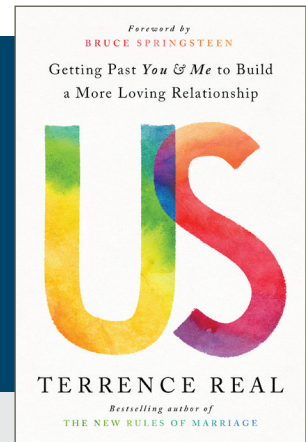


US - Getting Past You and Me to Build a More Loving Relationship

A book excerpt by Mobius Senior Expert Terry Real



Relational Life Therapy, a form of counseling developed by renowned psychotherapist Terry Real, is known for producing deep, permanent change quickly in individuals and in their relationships. It teaches men, women, and nonbinary people how to live skilled relational lives—lives of radically honest, fearlessly assertive, passionate connection to themselves and to those they love. Relational Life therapists break many of the rules we learned in school. We are not neutral, for example. When it comes to responsibility, not all problems are an even fifty-fifty split. We take sides. And we don't hide behind a mask of professionalism. We make a point of being real people, sharing when appropriate from our own journey toward wholeness and intimacy.

This is an invitation that I and other Relational Life therapists offer our clients every day. It's an invitation to truly master a sophisticated skill set, a technology. It's demanding, I won't lie, but once you learn it, it has the power to catapult you and your partner into a level of closeness, trust, solidity, and joy that leaves the norms of our culture in the dust. Would you like to feel heard? And can you satisfy your partner's need to feel listened to as well? Would you like to remember, even in heated or distant moments, that you and your partner stand on the same side?

Remembering Love

Before you pick up that verbal knife, before you brick yourself in even further, let me remind you that you love this person. And therein lies the rub, my friend. Do you remember, really, in that heated moment when fear or righteous anger courses through your veins, that you love this person? Do you remember it when your body shuts down and, for the life of you, you can barely squeak out a word or two? The sobering answer, if you're dead honest with yourself, is that you do not. In that heated moment, the sweetness between you, the sense of the two of you as a team facing the world together, the sense of *us*, is nearly impossible to locate.

The good news is that the love is still there. The bad news is that it's stored in parts of your brain, body,

and nervous system that, in those flash moments, you no longer inhabit. Your endocrine system is on high alert, pumping stimulants into your bloodstream. Your autonomic nervous system—far below your consciousness—is in fight-or-flight, spurring you on or shutting you down. The higher functions of your brain (the prefrontal cortex, the reins) have gone completely offline, while the more primitive parts of your brain (the limbic system, particularly the amygdalae) have decisively taken over.

At those times, the brain is in a state in which the prefrontal cortex is neither connected to nor soothing the subcortical system. Without that soothing and connection, we lose a pause between what we feel and what we do. These more primitive parts of our bodies

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and brains care only about our personal survival; they have no interest in maintaining the vulnerability of intimacy.

Us evaporates and becomes you and me, adversaries in a cold world of I win, you lose. *Us* is the seat of closeness. *You and me* is the seat of adversarial contest. *You and me* is great when you are confronting a tiger, but less so when you are confronting your spouse, your boss, or your child. In those fraught moments, what makes it so hard to keep a cool head is a million or so years of evolution, plus one other powerful force: trauma. Trauma pulls you into survival mode, in which you are clenching your fists for the fight or clamping your jaws shut like a fortress. And the more trauma you sustained as a child, the more compelling *you and me* becomes.

If you are thinking, *Well, gosh, I didn't have much trauma growing up*, my answer is maybe. But before you make up your mind, why not settle into my discussion of childhood trauma? Because sometimes it doesn't take much. Depending on your constitution and a host of other variables, it may take only a slight tap on the egg to produce fissures that can last a lifetime.

What's Your Trauma?

