

Learning to Commit

the best time
to work on
your marriage
is when
you're single

Avrum Nadigel



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Avrum Nadigel's Learning to Commit offers fresh perspectives for those interested in building an intimate, long-term relationship. It is much more than a self-help book. In a lively and informative narrative, Nadigel combines frank personal experiences, practical considerations, and an accessible account of the theory and practices in the field. Specifically, he bases his practice on systemic theories.

He poses a series of questions, based on hard earned realism, that will leave the reader in a much better position to acquire the evaluative skills needed to achieve an emotionally satisfying coupledom: "Who am I?", "What do I have to offer?", "What do I need in a partner?", and, most importantly, "How do I become the partner that I am seeking?"

For Nadigel, the key to success lies in the process of individuation, which results in a solid separate sense of Self: not in a merged identity. One is seeking not to be completed, but to share oneself completely with another on an equal basis. For this, it is essential to use all our resources to assess the validity of our choices and decisions. In a series of graduated steps, he leads the reader through the steps that result in a clear understanding of what is entailed in finding a compatible partner with whom one can achieve a long term successful, intimate relationship.

— Hanna McDonough, psychotherapist and former lecturer, Department of Psychiatry, University of Toronto

*When dating it's so easy to get caught up in fantasies of what life with someone else might be like. But with all those imagined possibilities, how can you stay grounded and focused on creating a relationship that you'll be happy with in real life? This easy-to-read and substantive book urges you and *gives you tools* to figure out what you're about so that you can pick a partner who's right for you for the right reasons."*

— Dr. Rachel Ptashny, psychiatrist

In a book world loaded with relationship advice, Avrum Nadigel's Learning to Commit stands out as a major contribution to understanding how our relationships can be improved. While its focus is on the commitment-phobic person, he provides useful information for all couples who are attempting to navigate their way to a better relationship. His style is clear, understandable, and entertaining. He vulnerably provides examples of his own problems with commitment and how he worked through them. In addition, he gives many other real, clinical examples of difficult relationship issues that most of us can identify with. His wise insights and his knowledge of the principles that make for better relationships are accessible and solid. Nearly every page offers useful information for making it through the challenging world of developing good relationships.

— Ronald W. Richardson, author of *Family Ties That Bind*

Avrum, this book is such a clear and easily understood manual on how to find and keep a relationship with oneself and with others. It manages to synthesise some of the most profound of concepts into one user friendly guide to conscious living and loving. I cannot wait to teach from it, and to give it as a gift. Your writers 'voice' is wonderful.

— Adrienne Gold, educator and former TV personality

I loved this book! Few self help books have kept my attention from beginning to end. Those that do I recommend to my patients. An enjoyable read chock full of valuable information and insights backed up by important theoretical perspectives. I will definitely recommend this book to anyone, single or coupled, who is struggling with relationships and those who need to reflect on family of origin issues to understand their present and improve their future.

Dr. Laurie Betito, Psychologist, Sex and Relationship Therapist,
author of *The Sex Bible for People Over 50*, Radio talk show host

Learning to Commit takes the stereotypical other-focused dating paradigm; "What do I want in a partner? What are the qualities I'm looking for? Who speaks my love languages?" etc, and turns it on its head. Instead, it asks, "What am I bringing to the table?" And, "What am I willing to do to about it?"

Using stories from his own life plus synthesizing concepts from various branches of Family Theory, Avrum has written an accessible and useful book about relationships-how to get them, how to keep them and how to improve them.

As I went through the book again to write this review I saw how many times I'd circled a notable paragraph or put an exclamation point beside something I found original and important pertaining to relationship dynamics.

Avrum listed some excellent resources at the end of the book that I highly recommend to anyone who wants to delve more deeply into the topics he's covered. However, the way he's used what he's learned as a researcher, a recovered commitment-phobe, a boyfriend, son, husband, father, and therapist is educational, entertaining, and optimistic. Learning to Commit is helpful on its own terms.

Lorna Hecht, MFT Individual, Couples and Family Counseling

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to:

My father, Steve Nadigel of blessed memory, who, on November 6, 1998, made a promise to be a better father, and spent his remaining years making good on that promise.

My mother, Gail Brown, for showing me that change is possible, and that you don't have to be a slave to your history.

