

## **Conscious Relationships: Understanding Ourselves and Improving Our Interactions**

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### **Relationships Courses**

The interest in enhancing relationships has been around for decades. To a large extent, this interest has been stimulated by a desire to improve marital relationships and marital happiness. After a sharp rise in the divorce rate during the 1960s, there was a greater focus on improving the chances of marital success by conducting premarital classes to help people deal with issues and challenges prior to marriage or cohabitation.

Usually, such courses have focused on basic skills that might improve relationships. The skills often have included what typically are referred to as basic life skills, such as communication, problem solving, conflict resolution, anger management, and goal setting. In some cases, there also have been courses developed to help couples look at similar attitudes, common interests, and developing shared values. The underlying assumption of these courses was that improving basic life skills would lead to improved communication, increased sharing of opinions and concerns, and more effective problem solving.

One of the aspects ignored in these approaches but often identified by marital therapists is the reluctance of each participant to accept responsibility for their contribution to the difficulty or problem at hand. Instead, the tendency is to point fingers and lay blame. From a family systems point of view, both people in a relationship participate in a difficulty, but it is a serious challenge to help people look at

their own contribution, especially without that person feeling blamed or hurt.

Yet, for a long time, family systems theorists have attempted to help each person in the relationship look at him or herself and how each participates. Challenging people directly has not been very successful, and so indirect approaches have been developed as a common part of the therapeutic approach. At the same time, while such indirect approaches can be useful in creating change, they often do not help the person become aware of what they are doing in order to generalize the change to other situations.

### **What Are Conscious Relationships?**

One way of addressing the lack of awareness problem is to help people see and understand the challenges they face directly. In this way, the issue is brought to consciousness for the people involved so they not only might change in one area, but also apply such insight to other areas. Yet, having people face these challenges often brings associated judgment, either by the partner or the individual. Such judgment limits change and instead paralyzes people or creates further conflict in the relationship.

The fundamental assumption of this series of three workshops is to bring behaviors and patterns to light by having people look at themselves in a safe and often humorous environment without judgment. It is a focus on understanding mental habits, preferences, styles, and patterns while also looking objectively at how these developed

and options for change without issues of blame. Participants are able to learn about their own and others' preferences, different coping styles and how they work, and the way energy connections impact interactions.

While consciousness is used in a variety of ways, it is included here as a means of being aware and awake to others and ourselves. When we are keen observers of ourselves, without judgment, we often gain insight into our contribution to relationship difficulties and the necessary changes to restore health and happiness.

<b>Continuum of Relationships</b>	
<u>Conscious</u>	<u>Unconscious</u>
Awake	Asleep
Aware	Unaware
Alert	Dull/ Oblivious
In the present	In the past/future
Taking responsibility	Blaming
Active choices	Passive/victim
Learning	Defending

### Conscious Relationships I: Perception

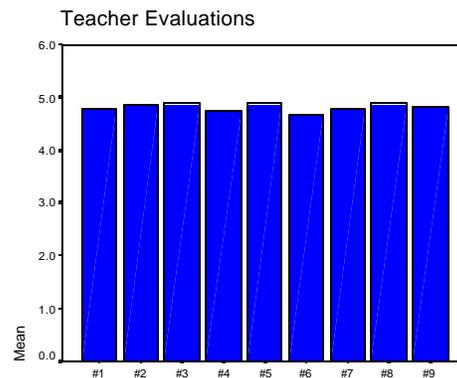
The first workshop is based on basic elements of personality developed by Carl Jung along with the extensions and responses to a questionnaire developed by Isabel Myers and Katharine Briggs. This workshop helps participants understand the habitual mental processes they use to gain perspective and make decisions. It also helps them identify their preference for engaging these processes internally through reflection and contemplation or externally through verbal give and take with others. Finally, individuals explore their preference for an ordered and planned lifestyle or one that is more spontaneous. More specifically participants will identify their preferences in the four dichotomies included in the Myers/Briggs approach; Introversion & Extroversion, Intuiting & Sensing, Feeling & Thinking, and Perceiving & Judging.

Exercises are used to help participants understand each dichotomy, and individuals are helped to identify her/his own mental habits and preferences. Some advantages and disadvantages of each preference are

discussed, along with problematic differences that arise in relationships.

Most importantly, the class seeks to set aside judgment of differences, emphasizing understanding. Differences are seen as normal and a source of strength or personal growth rather than the origin of fighting and disagreement. Used in this way, differences seem to be understood rather than judged, and people begin to focus more on how to work rather than fighting from differences.

The workshops have been well received, as can be seen from teaching evaluations. Nine questions are asked of each participant, and these have been grouped together for all workshops in the graph below. Participants are asked on a scale from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent) how they would rate the format of the workshop (#1), organization of materials (#2), quality of presentations (#3), clarity of presentations (#4), how useful was the information (#5), how useful were the exercises (#6), if the workshop met their expectations (#7), how worthwhile was the workshop (#8), and how good presenters were compared to other workshops (#9). The averages were between 4.66 and 4.87 out of 5 for each question, with an n=105.



Participants also were asked at the end of the workshop to evaluate changes on a scale from 1 to 5 in understanding and attitudes based on their experience. These eight questions about different aspects, including the extent of judging were compared to their understanding at the end of the workshop. In each case, there was a significant change on average for the participants, as can be seen below.

