

Making Great Relationships Webinar

with Dr. Rick Hanson

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Transcript

Note: this transcript has been automatically generated and may contain inaccuracies.

Rick Hanson [00:00:00] So first question, comment, you know, to date and I'll use the name the person who comes in. So Heather, she writes, "my question has to do with difficult conversations, specifically conversations with an ex spouse about asset division." So there are assets or stakes on the table, real stakes in addition to emotional stakes. "As the person who is betrayed and blindsided after 18 years of marriage, I have very strong emotions around this, but I really want to exit the marriage as soon as and as gracefully as possible, as soon as and as gracefully as possible so that I can move on with my life. I know the best way to do this is to negotiate the separation agreement as non-adversarial as possible. What techniques can I use to avoid being triggered and to not be overcome when I am inevitably triggered at times during the process?"

[00:00:59] Okay. So you can see the specifics of that. And I'm also going to broaden it out. So first, let me just speak to the specifics. I'm not an attorney. I'm not giving legal advice. I have been at the side of numerous people who've gone through the divorce process, which is really quite common, as you may know. 50% of the official marriages in America end in divorce. If you add to that people who never got an official divorce but really separated after marriage. And if you add to that people who have never been legally married, but they were functionally married today, they had children together, let's say that maybe they owned property together and then they separated. You know, the the actual dissolution rate approaches two out of three. You know, So that means to me not to feel doomed, but to be clear that it's useful to make the efforts that we can. And it's useful to appreciate that, you know, separating is is certainly not uncommon thing. If you're going to go down that road. I would just say two things that I've kind of observed that are really useful to understand.

[00:02:13] First, it's a legal process, certainly in America. And in that legal process, it's an inherently it's a very specific system. So it's important to get good legal advice. And it doesn't mean necessarily that legal advice is that you're going to go to war with your ex. It just means really understand the implications of being in that legal system. People can make missteps, including things they put into writing or even say or just say that actually have a long shadow later in terms of unfortunate consequences. So good legal advice for many people. Their divorce will be the biggest financial transaction of their life. So get it right and you know, understand your you've walked to the looking glass. You're in Alice in Wonderland territory now, and it can sometimes be like a war zone.

[00:03:08] So make sure you have good allies and good resources and you know, you're doing second up sometimes. And I've known couples who parted in a super friendly way.

That's wonderful if it's true often. And it could be in this particular case, given the betrayal that started it all, you realize that maybe for you, you look at that other person like you're looking at your partner. They're not looking at you any longer that way often. And there's a kind of wake up call that is useful when it's true that kind of wakes you up from disenchantment about, oh, fantasies or longings or that inner child. You know, I have this. My wife said to a fault, Rick, you see the good in people. It's a funny fault. And there's something in that, and it's helpful to appreciate that it could be something very sweet and innocent and childlike in you that just in a sense is kind of naive and doesn't see clearly what you're dealing with or keeps thinking that there's going to be cheese down that tunnel eventually, but there really isn't with that other person. So if that's true and I'm not saying what is true, I'm saying if that's true, it's really helpful to be clear eyed about this.

[00:04:24] So there's two points I've made, one about resourcing yourself. Given the scale of the issue you're dealing with and to being clear eyed and disenchanted, not despairing or depressed, just waking up from whatever enchantments that other people or your own, you know, mental processes are casting for you. Both of those are really useful things, especially when you're dealing with something significant and difficult. You know, very often as a clinician. People would come into my office with issues at this level, but resources at that level. And it was so important to be realistic and scale up resources of all kinds to, you know, what's really happening. Okay.

[00:05:10] Then specifically inside that particular frame, something that's a recurring theme and certainly in the book and in I think practical wisdom about relationships in general is to do what you can to influence the other person, whether it's in a divorce framework in which you're sometimes needing to create incentives for them to go in a to take the higher road. And you're needing to sometimes correct costs for them in taking the lower road beyond forms of influence of different kinds. And I'll get into more of those later on.

[00:05:49] The fundamental frame mainly is to focus on what you can do, what's on your side of the street, and how can you take care of yourself on that side of the street. So, you know, having a sense of being grounded is really important. Secure a base of operations. First rule of warfare. Right. Or the foundation of attachment theory. Establish a secure base inside your being with the support of others. Whatever helps you be stabilized. Second, be really clear about what the prize is for you, and keep your eyes on that prize. What are your primary aims? I've seen a lot of people in complex situations and interactions get distracted sometimes by the bait that's tossed out by the other person and they lose focus on what their primary aim is. Keep focused on what are your primary aims if it's an asset division here. I haven't heard about children in the picture, you know. What is that primary aim and how are you going about accomplishing it? If deep down inside you want to feel that you have neither taken advantage of the other person, you haven't cheated, nor have you been cheated. That's an important thing.

[00:07:10] The process of asset division is typically quite regulated, depending on the state or wherever you are, and there are the rules. So it's less like staying inside that frame. That would be something that's within your power to do for yourself. Limiting your interactions. If they're not comfortable for you, not seeing the other person in person

unless you have to. Doing things in writing, having third parties in the room. Things like that can also be really helpful in just taking care of yourself and the.

[00:07:45] I'll finish here by saying that these general ideas. Grounding yourself. Focusing on your clear interest. And you know, that's a moral interest and keeping your eyes on that prize, you know, protecting yourself and disengaging as appropriate and bringing in allies, all of those are really, really generally useful. And then last, I would just say that million you know, I don't know how many people go through or and begin a separation process each year in America. It's probably millions of people and probably many of them are much less resourced than you. It's helpful to appreciate that as challenging and difficult as it is for you, it's comfort in common humanity of a sort, a subgroup of humanity that you're part of, a group of people who are going through a challenging and difficult process. They did it. They did it with less resources probably than you have. You can do it too. And there's a kind of dignity and ness. Whatever's happened in the past, each day had high self-respect. Put some daylight between you and the train wreck each day. It's, you know, and keep moving toward a better future for yourself. And that's a good way to feel about this really difficult thing.