My wife, Dr. Aliza Israel, "because there is so much in this life to wonder at, and we've only just begun." You wrote that. You were right, as usual.

The late Dr. David Freeman, for providing me with a lighthouse; a way to navigate the rocky seas of my relationships.

Notice to Readers

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I am thankful to so many for the chance to do this, and for their help:

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To everyone who signed up for updates about this project. Well, you didn't receive a ton of those, but I hope this book has met all your expectations.

I am particularly indebted to my wife, Dr. Aliza Israel, who, by her actions, teaches me to stand up for what I believe in, and accomplish my goals. She does all of this with humility and grace. I picked a good one.

Finally, to the late Dr Murray Bowen, the founder of Family Systems theory and therapy: We never met, but your ideas have helped me think differently about my closest relationships and by doing so, cleared the path towards my becoming a better man and the optimistic husband and father I might never have become otherwise.

Introduction

Why read a book about marriage and commitment written by a self-proclaimed commitment-phobe? Because whatever you happen to be going through when it comes to issues with long-term relationships, you should know right off the bat that this is something I've struggled with, too.

Of course, you may wonder if you should buy a book with “marriage” in the title, or in this case, subtitle, at all. Unfortunately, it would be hopelessly awkward to splash the phrase “long-term committed relationship” on the cover and impossible to capture the nuances of every relationship. Please assume that I'm using the term “marriage” as a catch-all for all of these relationships — including yours.

The ideas in this book helped someone who viewed marriage as a death knell, and that someone was me. That's why I'm so eager to share them; as it turns out, sometimes the things we resist the most are actually the things that are the most precious to us.

No, marriage and commitment did not come easily to me, and maybe it doesn't to you, either. If you're anything like the singles and young couples I work with, you probably have varying degrees of cynicism and anxiety about how you will fare in your own marriage. You might

ask yourself, “What’s the point?” That question is the impetus behind this book, and one that I will hopefully have helped you answer by the time you’ve reached the final chapter. It’s a question that haunted me throughout my dating life, and reared its head during the first year of my marriage.

To quote marriage and sex therapist David Schnarch, “Marriage is not for the faint of heart.” It’s not hard to imagine why. The often-quoted 50 percent divorce rate (depending on which study you choose) gives people pause about committing to an institution that produces as many failures as successes. Things don’t improve when you consider how poorly so many of the other 50 percent are doing. The end result for many of today’s singles is a toxic mix of anxiety and cynicism for anything to do with monogamy. At its most extreme, this fear nourishes promiscuity and commitment-phobia, somewhat glorified by the media and relationship pundits.

There are lots of industries looking to cash in on this behavior, for example, Ashley Madison, a well-known online dating service and infidelity-supporting web community. Many of my young-adult clients wonder if monogamous relationships are social and religious relics from the past. Yet, within a few sessions, cynicism and personal defenses give way to fear, then fear to hope: hope that they might have been wrong to doubt monogamy.

I hope to share with you the things I’ve learned about improving relationships — our own and others’.

This book will be useful for clergy, family mediators, divorce lawyers, parents, and mental health professionals. But most importantly, I believe this knowledge will be useful to you. It certainly saved me from my own inertia and anxiety, and has helped many of my single clients, including some who are getting married as I write this book.

I will do my best to distill this information and make it applicable to your life.

However, I can’t promise you top-ten lists or quick fixes. I won’t tell you to be more loving, give more hugs, or improve communication. Instead, what I will offer is to guide you towards a better understanding of yourself and the people you love. The work may sometimes be tough, but my guess is you’ve come to be suspicious of relationship advice that’s too easy and doesn’t demand anything of you.

With any relationship dilemma or patterned response you find yourself in, you will constantly need to ask yourself, “What is my contribution to this?”

You’ll know you’re on the right path when old patterns and reactions start to change. You will get to see what you’re made of, and move from living out of reactivity towards a goal-directed life.

One request while you go through this book: Please make sure to bring your independent thinking with you to the material. Try some of the exercises, and wrestle with the ideas, but in the end decide for yourself if this information will benefit you. If not, I encourage you to keep looking until you find something else that will work. I wish you luck and courage on this journey.

