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two decades,  
the most respected  
handbook  
on relationships  
between equals.*

**THIRD EDITION**



# HOW TO BE A COUPLE AND STILL BE FREE

*Tina B. Tessina, Ph.D.  
Riley K. Smith, M.A.*

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How to  
Be a Couple  
and  
Still Be Free  
Third Edition



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Still Be Free  
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*By*

*Tina Tessina, Ph.D.*

*Riley K. Smith, M.A.*



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*We dedicate this book  
to Amanda Halley Bialack, age 15,  
who is rapidly growing into a young lady with  
relationships of her own.*



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The tremendous resource of writers that is ASJA: someone there always has the answer.

My recharging places: Beverly's Vintage Tea Leaf and Cindy's The Coffee Cup.

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***For Riley K. Smith:***

I started my adult life believing that, because I alone am responsible for my life, I had to do my life alone.

Developing and working with the material in this book was a part of my learning that, although I'm responsible, I don't have to do it alone.

I want to acknowledge with love and appreciation a few of the key members of the team that created *How to Be a Couple and Still Be Free*:

Tina Tessina, my longtime friend and colleague, who shared in the creation of this material and who patiently taught me a new way to write.

Rhoda Pregerson, who has practiced being Free Partners with me since 1985.

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# Why Be a Couple and Free?

Why did you pick up this book? Are you intrigued to think it is possible to be a couple and still be free?

How can you be true to yourself and true to your partner at the same time? If you honor yourself, will your partner leave? Can you and your partner have a loving, committed relationship without compromising or without each of you giving up some of who you are and what you need? Is commitment a type of bondage? Isn't it selfish to insist on having what you want? Doesn't true love mean that you joyfully give everything to your beloved? Does having freedom mean having affairs?

You are not alone in your questioning. Most of the people who come to us for help with their intimate relationships are struggling with questions such as these. If you are competing to find satisfaction in your intimate relationships (as so many couples we have worked with do), you may be struggling with your partner while searching for a way to be happy together.

- \* You may have experienced a sequence of relationships that were destructive and didn't work.
- \* You may be with someone new and fear you will repeat old, painful patterns.

- \* You may have a basically good relationship with some specific problems (such as financial struggles, disagreements about parenting, sex, intimacy, housework or time schedules) for which you can't find a satisfactory solution.
- \* You may fight all the time and are unable to resolve even minor family problems or conflicts without a painful and exasperating struggle, which leaves one or both of you feeling hurt, angry, resentful, deprived, cheated, or frustrated.

These are common couple problems. Sustaining a long-term intimate relationship with a partner is difficult. If you have had experiences such as these, you may believe that you have to choose between taking a stand for yourself and having a committed relationship, because you can't have both at the same time.

We have found that you most certainly can have both. Not only can you have both, but when you feel free to speak up and say what you want, confident that you will be heard and confident that your partner will work with you to find a solution, the love will flow more easily between you. That is the purpose of this book.

## **This New Expanded Edition**

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In 1980, when *How to Be a Couple and Still Be Free* was first published, it introduced a radical concept: cooperation instead of compromise or competition. When one partner compromises needs on behalf of the other, it invariably leads to a troubled relationship. One partner becomes a resentful caretaker, while the other feels oppressed and belittled. One partner will be alert to the moods of the other—often walking on eggshells not to upset the other. One will threaten to leave in order to get his or her way. One wants more together time and the other wants more space, and neither is satisfied with the compromise. The compromises and self-abandonment demonstrated here lead to resentment, hurt, and power struggles.

When partners struggle, the flow of love between them can be blocked—even when they truly love one another. On the other hand, partners who have the tools to negotiate and who are committed to

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equality and mutual satisfaction are far more likely to create the love and partnership they deeply treasure.

In the more than 20 years since the book was first published, we have developed many tools and techniques couples can use to create cooperation and freedom. We have expanded this edition to include many step-by-step instructions and guidelines, and we've added the Negotiation Tree, a tool that can help you turn any struggle into a cooperative problem-solving session. Through the addition of these components, we have created a manual you can use to create or restructure your current partnership into a Free Couple Relationship.

## Couples and Freedom

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Because we aren't talking about having affairs or "playing the field" when we use the word "freedom," and we aren't thinking of any lack of commitment to each other when we say "couple," it is necessary to define both terms. Because these are the terms that attracted you to this book, we invite you to check our definitions against your own. Knowing what they mean to you will better enable you to create the kind of relationship that fits exactly who you are.

