

## Chapter 6

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# *P*ersonal Freedom



*What I am is good enough—  
if I would only be it openly.*

- Carl Rogers

The value system of a relationship regulates the degree to which a relationship is open and equal or closed and oppressive. An important value that regulates the degree of openness in a relationship is personal freedom. As a part of your value system, personal freedom is something you create for yourself and honor for your partner. Personal freedom's significance, as an element of your value system, is how it impacts the *emotional climate* of the relationship.

Every relationship has an emotional climate. The emotional climate of a relationship emerges from each person's set of conditions for or prevailing attitudes about the different aspects of their relationships. The blending of these attitudes make up the emotional climate.

The emotional climate is to a relationship what sunshine, rain, sleet, or snow are to the weather. The relationship's emotional climate exists within a continuum. The emotional climate can be light and free or heavy and oppressive. Joy, harmony, and peace on one end of the continuum, or sorrow, conflict, and alienation on the other end of the continuum are the two endpoints of the emotional climate.

I know a man who is a practicing alcoholic. He drinks to excess almost every night. He was married for over twenty years before his wife left him. Anyone who knew the two, understood how complex the situation was. By day, the husband was a saint. He cared for his wife. By night, he became a tyrant.

His mood swings were so severe—no one outside this couple's *secret* group understood. When he drank, he acted very abusive. When he was sober, he genuinely felt bad for what he had done.

By day he was a *saint* and by night he became *Satan*. Someone close to the situation referred to him as Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde.

In his mind, he was warm, carefree, sometimes apologetic. Without a doubt, he lived in denial. His sense of shame was so great, he often walked on eggshells waiting for the other shoe to drop. At night, he became abusive, tyrannical, and oppressive. Both he and his wife lived in a relationship hidden from the outside world.

She became withdrawn, unable to defend herself from the change in his demeanor. Longing for a relationship of equality, balance, and freedom, she was resigned to her fate—an empty life wherein her emotional needs went unfulfilled.

The oppressive emotional climate stifled her. The combination of confusion and fear paralyzed her will to act. She was unable to change, unable to grow, unable to escape the prison of cautious servitude. It took years to find a solution. In the end, the only answer was to separate.

However, through her divorce, this woman finally discovered what she had forfeited for so long in her marriage for all of those years. She had forfeited her personal freedom.

For she discovered that personal freedom grew from an emotional climate of approval and acceptance. An emotional climate in which she gives herself permission to be unrestricted. And she has learned to accept that there is much about her partner that she cannot, nor should she try to, change.

She learned not only that personal freedom emerges out of approval and acceptance, she learned that personal freedom is established or restricted from two fundamental choices. The first choice is for her sake. The second choice is for her partner's sake.

Let's examine what those two choices might be. The first choice is between you choosing to act assertively or abdicate your personal power. The second choice is between you honoring your partner's dignity and esteem or narrowing who your partner is able to comfortably be in your relationship.

Consider a relationship shaped by an oppressive emotional climate for many years. Through judgementalness, unresolved conflict, and the unquenchable need to control another person, each person has stripped their partner of their personal freedom. The relationship has been reduced to one of endurance rather than enjoyment.

For instance, he pushes her to *look pretty* and criticizes her ability to keep a neat house. She wants to achieve more out of her life, yet feels limited by his lack of approval. She reacts to his restrictions by constantly accusing him of having affairs.

When asked, she says, "He spends his time looking at other women."

Both want the freedom to be who they are, but the walls, created by years of bitterness and restrictions, do not fall easily.

The desire for freedom is universal. One of the best signs I ever saw was on the office wall of a shipping dock. It was a room where many people came to get something done, and the manager wanted everyone to know that manipulation was off limits. The sign read, "Thanks for your suggestion, but remember: Helpfulness is THE SUNNY SIDE OF CONTROL."

Consider how the addition of freedom into any relationship impacts the relationship. We experience a sense of acceptance when our partner allows us to be who we

are. The presence of personal freedom creates an atmosphere of caring.

But freedom is not an all-or-nothing element of a relationship. Most relationships do not have *complete freedom*, neither do they have *no freedom at all*. In reality, they have a range with some freedom and some restriction. For personal freedom, the range runs from *no personal freedom*, which produces an entwined or enmeshed relationship, to *over-independence* at the other end of the spectrum, where people are detached and very separate. Between those two extremes, the many different degrees of personal freedom exist.

The range of personal freedom which exists in a relationship establishes the emotional climate. If we create an emotional climate which makes us comfortable, we prosper in all of our relationships. Otherwise, an uncomfortable emotional climate stifles and thwarts our attempts to grow and connect with our partners.

We all yearn to grow and become who we are meant to be. So we must take great care to allow our partner to be who they are. We certainly know all the ways we can pressure our partner into being who we would want them to be. But inevitably, that will backfire on us.

There's no question, if we create an emotional climate that does not support our partner freely expressing who they are, then we force our partner to hide important pieces of who they are. And when we deny our partner the safety of being who they are, we are actually asking our partner to live their life as a lie.

