



ALSO BY TERRENCE REAL

I Don't Want to Talk About It:

Overcoming the Secret Legacy of Male Depression

How Can I Get Through to You?

*Closing the Intimacy Gap
Between Men and Women*

Terrence Real

A FIRESIDE BOOK
PUBLISHED BY SIMON & SCHUSTER
New York London Toronto Sydney



FIRESIDE

Rockefeller Center
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

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DESIGNED BY ERICH HOBGING

Text set in Janson

Manufactured in the United States of America

20 19 18 17 16 15 14

The Library of Congress has cataloged the Scribner edition as follows:

Real, Terrence.

How can I get through to you? : reconnecting men and women / Terrence Real.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Marriage counseling. 2. Marriage. 3. Sex role. 4. Intimacy (Psychology)

HQ10 .R38 2002

362.82'86—dc21

2001057570

ISBN-13: 978-0-684-86877-6

ISBN-10: 0-684-86877-6

ISBN-13: 978-0-684-86878-3 (Pbk)

ISBN-10: 0-684-86878-4 (Pbk)

*To Belinda,
the jewel in the petal,
the object of my desire.*

What have we given?
My friend, blood shaking my heart
The awful daring of a moment's surrender
Which an age of prudence can never retract
By this, and only this, we have existed.

—T. S. ELIOT

We ourselves cannot put any magic spells on this world.
The world is its own magic.

—SHUNRYU SUZUKI-ROSHI

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I did not write this book alone, but with guidance and sustenance from many. First among them is Carol Gilligan. Over the past several years, our collaboration with couples transformed my vision of what men and women are capable of. Many of the critical ideas found here have been shaped by that association, and every idea has been touched by it. You are my fellow cartographer. But more than this, it is the lessons of our friendship that have lent me the most clarity and courage. Thank you for standing together with me.

Cheryl Richardson is my spiritual sister. Her insight, practicality, and sheer wattage have been abundant enough to empower both of us. Her positive energy ripples through these pages. Thank you for teaching me so much about generosity. Beth Vesel, my literary agent, has been intellectual companion, bellwether, and friend. At Scribner, Gillian Blake left her imprint on every aspect of this work. With unerring editorial instincts, she saw, and helped realize, a vision. I want to thank Pat Eisemann for her encouragement and savvy. And gratitude goes to the presiding spirit of Nan Graham, whose belief in me, and whose guidance, has been invaluable. You are the occasion I have tried to rise to. My association with Pia Mellody, teacher, healer, dear friend, continues to enrich. This work rests upon hers. I want also to thank the Meadows, in particular Pat Mellody and Lonnie Werdersky, for their support. Thanks go to the legendary Olga Silverstein, who sits beside me each time I see a couple or family, to Mel Bucholtz for helping bring me into right relationship to this work, and to Ed Shea for his unstinting help. I am grateful to my assistant, Liz Grabiner, for assistance throughout

the project, especially with the notes. I want to thank friends, old and new, for their love and patience. And finally, thanks to my family, to Justin and Alexander, who daily inspire, and to my wife, Belinda, who claims to have been put on this earth to, among other things, help me with my narcissism, a difficult task by any account. I hope to keep making it worth your while.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

All of the cases described in this book are composites. They have been deliberately scrambled in order to protect my clients' rights of confidentiality and privacy. No client found in this book corresponds to any actual person, living or dead.

How Can I Get
Through to You?

INTRODUCTION

If this book has found its way into your hands, then there is a good chance that you are concerned about your relationship. Odds are you are searching for a way to make things better, more like what they once were or like you had hoped they would be. Before going any farther, I first want to say this: Congratulations! Congratulations for having the courage to admit that your relationship isn't perfect, and the humility to seek help. You have already taken the first step toward greater fulfillment. You will find no quick fixes in this book, however, no Band-Aids or false reassurances. I advise you at the outset: This path you are just beginning is not an easy one. If you want to be truly close to the people you love, if you want to sustain real passion and authenticity, you will have to work for it, not just once or twice, but every day. And you will have to take risks.

Love is not for the faint of heart.

So what concerns you, exactly? Maybe you're a man trying to figure out how to make things work better between you and your partner. If so, you're a pretty enlightened guy just for having an interest in a relationship book. The overwhelming probability, however, is that you are a woman concerned about your male partner. Whether you are a male or female reader, relationship concerns are varied and occur along a spectrum. Some are chronic but relatively mild—like a partner who is often late. Some problems are short-lived but very intense—like the discovery of a superficial sexual encounter. Many problems are both long-lived and severe—like chronic anger, irresponsibility, uncommunicativeness, and sub-

stance abuse. More than twenty-five years as a couples therapist has shown me that, before setting things right, it is helpful to have a map, a sense of what's wrong with the relationship and the severity of the problem. Let's see what has to be fixed.

