

A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words

More than twenty years ago, I created an interactive model that portrays the different forces that create bonds in relationships. This model is now referred to as the *Relationship Attachment Model*, or *RAM*. I have used this conceptual picture countless times in my counseling practice to clarify the abstract and often contradictory forces of love. I received such positive feedback from my clients that I decided to sneak this model in when I taught graduate courses on marriage and family relationships. I presented it as a tool to assess relationships and as a way to visualize the dynamic, changing bonds in intimate relationships. In order to gain accurate feedback from the students who might have only said what their professor would want to hear, I waited until the end of the course before revealing that I developed this model. Before I disclosed the origins of the RAM, I had students anonymously fill out an evaluation of the course materials; the RAM was almost always rated the most helpful and practical assessment instrument.

I tend to be a big-picture thinker and naturally try to find ways to visually represent abstract concepts. Few subjects are as abstract and as big as love and attachment. Relationship bonds include concepts such as trust, reliance, commitment, affection, emotion, love, needs, and intimacy. Each of these is the subject of endless volumes. However, I believe that they are all related and are the product of only five universal human dynamics working together. The five fundamental dynamics are the depth to which you *know*, *trust*, *rely on*, *have a commitment to*, and *have sexual involvement with* another person. The RAM portrays these five dynamics in a way that explains their unique contributions to the bond developed in a relationship, as well as the interactions they have with each other.

Picture a sound system's equalizer with five up-and-down sliders evenly placed across the face of the board (see Figure 2.1). The slider on the far left represents the extent to which you really *know* a person. As you move the bar on this slider up over time,

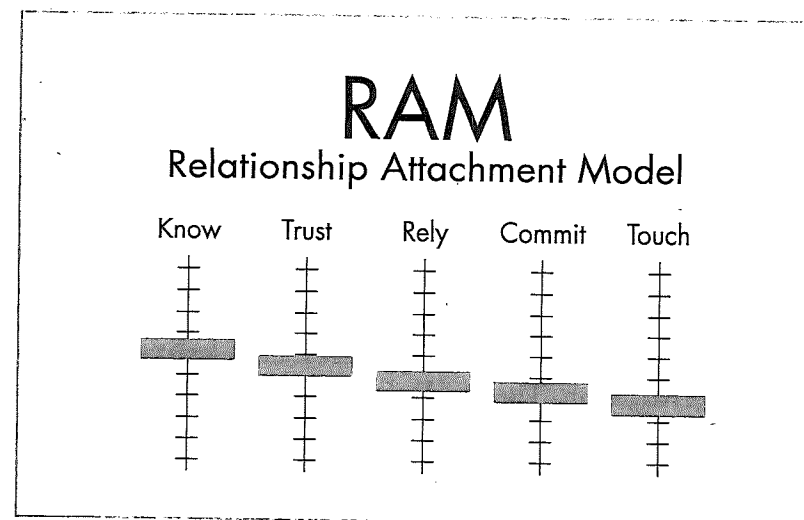


FIGURE 2.1 The Relationship Attachment Model

you signify a richer, fuller, and more personal knowledge of the other. The next slider represents the range of *trust* you have for that person. This bar rises to denote a deeper, more positive, confident trust in your partner. The third slider represents the extent to which you *rely* on this person. Moving this bar up indicates the greater ways you depend on this person to meet your most significant needs. The fourth slider represents the range of *commitment* you have established with this person. The slider for this dynamic rises to signify greater levels of commitment expressed within your relationship. The final slider, on the far right, represents the degree of sexual *touch* and chemistry that exists between you and your partner. Elevating this slider signifies increases in the passionate chemistry and sexual contact with your partner.

As you reflect on this portrayal of relationship connections, you will realize how bonding these five dynamics are in your own relationships. For example, your best friend likely knows you better than just about anyone else. This knowledge creates attachment. To the degree that you have opened up and shared yourself, you have become bonded to your best friend. An even

stronger bond results from a reciprocal exchange in each of these areas. In other words, the bond doubles when the two of you know each other better than anyone else.

