

CHAPTER SEVEN: SKILLS FOR LIVING BY THE NEW RULE BOOK

When there is a communication breakdown in a marriage there are always two distinct sides to the story. Once these two differing opinions become entangled with such issues as who's right, and who's wrong, and winning and losing, the relationship is already in a state of decay. It has become associated with competition rather than co-operation and a partnership cannot function properly under these conditions.

*(Will the Real Mr New Zealand Please Stand Up?,
Gwendoline Smith, p. 184)*

Given how men who are abusive learn to be in relationships competitive, seeking power over others, winning at all costs – we can clearly see that relationships are decaying before they even begin. This makes sense of my comments at the beginning of this book which talked about the confusion that men and women feel about their relationships. We have been conned into being expected to make workable styles of relating that are flawed from the beginning. In fact, they are set up to fail.

In this chapter we will continue exploring the skills necessary for a non-abusive lifestyle based on the New Rule Book.

These will include issues concerning communication, dealing with jealousy and solving problems.

Communicating Honestly

There are dozens of books written about the art of communication. What this means is that lots of people find themselves uncertain and struggling with how to communicate their ideas to others. I am not going to repeat all the material on communication because you can find this in other places. I have included a list of resources at the back of this book which you may find useful. What I am going to do is present a framework that you can use to help sort out what is going on so that you can communicate more accurately, honestly and clearly with the other person.

Men are not inherently bad communicators. Men will make decisions about how, when and how much energy they put into conversing with others. I have met a number of men who are incredibly articulate in the public world, but struggle to clearly sort things out in their private lives. As Harold said: 'This was my second marriage. I wasn't a good communicator. I could talk at work and speak in public but one-to-one I was hopeless.' In Harold's case it is not a matter of having a lack of skills to communicate, but his beliefs about putting the same energy into talking at a personal level.

Many men come to my groups claiming they are bad communicators. In the groups they talk with other men about very personal issues that they may not have ever talked to anyone about previously. These same men, who perceive themselves as not being able to talk personally, are often blind to the contradiction that they are in fact communicating at a deep and honest level in the group. So what stops these same men having this depth when relating to their partners and others?

‘When I ask this question men describe ideas from the Old Rule Book — ‘She’ll get the better of me’, ‘People will use what I say against me’, or ‘You don’t want to tell people too much about yourself.’ These men are always on guard against some hidden enemy. Is it any wonder that developing caring, trusting and open relationships with these men is almost impossible?

Questions to Ponder

- How have I convinced myself and others that I am no good at talking in a relationship? (Remember, relationships are much wider than just partner contact.)
- How have others described my ability or inability to communicate?
- Which messages from my Old Rule Book make it difficult for me to communicate with others?

I have found that when I am feeling vulnerable the most difficult thing to do is to stay connected to the other person. Let’s explore the common obstacles the Old Rule Book puts in the way of communicating well with others.

Communicating Pitfalls of the Old Rule Book

Hogging the Show

Talking too much, too long and too loud.

Problem Solver

Continually giving the answer or solution to a problem before others have a chance to put forward their ideas.

The Final Word

Giving one’s own solution or opinions as though the decision has been made. This can be carried out by tone of voice, body posture and taking up space.

Defensiveness

Responding to other people’s ideas as if they were personal attacks. Using all sorts of reasons to put down the other person’s ideas.

Task and Content Focused

Getting to the end is what is seen as important, with little time spent dealing with how people feel about the decision, processing how you worked together to reach your decision, and what the implications of the decision are for you at a personal level.

Put-downs and the One-up Game

Statements such as ‘How can you still believe that in today’s age?’, or ‘What a dumb thing to say’, or, ‘You’ve got it all wrong’, are all examples of put-downs. When these occur in public this is very humiliating for the person involved.

Acting Negatively

Seeing the negative side in everything, everyone and/or what people say.

Keeping on your Subject

Manipulating the discussion so your agenda gets dealt with. This means you can hog the show because it is your pet subject, usually at the expense of hearing from others about how it is for them or what is important for them.

Playing the Stuck Game

Taking a last-ditch stand on every issue, even minor items.

Being dogmatic and not being prepared to negotiate or even entertain other viewpoints.

Self-listening

Working out your responses after the first few sentences of what someone says, without listening to what is being said or the context of the discussion. Also, daydreaming when people are talking to you.

Avoiding Feelings

Becoming passive, making jokes and staying with thoughts can limit the ability to communicate.

Being ‘On the Make’

Using women seductively to manipulate for information or control.

Running the Show

Continually taking charge of tasks before others have the chance to offer their skills and expertise.

Limiting Information Flow

Keeping important information back from others, information they are entitled to have in order to make decisions.

Speaking for Others

Making assumptions about what others might be thinking or feeling. Making comments such as, ‘A lot of the people here feel that ...’, or, ‘What so-and-so really means is ...’

(based on *Off Their Backs ... and On Our Own Two Feet*, Moyer and Tuttle, pp. 25—26)

All of these tactics come from the Old Rule Book and severely limit the process of communicating honestly with others. One of the challenges for men in communicating with others is to become equal in the amount of energy put into sorting out emotional issues.

Related to this is how much responsibility men put into caring for the welfare of others. This means taking an active part in making sure men do what I call the 'social work' in a relationship. In our society it is often women who are expected to be the emotional caretakers and organisers. Partners, wives, secretaries — all seem to shoulder a greater responsibility than men to ensure that the behind-the-scenes organisation is done.

In order to become a responsible communicator it is useful, firstly, to become aware of which of the tactics you use to limit and control hearing the ideas of other people. Secondly, it is important to break with these styles and implement new ways to respond to others. Below are some specific ways to relate to others more respectfully. To embrace these new ways of being with others will make a huge difference to your own sense of self, as well as to how others perceive you.

