

# Walking the Tight Rope in Your Relationship



Balancing Freedom and Security

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## **Walking the Tight Rope in Your Relationship: Balancing Freedom and Security**

At our coastal community's annual Fourth of July salmon barbeque, the woman seated next to

me, a teacher, asked me about my work. I told her I was writing a book to help couples navigate the tricky balance between freedom and security in their relationship. I described how couples teeter on a tight rope with freedom on one end and secure connection on the other, and how difficult it is for couples to balance these needs, especially those who want a dynamic relationship and a full robust life.

Overhearing us, others seated at the long picnic table with us joined in the conversation. A retired banker commented a bit heatedly, “I don’t buy it. Why get married if freedom is what you’re after? Don’t get me wrong, it would be great but marriage and freedom are mutually exclusive.”

The teacher shared, “When I was single I felt free as a bird, and it was great, but it got lonely. Now my wings are clipped, and my adventurous side is pretty dormant, like I don’t do wilderness hiking or travel, but for now the settled, domestic life works okay. I love my kids and I’m never lonely anymore. Most days the tradeoff is worth it.”

A woman in her late seventies yelled from her chaise lounge a distance away, “I’ve never wanted to get married. Not that I wasn’t asked. I like solitude and can’t imagine marching to someone else’s drumbeat. I’ve led an exciting life packed with adventure, and rely on friends for my support system.”

A local artist, graying at her temples said, “I know what you mean about solitude, but it’s excitement that I miss. I’ve been married three times. When I’m married, life turns dull. Single life is more exciting, but then I miss constant companionship and get lonely. Guess I’m destined for discontentment.”

A middle-aged man, tattooed, and with a bandana covering his hair, chimed in. “Well, I’m a musician. Been playin’ guitar my whole life. Had my own band till my early forties when my wife threatened to leave if I spent one more night away doing gigs. So I quit to save my marriage. Now I’m desperately unhappy, maybe even depressed.”

“Free, what is free? I choose to go to work, support my family, and do the right thing. Nobody’s twisting my arm. Choice—that’s my idea of freedom,” piped in the owner of a local

construction company.

The topic had struck a resonant chord and the conversation continued until the sun dropped behind the redwoods. Ideas expressed fit roughly into two camps: the security-minded who choose stable connection over excitement; and the freedom seekers who value excitement over secure connection. Both groups end up disappointed. People don't thrive in either extreme, yet even so they cling to their beliefs and stand glued to their own end of the tight rope, not wanting to upset the status quo. In which camp do you belong?

People ask me if there is a solution. Beneath the question lies a glimmer of hope for more vitality in those who've traded freedom for the security of commitment, and for more security in those who value freedom. The real questions to be explored are: Can we have both freedom and the security of commitment in the same relationship? Can a person who values freedom over security successfully couple with a person who is security minded? If so, how do we structure such a relationship?

### **Exercise: Do You Know Your Freedom-Security Needs Quotient?**

The first step is to own your freedom and security needs. Be honest. Choose the response that first occurs to you. It's usually the most accurate. No response is more "correct" than any other. Place an "X" on the response that most closely fits you.



	<b>Column A</b>	<b>Column B</b>
1	I prefer to travel alone.	I prefer not to travel alone.
2	I like to make my own financial decisions.	I like for my partner to make my financial decisions for me.
3	When I'm at home, I am most relaxed by myself.	When I'm at home, I prefer to have company.
4	I find family obligations burdensome.	I find family obligations rewarding.
5	I dislike having to tell my partner where I'm going.	I like my partner to know where I am.
6	I am happier when I am not in a relationship.	I am happier in relationship.
7	I like to think of myself as not being like everyone else.	I like to fit in and belong.
8	I like going to parties by myself.	I don't like going to parties alone.
9	Being alone is preferable to being with someone just for his or her company.	Sometimes I hang out with people just because I don't feel like being by myself.
10	I don't like when someone tells me how I feel.	I like when my partner helps me to express my feelings.
11	In conflict it's important for me to have my way.	In conflict peace is more important than having my own way.
12	I like to make purchases without a discussion.	I prefer help making purchases.