The same is true for trust. The deeper and more positive the trust you have in someone, the stronger your feelings of connection to him or her. When that person also fully trusts you, then this mutual trust generates even greater feelings of oneness. Depending on someone who also depends on you to meet personal and emotional needs intertwines the feelings of both in a powerful union. There is little doubt that mutual commitment and sexual passion also are intensely bonding dynamics that contribute to the mystical experience of attachment.

Not only do these dynamics stand on their own as channels of bonding in your relationships, but they also interact with each other to produce a mix of the overall attachment in a relationship. As soon as you imagine some of the sliders up and some down, you immediately gain a sense of the mixed nature of love and attachment. In the same way that the controls on your equalizer affect the different tones of the overall sound of your music, the blend of the different levels of these five bonding relationship dynamics produces the “sound” of your attachment.

When all five are at the top level, the feelings of attachment are strongest. But when even one is low, attachment is weakened and your feelings of closeness become mixed. You are easily confused, hurt, and doubtful. The *balance* of all five bonding dynamics determines the healthiness of your relationship and the clarity of your perspective on your partner.

Here lies one of the most important keys to building a healthy relationship: *keep a balance among the five relationship dynamics*. Whenever the relationship dynamics shift out of balance with each other, you will feel unsafe, experiencing feelings of hurt, betrayal, confusion, mistrust, unfairness, anger, loneliness, or any combination of these. But when you keep these five dynamics in balance with each other so that you are not moving further ahead in one area than in any of the others, then you are securely planted in the safe zone.

Safe Relationships

There is one basic rule for guarding the safe zone: *never go further in one bonding area than you have gone in the previous*. This rule is based on the view that the five bonding dynamics have a specific order and logic to them: what you *know* about a person determines the degree you should *trust* him or her; this trust directs you in choosing what personal needs you can *rely* on him or her to meet; you should become *committed* only to the extent that you know, trust, and depend on that person; and finally, any degree of *sexual involvement* is safest when it matches the context of the overall intimacy reflected in the levels of the other four dynamics.

Slipping out of the safe zone explains the most common mistake people make in relationships: when the levels of the five dynamics are out of balance, then the emotional bond becomes unhealthy, and you tend to overlook crucial characteristics of the other person that should be exposed and explored. Thus, your love becomes truly blind. Or without knowing why, you wind up rationalizing characteristics and experiences that create a vague sense of unease.

Luanda always had a thing for the bad boys. Her romance with Anthony took off fast and furious. True to form, Anthony made Luanda feel drenched in his love; he convinced her that she was his breath of life and that without her he was nothing. They didn't hold back sexually, believing that their passion was unrivaled and that they would be together forever.

In time, though, Anthony started becoming extremely jealous. Almost as if some emotional switch had been flipped, he would become critical and insulting when she wore sexy outfits, went to particular places, or talked to certain people. Even though his behavior became a predictable pattern, she

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never failed to be surprised and angry. His rages intensified, and nothing she would say or do helped. She tried making promises and following his demands, but Anthony always found something more. In the height of his attacks he would resort to one of several threats: walk out, end the relationship, or find someone

better. Luanda would invariably cry, being obsessed with losing him, and beg him to stay.

When Luanda sat down in my office and described her relationship with Anthony, I was perplexed by the contradiction between her head and heart. She could describe his pathological pattern as accurately as any professional but still could not stop dating him or assert any ultimatums.

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What kept her stuck on him?

What became apparent as our sessions continued was that Luanda had made Anthony the center of her world. She totally relied on him to be her source of emotional security and personal identity. He made her feel needed—even possessed, in some warped way.

Luanda was a lot like a child in this relationship. A child wants to feel like she belongs to her parents and her parents belong to her. This “belonging” is at the core of feeling secure. Parents express their “ownership” in many ways: “That’s my girl,” “We love you more than anyone in the whole wide world,” or “You’re my pride and joy.” Children need this sort of exchange. When they don’t get it, they can end up looking for the feeling of being *owned* in some adult relationship. This always leads to overdependence on someone in search of his or her approval, which usually comes at too great a cost to one’s sense of self.