Relate to Others with Respect By:

- Limiting the amount of space you take when talking to others.
- Not interrupting people who are speaking, and allowing people to finish what they are saying. When people pause, it does not necessarily mean they have finished, but are catching their breath and getting their thoughts together
- Becoming a good listener. Active listening — that is staying with what the person is saying — is not a passive activity. It requires being open to hearing what the other person is saying and resisting the urge to censor out what it is you may not like about what they are saying.
- Getting and giving support. If we are able to put our own agendas aside and see the overall picture of what is to be achieved, it is possible to work with others as opposed to working against them. The final goals of most people are good relationships with others and the ability to resolve issues of difficulty so that they come out feeling they have been taken seriously.
- Not rushing to give answers and solutions. While sharing our ideas, beliefs and possible solutions to a problem is important, the process whereby the problem is resolved is the critical aspect. Each of us needs to be responsible for our part in working together to resolve issues; no one enjoys having solutions forced upon them. A more respectful way to work through issues is for everyone to have their say and to come to a joint agreement.
- Not speaking on every topic. It gets very boring having someone being an expert on every topic. It is crucial to have the broadest range of ideas possible. The final decision is much stronger as a result. Perhaps you don't have to have an opinion on everything.
- No put-downs. These only make the situation worse and build resentment. Remember to apply the Respect Test as a guide to whether you are doing this or not.
- Challenging others' oppressive behaviour. Each of us needs to take responsibility for behaviour that we know is harmful to others. If you see others acting in destructive ways, point it out. It is not helpful to collude with disrespectful behaviour. You will be aware of how this has been unhelpful in shaking off the abusive patterns of relating to others in your own life.

Questions to Ponder

- As I become more responsible for how I relate to others in a respectful way, will this increase or decrease their wish to share their good ideas with me? In what ways will I see this happening?
- What will it be like being open to others' important views about how they see certain situations or events? (Some men just don't want to hear ideas that contradict their own.) Will I be open to hearing these ideas or will I try to take back power and control by using tactics that keep me in the driver's seat?

How will you keep yourself open to the ideas of other people and stay aware of your own blocks and limitations? It is time to visit the 'What's Going On?' chart as a framework for being clear about what is going on for ourselves in any particular situation (see page 6).

Often it is easy to be blinded to the complexity of situations. You may find it easier to stay with a simple view of a situation (preferably your own); that way you don't have to take the other person into account. Many men find it easier to set ideas down on paper because, when they become upset or agitated, they have difficulty making sense of what is going on. By using the 'What's Going On?' chart you are in a position to begin to talk out and resolve the issues instead of letting them fester and grow out of proportion.

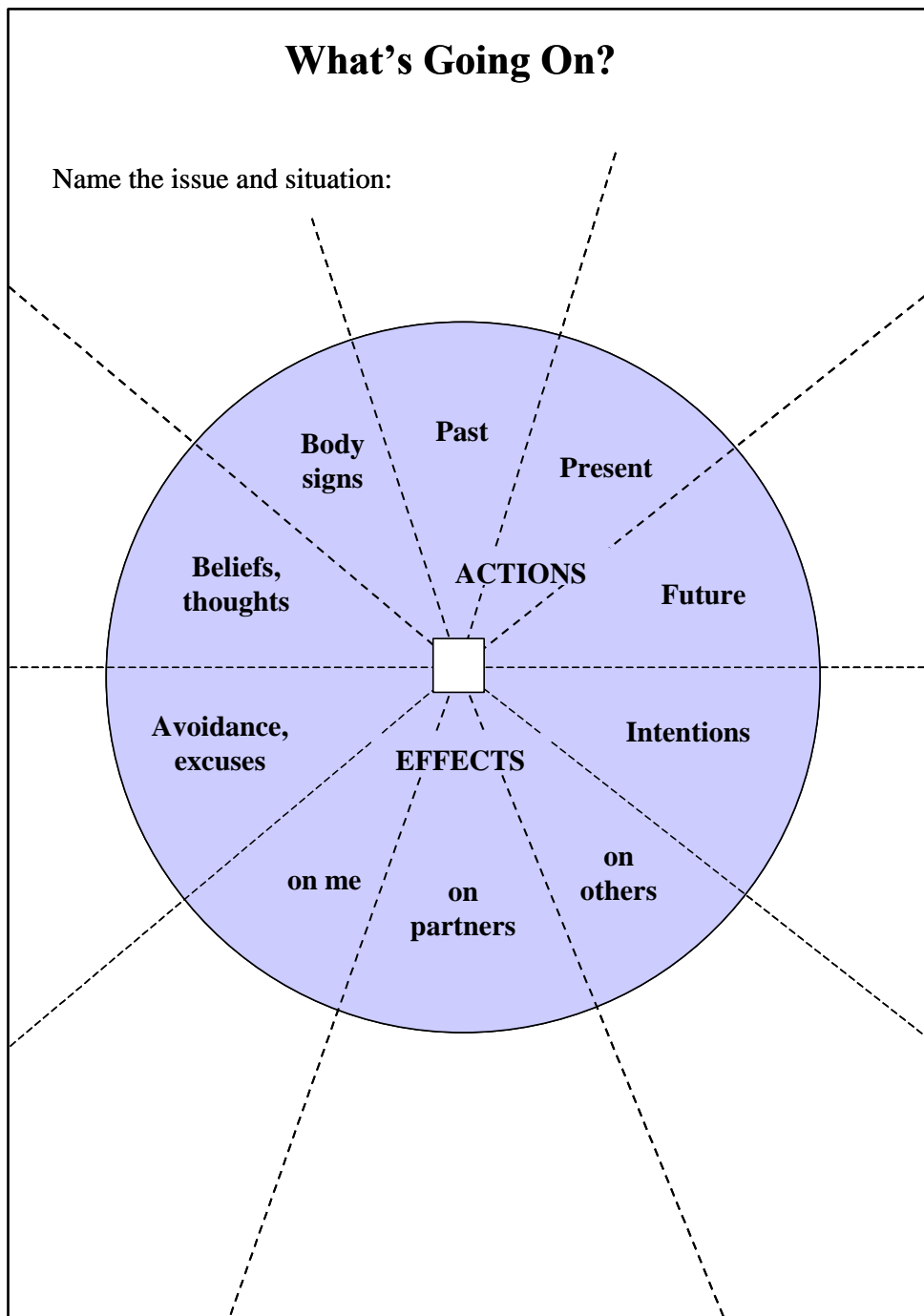
At these times, as you will know, it is easy to embark on controlling behaviour — which has nothing to do with the issue at hand — in order to take charge of the situation.

