



FEARLESS RELATIONSHIPS

Simple Rules for Lifelong Contentment

KAREN CASEY

Author of *Each Day a New Beginning*

FEARLESS RELATIONSHIPS

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Simple Rules for Lifelong Contentment

By Karen Casey

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Introduction

Exploring what helps and what hinders relationships has intrigued me for years. I have had many relationships, of course, in my sixty-three years. Sometimes my behavior improved relationships, and sometimes, unfortunately, my behavior hindered relationships.

For the first thirty-six years of my life, I did not understand which of my actions hindered and which helped my relationships. Since getting into recovery from addiction more than twenty-seven years ago, I have developed a keen interest in observing my own and others' behavior. The dynamics that foretell of a successful relationship have interested me the most. Those dynamics are the rules that I share with you in the chapters that follow.

Experience has taught me that the simple rules discussed in this book really can form the basis of a healthy relationship. Each short chapter is devoted to one simple rule. The order of the rules is arbitrary. All are equally important; one or all of them, when applied, will peacefully enhance every relationship in our lives. Each chapter ends with some final thoughts that I call Touch Points. These Touch Points are

intended to serve as concise reminders of how uncomplicated it is to work toward peaceful interpersonal relationships.

I believe that healing relationships is our common goal as members of society. As this world begins to seem more treacherous since the tragedy of September 11, 2001, there is no better time to seek to make our relationships, all of them, more peaceful.

We will not heal individually or as a society, and certainly not as a multicultural world, unless we heal our many personal relationships. And there is no better day than this one to begin the process.

The willingness to improve relations with others, including loved ones, colleagues, and even strangers, is the first important step to creating a world that will nurture us all.



Seek to Understand Every Situation from a Fresh Perspective

Choosing this particular rule as the first rule of a peaceful relationship wasn't entirely by chance. If you and I practiced this one rule in any experience that triggered even slight agitation in us, we would save ourselves from countless arguments, some minor, many major.

What does it mean to *seek to understand every situation from a fresh perspective*? It's quite simple, really. In any encounter with another person, there are two perspectives or viewpoints being expressed: yours and the other person's. These differing viewpoints aren't necessarily problematic in every instance. Two people may simply be having a conversation to pass the time and they feel no need for agreement. But when the conversation is about a situation that needs a resolution or reflects opposing opinions on a topic that is near and dear to both parties, tension often arises, and acknowledging the dissimilar perspectives becomes necessary.

It's at this point that seeking to understand, or allowing for, a different perspective or perception is beneficial. This does not mean you have to embrace the other perspective as your own, but letting your adversary continue to have his or



her opinion without allowing it to destroy your day or your relationship is both respectful and healthy.

Being able to live comfortably in a world which expresses thousands of heartfelt perspectives is becoming far more important with the passage of time and the clashing of cultures.

Because of our instant access to news around the world, we are bombarded by constant information and can hear contrasting perspectives on events that happen all over the globe. What we take away from this inundation of information is naturally what feeds the viewpoints we then so dearly cling to, and don't easily relinquish.

Deciding to switch perspectives, to exchange ours for one an adversary holds, does not mean we are weak or uncommitted to a particular set of values or philosophy. It may mean we allowed ourselves to be re-educated. Or perhaps we decided that the idea we were hanging on to didn't deserve our adherence any longer. For some of us, giving in to another perspective might mean that we made a choice to be peaceful rather than tense.

I can remember as though it were yesterday the first time I consciously chose to walk away from an argument rather than fight for an opinion that I knew really didn't matter in the larger picture of my life. Until that time, I had not actually appreciated that I could make this choice. I had been fighting with other adults my entire life. As the third child in a family of four kids, I had fought everyone's battles, including my mom's, against my domineering, angry dad far into adulthood. This pattern of behavior was constant.

