

Relating / 0314

Is Your Inner Child Keeping You Trapped in a Bad Relationship?

5 questions to ask yourself—the answers may help set you free

It happens when we see politicians repeatedly make the same self-destructive mistakes—think former legislator Anthony Weiner’s repeated sexting scandals. Or, we hear friends complain repeatedly about the horrible job they’re “stuck” in. Or, in a rare glimmer of insight, we wonder why we’re still hanging on to a “romance” that makes us miserable.

“When people seem mentally healthy and it looks like they could easily make a change that would make them happier, we’re absolutely baffled by why they don’t,” says Steven Jay Fogel, author of the new book *Your Mind Is What Your Brain Does for a Living* (www.stevenjayfogel.com).

When you’re the “stuck” person, the why may seem more evident: You’re scared, or you think, “If I just keep doing the right things, it will all work out.”

Either way, it’s likely they—and you—aren’t making a conscious choice at all, Fogel says.

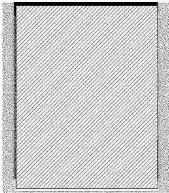
“We think we’re making decisions based

on the present, but we’re usually not. We tend to operate on automatic pilot, responding to situations based on the coping strategies and thinking patterns we developed in childhood,” he says.

“When those strategies are dysfunctional, we just keep repeating the same behaviors over and over again.”

The good news is that we can learn to recognize that “default” thinking and rewire the brain to change it, says Fogel.

What can you do to get yourself unstuck? Get started, he suggests, by answering these questions—in writing!



1. What is causing your pain? Think about whether you're in a relationship or job that's become less and less satisfying and increasingly painful over a long period. Describe in writing the elements of the relationship or situation that are persistently causing you pain and how long you've been experiencing these problems. Knowing that there are three ways to end your suffering—accept the situation, change it, or remove yourself from it—write down the reasons you're staying, even though you're suffering, and what is preventing you from choosing door one, two or three.

2. How are you interpreting your partner's behavior? If you repeatedly fight about the same issues, describe the issues. Think about whether you're unconsciously invest-

ing the issue with a meaning based on your "autopilot" thinking. For instance, if you're arguing because your partner is messy and ignores your requests to be neat, are you interpreting that as disrespect towards you? Do you further interpret that disrespect as a lack of love for you? Is it possible that your partner is just not a neat person and that has nothing to do with his feelings for you?

3. Do you have impulsive autopilot behaviors that are causing problems? We can often check the impulses that stem from our autopilot brain just by stopping to think before we act. Bursts of anger are one example; suppressed anger that turns into passive-aggressive behavior is another.

4. Do you feel shamed or blamed by your partner's

critical comments? Write down the comments accurately—as they were spoken. Then think mindfully about whether your partner was really shaming you or if you interpreted the comments in that way because of your own inner critic. If it was the former, have a conversation with the person about how you feel when this happens, and state that you'll be more open to the feedback if the criticism can be expressed objectively.

5. Did you bring a myth with you into the relationship? If so, describe the myth. For example, you might have believed that you will cure everything that's wrong with the other person, or that she will fix all of your problems. Describe how you came to believe that myth and what it would take for you to release it.