## Bridge Builder's Tip



*If you place demands on a person to change, can you see how you will require that person to lie to you?*

It's simple. In any relationship, we need to have a sense of personal freedom, permission to freely express who we are. Without it, we feel as if our options are limited. We feel powerless. Can you imagine how difficult it would be to *act naturally* if we had no freedom?

I'm reminded of the time a good friend of mine wanted me to meet her *special friend*. She met a man she really liked, and now she wanted me to meet him as well.

"Before you see him," she said, "I just want you to know a few things. He's very good-looking, but whatever you do, don't mention his hair. He is very sensitive about losing it. And don't make fun of the way he talks. He's from the South and he has an accent. Oh, and his dog died recently, so don't bring that up."

She thought for a minute and then looked up. "He just finished a bad divorce, so do not mention that, either."

Eventually, I asked her what I *could* say and just what she expected from me. My friend said, "You know Steve, just be yourself."

Well, by the time we met, I was anything but relaxed. Because I felt so concerned about honoring all the restrictions, I hardly said anything at all!

In any relationship, the presence of mutual freedom is important. Personal freedom can be easy to restrict, but difficult to encourage. Consider the word *should*. At

times, that word can be terribly confining.

Generally, when someone says *you should...* they are announcing the end of your ability to act. A statement like, "You should stop wearing loud ties with that suit," never seems to please us.

What the speaker really means is *dress my way, not your way*. Imagine the sense of freedom lost when one friend turns to the other and says, "You should really ask before you do that again." Translation: *Act the way I tell you*.

This loss of personal freedom restricts us and creates a *cage* or *box* that leaves us feeling confined with our partner. When someone begins to box us in by using a word like *should*, we quickly realize it is a challenge to our personal freedom. We are being told how to think, act, or do something.

And the impact on any relationship from being told how to think, act, and feel is obvious. Without personal freedom, mutual caring and acceptance is impossible.

I was caught in this very trap once when I was in college. I had a part time job that involved a lot of paperwork and filing. My boss constantly told me I was there to *do* things a certain way.

This was a way of life for my boss, not just his management style. My boss constantly told me how to dress, how to file, how to spend my time. It went beyond the job. My boss told me what restaurants to go to if I said I was hungry. He even told me what foods I should eat. My silence only made things worse.

Instructions in everything were given to me. Well, I eventually could not take the stifling sense of control any longer. One day I went in to quit. I sat there and explained my unhappiness with the job and a strange thing happened. The boss who had been such a tyrant, slumped

behind the desk and said, “Oh no, not another one. You are the fourth young person we’ve lost this summer.”

My boss thought for a minute and said, “No one seems to want to stay, I just don’t get it.”

I explained myself as best I could, speaking clearly about how it felt for me to have him tell me how to do everything. Eventually, we resolved things. My boss restricted my freedom less and I tried not to quit.

We all know exactly how it feels to lose our freedom to express, through our actions and words, who we are. Many of us have grown up in households filled with a constant barrage of instructions and restrictions. When they are out of balance, instructions and restrictions compromise our personal freedom. For most of us, our reaction to such a sense of restriction is little more than a feeling of unwillingness to share ourselves. No one wants to be open or vulnerable to a tyrant in those situations. And thus, we shut down as well as the relationships we are in.

So then, if that’s the case, how do we create the fragile balance between being who we are and compromising who we are for the betterment of the relationship? It’s really very simple. It goes on all the time, whether we are aware of it or not.

Between two people, there is always an agreement. An agreement that allows freedom and encourages responsibility. When the agreement works well, it goes something like this.

“I will honor your freedom to be yourself and you will honor my need to take responsibility for myself.” It is this kind of a contract that enables each side to enjoy an equal vote.

## Bridge Builder’s Toolbox

Now remember the fundamental importance of personal freedom. The well-being of a relationship is directly linked to how open or closed the relationship is. And the presence of personal freedom determines the degree of openness in any relationship.

Open relationships are dynamic and ever-growing. They crackle with the aliveness and vitality two people can share with one another. The degree of openness will determine the long-term viability of any long-term relationship.

On the other hand, closed relationships have little room to grow—each partner dies a thousand deaths as the relationship cracks from the brittleness created by the rigid nature of the relationship.

In an open relationship, people are allowed to be themselves. Their partner does not constantly attempt to shape who they are. And problems in an open relationship are viewed as opportunities to be creative, not strangleholds that stifle each partner.

A dear friend of mine was married for fifteen years. Disinterest between she and her husband became the weed that choked the relationship. She stopped caring and gained fifty pounds. Her life had become stale, lethargic, and tedious. He was reduced to a couch potato.

Finally, after years of apathy and disinterest, they filed for and received a divorce.

In the midst of what seemed to be a hopeless situation, an odd thing happened. My friend woke up from the suspended animation her life had become.

Today, she’s in a relationship that is rewarding, open, and filled with communication. Feelings are not ignored.

Openness between her and her new partner were the spark for many of the changes.

When I asked her about the changes, she said, “Dead relationships are populated by emotionally dead people. Spiritually and emotionally, I died.