Finally, about terminology: I will alternate between the terms “marriage,” “long-term relationships,” and “committed relationships,” but the ideas throughout the book pertain to all of them equally. Also, while most of the examples in this book will be of heterosexual couples, the ideas here are equally relevant to same-sex couples.

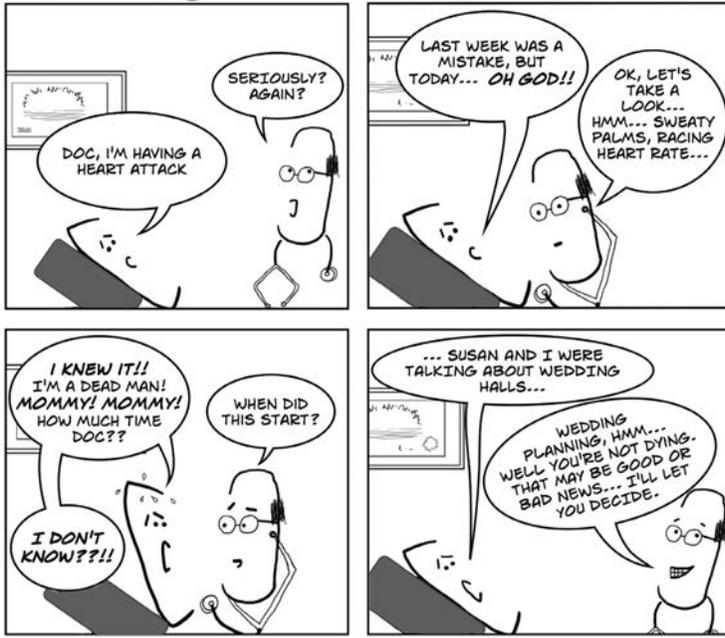
1

Beginning to Learn



Ball + Change

by Avrum Nadigel + Gabe Meranda



1. My Story: A Fear of Commitment

"We teach what we most need to learn."

— Richard Bach,
Illusions: The Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah

It has only been a decade since I did battle with my own struggles with intimacy and commitment-phobia. In my mid-thirties, and by the time I met the woman who would become my wife, I had a string of relationships, none of which lasted longer than five weeks.

In my late teens and early twenties, my trysts and brief relationships went hand in hand with my indie-rock lifestyle. However, by my late twenties, my friends — most of whom were settling down — lost interest in hearing about my adventures. In time, I became the punch line of a joke, as told by comedian Chris Rock:

“Eventually, every man has to settle down. Cause you don’t want to be the old guy in the club. You know what I’m talking about, any club you go into there’s always one old guy. He ain’t really old, he’s just a little too old to be in the club.”

But I didn’t settle down then; I just avoided clubs. I also did my best to convince myself that I was doing something about my self-imposed allergy to commitment.

Therapy helped to a degree. However, as the years passed, the sessions started to meander and feel self-indulgent.

I asked my therapist, whom I had already been seeing for two years, how much longer he felt we would need to work together. His answer? “Two to three times a week for another three to four years.”

The next day, I terminated therapy.

A much cheaper — and hopefully quicker — option was to check out the self-help and relationship sections of my local bookstore. I pored through pages of relationship advice, mining for any hidden gems that therapy had not provided. Instead, the professionals made one thing clear: People like me were beyond repair, so should be avoided at all costs.

I would end each of these self-therapy sessions feeling weary, hopeless, and painfully alone. Yet I never lost hope. Perhaps it was the years of personal therapy or my own training as a therapist, but I understood the pain was a necessary tool for growth.

It would take several sobering experiences, along with the support of friends, and the passage of time, to help me move beyond a crippling fear of commitment.

I’ll discuss these later in this book, but just to look at what these experiences were briefly:

1. My introduction to Bowen family systems theory in a graduate program at McGill University.
2. A defining experience leading a group trip to Israel.
3. Establishing a one-on-one relationship with each of my parents.
4. Overcoming my parents’ divorce and moving to Vancouver.

5. Meeting Dr. David Freeman, a family therapist who introduced me to some (at first) mind-blowing ideas.
6. Discovering the book *Passionate Marriage*, by Dr. David Schnarch.

As these disparate experiences were influencing my thinking, I found it interesting that they almost all came back, in some way, to Bowen family systems theory.

