

**THE**

**How to Stop Hurting  
The People Who Love You**

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**Program**

*William E. Adams, Ph.D.*

***The Choices Program:***  
***How to Stop Hurting***  
***The People Who Love You***

*William E. Adams, Ph.D.*

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*The Choices Program:  
How to Stop Hurting  
The People Who Love You*

## Acknowledgements

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This book is dedicated to the men and women who shared their lives with me in the group room. They taught me everything I know about the concepts and skills in this book. Week by week they showed courage and dedication to the goal of making meaningful changes in their lives. Through their effort and feedback they taught me what worked and what didn't, and I'm sure I learned more from them than they ever did from me. In the process, they taught me how to be a counselor. Thank you.

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*I am today what my  
Choices were yesterday.*

*I will be tomorrow what my  
Choices are today.*

*(author unknown, but often quoted)*

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# Chapter 1

## Stay In “The Box”

*Key Concepts: Domestic violence doesn't just happen. Violence occurs when people attack each other rather than their problems. Violence stops when couples choose to “stay in the box.” The Box model will help you make better decisions in the future, avoid abuse, and resolve family problems.*

*Skill Building: Use “The Box” as a roadmap the next time problems and anger arise. Lay the foundation for a violence-free relationship by choosing to “stay in the box” during times of conflict.*

Evan slumped down on the sofa in my office, heartsick and dejected. He had plenty to feel bad about. A few weeks earlier, Evan had been arrested and convicted of spousal abuse after hitting his wife, Grace. The court ordered Evan to attend 52 weeks of domestic violence counseling and issued a protective order that barred him from any contact with Grace. Now, after twelve years of marriage, Grace wanted a divorce. Evan hadn't seen his children for weeks. On top of that, Evan lost his job while he was incarcerated. “I don't know what happened,” he said. “Everything was great when Grace and I got married. Now all we do is argue and fight. Somehow, things just got out of hand.”

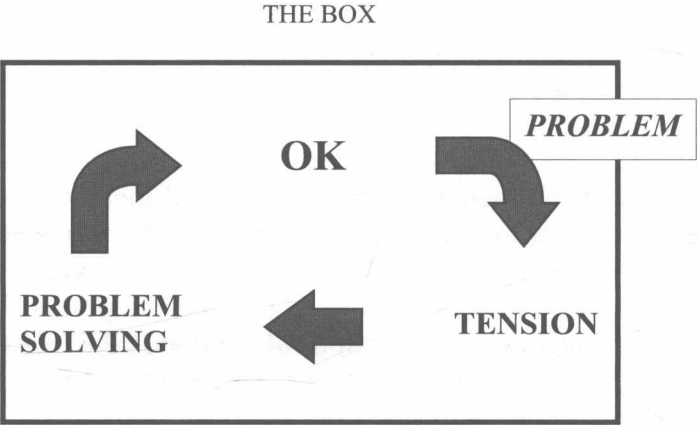
Evan is typical of the men and women who find their way to my office. Like Evan, most people are unaware of the crucial choices they have made. Even fewer understand how the choices make, day by day and year by year, slowly erode their relationship until nothing is left to save. How did Evan end up in jail? Who's to blame? Across town, Grace is struggling with questions of her own. She looks at photos taken on her honeymoon with Evan. It seems so long ago, like another lifetime. What happened to the two smiling people in the pictures? They seem so happy and in love. But that was before all the hurt and pain, before attack and counterattack became the norm, before the abuse.

What happened to Evan and Grace, and to thousands more like them? How did a loving relationship turn abusive? How did twelve years of choices sweep Evan from a honeymoon in Hawaii to a seat in the back of a police car? This book will answer these questions. It was written over the years with the help of hundreds of people who wanted to stop their abusive behavior and have violence-free relationships. There were also people in my groups who had no intention of changing. They also made their contribution to these chapters, albeit in a different way. They came from all walks of life, and you'll meet many of them in the pages that follow.

To understand what happened to Evan and Grace you need a map that shows the chain of events that led Evan from feeling “OK” to an act of physical abuse. You need a roadmap that shows you how verbal and physical abuse happens. Once you're familiar with the road to family violence, you can choose to avoid that road in the future. The

map in this chapter is called *The Box*. The Box will let you know where you are, what to expect next, and what road to take to avoid violence and resolve conflict. Like a navigator's chart, it will help you make wise choices during times of crisis and avoid unseen dangers around the corner that can be disastrous for you and your family.

