

# Healing Good-Byes and Healthy Hellos: Learning and Growing from Painful Endings and Transitions

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## **Abstract**

**This article presents a model that is useful for healing, learning, and growing from painful experiences, endings, and transitions in relationships. The learning and growing process applies whether the painful endings are the result of a game or natural life experiences and circumstances. The new awareness and learning from mistakes can then be applied to the new beginnings and to new hellos with the same person or in a new relationship. This nonblame good-bye/hello model encourages clients to become aware of their patterns of relating, to keep what is working, change what is not, and let go, grieve, and heal those losses that cannot be changed. Case examples illustrate uses of the model.**

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In spite of the best intentions and expectations when developing and committing to a love relationship, a friendship, or a professional relationship, conflicts occur, and one or both parties may end up feeling disappointed and disillusioned, rejected (sad), or violated (angry). Sometimes these painful experiences in relationships are the result of mistakes in judgment regarding the other person's character or mistakes in expectations.

People will often blame themselves or the other for the difficulties. Blaming is not effective. It is part of the game and perpetuates the problem. Learning from mistakes is useful, particularly since often in games the mistakes are made outside of awareness. Thinking about feelings and needs is a good option for learning how to avoid games and how to get needs met instead.

Attachment theorists remind us that conflicts in couple relationships result from an inherent need for attachment with another human, both for children and as adults (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980; Johnson, 2008). Regardless of the root

cause of disruptions and endings in relationships, the fact remains that if left unattended and unexamined, such conflicts can result in unhappy relationships and divorce. Unaddressed conflicts and painful situations in relationships also have a tendency to repeat themselves as both parties repeat their unproductive relational patterns over and over. "Most fights are really protest over emotional disconnection," wrote Johnson (2008, p. 30). She continued, "Underneath all the distress, partners are asking each other, 'Can I count on you, depend on you? Are you there for me? Will you respond to me when I need? When I call?' " (p. 30). Only when couples learn to identify and manage their negative repetitive relational patterns (games) can they learn to ask for and receive the reassurance and connections they need.

In this article, I present a model that is useful for healing, learning, and growing from painful experiences in relationships, that is, a process for healing, saying good-bye, and finding closure. The process applies whether the painful ending is the result of a game or from natural life experiences and circumstances. The new awareness and learning from mistakes can then be applied to new beginnings and new hellos with the same person or in a new relationship. This nonblame good-bye/hello model encourages clients to become aware of their patterns of relating, to keep what is working, to change what is not, and, importantly, to let go, grieve, and heal from what cannot be changed. Transactional analysis tools that are useful for managing loving and mutually enriching and joyous relationships are also discussed.

## **Options for Avoiding or Dealing with Painful Endings and Disruptions**

Game and script theory offers a good deal that is useful in helping us to understand and

avoid unexpected shifts and negative payoffs in relationships. Some of the options for avoiding games that lead to negative payoffs include:

- *Avoiding the con*: “I don’t know what to do about my ailing husband” can be followed by “I hear you are concerned about your husband’s health” instead of by offering solutions.
- *Confronting the con*: “Would you like something from me about that?”
- *Avoiding discounting yourself for the other by crossing the con transaction*: “I trust that you will look for and find solutions that can help you. If you need help from me, please ask.”
- *Avoiding initiating games by asking for help and/or strokes directly*: “Are you willing to help me explore options for finding help for my ill husband?”

I offer two additional options for addressing difficulties in relationships and in life. These facilitate learning from mistakes even when the mistakes are made outside of awareness as moves in games. The options are also useful when dealing with painful experiences that are not games but challenges found in normal life processes.

The first option is to explore the history of the feeling clients are experiencing from the current painful or uncomfortable situation and to learn to recognize how this fits their own pattern of negative payoffs in past relationships or similar past situations in a current relationship. The history of the repetitive hurtful feeling will often go back to the client’s disappointments and disillusionments in his or her family of origin (Bader & Pearson, 2011; Berne, 1972; Goulding & Goulding, 1979). It is also useful, when possible, to recognize and explore the pattern of relational difficulties and repetitive payoffs of those with whom the person is relating and the possible interplay of the mutually script-reinforcing patterns.