There are certain ideas that just ring true, from the minute you first hear them. They touch you deeply, and as you carry them around, you find them helpful in many ways. Naturally, if you find such an idea, you hold on to it, and try to put it into practice. And if it works, hold on to your hat: You just can't help becoming somewhat of an evangelist for these ideas ... you want other people to reap the benefits as well if they're that dramatic.

That's why I wrote this book.

A lazy part of us is like a tumbleweed. It doesn't move on its own. It takes sometimes a lot of depression to get tumbleweeds moving. Then they blow across three or four states.

— Robert Bly, *Bad People*

Like most people, my knowledge of how relationships worked was formed by watching my parents. From what I can remember, they had a normal marriage. What I thought was normal, however, was actually a cool indifference, with the occasional blowout. Since the marriages of my friends and extended family seemed about the same, I never wondered if things could be different.

I recall my maternal grandmother sharing stories about the man she almost married, but let get away. Actually, all the stories of misery and regret that I encountered were similar. The stories would end with some variation of the phrase, "And that's how I ended up with your grandfather." The message seemed to be twofold:

1. "If you don't want to end up like us, don't pick the wrong partner."
2. "How will you know you've found the right one? You'll know when you know."

I'd agonize trying to figure out what might happen — emotionally or sexually — to tell me I was with the right partner. I'd wonder whether thinking “you'll know when you know” would eventually turn into me making the wrong choice. These questions, fuelled by fear, consumed me.

I already knew how much was at stake. My mother, who'd always been one of those people clamoring, “you'll know when you'll know,” ultimately left my father. Had she failed to heed her own advice and married him despite not knowing? Or had she known at the time she married him, then stopped, somehow?

Whichever was the case, I continued to live, and date, with this idea in mind. I wasn't alone; many people believe this idea. In time, I came to realize it is a false idea that leads many singles off the right track. But that revelation didn't come right away.

Since I wasn't willing to commit to a relationship until I had a guarantee that I was with The Right One, I remained single.

Whenever I was on a date and felt pangs of anxiety or doubt (which appeared with remarkable consistency by the three- or four-week mark of all my relationships), I would become highly critical. I was looking for the smallest of details to indicate I might be with the wrong person. An irritating laugh or blemish would raise my anxiety, nudging me to move on, to keep searching. The reward was always the same: reduced anxiety and profound relief that I had narrowly missed falling into the wrong relationship.

The sum total of these ideas had me abandoning any date or relationship at the first sign of doubt. Meanwhile, friends, family, and other professionals were adamant that relationships shouldn't be as hard as I made them.

All of this became an albatross around my neck, as my commitment-phobia became deeper and deeper entrenched. But the human mind is powerful, and I used it effectively to rationalize my predicament. I told myself smugly that I had outwitted my friends and family; that they were miserably wasting their lives in dead-end relationships.

As a songwriter, I'd romanticize my attempts to stave off commitment with flowery lyrics about independence and truth. I was a maverick forging my own path, different from my friends who had sleepwalked into long-term relationships out of fear of being alone.

One of the first life-changing experiences that got me off the loneliness train for good happened while I was volunteering for an organization during a summer trip to Israel. The group was mostly composed of university students, with a few middle-aged volunteers, and one man in his sixties.

Curious, I asked the older man why he chose to volunteer on this program. He seemed glad to share details about his life. He told me that he had never married because he was holding out for The One. He expressed some regret about this and mentioned that he was lonely, particularly when he was in his apartment in the United States, so he spent three-quarters of the year volunteering for various organizations in Israel.

He turned to me and asked if I was in a relationship. I said no, and with a bit of a smirk told him that I too hadn't found the right one. His facial expression immediately lost any sense of levity, and he said: "Keep on running, and you'll end up like me."

I watched his lips move, knowing he was right, thinking, "This will be me. I will be alone, in my 60s, traveling the world to avoid sitting home alone ... no wife, no kids." I was terrified. But within a few hours I was back to chasing the next passing thing that caught my attention.

Motivational speeches are rarely enough to change our lives. Fortunately, time has a way of exposing even the most ardent self-delusions. Perhaps it was turning 30. Maybe it was my parents' divorce, or that my friends were now spending time at home with their partners playing board games, instead of gallivanting with me. Casual sexual encounters — which had once provided adventure and distraction — became meaningless and depressing. Dating was a chore. Thoughts of being alone and childless started to haunt me. It was a time of profound sadness and trepidation about the future.