It's tempting to blame abusive behavior on the problems in your relationship. This is a grave mistake. It's like a ship's captain blaming the rock for the shipwreck, rather than his own poor seamanship and navigation. In all relationships, periods of calm are broken by periods of tension and conflict. Alternating episodes of calm and conflict are a normal part of trying to live together. If handled properly, conflict is not destructive. Quite the contrary; conflict can make a relationship stronger if it results in problem solving and a greater understanding of each other. But if handled improperly, conflict can result in the abuse of family members, the destruction of the family, and, as with Evan, incarceration. Why do problems lead to violence in some relationships but not others? The Box below shows how problems are handled in violence-free relationships.



**OK: Periods Of Calm**

Let's examine the parts of the box more closely. Everything starts at the top of the box in the area marked *OK*. During the *OK* stage there are no serious problems to resolve. Everything may not be perfect, but you and your partner are generally satisfied with the way things are going. Like a table with four good legs, the relationship is balanced and stable. Enjoy this period of calm while it lasts. The calm *OK* period never lasts for long. It ends when a problem comes up.

**The Problem**

Following the arrows in the box, you see that things are *OK* until a problem comes up. As I stated earlier, problems are an inevitable part of living with another person. No two people are exactly alike. You each have your own expectations and

attitudes about how money should be spent, how much time should be spent with friends, and how leisure time should be used. You may differ about the proper division of household chores, the proper roles of men and women, sex, work, children, the desire to stay close to your extended family, future goals, or anything under the sun. You may even have differences about the way problems should be handled and how anger should be expressed.

Falling in love will not protect you from interpersonal problems. You were individuals before you were a couple. The struggle to cope with personal differences cannot be avoided; it's the price two people pay to be in a relationship. Personal differences are potential problems. Differences become a problem when they cause you or your partner to be dissatisfied with the way things are in the relationship.

**Tension: Things Are *Not* OK**

Problems cause tension between you and your partner. Things were OK before the problem came up, but they are definitely *not* OK now. *You know things aren't OK because there's a feeling of "tension" between the two of you that wasn't there before.* The word *tension*, as used here, is a generic word that refers to feelings of anger, frustration, resentment, jealousy, or any other feeling associated with anger.

**Tension Can Take Many Different Forms**

frustration	annoyance	defensiveness	insecurity
anger	resentment	indignation	irritation
jealousy	rage	bitterness	infuriation
spite	rivalry	exasperation	aggravation

**Problem Solving**

What you do now is extremely important. How you choose to behave when feelings of tension arise will determine, by and large, the type of relationship you will have. The important thing to understand is that you cannot get rid of feelings like anger by venting, lashing out, or hurting your partner. The only way to get rid of anger is to solve the problem causing it, by problem solving. Tension builds until the problem behind it is solved in a way that you and your partner find acceptable. Tension levels may go up and down, but the tension never goes completely away until the problem is solved. Even if you walk away and refuse to talk about it, the *tension* is still there because the *problem* is still there.

## What Happens When You Don't Solve Your Problems

When a problem comes up tension starts to build. Tension disconnects you from your partner. When this happens, the goal is to reconnect with your partner (get back to OK) by solving the problem. If you do that, the tension between the two of you will go away. *But let me make this point once more: **tension never goes away until the problem is solved. Problem solving is the only way to make things really OK again. When you feel tension (or anger, frustration, jealousy, etc.) between you and your partner, it means there is a problem that needs to be solved.***

The quality of your relationship is defined by the way you choose to handle problems and tension. Successful couples understand that the feeling of tension is a signal telling them that they need to work together as a team to resolve a problem. It is *not* a signal to vent anger or abuse each other. An effective problem solving strategy does NOT include yelling, throwing tantrums, or acting like a spoiled child. Instead, successful couples work together as a team. ***They attack the problem, not each other.*** They know that things will be OK again once the problem is solved. Actually, things will be better than they were before. Confidence in their relationship and their trust in each other is confirmed from the experience of working through a problem successfully. After all, they've demonstrated their ability to work together and successfully resolve a problem, and they know that they can do it again if they have to.