Exploring the history of their relationship patterns provides clients with opportunities to understand how their script is playing out in their lives, game payoff by game payoff. It is helpful for clients to work, when possible, in collaboration with mates or significant others to learn how they reinforce each other’s negative early decisions so that they can, instead, support

new, healthy, life-giving decisions and behaviors. It is a gift the members of a couple give each other when both are willing to examine how they hurt one another over and over and how they can change the pattern. However, the learning and growing can be done even if one person in the relationships is not willing or present to do his or her part of the work.

The second option for dealing with painful times in life is to identify and accept that which cannot be changed and to let go, grieve, and grow from the experience. These events or situations may include: (1) shifts in relationship expectations brought about by discovering a new personality characteristic of mates, children, friends, or colleagues, one that is troublesome or unwanted; (2) career transitions or job endings; (3) family transitions (e.g., empty nest syndrome or divorce); (4) aging and loss of a physical capability; (5) the emotional impact of traumatic events such as war or near-death experiences (including posttraumatic stress disorder); and (6) the death of a loved one. These events and situations are like little deaths in life. Learning to deal with them helps us to prepare for future difficult endings and transitions, including our own aging and death processes.

### **Healing Good-Byes and Healthy Hellos**

As with life itself, relationship dynamics are circular in nature. The first relationship with the world starts with the first hello, birth, and ends with the final good-bye, death. Hellos and good-byes in relationships are ongoing. The first hello may be the first time members of a couple meet, and the good-bye if and when the relationship ends. There are many smaller hellos and good-byes during the life of a relationship as we unintentionally hurt each other and learn to say hello to what we learn about ourselves and the other. Good-byes also include those brought by life’s natural losses and endings. Sometimes a small good-bye may be about letting go of the illusion of whom we thought the other person was and saying hello to the new reality of who we have found the other to be. For example, Judy falls in love with Tom. Judy loves Tom’s willingness to listen to her and to talk about his feelings. They do many things together. Judy thinks she has found

someone who likes to spend his free time with her. A year into the relationship, Judy has great difficulty with the realization that Tom also enjoys spending time with other friends and is not always available to her. Judy needs to say good-bye to the illusion that Tom shares the same goal of spending most of their free time together and hello to the fact that while Tom does enjoy her company, he also has other relationships that he considers important. She can enjoy their time together and find ways to enjoy herself when he is sharing time with his friends.

A model for learning and growing from the good-byes and new hellos is shown in Figure 1. The hello/good-bye model begins with the good-bye process in the cycle because it is of-

ten at a time of loss, disappointment, disillusionment, or conflict in relationships that clients seek therapy and/or become introspective. Healing good-byes includes several helpful steps, which are listed in Figure 1: recognizing and acknowledging the loss, grieving, forgiving, letting go, learning, and moving on. Good-byes vary depending on the situation: the loss of a loved one; a disappointment or hurtful experience in an ongoing relationship; or being left or betrayed by a lover, mate, friend, or colleague. Some good-byes are circumstantial and not necessarily the payoff to a game, such as the loss of physical capabilities or being laid off from a job. Working through the steps in the hello/good-bye model can be healing and insightful for clients in either situation.

