

The DNA of Relationships
Book Discussion Guide

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Chapters 1 and 2 – The DNA of Relationships

“You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” (Matthew 22:37-39, NLT)

Identify the three relationships in this passage.

You are made for relationships. Relationships are part of the creation design. You are created to need relationships. What type of relationship do you have with God, others, and yourself? Be honest with yourself and really evaluate. What kind of relationship with God do you desire? What kind of relationship do you want with others?

You are made with the capacity to choose. You can’t always choose your relationships, but you can choose how you will act in those relationships. Describe in a few sentences your typical reactions when faced with difficult relationships.

You are made to take responsibility for yourself. You are responsible for your choices and actions. You cannot change the other person, but you can take responsibility for your own behavior. Have you identified a pattern in your relationships where the problem is always the other person’s fault? Have you ever felt helpless when the other person refuses to change? When you find yourself stuck in a relationship, what steps do you take in an attempt to change the other person?

You have relationships with others, with yourself, and with God. Each of those relationships is not only important, but each is also intricately related to the others. Does having a relationship with yourself strike you as odd? If so, why?

It’s never just about the other person. The problem you have with another person is often a problem you have with yourself. List two or three of your “pet peeves” when it comes to relationships.

Put yourself in the picture. When you see yourself in the same “frame” as the other person, you begin to see yourself as part of the problem as well as part of the solution. Why is it easier to point the finger at someone else rather than looking closely at yourself?

Get God’s lens for a healthy view of your relationships. Only when you see your relationships through an accurate lens—God’s lens—can you see others as he sees them and see yourself as he sees you. That lens is the basis for healthy relationships. How does your picture of God affect the way you view yourself? Do you have a hard time viewing God as your Father? How does your picture of God affect the way you view others?

All three relationships must be in balance. Each of the three relationships is so tied to the others that if one is out of balance, the other two will be out of balance, too. Which of the three relationships is out of balance in your life? Describe the symptoms that point to the imbalance.

Choice equals change. All relationships involve choice. When you choose to work toward healthy relationships, you often find things that need to change. You must choose to change, even when the change is scary. What type of choices do you make with others? Are you willing to repair any of your relationships? Make a list of the relationships that are in need of repair.

Not choosing is itself a choice. If you postpone making a choice, making a change, then you are choosing. By not doing anything, you force change to be done to you. Would you say it is time to start making some changes? List a few of the changes you would like to make.

Chapter 3 – The Dance that Destroys Relationships

“Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, ‘Where are you?’ He answered, ‘I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.’” (Genesis 3:8-10, NIV)

In the above passage, can you identify man’s common response to God? What’s the core problem?

The external problem is rarely the real problem. What we think is the problem—finances, the other person—is not the core problem. List the issues, people, or problems that you tend to blame for your stuck relationships.

The core problem is our fear. The problem in nearly every conflict is that something touched each person’s core fear. We wrestle with a core fear. To better understand your core fear, ask yourself the “So what” question. When you ask yourself that question, can you identify a common thread that touches each conflict you experience?

Each of us is involved in a Fear Dance. Triggered by a core fear, we get stuck in a destructive Fear Dance that involves our hurts, wants, fears, and reactions. How do you respond when others “push your fear buttons?”

Don’t expect the other person to be the solution. When we hurt, we want the other person to change so that we won’t feel the hurt. But the solution is not to change the other person. How effective have you been in the past at changing others?

The Fear Dance is functionally dysfunctional. Because the Fear Dance is the only dance many people know how to do, they “function” in the midst of dysfunction. They adopt coping mechanisms, which often only deepen the problem. In your own words, but from the other person’s perspective, how would they say you react or cope when faced with dysfunction?

We can break the rhythm of the Fear Dance. By identifying our core fears and by understanding that the other person isn’t the problem, we can begin to learn new dance steps to healthier relationships. What reactions do you want to work on throughout this study? What should you do immediately after your buttons are pushed?

Chapter 4 – The Power of One: Taking Personal Responsibility

“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. . . .