[00:09:11] Okay, Next person. Another one, Anonymous writes, "my question has to do with when a life partner falls apart, literally has a nervous breakdown or a major mental health crisis. I understand and see clearly that my husband isn't falling apart on purpose, and I understand many of the reasons. Much of the background for this crisis. He is working with a therapist who I'm not sure is actually helping. And we have a couples therapist to whom I believe is fantastic. However, after two and a half years," so this has been going on for two and a half years, "the day-to-day hostility directed at me is still substantial and it has worn me to a nub. What advice can you offer in a situation like this? I really don't know how to stay married to someone who is so out of his mind in ways that are very detrimental to me and also I am not comfortable abandoning or leaving him when I believe that it's not his fault. In other words, what I leave my husband if he developed a brain tumor or cancer. What I be willing to divorce him if he developed Alzheimer's."

[00:09:49] So you could see there's a lot in this particular question, and I'm really glad to start with, you know, big stakes questions, high-intensity questions. So first off, there's the question of duty to others, duty to self. And I find that so many interpersonal issues are, in some ways ethics issues. And I don't mean to get philosophical or complicated, I just mean to surface or to foreground a key element in the mix, which has to do with thinking clearly about our own integrity, our own inner integrity system, which is distinct from the outer integrity system that we've kind of acquired often through our childhood experiences in our culture, the shoulds of other people. And that outer integrity system overlaps with often the inner integrity system.

[00:11:24] Sometimes it's wildly divergent circles that are far apart from each other, almost at odds with each other, and sometimes are completely congruent. But it's very helpful to make that distinction between what's my inner, what are, what are my inner values? And distinct from the messages I've gotten throughout my life about how a pers how I ought to be or a person like me. How a woman, for example, identified as a woman ought to be, or

how a man male identified, let's say, ought to be or a good daughter ought to be, you know, get a little breathing room between those odds and keep looking at what you really what your integrity system says. So there's a question here about what do we owe them or do we owe ourselves? And these are tough calls. I can't tell you how to make the call, but I do think there's a call to be made.

[00:12:19] And I also think that when a duty to another person who is willfully acting in certain ways. This is not someone whose in the account is demented. This is not someone who's had a brain tumor or an injury that has catastrophically damaged their functioning. This is someone who is making choices, honestly. And this is someone who is, I suspect, not directing so much hostility to other people. And at what point does that cause the grinding impact on yourself amount to a tipping point for you? And I can't tell you where that point is, but I just want to raise the question of whether or not your duty to yourself is at least as significant, if not even more significant, than your duty to that other person. Now, I think there's a particular exception in my own moral calculus, which has to do with duty to children and duty to others, you know, that are that are really vulnerable in society. But, you know, generally, though, I think that we as a moral principle have the greatest duty to those over whom we have the greatest power. And guess who you have the greatest power over to your future self. Who will you be in the days and weeks and years to come? That's the first one.

[00:13:58] Second, as I talk about in the book, you know, lots of practical length where often it's helpful to be in a process when there's a collision of wants. At some level, this husband wants to be hostile. Now, yes, maybe he's not quite in his right mind. Yes. He's had a nervous breakdown. Yes, he's hijacked. It's been two and a half years. So there's the force in him that wants that is hostile. Then there's the other person, the person who has the question. The wife, I believe, would be an appropriate term who does not want that hostility. Okay. Collision of wants. Now what? That's the actual structure of so many interactions and issues in relationships when we both want the same thing. Living is easy, right in this summer time, but when we don't want the same thing. Well, that's where it starts. And it doesn't mean it's the death knell of a relationship. Many parent-child interactions have to do with a collision of wants, and then they get managed hopefully well. Okay. So in the frame of two people who want different things, it's really important to discover whether you can make an agreement and to frame it in the form of requests from now on. People argue about the past. There's a place for that a little. I often find it unfruitful with people because they're just not going to agree about what happened or what it meant. And often there's one party who, you know, they would not agree that the sun has risen today. You know, if it meant them admitting that they were wrong about something. So. But the future. You can make agreements about. But then you discover is your partner willing to make that agreement. So let's suppose you really, really try to make concrete agreements, perhaps in the frame of the couples counselor. So there's a referee in the room. Your partner may make an agreement or refuse to make agreements if your partner refuses to make agreements or if anyone in a significant relationship with you refuses to make reasonable agreements about how they treat you. That is a major red flag, minimally, or an orange flag about that relationship. How do you go on getting hammered every day? All right.

[00:16:18] Also, if someone makes an agreement says, okay, I won't, I won't do that anymore, or okay, I'll always start with this. And then they just blow it off. And then it becomes clear over time that they have actually no intention of keeping their agreement with you. It's kind of stunning to realize how many people will say the right things, especially in the therapist's office. I've seen that. But really, they don't care. They're not committed in their heart. And it's shocking sometimes to appreciate that someone that has mattered a lot to you, you don't really matter that much to anymore. That's disenchantment. It's painful. There's grieving. But to me, the foundation of any kind of effectiveness in the world or well-being or healing inside is truth.

[00:17:18] There's a line in Resilient, the book I wrote with our son Forrest a couple years a few years ago, that, you know, we often have to choose between truth or harmony in our relationships. And sometimes it's appropriate to choose harmony over truth, including letting things go by or not bringing things up. But around big issues and in important relationships, very often, people who choose, who choose harmony over truth repeatedly end up having neither over time. So if you've got a partner who just says they're going to keep an agreement but just won't, at some point, it's important to start to realize what you're saying. I think there's that line from Maya Angelou, right? When someone shows you who they are, believe him the first time. Believe him.