13	I am not willing to be in a relationship <i>just for sex.</i>	I am willing to be in a relationship just for <i>sex.</i>
14	Following rules is difficult for me.	Rules are meant to be followed.
15	I don't like anyone to tell me how to <i>spend my time.</i>	I like to have help scheduling my time.
16	I need to control the TV remote.	I like someone else to change the channels.
17	I like sleeping alone.	I like sleeping with someone.
18	It annoys me to talk when I don't feel <i>like it.</i>	I really enjoy having someone around to talk <i>to.</i>
19	I don't want to live up to the <i>expectations of others.</i>	My partner's expectations help me achieve <i>goals.</i>
20	I fear getting trapped in a relationship.	I feel safest when in relationship.

**Freedom to live the life you want:** Everyone has different appetites for risk and adventure, and varying needs for security and stable connection. Consciously choosing a lifestyle that balances these competing needs in a way that satisfies both partners can be challenging for couples. Does your lifestyle satisfy your need for adventure?

**Freedom to be your authentic self:** Beginning at birth, we're bombarded by messages telling us who we should be. We're pressured to be more beautiful, funnier, smarter, wiser, richer, kinder, skinnier, sharper, hipper, without regard for who we really are, our authentic self. Healthy relationships create environments that promote authenticity, acceptance, and encourage personal growth. Does your relationship allow you to relax, be yourself, and pursue your goals?

**Freedom to have a private life:** Many people feel entitled to know everything about their partners—all of their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. They believe that a committed relationship gives them license to access their partner's inner life. Others require personal privacy. They want time alone with family and friends, their own telephone, to keep private journals, sole access to the email and Facebook, etc.

One clarification needs to be made here. Having privacy is not the same as having secrets from your partner that violate the terms of your relationship agreement, whether implicit or

explicit, i.e. sending Anthony Weiner-type emails, sexting, online relationships, financial secrets that affect your partner, and so on. Some couples manage to balance shared and private domains. Couples need to decide how transparent or private they want to be. Does your relationship afford you enough privacy? Do you feel excluded from too much of your partner's life?

**Freedom to have your own friends, adventures, and vacations:** Some partners share everything: family, friends, vacations, adventures, etc. They believe that sharing is good and separation is bad. Others feel suffocated by so much sharing, and require more "me" and less "we" time. Couples succeed at every point along the share-all to share-less spectrum.

Conversations about this topic can be tricky. People can be sensitive and feel excluded if their partner wants time away. It can bring up fears and insecurity. Do you want more "me" time or more "we" time in your relationship? Do you ever long for a week away without your partner? Do you feel comfortable talking with your partner about these matters? Is the level of trust in your relationship sufficient to allow separate treks?

**Freedom to be a multifaceted person:** Everyone has many facets to his or her personality, some active, others dormant. Often, our different facets contradict one another. A person may be capable of being a sensitive nurturer and a Marine Corps drill sergeant. One partner may refuse to acknowledge or openly disapprove of facets of the other. This can cause the disapproved partner to go underground to feel accepted. Repression causes a person to lose parts of him- herself.

Are there parts of you that you hide from your partner? Are there ways that your partner behaves that you won't accept even though harmless? Do some aspects of your partner embarrass you? How do you handle this?

**Freedom to change:** People change over time. What motivates a twenty-one-year-old probably won't work for a forty-five-year-old. For one thing, the needs and desires of young couples differ from those in retirement. Children require change. Ideally, partners encourage and accept change in one another. Does your life still fit the person you are today? Are you happy with your role in your relationship?

**Freedom to have your own space:** Some couples enjoy sharing the same physical space when they're together. Others like separate offices or bedrooms. The degree of togetherness and separation is negotiable. Do you long for a "room of your own"? Do you want more control over your belongings and space? Or do you feel hurt by these kinds of boundaries and want more sharing?

**Freedom to pursue passions, dreams, and interests:** Sometimes a partner has interests his partner does not share. An extreme example of this is a friend of mine who is an avid sailor and takes trips for months at a time. His wife enjoys living alone then, and feels that separation reinvigorates their connection. Obviously, few people could accept such an arrangement. Partners can negotiate the amount of "us" time and "me" time they want. The balance depends on what the relationship can tolerate.