Steps to Understanding a Problem

1. Decide on the presenting issue. This may not turn out to be the real issue but it is the starting point of your exploration. Briefly describe the issue and write this down beside the line on the chart 'Name the issue and situation'.
2. List all the body signs you feel when you think about the issue. You will be aware that these change as you get more worked up about what is going on. One way to realise that something is not right is to recognise your signs of tension, which may include the following:

tightness in stomach	disturbed sleep
headaches, tightness in face	tension in arms, legs, face; wrists, hands, neck and shoulder
feeling hot in face, chest	breathing faster or shallower
3. Now write down your past, present and intended future actions for dealing with this situation. This helps to distinguish past choices from the choices you may decide to make now or in the future.
4. It is very important to be aware of beliefs and thoughts about the situation. These are your ideas, beliefs, expectations, values, attitudes, and the assumptions you make about the issues or situation.
5. Now list what you have said that shifts the responsibility, and avoids or excuses your part in the issue.

6. Next, note the impact of this issue on yourself, the other people around you and the wider system.
7. What do you want, desire or hope for? Write down what it is you hope to achieve. There are two types of intentions — the positive ones, which invite respect and trust; and the negative ones which are about winning at the expense of others.
8. Note all the feelings you have about the issue. See Chapter 6, pages 15-16 if you need help putting names to feelings.



Ron and Kathleen's Story

This story will illustrate how the model works. The issue was to do with Ron's wife, Kathleen, going back to work. All three children were now at school, the youngest having started a few days earlier. The children had gone to bed and Kathleen and Ron were sitting in the lounge watching television. Kathleen said to Ron that she would like to return to work, that this would bring extra money into the house, and that she was looking forward to being with more adult company. Ron was stunned and went silent. He began to find reasons why it wasn't a good idea for her to go back to work and why she was better off staying at home looking after the house.

Ron's beliefs and thoughts were:

- men earn the money to support their family; if not, they are failures;
- children need mothers when they come home from school;
- maybe she thinks I don't provide well enough;
- if she goes to work then she will be less available to me;
- if she has money to spend I will lose my control;
- she might meet someone else; her remark about adult company suggests there's something wrong with me.

Ron's past patterns of behaviour were:

- to not give in to Kathleen's demands;
- to try and ignore major family issues and hope they would go away;
- to muster up arguments for why Kathleen's ideas are not thought through.

Ron's family traditions were:

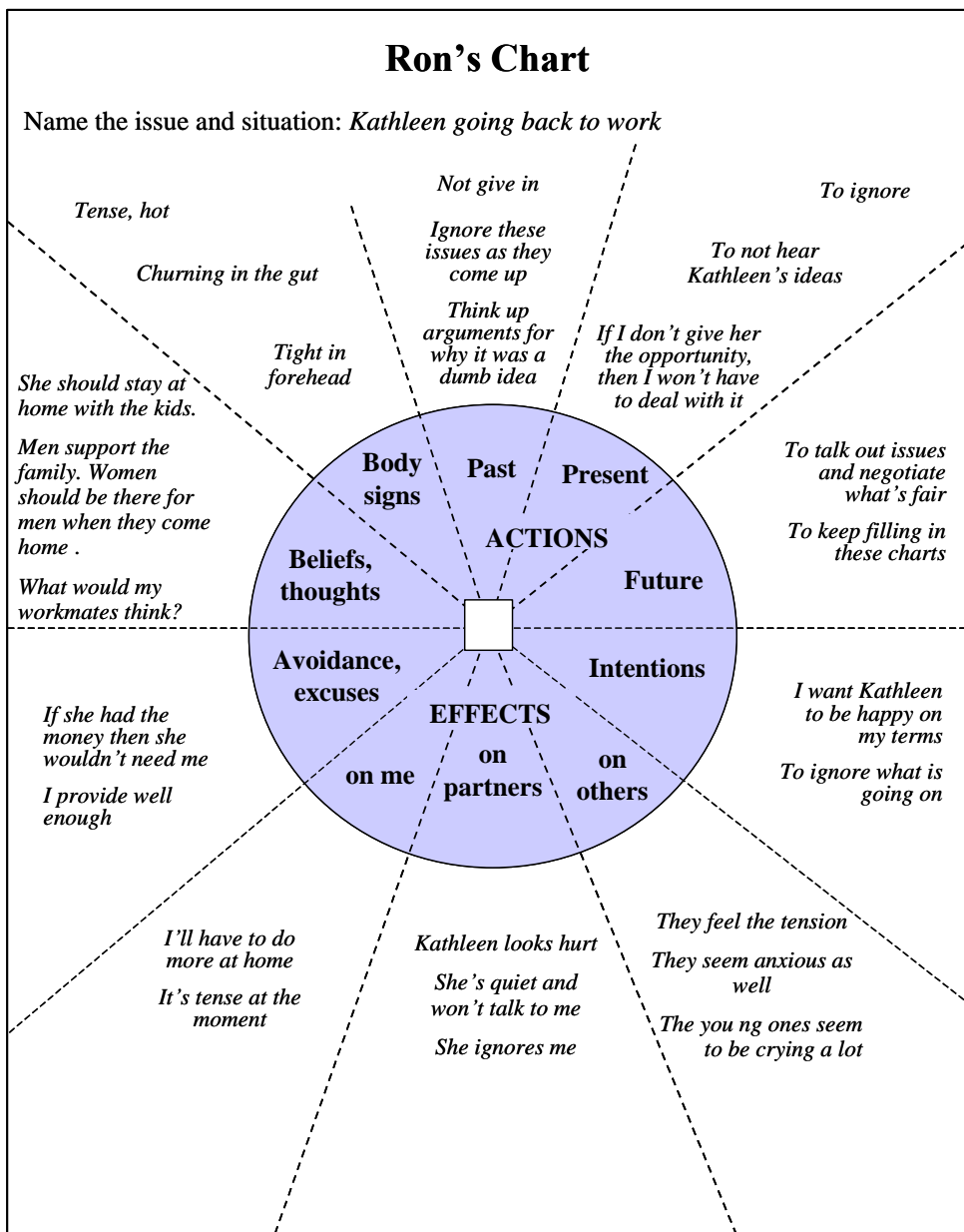
- his mother never worked outside of the home;
- women are suited to homemaking, a role he couldn't fault Kathleen on;
- men didn't contribute much to indoor tasks. 'Would Kathleen's decision mean he might be expected to do housework or childminding?'