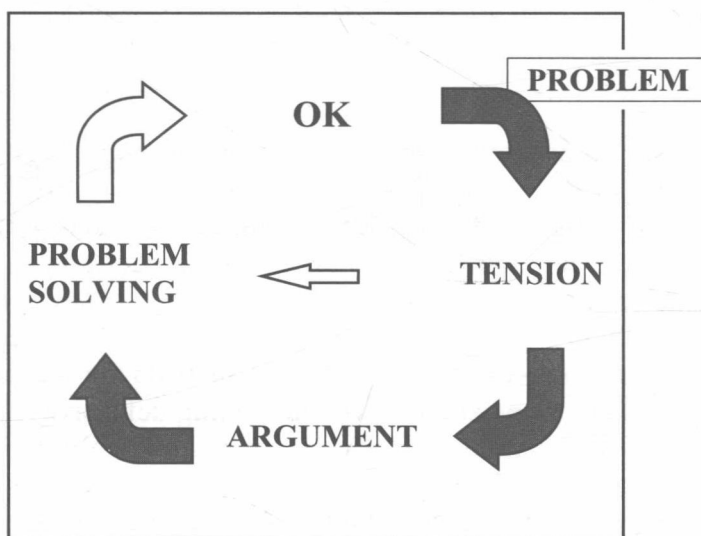
To sum it up, every couple has its share of problems. Whether your relationship flourishes or fails doesn't depend on whether there are problems. Rather, success depends on how you handle the problems that come up. Couples who have long-term, satisfying relationships have their share of problems just like everyone else. ***Their relationships work because they tend to be good problem solvers.*** They know that communication, respect, compromise, and negotiation get good results, while venting, yelling, and controlling tactics do not. Unfortunately, many people in relationships have yet to figure this out.

Problem solving isn't always easy. Maybe you don't agree that there is a problem, or you may not agree how to solve it. Perhaps you get defensive and hostile when you think you're being criticized. Also, real problems require a real solution, and that usually means that someone has to change in some way. Who will do the changing? Maybe you don't want to change; instead, you're determined to make your partner change. Perhaps you react to problems by blaming and finger pointing, or you may become rigid and controlling rather than trying to compromise and negotiate.

When a problem is handled this way, you and your partner end up on opposite sides of the fence. *You become adversaries instead of teammates*, and the tension grows. The problem becomes a wedge driving the two of you apart, making problem solving impossible. This is why some couples never really solve their problems; they only argue and fight about them. They never really get back to the OK zone. When this happens, the tension from unresolved problems builds up over months and years and bleeds over into new problems. They blow up over relatively minor problems, and they fight

constantly. Over time the softer feelings of love, support, and caring are covered with a heavy blanket of anger, mistrust, and resentment. Communication becomes increasingly hostile and abusive; each new abusive act and hostile word further erodes the relationship. The erosion continues until, like a beach washed away in a storm, there's nothing left. There is so much damage that the relationship can't be fixed. There's no relationship left to save. They can never again get back to *OK*. But we're getting ahead of ourselves.

When the solution to a problem is not readily apparent to both partners an argument often begins, as shown by the dark arrows in the illustration below.



### Argument

Notice that an *Argument* lies inside the box. However, it is important to know when an argument stops and a fight (or abuse) begins. ***An argument, as discussed here, does not involve verbal abuse or violence.*** You'd be surprised what some people call an argument. Helen is a good example. One day Helen drove to the apartment of her boyfriend, Tom. When she got to Tom's apartment she saw him talking to a voluptuous young girl outside. Helen flew into a jealous rage. She stomped on the gas pedal and drove straight for Tom, who saw her coming. Tom's no dummy. He jumped onto one of the cars parked nearby. Helen slammed into the car Tom was perched on and threw her car into reverse for another try. Tom nimbly jumped from car to car as Helen repeatedly tried to turn him into road-kill. This went on until the police arrived. After her release from jail the court sent Helen to me for counseling. When I asked her what happened on the day of her arrest, she said meekly, "I had an argument with my boyfriend."

