

What is Imago Relationship Therapy?

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Imago Relationship Therapy was developed by Harville Hendrix, Ph.D. with Helen LaKelly Hunt Ph.D. who coauthored the book *Getting The Love You Want*. It was conceived to help couples improve the quality of their relationships. It assumes that each of us comes to our relationship with 'unfinished business' from our childhood. On an unconscious level, we choose a partner to help us heal from these 'emotional wounds.' Through the process, we learn about the unconscious factors in our selection of our partner, how to communicate effectively to break destructive cycles of relating, and how to use the relationship for personal change and growth.

What does Imago mean?

As we mature, we develop the 'Imago,' an image that consists over time of the most vivid impressions formed of our caretakers and other important people in our childhood incorporating both the positive and negative traits. The ones most deeply ingrained are the 'wounding' ones because they threatened our existence.

How does this affect our selection of a mate?

According to Imago theory, in romantic love, most of us are attracted to partners with both the positive and negative traits of our caretakers and other important people in our childhood. The negative ones are the most influential. In addition, we choose a partner who manifests qualities that we don't have. Many of these traits we repressed because our caretakers or society saw them as being undesirable. For example, we may have been told 'don't touch yourself there,' or 'big boys don't cry,' or 'you're too smart for your own good.' So if we have problems getting in touch with our emotions, we may choose a mate who expresses themselves emotionally. If we feel insecure in social situations, we may choose someone who is outgoing.

According to Imago theory, this makes perfect sense. When we first form a relationship with our partner, we look to each other to provide for all our emotional and physical needs. We feel 'whole,' secure and alive!

So what happens when we establish ourselves in the relationship?

It is inevitable that differences will occur which may lead to a power conflict. We may see our partner's negative traits as being as wounding as our caretaker's traits. Even though our partner may embody some of our caretaker's negative traits to a lesser degree, we may behave as if our partner is a carbon copy of our caretaker. In addition, those missing traits in ourselves that we valued in our partner may become very annoying to us. For example, if we have a difficult time

making decisions and become attracted to someone who can, we may then complain that our mate is too controlling! This can lead to great disappointment and feeling a sense of loss of the relationship.

The purpose of the unconscious is to finish the journey of 'healing,' to resolve childhood wounds. We have chosen an Imago match who can help us heal from these wounds. Our partners, with these negative traits (or perceived negative traits) and our missing traits that we repressed, will push our buttons giving us a blueprint to work on our unresolved issues. Also we need to 'stretch' ourselves to become the person our partner needs to help with their healing process. This is very difficult, because we must regain parts of ourselves, which we repressed. For example, if we felt smothered by our caretakers, we may form a relationship with a partner who felt ignored and rejected. We may have adapted early in life by becoming distant; leaving us with difficulty expressing feelings of closeness and support for our partner. As we 'stretch' ourselves to give our partner our love and support, we help our partner feel loved and valued, and in turn we benefit by developing a new level of growth.

How can couples continue to develop real love and deep connectedness?

The core communication skill of Imago Relationship Therapy is The Couple's Dialogue. The goal is to develop 'conscious,' 'intentional relationships' becoming 'passionate best friends.' Both partners need to make a commitment to this powerful process. It involves 'mirroring,' 'validating,' and 'empathizing' with our partner. 'Mirroring' is the process of accurately reflecting back the 'content' of our partner's message, while emotionally 'holding' our partner and letting go of our reactivity. 'Validation' is communicating to our partner that we understand our partner's point of view and that it makes sense (although we do not necessarily agree); thus becoming aware of our partner as separate from us and having valid perceptions different from our own. And 'empathy' is getting in touch with the emotions of our partner by feeling compassion. When we empathetically respond, our partner feels 'affirmed,' 'accepted,' and 'valued.' In turn, our partner is more emotionally and physically available to 'be there' for us.

Through dialogue, we can express our frustrations with our mate, and the emotions underneath the anger, such as being hurt or feeling lonely. These emotions may remind us of similar wounds inflicted by our caretakers or other important people in our lives. Once our partner understands that many of these feelings originated in our childhood or from other experiences, our partner can develop more empathy for us. We can then ask for 'gifts,' changes from our partner, to help heal those wounds. These 'gifts' are 'unconditional,' expressing our love.