“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift. Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison.” (Matthew 5:21-25, NIV)

Take control of your thoughts, feelings, and actions. You are part of the picture in every relationship, in every Fear Dance. You can choose to do something. Remember that your thoughts determine your feelings and actions. Circle the thoughts or words that best describe your frustrations in relationships:

“You don’t see it, do you? You’re too negative and it’s driving me away!”

“You say you’re sorry, but you keep doing the same mean things over and over. You’ll never change!”

“It’s your fault that he talks to me like that, you’re a great example!”

“Forget it then. Go out with your friends. See if I care! Stay out all night, you like them better than me anyway.”

“I’m not talking about that anymore. It’s too hurtful.”

“I’ll just leave the house if you continue talking about this. End of discussion; it’s over.”

“That subject is not open for discussion.”

Take responsibility for your buttons. You have a choice about how you react when someone pushes your fear button. No one controls how you react. You alone do that. You

are in charge of your buttons. In two or three sentences, share a scenario where your buttons were pushed.

Don't give others the power to control your feelings. Focus on the right person. Personal responsibility means refusing to focus on what the other person has done. The only person you can change is yourself. You can stop the Fear Dance. You control whether you get stuck in the Fear Dance. It takes only one person to stop the destructive dance.

When conflict raises its ugly head, where do you place blame? On your spouse? kids? boss? job? church? money? What steps could you take to accept personal responsibility in your life?

Don't look to others to make you happy. Don't fall into the "If you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours" myth. Come to relationships with realistic expectations. List some unrealistic expectations that you have of your spouse, children, parents, coworkers, boss, etc.

Become the CEO of your life. You can't force people to meet your needs, but when you express legitimate needs to others, they can choose to step in to assist you. How would you ask someone pushing your buttons to help you during your maturity journey?

Forgiveness heals relationships. Taking personal responsibility means you confess your wrongdoing and ask for forgiveness. You also forgive others. Whom do you need to forgive? Whom do you need to ask for forgiveness?

Chapter 5 – Safety: Create a Safe Environment

Read the following passage and list two reasons why we make bad judges.

"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye." (Matthew 7:1-5, NIV)

When you create a safe environment, relationships flourish. What relationships do you not feel safe in right now? Have you created any unsafe environments?

Respect the wall. When people are threatened, they build a wall. Instead of trying to knock down the wall with a sledgehammer, respect the wall. Create a safe environment in which the other person can gradually take down the wall. Would you say that you are perceptive in identifying walls others have built in protecting themselves from you? If so, outline the steps you take in attempting to tear down the walls.

Honor others. When we honor others, we see them as valuable. We see others as God sees them. Honor creates a safe environment in which people can come together. What are some ways you can express honor to your friends and family? What words can you use?

Suspend judgment. When we express genuine interest in people rather than judge them, relationships have a better chance of growing. Would others describe you as negative, pessimistic, or judgmental? Or would they describe you as positive, optimistic, and unconditionally loving?

Value differences. When we value our differences rather than make them the focus of our conflict, we create safety. Make a list of the differences between you and someone you struggle with relationally.

Be trustworthy. When we are trustworthy with others, we dedicate ourselves to treating them as the valuable and vulnerable people that they are. When we are trustworthy with ourselves, we act in ways consistent with our own value and vulnerability. Next to each point you listed above, express the value of that difference and how it can be used to strengthen the relationship.

Chapter 6 – Self-Care: Keep Your Battery Charged

Read the following passage and identify the four ways in which Jesus grew.

“And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.” (Luke 2:52, NIV)

What words would you use to describe your physical health right now? (i.e., tired, exhausted, chipper).

Self-care is essential to all relationships. If you don’t take care of yourself, you will have nothing to give to a relationship. On a scale of 1-10, how charged are your batteries

___ Spiritually
___ Emotionally
___ Physically
___ Relationally

For any battery lower than a 10, what can you do to “recharge”?