Is there a hobby or activity you want to pursue that your partner does not? Is your partner willing to "give" you the time you need to pursue it? Or do your partner's activities leave too little time and attention for you? How would it be to talk about this topic?

**Freedom to do what you want, when you want:** Does a partner need permission to spend time away? Do partners need to check in? How often? How does having children impact these decisions?

**Freedom from your own inner conflict:** Almost daily we face conflicts between what we want and what we think we "should" do. Different parts of a person have conflicting motivations. For instance, you might want to take a vacation, but also set aside money for your children's college fund. Perhaps your partner wants to go to the movies. You want to stay home and practice guitar, but you also want to please your partner. What do you decide?

We are faced with decisions like this all of the time. When inner conflicts are unexpressed and unresolved, a person may get depressed or suffer from anxiety. When inner conflicts are acknowledged, we can strive for a more harmonious balance. What inner conflicts do you face? How many of them are unresolved?

The clearer we can be about our needs and the nature of our commitment to our partner, the

greater our chances for relationship satisfaction. In the next section we'll discuss the subject of commitment.

## **What is Commitment?**

If you say that you are in a committed relationship, what does that mean? What are you actually committing to? If I ask some people who claim to be in committed relationships, what they mean, they say things like: I'm committed to my partner. I'm committed to loving my partner. We are committed to having a spiritual bond. If I ask for clarification, most people get tongue-tied or mumble words that sound like marriage vow —love, honor, sickness, health.

It's rare for couples to discuss and agree to shared principles of commitment. Many would be surprised to learn of their partner's definition of commitment. For some, the extent of commitment starts and ends with a promise of monogamy. As long as they are not having sex with anyone but their partner, they feel they've satisfied their commitment. Never mind that they stonewall their partner, leave their clothes lying around, and show no respect.

People commonly adopt over-arching goals and aspirations for themselves in relationships. This is a good start especially since many couples have never made the terms of their commitment explicit even at the aspiration level. Here are some commitment gems, culled from forty years of therapy practice, for you to consider:

- Personal growth of a partner.
- Remain emotionally engaged with one another.
- Same level of emotional commitment to the relationship.
- Monogamy.

- Health and well being of your partner.
- Love, care and support your partner.
- Work things through and to find solutions to problems.
- Encourage partner to pursue his or her passions.
- Live by the agreements partners create.
- Consider partner when making important decisions.
- Help partner realize dreams.

### **Defining Your Unique Commitment**

Each couple needs to get serious and define together what you mean by commitment. This process helps you get clear about what you're promising one another. It also brings to the surface your dreams and expectations for the relationship. Abstract principles, like those in the last section, can serve as the umbrella for further specifics. Start by explicitly defining what your unique commitment looks like. For each principle, talk about feelings, actions, reactions, expectations, and consequences.

The clarity that emerges from these talks will reduce the fear and anxiety which is a by-product of confusion and uncertainty. In turn, your mutual comfort, trust, and connection will deepen. With time your relationship will be infused with a new sense of ease. You move from lofty abstractions and woo-woo vagueness to the real life stuff where true love lives.

Let me illustrate with some examples:

#### **Commitment to love and care for your partner.**

*Specific actions to achieve commitment goal:*

Show me that you love me by unexpectedly cooking dinner, send me a sweet tweet, surprise me with small gifts at random times, tell me you love me, like me, need me, appreciate me.

**Commitment to the personal growth of your partner.**

*Specific actions to achieve commitment goal:*

Talk with me about my dreams and goals. Encourage and support my goals through specific words and actions. Make it easier for me to go to a seminar by taking over my responsibilities while I'm gone. Be willing to sacrifice, if necessary, to help me reach my goals. Cheer me on. I'll do the same for you.

**Clarity gets you in the spirit of commitment. By daily small acts of love, you'll demonstrate your commitment and spark and re-spark the passion in your relationship.**

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**The Big Picture: Teetering on the Tight Rope of Freedom and Secure Connection**

In my work with couples, freedom often emerges as an area of contention. Couples struggle when one partner's need for a secure connection conflicts with the other partner's desire to feel free. For some, a partner's freedom triggers feelings of insecurity or anxiety.

