



WHAT IS THE “WE”?

marital distress, from what marital resource do troubled couples derive this fuel?

The “We”

Our answer is that the source of positive energy for couples lies in a **shift in consciousness** that translates into a series of daily practices. Distressed couples will learn to tap the positive elements of their relationship or learn how to generate them by shifting from an individual consciousness of what each partner needs or wants to a **consciousness of the relationship or the “We.”** Or as Taibbi (2009, p. 11) succinctly puts it,

$$1 + 1 = 1 + 1 + 1$$

which signifies “two people who are balanced and individually strong but who have created something else—the two has become three, and the third is the relationship between them that they share and nurture.”

When we talk about couples working through their patterns of conflict and distress to build this stronger connection, we are really talking about forging resilient relationships. Resiliency is the ability to bounce back after challenges and to learn and grow from adversity. **Relational resilience**, as exemplified in **We-ness**, consists of a capacity for working together, interpersonal sensitivity, and generosity, as well as a willingness to set boundaries and give space with a confidence that both separate and coordinated action will lead to mutual benefit.



The Seven Elements of the “We”

The following characteristics are the key attributes of the “We,” and we shall return to them repeatedly throughout this volume:

- Security
- Empathy
- Respect
- Acceptance
- Pleasure
- Humor
- Shared Meaning and Vision

Security

Security entails a willingness on both partners’ parts to acknowledge the primacy of their relationship in their lives. There are many ways that we help couples to think about the extraordinary miracle it is to have



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another person share a life with you—to experience concern for your disappointments; to express joy at your successes; simply to remind you of an appointment; or warm a bed with you on a winter night. We strive to reorient couples back to this basic shared commitment and the most elemental gratitude each partner can have for this bond. We tell them to think of a famous movie star living in a Malibu mansion, recently on the cover of *People* or *Us*, wealthy and glamorous, a supposed object of envy in our culture. And then acknowledge that any one of those stars lying in that Malibu bed alone would trade their celebrity in a heartbeat for the loving relationship that the couple can build together.

True relationship security means prioritizing the relationship as the most important commitment in the couple’s life. This seems simple on the couple’s wedding day, and then day-to-day life becomes increasingly more complicated. Demands at work, the arrival of children, aging parents, community and religious commitments—it gets easier and more routine to move the relationship lower and lower down the list of “must do’s” and “can’t do without’s.”

The essence of our focus on the “We” is to reverse this slide and challenge couples to reprioritize their relationship. Often couples with children will say, “But our children have more pressing needs.” Our simple response, and it is not at all glib, is that the greatest gift that you can give to your children is to offer them evidence of a loving and positive partnership. When they experience their parents in a unified and affirming relationship, their lives will inevitably gain in safety, structure, and happiness. For the distressed couples who have spent years constructing what Harville Hendrix (1988) calls “exits” from genuine intimacy, this reprioritizing process is a challenge, but it is essential if they are to achieve the hard work of change. Each partner needs to know that the other one is “all in.” We like to tell couples about one husband who worked in construction and taped the following sign to his dashboard, so he would be sure to remember his commitment as he drove to work each morning and drove back home each night:

COUPLE FIRST

Empathy and Respect

One of the greatest virtues of EFCT is its ability to use immediate emotional experiences in the therapy session to engender **empathy** in a partner for the other partner. Seeing pain or hurt behind a partner’s anger or withdrawal is a sudden reminder of connection. However, so often in our work when we get to this point, we often find that this awareness is short-lived and the partner retreats back into a familiar feeling of resentment and confusion.

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Lasting empathy takes hold when each partner also feels that his or her own feelings are being acknowledged and respected as well. Empathy and concern for the other need to come in the context of self-care and self-respect. Whenever we begin to work with couples to refocus on the “We” and the importance of their relationship, we often encounter a fear that we are asking the two partners to submerge their own identities or give up their autonomy. Traditionally, many women have been forces of nurturance and self-sacrifice in their relationships; the prospect of making the “We” a priority seems either redundant or counterproductive to their hopes for greater autonomy and self-expression in the relationship. In confronting this legitimate concern, we immediately return to Taibbi’s formulation of the 1 + 1 + 1. True We-ness means that two “I”s live inside the “We” and that there must be **respect** for each of these separate individuals to grow independently and together.