Soon after the divorce, my parents moved on with their lives. I did not. Months of worrying about and advising my parents resulted in my exhaustion, sleeplessness, and anxiety. They moved on, and it was time for me to do the same.

I took Horace Greeley's advice to "Go west, young man." I sold all my belongings and moved to beautiful Vancouver, British Columbia. I'd dreamed of living there since my early twenties, but as with my inability to commit to a relationship, fear of the unknown also held me back from moving. It took a spiral of worsening panic attacks; the pain of my

inertia outweighed any perceived fears of living in Lotusland. So I quit my job and made my way west.

After settling into my new surroundings, I found myself spending time with a group of perpetually single thirty- and forty-somethings. We were a motley crew with differing accents, careers, and reasons for uprooting our lives and resettling in Vancouver. We connected to each other through our loneliness and yearning to establish committed relationships. Every week I'd show up to another event, mustering the optimism to believe that this would be the week I'd meet my life partner. It did not happen.

What did happen was another one of those life-changing experiences: I heard author and family therapist Dr. David Freeman speak at a singles' event held at the local Jewish Community Centre. Picture the host, a Chassidic rabbi — black hat, shiny coat, long beard — standing up to introduce that week's speaker, Dr. Freeman, a tall, clean-shaven New-Yorker, sporting typical therapist garb.

Freeman's thick Brooklyn accent amidst this left-coast audience added to the oddity of the evening. All in all, the quirkiness helped create space and made me curious about what would soon unfold.

For all I thought I knew about relationships (I was a practicing therapist at the time), Freeman debunked many of my own assumptions, for example, that poor communication is the cause of relationship problems. He introduced novel ideas about romantic love, providing subtle warnings that the very things that cause a young lover's heart to flutter can, down the road, be the catalyst of dissatisfaction and divorce. He encouraged us to focus on our own interests, because the more interesting we are to ourselves, the more we have to bring to the table in our relationships.

At the time, I had no idea why his ideas resonated with me. In fact, they shouldn't have. For at least a few months, I was attending the same weekly singles event, with speakers all addressing issues about dating, marriage, and sex. By the time Freeman spoke, every speaker sounded the same, but not Freeman. Why? At the time, I could not answer this question.

Later on, I would learn that Freeman trained with Dr. Murray Bowen, one of the pioneers of family therapy and founder of family systems theory. This would be one of a plethora of disparate run-ins with family systems theory that would become instrumental in my ability to work

through my own fear of commitment. Freeman didn't mention Bowen Family Systems theory once, yet his talk moved me, in the same way that Bowen had jumped off the page for me when I had been a student at McGill.

During the question-and-answer period afterwards, I said I'd just ended a relationship and was finding Harriet Lerner's *The Dance of Intimacy* quite helpful. Before I could ask my question, a woman from the audience suggested I read a book entitled *Passionate Marriage* by Dr. David Schnarch. Freeman piped in and said: "Oh yes, Dr. Schnarch is doing very interesting things." I bought the book the very next morning.

Passionate Marriage moved me, by saying things that were contrary to conventional wisdom and somehow instilled me with hope. And throughout those pages, it was Bowen whom Schnarch credited most.

To me, my seemingly random experiences started to feel less and less random, pointing to the power of family systems and how its ideas stood out from everything else out there, providing a compelling argument for marriage.

1.1 A paradigm shift

All breakthroughs, in every sphere of activity, have involved a 'break with'. There is no breakthrough without a change in paradigm. We need to break with the old ways of thinking. The structure of scientific research shows us that breakthroughs require a break with the old ways of thinking.

— Stephen Covey,
in *Director* magazine (2009)

A paradigm shift, according to Stephen Covey, is an experience that changes your perception of how the world works, and leads to profound life changes. For most people, paradigm shifts occur after a significant event happens in your life or family, i.e., a death, the loss of a job, or the birth of a child. For me, a gradual, largely unconscious process of finding Bowen behind every corner crystallized one day over a book.

The unforgettable moment I realized it was happening, I was in a coffee shop, sipping a mocha and reading Schnarch's *Passionate Marriage*.

