



INSTITUTE FOR
PERSONAL
GROWTH

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Love is the Path to Wholeness

Love Is the Path to Wholeness: A Weekend Workshop for Lesbian and Gay Couples

Therapists have often explored why it seems so difficult for lesbian and gay couples to seek help from professionals – and why they so often wait until it is too late.

Several reasons why our community may wait before going to a professional include the fact that lesbian and gay relationships, in general, are often unsupported by family, heterosexual society at large, and they may be closeted. Some people suffer feelings of failure about their past or current relationships; there may be shame, guilt, or embarrassment. Out of these feelings of shame or embarrassment they feel that they must struggle alone with this private and personal pain. It is sad that they may be unaware that all of this is part of BEING in a relationship and that all couples experience these feelings.

There are an equal number of reasons why couples may wait to enter therapy. They may be in an unsatisfying, disillusioned relationship, they may be in one with long-standing conflicts, or uncertain about what direction a new relationship is taking, or they may want to enrich a current one. A very common point for couples to seek therapy is when the romantic love seems diminished and the qualities that attracted them now seem to drive them crazy. This “phase” is called the power struggle.

Couples enter the stage of a power struggle when they feel the partner they chose to make them feel better is not delivering the goodies. Control, manipulation, anger, etc. will not produce what they want from their partner. Anyone who knows the pain and heartache of facing relationship problems are all too aware that the usual choices of staying stuck or leaving are never simple. They wish that there was another way or another choice and should be pleased to hear (and hopefully excited) to know it does exist.

In the April issue of *Sappho's Isle* I introduced an exciting new form of couples therapy called Imago Relationship Therapy (I.R.T.). To recap a little, this therapy was innovated by Harville Hendrix, Ph.D., who wrote the popular book *Getting the Love You Want*. The theory behind this couples therapy is based on the notion that the underlying purpose of a relationship is to finish childhood business; to repair the damaging effects of childhood so we can be healed and made as whole and complete as when we were first born.

The IMAGO is an image of the combined traits and characteristics of our unconscious mind. And it is this Image that we use in choosing our partners. We choose people with the same characteristics (especially the hurtful, negative ones) of those early caretakers. We do this, according to the IMAGO theory, because our unconscious is stimulated by the familiarity of the traits. We select them because they have the key to healing our deepest wounds and unmet needs. The partner that we choose to fall in love with is our IMAGO match, and therefore the perfect person for our healing. It is our attempt to re-do our childhood and have it turn out right.

The problem in the power struggle is that feelings of safety have been diminished. The key to the IMAGO weekend workshop is that it establishes safety - the safety for the needed work to unfold.

Trained IMAGO therapists offer intensive workshops built around a weekend process utilizing this knowledge of how partners choose one another and try to rework their childhood wounds. Specifically, 'Relationship Resources' was formed by

psychotherapists Sharon Kleinberg and Patricia Zom to take the principals of I.R.T. and adapt its theory and communication tools for the lesbian and gay community.

As IMAGO therapists we know well the transformational power and impact that I.R.T. can have for couples. The participating couples become aware of how important, effective, and helpful the IMAGO methods are by having results so immediately apparent.

The IMAGO methods are geared to intervene in the power struggle of the couple. Every tool and technique is about reinstating the safety factor. Without the return of safety there can be little fun, passion, joy or romance. A further ingredient of the weekend is learning many ways of getting energy back into the relationship through fun and playfulness. The weekend generates love and laughter, which help to renew hope in couples.

One of the primary - and possibly the most important - communication techniques used during the weekend is called the "couples dialogue", which allows for one partner, in a very specific way, to listen, reflect back, validate, and empathize with her partner. This is an invaluable tool for effective communication. It opens up communication rather than the shutting down caused by the unproductive defensive style normally seen in power struggles.

Another significant part of the weekend is learning the five step processes of I.R.T. which allow couples to transform the negative, difficult aspects of their relationship and create safety, gain compassion and re-open the doors to loving, caring, and support.

These five processes are accomplished by using a combination of lectures, guided imagery, written exercises, and communication techniques.

The first is REVISIONING. In this process partners create a vision of their desired relationship. Their complaints and frustrations, as well as their future dreams and wishes, are spelled out in a positive way.

Second, REROMANTICIZING. Because partners have often become enemies and sources of pain to each other, this process re-introduces pleasure into the relationship. It helps to reconnect to the old romantic behavior and create a new list of caring behaviors, secret desires, fun and surprises.

In REIMAGING, the couple discovers and recognizes that we choose a partner wounded in similar areas with similar needs, but who defends herself in an opposite style. This process helps us see the wounded child in our partner and it allows for a compassionate view of their hurt areas.

Through RESTRUCTURING FRUSTRATIONS, the couple can find that while the old way of complaining is basically unproductive, the frustration still contains hidden pieces of valuable information about unmet needs of your partner or lost parts of yourself. This process helps reveal the fear and hurt behind the complaints. Partners learn to give up the complaining and to instead formulate concrete behavior-change requests. This process also introduces "stretching" behavior, which offers a built-in double pay-off.

And finally, RESOLVING CHILDHOOD RAGE exercises teach a procedure for containing anger and rage. Most of us have stored rage from our past - fears, terrors, sadness. The largest part of these feelings has nothing to do with our

present partner. Containment techniques teach non-reactive responding by your partner to negative communications and intense emotions, and this allows rage from the past to dissolve.

When couples participate in these workshops they are taught how to get the nurturing and care from their relationship that they did not get as children. They can expect to learn how to use their relationship for emotional healing and spiritual evolution. Couples can heal and deepen their relationship as they help each other finish childhood business. With renewed hope and love they will be on the path to joy and wholeness.