Ron's lack of skills to resolve the issue were:

- he had trouble identifying his feelings;
- he was not a good communicator; he tended to withdraw and not discuss issues of concern.

Ron's hopes and desires were:

- to allow Kathleen to be happy within the bounds of what he was comfortable with;
- to ignore or talk Kathleen out of this 'crazy' idea.



Ron's feelings were a mixed bag, and included fear of losing Kathleen and being lonely. He enjoyed coming home to a warm house with dinner on the table and the children bathed and ready for bed. He also felt rejected by Kathleen's comments about adult company, but he would not check with her exactly what she meant. He also felt betrayed as Kathleen had been happy to stay at home when they married. This didn't fit with the agreement made twelve years earlier He was afraid of what his peers would say or think as none of their wives or partners worked.

All of these different strands came together when Kathleen persisted in her wish to discuss this issue which was important to her. Ron ignored her for as long as he could, then said it was a

bloody stupid idea which he refused to talk about any further at any time, and went off to bed. His action was to refuse to negotiate or even hear Kathleen's wants and to refuse to explore, from both of their positions, the feasibility of the idea.

What do you make of this situation and all the different levels operating? How would you react in Ron's situation and what beliefs, patterns, traditions, skills, intentions and feelings would you bring to work out your response?

Ron was able to identify the strategies he used to keep Kathleen from threatening his position of authority within their marriage. When he gave up his need to control Kathleen, recognised that relationships are about continual negotiation (not once and things are set for ever), and understood how families change over time, Kathleen returned to the paid workforce. Their relationship improved greatly as Ron gave more of himself, and began to enjoy learning new skills, including how to be with his children in a more genuine way. Later, Ron said:

'At the time I was really scared about losing Kathleen, but it's made the world of difference. We come home and everyone is chatting about what they have been doing through the day. We normally all end up in the kitchen. I've learnt more about myself in the past six months than in the past twelve years. We were on a road to nowhere.'