[00:18:04] So now let's suppose you've got a partner who is hostile. You care about them. You have a lot of loyalty to them. I mean, that really comes through the question, which is really touching. And there, you know, if you kind of project the trend line, that's another thing. The best predictor of the future is the past. You know, the next month is really likely to be like the last month with that person, especially if they don't demonstrate a learning curve or a willingness to make agreements and keep them. What's their learning curve? What's the force of the tendencies inside them? What's the level of commitment to taking a higher road? You know, if you assess that, you know, it's tough. So what was that last word? Let's see. I just see some. I don't know. Margo. Oh, sorry. People who choose harmony over truth over time often end up having neither. That's what I said. So, okay. What did you hear? What you might do is take a break and take a big step back. It's helpful also in relationships to appreciate their kind of scripted nature of many interactions that have a kind of equilibrium. In other words.

[00:19:25] And sometimes what's helpful is to break the script. So in this situation, I would imagine that the husband is getting a lot of payoffs or secondary gains in the therapeutic lingo from what he's doing. It has a reward value for him in some ways. Well, one thing you could do is to disrupt that reward value or disrupt the typical sequences that lead to that hostility. Maybe implicitly, the husband or explicitly has some request for you. Okay. Or maybe you can just understand, aha. This person is going to take issue with the least thing. So as best I can, I'm going to eliminate anything they can take issue with. Aha. Or this person is going to rebuff and punish any of my bids for closeness, including vulnerable self-disclosure? That is a useful insight if it's accurate to realize, aha, that person over there is committed to distance from me. And so anything that smells like a pursuit of them or an appeal to them to come closer, they're going to cut off and even punish to try to

teach me not to do it in the future. They may not even be doing this particularly deliberately, but that's the functional driving purpose behind what they're doing. So you always want to look at what's the function, what are the payoffs that are being served by certain behaviors. So what a person can do sometimes is disrupted. Now maybe that disruption looks like if you can do it, you know, moving out of the home for a while or, you know, going on a weeklong meditation retreat or just a long drive or, you know, spending a few days away with a friend, some kind of disruption and some kind of distancing can help.

[00:21:22] And then last and I probably have given a long answer here, if there's a third party in the mix, is to talk with a couples counselor. A couples counselor will typically be quite careful about allying or aligning with one person against another. But certainly in the room with the partner, you could raise the question like this is what's happening? What can we do about it? And to really name what's going on in a very explicit way rather than beating around the bush about it. Okay. Hopefully that was helpful. I don't know. All right.

[00:21:57] One more here. Okay. Briefly. June writes, Yep. Julie, rather, "would you address somehow somewhere the ways the rules on our relationships Communication have changed with the text box, social media norms in the year 2023?" Yeah, I've noticed it too. We become used to a certain kind of relationship. You know, millennials, Gen Xers, they're very used to connecting through texting and they don't... That's how they feel connected. People of my generation, it seems so distant, and certainly in our biology we long for eye contact and touch, which has been disrupted as well in this time of plague and other illnesses. So what can you do?

[00:22:44] One thing I find that's helpful is to really regenerate inside myself the feeling of connection deliberately. Bringing the person to mind, even if I just got a text from them seeing them. You could even look at a picture of them on your computer or in your wallet or on your wall so you feel closer to them. That's a thing.

[00:23:07] Also, look for ways to get the kind of contact you do, like perhaps in service opportunities, like volunteering in a rescue animal shelter or being involved with others and some kind of simple common cause that's not stressful or draining for you. That can be nice deliberately being more available for contact with others because others often long for contact to, you know, being able to sustain a conversation for a couple more back and forth where the person next to you in line waiting to get your coffee, let's say somewhere. These are things we can do. We can also make specific requests of people that are a little distanced. I'm going to get to another question related to that in a second. The final of my four and just asked them, hey, are you willing to get lunch some time or a cup of coffee or spend half an hour on Zoom? You know, I know it's Zoom. It's not 1 to 1. You can't touch them or smell them, but you're still you know, you can interact. So I think that's what I would think. We just need to be more resourceful. But I think in a lot of little ways we can deepen our felt sense of connection with others, even in this time in which a lot of relationships are a mile wide, but only an inch deep. All right.

[00:24:27] Last one. Patricia asks, "I would appreciate some advice on how to approach a communication issue with my 35-year-old son. He's a busy doctor, and we talk about once

a month. I mentioned on a recent phone call that I was sad that we didn't have that close communication that we used to. His response was, Well, sorry, but I can't make that right for you. There seems to be a fine line between expressing feelings and someone interpreting them as you, asking them to take care of your feelings. I have some judgment about what I perceive as a lack of compassion or curiosity about my feelings from him. Can you address this, please?"

[00:24:34] A lot in that, including for, you know, aging parents. I'm in that. We have a 35-year-old son and a 32-year-old daughter. And we, of course, welcome our communication with them. My wife and I, even though it you know, it's fairly robust, you know, one or two times a week, I think at least. But even then, we want more, of course, and all the rest of that. What do you do? A few things here.

[00:25:13] One, the person flags this wonderful distinction between sharing your experience and being critical or making a request or demand. And Marshall Rosenberg, bless his memory and others I've created and he in particular, nonviolent communication, have a wonderful way of looking at all this. I recommend my book, you know, about this kind of thing. And also orange. So first book. Say, what do you mean? Which is a lot about nonviolent communication and the details even of how to do it. So it's particularly helpful with someone who is defensive, maybe, and vulnerable to feeling criticized like the son here. I think to lead with this is not a criticism and it's not even a request like just like hypothetically in your own way, something like, "oh, it's so nice to talk with you. I know you're really busy. You know, I know you're a kid, I know you have a life, I know you're an adult. I know you have a life of your own. I get it. And I just. I really like talking with you. And, you know, just. It's true. It's just true that I miss you. And, you know, it would be wonderful. Yeah, I'll just leave it at that. You know? I miss you. That was pure experience, right? No criticism. Just fact. I miss you. I'm your mom. I love you. You're my special son. You know I miss you." See how clean that is? Now, he might take issue still, but it's clean as a whistle.