Take a moment to answer the questions on our Relationship Inventory, a simple tool designed to shed light on *what kind* of relationship difficulties you have, and *where they fit* in the broad range of problems couples often face. It measures five different areas of intimate connection—emotional, intellectual, physical, sexual, and spiritual—and flags concepts or skills from the book that might be of particular relevance to you based on your couples profile. Try to be as honest and realistic as possible. It's best neither to exaggerate nor downplay your experience.

- 1) When I open up to my partner and share vulnerable feelings, I mostly feel
 - a. understood and supported.
 - b. like my partner is interested but not very involved.
 - c. like my partner moves in to “solve my problem” or else gets defensive.
 - d. At this point, I don't open up to my partner much.
- 2) I feel like I understand my partner's insecurities because
 - a. he or she talks to me about them and asks for my support.
 - b. he or she mentions them without much emotion.
 - c. I can tell when my partner's upset even though he or she doesn't talk about it.
 - d. Much of the time I honestly don't know what's going on inside my partner's head.
- 3) Spending time alone with my partner is most often
 - a. relaxing and a treat just hanging out together.
 - b. fun if we are sharing something that we both enjoy.
 - c. not as much fun as being with other people together.
 - d. a mixed bag, sometimes enjoyable but sometimes tense.

- 4) When we have a conflict we
 - a. may blow up or get heated, but then talk about it and work it out.
 - b. We rarely have conflicts, we sometimes disagree but it just works out somehow on its own.
 - c. There's a lot of conflict, either open or unstated, in our relationship, but we don't address it.
 - d. We used to fight a lot, but we've pretty much given up.
- 5) In our views on how to live life (money, raising children, values) we
 - a. don't always agree but are able to respect each other's differences, even if they grate from time to time.
 - b. share a lot of common interests. Our values seem similar enough to not create problems.
 - c. have very different values on many issues, but discussing them doesn't get us anywhere.
 - d. usually disagree. My partner tries to control many aspects of our lives.
- 6) When I share ideas with my partner about myself or the world, I generally feel
 - a. stimulated and respected. I'm interested in my partner's opinion and feel the same back.
 - b. like my partner listens respectfully, but is really more concerned with his or her own thoughts and ideas.
 - c. like my partner turns to other people for intellectual companionship.
 - d. like my partner rarely gives me the credit I deserve. Sometimes, he or she just acts like I'm stupid.
- 7) I feel judged and criticized by my partner
 - a. only rarely.
 - b. occasionally.
 - c. often.
 - d. most of the time.

- 8) My partner and I are physically affectionate (hold hands, cuddle, put our arms around each other)
- a. a lot.
 - b. occasionally.
 - c. rarely.
 - d. almost never.
- 9) Sex with my partner is
- a. a place where we connect, even though it's hard to make time for it sometimes.
 - b. satisfying if a bit routine.
 - c. something I'd like to see more of, but I need to feel connected first.
 - d. a sore spot between us, something we often wind up fighting about.
- 10) When I think about the two of us growing old together, I
- a. imagine it will be great to be unconstrained by our many responsibilities and that we will enjoy the world together.
 - b. think we will be good companions who can trust each other.
 - c. wonder if we will have enough in common to share a good life together.
 - d. worry that without the glue that's been holding us together, things may get worse between us, or we might drift apart.

For each *A* answer, give yourself 4 points, 3 points for *B*, 2 for *C*, and 1 for *D*. Now add up the sum of the ten questions.

Results:

If you scored between 35–40, you are rich in intimacy. It may not match up with our idealized vision of a “perfect” relationship, but you are in great shape. Real relationships are not perfect, but an

endless dance of *harmony*, *disbarmony*, and *repair*. While there may be rough spots, as a couple, you are not stuck. Relax and appreciate it! You will find the book's discussion about *real love versus romance* most relevant.

30–35

You are in a solid relationship. If you scored a preponderance of *B*'s you are highly companionable but might work to further a more passionate connection and richer communication. The skills of *relational speaking* might help. If your score was mixed (highs and lows) you are still in a solid relationship, although on the surface it may look volatile. The difficulties you face are passion and commitment. Skills of *negotiation* and *relational integrity* will be critical for you.

25–30

If your score was made up mostly of *B*'s and *C*'s then you are in a workable relationship but one that lacks real connection. You must work to open up communication and start sharing more in each other's life. You or your partner may be putting up *walls* that need to be transformed into more permeable *boundaries*. Learning how to *listen and respond relationally* will be of particular interest to you. Pay attention to the skill of *scanning for the positive*.

