

Chapter 1: THREE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS



Every potion needs a strong base, as a tasty soup needs a flavorful stock and a trustworthy house needs a strong foundation. *Communication Elixirs*, the previous book in this series, outlined how to speak in order to increase your odds of being heard and understood, the benefits of listening with empathy, and how to combine those skills in order to have a respectful and successful dialogue. *Savory Safeguards* builds on those foundational skills by adding the three ingredients described below that are necessary in order to successfully resolve any problem: Goodwill, a Skillful Dialogue and An Effective Problem Solving Plan.

#1: GOODWILL

The base to your potions is *goodwill*, meaning that you want what is best for you, of course, but you also want what is best for the other person and in the best interests of your relationship. I must make an assumption about you and the relationships you have in mind when reading this book. It's a big assumption because this may not be true for you. I am assuming that a base of goodwill exists. You may have to dig to see if this goodwill exists. In the heat of an upset, goodwill may temporarily be submerged under hurt feelings or anger. Without that basic container of goodwill, attempts to manage conflict or successfully problem-solve will likely break down.

You don't *necessarily* need assurance that goodwill exists from the *other* person with whom you are in relationship, although that, of course, is ideal. You can effectively work your side of this process whether or not the other person has your best interests at heart. You're the only one who must be aware of and be ready to stand up for whatever is in your best interests. If the person with whom you have an issue hasn't read these books, or learned healthy speaking and listening skills, review Chapter 10 in *Communication Elixirs* titled "All By Myself." It really is possible to have the *outcome* of a skilled dialogue when you are the only one being skillful!

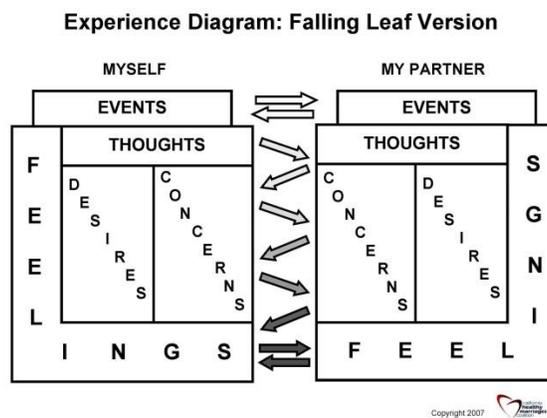
And should your own levels of goodwill feel low, please read on anyway as your goodwill is likely to grow as you gain new knowledge, awareness, skills, and hope for better relationships.

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#2: A SKILLED DIALOGUE

A Skilled Dialogue is where both (or all parties) are able to truthfully and respectfully share Thoughts, Feelings, Concerns and Desires. It means that when one is speaking, the other is listening with the goal of fully understanding. To facilitate empathic listening, the listener repeats back what the other has said in his or her own words to confirm that the meaning understood is accurate. This exchange continues until each has identified his or her core concern.

Often (in fact, usually) the surface issue is rarely the same as the core concern. It takes a dialogue in which the response to intimate exposure is non-judgmental listening in order to go deeply to the underlying need (core concern). This was illustrated in **Communication Elixirs** in Chapter 9, *Return to Kindergarten* and will be reviewed in the next chapter. The process of a skilled dialogue that takes both parties into deeper levels of communication is beautifully illustrated by this diagram. (Used with the permission of Dennis Stoica.)



It is essential that at least one party (you) be committed to having a *Skilled Dialogue*. It's best, of course, if both persons know the guidelines of a *Skilled Dialogue* and be committed to having one.

#3: AN EFFECTIVE PROBLEM SOLVING PLAN

An effective problem solving plan is one in which the core concerns of each person are met.

Jim and I had many conversations that led to an agreement to resolve our main issue. Each time the solution broke down as either he or I failed to follow through. Many of the couples I've coached have had the same frustrating experiences. Without a concrete plan that meets both persons' needs, *and* a way to be accountable to each other, even a good solution may fail. When attempts at resolution repeatedly fail, one or both parties lose confidence that they are capable of problem solving. And without successful problem solving, relationships may fail, as well.

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Chapter 4 provides a clear outline for mapping out a solution that works and includes the accountability that is the essential follow-through to any good plan. *Chapter 11* adds an effective strategy for working your way through a long-standing issue that is impossible to resolve in one or two sessions.

IN SUMMARY

Successful conflict resolution must begin with a basic foundation of *Goodwill*...meaning that you want your core concern addressed, *as well as* the core concern of the other party. To that add a respectful and empathic *Skilled Dialogue*, and then, a concrete *Plan* that implements a resolution to the problem that meets both your and the other person's core concerns.

The Love Potions Series was conceived to demonstrate that the skills my late husband Jim and I learned in our marriage are applicable to all relationships. Although many of the examples I share come from our marriage, I relate other examples from other relationships, as well, to (1) validate the universality of these skills and (2) to give you examples that relate to your life whether you apply these skills to a marriage or to other relationships.

With that goal in mind, the following is a true example of the skills taught in *Savory Safeguards* as used in a business relationship.