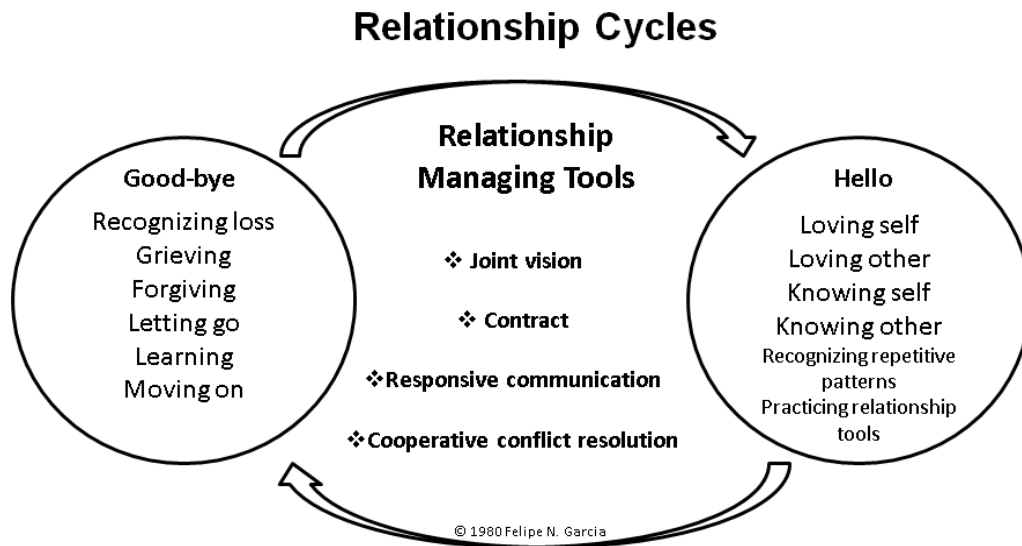


Figure 1  
The Hello/Good-Bye Cycle

### Healing Good-Byes

“Clients who do not say good-bye keep part of their energy locked in yesterdays. They may refuse intimacy in the present and may experience extreme difficulty with current ‘hellos’ and ‘good-byes’ ” (Goulding & Goulding, 1979, p. 142).

The first step in the good-bye stage of this model is to recognize and name the loss to be faced. The loss may be of the dream or the illusion of whom the client thought he or she was relating with or what the relationship would be. Sometimes the loss and grief is about facing aging and physical impairment so the person can move into the grieving process and obtain support for the loss or disillusionment. The client may go through any or all of Kübler-Ross’s (1975) stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, and depression) before finally reaching acceptance and moving on to the other aspects of the good-bye process and the new hello. Some cultures are not supportive of grieving as in “Don’t cry, be strong”; “Look on the bright side”; or “Things will get better.” Yes, things will get better, but only when the client has faced and experienced the grief. “Tears are then the jewels of remembrance, sad but glistening with the beauty of the past. . . . Grief in its bitterness marks the end” (Tatelbaum, 2008, p. 7). Grief is a necessary step in letting go and moving on (Goulding & Goulding, 1979).

Often, divorced or divorcing clients spend substantial energy blaming themselves or their partner for the mistakes they made that led to the breakup. Blaming is counterproductive and feeds the script. The letting go step in saying good-bye includes stopping blaming oneself and the other for the situation and withdrawing psychic energy from the attempt to hold on to the past or to unrealistic expectations. Learning from any mistake (e.g., taking the relationship for granted or being too critical) is useful for planning how to be different in the future. Sometimes, as in the case of infidelity, letting go may take a long time because holding on to the anger and mistrust is essential for protection and self-care before being vulnerable again. Letting go sometimes requires forgiveness. This is particularly true when someone holds on to resentment and wants revenge. Held resentment only

hurts the person holding it. Olson (2011) summarized this well:

[Held] anger has been shown to have a host of negative physical and mental health effects and forgiveness may be a psychological antidote to anger. Healing is composed of two parts: letting go of the anger toward the offender and looking towards reconciliation. Forgiving does not mean forgetting, nor does it mean that you are saying that what the offender did is alright; it just means that you have let go of the anger you have towards the other. If you are the offender, you must let go of your own guilt. (p. 28)

There are many situations in life and in relationships that clients cannot control and, therefore, must learn to let go of, including letting go of a partner who has left, become ill with a terminal disease, or died. It can also include a partner who is often blaming or discounting and who, even though he or she has agreed to change, does not change his or her behavior. At some point, if the relationship is valuable in most other ways, clients need to learn to let go of trying to change the unchangeable rather than holding on to negative feelings that get in the way of joy and intimacy now.

Such unchangeable situations provide opportunities for clients to learn to let go and face the truth. Change is difficult because it threatens the stable sense of self. Support and encouragement are vital during these times of letting go and trusting the process. Tatelbaum (2008), in her book *The Courage to Grieve*, wrote that

emotional maturity is the willingness to acknowledge and cope with reality, to experience and express our feelings; it is also a kind of resilience, a capacity to bounce back to “normal” after we have faced stress. . . . Life continually makes new and different demands on us and all these demands are really opportunities for us to develop emotional maturity [by learning to let go]. (p. 17)

The process of letting go relies on our capacity to live in the process. “We must acknowledge our role in the process that has created our present reality and accept our role as active participants in all of life’s process in order to move in the direction of healing [and letting

go]" (Schaef, 1998, p. 4). In some situations, such as a repetitive disillusionment and/or a negative game payoff, the learning in the good-bye stage invites the client to recognize his or her negative relational patterns and the patterns of those with whom he or she chooses to be in relationship. This step is often difficult for clients who insist on blaming their discomfort and bad feelings on their mates. It becomes important to remind clients at this time that the only person they can change is themselves.

