

Selecting a Persistent Pattern of Conflict in a Most Significant Relationship

The place to start the search for a new way of being is at the places where *the old ways of being aren't working for us*. Those are the places where we have the most energy for transformation.

- But when we are in highly conflicted relationships there may be *many aspects* of our lives where we are in conflict.
- When we struggle with depression, we may be *unable to find just one thing* to address because there is so little that feels satisfying in our lives.
- And when life is good, there may be *no place* that we feel an edge.

We need to find one thing to address, and only one thing.

To some degree it doesn't matter what we choose to work on. Everything is connected and any starting point can be a trailhead for deep work. But transformation is hard work so we want to start in the place that will lead to the greatest results. We want to find *a very specific repeating pattern* around something that is profoundly important to us. We start with the relationships we have with those who matter the most.

Identify your five most significant relationships

We normally think of a relationship as something we construct with another human person. To the degree that your list includes specific persons whose name you know you will be in a better position to address the issues that arise. But sometimes we have relationships with a category of person, like, those drivers of cars I share the road with, or my customers, or people who originate robo-calls.

Significance in a relationship is a function of three qualities: time spent together, intensity of emotion, and impact the other has on us.

Who do you spend the most time with?

Make a list of the five people you spend the most time with. In a typical week, who do you spend time with?

Who do you have the strongest feelings about?

Which five relationships evoke the strongest emotions? Remember to include feelings both positive and negative. We are not only looking for highly conflicted relationships. We have conflicts in all relationships and those in which we are able to resolve conflict easily and well can teach us a lot about how we manage conflict.

Whose choices have the biggest impact on you?

Which five relationships impact your life the most? Who has power over you? Everyone. But not everyone has the same amount of power. You may welcome their influence or be rankled by it. No matter. Who has the most power in relation to you? We may think of infants as being powerless, until we live with one. You may not think of their choices as being deliberate. No matter. Focus on the effect of the other's behavior on you.

You now have three lists of five relationships each. You may have fifteen names but it is unlikely that these three lists don't have some repeaters. Go over the three lists and highlight the five that seem to be the most significant but be sure you have at least the top relationship from each list. The person you spend the most time with might be the same person you have the strongest feelings about and whose choices have the biggest impact on you. But be sure the top relationship on each list is in your five.

Some people have trouble getting to five. You may find that the significance gap between the top three and the rest of the field is really big. Stretch yourself. Find five for the next part of this exercise.

Persistent Patterns of Conflict

All relationships have conflict. In some relationships we are so good at resolving conflict that we hardly notice them. In others they appear so intractable that we assume they cannot be resolved. We can learn from both.

In each of your five most significant relationships make a list of the persistent patterns of conflict that arise.

Because we tend to minimize our awareness of conflict, this may take some time and some effort to identify. Remember, a conflict is simply a difference we don't like. This may be the irritation that other drivers don't use their blinkers or it may be the awareness that we forgot to turn ours off and we are anxious that we are irritating others. Just notice whatever bothers you. Look for the patterns. Try to find five.

Once you have a few patterns identified in each significant relationship, see if you notice any common features between them. That is, do you seem to have the same conflict in several different relationships. Often this is hard to see on our own so you may want to share the list with others and see what they see. If you have similar conflicts in multiple relationships then this would be a good one to work one. Addressing it in one relationship will give you insight into how to address it in others.

Pick one persistent pattern of conflict in one significant relationship

I had a client who was very resistant to picking one conflict to work on. Even as he was honing in on one he would start to drift off to focus on another. I finally said we would only look at his relationship with his girlfriend, but even then there were multiple issues vying for his attention. We finally managed to settle on the fact that he would get really irritated whenever he realized that she understood a situation differently than he did.

This helped us see the scope of the problem. Everyone always sees things differently than we do. We each have a unique perspective. But as global as this one thing is, it helped him see that the problem was his expectation that others would see from his perspective.

I cannot stress too much how essential it is for this process to select a single thing to work on. The more we can narrow the field the greater is the clarity we will see with. What is that thing that happens again and again in a relationship that is important to you that you find most troublesome?

Now, write that down in your journal so you can refer to it.