[00:27:22] Maybe after he responds to that in some way, you know, you potentially might offer a request again in your own way. Something on the order of. "Well, yeah, thank you for that." Let's say if he was reasonably nice about. "I miss you. I know you're super busy. I don't want to be a bother. I just kind of wonder if, you know, what would enable you to be comfortable. Maybe talking with me twice a month, 20 minutes each. I promise I won't do more. I'll put the kitchen timer on. I won't take long. Fear not. I'm not an emotional vampire." Lighten it up with a joke, maybe. What do you what do you think? What would enable you to do that? That be okay? See, that's a request.

[00:28:11] There are different ways to make requests. Your style might be a little different. Maybe you could improve on what I just adlibbed. There. That's a request. You see, there's no demand in it. There's no criticism. There's a lot of room around it. But it's an unmistakable request. That's another thing that people often get in trouble around. They think they've made a request, you know, like, "gee, you know, I wish we could talk more." That's kind of a request, but it's still pretty fuzzy. Or they say, "Gosh, we used to talk so much." They think that's a request. That's not really a request. And maybe there's a place

once in a while for beating around the bush and using euphemisms, but it's not that effective. Usually a request to something clear operationalized, unmistakable, you know, whether they fulfill it or not. And they know what they're being asked for, a sked of. And it's often helpful, especially with people who are putting up boundaries, like the sun has to offer a bounded request and to make clear that it's bounded from the get-go.

[00:29:20] The last thing I'll just say is that battle kind of the final point in the larger issue, if you will, about people lacking compassion for others in general and adult children lacking compassion or generosity, really, toward their aging parents. And I look back on my life with my two parents who are no longer with us, and I went sometimes of my own self-absorption and rebuffing of their bids for greater contact, particularly my mother's. And I, you know, I wish I'd done better, which is probably a way of saying that it's really common a certainly in American culture, maybe Western culture in general, for there to be a kind of presumption by the time you're a young adult that, you know, your parents did whatever they did, and some of what they did probably still ticks you off. But. Okay. And, you know, if you send them a Christmas card every year, that's pretty good already. Yeah.

[00:30:28] What do you do? And I think offering clear requests is really helpful. I also think there's just a place for coming to terms with who we are to other people, as painful as it may be, and to kind of face the grieving and the mourning directly that the relationship has changed. And we have, in a sense, lost the kind of contact and the closeness they used to be. And it's probably an irrevocable loss, including for simply developmental reasons. They have a life of their own. They're in full stride where we may have a lot more time on our hands, actually, than they do.

[00:31:17] You know, my parents would sometimes call me and I'd let it go to voicemail cause I just didn't want to spend the next 20 minutes talking with them because I had to do something else over the next 20 minutes, you know, and. So my point is there's a place for us, and I'm in that place myself of just a kind of. He let it land that it's real. It's almost like the Kubler-Ross stages, you know, of dealing in her case with facing death. But more broadly, you know, where we kind of go through disbelief and then anger and then bargaining and despair. And then we finally get to a kind of serenity, a kind of acceptance, a kind of realism, kind of, you know, serenity.

[00:32:04] And I think that's a useful place, including with our own adult children or others. Siblings. Relationships blow up after parents die, among adult siblings, really commonly friends you can't talk to anymore because your politics are so different. People who blow your mind how inconsiderate and ungenerous and irresponsible they are. Many people disappoint. And I say that as someone who led today's event with a focus on inherent goodness. So, you know, that's true, too.

[00:32:37] But being realistic, there's just no replacement for truth. If you've got to choose ultimately between truth and harmony, I think the wise choice long term is to pick truth and to be in truth yourself. And finishing. It's to realize that we can do so much for other people with little things. You know, I've become a much better friend after I have observed kind of how I felt with certain distancing and of people in my life. I realize I don't want to do that to

anybody. You know, just a minute here. Sustained eye contact there. Deep listening for a couple of minutes can really do a lot for other people, you know, taking the high road all the time. Really do a lot. You know, we can help people a lot by just letting them know that we see them. They do matter to us. And, you know, it's just a quick email or just a 20 minute chat once a year. But it's you know, it's real. You catch up or you have lunch once a year with somebody, you're catching up. But they matter to you. Okay. All right, good. I see hands. So I'm going to shift over to Robin.

Robin [00:33:54] Hi there. I'm getting your book today, I didn't read it yet. So my question is more about hearing to deaf relationship. But I believe you can apply to any type of relationship like personal relationship or business relationship. My question to you is, I don't know if we have one in America, but I would love to build a bridge to love between deaf culture and hearing culture as a full cultural relationship. What we have then called culture, community, and then quote, culture business because we have unhealthy relationship between deaf and hearing. Did you know anybody that got in America? Or maybe you. I don't know.

Rick Hanson [00:34:44] I do not know anyone. I saw a movie recently that I'm sure you know about, about people in the deaf community. It was a beautiful movie. And I looked into so much of the information behind it, and I was very touched by it personally. I so I do not. Unfortunately, Robin, I do not know. And what you're saying is very important both about people who are hearing impaired and not that it's the same as, but realizing that many people are dealing with something big. That may be I do not know about. Right. And it could be some kind of. You know, like a physical thing they're dealing with. It could be a recent loss. It could be. They just had a big argument with their 35 year old doctor son who is busy, doesn't have time for them. It's very helpful to appreciate that other people everyone. One way or another, I'm not making things equal. I'm just saying one way or another. Everyone has a struggle. Everyone has something. Often a lot of somethings. And to try to take that more into account. Many people have observed that American culture and maybe Western culture is getting increasingly narcissistic, self-absorbed. And I just think morally it's it's good for the world and ultimately it's good for one's self to keep looking outside of our own bubble to take more into account. To take more into account about other people who have to take into account things that we are not aware of initially. So anyway, I appreciate that, Robin. And I wondered, did you want to say more?

