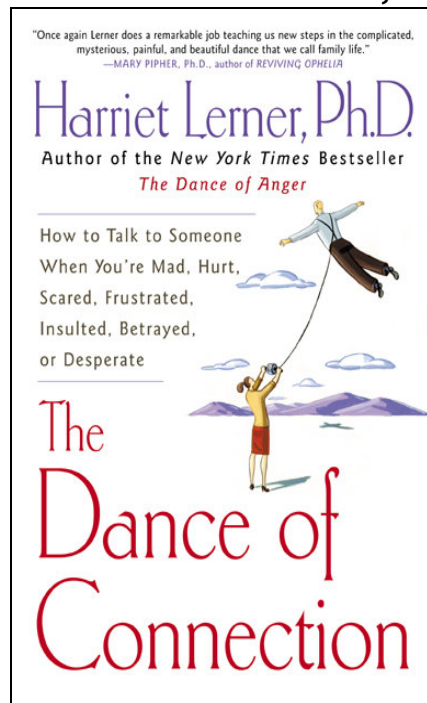


The Dance of Connection

BY HARRIET LERNER, Ph.D.



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An Introduction to the Readers Guide

THE DANCE OF CONNECTION: HOW TO TALK TO SOMEONE WHEN YOU'RE MAD, HURT, SCARED, FRUSTRATED, INSULTED, BETRAYED OR DESPERATE

In her most groundbreaking book to date, Dr. Harriet Lerner takes us beyond *The Dance of Anger* and shows us how to “find our voice” with the people in our lives who matter the most. *The Dance of Connection* tackles the most difficult problems we face with people who hurt us.

Drawing on her own experiences and those of some of the many clients that she counsels privately, Lerner illumines the most pervasive and profound relationship issues, including how to cope with feelings of rejection; how to embrace emotional vulnerability, how to take positive steps to deflect criticism or negativity from a family member or friend; and how to reinforce the positive in all of our relationships.

Lerner reveals a startling new definition of what it means to have an “authentic voice”—one that runs counter to the automatic ways we try to speak our truths. *The Dance of Connection* goes beyond “communication techniques” to provide bold and innovative “voice lessons.” Lerner tells us when to lighten up and let things go, and when we need to take specific steps to heal betrayals, inequalities, and broken connections.

With wit and wisdom, Lerner shows us how to “set things right,” how to pay attention to and trust our “inner” selves, and how to heal the most painful disconnections with others.

An Introduction to Harriet Lerner A Brief Biography

Harriet Lerner, Ph.D., is one of our nation’s most respected relationship experts. A renowned scholar on the psychology of women and family relationships, she served as a staff psychologist at the Menninger Clinic for more than two decades. Her popular trilogy, *The Dance of Anger* (1985), *The Dance of Intimacy* (1989), and *The Dance of Deception* (1993) has been published in more than 30 foreign editions, and has sold more than three million copies.

Born in Brooklyn, NY, Harriet Lerner graduated from the University of Wisconsin, where she majored in psychology and Indian studies. Lerner received an M.A. in educational psychology from Teachers' College of Columbia University and a Ph.D. in clinical psychology from the City University of New York. It was there that she met and later married Steve Lerner, also a clinical psychologist. After a postdoctoral internship at Mt. Zion Hospital in San Francisco, the couple moved to Topeka, Kansas, for a two-year postdoctoral training program at the Menninger Foundation.

Harriet Lerner and her husband reside in Lawrence, Kansas, and have two sons. In addition to her private practice, Dr. Lerner tours the country to lecture, consult, and present workshops on her findings. She has coauthored several children’s books with her sister.

Questions for Discussions

1. Harriet Lerner writes that “we all seek to control the flow of personal information about ourselves” (Chapter 4). How do you feel about being emotionally vulnerable—is it something you prefer to avoid, or something that you actively seek? Are there situations where you are more comfortable with your vulnerability than others?
2. In *The Dance of Connection*, Harriet Lerner talks about putting her family on “the hot seat,” and she describes confrontations with her parents in which she openly acknowledges differences of opinion (Chapter 6). Do you find you are able to address sources of conflict with your parents or your children? Did any of her remarks ring especially true for you?
3. Lerner argues that we rarely evaluate prospective partners “with the same objectivity and clarity” that we bring to making major purchases (Chapter 7). Can you relate to this idea? Have you ignored important differences with a partner in order to continue a relationship that was ultimately doomed?
4. Harriet Lerner talks about establishing a “bottom line”—a point from which you won’t retreat—to help a partner to realize that you are serious about a problem in your relationship (Chapter 9). Do you think this is realistic? Can you articulate your bottom line in your relationship with your partner?
5. Harriet Lerner writes that “there is no expert who knows what warms your partner’s heart the way you do.” (Chapter 10) Do you think this is true? What specific actions could you take to improve your relationship with your partner? What actions could your partner take?
6. Review Harriet Lerner’s list of ten “do’s and don’ts” in coping with criticism (Chapter 12). Do you agree with all of her suggestions? Are there any other strategies that you have learned over time that you think belong on her list?
7. In the anecdote about Joan and Corrine, Lerner describes a friendship that—literally—falls apart. Have you experienced any total breakdown of communication? How did you deal with it? Did your relationship recover? Were you able to get closure on the relationship?
8. Were there any individuals in *The Dance of Connection* whose stories you found especially poignant or relevant to your life, or whose experiences spoke to you? Who were they? What about their experiences did you find compelling?