If your score was all over the map, then you are in a volatile relationship and you must learn the skills of mature intimacy—*all five skills* will be important to master. If you don't see much progress, consider a couples therapist.

20–25

Your relationship is in trouble. You are either very distant, sharing little intimacy (if your score was consistently low), or you are highly volatile with a lot of unresolved conflict (if there was a lot of scatter in your answers). In either case, it is hard to imagine that you are happy or that this is a healthy emotional environment. You made the right move in selecting this book. All of it will be important for you, particularly the book's discussion of how to find a good counselor and how to "train" him or her to be truly helpful.

15–20

Unfortunately, there are few positives holding the relationship together. It is extremely doubtful that you can fix this without help. You are desperate to learn how to move from *disillusionment* to *repair*. When things go wrong in your relationship, they tend to stay unresolved. You are quickly losing the good feelings that brought you together. Instead, the relationship has begun to revolve around *control* and *revenge*. The chapter called “Love’s Assassins” will be of interest to you. You must stop the downward spiral soon.

10–15

You are in a disaster—either a highly psychologically abusive relationship or one with virtually no intimacy at all. You are stuck in either the *revenge* phase or, worse, in the final stage of love’s degeneration—resignation. If you have been silenced, you must dare to speak! You are in the position I describe in the book as *explode or corrode*. If you really deal with your dissatisfaction in this relationship, it may well blow up—and that is a real risk. On the other hand, your feelings about the relationship are rapidly becoming so toxic that you will either break up or, perhaps worse, persist in a miserable situation. You need to either make a decision to embrace the relationship while standing up for yourself in it, or leave. Read with particular attention the discussions on relationship esteem, evaluating your relationship, how to find a good therapist if you need one, and how to train your therapist to back you up and be more helpful.

No matter where you may be along the spectrum of difficulties, rest assured you are far from alone. Relationships between men and women have never been more difficult. Close to half of all couples getting married will divorce. And there are far too many couples who are not ready to divorce, but suffer in relationships that lack the closeness and passion we all deserve.

In *How Can I Get Through to You*, I explain why so many good men and women have such a terrible time staying connected, and

in particular, why so many men are what I describe as relationally damaged. After years of counseling and research, I maintain that, by and large, girls and women are raised in our society to know more about, and want more from, relationships than do most boys and men. I call this *the intimacy gap*.

Most women would make good relational coaches for men. But men tend to find their partner's attempts to "shape them up" controlling and condescending. After a time, most women learn to back off and become passive about how they are treated in their relationships—but not without resentment. And that resentment shows up as withdrawal. As women shut down their needs, they also shut down their sense of pleasure. They want less pleasure; they are less interested in pleasing their partners. While there may be much that works wonderfully in the relationship, there is also a sense of chronic resentment, as women feel unheard in their relationships. While men, who are just doing what they've been programmed to do—work hard, try to be more involved in the family, try to be responsible and responsive—feel progressively that they will never "get it right." The result is a resentful dissatisfied woman matched with an unappreciated and unloved-feeling man. The grim statistics tell us that this is not a fall from an average modern marriage. In far too many instances this *is* an average contemporary marriage.

We deserve better.

I believe we can sustain the love and intimacy we all long for. That state is our birthright, what we are designed for as human beings. But sustained love is an art, a craft, a daily practice—both rewarding and demanding. I tell the couples I work with, "Hot passion requires cool skills." My hope in writing these pages is to help people recover both aspects of a living relationship—to become "intimacy literate."

This book will offer both men and women a roadmap out, practical advice to revolutionize their relationships, advice on what to expect from therapy, and finally, a way to transform the patriarchal culture in which we live—men and women, boys and girls, together. Women must bring into their most intimate relationships

the assertiveness and empowerment they have worked so hard to claim out in the world. I dare women to “rock the boat!” Men must learn to open up and listen, without stonewalling, fleeing, or fighting. Opening up women’s voices and opening up men’s hearts, empowering wives and reconnecting husbands—that is the work this book describes.

Love on the Ropes: *Men and Women in Crisis*

Women marry men hoping they will change. They don't.
Men marry women hoping they won't change. They do.

—BETTIN ARNDT

"I've always felt our relationship was a threesome," says Steve Conroy, crossing thin legs sheathed in worsted wool, black socks reaching not quite high enough, cordovan loafers with tassels. His style is pure Beacon Hill, his voice soft, modulated. "Our little ménage à trois has consisted of me, Mag, and Maggie's misery."

"Oh, *nice*, Steve," Maggie snorts, on cue. Short, blond, muscular, she seems coiled for action.