One of us (JAS) has a distant cousin whom my wife and I would see every few years when we traveled to California. Whenever he would meet us, his wife and he would be wearing identical matching sweatshirts. **This is not what we mean by the “We”!** Creating a true sense of We-ness in a relationship means creating more room for each partner to express and act on their individuality confident in the support and security that their partner provides. In fact, a partner who embraces the “We” strives to help his partner reach her dreams more ardently, precisely because he knows that his partner is wishing and working for the same in his life. This acknowledgment and support of difference in the couple is the deepest form of empathy or what Skerrett (2013) calls “flexibility to see self and other within the We.” Compare this with a relationship in which each partner is zealously protective of his or her individual needs and vigilant about how much their partner might interfere with their efforts. In this latter case, each partner sees himself or herself as pursuing their dreams *in spite of* their partner rather than because of them. Feeney (2007) identified the ability to grow within the “We” as a “paradox in close relationships where accepting dependence promotes independence” (p. 268).

In order to accomplish this goal of cultivating individual growth within the larger relationship, partners have to work at cultivating an awareness of their own needs, as well as an awareness of the needs of their partner. Even more, both partners must learn to articulate and express their needs respectfully. For example, Kristen and Rich were extremely different in their need for communication during the course of the week. Kristen liked to touch base during the course of the day and Rich could go the whole day without a text or phone call. Kristen felt that Rich’s lack of contact was a sign that he did not care; Rich felt that it was just an indication of how busy he could get at work and that his silence said nothing about his feelings. We asked Kristen how she handled this difference, and she replied,

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I realized that he felt that I was nagging him or needy, so I decided to just shut up about it. I have tried to put my focus on my own job and not worry about it, but it continues to bug me.

In working on developing a We-consciousness with Kristen and Rich, we explained that suppressing a legitimate need supposedly to help the relationship is like putting a **pebble in your pocket** and over time that pebble is followed by similar pebbles until you are pulled down by a huge **weight of resentment**. Awareness of your own need and respect for that need requires a respectful but continued expression. To build a true “We,” Kristen was able to say to Rich, “I do want some contact, even if it is not as much as I would ideally like.” In response, Rich modified his approach by sending a text or making a brief call; he felt that he could do this without compromising his own integrity. These shifts in behaviors that acknowledge the other partner’s needs, while still honoring one’s own, are what Hendrix (1988) calls “stretching” on each partner’s part. They also reflect what developmental psychologists call a “theory of mind”—the capacity to step out of one’s own thought process and grasp (and ultimately feel) what is going on in the other partner’s head. True empathy and true respect!

A critical factor in taking these steps is the awareness of the relationship itself. In confronting this dispute, we coached the couple to ask the fundamental question, **What is Best for Us?** It might be good for Rich to go through his busy day without distractions, but is it good for his relationship if Kristen’s resentment is slowly building? Similarly, he could call and text multiple times in the course of the day, but if each contact builds his annoyance, they have moved no closer to a healthier “We.” When the health of the relationship is set as the ultimate objective, then the reduction of resentment and the respect for each individual within the “We” remain paramount.

Acceptance

Returning to the IBCT perspective, We-ness ultimately means an **acceptance** of the imperfections and vulnerabilities that each partner brings to the relationship. A theater professor with whom one of us co-taught a course used to employ the following exercise to help actors get in touch with the vulnerability of their characters. The two actors would sit very close, face-to-face. One would begin the exercise by saying, “I could be hurt by you.” The other responded in kind, “I could be hurt by you” and the remainder of the exercise was to alternate repeating the phrase while looking in each other’s eyes. Needless to say, it could often bring one or both of the participants to tears.

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Living inside a true “We” is living with this reciprocal awareness of the fragility of each partner and the recognition of how much care such awareness requires. Jordan (2010) and Skerrett (2013) describe this as “mutual engagement in supported vulnerability.” It is a willingness to stand naked in front of the other person and say, “Here I am, flaws and all” and know that your partner is willing to do the same, and that it is good enough for both of you. Interestingly, we have found in our work with couples that the most challenging part of helping partners achieve this joint vulnerability is not a partner’s willingness to accept the other partner’s imperfections, but rather the partner’s own unwillingness to accept his or her self-perceived flaws, compounded by a skepticism that the other partner truly would accept them as well.

Garrett and Duane were a couple that exemplified this difficulty. Garrett had grown up in a high-powered, extremely successful family of physicians (both parents and his two older brothers were all MDs), but he was the one child who had not become a doctor. Not inclined toward science, he had worked with at-risk youth and become a beloved social worker at a large community mental health center. Despite his fine work and the high praise he received from his coworkers and clients, Garrett always measured himself against the yardstick of his parents and older brothers. Unfortunately, these feelings of self-doubt had built up a strong defense against the belief that anyone might find him worthwhile, and even more, worthy of love. Nothing confounded his partner, Duane, more than Garrett’s unwillingness to accept his own goodness and inherent value. Duane would endlessly tell Garrett that he loved him, but Garrett could not seem to trust fully in these declarations. Duane felt pushed away and frustrated. In response, we worked closely with them on building a stronger and safer “We” that would give them more room to allow these vulnerabilities to be supported and accepted.