A PROFESSIONAL EXAMPLE

Mary grew up in a home where conflict had a cost. Arguments weren't just about the issues that started them. Every new conflict soon included disagreements of last week, last month, last year. They inevitably ended with an exchange of words meant to hurt, followed by very loud silence. She watched her parents tear each other up and decided the solution was just to never disagree.

Mary carried her understanding of the awfulness of conflict into her marriage. It worked to her advantage through the early years when she and her husband had to figure out how socks were folded, green beans cooked, and whether to buy a car or a truck. In a spirit of love and caring, both she and her husband readily bent to find solutions to inevitable problems. But when serious problems came, she had neither tools nor heart to face and struggle through tough issues. She found herself replicating the pattern of her parents. She wouldn't discuss a problem until it was so great that her feelings caused her to pour out fury and frustration in a spirit of hopelessness and hurt. She attacked like her parents had. Her husband attacked back. Fights became frequent, repetitive, without solutions, and eventually debilitating to marriage, children, and her sense of self.

As part of her work as head of a teen pregnancy program, Mary had learned some powerful communication methods from Bernie in a workshop at Penn State University. They gave her confidence a gigantic boost in regard to interacting with others socially and in expressing herself professionally. Part of the system she'd learned, called Relationship Enhancement®, was a

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method for problem solving that guaranteed that a solution can be found that will meet both persons' core needs. Mary saw this system work professionally, but she found it hard to trust that conflict solutions could be found that would take away the anger or attacks when feelings were strong and relationships close.

Mary and Bernie eventually became colleagues and began to write a book together. They had a standing telephone appointment on Monday evenings to review the writing each had done the previous week and plan for the work of the coming week. One night a huge disagreement erupted.

When Mary reverted to her learned attack-block-attack-again conflict methods, Bernie insisted that the Relationship Enhancement method be used instead. Mary was already very upset, but she agreed. What happened next was life-changing for her. At Bernie's insistence, each spoke using respectful communication tools taught by the *Relationship Enhancement* program referred to in *Communication Elixers*. The Listener would repeat back what was heard with empathy, listening for the Thoughts, Feelings, Concerns and Desires of the Speaker. Periodically they would change roles...the Speaker becoming the Listener, the Listener becoming the Speaker.

The issue was one in which each of them had intense feelings and powerful opinions. (What the conflict was about has been forgotten and isn't even important. This story could be true of any issue.) Even though they both were adamant in their respective positions, they both remained true to the respectful speaking and listening skills taught by *Relationship Enhancement*.

In spite of that, Mary was uncomfortable with the depth of the disagreement. As the conversation continued, Mary's anxiety increased. She was sure a combustible moment was approaching when Bernie would resort to brutal words in order to win. All of her previous experience shouted at her to back off...give in...surrender. Whatever the issue was, it wasn't worth being on the receiving end of attack by someone she held very dear. This had been the outcome of all previous experiences with conflict. She waited for it to happen again.

Bernie, however, would not allow her to bow out or cave in to her own anger. He pushed her to stay engaged in the process...to keep expressing her Thoughts, Feelings, Concerns and Desires...to listen to him with empathy...to allow him to listen to her. With all of his being, he believed that by staying with the process, they would eventually find a solution to the conflict that satisfied both of their core concerns.

This dialogue took place over several days. Some evenings they called a halt because it was 11 p.m. Some evenings one or the other had feelings strong enough to need a "time out" in order to calm down and avoid speaking unskillfully. Once or twice Mary called a postponement because she needed time to process what Bernie said and identify what she was feeling or thought in response. Several times she tried to quit, allowing Bernie to have it his way without further challenge. Always, Bernie would not allow her to do that.

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It was a challenging process for both of them, but especially excruciating for Mary who expected that, at any moment, Bernie would turn vicious on her, as had been her past experience with others.

Finally the time came when they had thoroughly explored each other's Thoughts, Feelings, Concerns and Desires in regard to this issue. They then brainstormed solutions that would meet both persons' core concerns. They found a solution that satisfied both. The conflict was resolved and a solution implemented that they would both happily support.

In the process a major wound in Mary was healed. She saw that conflict did not need to be debilitating. It did not need to be destructive. It did not need to be brutal. She had experienced a major conflict with a person she respected and cared for and it didn't *ever* cross the line from respectful to disrespectful. Now she knew by her own experience that conflict can be resolved if both persons are willing to use healthy communication skills and are committed to finding a solution that meets both of their core concerns.

She shared with me that from that time on, her basic distrust of others and herself was gone. Her assumption that conflict with another would end in pain and disruption of the relationship was gone. She found new courage to face conflicts that arose at both home and work, knowing that by using good skills they could be resolved to the satisfaction of both or all parties.

Since then, these skills have become an integral part of who she is. At work, with friends, within her family, she sees finding solutions that meet both people's needs as a way to approach the world. She still may choose to withdraw from conflict if the other person is disrespectful, but always with a warm invitation to return to discussion later and find a solution that works for all. The incident with Bernie, lived out through the years, has given her an enormous boost of confidence that she can hold on to herself, her values, and her point of view while engaging in a process that will result in mutual satisfaction to any conflict.