A Conversation with Dr. Harriet Lerner

Q. You draw on a number of valuable stories about your family in *The Dance of Connection*. Was it difficult for you to share these personal accounts with your readers? Were members of your family concerned about your using their stories as raw material for your book?

A. Sharing personal stories is what I do best, and what I most love to do. It is easy for me, except for my concern about the feelings of others. Most people do not like to be written about, and I don't blame them. How dreadful to have a writer in the family!

I run the manuscript by friends and family members who appear in my books, and I don't include anything personal without permission. My father died before I began writing this book. He appears prominently and I was glad to not have to run the manuscript by him.

Q. In *The Dance of Connection*, you describe an “experiment” you conducted, in which you regularly commented on specific qualities you admired in your husband, Steve, to emphasize the positive aspects of your relationship. Have any of your readers or clients made use of this technique? Do you continue to practice it?

A. Actually, I do continue to make an effort to notice and comment on the positive with Steve, because commenting on the negative comes automatically to me. I don't think of it as a "technique" but rather as a matter of kindness and balance

and truth. Readers have commented that this chapter ("Warming Things Up") is one of the most useful to them—which surprises me.

Q. You write: "Listening is an essential part of having [a] voice." Do you find that many of the problems people have in connecting with their loved ones have to do with a refusal to listen? How important a role does listening play in emotional connection?

A. Most people don't "refuse" to listen to people they love, since *refusal* implies an active intention to shut the other person out. Most of us truly want to listen. But when we are criticized or attacked—or when we are anxious or intense—we automatically become defensive. We listen for the distortions, inaccuracies, and exaggerations (which will inevitably be there), rather than listening *only* to understand, and saving our defense for a future conversation.

Another part of listening is learning to ask questions about difficult subjects, to extend an invitation to the people we care about to tell us their stories when they are ready, and to have the courage to ask, "Is there more you haven't told me?"

Learning to listen differently plays a crucial role in deepening our connections. To listen with an open heart in order to understand the other person requires intention, commitment and practice. It's a spiritual exercise, in the truest sense of the word.

Q. How would you advise readers who feel that their relationships are beyond repair? Are there any simple guidelines you would encourage them to follow as they struggle to reclaim lost friends, family members, and lovers?

A. Sometimes we need to let go of a relationship and move on. My college friend Ralph tacked a poster on his kitchen wall that said: **YOU'VE GOT TO LEARN TO LEAVE THE TABLE/WHEN LOVE'S NO LONGER BEING SERVED.**

Sometimes what we need to do is as simple—and as difficult as that. But sometimes, we are cut off from an important family member and the challenge is to respect the need for distance—but *not* leave the table. Distance and cutoffs don't imply a lack of feeling, as we commonly assume. Rather they speak to an intensity of emotion that makes contact too difficult.

There are no simple guidelines for knowing when to let go and when to hang in, because this is not a simple matter. I spell out the "whys" and the "how-tos" in the book, but there are no six easy steps.

Q. In your book, you talk about the "Velcro" stage of intimacy in a relationship—when partners view each other through rose-colored glasses and tend to ignore each other's important differences. How commonly does this occur, in your experience? How do you advise readers and clients who can't seem to get past this stage in relationships, or whose relationships founder when the true selves of both partners emerge?

A. Steamy starts are compelling but our emotions can block our objectivity and blur our capacity for clear thinking and clear speaking. If we're too eager for a relationship to work, we will overlook and excuse differences, or we will be taken by the novelty and find differences exciting or appealing. Or we may resist getting differences out in the open, looking them straight in the eye and having a good fight when necessary.

Only time and authentic conversation (talking, listening, observing, questioning and thinking) get us past this Velcro stage. We need to use a clear, strong voice to bring our knowledge of the relationship into sharper focus, set limits and boundaries, define differences, and test out what's possible, rather than comfort ourselves with fantasies about how our partner might change in the future. We need to speak up, insist on fair treatment and respect, and observe the other person with his or her friends and family—and with our friends and family—since you can't learn much about a relationship if you insulate it from other important relationships. We need to know what we can live with (he's not a dog person) and what we can't (he lies)—and never count on the power of our love or nagging to create what isn't there to begin with.

Q. In the writing of *The Dance of Connection*, were you surprised by any of the truths you uncovered? Was any part of the book especially challenging for you?

A. When you write a book you don't just say what you think. More accurately, you discover and enlarge what you think. Especially challenging for me was writing the chapter on apologies—good apologies, bad apologies, and the people who can't apologize at all. I had the opportunity to clarify—for myself and my readers—why the people who harm us the most, are the least able to apologize and be accountable.

Another huge challenge for me was helping readers to clarify a bottom line position, especially in a relationship like marriage where a lot is at stake and it may feel impossible to make oneself heard. I also gained a deeper appreciation of the fact that having a voice is not just a women's issue. It's an equal opportunity employer.