Luanda was fixated on wanting to be lovingly owned. She was trying to gain what she had never received from her father. She found “normal” guys boring. It was the overly controlling man that consistently caught her eye. But it was these same men who never assuaged her need: they just temporarily drugged it

with their own paranoid controls. Relying on someone *beyond* your level of trust hooks you emotionally in a dangerous relationship addiction.

Safe Relationships Prompt Healthy Choices

Ultimately, Luanda’s knowledge should have determined the boundaries of her reliance and trust. If she had set boundaries based on self-respect and an understanding of her boyfriend’s problems, then she would not have panicked at his threats. She needed to lower the level of her reliance to match her reluctance of trusting Anthony. Then, and only then, would she have been able to stay healthy in the relationship, maintain a clear perspective, and have the strength to either push for change or break up with him.

When the safe-zone rule is followed, then your relationship grows in healthy and stable ways and the potential for making a lasting marital choice is maximized. The need to maintain balance among the bonding dynamics is central to keeping an objective perspective and avoiding overattachment. You must keep an equal involvement of your heart *and* mind. A healthy premarital relationship and a choice of a partner you won’t regret require input from both the head and the heart.

The heart and mind were made to work together, each one making a vital contribution to the experience of love and attachment. When the safe-zone rule is not followed, the heart and mind are not in harmony. The attachment of the heart overrides the insights of the mind. Unhealthy love is blind because the mind disengages in order to maintain the imbalanced attachment of the heart. Healthy love is not blind, because the heart and mind are in sync with each other.

Scientists have now found evidence to support the old adage that love is blind. Through brain-imaging studies, researchers at University College London found that “feelings of love lead to a suppression of activity in the areas of the brain controlling critical thought. It seems that once we get close to a person, the

brain decides the need to assess their character and personality is reduced.”¹ Romantic love *suppresses* the neural activity associated with your ability to judge correctly a partner whom you have negative feelings about. In addition, massive releases of oxytocin, dopamine, and other hormones and neuropeptides in the brain create euphoric feelings that further cloud analytic judgments, masking those repeating offenses that should be obvious warning signals of problems to come.

Of course, there may be times when an imbalance among the five bonding dynamics is needed, and this is especially the case in a marriage. Ideally, married couples should work through conflicts in ways that strengthen all five of the bonding dynamics. However, sometimes sex is used to heal the wounds of an argument, because loving affection can be so effective in dampening grievances and rekindling closeness. Other times trust is compromised, and you need a heightened commitment to steer you through the rough waters. Under these circumstances, persevering commitment empowers you to lovingly stand your ground while facing a crisis.

Marriage Benefits Can Be Dating Detriments

Nevertheless, what is beneficial in marriage can be detrimental in dating. In marriage, the persevering forces of attachment and commitment are essential to overcoming the challenges and shortcomings partners face. But in a dating relationship, the stronger your feelings of affinity and loyalty, the more likely you will overlook the shortcomings and failures in a potential partner. The danger of any imbalance among the bonding dynamics is that it leads to tolerating or even encouraging serious problem areas that should be addressed once they are exposed. Although this same imbalance may be needed at some points in marriage, it is exactly what you do *not* want to happen in your search for a partner.

DON'T FORGET

- A jerk can be either a man or a woman.
- The most fundamental quality of jerks is their *persistent resistance* to ever changing their core jerk qualities.
- Three identifying features of jerks is their habit of breaking boundaries, their inability to see others' perspectives, and their dangerous lack of emotional controls and balance.
- One of the most common ways you become set up to get involved with a jerk is by accelerating the pace of your relationship.
- It is crucial to realize that your ability to form strong loving bonds can betray you if you do not intentionally pace a new relationship.
- The RAM comprises five dynamics—know, trust, rely, commit, and sex—that all contribute to the bond you develop in a relationship.
- Remember the safe-zone rule: never go further in one bonding dynamic than you have gone in the previous.