Steve stares down at his hands folded together in helplessness; his forehead puckers with concern.

My wife, Belinda, also a family therapist, has a saying: "Beware of 'nice' men with 'bitchy' wives."

"Her misery?" I pursue.

Steve nods, ruefully. "It's rare to see my wife happy."

"It's rare to see her happy with *you*, maybe." Maggie takes the bait.

"Asshole," I finish for her.

"Pardon me?" Maggie turns to me, flushed.

"It's rare to see me happy with *you*, maybe, asshole," I paraphrase.

Maggie pulls her head back a few inches, as if smelling something disagreeable. "I never said that," she tells me softly.

I nod, turning to Steve. "Is she always this easy?"

"I'm not sure I take your meaning . . ."

"This goad-able?"

"Look." The concerned frown reappears. "I have no interest here in . . ."

I take a breath, regroup. The covert hostility flying around the room is getting to me. When I ask Steve how his wife's "misery" manifests itself, he hesitates, and, studying him for a moment, I sense that his reluctance is more than a move in their game. He really is afraid of her. On the other side, Steve's negative image of Maggie traps her like tarpaper. The more violently she protests, the more he stands confirmed as the victim of her irrationality. For eighteen years, Steve has managed to outflank his wife like this. Enormously successful in the world, ever reasonable at home, often beleaguered by his wife's high emotions, steadfast, patient Steve has only one problem—Maggie wants to leave him.

"I love Steve," Maggie declares. "I'll always love him. But not in the way I need to, not anymore," she trails off, seeming more worn out than angry.

Steve has no idea why his wife wants to quit their marriage, even though—watching from the outside—I can recognize their troubled dance within a few minutes of our first encounter.

"I just don't feel connected," Maggie tries to explain. "I used to fight it. Years ago. I'd try to talk. I'd arrange little dinners. I'd beg Steve to open up . . ."

"You'd throw things," Steve adds helpfully.

Maggie looks at Steve sideways and then sighs. "Sometimes I'd be measured, sometimes I'd be wild," she says, like a nursery rhyme. "Sometimes I'd be seductive, sometimes I'd be cold."

"There was a little girl who had a little curl," I chime in.

"Yes, but then one day the little *woman* looked at herself in the mirror and came to a big realization."

"Which was?" I ask.

Maggie leans toward me in her chair and confides in a stage whisper, "*It doesn't matter*. It doesn't matter *what* I do. With Steve, what you see is what you get. This is as open as my husband is going to become." She leans back again. "I don't know what I am to Steve. I don't know *who* he thinks he needs to ward off. To be honest, at this point, I don't care. I'm just tired of it, whatever it is. All right, Doctor?"

"Call me Terry."

"You win, Steve." She pushes right through me. "Here's the white flag, okay? 'Uncle.' I surrender. I'm a bitch, okay? I admit it. There. Can we all go home now?"

I raise an eyebrow toward Steve.

"What am *I* supposed to do?" he complains. "Forgive me if I don't feel quite as vile as her portrait suggests. For years now Maggie has complained that I am 'shut down.' But, frankly, I just don't buy it. Actually," Steve says, crossing his legs, "for a guy, I think I'm pretty romantic."

Maggie laughs.

"You want to put that into words?" I ask her.

"By romantic . . ." Maggie looks at her husband. "Steve means flowers and music whenever he feels like having sex."

"You know, that really is unfair . . ." Steve begins.

"Anyway, what's wrong with that?" I ask Maggie, heading him off.

"Nothing," she says, "as long as it doesn't take the place of other ways to be close."

"Like?" I prompt.

Maggie's eyes dart over the room, anywhere but at Steve. "Like *listening* to me!" she says.

"But Maggie," Steve whines, "once again, you simply don't . . ."

"Like," I ask Maggie, "as in now, for example?"

"Now, just hold on a second." Steve's voice rises.

"Is this how it is at home?" I ask her, ignoring him. "How it's been?"

Maggie's head drops; she nods. I can't tell if she's crying.

Finally, Steve's reasonableness cracks. "Do I get to speak here?"

He vibrates with indignation, hands outstretched, warding off the two of us. "Do *I* have a voice?"

"Not yet," I answer softly, trying to catch Maggie's eye. "So," I continue, "this is how it is?" She nods, beginning to cry while Steve fumes.

"If I push him," she says, her voice small, "which I don't anymore."

"How long?" I ask. Steve impatiently shifts in his chair.

"Steve," I say, an aside. "I can be nice to you right now, or I can do my best to salvage your marriage. What's your preference?"

He opens his mouth, shuts it, and then waves me on.