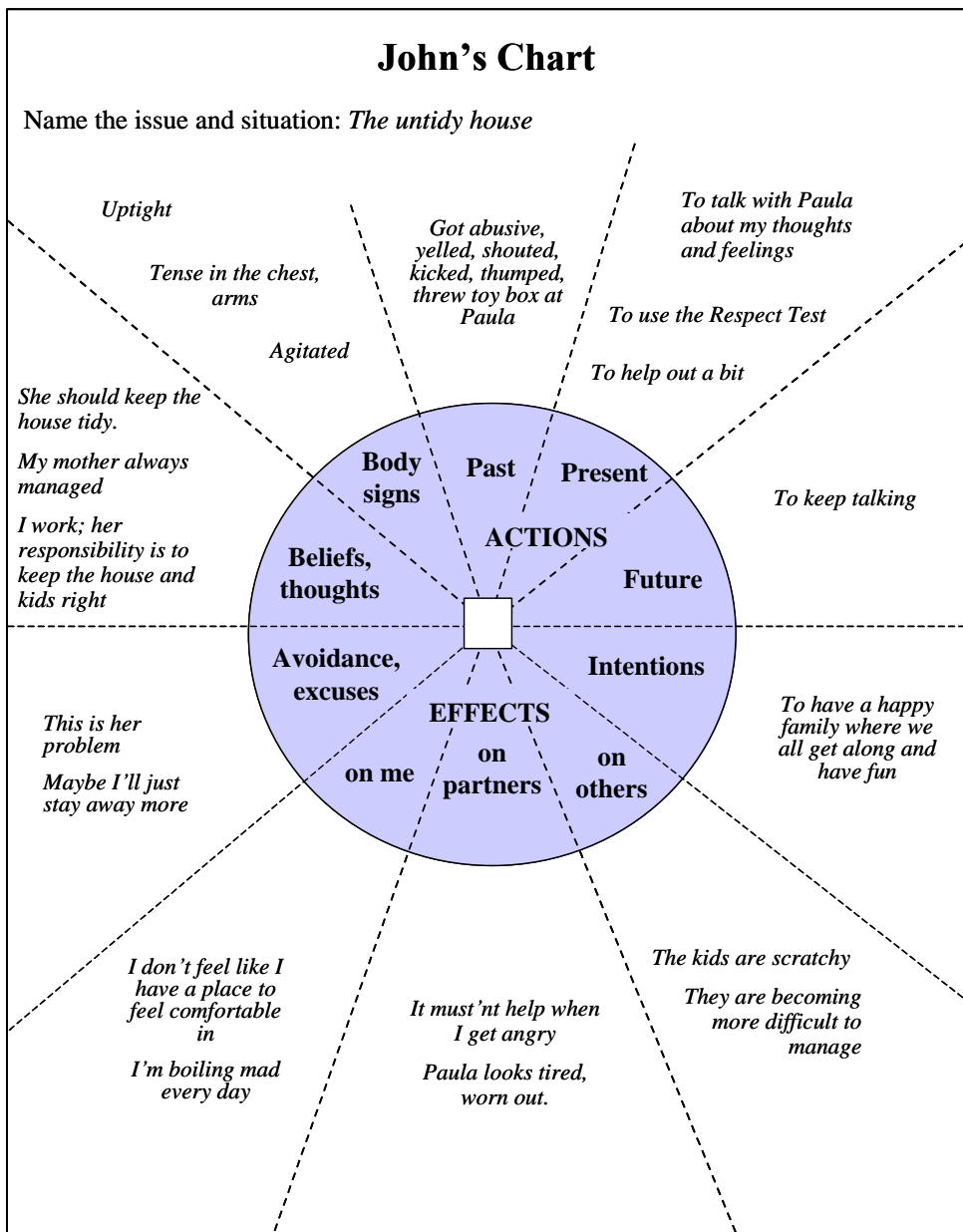
John and Paula's Story

John (24) presented an issue in a group recently which was to do with what he saw as Paula's (25) untidiness at home. He often came home to what he considered a mess — toys over the floor, washing lying on the couch, and dishes on the bench, John was asked to go away and fill in a 'What's Going On?' chart (see page 6). It was obvious that John was working from a series of beliefs and ideas that created obstacles to him understanding the situation. In the past he had been physically abusive to Paula, hitting her, threatening to leave her and undermining her confidence. John had this idea that Paula just needed to be better organised around the home and he had made numerous suggestions to this effect.

John sat down one night and shared his chart with Paula; she was surprised at what she read. She wasn't aware of how John was feeling and thinking. Paula only saw John's annoyance and heard his criticism which felt undermining for her, adding to the failure she felt in her role as a house-parent. She was then able to talk to John about her view of the problem.

Paula was annoyed that John saw the household as her sole domain. He worked eight hours a day; she fourteen. With talking, it became clear that the problem was not that the house was a mess but that John expected Paula to do it all. This meant she was always on the go and tired. When John wanted to be with Paula, she was either distant (thinking about what she hadn't done) or was really tired. John had interpreted this as rejection of him and began to feel scared. What John and Paula were able to do from that point was to work out what would help to resolve the problem. John agreed that when he came home he would be actively involved with the children (in a fun way), tidying up the house, folding the washing, or whatever else that needed doing. After a week John was feeling very different. He found he actually enjoyed helping out, hearing about the children's excitement over the day's events, and he developed a new sense of caring for Paula.


Of course by eight o'clock the children were in bed which meant they had more time for each other. In a follow-up session, when I asked what they found to do with all of this untired time together, they both looked at each other, smiled shyly and told me to mind my own business.



What the chart assisted John to do was to work out what was going on for him, what beliefs/thoughts he was having, and how he felt about the situation. Instead of becoming abusive, which wouldn't have added anything positive to the situation, John discovered a whole range of limiting ideas and behaviours that would eventually see his relationship in serious trouble.

When you are able to acknowledge your thoughts and feelings, and take responsibility for behaviour, you are well on the way to creating a better relationship. Often it is very confusing to know what is going on and make sense of the world. To avoid looking seems irresponsible and unmanly to me, because to know ourselves helps us to know others.

Exercise

 Fill in the 'What's Going On?' chart (page 6) for yourself about some issue related to your angry or abusive behaviour that you are struggling with. From all the hard work

you have done to date you are in a good position to draw on all the areas that need to be covered. When you have done this arrange a time to share this information with the person concerned with the issue. Remember, if you start to head back in the old direction (self-righteous anger), take time out and come back to the task at a later time or date.

Dealing with Jealousy

One of the major issues that men talk about when they explore abusive patterns of behaviour is that of ownership or jealousy. The idea of male ownership is very old indeed and dates back to Roman times to the concept of ‘paterfamilias’, where men were the absolute heads of the household. Men’s word was law, and they could do whatever they chose within the household, with no intervention by the State. In her book *The First Man In Rome*, Colleen McCullough has expressed this idea through the words of one of the many Caesars:

Therefore, daughter, it behoves me to tell you. I am the paterfamilias, the absolute head of this household. My very word is law. My actions are not actionable. Whatever I choose to do and say within the bounds of this household, I can do and I can say. No law of the Senate and People of Rome stands between me and my absolute authority over my household, my family. For Rome has structured her laws to ensure that the Roman family is above the law of all save the paterfamilias. If my wife commits adultery, Julilla, I can kill her, or have her killed. If my son is guilty of moral turpitude, or cowardice, or any other kind of social imbecility, I can kill him, or have him killed. If my daughter is unchaste, I can kill her, or have her killed. If any member of my household — from my wife through my sons and my daughters to my mother, to my servants transgresses the bounds of what I regard as decent conduct, I can kill him or her, or have him or her killed. (p. 214)