Finally, they came into therapy and recounted a pivotal night in bed together. Duane had just made an affectionate statement to Garrett, but Garrett had been down all day, blaming himself for a negative interaction at work. Duane told Garrett again that he loved him, but Garrett said that it was hard for him to believe that anyone could love such a “fuck-up.” Duane had finally had enough. He spoke clearly to Garrett and told him that he did love him, but that he wasn’t sure how much longer he could put up with this. He felt pushed away and that his love was being devalued and treated as superficial or phony. He said that if Garrett could not love himself, then maybe this was sending a message that the love he was offering was a mistake.

Now faced with the real prospect of losing Duane, at last it clicked for Garrett—that Duane truly did love him and that the only real impediment to their relationship was his unwillingness to give himself over to



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this idea. He was using his self-doubt to protect himself from true vulnerability and acceptance of Duane’s love. He told us that he still had a lot of work to do on having more self-confidence, but he was no longer willing to doubt that he was worthy of the gift that Duane was offering. Duane felt an extreme sense of validation from this leap of faith, and that his own vulnerability had finally been rewarded.

Acceptance of self and acceptance of the other, patience with the shortcomings that are inherent to being human—this attitude engenders a wisdom that grows stronger over the course of a long-term relationship and leads to the deepest resilience in times of stress and challenge.

Pleasure and Humor

Thus far, we have made the “We” sound rather heavy and somber, but the essence of the relationship should also include pleasure, humor, and passion. No partner in a couple ever went to the altar saying, “I know that I want to build my 401k with you and make sure that there is an equitable distribution of domestic chores.” Couples marry with visions of romantic vacations, ardent lovemaking, dinners with good friends, and casual Sundays eating a late breakfast and reading the newspaper together. Through it all, they imagine forging an ever-deepening friendship with each other.

Obviously, the couples we tend to see in therapy have strayed far from this vision. Our job is often to bring them back to this aspiration—to help them find the humor and fun that were central parts of why they got together in the first place. We seize any moment of shared humor that we observe between them. We highlight the good acts that they do for each other and encourage them to continue and slowly build on them. We initially prohibit grandstanding acts of buying flowers, surprise gifts, big nights out. Instead, we talk about simple acts of kindness—handing the towel to your partner when she steps out of the shower, making his coffee before he gets up, agreeing to watch a favorite TV show rather than going to your office to surf the Internet, volunteering to do the bedtime rituals for the kids on a day that’s not your usual routine. And in all cases, such acts must be followed by explicit acknowledgment—in other words—a “thank you.” We call any act of kindness “**gift-giving**,” and we have been stunned to see how many of these micro-moments can pass in a session without the partner noticing them and registering gratitude. Robinson and Price (1980, cited in Gottman, 2008) found that happily married partners were aware of almost all of the kind gestures of their spouses, while distressed partners registered only half of these behaviors. With many distressed couples, no slight, however trivial, will be overlooked, and yet numerous subtle loving acts will land and vanish, like a spare snowflake on an asphalt drive. We purposely disrupt this pattern by



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asking partners to say their explicit thank you’s to each other while making eye contact. They often describe that they feel self-conscious doing this and repeating it at home, but then they soon notice that it starts to make a difference in how they treat each other.

Once couples start to shift their mindset back to seeing the “We” as a source of pleasure rather than repetitive frustration, they are more ready to engage in the exercises endorsed by Gottman (2008, pp. 153–154) that promote “love maps,” building a “culture of appreciation and respect,” “increasing and savoring positive affect,” and “building affection, good sex, romance and passion.” Once they can see the positive potential of the “We,” they are ready to take up Gottman’s “Love Map Card Deck” or his “Salsa Deck” as a means to greater pleasure in their lives together.

Silvio and Amelia were a couple that had built up a powerful wall around sexual intimacy. Silvio had a chronic back injury and worried about his sexual performance, not to mention his fear of reinjuring his back while making love. Despite his reticence, Amelia was desperate to reconnect with him physically, and this tension between them created ongoing conflicts and alienation.

At the same time they continued to work together every day in raising their three children, negotiating their finances, managing their extended families. When not focusing on their sexual problems, they were considerate, loving, and engaged with each other. Still, Amelia could not accept the possibility that they would live without sexual contact, and Silvio felt deeply threatened and defensive in response to her frustration.