It is also important during the learning process for clients to understand that some difficult aspects of relationships with significant others are reflections of their relationships with significant others in their past (Bader & Pearson, 1988; Berne, 1966; Cornell & Landaiche, 2006; Goulding & Goulding, 1979; Hendrix, 1988; Levin, 2007; Weiss & Weiss, 1989/2011). If clients, during childhood, perceived and decided as a result of the behaviors and attitudes of significant others that they were unlovable, later in life it is likely that they will be attracted to people who do not know how to demonstrate their love. If clients concluded that they could never please a parent, they will find mates whom they also cannot please. It is amazing how the client's intuitive Child is active, out of conscious awareness, identifying others with whom he or she can play his or her games, which can result in repeating the person's relational patterns.

This repetitive phenomenon can offer clients abundant opportunities to heal their unfinished business with the past, to make new decisions about themselves and others, and thereby to build their capacity for intimacy, spontaneity, authenticity, and joy. Learning to identify the indicators of the repetitive pattern is useful for understanding how they are playing it out in their relationships and how significant others also invite them into the interlocking patterns.

The lens of relational practice sees a person's learned patterns of relating to be at the root of his/her psychological [relational] problems and proposes that paying attention to these patterns as they emerge between client and practitioner is likely to change them—both within that relationship and outside of it. (Fowle & Sills, 2011, p. xxx)

With professional guidance from a relational therapist, the members of a couple can learn to understand how such ineffective relational patterns play out between them and how to avoid and change them into productive, intimacy-enhancing interactions.

Most people we find attractive are so because our intuitive Child ego state recognizes in the other a resemblance in a significant way to an important other in our past. The child intuits the possibility of completing unfinished developmental tasks. Instead, it is possible to attract another with whom the negative pattern can be repeated. Noticing the early transactional indicators of the pattern offers us the ability to manage the relationship so as to meet our target needs and to confront and avoid discounts that feed the pattern. For example, you might notice early on that an attractive new person is not listening to you but shifts the conversation to himself or herself. If the person is available to discuss it, make an agreement to take turns listening to each other so as not to repeat the pattern that invites you to believe that significant others do not care about you. The person's willingness to do this is an act of love.

A *target stroke* is what an individual most wanted to obtain from his or her parents, for example, attention, support, help, encouragement, or protection (Hendrix, 1988, p. 123). A *target discount* is that which is most hurtful and painful to receive, such as betrayal, lies, criticism, control, indifference, or judgment (e.g., "You never do it right"). The discount feeds the negative repetitive relational pattern. Agreements for increasing target stroking and diminishing discounts are ways to take charge of relationships to avoid repetitive patterns in spite of the susceptibility to do so with those we care about the most.

### Case Examples

The following example illustrates how childhood decisions impact adult relationship patterns. Jane falls in love with Rich and Rich with Jane. They date for a while and eventually marry. One day, several years into the marriage, Jane finds out that Rich has been having an affair with another woman and that this is not the first time. First, of course, she is angry

and sad over the betrayal. Rich feels shame and remorse as well as fear at the possibility of losing his marriage. On closer examination of the relationship, we find out that Jane unknowingly started dating Rich while he was still married to his previous wife. Jane had also had a previous relationship with a man who broke her heart when he left her for another woman.

Jane's father was never close to her. He was very involved with work and his job required him to travel extensively. She always felt as if his lack of affection and attention was somehow her fault, that she was unlovable. Rich was a second child and could never measure up to his older sister, who was an "A" student and very successful in her life. He "messed up" a good deal and was in trouble both at home with his parents and at school. He thought of himself as a "screw up." His father was a womanizer, and eventually his mother left his father when Rich was in the ninth grade.

On their first date, Jane noticed that Rich kept flirting with the waitress. Jane remembered this later after she found out about his affair. She also remembered how many times Rich would call and say he was going to be late because he was overburdened with work. Jane chose not to confront these behaviors so as not to make waves and to avoid reinforcing her belief that she was not lovable and desirable. Jane filed for divorce and has been living alone, scared to begin dating again. Rich lost his job because of the stress of the divorce and is trying to put his life back together. He feels like a loser.