For years, I had tried to make peace with my seeming inability to commit. I reasoned that some people are marriage material and some people are not; I clearly was not. Then along came Schnarch to inform me that I had it all backwards. He argued that our struggles with intimacy, rather than being a sign of failure, exist to guide us to a path of profound, mature love. He said everyone, even commitment-phobes, is wired properly for intimate relationships. For the first time in years, I was offered real hope that my difficulties with intimacy were not something to run from but to run towards.

Most inspiring among Schnarch's ideas was his belief that one could work on becoming better at intimacy through practice, much as you can strengthen your muscles by lifting weights.

For Schnarch, the key to practicing hinged on differentiation; the ability to separate your own thinking and feeling from other people's, particularly individuals in your own family. In fact, it is the expectations and pressure from our families — with all of their multigenerational, knee-jerk reactivity — that most threatens our ability to function as separate, thinking beings.

When you have your own ideas, and act on them whether alone or in close proximity to those you care about, Schnarch wrote, you can increase your own level of differentiation and, in doing so, become more capable of being in an intimate relationship.

This counterintuitive idea instantly rang true for me. The beauty of this idea for a perpetually single guy like myself was that, according to Schnarch, I could become more differentiated by working on any intimate relationship, not just a romantic one.

Schnarch borrowed the concept of differentiation from Dr. Murray Bowen. I'd first encountered Bowen in graduate school, where his ideas had stood out against the background of the dozens of therapists and therapeutic modalities to which we were introduced. He wasn't the cool kid on the block, or the trendiest theorist out there, but once I encountered Bowen, everything else faded into the background. From psychoanalysis to Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, only Family Systems spoke to me: telling me all I'd ever wanted to know about my family, including the frightening observation that — without a lot of work — bad dynamics get passed down from generation to generation.

I was charmed by the delightfully outrageous story of the origins of Bowen's theories, when he first planned an emotional, nonviolent

confrontation with his family. He wrote a series of letters and made several phone calls to his parents and siblings, disclosing family secrets and telling each person what the others had said about them. Within a short time, everyone in his family was furious with him. But when the dust settled, Bowen noticed that:

- Family members were now able to deal with each other directly, rather than going through third parties or keeping secrets.
- Relationships that had seemed stuck were now more fluid and open.
- He was able to heal a distant and conflicted relationship with his brother.

Intrigued by Bowen's example, and I admit, tickled about the idea of creating a ruckus of my own, I decided to give differentiation a try to help repair my relationship with my father; a relationship which was (to put it mildly) strained.

According to family lore, things had been that way for generations. Following Bowen's pattern, I spoke with my father and told him something my mother had told me: that she was thinking of leaving him. She was livid.

"How can you betray our trust like that? I thought we had a special relationship! How can you be so selfish?"

But I was determined to break the triangle of mother, father, son. To develop one-on-one relationships with both parents, and not be a confidant of either, and that is what I did to deal with it. My hope was to put the (marital) problem back where it belonged. If my parents couldn't deal with each other, why would they think that I — their son — could solve their marital issues? Worse, by agreeing to take my mother's side, I drove a wedge between my father and me

. Ultimately, this would take a toll on my emotional well-being, leading to increased anxiety, insomnia, and a paralyzing fear of commitment. And though it took a few years (and my parents' divorce) for change to take place, ultimately, I managed to break this generational pattern and develop a close relationship with my father.

This did not happen overnight, but over the next few years, I was able to establish relationships with both of my parents. By removing myself out of their marital gridlock, they chose to face each other. Ultimately they divorced, found new partners, and moved on with their lives.

Now I was free to choose what type of relationships I wanted with my parents. As you'll discover throughout this book, this was the first — at times grueling — crucial step to tackling my own fears about intimacy.

1.2 Everything coming together

That had happened years before my move to Vancouver and my encounters with Bowen through these new messengers, Freeman and Schnarch. But something clicked now: I realized that my significantly improved relationships with my family were all the evidence I needed to throw my weight behind Bowen. This decision would provide new, but exciting, meaning for the popular lyric from the Sinatra song *New York, New York*: “If I can make it there, I’ll make it anywhere, it’s up to you ...”

It was up to me, but where to start?