As adults, we generally carry into all other relationships those behaviors we mastered in our families of origin. My

argumentative nature went with me into my first marriage. My husband and I didn't quarrel constantly, but we disagreed often and I became a master at using silence or passive aggression, coupled with long-held resentment, to make my point when words couldn't. Either way, the outcome was the same: no resolution and certainly no peace. For twelve years our lives were tension filled and our minds, on myriad issues, remained unchanged. Our relationship brought little comfort to either of us. Naturally, it ended. Neither of us was willing or able to shift our perspective on the meaningful issues in our lives, nor were we ever willing to choose peace over the insistence that we were right.

And then, in 1975, my life dramatically changed. Through a series of significant, and not coincidental, interactions with friends and colleagues, I ended up at a Twelve Step recovery meeting, and my worldview began to change. I had never planned on changing my life or my outlook in such specific ways, but the ideas being exchanged in this circle of people immediately captured my imagination.

At my first Twelve Step meeting, in the basement of the Unitarian church in southeast Minneapolis, I was introduced to the idea that I didn't have to react, in any way, to the behaviors or the opinions of others. I had never considered *not reacting* as a viable alternative to reacting. Throughout my entire life, I had been intent on being heard, being understood, and being right!

Yet there I sat, listening to a group of happy men and women sharing their experiences, strengths, and hopes, and it was evident that they were making clear choices based on their specific needs. The results of their choices were

thoughtful actions, never the hasty, angry reactions that were so typical of my behavior.

I knew the wisdom of what they were saying, and I knew I was familiar with the underlying idea, but I just couldn't recall where I had heard it before. I left my first meeting eager to know more about the set of beliefs that seemed to make these men and women so happy. I was truly astounded to realize that there was another way to live and that it was possible to let others have whatever idea or perspective made them happy. Furthermore, I could still keep my own perspectives if they continued to bring me happiness.

Following this first rule, seek to understand every situation from a fresh perspective, will eliminate most of the disagreements that surface in our lives. Our disagreements are often rooted in past hurts. Deciding to let go of past hurts is what this rule is all about.



TOUCH POINTS

1. When in conversation today, quiet your own mind, completely. This response will not come naturally.
2. Next, focus intently on every word the other person is saying. When your mind wanders, bring it back.
3. Then listen with your heart.
4. In your heart, change places with the other speaker. Be him or her for a moment. How does it feel?
5. Ask yourself, is my perspective more important than my peace of mind?

6. Seek the willingness to let go of your own perspective.
Ask your Higher Power for help.
7. Take note that your perspective is related to your past,
never the present moment.
8. Feel the change in mood as you let your own perspec-
tive go.
9. Feel the tension leave your body.
10. Note the change in your companion's body language
too.
11. Be grateful for the willingness to be at peace.



Be Kind No Matter What

I was first introduced to the idea of being kind no matter what in the early '70s through a book by John Powell. I had chosen *Why Am I Afraid To Tell You Who I Am?* as a text for a journal writing class I was teaching while in graduate school. In the early pages of the book, Powell recounts an episode that occurred while he and a friend strolled down a New York City street.

They had stopped to buy a newspaper and the street corner vendor was extremely rude to Powell's friend. Powell noted that this same vendor treated his friend this way every morning. His friend was always very kind to the vendor and tipped him every morning. Powell asked him why he continued to be so nice when the vendor was clearly deserving of a rebuff rather than kindness. His friend said, "Why should I let him decide what kind of a day I am going to have?"

When I read this simple passage I felt like I had hit the jackpot! At that moment I realized my entire life had been about letting others decide what kind of day or hour or moment I was going to have. Taking complete charge of my actions or feelings was a totally foreign idea. I had quite willingly

been held hostage my entire life by other people's behavior. What an eye-opener Powell's story was!

Choosing to be kind in ordinary encounters is not difficult, but in certain encounters, kindness may not be prudent, especially if you are female, alone, and unfamiliar with your surroundings. However, you can generally choose to walk away rather than become engaged verbally. Just remember, being unkind is never the best response.