Now, I am as happy as I can possibly be. What more could I want?”

And how did my friend create a life full of enriching relationships? How did she transform her relationships from imprisoning to empowering? Personal freedom is the short answer.

Think of it this way. In certain respects, relationship bridges are similar to a water hose. Picture a water hose stretched out on the lawn. As long as it’s stretched out and untangled, water will be able to move freely through the hose.

Now, picture that same water hose all knotted up. How easily and how much water will be able to flow through the hose under those conditions?

Much like the knots in a water hose, relationship bridges have potential obstacles which will inhibit the flow of the relationship. For instance, unresolved conflict, smoldering resentments, or unspoken fears are but a few examples of obstacles that close off the flow in any relationship. Judgementalness, controlling behavior, irresponsible behavior are other examples of obstacles that limits one’s ability to be free in a relationship.

For my friend, she was able to rewrite with her new partner, the foundation upon which all of our relationships are built. I refer to this foundation as the *relationship contract*.

## Bridge Builder’s Tip



*All relationship bridges are built by following a specific recipe. This recipe is called the relationship contract.*

That’s right! All relationships have a contract. This contract consists of all the many spoken and unspoken expectations, needs, hopes, demands, fears, and fantasies we uphold.

This contract is the basis from which all of our relationships are constructed. In fact, you can think of this relationship contract as a recipe for the on-going development of the relationship.

The relationship contract is to a relationship what a recipe is to baking a cake. When you bake a cake, you follow a recipe. The recipe prescribes specific ingredients to use. The same is true of the relationship contract. These ingredients, as variables, create or diminish the presence of personal freedom. Ultimately, these ingredients create the emotional climate.

You may be wondering how this contract is created! You create it the same way you create a legal contract, by negotiation. But the negotiations of the relationship contract are much more complex than a legal document. Basically, there are three ways you negotiate a relationship contract:

*ONE* - The first style of negotiation is verbalized two-way mutual negotiations.

*TWO* - The second way is through unspoken one-way-in-your-head negotiations.

*THREE* - The third way you negotiate the relationship contract is through acted-out behaviors in the relationship, that is, domination, aggression, submission, passivity, respect, and equality.

I'll give you an example of what I mean by the three different styles of negotiation. I have a friend who has lived with his girlfriend for years. One night, he went to bed early. As he was turning the covers of the bed down, a note fell off her pillow. The note had a man's name and phone number written on it. He thought about it for a while and decided to bring it up when his girlfriend got to bed. They talked about it (I'll tell you who the man in the note was in a minute). And the discussion took five minutes. That's an example of verbalized two-way mutual negotiations. They *talked* about it.

Now imagine the same story, only this time, think about what would have happened if he decided not to discuss the note. In his mind, he might have thought that silence was an easier choice. What if, he reasoned, I simply take the kinder, softer way and just fall asleep and say nothing. But he would wonder for a long time who this man was. Every time his partner answered the telephone, he would want to know if this were the man in the note.

He might even think about all of the conflict involved in discussing the problem. He might say to himself, what if she justifies her position to me or argues the point for a long time? In his mind, that would just make matters worse.

By not talking about the note, he limits the situation to the second kind of unspoken, one-way-in-your-head negotiation. The result is obvious.

Finally, imagine what would happen if he saw the note,

and decided it was a bad thing (say for example, a new lover). In this example, he does not talk about it, and doesn't really think or feel anything about the situation. He simply acts out the feelings he has about the situation. The next morning he refuses to kiss his girlfriend good-bye when she leaves for work. He misses their next dinner date, and doesn't call during the day in order to punish her because this situation is obviously her fault.

That would be an example of behaviors acted out in the relationship. It is not an effective choice.

As it turned out, the note he found simply referred to a new dentist for his girlfriend.

Remember our basic premises. We are talking about personal freedom and its impact upon the emotional climate of the relationship. Personal freedom is a necessary value to the creation of open and equal relationship bridges. The openness of a relationship is directly proportionate to the amount of personal freedom present. The ingredients necessary for personal freedom to grow are equality, acceptance, self-permission, and mutual respect.

The relationship contract establishes the emotional climate necessary for personal freedom to grow and remain present. This relationship contract is the recipe that prescribes the specific ingredients I just mentioned, which make-up the overall emotional climate of any relationship.

In a relationship bridge, the quality and degree of personal freedom you cultivate will intensely affect the emotional climate of the relationship. Each partner should try to be aware of how important this aspect of their quality of life is. Each should try diligently to negotiate well to preserve it. One of the best ways to negotiate is to remember how much each is impacted either positively or

negatively by the freedom of their relationship.

Freedom means allowing each member of the relationship to be unrestricted.

It can be elusive. But the struggle for freedom has great rewards.

For you and me, the best way to define personal freedom is to view it as a choice. A choice for your sake, and a choice for your partner's sake. It involves acting assertively, proactively, convincingly, and credibly. And most importantly, it considers the honor of your partner's dignity, legitimacy, and esteem.