Before I started reading Schnarch, I assumed I couldn’t change (yes, even therapists get hung up on bad assumptions sometimes). We assume our roles in our families of origin, and most of us figure they won’t change. Delving into Bowen’s family systems theory made me realize that not only could I change things, but that if I didn’t, I’d probably pass these bad dynamics onto my own children.

A word about family systems theory. Our families are a complex system, made up of relationships, each with their own history, rituals, and functioning. A problem with one person, or one part of the system, impacts the entire system. So, for example, if one of your parents loses a job, it is likely that this will impact you either emotionally and/or in the form of a lifestyle change. Because individuals and systems (families, couples, corporations, etc.), resist change, we do our best to maintain homeostasis. This means that we try to keep things stable or the same. So, to continue the example above, if your mother loses her job, and decides that the family may have to go through a temporary challenging time while she goes back to school, it is predictable that certain members of your family (perhaps the spouse) will push her to get another job — to bring things back the way they used to be.

For our purposes, this basic but compelling observation about how human beings behave, suggests we should do our best to expand our thinking about relationship problems — that there is rarely a smoking-gun, rarely only one person at fault, whether you or your partner. As you’ll see in some examples later on, however, this type of process is rarely simple. In my case, it involved establishing one-on-one relationships with each member of my family, breaking existing triangles, and more.

I did the work, and managed to establish a relationship with my father (as previous generations in my family hadn't been able to do with their fathers). Later on, the payoff would be huge.

Even as I worked on all those family issues, I never thought that any of that would help me overcome my issues with promiscuity and commitment-phobia. I still thought they were two separate things. It was only after bumping into family system's ideas over and over through those numerous coincidences (Freeman, Schnarch), that the work I'd done with my father came rushing back to me.

I realized that if this stuff could work with my dad, who knew how it could improve my relationships with women? Although I was still wondering how these lessons in differentiation would apply to my future relationships and help me find The One, I was encouraged enough by my success with my father to start applying these lessons to other family relationships: first my brother, then my mother, although that's not to say it happened overnight.

I knew from reading that attempts to untangle oneself from family secrets and establish one-on-one relationships with family members don't always go smoothly. My family members reacted with anxiety and resistance to change.

They said I was selfish, and when things didn't revert back to business as usual — in the previous story, this took the form of pressure to continue to be my mother's confidant in matters about my father — they would threaten to stop talking to me.

In the past, I would have fought and threatened them right back. I would have taken their reactions personally, and blamed other family members for my misfortunes, perpetuating the negative cycle.

This time around, using the new ideas I'd discovered, I could anticipate and plan for these reactions. This gave me more choice about how I wanted to act with my mother, father, etc.; I no longer had to rely on my primitive "fight or flight" reflex. And with more options, comes less anxiety and stress.

The reason I've started by sharing my story is not because I'm anything special; in fact, for the opposite reason: I think I'm pretty typical. For now, I'm mainly using my own example to show you that:

- I know Bowen's family systems theory works.
- Working on current relationships pays off in all future relationships (intimate and otherwise).

- Improving relationships in your family of origin helps, even when it looks like the current problem has nothing to do with them: in my case, the problem was promiscuity and fear of commitment.

As you'll see, these ideas can help you expand your repertoire of thinking and being with family, lovers, friends, and colleagues. With that, you may find yourself with more options for handling yourself in difficult situations. Whereas in the past, you may have had only two options: run away, or capitulate. Now, you can tap into your own creativity, intuition, values, and principles and take action from the best in you. Don't worry if you have no idea what that looks like. We'll discuss what "the best in you" looks like, and how to cultivate this over time. A nice side benefit is that, when we're able to do this over and over again, we increase our psychological resilience, and with that, we become less reactive, experience fewer psychological symptoms of stress and, ultimately, more loving and satisfying relationships.

Upon my realizations, I wasn't out of the woods yet, but I slowly began to reap the benefits of this work in my dating life. I started dating with an internal, rather than external, focus. I still had criteria for the characteristics I wanted my partner to have, but now I could balance those desires with the big picture of my life's goals, as well as my values and principles.

Incredibly, within a year, I had met my future wife. At the same time, I started seeing the benefits of the work I had done in my own family within my clinical practice.

