

# WHO NOT TO MARRY

**Imago is the new couples therapy Oprah calls 'life-changing'**

**BY JULIA MCKINNELL** • In the basement of a private home in Wellington, N.S., Toronto relationship therapist Maureen Brine is on her hands and knees on the floor. She is adjusting the arms, legs and heads of a couple from Halifax, who are also on the floor. John and Margaret (not their real names), parents of four children, have been married for 35 years. Brine straightens one of John's legs and bends the other. Margaret curls into a fetal position like a human cashew and Brine instructs her to lie across John's lap, her ear propped on John's chest directly over his heart. John looks as though he is breastfeeding Margaret. Brine tells Margaret to listen for the beat of John's heart.

Nine married couples have paid \$750 for a 20-hour seminar, led by Brine and local therapist Judy Bates, titled "Getting the Love You Want." The workshop, based on a book of the same title, teaches couples how to use the love-hate energy within their marriage to move past hate into deep, lasting love.

Harville Hendrix, author of the book *Getting the Love You Want* (which last week hit No. 2 on Amazon's bestseller list), and his wife, Helen LaKelly Hunt, have an unusual theory about why people are attracted to each other. "You fell in love because your old brain had your partner confused with your parents." Hendrix's parent theory and process of relationship problem-solving is known as Imago Relationship Therapy. Two weeks ago Oprah Winfrey called it "life-changing." Brine says Oprah credits Imago with saving her relationship with her long-time partner, Stedman Graham. Alanis Morissette is so enthusiastic about the method she's completed training as an Imago therapy educator. "I'm so grateful to Imago," Morissette says in an Imago press release. "There's a comfort in knowing that I'm not alone and that there are many other couples that are experiencing similar conflicts. It really allowed me to reframe what love meant." Imago therapy is now practised in 21 countries, including Croatia, Bolivia and Namibia.

Minutes before the floor exercise in Nova Scotia, Margaret had confessed to the group the details of her biggest problem with John. It has been going on for years, she said, but

has “fossilized” over the last five.

“Whether we make love is not the prime issue,” says Margaret. She simply wishes that when she goes to bed at night John would accompany her upstairs, instead of staying downstairs to watch TV. Margaret says that when the problem began, she used to fall asleep by herself, then awake feeling cold, at which point she would go and get John. A few years back, she told herself to be a “big girl” and began taking a hot water bottle to bed and not bothering to get her husband. Last year, she told John she felt like a widow: “I feel really lonely. I feel like I’m not interesting enough to be with. You know, the physical comfort of being in bed is not a draw for him anymore.”

Watching Margaret and John on the floor nine hours into the therapy, are the eight other married couples, who are seated in chairs in an oval around the room. The couples have already witnessed Margaret and John’s “couple’s dialogue,” which Hendrix says is the central therapeutic process in Imago relationship therapy. The couple’s dialogue incorporates a process called “mirroring.” Couples sit in chairs facing each other. The “sender” of the message talks to the “receiver” in short simple bites and then the “receiver” of the message repeats or “mirrors” back the message. The process goes on until the “sender” feels he or she has been understood. Hendrix’s book explains that the dialogues train couples to “listen accurately to what [their] partner is saying, to understand and validate [their] partner’s point of view.” The dialogue process might feel cumbersome at first, says Brine, but it is necessary for accurate communication. Therapist Judy Bates’s husband, Steven Bates, a scientist, is sitting in on the seminar. He notes that the couple’s dialogue concept is continually finding new applications; he’s even heard of an Israeli and a Palestinian using couple’s dialogue to discuss politics.

Most of the 10 couples get a chance to practise in front of the group. Problems range from sexual unresponsiveness to non-stop arguing. In one exercise, a husband is instructed to role-play his wife’s father. The woman tells the grim tale of how her father drowned a litter of kittens. “I don’t know how you could do that,” the woman says to her husband.

During the “holding” exercise with John and Margaret, Brine asks Margaret to think

back to her childhood. How did she feel? What are her emotional wounds? Margaret’s voice drops to a near whisper, her head turned into John’s chest. As the seventh and middle child in a family of 14 kids, Margaret says she often felt overlooked. She felt she couldn’t ask



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for the things she wanted. John “mirrors” back Margaret’s childhood recollections. Later, before the seminar ends, John will invite Margaret to sit on his lap to receive some of the affection she missed growing up. In his book, Hendrix writes that the person you marry will “stir within a deep sense of recognition: ‘This is the one who will make up for the wounds of the past.’”

In Wellington, Brine tells the group, “I want to help you come to the realization that

the frustrations you have with your partner are exactly the frustrations you had with your parents.” The purpose of falling in love—“romantic love,” says Brine—is to connect two incompatible people. “Incompatible,” she emphasizes. “In Imago, we say that incompatibility is the grounds for committed partnership. We need to be with someone who is very different from who we are,” she says, in order to heal childhood wounds, in order to become complete.

Driving to lunch on Sunday, John and Margaret reflect on the previous day’s session. Did the dialogue help? Are they any further along in resolving the TV issue? John makes an incriminating admission. “First of all,” he says with regard to staying downstairs at night, “I am withdrawing from the world, not from Margaret.”

“The other thing is,” he says, his wife looking at him but saying nothing from the passenger seat, “I would use Internet images, pornographic images, as a way of self-stimulation, a way of self-pleasure.” Margaret says nothing, although she’s heard this before. In fact, two years ago Margaret sought personal counselling “for the whole thing.”

“First, it’s pleasure,” says John, who has now parked the car outside a Tim Hortons. “Then it’s shame,” he continues, staring out the front windshield. “And then I don’t want to go to bed if Margaret is awake. I get myself into an adolescent state trying to deal with the guilt of being a bad boy. I’m at a very young mental stage when I’m doing this,” he says. Margaret is looking at him, listening. “Maybe around age 15 or so,” says

John. “So what the hell would I want to go to bed with somebody who’s over 50 years of age for?” There is silence in the car.

“John has a problem,” says Margaret. “It’s been a source of anxiety and pain for him, pleasure and pain, way before he met me.” But, says John, “I’m feeling a lot more new life and new hope, and the Imago thing will add to that. It’s been a long time since we’ve spent this amount of time focusing on each other. It comes at a great time for us.” M

#### HOW THEY DO IT IN...

#### RUSSIA: MOSCOW SOCCER IS NO PLACE FOR A PIG

Moscow police know how to prevent a riot. They refused to let Vladimir Kisilev, a farmer from St. Petersburg, enter a soccer stadium with a pig—police barred it because St. Petersburg fans’ incendiary label for Moscow fans is “pig.” The animal had just won a prize at a Moscow show; Kisilev says he brought it to the game because he had nowhere to store it. “I almost [got] it into the grounds in a bag, but it started grunting and police noticed.”