Robin [00:36:57] I'm I believe it is so important. Would you have a healthy relationship? I mean, you have a healthy communication. And between deaf and hearing, they have a feel of each other and they also have it about each other. And also they have negative attitude because they are the opposite, that the culture is because the language, different English spoken language. And I'm like, I'm out to find good. But I would love to have a global problem to thought America first, then later global. But I'm trying to find my way. Maybe I could talk to you later to guide me, to try and figure out how to get started. I'm not really sure. Meaning I'll read your book down out of your closet later or something like that.

Rick Hanson [00:37:44] Yeah. Well, Robin, I really appreciate you bringing this up. And please contact me through my website. There's a contact form. It'll go to me, and I will tell

you more about what I will say to everyone here, which is the Global Compassion Coalition that I started that is really developing. And a very important part of it is, is to really include which we're committed to people who are grappling with one, you know, I am searching for, I hope it's the right term. It's okay, you know, an impairment of some kind. That's so important to include. So if you write me, I will involve you in that, because I can tell already that we need your help. Okay. Will you do that? Good.

Robin [00:38:47] Yeah. One thing I don't as a deaf person, I would point out, I don't think my ability to go to the moon means you're not capable. I'm capable to do anything.

Rick Hanson [00:38:58] That's right.

Robin [00:39:00] The gap in that language. Talk about that. But the ability that my opinion.

Rick Hanson [00:39:05] Yeah. What word would you use yourself?

Robin [00:39:11] Well. Well, either that or how it appeared. You have the outer approach of what they perceive to be right.

Rick Hanson [00:39:18] You don't? Yeah, that's very good. So rather than a general term like disability or impairment, just. Avoid that terminology altogether.

Robin [00:39:28] Or hearing impaired. Yeah. Okay.

Rick Hanson [00:39:32] Yeah, And just be specific, but not call it a disability or an impairment or a handicap or any of those other words. That's it. Thank you. That's really helpful right there.

Robin [00:39:45] Well, if you talk about their people, they will be called that. That's all I appear. But we will keep a blind people. I have no idea what they do. Maybe they believe the ability. I can't speak without getting my mind in the wheelchair on my blindfold that they feel.

Rick Hanson [00:40:01] Yeah. No, I appreciate that. Well, thank you. That's great. And do email. Do contact me and we'll take it forward. All right. Thank you very much, Robin. Really? Okay, so I see Erica and then Claire, and then maybe we'll move to a finish with another little practice at the end here. So, Erica, I'm asking you to unmute. Great. Yeah.

Erica [00:40:27] Okay, great. Thank you so much. I'm so grateful that I'm talking to you. And with the whole group here. What a wonderful group. So I timed it. This is a 75-second question. Are you ready?

Rick Hanson [00:40:39] I'm ready.

Erica [00:40:40] Okay. I wrote it down so that we could be brief. So I struggle in situations where the other person can be unresponsive. It's like a fear of an abandonment thing. So

the scenario that I would like to introduce is that I live in the country. And out here, generally men's words are tend to be more have they have more say? And stoic communication is really respected. I'm not a man and I communicate quite openly. And my landlord, who I share a community with, hasn't been responding to texts since I had asked him to clear the snow differently than he was doing it. So I initiated this conversation. Now I'm having reduced communication, so I'm feeling kind of ostracized and a bit disempowered. I wanted to share that. I have read a service books. I'm through some PTSD therapy, and I've also taken Orange offers, nonviolent communication training. And what I'm coming to you with is that I don't feel they emphasize when to back off versus when to try harder or when to let it go and not engage. I tend to always be on the edge of adjusting, trying harder, doing all the things. So to close, I feel unsafe sometimes because I'm worried that they don't want me here because maybe now I'm weird, because I've tried to communicate with them and maybe the house issues will get attended or I'll be kind of like silently pushed out of the community, which does happen. And so I'm having trouble to differentiate between his unresponsive behavior and kind of my sense of like, here, the cat wants to join. Between his unresponsive behavior and my fear of having a lack of belonging. So I'd like to resolve through communication, but that just seems to make things worse. And I don't I attend I have so much communication education, but none of it's telling me when to be stoic and less engaged.

Rick Hanson [00:42:32] All I. Wow. Yeah, there's a lot in that. And your cat's really sweet to see as well. Well, let's see here. So if I follow you. Right. What strikes me is the almost universal dynamic between people in which they're seeking an optimal distance. And for some people, given their culture, their optimal distance is 50 miles apart. You know, even when they're in the same room across the same table eating dinner. Right. Other people there, their optimal distance, you could just talk with them. They start moving closer to you. I have a friend who comes from New Jersey. He's very relational. And, you know, he always wants to get close and interact and I'm more introverted. I'm like a friendly introvert. So we're kind of managing that.