In an argument there is no attempt to abuse (or in Helen's case, to kill) your partner. Anger may be expressed during an argument, but it is expressed without threats, name-calling, or physical violence. You can tell someone you're angry without telling

them off, and that’s the difference between an argument and a fight. During an argument you respect your partner. In a fight, however, you disrespect you partner. If you engage abusive, hostile, or disrespectful behavior you are *not* arguing. You are fighting. The chart below shows the difference between behavior that we will refer to as “in the box” (arguing) or “out of the box” (fighting, or verbal abuse).

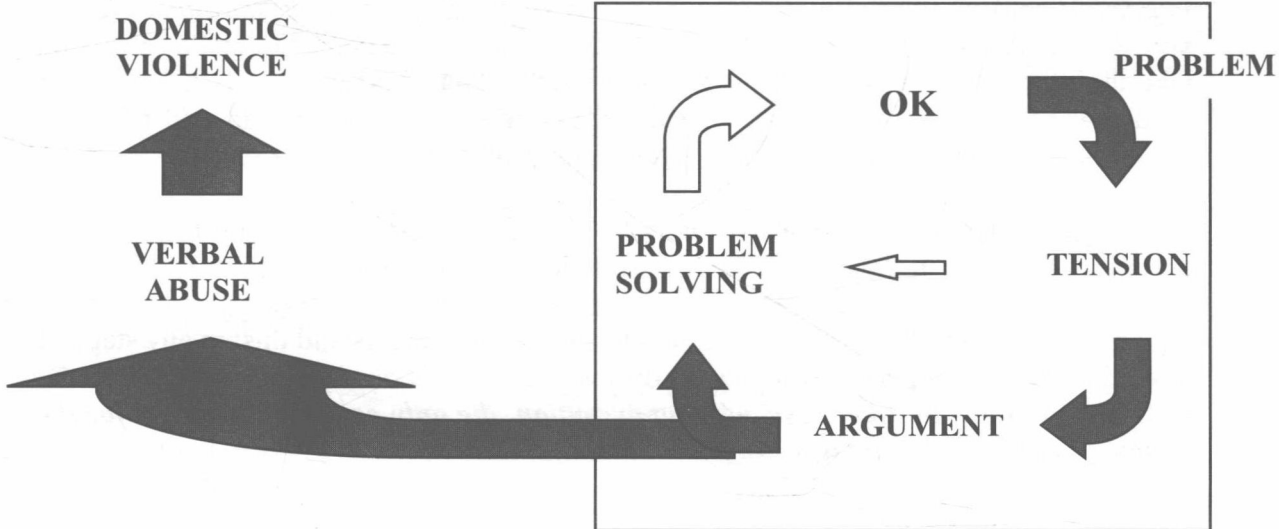
In The Box	Out Of The Box
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Keep your tone of voice down</li><li>• Show respect in the words you choose</li><li>• See yourselves as teammates</li><li>• Constructive focus: Attack the problem, not your partner</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Yell and shout</li><li>• Swear, insult your partner, call your partner names</li><li>• See your partner as your adversary</li><li>• Destructive focus: Attack your partner, forget the problem</li></ul>

It’s not realistic to expect that you or your partner will always avoid arguments and *appropriate* expressions of anger. Nor should you always try. When each of you assumes personal responsibility for expressing anger in a non-abusive way positive change can occur in the relationship. Couples that respect and care for each other understand that anger can be expressed in a respectful way. They can tell their partner that they are angry without “telling them off.” When people assume responsibility for expressing their anger in a non-abusive way, their partners do not feel personally attacked or threatened. They listen to one another without getting defensive. They come to trust each other well enough to express themselves and their feelings openly. A better understanding of the each other’s needs and expectations is the result. The better you understand each other, the more effective you will be at problem solving. We will have more to say about problems and problem solving in the chapters to come. For now, it is important to remember the difference between an *argument* and a *fight*.

In abusive relationships, the focus is not on solving the problem. Rather, one person (the abuser) vents anger towards his or her partner in a hurtful and disrespectful manner. The abuser is not interested in resolving problems or working as a team. Instead, he or she is motivated to control, harm, humiliate, and intimidate. The abusive person attacks their partner rather than the problem, as shown in the chart of *The Box* on the following page.