In ordinary experiences, if a kind response isn't forthcoming, the next step is to walk away without becoming engaged, especially if the encounter has turned unpleasant. This takes willingness, effort, and the commitment to take charge of your every thought, but the payoff is transforming. I know. I have experienced it!

Indeed, I re-experience this transformation daily. Is this because I have a tendency to surround myself with unpleasant people? I think not. It's because I, like you, live *in the world of people* and most of them would like to be in charge, not only of their own life, but of mine and yours too. That's the way life is in our human community.

Dozens of times a day, we have the opportunity to practice this rule of kindness. Making the choice to be kind to whomever we share breakfast with is a good place to begin. It doesn't mean we have to talk at length, or at all, if we feel the need for silence. It simply means we can share how we feel with a smile and then be quiet.

Being kind takes so little effort. It's often nothing more than an expression we might wear on our face, or a nod in someone's direction. It's maintaining eye contact when

speaking with another person. It's standing or sitting still while another person is directing a comment or a question to us. It's acknowledging the people around us in the grocery store or the restaurant. It's being *present* when someone is attempting to get our attention.

Some years ago I heard a wonderful story about the Dali Lama. He was invited to give an address to a prestigious California crowd following a fund-raising dinner. He walked slowly to the podium after being introduced. He very quietly surveyed the crowd for a few moments and then said, "Your assignment in this life is to love one another." After speaking those few words, he walked back to his seat.

The crowd seemed quite dissatisfied that his address was so short. After all, they had paid for far more. But then he rose again, and headed back to the podium. His movement was met with sighs of relief and approval. Once again, he stood very quietly before his audience and said ever so gently into the microphone, "And if you can't love one another, at least don't hurt one another." He then walked off the stage.

His words are timeless wisdom, the only wisdom any of us needs if we have the desire to live in our communities peacefully. Have you refrained from hurting anyone today?



TOUCH POINTS

1. Upon arising every morning, ask your Higher Power to help you be kind.
2. Pause a moment before answering a question. In that moment, remember kindness.

3. Remember that being kind doesn't mean you have to agree with the other person.
4. Being kind means using a soft voice.
5. Being kind means not using hurtful words.
6. Being kind means speaking from the heart.
7. Kindness can be practiced until it becomes real.
8. Acting as if we feel kind is just as good as feeling kind to begin with.
9. Kindness is a habit.
10. Kindness isn't weakness.
11. Kindness can transform a hateful situation and a hateful person, ourselves included.
12. Only one person has to be kind for a situation to dramatically change.
13. Being kind changes us beyond our wildest expectations.



Listen, Then Comment If Necessary

Listening fully to what another person is saying to us shouldn't need to be a rule, but my own experience has proven otherwise. Do you ever plan your response to what someone is saying before they have even finished speaking? It's a behavior I have fought against for years. And I am thrilled to be able to say that I have made progress! It has come about only because of my persistence. Being willing to actually listen, completely, to another person's entire thought is not an easy task.

I don't think it's unusual to constantly entertain drivel or even serious opinions in our minds while in the midst of conversations with others. Wanting to control all situations, and thus the people in our lives, means wanting to have the last word in any discussion. The only way to accomplish this, we think, is to be ready with an answer or a solution for every point in a conversation as soon as the other person has quit speaking. Many times even before, to tell the truth.

Having our response in mind ahead of time becomes the way we try to manage the outcomes in our lives. Our folly is that because our focus was not on listening to the other person in the first place, we seldom offer the right response.

Perhaps not being listened to as children has contributed to our need to win every argument, or at least to have the final say. It doesn't matter why we behave this way, but every time we do, we are harming the other person as well as ourselves. It is not coincidental that we have been drawn into the company of certain people. They have wisdom or information we need. Any time we interrupt the message they are offering with an idea of our own, one either spoken or simply coddled in our mind, we are missing a thought we need to experience.