### What We Mean by "Couple"

As a *Newsweek* special report put it: "The American family does not exist. Rather, we are creating many American families, of diverse styles and shapes. In unprecedented numbers, our families are unlike. We have fathers working while mothers keep house; fathers and mothers both working away from home; single parents; second marriages bringing children together from unrelated backgrounds; childless couples; unmarried couples, with and without children; Gay and Lesbian parents. We are living through a period of historic change in American family life." The trouble is that many relationship books offer patterns and role models based on this nonexistent "American family" and do not adequately consider these other types of relationships, or they do not recognize the changes that have taken place.

*How to Be a Couple and Still Be Free* is designed to help you create a relationship that is suitable for you, whether your relationship is gay or

straight; traditionally monogamous; or nontraditional, such as an open relationship; a group marriage; a bi-coastal, two-career relationship; or a committed, living-separately relationship.

More people are choosing not to marry, or not to stay married, today. Instead, they are redefining couple relationships in many ways. There are many possible variations of satisfying relationships, and this book is about creating the kind of relationship that satisfies you *and* your partner, whether you are married or not. Therefore, we offer a broad definition of “couple” so that you and your partner can use the tools here to develop your own mutually satisfying definition, which is specific to your individual relationship.

We define a couple as two people who are committed to being with each other more intensely and/or more often than with others. This usually implies a degree of love and intimate contact. It could be a dating relationship, living together, married, or not married. It could be a deep, intimate, and sexual commitment, sexually exclusive or not. Our intent is to help you and your partner develop a relationship that is mutually satisfying by your own, unique, and specific definition. With specific, step-by-step techniques and guidelines, this book will teach you the negotiation and communication tools and skills you can use to create a relationship that ensures that both of you get what you want. In short, a relationship that is secure and committed, but within which you both feel free.

### What We Mean by “Freedom”

By its very nature, freedom is defined differently by each individual. Each person has individual needs for closeness and personal space, as well as other needs to feel nurtured, understood, and autonomous within a relationship. Individual people define their freedom in very different ways: Some want the freedom to be close and comforted, others want the freedom to be autonomous and unfettered.

Understanding these components of freedom requires self-knowledge. To know what you need, you must focus on your self, see yourself as clearly as possible and accept what you find there. Knowing what you want and what you feel are skills that are essential to creating a mutually satisfying intimate relationship.

In this book, you'll find specific exercises designed to help you clarify what you want and feel, to create a personal definition of freedom, and to communicate that to your partner. By learning and using these techniques, you'll create a mutual understanding and cooperation in helping each other get exactly what you want.

Whether your reasons for wanting to be a couple are romantic or pragmatic, social or cultural, based on passion or a need to create a healthier family than you grew up in, a desire to have children, simple loneliness, or a spiritual or "soul mate" connection, it is important to you, and we want to help you create it as you see it.

## **The Desire for Intimacy**

Most couples are drawn to enter relationships because of the possibility of intimacy. Intimacy, or lack of it, is also what creates most of the struggle in relationships. Creating a satisfying couple relationship requires meeting the individual intimacy needs of each partner.

You need intimacy just as you need food and shelter. Just as with the other basic needs, no one needs intimacy all the time, but some people need more than others. It is possible to be intimate without being a couple; however, the development of emotional closeness over time combined with the easy availability of physical closeness, make couple relationships the ideal opportunity for intimate contact.

Building intimacy is easier in a relationship because it takes less energy and decision-making to get together. Friends, family, and culture support and endorse your togetherness. When things go well, the teamwork of partnership (common goals, successfully solving daily problems, and doing chores together) creates a feeling of mutuality and appreciation that enhances your closeness. As a couple, you are freed from the search for intimacy, so you can focus on other areas of your lives.

In a healthy relationship, intimacy grows with time. Two people who have been together for 20 years can have a deeper connection than they did when they were only dating for three months. Time together doesn't guarantee intimacy, but it does create an opportunity for intimacy to grow. It takes time to know and trust each other. As trust builds, you open yourselves. Over the months (or years), you reveal yourselves.

If you nurture your closeness through the years of each partner's personal growth and changes, you will know more about each other than anyone else, and your contact will grow deep.

Once you learn the communication and problem-solving skills in this book, you'll know how to create the kind of teamwork and mutual benefit that supports the growth of intimacy and satisfaction: a relationship of equal partnership and autonomous cooperation.

## Cooperative Problem Solving

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Most people don't believe that it is possible for a couple to be so adept at solving problems together that both of them are fully satisfied. The myth is that you must choose between intimacy and freedom—that is, you can have what you want, or you can be close. Couple relationships are seen as an extension of other types of competition. Because this competitive attitude is so ingrained in each of us, it usually takes a shift in belief and a lot of practice to learn how to stop fighting, arguing, and insisting you are right; or to stop being afraid you won't get what you want.