It's not like the old days, when roles clearly defined the parameters of freedom. In the 21st century, there is no one set of rules. As Americans we are freedom crazy, wanting to cast off as many restraints as we can. What works for one couple might not work for another. Each couple needs to negotiate the degree to which they want freedom for themselves and their level of comfort in allowing freedom for their partners. **What is great is that we have the freedom to design our relationships to fit ourselves and our partner.**

People naturally desire to be independent and autonomous. We want others to embrace our individuality and uniqueness. We need room to breathe and be ourselves, to think our own thoughts and feel what we feel without anyone asking us to change or be something we're not

To be your true self in relationship (and to allow your partner to be his or her true self) is one of life's biggest challenges.

But again, here's the rub: People want freedom, but they also want the security of a committed relationship, like a comfortable pair of slippers you can't wait to put on. We all want love, acceptance, respect, and passion. We want to feel confident that when we wake up in the morning our relationship will be the same as when we went to sleep the night before. We want to feel that our partner's emotional commitment matches our own, and that our connection is solid and predictable.

Over the years, I've been fascinated by the myriad ways couples accommodate their different freedom-security styles. Their arrangements are intricate and reflect the uniqueness of their individual inner relationship fingerprints™ (go to [www.relationshiptransformers.com](http://www.relationshiptransformers.com) <http://www.relationshiptransformers.com> where you can discover your fingerprint by using our assessment tool) and their relationship. How much freedom do you need in a relationship? How much safety and constancy do you want?

Every couple faces the tension between freedom and the security of commitment. The balance of the two is pivotal to the success of a relationship. *A couple reaches equilibrium when they each have space enough to feel free yet are connected enough to feel safe and loved.* At this delicate tipping point you get to have your cake and eat it too. You luxuriate in the sweet spot.

Do we need to be with a partner with the same freedom-security needs for a truly successful relationship? Let's explore this question.

Julie and Jim have been happily married for ten years. They share office space, friends, and most interests, and rarely spend any time apart. For Chuck, the thought of such togetherness makes him gasp for air. He needs plenty of space to do his own thing, though he adores his wife Lisa. Their time together is limited to dinner on Wednesdays, a date on Saturday night, and a quiet Sunday at home together. In his leisure time, Chuck pursues a life of his own: band practice, playing poker, and golf. An independent guy like Chuck is perfect for Lisa, an ambitious lawyer who works twelve-hour days. She says that men are like pets—you want one

around, but not in your face all the time. Lisa loves Chuck's independence and self-sufficiency. She enjoys her own interests, and spends time with her sisters when she's not working.

The arrangements of these couples work well for them, partly because their freedom and security needs are compatible. But what happens when these needs are widely divergent? Couples may encounter problems. One partner may feel suffocated while the other grasps for security. Sometimes one partner wants a relationship like Julie and Jim's, and the other partner leans toward a relationship like Chuck and Lisa's. When needs differ significantly, it can be challenging (but not impossible) to design a relationship that meets each partner's need for freedom and security.

To better understand the options available to couples in conflict, let's visit the lives of a couple with very different freedom-security styles.

### **Eva and Jack Struggle to Find the Sweet Spot**

Eva, single for the past fifteen years, spent every Friday and Saturday night Salsa dancing. After she started dating Jack, Eva danced less often. As they approached marriage, Jack, eager to please his new wife, decided to take up Salsa. He took the lessons offered before the dance. At these dances everyone circulates, dancing with as many partners as possible. Couples are permitted to dance only the first and last dances together. It was crucial for Jack to learn the steps. After diligent effort and concentration, Jack found he lacked rhythm and grace. He was both out of step and stepping on toes. He struggled for three weeks to emerge from wallflower status, but failed. Jack declared, "That's it—never again!"

