom validation was not received. In this way, I think a resentment can be seen as a simple frustration – a desire that is blocked. Since the human brain is not designed to forget, and particularly it is not capable of forgetting threats or injuries, I believe that resentments don't go away. If anything, they accumulate and the pile grows larger as time passes – particularly if similar invalidations continue to occur.

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## Focus vs Fault

I believe resentments, just like frustrations, have triggers – some action by someone else that evoked the feeling of frustration, or the feeling of invalidation/resentment. The trigger may be extremely small and done by a person who has nothing to do with the original "focus-person." (See my paper on Healing Frustrations for a deeper discussion of the role of triggers.)

One of the primary gifts of the Imago Restructuring Frustration process, I believe, is to define the boundaries in this situation. It clarifies that the "triggerer," the one who did the trigger behavior, is not the cause of the frustration. This seems a crucial learning to me. To solve the frustration, it seems best for the frustrated person to look into themselves, perhaps with the help of the person whose behavior triggered their frustration. I am convinced that eventually the frustrated person has to take primary responsibility for their own frustration. Until this happens, I believe a couple will remain stuck.

**I am never  
Responsible for  
Another person's feelings.**

**But I am responsible to help them  
With their feelings.**

I think this gift of clarity, of clear boundaries about responsibility, leads to growth on the part of the frustrated person and on the part of the assisting person whose action happened to

trigger the frustration. In a couple I see this as a Win-Win situation.

I believe this gift of clarity also shifts people away from the completely pointless fault-finding and blaming that is so prevalent in our society. This blaming produces what I think is a typical pattern.

Example: Partner A says/does X.

Partner B feels invalidated and points at and blames Partner A.

Partner A now feels invalidated and points at and blames Partner B.

Both withdraw from connection, carrying their Resentments with them.

### Summary:

Thus, the way I see it, a resentment has a focus (a "triggering/invalidating" person), but is essentially an event within the person who carries the resentment. (You can write a few examples here – just look at who is the FOCUS of your spouse's resentment. By whom did they feel invalidated?) Please, remember I am not at all interested in "blaming," but in identifying the focuses.

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### The Fix for Resentment

My belief is that Resentment is healed by Validation – actually two validations.

I learned this years ago from Robert Bly, who was teaching a class on "broken connections" and on shame. He pointed out that when a father rejects his child, it is as if a bridge, or soul-connection, between the two has been broken – and at the father's end. The only one who could fix this breakage, Bly said, was the father (at least till after the kid reaches the age of 21). To repair the collapsed bridge, two things have to happen. 1) The father must acknowledge that he did the thing that broke the bridge – that he was there. He has to admit he did the invalidating, trigger behavior. ("When you came to me and asked for help, I told you to shut up and go away, son. I now see that hurt you a lot." 2) Then the father must acknowledge what happened to his son in the time between the collapse of that connecting bridge and the present. ("I see that we haven't talked about this for years and we've kind of been strangers over this. I'm sorry for how this must have hurt you over the years. I gather its

been pretty bad for you.”

### **Work with the Original person or a "reasonable facsimile"**

In many cases, the actual father is not available or willing to acknowledge and validate. In this case an intimate partner, ideally an Imago match, often becomes the focus of resentment for all un-validated, unacknowledged rejections or resentments which occurred during childhood.

The Restructuring Frustration process, gives structure for the validation necessary to heal the old resentments, over time and with consistent repetition. It is vitally important that the partner expressing resentment in the present time, seek within themselves and acknowledge the roots of resentments which happen to be triggered in the present day but which began with yet-to-be-healed invalidation(s) experienced in childhood.

### **Summary of the Process of Removing Resentment**

The person who is the focus of “my” resentment can get rid of “my” resentment by

- a) validating “my” original invalidating memory, and
- b) validating “my” experiences that resulted from that original experience.

The clue seems to be a lot of Validation. I suggest you get really good at it – an expert. I think resolving resentments is very much like doing Restructuring Frustrations on past events.