## The Free Couple

Free Couples embody five qualities: 1) love easily expressed, 2) mutual respect, 3) a sense of equal power in the relationship, 4) the willingness and ability to express desires, needs, satisfactions, and 5) the willingness and ability to resolve conflicts cooperatively—without power plays, manipulation, and unsatisfying compromises.

*How to Be a Couple and Still Be Free* will teach you to work together to create whatever kind of relationship you want, free from the restrictive patterns of your parents, your past experience, and social pressures.

When you and your partner know how to cooperate to solve problems and resolve differences, you can freely express your desires, needs, and satisfactions. You can share your worries and your joy without fear of being manipulated by them. You both feel equally empowered. You can say what you want, knowing you will work together to make it happen. When you experience and express mutual respect, love flows more easily between you. You are equal partners. Equal. Partners. You understand

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how to cooperate to create a truly satisfying life as two free individuals working together. You can be a couple and still be free.

### Emphasizing Function Rather Than Dysfunction

Many books have been written about relationship problems. These books place an emphasis on dysfunctional, codependent relationships; compulsive or obsessive love; domestic violence and sexual molestation. They focus on the emotional and psychological (and often physical) damage these relationships cause, how to recognize them, and how to free yourself from them. Simply recognizing, describing, and suggesting ways to end such negative relationship dynamics is an enormous task.

All of these books focus on unsatisfying or unhealthy relationship patterns and how to recognize and overcome them. Little is said about how to create and sustain a healthy, functional, non-codependent relationship. You may be very familiar with the frustration of being told how not to create an unhealthy relationship, but it may never be clear what you should do instead.

So, if you're asking, "What is a healthy, functional relationship and how do we get one?" *How to Be a Couple and Still Be Free* is designed to answer your questions and teach you (either individually or together with your partner) how to create and sustain a fully functioning partnership between equals.

*How to Be a Couple and Still Be Free* is a manual that provides intimate partners with a proven, step-by-step guide for working together as a team. Together, you can overcome negative relationship patterns and master the positive new skills you'll need to know to create a successful, satisfying, and sustainable relationship that fulfills both your individual needs. The exercises in this book have been used and recommended by many therapists to help couples in therapy.

*How to Be a Couple and Still Be Free* is a guideline for transforming an unsatisfying relationship into a loving, sustainable, healthy partnership between equals who support each other and work together cooperatively to ensure that each partner gets what he or she wants. We call this equal, mutually supportive partnership a Free Couple Relationship.

The central idea of this book is a method for Cooperative Problem Solving that involves both partners working together as a team. Through this process, any problems, difficulties, obstacles, differences, or struggles that arise can be identified, negotiated, and solved to the mutual satisfaction of you and your partner.

This book will lead you, individually as well as together, through a series of carefully planned exercises designed to help you develop the skills (such as problem-solving, cooperation, clear communication, and teamwork) that will enable you to use the Cooperative Problem Solving process to build and sustain a healthy relationship.

In *How to Be a Couple and Still Be Free* you will learn how to work together smoothly to solve the very problems that created competition, pain, and struggle between you and your partner in the past and to build teamwork and cooperation where you previously had fighting, frustration, and despair. Your problems are probably solvable; relationship problems feel overwhelming and difficult only if the partners involved lack the skills they need to solve them.

The basis of this approach is the Negotiation Tree: A step-by-step guide to working smoothly together to solve all the problems and disputes partners can encounter over the course of a relationship. It will guide you safely through the five steps of solving any problem and help the two of you reach a solution that is wholly and non-competitively satisfying to you both.

This book will introduce you to a relationship of equality:

- \* Designed to meet your unique needs as individuals and as a couple.
- \* In which both partners feel equally important, equally powerful, and equally free to express their wants and needs.
- \* In which both partners work together to find a mutually satisfactory way to get what both of you want every single time.
- \* In which you support each other in making sure you are both satisfied in the relationship.

- \* Which contains far less conflict, frustration, anger, and fewer arguments, disputes, and feelings of deprivation than most couples experience.
- \* Which is easy to sustain because you both learn how to get what you want from it all the time!

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## How the Book Is Organized

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The first chapter, “How to Be a Couple and Still Be Free,” explains what an intimate partnership between equals is, why it works so well, and how you can achieve it. Cooperative Problem Solving is also introduced and explained, along with the Negotiation Tree, a step-by-step guide that you can follow through the Cooperative Problem Solving process. The Negotiation Tree will help you much the same way we help our clients, by outlining and guiding you through the five steps of the process, referring you back to the proper information and exercises whenever you have difficulty, and helping you to know when you are ready to go on to the next step.