Roman law became the foundation for the laws of Western European cultures, being passed down through the centuries. For example, in Britain, the beating of a wife was seen as permissible in 1782, when Judge Buller declared that a husband could beat his wife as long as he didn’t use a stick thicker than his thumb. As Blackstone notes:

*The husband also might give his wife moderate correction. For as he is to answer for her misbehaviour the law thought it reasonable to entrust him with the power of restraining her, by domestic chastisement in the same moderation that a man is allowed to correct his servant or children. (Quoted in J. Pahi (ed.), *Private Violence and Public Policy: The Needs of Women and the Response of the Public Service*, p. 11)*

The idea of male ownership and control is therefore not new, and is one of those long traditions of masculinity that see men as more responsible than women; more powerful and more capable of judging situations. This has led very much to a hands-off policy about what takes place within the household. Unfortunately, these ideas do little to develop respectful and trustworthy relationships. Like many ideas they have had their time, and we are now faced with the opportunity to pioneer new and more appropriate rules for our lives.

In many parts of the modern world abusive behaviour within the home is still seen as more acceptable than that very same behaviour in public. Our laws, although changing, have still not adequately addressed this question.

What has occurred over the past few years is a rethinking of how and where issues of abuse are dealt with. We are seeing a more consistent approach to these issues, with the clear


message to men that any abuse is not acceptable. This is a strong challenge to the historical legacy of male ownership and entitlement that men have had to carry.


Male ownership is most frequently seen when ideas around male privilege – where men make decisions either on behalf of or that affect other members without negotiating – are explored. Another area where male ownership is most vividly seen is with the issue of jealousy. Jealousy is a feeling that arises from suspicion, apprehension, fear of unfaithfulness, or fear of being replaced by someone. Jealousy can serve several functions in a relationship:

- it can limit the level of contact with others outside of the relationship;
- it can communicate caring and commitment to a relationship;
- it can signal a warning that there are negative feelings and insecurity in the relationship.

Jealousy becomes a problem when it is connected with possessiveness. Men often assume that they should be in control of the family, and assume that they have control over others. From the history of men’s ownership and control over women and children, this is not at all surprising. It is not unexpected that men will struggle with the notion of allowing women the freedom to be their own person.

Exercise

 List all of the things you get jealous about.

 What do you imagine might be happening?

 Make a list of unhelpful ways to respond. Make a list of helpful ways to respond.

What men often find is that jealous feelings arise from fears of what might happen, not the reality of the situation. Let's look at how Sam dealt with his jealousy.

Sam (aged 42) was married to Marcia, an attractive woman, also in her forties. Marcia liked to dress up, was the centre of attention at parties, and enjoyed herself a great deal. Sam struggled to express himself tending to be quiet and reserved when they went out. Marcia, on the other hand, really enjoyed the opportunity to meet with other people and have them respond to her in interesting and stimulating ways. Sam felt threatened and frightened when they went out, heard comments about how wonderful and witty Marcia was, and saw men talking in animated ways to her. Marcia found Sam an effort at times.

Sam began to imagine and wonder if Marcia was being unfaithful to him. He began phoning her at odd times during the day to check on where she was. If she wasn't home he would worry, fearing the worst. He would come home and literally interrogate her about where she had been, whom she had been with, and what she had been up to. No matter what Marcia said, Sam was unable to trust her.

Sam began to follow Marcia when she went out, trying to catch her out. She caught him, and wondered what he was doing. This resulted in an argument and Sam's accusations of infidelity began to fly. Sam was cornered, unable to articulate his thoughts and feelings. He was referred to me because his relationship was on the line.

Sam was invited to look carefully at the basis of his feelings and thoughts about Marcia being unfaithful. He was also challenged about the secretive, furtive process he had used to 'catch Marcia out'. He was asked to check out how his thinking process was making something much bigger than it was.

I had a hunch that the more energy Sam gave to his worries about Marcia's behaviour, the narrower his ability to see the wider picture would become. He would eventually become so obsessed with what Marcia might be doing that his life would revolve around a crazy game of find the lover, if one existed at all. For Sam this would not matter, because if he persisted in thinking this other person existed he would just look all the harder.

Sam was a classic example of how jealousy can easily turn into possessiveness. If Marcia were to decide she'd had enough, Sam would be one of those men who would follow her, breach his non-molestation order, phone her at all hours of the day and night, and eventually end up in court.

When Sam was confronted with the destructiveness of his behaviour and worked through his distorted thinking about the situation, he came to realise that the issue was to do with his own insecurities and had little to do with Marcia's actions. What his behaviour was actually doing was increasing his insecurities.

It is perhaps easier to understand this situation from the outside than for Sam and Marcia who were on the inside. Sam was clearly worried. All that Marcia was aware of were his attempts to undermine her. For Sam to respect Marcia he needed to

develop the ability to trust her. The thought of having an affair had not even crossed Marcia's mind — although she found Sam frustrating as hell at times, she truly cared about him.

Like Sam, you might be thinking that the answer to the problem is for Marcia to stop being so sociable. If Marcia did this, she would be taking the responsibility for what is essentially Sam's issue.

Sam took it upon himself to express to Marcia his concerns. He told her of how he really loved her attractiveness, her company and how devastated he would be if their relationship were to end. He told her about his feelings of jealousy, and was able to hear Marcia's needs for more social stimulation. Marcia felt good when people still saw her as attractive. Sam hadn't commented for years on her attractiveness; like many women in their forties, she felt depressed about her fading looks.

Sam also acknowledged that he was beginning to go through a mid-life crisis, questioning his own attractiveness (his middle had all of a sudden begun to spread), his career prospects and his role within his family.