We must love God above all and love others as we love ourselves. This great commandment indicates that we can love others only as we love ourselves. When we take care of our whole selves—spiritually, emotionally, intellectually, and physically—we set ourselves up for healthy relationships. Why does loving ourselves sound selfish?

Your emotions are your information system. Your emotions inform you about what you are feeling. What are your emotions telling you about your pace of life at this moment?

Listen to your emotions. Identify your emotions, and evaluate whether or not they are true. Identify some negative emotions you may have as a direct result of negative thinking. What type of actions are your thoughts producing at home, at work, and with family and friends?

Self-care is not selfish. Taking good care of yourself is one of the best things you can do for your family, friends, and coworkers. Is your relationship with yourself healthy? Do you value yourself as God does? Write down three ways in which you can choose to honor God by honoring yourself.

Good self-care involves receiving, attending, and giving. You need to receive from others, attend to your legitimate needs, and give to others out of your fullness. Do you take enough time out for yourself? If not, list two or three activities you can cut out to free up some time. What roadblocks might you encounter in freeing up this time? How will you handle them?

You can release your stress and find peace by

reducing expectations;
receiving everything that happens as filtered by God;
using every stressful experience as an opportunity to worship God;
resting in God, listening quietly, and asking him what he's telling you to do.

Are your thoughts true as recorded in Scripture about trials, gossip, your view of yourself, God's love, all circumstances and other things that happen to you?

Chapter 7 – Emotional Communication: Listen with the Heart

“My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.” (James 1:19, NIV)

Listen beyond the words to the feelings. People generally feel more understood, cared for, and connected when communication focuses on their emotions and feelings rather than merely on their words or thoughts. When listening, do you find yourself asking questions to gain deeper insight? Or is your focus on yourself, thinking about the next point you can make?

The real message is often the emotion behind the words. When you listen with your heart and listen for the heart of the other person, you show that you care. When we find ourselves disagreeing with someone, what steps can we take to become better listeners? Try saying statements like, “Let me see if I’m hearing you right” or “So what I hear you saying is . . .”

Allow others' emotions to touch you. People feel loved when they know you truly understand their feelings. When someone is sharing with you, how do you respond to let them know you're getting what they're saying?

Effective communication is a dynamic process of discovery that maintains energy in a relationship. When you see communication as a dynamic process of discovery rather than one of solving problems, you often solve the problems by default. Do "deep" conversations tend to wear you out? In a couple of sentences, explain your feelings during times of intense conversation.

Effective communication starts with safety. When you listen rather than judge or correct, you create a safe environment in which understanding can blossom. Which relationships of yours could benefit from your quest for understanding rather than problem-solving?

Communication is understanding, not determining who's right. Your relationships will thrive if your priority is to understand the other person.

When you find yourself in an argument, what is your goal? Is your goal to win or be right? Or is your goal unity and harmony?

Chapter 8 – Teamwork: Adopt a No-Losers Policy

“Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand.” (Philippians 2:3-4, THE MESSAGE)

What have you done this week to assure your spouse that you are on the same team? How about your coworkers? children? parents?

Adopt a no-losers policy. When one person in a relationship loses, everyone loses. A no-losers policy works toward mutual understanding and a win-win. Make a list of the most common disagreements you experience in your most cherished relationships. Write down both points of view. Then write a one-sentence explanation as to why one opinion is better than the other.

Winning is finding a solution that both people feel good about. Winning is not compromise but a true sense of win-win. Would you say that you work hard to see the issue from both sides?

In healthy relationships, everyone wins. If we see relationships as teamwork, we can commit ourselves to working on cooperative strategies. With the list you've just finished, explore options and allow for room on both sides.

Seven steps to win-win solutions:

- Step 1: Establish a no-losers policy.
- Step 2: Listen to how the other person feels.
- Step 3: Ask God for his opinion.
- Step 4: Brainstorm about a win-win solution.
- Step 5: Select a win-win solution.
- Step 6: Implement your solution.
- Step 7: Evaluate and rework your solution, if necessary.

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