When I'm working with a couple, I have one important question in my mind. It's not *What are the*

stressors? Stressors—like the pandemic, money woes, mismatched sex drives, kids, and in-laws—are all important, but a well-functioning couple can handle a reasonable amount of stress. The critical question I think about is not even *What is the dynamic, the choreography, between you*? That's also an important question, but it's not the most essential. The central question I ask myself during a therapy session is simply this one: *Which part of you am I talking to?*

Am I talking to the mature part of you, the one who's present in the here and now? This is the part I call the *Wise Adult*. That's the part that cares about *us*. Or am I speaking to a triggered part of you, to your adversarial *you and me* consciousness? The triggered part of you sees things through the prism of the past. I believe there's no such thing as overreacting; it's just that what someone is reacting to may no longer be what's in front of them. One of the blessings that partners in intimate relationships bestow upon each other is the simple and healing gift of their presence. But in order to be present with your partner, you must yourself be in the present, not saturated by your past.

The phrase *trauma memory* is really a misnomer. You don't remember trauma; you relive it. The combat vet who hears a car backfire and suddenly spins around like he's gripping a rifle is not thinking, *Now I'm walking down Main Street remembering combat*. In that flash moment, the vet is viscerally back at war. The past

“Looking more broadly, the price we pay as a society for our toxic individualism and patriarchy is our permanent estrangement from one another. If I can't connect to you, I can't connect to us. Whether it's racism, class differences, or any of myriad other social plagues, its cost is always the same: a broken and dysfunctional system that prevents us from recognizing and caring for our neighbor with a flawed but full heart. Terry's writing is loving and kind, clever and strong, and he's written a beautiful and important book, particularly for the moment we are in.”

— FROM THE FOREWORD BY BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN

superimposes itself onto the present, fundamentally confusing the mind. When our trauma is triggered, we might physically spring into fight-or-flight mode. Faced with an overwhelming shock—infidelity, for example— I’ve seen patients gasp and head for the door before they came to in my hallway.

But most of us do not reenact the experience of the trauma itself. Instead, we act out the coping strategy that we evolved to deal with it. You were emotionally abandoned throughout your childhood, and so you’ve grown into a charming seducer, expert at securing others’ attention. Or you were intruded upon as a child, and now you operate behind walls; you are adept at keeping people out. I speak of this compensating part of us as the Adaptive Child.

One of my great mentors, Pia Mellody, spoke of the Adaptive Child as a “kid in grown-up’s clothing.” The Adaptive Child is a child’s version of an adult, the you that you cobbled together in the absence of healthy parenting. Here are the traits of Adaptive Child and Wise Adult, which are distinct from each other.

Adaptive Child	Wise Adult
Black & white	Nuanced
Perfectionist	Realistic
Relentless	Forgiving
Rigid	Flexible
Harsh	Warm
Hard	Yielding
Certain	Humble
Tight in Body	Relaxed in Body

I’d like you to notice a few things as you look at this chart. First of all, see how tight, certain, and black and white the Adaptive Child is? One of my clients said that her Adaptive Child was like a little fundamentalist who lived inside her. This is in contrast to the flexibility, humility, and appreciation of nuance that are characteristic of the Wise Adult—qualities you may also recognize, from the literature on adult development, as those associated with emotional maturity.



TERRY REAL is a Mobius Senior Expert and an internationally recognized Family Therapist, Speaker and Author. He founded the Relational Life Institute (RLI), offering workshops for couples, individuals and parents around the country along with a professional training program for clinicians wanting to learn his RLT (Relational Life Therapy) methodology.

A family therapist and teacher for more than twenty five years, Terry is the best-selling author of *I Don’t Want to Talk About It: Overcoming the Secret Legacy of Male Depression* (Scribner, 1997), the straight-talking *How Can I Get Through to You? Reconnecting Men and Women* (Scribner, 2002), *The New Rules of Marriage: What You Need to Make Love Work* (Random House, 2007) and his most recent book excerpted here.

A senior faculty member of the Family Institute of Cambridge in Massachusetts and a retired Clinical Fellow of the Meadows Institute in Arizona, Terry has worked with thousands of individuals, couples, and fellow therapists. Through his books, the Institute, and workshops around the country, Terry helps women and men, parents and non-parents, to help them create the connection they desire in their relationships.

Terry’s work, with its rigorous commonsense approach, speaks to both men and women. His ideas on men’s issues and on couple’s therapy have been celebrated in venues from the Good Morning America, The Today Show and 20/20, to Oprah and *The New York Times*.