"How long?" I resume, turning to Maggie.

"How long has he been treating me like this?" she asks.

"How long since you gave up?"

"Years." Maggie begins to cry in earnest. "Years."

I lean back, sobered, sad. "I'm sorry," I tell them both. "I'm sorry you've had to go through this." Maggie cries harder. Steve looks to the side, upset as well. "And you tried therapy?" I ask.

"Yes." Maggie nods vigorously. "Twice, no, three times, really. But . . ."

"But no one took him on." I finish the sentence for her. She nods.

I lean toward her. "And if I do, Maggie?" I ask. "If Steve changes? I mean really changes. Are you even open to it at this point, or is it a forgone conclusion that—"

"No!" Maggie wails. "I *want* this to work. I *want* to love him. Three children, eighteen years!" She folds in, crying hard, angry and hurt. "Don't you think I've *tried*?"

"Okay," I soothe. "Okay, Maggie. I've got it. Breathe a little. I've got it."

Now Steve charges in, furious, oblivious to his wife's tears. "She asks me to cut back on my work. I say, 'Okay, I will.' And I do. She wants me to be more involved with the kids. I don't turn around like a lot of—"

"Steve," I interrupt, speaking gently. "Are you aware of your wife crying a few inches next to you?"

"Of course I'm aware," he blusters, offended. "And you accuse

me of condescension! What kind of cretin do you take me for? I *do* respond to my wife. That's precisely the point. I work hard. I tend to our children—"

"That's all to the good," I stop him. "It really is. I am not being glib about that. But it just doesn't seem to be good enough, Steve. I'm sorry. I believe you are trying, trying hard in fact. But it's just not the fundamental thing."

"What I'm attempting to say . . ." Steve tries plowing on.

"The fundamental thing," I continue, "is that, real or imagined, your wife experiences you as someone who, though you don't mean her harm, is nevertheless in day-to-day life simply too selfish and in your own way too controlling to live with."

Steve stops short. "I can't believe this!" he says, his voice a whisper. "You don't even *know* me."

"Do you think I'm wrong?" I ask him. "*Do* you? Watch this." Steve is speechless. I turn to Maggie, "Am I?"

She shakes her head vehemently.

"Then maybe you'd better tell him yourself."

"Steve," she says turning to him. "My darling. Idiot! I've *been* telling you. I've used those very words—for years!"

Steve contemplates us both for a long moment, eyes squinting as if in bright light. Then, to my surprise, he suddenly smiles. A shrewd businessman, Steve is, in fact, nobody's fool. He knows, for example, when he's been had. I notice he stands in possession of a truly disarming grin. What causes him to back down now? Because he has correctly assessed that within minutes I have gained access to something he has been living without and very much wants—Maggie's goodwill.

"Nice smile," I say, breathing again. "So, what are you feeling?"

"Like I've just lost controlling interest of the board." His smile broadens.

"And how is that for you?" I ask.

"Well, I guess we'll just have to see, won't we?" he replies. We let that one sit between us for a while. "So now what?" Steve breaks the silence. "What do I need to do?"

I find myself matching his smile with one of my own. "Now,

that's the most refreshing question I've heard so far today," I answer. "So, listen. I have good news and bad news. Which do you want first?"

"Oh, you decide," he offers magnanimously, the tension between us dissipating.

"What happened to all that anger just a moment ago?" I ask.

Steve grins again. "Well," he says, "sizing things up, I suppose I decided that it was just . . . too irrational. You were giving me some news?" he prompts.

"Fine," I answer. "Here's how it is. The good news is that I think I can help you, if you're willing to do the work. Unless there's some curveball I don't know about, my guess is we have a fair shot at turning this around."

"And?"

"The bad news is that you have to do what I tell you."

"Which bridge will I need to dive off of?"

"None, most likely. I think you'll find most of what I coach you to do eminently reasonable. But it may be uncomfortable a little, Steve. Maybe even uncomfortable a lot."

"Hey, I'm a captured market," he says. "Bring it on."

"Are you sure?" I ask.

"Yes," he answers simply, seriously.

Now it is my turn to contemplate him for a moment. "Why?" I ask.

"Eighteen years," Steve replies without a pause. "My family, my home. You don't think I care about that?"

"And Maggie?" I ask.

"Sure Maggie," he says. "Of course Maggie."

"What about her?"

Steve turns to his wife, as she burrows and cries. For the first time in the session, he seems really to look at her. As he answers, his gaze finally matches the softness of his voice. "Maggie's the woman I love," he tells me, eyes shining.

She looks up at him.

"And those tears in your eyes, Steve," I amplify. "If they could speak, what would they say to her?"