For many years, I had understood emotional pain as something that is happening inside a person, be it biochemical or psychological. Because of this framework, I'd worked mainly with individuals separate from their partners and other family members.

Now that I'd seen these changes in my own life, and experienced my own radical paradigm shift, I realized I could expand the scope of therapy by involving partners and other family members in therapy sessions. Opening sessions up like this helped me get a richer history of how negative situations had developed, and what forces had led to the current anxiety, divorce, job loss, or depression.

To my surprise, this way of working produced results in weeks, rather than years of individual therapy. Remember how my own therapist had told me we'd need to meet two or three times a week for another three or four years? He was working from the paradigm of

psychoanalysis, but I was able to accomplish results much sooner with the tools in this book.

2. How Family Systems Theory Works

I've mentioned how Bowen family systems theory kept popping up "randomly" in my experiences. In reality, it wasn't random; as I said, certain ideas just resonate ... and then, if they really work for you, you want to turn around and share them with others.

In my practice over the years, I've seen the results of Bowen family systems theory. There are a lot of theories out there in psychology, but in this case, I've seen it work over and over again, in my own life and the lives of my clients.

I'd like to briefly explain the core ideas of Bowen theory, to help give you an educated layperson's appreciation of this rich body of psychological, sociological, and anthropological knowledge going back more than half a century (though the core ideas have been around for millennia).

When I first introduce these ideas, clients' feedback is often heart-breaking. Nobody has ever given them tools like these to manage their own relationships. They say things like: "Why have I never heard this before?" "How come my priest or rabbi never mentioned this to me during our premarital classes?" And sadly, "These ideas might have prevented my divorce, or at least would have let me end things way better."

There are some great books about family systems theory out there, including some to help married couples. But why wait for marriage? Most people find that, once they're married, with a mortgage, kids, and deeply entrenched resentments, doing this work is much more difficult. Also, while you're single, you have the ability to see yourself more clearly without the confusion and clutter of a relationship. That's why I wanted to try to share these ideas with singles, and with couples in the early part of their relationship. But it's not just about intimate relationships. More than just your ability to be part of a couple, the ultimate payoff of family systems theory is in healing your ability to be part of all relationships, including those within your family of origin.

The message is a hopeful one: Your struggles are not meaningless, and you can build a long-term relationship that is far better than the ones you've seen so far. So why not start as early as possible?

If you're wondering what any of that has to do with picking the right partner or resolving a current relationship dilemma, here's one

of the main tenets of family systems theory: You will only succeed in future relationships in ways you have already succeeded with your parents, siblings, and/or extended families.

Let's say you have trouble being in the same room with your father when he is sad. You find yourself cracking odd jokes; anything to try and cheer him up, and in turn, avoid your own inner discomfort and worry. Over time, you may find that you will bring this reactivity into all of your relationships whenever you're dealing with someone else's sadness, perhaps even your own. You'll most likely end up repeating the pattern in your intimate relationships, and in parenting. Maybe you can see now why it's worthwhile to start improving these family of origin relationships first. Most people are shocked to discover how deeply their current problems are rooted in previous generations.

That's why working on your current relationships, regardless of whether you're single, dating, or married, is so important. Family systems theory is all about improving past and current relationships in order to succeed in future ones.

The payoffs are immense. For me, this work allowed me to turn a distant and stormy relationship with my father into a warm, caring, and honest friendship. I don't think it's a coincidence that soon after our relationship improved, I was less prone to run away from difficult relationships and scenarios. This learning was easily transferable to intimate relationships, so when the going got tough, I was better able to remain calm, not lose myself in escapist fantasies, and ponder my choices. Again, when you increase your options, all difficult encounters become a little less difficult.

Then — no big surprise — this newfound outlook made its way into my dating life. I was better prepared to meet the right woman; I was less anxious about commitment, better able to deal with conflict, and I felt curious, not fearful, about what it might be like to stay with one person for longer than a month. At last, I was capable of committing to the woman I would eventually marry.

That's why I'm excited to share these ideas with you. Many are not my own; I stand on the shoulders of giants in my field. Don't think of me as an expert; I'm just a fellow explorer. Just when I think I've figured any of this out, family reminds me of how much I still have to learn.

I hope I can do the real experts' work justice, and that their ideas will resonate in a way that makes you excited by the possibility of positive change.