

Where do you start? What goes first?

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I often get asked this, and fortunately for me my answer is clear. Let me state the question more clearly. If I am in a couple, what do I/we focus on first, second, third, etc.

My answer arises from two major principles: the [Anna Karenina Principle](#) and the [Biological Dream](#).

Anna Karenina Principle

Biologist Jared Diamond ([Guns, Germs & Steel](#)) begins one of his chapters on domesticating animals with a quotation from Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." He pointed out that to be capable of being domesticated an animal must possess **all** of a set of traits. Miss one trait and the animal will probably never become domesticated.

Another way I like to look at this is in flying an airplane. When you fly from Seattle to San Francisco, you need a whole bunch of skills. You need to be able to use them at once, but have to learn them one by one.

I liked this idea and have adapted it to my experience in relationships. What I have found is that happy couples are all alike; every unhappy couple is unhappy in its own way. The principle is fairly simple. To be happy, a couple needs to become practitioners of full set of skills that make relationships happy. To be unhappy, all a couple needs is to miss one or more of the skills – any one or more.

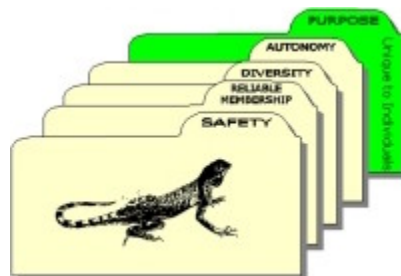
Let's say there are ten vital tools a couple needs to be happy. Number them tool #1 through #10. One couple comes in missing #3 tool. Another couple comes in missing #2 and #7. So when a person asks me where to start, this principle suggests they start by identifying what tools they are missing.

By the way, all couples come in to my office with then finally realize that the tools they are using are not working; in fact, the tools they are using are driving them further and further from the relationship of their dreams.

But how do I or they know what is missing? Great question, and this is where the Biological Dream comes in.

Biological Dream

I believe that humans are designed, by their DNA, to live in a particular type of relationship with other humans. And we are not designed to live alone. I believe that humans from birth will move, whenever they can, toward this type of community. I don't think this is learned, but designed into the structure of our brains. I think it is Nature, and not Nurture. In my essay on the [Biological Dream](#) and in article on the [Map of Relationship](#), I put forth a five part definition of this ideal community. And the defined qualities follow an order of precedence: 1) [Safety](#), 2) [Reliable Membership](#), 3) [Diversity](#) and [Autonomy](#), and 4) [Purpose](#). (I think the traits of Diversity and Autonomy go together.)



What I have found is that to be a happy couple, the pair need to be relatively good practitioners of the skills of all components of the Biological Dream. If the couple is missing any of these skills, trouble and

unhappiness will occur. However, thankfully, this trouble always points the way toward learning the skills of the Biological Dream.

The Typical Couple

People, when they come in, usually have no ideas about all this. They know they are in pain, and they usually blame their partner as the cause. Some manage to blame themselves, but often in a very self-defeating way. I, as a coach, don't get to start where I want to start following the priority of the Biological Dream. I, after all, am not in control of their relationship – they are. They can and will do what they want to. I can try to share with them what I've found works. In another paper, I'll share what I do with couples and why I do it. But let me just share here that I try to create in my office an environment that recreates the "tone" of the Biological Dream, and the skills that go with it, as much as I can. I try very hard to "walk my talk."

This seems generally very helpful to couples and individuals alike. And if instead they want to practice skills that clash with the Biological Dream, I invite them to do so in the parking lot – outside my office. After all, my office is a place to learn what Al thinks works. For this article, I will set aside the task of the relationship therapist's office, and look at the problem from the couple's point of view.

Start with Safety

The first step is to reduce, and eventually remove all threat and to rapidly increase the experience of Safety for both partners when they are together. Unfortunately I find that our cultures use threat, and evoke fear, in attempts to get obedience. I believe our cultures are generally "control freaks." Thus each couple must step aside from the typical cultural training – the typical "Nurture" of living in our cultures.

A new definition of Safety/Trust is required to achieve this. Here is my definition, once more. Safety means "my blood pressure starts to go down when I see you." Un-safety means "I start to tense." I've written extensively on this concept of [Safety in my paper on the Lizard](#). I have found the metaphor of The Lizard to be extremely useful. Getting a couple to talk about Lizards seems to work very well.

Once the new definition of Safety is in place, I think the couple needs to work hard on developing skills and habits that make their Lizards purr (to make a weird image). This involves practical skill building/training techniques like Caring Behaviors and [Caring Days](#) on the positive side (Romancing, Dating, etc.), and [Timeouts](#) on negative side. The former skills develop efficient ways of promoting, maintaining, and recovering Safety. The latter, vital, skill develops ways of excluding the powerful threat of anger/rage and other overwhelming acts from the inside of the relationship, while not dishonoring the valuable passion of anger/rage.

Reliable Membership

As the percentage of time spent together in Safety increases and the percentage of Threat decreases, the couple will probably advance to the issue of neediness for togetherness vs. neediness for space. One partner, at any time will tend to be more needy of being together than the other. Or vice versa, one partner at any time will tend to be more in need of quiet space than the other. This often creates a dramatic and painful process of chasing and avoiding. My paper on [Reliable Membership](#) covers this problem pretty thoroughly, and [Timeouts](#) again become important. This problem is also a bit one-sided. Check out my paper on the [Testicle Principle](#).

Diversity and Autonomy

As 1) [Safety](#) and 2) [Safety To Be Together and Get Away](#) becomes more consistent, verbal communication will probably be the next focus area to face a couple. Learning how to maintain each other's need for [Autonomy](#) and [Diversity](#) becomes essential. My papers on these subjects ([Diversity and PreValidation](#), and [Master/Slave](#)) cover most of the theory relating to learning the skills of creating a community which simultaneously values each person's integrity.

Speaking of integrity, learning about Autonomy will lead a couple to learning critical Boundary skills. I have written my own papers on Boundaries for individuals and for couples. Each partner needs to develop the skills that define their integrity as safely distinct from that of others. And both partners need to tackle the enormous emotionally charged issues that they trigger in each other. This latter leads to needing to develop the skills of healing past wounding and facing frustrations.

These are also times of learning communication skills. I have found that Mirroring is a wonderful training tool that rapidly teaches 52 critical skills of Dialogical sending and receiving. These skills are all about "how to make a person feel heard" and "how to speak so that others easily hear your words." The habit of PreValidation and the skills and Art of Validation are even more important in making a person feel understood.

The more these skills are learned and become habits, the more the life of a couple seems to become a relatively continuous see-saw conversation proceeding reliably and safely from validation of one to validation of the other, over and over.

Purpose

I believe that from the above foundations of (1)Safety to be, (2)Safety to Reliably Connect , and Safety to be (3 & 4)different, emerges the impulse to become truly unique and to develop each person's purpose in life. The focus tends to shift toward a mutual statement of "Who or what do you want to become in life, and how can I support you."

Summary

I have shared the order to address the learning tasks. However, every learned component effects every other all the time. And so I think it better to get to work on the whole set of learnings. You see, the human brain considers it a threat (un-safety) if it's needs for space or connection, its needs for relaxed sense of diversity, its needs for relaxed sense of autonomy, and its needs for support in self-development/espression are thwarted. And this happens simultaneously in whoever is your partner.

Good luck.