[00:43:21] And I spent my first ten years as a therapist doing unconditional positive regard with my clients and a certain kind of client. It never worked because the more the warmer I was, the more distant they were. And I thought, I just have to be warmer, and they would then get more distant because I realized that my warmth was, as I said earlier, it was like a bid for contact. And that bid for them was provocative. And it just even unconsciously, they just wanted to back away from it. Right. So so I think paying attention to that subtle dance and watching it

[00:44:00] You know, I was in a meeting earlier today with this guy on a team. We're on a Zoom call. And I've started to notice that every single time I say anything like I'm the boss of the team. All right, If I say anything that's sort of personal and vulnerable and he immediate his, he will very quickly bring up something unrelated, like Spock, letting me know that the landing craft is, you know, needs more gas or something. I don't know. And here I'm just sharing something from my heart. And he's kind of suddenly telling me about a gas gauge. That's his form. He distances. So what to do about that? I think playing the long game to win is really smart, where you just start to watch people. And if I may. I don't

know if this is true, but I think inner calm is really a good thing to cultivate, which is a tricky thing if we have a history of trauma and also by our nature, maybe some insecure attachment, insecure, anxious, anxious attachment maybe. And also, you know, if there's a history here, we're vulnerable to feeling ostracized, like, you know, dismissed an outsider. And a lot of that can be kind of us and just that. Inner churn, as normal as it is, can be read by a certain kind of stoic man as alarming or bid for contact or. And so.

[00:45:27] Not that it's your fault. I'm just being incredibly pragmatic. Right. And just think, okay, I'm going into this as best one can. Super calm, really calm, you know, calming. You know, mellow

[00:45:45] , that's an interesting thing to pay attention to. Not suppressed, but just. You see mellow and doing that inner work first. So I think about that. One last thing and then I'll, I'll put you on mute and then we'll keep going with Claire. So I'm going to ask you to unmute and I'll just finish my point here. So I find that it's often helpful to do things like making requests, like I said, in a very gentle way, kind of simple bounded request. Easygoing. I also think at the end of the day, you have rights and needs, you know, and you're weighing whether it's time to lose another battle to win the long-term war of keeping the peace. And as a guy who came up through the human potential movement, I was a total non-communicator. Then I landed in the seventies and eighties, just full-throttle communicating. I'm now swung more toward the middle where I realize a lot of people, they can't communicate. For whatever reason. They're just. They can't do it. They won't do it. And attempting to get them to do it creates issues because it's it's an aversive experience for them that you're asking them to engage. And so there's just no gain and just pain. There's only downside in. Trying to do something. So that's on the one side. On the other side. Sometimes there are certain things that are just really, really important. And they're important substantively, not because they mean that these people like you. They're important because, you know, the roof is leaking and there's black mold in your bathroom and it better be fixed like that. And so you kind of way that and just last sometimes, you know, I think a lot about relationships is about selection. Who are we selecting and subtle sometimes we can't select. We're stuck in certain situations, but often the solution to relationships problems after you make skillful efforts to improve them is to find a more capable and competent relationship partner, a more capable and competent landlord or not a shared dwelling situation. Sometimes I'm not saying what you should do, I'm just naming that sometimes that's what we have to do. Okay. What do you think about what I'm bringing up here, Erica? And then I'll keep going to Claire.

Erica [00:48:23] Yeah, I'll be brief. I really appreciate your inclusive response. I'll watch it again. I think it's lovely. I also used to be a very stoic communicator that learned to communicate at 150%. And now I'm trying to find the middle. And I really take your point. One thing that I think I need to work on out of everything you said to share is to be calm while making a request. Sometimes when I go to make a request and I feel powerless, I come up with a bit extra spice. So I need to work on that and find a middle ground with still the power to make a request. And that's a real growth edge for me.

Rick Hanson [00:49:02] So yeah, may I add one more thing that was just in my mind and you know, I'm we're just meeting each other and I'm kind of intuiting and so forth. But what I, I mean, tell me if I'm wrong, but I can just feel your goodness, you know, and you're, you're, you're goodness and your willingness to take personal responsibility, it's like yours. And you're you're owning so much responsibility for how things go. And there is a part of me intuitively that almost wanted. To relieve you of some of that sense of responsibility. You know, like there's a place for agency, like, yeah, you do what you can. But so much about what happens is not your fault. It's not your problem. It may have practical consequences you have to deal with. So you take that into account in the back and forth, the chess game, if you will, with the other people. But. Again here, too. I don't know if this is at all true, but I think sometimes what happens is that young people grow up, children grow up and they just feel. Excessively responsible, which for how things unfold in their family or with their parents. Maybe there's a depressive parent or a parent is drinking or something or, you know, they just take it on. And especially, you know, people who are socialized as girls or women really tend to be socialized around being responsible in relationships, if that's at all relevant. I don't know. And and, you know, that socialization can happen in more individual ways, too. But I just I just think there's something where we we lay that down. We realize, you know. 10,000 causes. You know, hundreds of causes upstream. My name tags on a dozen of them alone. The dozen that I put in motion, the currents in the river of reality unfolding continuously in the present. But the rest of it. How could it or whatever salty language you might use. It's just not my bad. It's not on me. It's not mine. It's not mine. I don't own that. I don't own that. I don't own that. I don't need to be Velcro for that. I don't own that roof. And that's just a deep, even profound kind of releasing. I don't know the rest of it. The rest of it was not about me. I can have compassion. You can have compassion for others, you know, for the stuff that's not about you. And you can deal with the practical impacts on you or the stuff that's on about you, but to fill in your bones. Yeah. Finish it up. Yeah.

Erica [00:51:48] You nailed me. Thank you for that.

Rick Hanson [00:51:50] Well, nailing sounds so aggressive. I get you, though. I get you that everyday. Okay. Okay, good. All right, Now, it's got no ostracizing from me. No ostracizing, none felt.

Erica [00:52:05] Only I feel very seen.

Rick Hanson [00:52:06] Oh, that's good. It. Yeah. Appropriate. Well, thank you so much. Okay, great. So I'll. I'll meet you here if it's okay. And then finish up here. Great. With Claire.