Even though relationship patterns, game moves, and payoffs are not always as obvious as they were with Jane and Rich, staying aware of behaviors that indicate a new start to a repetitive pattern and confronting and discussing the discounting behaviors and beliefs is useful in stopping the repetitive pattern and sharing personal script issues with the other.

In the example of Jane and Rich, their relational patterns led to betrayal, guilt, and divorce. If such patterns are not examined and identified, clients often move on to find someone else with whom to repeat the same pattern. If the couple works on their relationship patterns and both are aware of their target strokes and target discounts, they can support each other in

changing the behaviors that support the negative patterns for the other. For example, Jane's target stroke is fidelity and commitment; her target discount is being ignored, lied to, and betrayed. Rick's target stroke is appreciation; his target discount is distrust and criticism, even though he keeps setting himself up for the target discounts. It was too late for them to apply this relationship model to interrupt the pattern of destruction, but hopefully they will take the time to do the learning before and as they begin their next hello. This is an essential aspect of the learning process for each of them.

This hello/good-bye model is also useful in working with clients about repeating negative payoffs in ongoing relationships. For example, Peggy becomes overwhelmed with chores and responsibilities and aggravated at her husband, Tom, for not helping to do "what obviously needs doing." Tom resents Peggy's parental put-downs and becomes defensive and angry that she does not appreciate all that he does to help her. This pattern repeats itself over and over, creating distance and getting in the way of intimacy.

Before they came to therapy, Peggy and Tom were escalating this pattern. They were aware of the futility of their fighting and did not want to enact it in front of their children. In working through their relationship patterns, Peggy became aware of the ineffectiveness of her outbursts of anger and Tom of his defensiveness. Peggy also realized that she felt toward Tom the same resentment she felt as the responsible child in her family growing up. Tom realized that his defensiveness and rebellion were similar to how he acted toward his older brother, who was often critical of him.

Cornell and Landaiche (2006) described transference and countertransference as

unconscious communications and interpersonal processes from the client to the therapist arising from the client's emotional (Child ego state) confusion of the therapist with an early parental figure that causes the therapist to seem to the client to feel and behave like the historical figure. Berne's game theory provides one avenue for analyzing and intervening in the interpersonal communication patterns that sustain transference/countertransference dynamics. (p. 198)

With the guidance of a relationship therapist, members of a couple can identify the transference/countertransference dynamics at play in their negative repetitive relationship patterns with significant others and mutually intervene in their own and the other's negative patterns. For example, Peggy and Tom both became more proficient at reflective listening, more direct in asking for and getting what they want, and better at avoiding target discounts of each other and giving target strokes instead.

Repetitive patterns play out in our consultation rooms as well. Identifying these patterns can help both client and therapist confront and shift out of the transference/countertransference behaviors that can perpetuate the client's issues (Cornell & Landaiche, 2006). For example, I have a client who has been in one of my psychotherapy groups for many years. In spite of both of us raising the issue of how long she has been in group and discussing what she needs to work on for a successful termination, the work becomes derailed until we bring it up again. The client has identified and is aware of her difficulties with good-byes. She has worked on and, with difficulty, finally left jobs and relationships that have not been good for her because of their discounting characteristics, which repeated her mother's Don't Be and Don't Make It injunctions. She has essentially completed her contract for overcoming her depression and is taking good care of herself. Yet she remains in group. She is aware that as a little girl her father traveled for his work and was gone for weeks at a time, leaving her alone with her abusive mother. Each time he left and she said good-bye, she knew she was being left alone with her mother. For her, in her Child and out of her awareness, good-byes still mean pain and suffering.

Good-byes for me have also been difficult in some ways. After careful consideration of this situation, I became aware of my corresponding pattern of slow good-byes. My mother found good-byes sad and disappointing and I did not like disappointing her. This dynamic is part of my Parent and Child ego states. I realized that I was avoiding pressing my client to say good-bye. I talked about this mutual pattern with her, and we both acknowledged how it may be

playing out in our therapy process. I have reinforced my wholehearted support for her leaving the group in order to enjoy safety and support from the relationships she now has outside the group.