The next five chapters correspond to the steps of the Negotiation Tree: “Define and Communicate the Problem” (Chapter 2), “Agree to Negotiate” (Chapter 3), “Set the Stage” (Chapter 4), “State and Explore Wants” (Chapter 5), and “Explore Your Options and Decide” (Chapter 6).

These chapters explain each step, why it is important, what happens if you don't cover that step in negotiating, and the problems you may encounter in that step. It provides information, exercises, and guidelines that teach you skills for overcoming each problem as it arises. Each chapter presents examples of couples engaged in negotiating in order to demonstrate how your new skills will work. Each exercise builds on what you learned in previous exercises, so your familiarity with and competence at using the skills of Cooperative Problem Solving will increase as you go along.

The final chapter, “Feeling Free Within Your Partnership,” outlines ideas for using Cooperative Problem Solving and the Negotiation Tree to improve various aspects of your relationship, and thus, over a period of time, it will transform the relationship into one that is wholly satisfying

to both of you, which will enhance your pleasure in being together and make your relationship easy to sustain.

### Using the Exercises

We recommend that you begin by reading this book in its entirety to gain an overview of the stages of the Negotiation Tree and the relationship skills that accompany them. You may be tempted to use the Negotiation Tree right away to solve a problem. If you do, you could find yourself feeling lost and frustrated. Without reading the rest of the book, you might not have enough understanding of what is meant by many of the suggestions and steps of the Negotiation Tree.

The exercises in this book are designed to teach every skill needed for and explore every barrier to achieving a healthy relationship. The exercises build on each other, with the later exercises drawing on skills you learned in prior ones. Each exercise is prefaced with a complete explanation of what it is designed to teach, and when it might be needed in your relationship. Step-by-step instructions help make the exercises easy to follow and easy to put into practice.

Each exercise will supply criteria for determining when you have either mastered each skill, or when you still need more practice. If you find you need help with certain skills, or you need help at a particular point in your negotiation, the Negotiation Tree will refer you to the proper exercises and examples. You can pause in your negotiation at any time to revisit a needed exercise or to help you overcome any difficulty or confusion you're having, and then return to the Negotiation Tree for the next step.

If you have read other self-help books, had couples' therapy, or participated in workshops, some of the skills presented here may already be familiar to you, and you may go on to those that are less familiar or more needed. We have included exercises you can do on your own, as well as exercises you can do with your partner. We recommend you do the exercises in the order they are presented because they build on each other, and they follow the Cooperative Problem Solving process. The exercises themselves will refer you to other related exercises that might be helpful. We have written this in the sequence we feel will meet

the needs of the broadest number of readers, but each couple has individual negotiating strengths and weaknesses, and the Negotiation Tree will help you adapt the guidelines and exercises to your own unique situation. Experiment with the Negotiation Tree, and as you use it, you will see which techniques you and your partner most need, and which guidelines are most helpful.

The Negotiation Tree is a “negotiating road map” to the five steps of Cooperative Problem Solving. Once you feel you understand the steps of the Negotiation Tree, the book will guide you to try using it on a simple “practice” problem. Both of you will be astonished to discover how easy it is to use and that the two of you can find a solution where each of you will get what you want!

By the time you have mastered all the skills and exercises taught here, you will have a full set of “tools” that will enable you to fix any problems that may arise in your relationship, before you and your partner are so frustrated and angry that your problem becomes too big to handle.

By reading this book, doing the exercises, and following the Negotiation Tree, you will give yourself the best possible chance of creating a relationship you can both enjoy, feel proud to share, and in which you will feel comforted and supported.

We invite you to open the following pages and begin building your Free Couple Relationship.





# How to Be a Couple and Still Be Free

In 15 years of working with couples in private therapy and workshops, we have found that no matter how unsolvable a problem seems to the couple presenting it, when we help them apply Cooperative Problem Solving, a solution can always be found. Over the years, even when a couple presented the problem that had caused a previous divorce or breakup, we could find at least one solution acceptable to both of them by using the Negotiation Tree. As experts in problem-solving, we know how to help each couple explore all the underlying wants; break free from old, problem-creating behaviors; and eliminate the false limitations they had placed on the problem.

We have found, repeatedly, that most of the trouble that occurs between intimate partners happens because they don't know how to work together to solve problems. The frustration, resentment, anger, disappointment, and despair these couples feel almost always stems from not being able to get what they want from the relationship and from each other. Whether their fights are about money, sex, affection, time, infidelity, in-laws, raising children, housekeeping, or other problems, their inability to reach a mutually agreeable or satisfying solution keeps them repeating the same old arguments without any resolution. It also keeps them locked into habitual ways of reacting with what they think they "should" do. Those actions only create more dissatisfaction and struggle between them.

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