Claire [00:52:15] My question is about my husband and I. We've been married 33 years and we have very different styles of communicating. We're very different people. Opposites attract, so we're working with a therapist. And what I've learned is that I. He feels that I blame him in lots of the ways that I say things, that I just I, I blame him. And so that's irritating and frustrating for him. And he gets really angry at me. I don't mean, you know, like I've gone over, I've got the nonviolent communication work. I'm working with a

therapist, I am a counselor and a life coach. I love people. I'm very social. People tell me I'm a good communicator. But it's like apples and oranges sometimes with him. And I you know, I am very much more emotional and he's very logic. Computer programmer. Engineer. Yeah. And so I don't I'm not trying to make him angry. In fact, I feel like I'm walking on eggshells sometimes to try and not say things, you know, so that he'll get angry. Because when he gets angry, I'm really upset. So we have a therapist, and I'm not feeling like he's being terribly helpful. Yeah. Simply because I feel like I'm bringing. Okay, everything is my fault, I'm willing to admit. Okay? It must be me because my husband feels that I am the root of his anger. And therefore it's justified because. And I'm just feeling like, okay, wait a minute, I'm willing to admit that I say things wrong sometimes. I'm working on it. I'm anxious. I get frustrated with the computer, etc., etc.. But can you work on your anger? Yeah. And I'm working with a therapist and he doesn't want to work with one because he doesn't feel there's anything for him to do. That is right. If I would stop, if I would just stop and blaming, he wouldn't be angry.

Rick Hanson [00:54:24] Right.

Claire [00:54:26] How about.

Rick Hanson [00:54:27] Oh, yeah. Marriage. What were you thinking 30 years ago, anyway? Okay, so I'll be kind of succinct, just as we're coming to the end here. Yeah. So to me, you're right on this key topic territory that I spent the last third of the book talking through and the first two-thirds prepping for to lay the foundation. In other words, how do you deal on a situation like this? So I just want to kind of flag some general themes. So one is. It's really obviously useful to be very clear about whatever the facts are for yourself. Being really clear for yourself.

[00:55:11] For example, do you actually use words in a way that are blaming in which basically you're accusing him or asserting that he is responsible for something problematic? And to what extent are you? And to what extent is he way off the deep end and over-defensive and not being very nice about it? You know, to your clarifying reality, that actually can be really quite helpful if maybe you've done it already. But if you haven't done that, imagine that you're videotaping interactions and you're you're really looking carefully at assertions of his responsibility. In a critical frame. Yes or no. So just clarity about that and also clarity about what is the maximum reasonable. Legitimacy of his wants for you. What are those? Just really.

[00:56:18] And including as concrete as you can make them concretely. And then one thing you could do is decide for yourself. It's. I call it unilateral virtue. Decide for yourself for some reasonable period of time, measured in weeks, not years, you know, like a few weeks in a row where you will just quietly and it's one day at a time. It's one hour at a time. You will just quietly go to zero. On whatever you consider to be reasonable and legitimate in his request for you. Right. Just go to zero. Don't do it. It's really a kind of amazingly powerful to just go to zero. Very often the other person doesn't even notice it, and which is so annoying. But usually within a few days, they start to notice it. You just make yourself go to zero. I'm not letting him off the hook at all. I'm just saying this strategy, if you can do

it, takes discipline. And clarity is very empowering for us because now you have agency instead of trying to get him to change something. You're exercising agency over what you can change, which is you are removing any legitimate cause for complaint about you. You're removing it doesn't end your—

Claire [00:57:43] I just wondered if you could just clarify this. Go to zero for me. I'm not quite sure I'm understanding what that would look like.

Rick Hanson [00:57:52] Oh, let's suppose that. Because he's a computer person. Let's suppose that it bugs him when you get frustrated with a computer because he assumes you're criticizing him, when in fact most of the time you're just frustrated with a computer. Okay so it would mean okay. I you know, I you I Claire I'm going to go to zero expressed frustration about the computer. Day after day after day after day, I'm gonna go to zero. I'm not going to let any of that leak at all. I'm not going to whack the keyboard. I'm not going to say a word. I'm not going to go to zero. Or with regard to household stuff, you know, he's kind of messy. I'm sort of tidy. I'm making this up. I'm just not for this.

[00:58:40] Okay? I'm not going to say a critical word about his credit in the common area. I'm just going to go to zero. I'm going to not say a word about it. For example, a little metaphor here that's useful if you drag your fingernail across the back of your hand the first ten times you drag your fingernails across. It's not a deal 100 times. It's starting to get kind of pink and sensitive. Your finger approaches the thousandth time the hand wants to pull away. Even even though it's a little thing, he's become extremely sensitized to you and to certain things. The only way to it's behaviorism, 1 to 1. The only way to remove that sensitization is to go to zero for quite a while. So this eye, this stance that I talked about at some length in the book, it takes it, you know, thoughtfulness because it's counterintuitive, Right? But it basically gets out of the war with the other person. It just and you just focus on your side of the street entirely for days and even weeks in a row. I like this approach because it tends to lower the conflict temperature. It focuses on where you have control, which is over your own behavior, and it removes any reasonable basis for complaint about you. And over time it puts you on the moral high ground to now make your own requests.

Claire [01:00:07] Hmm. Hmm. Quite challenging since you mentioned the computer area, because I can be okay. I don't hit the computer. I do get frustrated with change because I'm not used to things and it freaks me out, and that freaks him out. So I can really work on that. But he's my go to person if I can. Can you? And he's really good about Dan, Can you just help me with this constant contact thing? I can't see how to get the picture from over here to over there. He's fine with that because that's a specific thing. And if he can help me, he'll help me. He likes to help. Okay, But he kind of wants to. Have more. It's kind of grandiose about it in a way, though, so I don't really like asking him. So, All right, I'll try it.

