



Riding the Horse of Life 
Chris Hagan

PILLOW TALK

5 QUESTIONS TO Heal a Relationship

“WHAT DO WE DO NEXT?” IS THE LAST QUESTION TO ASK

HERE'S SOME easy pillow talk: A DuPont marketing study once revealed that the period of time it takes for a person to actually buy a new pillow after he or she decides that a new pillow is necessary is typically two years. Why? Because we get attached to the pillow, inertia takes over, and so we continue to sleep on it—long after it's a pain in the neck. But when two pillows

are involved the problem can get much more protracted. According to relationship researcher John Gottman, who has studied marital stability for 40-plus year, by the time a couple chooses to get counseling, at least one of the two has been in relational distress for an average of six years. That's a lot of pain. The upside is this: one painful pillow will never get better, but two pillows just might.

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Of course there is a reason that couples often don't seek help until the situation is dire, and I always warn clients upfront that, whatever discomfort got them through my door, they should be prepared to feel equally, if not more, uncomfortable as they shift away from the status quo. Many clients come hoping to get answers. What they learn is that what they really need is to ask five illuminating questions.

1. What Do I Need to Face?

People pay me good money to ask the seemingly obvious. Why? Because to acknowledge "what is" is an enormous first step. When we feel uncomfortable, we tend to deny, defend, or rationalize our behavior. We get lost in our own stories about a situation: "She always has to be in control, and I'm walking on eggshells. If I try to defend myself, it just makes her angrier." We also lose our capacity to discover deeper truths: "I've given away my power in this relationship and default to his demands." Facing "what is" is the first step toward improving your plight.

2. What Do I Need to Feel?

We consider ourselves rational beings, yet our emotions are the prime motivators for most of our choices—just ask any marketing expert. Experiencing anger, sadness, fear, joy, and sexual feelings is an integral aspect of being alive. Staying current with our feeling states supports us in staying connected to our aliveness.

These feeling states are much like the spectrum of a rainbow. They each have their own unique hues

of expression, yet they often blend together to create more complex emotions. If a backlog occurs, it can contribute to confusion and a feeling of being overwhelmed.

Allowing your emotions to flow does not give you license to dump on others without their consent. It does mean taking ownership of your emotions and finding an appropriate environment to acknowledge them fully: "This relationship reminds me of my parent's dysfunctional marriage, which I swore I'd never repeat. Underneath my frustration, I feel scared and deeply sad about how I'm repeating the same patterns." Tears flow, the body gets hot, maybe it trembles. Welcome it. Most clients are surprised to find that just a few minutes of allowing their most vulnerable feelings to flow creates inner spaciousness and a greater capacity to deal with whatever they have to face.

3. What Do I Need to Take Responsibility For? (Hint: what I've been blaming somebody else for)

It's common to react with blame when life isn't giving us what we want. Blame and judgment—including judging yourself—serve to perpetuate negativity, not to resolve it. When we are able to step back and sincerely take stock of our role in a situation without blame, a shift begins to occur—we get curious, we open to learning, and become willing to approach an issue from a fresh perspective: "I have an old belief that speaking up leads to problems with women, and it's my job to keep quiet. I wonder how I can shift that in myself?"

4. What Truth Do I Need to Express?

When we squelch our truth, we forfeit an opportunity to directly influence "what is," and so we remain stuck. Being candid with someone without blame (#3) and from a place of spacious vulnerability (#2) can have a profound impact in how it's received: "I am no longer willing to sacrifice my truth in a futile attempt to keep the peace. I'd prefer we get support together around this pattern. Either way, I am committed to shifting it, or leaving." Even if your truth is not well received, being truthful evokes a sense of inner congruency. The more congruent we are, in ourselves and with others, the more authentic our choices—and our lives—become.

5. What Right Action Do I Need to Take?

Most clients arrive wanting to know, What do we do? They have been in an unsatisfying cycle of reactivity and want resolution. Right now! But right action is the product of a clear mind connected to a clear heart. In other words, it can only occur after thoroughly exploring questions #1 through #4. Through that process, simplicity emerges and next steps become clear. Often right action involves courage, where we must be willing to acknowledge our fears while simultaneously trusting our heart's wisdom on how to proceed. Sometimes that means working alone and building to the point of saying, "I am going to share with my partner what happened here and ask her to come with me next time."

Pain and suffering are motivators for changing our behaviors that lead to destruction if we don't heed their call to attention. So whenever a well-worn strategy stops working, be grateful. Life may be summoning you to the next level of your evolution.

—JOY HOSEY