As I (JAS) embarked on direct efforts through the technique of sensate focusing to reduce their anxiety and build up their positive physical connection in small steps, they both emphasized their shared story of disconnection from each other. Silvio said to me, “What’s the point of this exercise that you want us to do—the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior.” Amelia agreed with a downcast look, “We’ve tried so many times before, but nothing changes.” I pointed out that if past behavior predicted future behavior, they had plenty of reason for hope. I asked them to consider a number of shared moments that I had just witnessed in the current session. Silvio had stopped on the way to therapy to buy coffee for Amelia. Amelia mentioned that she had been dying to tell Silvio about something that happened at her work. They shared a laugh about their youngest son’s disaster of a bedroom. I asked them, “Aren’t these examples of ‘past behaviors,’ along with the hundred other ways that you daily think of and attend to each other’s needs? Isn’t your relationship a record of support and affection as much as it is one of alienation? Wouldn’t it be more effective to concentrate on the gratitude you feel for each other’s acts of good will rather than on your setbacks as you take these steps toward regaining intimacy? You have a story of kindness that exists just as powerfully as your current story of discord.”



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In the chapters ahead, we shall address exactly how couples can learn to leverage the positive stories of We-ness in their relationship and how to find more uplifting meaning in the stories of struggle. As EFCT emphasizes, positivity grows out of immediate emotional experience in the present moment, but the capacity to notice that brief quasar of kindness is born from knowledge of past benevolences. We must use our storehouse of positive memories shared with our partners to heighten the value of the current positive interaction or as Gottman (2008) writes,

It is like periodically lifting out of one’s memory a many-faceted jewel, each face of which contains a lovely and loving memory of how the partner or the relationship has enriched one’s life.
(p. 154)

Shared Meaning

In studies of both individuals and couples, the capacity to draw meaning from life experiences and to see a larger purpose to one’s existence has been associated with higher levels of adjustment and greater subjective and psychological well-being (Bauer, McAdams, & Pals, 2008; Blagov & Singer, 2004; King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006; Lyubomirsky, 2007). In particular, individuals who are able to grow from adversity and finding meaning in traumatic events often show better long-term outcomes than individuals who are unable to build a meaningful context from these events (Joseph & Linley, 2006).

Ultimately, the “We” is a statement of meaning about the relationship and about each partner’s life trajectory. Individuals who have grasped the “We” see themselves as engaged in a lifelong project—the building and sustaining of a structure that they have created and that is unique in the world. We encourage them to see their relationship as belonging to them; they build its private language, rules, symbols, rituals, and meaning systems. We like to tell them that their being together in the way they want to be is “off the grid”; they can bring their own style, ingenuity, and spontaneity to the relationship and need not involve any material purchase or consumer activity. In other words, their relationship, treasured and savored, in their home, and behind their bedroom door, is an act of radical freedom that they can share together. We will never forget the pleasure we saw in the face of an executive husband in our practice as he confessed how much fun he was having in his marriage once he embraced the “We.” It was the first time he had bucked the corporate system in his life. “I kind of like being a rebel,” he told us.

We once worked with a couple that had the last names of Zimmerman and Rosenstein. Each partner came from very close families, and their respective parents continued to play strong and, at times, intrusive, roles in their married life. Once we began to discuss the “We” with



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them, we examined how important it was for them to establish their own married identity, separate from their families of origin. Too often, they used the value systems of their parents (not infrequently supported by comments from their parents) to judge their partner as falling short or not doing things right. Zimmermans always went to Sabbath services on Saturday mornings and Rosensteins on Fridays. Zimmermans believed that young children should be free to play and not tracked into achievements. Rosensteins felt that children should be exposed to an instrument or sport as early as possible to give them a head start in life. Our sessions devolved into Talmudic debates with each partner quoting the “scripture” according to Zimmerman or Rosenstein.

In the spirit of the “We,” our intervention was simple—we asked them what the **Zimmersteins** thought was the right thing to do. They were their own couple—a unique combination that they had created that belonged to neither the Zimmermans nor the Rosensteins. It was time for the Zimmersteins to carve out their own turf and personal vision in the world. This, of course, meant creating some necessary boundaries that pushed back the all too well-meaning relatives and allowed the Zimmersteins to begin to flourish on their own. “What do the Zimmersteins want and what have they decided to do?” became a powerful catchphrase and touchstone as this couple pursued a meaning and purpose in their relationship distinct from their families of origin.

As we explore other couples’ stories in greater depth in the chapters ahead, we shall see how their ability to define a sense of shared purpose and to use stories to highlight these meanings is critical to the positive energy that thriving couples possess.

To summarize the seven basic elements of the “We” that serve as the foundation for our therapeutic work with couples, we developed the following acronym:

Security

Empathy

Respect

Acceptance

Pleasure

Humor

Shared Meaning and Vision