### Saying Hello

"To say Hello rightly is to see the other person, to be aware of him as a phenomenon, to happen to him and to be ready for him to happen to you" (Berne, 1972, p. 3).

New beginnings with the same partner after working through conflicts or with a new person after a relationship breakup can be full of renewed hope and optimism. Sometimes, because of the pain of the last good-bye, there may also be some apprehension and caution. Optimism with caution makes for a healthy hello: optimism, because of the new opportunity for joy and intimacy, and caution because of the awareness of the susceptibility to repeating negative relationship patterns and painful experiences.

Healthy hellos include positive self-regard and positive regard for the other, loving self and loving other, being aware of one's own target strokes and target discounts, and accounting for indicators of old relational patterns. Knowing the other person's target strokes and target discounts whenever possible is also useful. New hellos offer better opportunities for lasting joy and intimacy if relational tools are applied. Such tools include responsive communication, a mutually agreed vision for the relationship, and conscientious contracting. References for these tools are presented in the next section of this article.

A healthy new beginning is based on self-respect, self-love, and respect and love for the other, that is, on "I'm OK, You're OK." It is at this stage that clients renew their hopes and self-respect and are ready for the new. This is the stage of grief that Kübler-Ross (1975) called *acceptance*. Healthy hellos after healing from the death of a loved one or acceptance of a physical limitation are important for getting on with life. The healing and acceptance may take time, and facing life again without the loved one or the physical ability requires adjustments and exploring options for how to proceed. There are also great opportunities for new

learning about oneself. The letting go in the good-bye stage is necessary for moving on to the new hello. If the new hello is with a person in an ongoing relationship, it means starting afresh, having expressed the feelings of hurt, learning about each other, and taking steps to avoid the same patterns using new tools for communication, commitment, and understanding. The new hello also means that clients are aware of their relationship patterns and notice the discounts that can lead to repeating the pattern payoffs. Avoiding the same patterns requires talking about the patterns and identifying alternative behaviors for both oneself and one's mate. Successful hellos, which include spontaneity and intimacy, are only possible if the good-bye has been done and the open gestalt closed. There may be many good-byes to be closed before a true and honest new beginning is possible.

#### **Tools for Maintaining Intimate, Spontaneous Relationships**

The tools for maintaining intimate, spontaneous relationships that are useful during the new hello and throughout the relationship include: (1) a joint vision for the values and characteristics of the relationship, that is, making sure that everyone has the same goals and dreams for the relationship (Garcia, 2006b, pp. 430-431); (2) mutual contracts and agreements concerning acceptable behaviors, expectations, and boundaries (Garcia, 1982, pp. 125-126); (3) responsive communication, which involves using feelings to identify needs, acting to get needs met, and responding to the needs of the other; and (4) a process for effective, collaborative conflict management. Much has been written about these tools in the transactional analysis literature as well as in other psychological journals (e.g., Bader & Pearson, 1988; Berne, 1972; Hendrix, 1988; Levin, 2007; Steiner, 1974, 2003).

An example of a vision statement for a new relationship and steps for collaborative conflict management can be found at <http://www.winningtogether.org> under the publications tab. A process for developing a joint relationship vision is available in *Getting the Love You Want* (Hendrix, 1988, p. 258). The responsive com-

munication process is described in detail in "Responsivity" (Garcia, 1991) and in "The Role of Feelings in the Workplace" (Garcia, 2006a).

#### **Summary**

Mistakes in managing relationship are inevitable and often occur out of awareness. Painful endings or conflicts offer us great opportunities to identify unproductive, repetitive relational patterns and to intervene with life-giving behaviors. Changes and losses in life are also ongoing and inevitable. How clients deal with mistakes, changes, and losses depends on their capacity to grieve, let go, learn, and move on to a new beginning. Unexpected and disappointing mistakes and change offer clients information about themselves and others. Learning to say good-bye to unrealistic expectations is essential for maintaining meaningful relationships. The healing good-byes/healthy hellos model offered here provides us and our clients a process for learning to identify negative relational patterns and manage those patterns in ways that lead to intimacy and for joy in the new hellos. Learning to let go prepares us for handling life's unpredictability and dealing with the death of loved ones and our own death process, thus freeing us up to enjoy life and relationships to their fullest.

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