Eva faced a dilemma: Leave Jack behind, or give up dancing. At first, she stopped dancing, not wanting to risk Jack's displeasure. After three or four months, Eva was angry and resentful, which intensified as she watched reruns of Jack's favorite action movies or hockey games. Impatient, she made snide remarks. One night she blew up at him: "Next weekend I'm going dancing. It's not my problem that you have two left feet. Being a couch potato is hardly my idea of living."

Feeling demeaned by her words, Jack got furious. Luckily, though, he was more perceptive

than his action heroes and did not react. He wanted to clear his own confusion rather than risk compounding the problem. He felt conflicted. He wanted Eva's company, and he wasn't wild about her going dancing alone. He found himself thinking, *What husband "lets" his wife go dancing on Saturday nights without him?*

On the other hand, Jack felt selfish depriving the free-spirited Eva of something she loved. He decided to compromise. He told Eva he'd try to be okay with her dancing a couple of Saturday nights a month, even though a big part of him wanted her home with him. After a few months, Jack learned to handle his discomfort, accept Eva's need for freedom, and let go of his outmoded beliefs about marriage. He organized a group of buddies for solo Saturday sports' nights. Eva was grateful for the freedom to pursue her passion without feeling guilty. She admired Jack for working through his conflict. In time Eva and Jack were having their cake and eating it too in the sweet spot.

## **Freedom Styles in Relationships**

One of the most common maxims about relationships is that opposites attract. In my own experience that is true—sometimes. Like also attracts like. Some people seek a partner who is a mirror image of them. We're all different, and there's no one formula for success.

On the freedom-security continuum, your partner's needs may be similar to or quite different from yours. Let's explore the possible combinations of freedom-security styles and their advantages and disadvantages.

### ***Style 1: Freedom-Freedom Couple***

#### **Advantages**

Free to live the way they want without pressure;

Each understands the other's need for space;

Share similar desire for spontaneity, stimulation and risk;

Free to be their authentic selves;

Free to pursue their personal dreams;

Free to have own routines, friends, and other interests.

**Disadvantages**

Possible loss of connection or intimacy;

Difficulty synchronizing their lives together;

Relationship could lack cohesion.

*Style 2: Security-Security Couple*

**Advantages**

Similar needs for constancy and routines;

Neither has desire for high risk or spontaneity;

Emphasis on comfort within relationship;

Good potential for connection and intimacy;

Build dreams together.

**Disadvantages**

Relationship may feel stale or boring;

Possibility for low passion;

One partner may feel suffocated or stifled.

*Style 3: Freedom-Security Couple*

**Advantages**

Partners create a dynamic balance.

Potential to learn from one another;

Partner offers resources to the other to compensate for deficits.

**Disadvantages**

Differences in approach can be a source of conflict.

Potential for not understanding the other's perspective.

Were you able to identify the freedom style in your relationship? Do you feel a balance of

freedom and security that suits you? What needs tweaking for better balance? Is your partner satisfied with this balance? Be specific.

To stay in the sweet spot and maintain a workable balance of freedom and security can be elusive. A person's freedom-security style can change over a lifetime. A young person might want more security, and then at a later stage of life want more freedom. For some people, matching their own style with another's might be ideal. Others need the tension of the opposite to keep the juice flowing in the relationship.

Freedom brings with it a kind of insecurity and instability. How much freedom can a relationship tolerate and yet sustain itself? Everyday life tests the boundaries. For instance, is James really comfortable with Kate going out after work for drinks with her boss? Are you comfortable with your partner taking a vacation with friends? Can Jack actually feel good about his Saturday nights alone?

Over the years, I've heard clients complain of stifling relationships. They were bored or felt trapped. When appropriate I recommend, as antidotes for this malady, that they take or give their partners some freedom, be more spontaneous, and live outside their comfort zones. It brings a little edginess, sends a jolt of energy, and reminds the couple that vitality is possible in their relationship.

Freedom and secure connection can co-exist in love relationships. You *can* dance with your partner at the perfect spot on the tight rope. Sometimes you will teeter and move to your own default comfort zone. Yet you will find that by communicating and understanding each other's needs you will dance more often and teeter together. It's all about finding the right balance and being open to change as you move along in the journey of life together.