This example is taken from the experience of two professionals who worked closely with each other. When my late husband Jim and I decided to do our best to always treat each other with respect as recounted in the Preview of *Savory Safeguards*, we didn't know the concept of finding a solution that meets each person's core concerns. Consequently we included in our problem solving tool box options of compromise, trades (I'll do this your way if you do that my way) and love gifts (giving the desired solution to another as a gift without resentment). (See Chapter 17 of *How to Stay Married & Love It! Solving the Puzzle of a SoulMate Marriage*.)

The conflict and problem solving process that you'll learn in *Savory Safeguards* holds as it's standard that two (or more) persons who are committed to speaking and listening with respect and empathy, can eventually find a solution to any conflict that works for each individually *and* for the relationship. Since learning this higher level of conflict resolution, I've seen it work successfully in a variety of relationships: marriages, parent and child, as well as boss and employee.

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You'll also learn how to successfully and respectfully manage your feelings when you either want to burst into angry, brutal words in order to win the argument or, out of fear, give in to avoid the conflict altogether. Both angry retorts and passive surrenders damage a relationship as well as hurt the individuals involved. Both choices block the benefits that each can ultimately bring to the situation, the solution, *and* the relationship.

STIR THE POT: Exploring Conflict

When pushed to the edge in any conflict, how do you typically respond? Does a nasty ogre emerge from within to beat your opponent into submission? Or do you duck and run for cover, abandoning yourself in the process? What do you think about Bernie's insistence that Mary stay engaged? Have you even *imagined* that a serious conflict can remain respectful and find mutually satisfactory solutions? Or has there always been a "winner" and a "loser?" What habits or beliefs in you prevent satisfactory resolutions of conflict? In what relationship of yours do you hope this process will bring a mutually satisfactory solution? Even if it seems impossible, will you remain open to this possibility?

POSTSCRIPT

My deep gratitude extends to both Bernie and Mary for permission to use their real life example of the success of respectful dialogue and problem solving skills. The **Love Potions** series is meant to teach skills that are useful in *all* relationships. Yet so many of the examples I use are from my marriage with Jim. I chose to use Bernie and Mary's experience because it represents the use of these powerful skills in a business relationship that was also a friendship. It also demonstrates the common dynamic of a very strong, forceful person in conflict with one who feels overpowered and tends to surrender passively when faced with conflict.

Dr. Bernard Guerney, Jr: Dr. Guerney headed the relationship research laboratory at Penn State University for over 30 years. His goal was to identify speaking, listening and problem solving skills that created and sustained healthy relationships. The outcome of his life's work is represented by the *Relationship Enhancement® Program (RE)*, a curriculum that has enabled thousands of couples and families to build intimate connections and resolve differences. *RE* has been tested against many other relationship skills program and empirically delivered higher rates of long term benefits to relationships in which those skills were learned and used. Dr. Guerney and his wife, Louise, are retired, although Louise's book about the use of these skills in parenting, *Parenting Skills*, is newly revised and available from IDEALS, Inc.

Mary Ortwein, LMFT: Mary, whose work focus has always been "people on the edges," adapted the *Relationship Enhancement Program* into an easy reading version, *Mastering the Mysteries of Love (MML)*. It has been taught extensively in the United States and in several other countries in multiple languages, with variations for unmarried parents with a child as part of ACF's Building Strong Families Project (*Love's Cradle*), singles (*Ready for Love*), and refugees (*Relationship Enhancement for Immigrants and Refugees*.)

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Mary currently lives and works in Kentucky where she heads an agency reaching lower income clientele with healthy relationship and parenting skills. She supervises 12 MFT interns per year, guiding them in the use of these valuable skills as prospective therapists.

Learn more about *RE* or *MML* and read supporting research outcomes at either www.nire.org or www.skillswork.org

Beginning in 2007, I have taught *RE/MML* skills to hundreds of couples in classes or in private coaching sessions. Because of my personal experience in a stepfamily, I was invited by Mary to combine the skills taught in *RE* and *MML* with strategies that help step-families succeed. *Mastering the Mysteries of Stepfamilies (MMS)* was published by IDEALS, Inc in 2010.

In 2011 the stepfamily content was separated from *MMS* when I published *Stepping TwoGether* with Ms. Ortwein's blessing. A 40 page summary of stepfamily guidelines is available at www.nancylandrum.com

The newest version of the *Relationship Enhancement Skills* is *CoupleTalk*, a video based program developed by Don and Alex Flecky in California. Find them at www.CoupleTalk.org

Although the *Love Potions for Healthy Relationships* series is largely based on the experience I had in my marriage to Jim and other personal relationships, as well as my extensive experience teaching and coaching good skills, I borrow heavily from the skills passed on by Dr. Guerney and Ms. Ortwein in writing this series. I'm excited about sharing them with you!

Mary, Bernie and his wife Louise are still in frequent and close contact with each other. Their mutual affection and respect continues...

The listening skill is still used by hostage negotiators...

We can only hope and pray that powerful leaders of our world will be inspired to use respectful speaking, listening and negotiating skills to bring peace to our planet...