Question	Before	After	p<
1. Fundamental Compon.	1.85	4.33	.001
2. Individual Orientation	2.10	4.21	.001
3. Sizing situations	2.00	4.23	.001
4. Making decisions	2.05	4.13	.001
5. Coming to closure	1.97	4.21	.001
6. Styles influence dec.	1.90	4.26	.001
7. Types solve problems	1.77	4.28	.001
8. Judging others*	2.16	4.55	.001

\*Because this question was added after the first workshop, the n=25 in contrast to the other seven questions.

### Conscious Relationships II: Partnerships

The second workshop uses the concept of informal partnerships and agreements that often get made in relationships yet are not obvious or even made consciously. Using the nine coping styles or fixations of The Enneagram, people begin to understand aspects underlying many of their own responses and interactions. In other words, it becomes a non-threatening way to look at what Jung called the shadow side.

The Enneagram outlines nine styles of avoiding and responding to the world that usually are not in our own best interests. As we become more aware of hidden agreements we make with ourselves and others, along with the associated coping styles, we can begin to have more choices, making decisions from a conscious rather than an unconscious place.

Again, the workshop is well received and seems to have an impact on the participants. At the end of the workshop, each participant is asked to complete a pre/post post-test on a scale from 1 to 5 for identifying changes in eight different areas covered in the workshop. With 38 participants responding, there was a significant change in each of the areas assessed, as can be seen below.

Question	Before	After	p<
1. Enneagram about	1.91	4.37	.001
2. Informal agreements	2.26	4.39	.001
3. Defense styles	1.42	4.16	.001

4. Enneagram fixations	1.99	4.27	.001
5. Run defense styles	1.99	4.27	.001
6. Personality vs. Essence	2.21	4.45	.001
7. Unravel fixation	1.47	4.18	.001
8. Being awake to live	2.18	4.47	.001

### Conscious Relationships III: Energy

The third workshop uses a focus on human energy fields, including the chakras, to help participants look at their own energy, how it is used in interactions, and how different connections might be established. Information about the research on the development of energy fields, including work on children, and measures of energy, help people understand how such energy influences us and our relationships. Again, many exercises are used to increase understanding and experience with energy fields, as well as how we hold our energy and develop obstacles in our relationships.

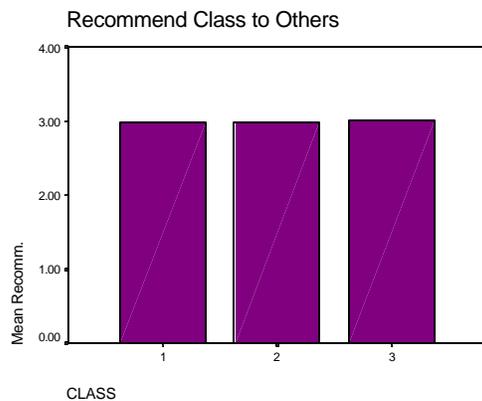
Similar to the other workshops, the evaluations have been positive and the changes noteworthy. Of the eight questions used to assess change, all were found to have significant differences by the end of the workshop as can be seen below.

Question	Before	After	p<
1. Basic elements	2.89	4.53	.001
2. Understand related part	2.58	4.42	.001
3. Influence relationships	2.21	4.32	.001
4. Clear blocks	2.21	3.95	.001
5. Communication	2.42	4.26	.001
6. Chakra archetypes	1.89	4.29	.001
7. Use energy to help	2.26	4.42	.001
8. Live from essence	2.68	4.48	.001

### Further Impacts

In addition to the teacher evaluations and the assessment of changes based on content, each individual is asked whether they would recommend the class to others. A three-point scale was used that included unlikely, likely, and very likely to recommend the class to others. As can be seen from the graph below, almost every participant said they would be very likely to recommend each of the workshops to others. Not one of the participants indicated they

were unlikely to recommend the class. Such responses tend to speak loudly of their excitement and approval of workshops covering challenging material.



Each class uses PowerPoint presentations of information with a book of the slides each participant keeps. This provides the information in a format that is easy to follow with room to write comments or other ideas presented. Participants seem to enjoy and appreciate these books and keep them for future reference.

While the workshops present challenging material to individuals and couples, participants seem not only to enjoy the workshops, but they also seem to incorporate useful changes. These changes continue two months after the first workshop when a follow-up evaluation was asked of 11 participants who attended a second workshop. Their responses were compared in the table below, with each being a significant change two months after the initial workshop.

CR1 Workshop Follow-up Evaluation n=11			
Question	Before	After	p<
1. Judging others	3.09	1.91	.01
2. More patient	2.64	4.00	.001
3. Comfortable with I/E	2.73	4.55	.001
4. Comfortable with E/S	2.45	4.27	.001
5. Comfortable with T/F	2.18	4.05	.001
6. Comfortable with J/P	2.09	4.18	.001
7. Deal with differences	2.36	4.45	.001
8. Developing strengths	2.18	3.73	.001

This series of workshops appears to offer a useful approach to helping people enhance their relationships by helping them look at themselves first. It also addresses an important need identified by marital and family therapists of how to help people look at underlying challenges to relationships. Such an approach also has been developed to help parents to look at themselves first for improving relationships with children.

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