Rick Hanson [01:00:58] But here's the here's the general approach. Yeah. When you're dealing with somebody like that and you want to stay married and there's goodwill also alongside that increase the positive, what can you do? And you're in your own power to increase the positive. You know, I don't know. Watch his TV shows with him or whatever he might like to do. Being warm, being interested, you know, asking questions, being present

for the answers, whatever is realistically, authentically available. You say there's a range of what's authentically available with other people. Just go to the high end of that range of positive stuff and go to the low end of the range and ideally zero on anything negative, anything, anything, anything. And that actually, in my personal experience, if typically with a couple, if I can get them to have ten good days in a row, like if he gets ten days in a row with you in which he's had no aversive experiences from his perspective. If this means getting out of our own righteousness about how others ought to be. That'll come. That'll come later, That'll come later. But we're laying a foundation so that when you get there, you'll be much more likely to be successful at it. Yeah, and. Yeah. Just zeroed out. They have no aversive interactions with you day. There's no fingernail dragging across the back of the hand. Not thing. It's really quiet, and I go into it a lot of detail. Okay, great. Okay.

Claire [01:02:33] Good. Yeah, I guess I just. I am happy to do that on my part. I guess when we're working with a therapist. My. My last thing is just. What can I. I've tried to say this, like, couldn't he work on as you're asking me to do? I'm asking myself to do a lot. Could he ask himself to? Yeah.

Rick Hanson [01:02:56] Right, exactly. So people put that in, and I want to be really clear. I've got zero tolerance for men bullying women. In all kinds of levels and poor people, bullying in general. And I want to be really clear. I'm not at all trying to speak in the frame of, oh, just swallow it or just, you know, put up with it. No, I'm just being okay. But that's clear. I'm just being pragmatic. And I again, I'm not telling you what to do. You have to think about it. But what I'm hearing is that what you've tried to do hasn't worked well. All right. You're not headed. You're not getting divorce lawyers, but you're not getting what you want. And it's a pretty typical dynamic in which one person is much more engaged with trying to improve their relationship, typically much more psychologically minded. And the other person is kind of reluctant and like, it's all your fault. What do you do? And you know that the other person is kind of oblivious to entreaties. They won't go see a counselor together, you know, they won't get a book like Orange Book or Mine and work through it together. What do you do?

[01:04:02] You know, that's the reality, right? And so for me, one thing that's quite helpful, I think, is to zero in on being crystal clear about where you see and crystal clear on what you care about and make a plan for yourself. And one of the useful elements is this unilateral virtue approach, which then is Stephanie Veil and put in the chat. What do you do after ten days? Right? Or what do you do after, you know, a few weeks in a row and. Again, I talk about it in the book in great, you know, in serious detail, like how to actually pin people down to agreements. If you've removed if you have removed any reasonable basis for him getting angry at you. You're in a very strong position to. Make a really clear request. From the heart. And there are things that help requests go well. You know, I write about it as well. Speaking from the heart. Being vulnerable about it. He seems very prickly about blame. He seems very caught up in logic and all the rest of that. And I think it's often the case for a partner who seems distancing is that they're distancing because they're actually so affected by relationships. And a partner who rebuffs responsibility, who is very defective is because deep down, if they felt responsible for the distress of their partner,

they would feel ashamed or very upset with themselves. So there's a defensiveness against that.

[01:05:46] So it's a way to understand sometimes people who seem superficially cold and distant and denying are responsible. They're actually really sensitive and excessively responsible for the feelings of the other partner sometimes. So then maybe you get to a place where you think about a really clear request and. Maybe. Maybe the clear request happens in real time where after ten days or a couple of weeks, you know, you've been you really can enjoy the bliss of blameless mess. In that phrase, you really have been genuinely remarkable. And then you just say something. Does you make an observation like, Oh, dude, do you want this thing on the counter that is left all cluttered because because you're going to move stuff to cook and he snaps at you. And then maybe you'd be in a strong position there to look at him with kind of dignity. Slowing it down. And just saying. Well, actually, I wasn't mad at you at all, and I wasn't. Critical. There was no criticism in my mind. It was just. The question, did you want this thing? Because I'm going to move it on. Cook Here. That's all. And then what does he do with that? And especially after a little sputtering, probably, you know, like, well, honest, I didn't have a critical thought in my mind. I didn't feel mad. I love you a lot. Felt really good recently between us and, you know, like, it's fun to shake him out of his own scripts. And then at that afterward, it might be appropriate to say, you know, I mean, this is a little bit of an example where. You know, I'm just kind of being me. I'm not attacking you. I'm not criticizing you. I'm not against you. I appreciate you. I love you. So happy I'm married. And you just kind of. You get harsh with me and your tone. You know, I kind of feel sad. I kind of feel sad when you're like that. You know, whatever you do, I still love you and. Kind of wish the next time you might give a little thought to. You know, am I really being critical? You know you then you're you're much. Then you go forward from there. You know you're then in the process and I got to finish here in which we're making agreements with other people. We're finding ways to talk about things. But all of that, I just tell you and from personal experience, my you know, in my relationships, all of that, your odds are so much better. Of last of a durable change for the better. If you've started by totally cleaning up your side of the street and getting days and even weeks in which you're no longer sensitizing, you know the other person. Yeah. And it's a much stronger position. It's counterintuitive. It isn't. It might feel initially like, Oh, I'm letting him win or I'm. I'm giving up my rights. No, no, this is the strong thing to do.

Claire [01:09:08] No, no, It's a win-win.

Rick Hanson [01:09:10] Yeah. Okay, great. These questions, these interactions really revealed that there are things we can do. And so much. It's about what we do. Thought weird, indeed. What do you think? And what you say that makes the difference. And it's so helpful to know that there are things you can actually do that will make a difference. And it's important to be skillful about the things you can do that will actually make a difference for your own sake and that of other people.