Take time to study *The Box* carefully. It’s the model that you’ll learn to follow during times of anger and conflict with your partner. The Box will tell you where you are in the conflict and help you make wise decisions. Most importantly, it will tell you when you’re *in The Box* (making constructive choices) and when you’re *out of The Box* (making destructive choices).

## The Box



The dark arrows in *The Box* show the road that leads to abuse and violence. If you don't want to go down that road again, you'll want to remember this roadmap. *Memorize it and use it during times of conflict.* That's the only way you will recognize the road you're on and tell yourself, "I've been down this road before. I know where it goes, and I don't want to go there again." The Box will help you make better choices in the future. Let's follow the arrows in The Box to see how problems lead to violence. Tension starts to build when a problem comes up. An argument follows. When tension reaches a certain point the problem is forgotten and the abuser gets "out of the box" and starts to attack the partner. In most instances the attack starts with verbal abuse, which is usually the first sign that you're out of the box. The verbal abuse greatly escalates the anger between the couple. Verbal abuse is like throwing a match into a pool of gasoline – it's just as explosive.

### Verbal Abuse Has Many Forms

yell  
shout  
insult  
name call  
threaten

harangue  
sarcasm  
curse  
berate  
belittle

chew out  
denigrate  
bully  
swear  
insult

humiliate  
offend  
nettle  
rant  
scold

rip into  
lambaste  
put down  
castigate  
condescend

## Getting Out Of The Box: Verbal Abuse

After listening to so many people relate the chain of events that led to violence against their partner, I am convinced that in the vast majority of cases verbal abuse “*unlocked the door*” for the violence that followed. ***One of the most beneficial and important resolutions that you can make is to stop engaging in verbal abuse.*** When you become angry or find yourself in an argument you have a choice to make. Will you take the road toward violence by engaging in verbal abuse, or will you take the higher road toward problem solving and conflict resolution? Whichever road you take, the choice is yours alone and you must take full responsibility for it.

Verbal and physical abuse usually occurs after a period of tension-building and arguing, especially in the early stages of a relationship. But that is not always the case. In time, a person may begin to verbally and physically abuse the partner with little or no argument phase, and the partner is helpless to stop it. But understand this: in any stage of a relationship, every person who abuses does so *because he or she wants to; because he or she chooses to.* ***In every case, without exception, the only person responsible for the violence is the one doing the hitting.***

## Stay In The Box

The goal of this book is to help you stop abusive behavior by staying inside the boxed area on the first chart. ***We call this “staying in The Box.”*** As long as you stay in The Box you won’t engage in abusive behavior. To accomplish this goal, you must be aware of your own words and behavior, especially words and behaviors that are abusive. *Usually, the first warning that you are outside of The Box will be your own verbally abusive language.*

Verbal abuse escalates anger, and it’s destructive to you and your partner. As we have discussed, verbal abuse is often the beginning of an episode of domestic violence. It is an indication that you are out of the box and moving towards a violent incident. When you find yourself becoming verbally abusive, step back and cool off. *Use your head, rather than your hands,* and take a *time-out* to regain control of yourself. More will be said about using the time-out procedure and problem-solving techniques in the following sessions. For now, familiarize yourself with The Box. Develop an awareness of where you are on the chart during times of conflict, so that you can stop yourself when you need to.

# HOMework ASSIGNMENT

## CHAPTER 1

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It's important that you become very familiar with *The Box*. It is the model that will guide you through future conflicts, and the chapters that follow will build upon The Box. This exercise is designed to help you apply The Box to your individual situation. Think about the last time that you were abusive to your partner and answer the following questions completely. Remember to stay focused on your own behavior.

- 1) What was the first sign that there was tension between you and your partner?  
What did you feel?
- 2) Describe the problem that created the tension between you.
- 3) What did you say or do to attempt to solve the problem?
- 4) Looking back, what was the first thing you said or did to your partner that was out of the box (swearing, yelling, threatening, saying hurtful things, etc.)? Be specific about what you said or did.
- 5) How long did the verbal abuse continue until the violence started?
- 6) What acts of abuse and physical violence did you engage in? Be specific.