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### **Pro-active Suggestions to the Focused-upon person – the one who did the trigger behavior**

1. Lead the way by becoming an expert at Validation.
2. Lead the way by validating any resentment anywhere in the relationship. Invite, invite, invite. Validated, validated, validate. Be successful.
3. Lead the way in learning and acting in congruence with Biological Dream. This stuff is pretty objective and I believe can be taught and measured directly. In this instance, Resentment is the memory of a threat to Diversity, probably a threat to Reliable Membership and thus a threat to Safety. Validation is an act of assurance to Diversity, Membership and thus a move toward Safety.
4. Lead. I believe passivity is absolutely the wrong way to go.

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### **A Challenge – Maintaining Self-Responsibility without Guilt**

One major difficulty is thinking that "if I validate someone's pain, I am admitting responsibility for causing that pain." In working with Resentment, just as working with Frustration, the possibility of misplacing responsibility, of losing boundaries, is very high. This is particularly true when people do not understand the different between Dialogical and a Master/Slave relating.

In Dialogical Relationships both parties carry some responsibility for the situation – their part. Eventually both have to clarify what those differing responsibilities are.

In a Master/Slave relationship there is always an attempt to hold one person totally responsible and hold the other totally un-responsible or blameless. (I believe this is particularly aggravated by a legal court system that speaks of perpetrators and victims.) Staying Dialogical leads to discussion and clarification about "who is responsible for what."

In a Frustration, the boundaries divides along the line between the trigger behavior and the frustration reaction. One person is responsible for doing the trigger behavior, and the other is responsible for their reaction (their interpretation, emotional and physical responses) to their partner's trigger. I like to say that the trigger (triggerer) contributes about 20 calories of energy to the situation. The reaction (frustrated partner) contributes about 450 horsepower. Both, I believe, are 100% responsible to help in building and maintaining a safe and loving relationship.

With a resentment, clarity divides along the line between the "invalidating behavior" or reminding behavior (the trigger) and the resentment. One person is responsible for the "invalidating behavior" or reminding behavior and the other is responsible for their resentment. Both are 100% responsible for helping to rebuild and maintain a safe and loving relationship.

In a Master/Slave relationship, by contrast, people tend to focus on the "the truth," forced agreement, arguing and on "blaming". While very familiar to us all (and useful on the battlefield of war) Master/Slave does not seem to me to be of value in an intimate relationship.

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### **Pro-active Suggestions to the Resenting person**

Make appointments to improve your relationship with your partner by working together to heal resentments. Bring your resentment to the meeting, not to blame, but to resolve. Use your partner's help to discover more about why this issue bothered you so much, to discover why you have held back resolving it for so long, to give your partner practice at validation, and to improve the connection and quality of your relationship.



**A Start at a Procedure for Restructuring Resentment** (adapted from Restructuring Frustration process)

1. Make an appointment to work on a resentment.
2. State resentment in 1 or 2 sentences, Partner Mirrors just these sentences.
3. Partner states, "I know your resentment makes sense. Would you share all about it, please?" (PreValidation)
4. State what you remember of the original situation. Partner Mirrors.
5. State what you remember was the trigger. Partner Mirrors.
6. State what you remember of your feelings at the time. Partner Mirrors.
7. State what you remember of your reactive behavior at the time. Partner Mirrors.
8. State what you remember of your hurt at the time. Partner Mirrors.
9. State how you felt invalidated at the time. Partner Mirrors.
10. State what you remember of your fear at the time. Partner Mirrors.
11. State how this situation reminds you of past experiences, particularly in childhood. Partner Mirrors.
12. Now the Partner should validate, and empathize thoroughly. "Did I get this? Is there more?"
13. State what you believe has happened to your life as a result of this situation. Partner Mirrors.
14. Now, the IPartner should validate, and empathize.
15. (Optional.) Develop a Behavior Change Request.