Sam agreed to try to be more involved in social situations and learn from Marcia how to do it. They also agreed to spend time talking with each other about things that were important to each of them. They had begun that all too familiar process of distancing emotionally and physically from each other. It was time for them to begin to reconnect with each other in order to maintain their relationship.

Solving Problems

By now you will have most of the tools you need to develop a non-abusive lifestyle. One further tool I would like to share with you is a model for resolving problems or conflicts that you may have with others. Have you ever had the feeling that the more you talk about something the more stuck you become? I hear this a lot in my work with men and with couples.

Education about being a responsible problem-solver may have been lacking in your upbringing and, if so, you will usually resort to those patterns that are most familiar — those from your family of origin. These may not have been the most healthy or useful, which means that you are likely to get more stuck instead of resolving the situation.

The following problem-solving model works equally well within families and in the outside world. It is really just basic common sense.

Step I **Have a positive attitude**

It is important to embark on problem-solving with a positive attitude about the value of the exercise. If you come to it expecting to win at all costs, not prepared to compromise or listen to the other person's opinion, it is not even worth beginning the process. Carry out an attitude check for yourself and run the Respect Test. Some good questions to ask yourself are:

Am I prepared to listen without interrupting?

'Will I be able to handle hearing issues that may be difficult to hear without getting into self-righteous anger and abuse?

Do I want us both to win and come out of this situation respecting each other, or do I want to be the winner even if it is at the other person's expense?

Step 2 **Make a statement of goodwill**

Where there have been difficulties in resolving problems in the past it is easy to bring the memories of these circumstances to the current situation. Escalating a situation and getting away from the issue by dragging up past issues, by blaming and not by listening, may be a common pattern. A statement of goodwill works as an aid to putting us in a positive frame of mind to meet with others in the pursuit of mutual respect. Examples of such statements are:

‘I care about myself, and I care about you. I want this to work out for both of us.’

‘I know that we have not been able to resolve issues in the past, and I do feel worried that my old pattern may emerge again, but I am committed to working respectfully with you this time.’

Step 3 **Choose a time and place**

Important issues need to be addressed with the significance they deserve. It is impossible to give the necessary weight to issues if the time and place creates interference. For example, avoid distractions such as the television, radio or stereo, children, visitors, phone calls, and so on. It also means not being in a drug-induced state (alcohol included). Avoid busy times such as before or during meals or meetings, or when there is insufficient time to complete the discussion.

I suggest you choose a time and place where you will not be interrupted, and where you can feel safe and comfortable. Set a time limit on the discussion, depending upon the issue involved.

Step 4 **Define what the issue is**

Many men and women find it valuable to put time into the “What’s Going On?” chart before coming to a problem-solving meeting. This helps to remind the person of the complexities lying behind any issue. It also invites a clarity of expression which is often missing when there are emotionally charged issues to resolve. Keep the statement of the issue brief and keep it to one issue. One of the major problems in resolving conflict is that people try and deal with twenty problems at the same time. Let me tell you, this does not work.

Make a statement — such as ‘I have concerns about ...’

State what you are feeling — “When you ... I feel ...’

Make a statement about what you would like to be different —such as ‘I would like ...’

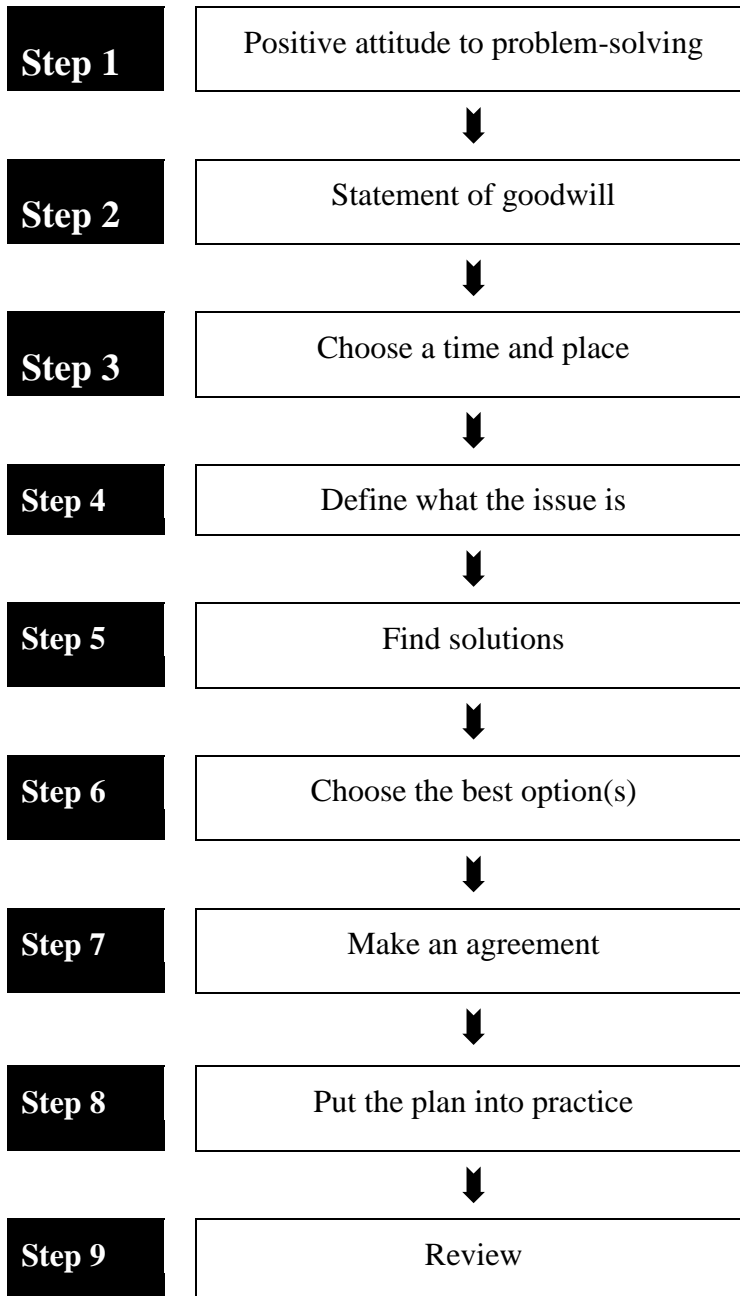
Notice that all three of these statements avoid the traps of blaming, getting off the topic and dishonest communication.