Looking at our relations with all people from this perspective can dramatically change how we interpret each one of them. And it does make it easier to listen more completely every time we are in the company of another person. With practice, it can become exciting to speculate about where each new piece of information might be leading us. We can be certain that every bit of information has its part to play in our development.

If you doubt this, spend a few moments reflecting on some of your past experiences. My first marriage often comes to mind when I consider how I came to be here, doing what I am doing with my life. The pain of the past seems like a very small price to have paid. And without those specific experiences, I would not have so willingly sought the help I found in recovery. The rest is history.

Making a living as a writer, having a Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota, living in Florida during the winter months with my wonderful second husband, and riding my own Harley all over the country are outcomes I would never have imagined for my life.

Marrying my first husband while at Purdue, developing a dependency on alcohol, other drugs, and men, and then moving to Minnesota, opened the door to the journey that has carried me to this very spot, a journey that was mine to make. And I couldn't be happier! I have come to believe that God's plan for us is far grander than our own plan.

Learning to listen to the messages that were meant for my spiritual development didn't happen without resistance. This is no doubt true for each of us. Unless we are familiar with the idea that *we will be told what we need to know when the time is right*, we will no doubt miss the message. But it will come again. It will come as often as necessary until we finally surrender to it.

One of the most reassuring things I have learned on this spiritual path is that I will not be able to avoid learning what I need to learn. The lessons will come again and again until I acknowledge them and let them infiltrate my life.

We can save hours, days, maybe months of frustration by deciding to listen now, while the messages are fresh. Listening will be helpful to the people sharing our path as well. Remember, they are not on our path coincidentally. The messages they share with us are part of their evolution too.

I have learned in twenty-seven years of recovery that many of the ideas others share need no response at all. Often people are simply venting their feelings and don't want a response. I didn't know this for the first thirty-six years of my life. I thought I needed to respond to everything people said to me, and that it better be the right response or I'd look like a fool.

Many relationships are endangered by the need we feel to make a response when one isn't actually necessary. But

until we experience the freedom of making no response, we can't appreciate the *holiness* of this idea. And unless we are in perpetual solitary confinement, we will be in relationship with others. From my perspective, that's by design.

Our work in this life is to have and to heal relationships. Learning what this means can take a lifetime. Accomplishing it takes a willingness most will have to cultivate.

A very simple beginning is to practice the statement: *I need say nothing*. In fact, even when a response is required, it need not be made instantly. Seeking clarity about the right response is possible only in the quiet spaces of your mind. Listen. Listen to the other person. Listen to yourself. Only then, respond. And never forget: *the right response may be no response at all*.



TOUCH POINTS

1. Listening is first and foremost a decision.
2. The freedom to say nothing is empowering.
3. Listening becomes easier with practice.
4. Listening intently will clarify the response that is necessary.
5. Listening fosters peace of mind.
6. Listening is a tool for healing relationships.
7. Through listening, we will receive the messages we are ready for.
8. Listening is honoring another.
9. Listening is honoring God.
10. Listening is honoring the world community.
11. Our response after careful listening is our gift to the moment which eventually touches us all.

SELF-HELP/RELATIONSHIPS

**Relationships are why we are here.
Forgiveness is the key to happiness.
Every argument is about fear.**

Such simple rules in principle. Such challenging rules in practice. Drawing from life experiences and lessons learned the hard way, best-loved author Karen Casey explores what helps and what hinders relationships in this collection of original essays. Casey's reflections are at once familiar and revealing, reminding us of simple truths we inherently know but need to rediscover for ourselves again and again. All of our relationships—with loved ones, co-workers, neighbors, and even strangers—provide us with opportunities not only to enrich our lives but also to create a more nurturing world.

About the Author

Millions of people around the world spend a little time with Karen Casey every day. She is the author of numerous best-selling self-help and recovery books, including the classic *Each Day a New Beginning*.

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