Allow equal time without interruption to talk about what you want to be different. Some people use a watch to time the encounter. Stay on the topic.

Step 5 **Find solutions**

This is the fun part of the exercise. It involves writing down all of the possible options that exist for resolving the issue. They should be as creative as possible and not restricted to what has been done before. I encourage people to sit down with a large piece of paper and write for as long as possible. This is not a time to evaluate whether these options will work or not, just an opportunity to write down what all the options are.

A Problem-solving Model



Step 6 Choose the best option or options

Go through the list deleting the options that are not feasible. Select the best remaining two or three and talk about these in more depth.

Step 7 Make an agreement

Be very clear about what each of you is committing yourself to. I encourage people to make a written note of these — include the date, when it will happen, where, how long and what reward will be at the end of a successful resolving of the issue. Put a review date on it so that you can come back in a month or two and evaluate how successful you were.

Step 8 Put the plan into practice

Step 9 Review

How did it work? What is different? ‘What changes have you and others noticed? ‘Was it fully successful, partially successful or a failure? Do you deserve to celebrate your success? If the issue hasn’t been resolved then go back to the start and work through the process again.

Alec (27) came back to a group in a very excited mood after we had explained this technique of problem-solving. He took time to tell the group how he worked through an issue with his partner Katie (25,), an issue he saw as major in respect of his relationship with her.

The issue which he had got stuck on was to do with Katie’s contact with her extended family. Alec found it hard to be around Katie’s family, feeling that they were critical of him. He often felt jealous when she talked about what her brothers and sisters were up to, and what her parents thought about this and that. Alec would shrug and try to ignore Katie when she talked in this way, walking out on her midway through a conversation. He was finding the situation intolerable and was actively discouraging Katie from having contact with her family.

Alec used the problem-solving outline, beginning with stating how much he cared for Katie and valued their relationship. He stated the problem as how difficult he found it when Katie talked about her family.

They both worked through the ‘What’s Going On?’ chart, with Alec becoming aware that he was isolated from his own family and feeling that Katie had a new family now (him), and that he was afraid of what she was saying to them about him. Alec was aware of how he was trying to control and set limits on Katie’s contact with her family, something he recognised that Katie was rebelling against.

Katie acknowledged how she felt about this controlling behaviour, and how embarrassed she felt when they were at family gatherings or visits to her family. Katie told Alec her family did not dislike him but thought of him as aloof and hard to get to know. They came up with the following list of options:

cut the phone off, leave each other;

avoid family gatherings;

Alec to be more sociable;

Alec to contact and heal the difference with his family; for Katie to go alone to family gatherings;

Alec and Katie to talk with Katie's family about his difficulties;

for Katie's family to adopt Alec as their son;

Alec and Katie to invite Katie's family over for a barbecue lunch.

They agreed that Alec would make contact with his own family and begin to heal the hurts that existed there, that he would put energy into getting to know Katie's family, and that they would host a family barbecue. These things happened and Alec felt accepted by his in-laws who got to know a different side of him. He also arranged to go fishing with Katie's father in a couple of weeks' time.

As you can see, this model can work. What it does is clarify the real issues, giving an opportunity to resolve damaging patterns of behaviour in relationships.

This model can be used with families or at work; in fact, any place where there is a situation of conflict. My suggestion is that you start with a small problem or issue that won't be too hard to resolve and get used to the framework. Once you have got into the habit of using the model you can tackle more major issues affecting your relationships with others.

Questions to Ponder

- How will I cope with my old feelings of wanting to keep control over others?
- 'Will others respect me more, or less, for communicating with them in open, honest ways?
- What will I need to do to persevere with the changes I have made?

Summary

In this chapter, we have explored the concrete skills that make implementation of the New Rule Book possible. Communicating honestly, resolving problems so that both parties are winners, and standing up against the history of male ownership of others all of these are vital skills for living a non-abusive lifestyle. As you begin to relate to others in a more honest way you will be surprised at the depth that this will bring to your relationships.

These skills require practice; at first you may find them awkward. Resolve to keep going because, like any new skill, it takes time to get it right. Talk to your support team if you are struggling; enlist their help and support.

If you have children you will be passing on to them, through your actions, appropriate and useful ways to be with others. They will quickly acquire these skills through seeing you acting differently. As George said:

'I wanted to break the cycle so that my kids aren't afraid of me. I want to talk to the kids instead of lecturing them about what's going on, how I feel, what I'm doing. I want them to have the chance at getting it right without going through the struggle I have had to in order to survive in a relationship.'

The skills covered in the last two chapters have included identifying feelings at a deeper level, understanding ownership issues, communicating honestly, and resolving problems. Each of these skills needs to be practised for things to be different. The New Rule Book invites you as a man to be responsible for your own emotions, to communicate honestly with those around you, and to value equality over ownership in relationships. The next chapter takes you a step further along the road of a non-abusive lifestyle, and will help you begin healing the past hurts in order to move on.