

Big Picture Partnering

WITHOUT A CLEAR VISION, EVEN A STRONG LOVE CAN LOSE ITS LUSTER. HERE'S HOW TO REFRAME YOUR RELATIONSHIP FOR A BETTER FUTURE.

By JAN HOISTAD, PHD

Your heart fluttered with the excitement. You couldn't believe your good luck. You'd met the person of your dreams, and it seemed like you and your partner had all the time and energy in

the world for creating new hopes and plans for a beautiful life together. You were in love, and the future looked amazing.

Then you settled down. All too soon, the warmth you felt for your partner got buried under a pile of laundry and a stack of bills. Now putting the passion and commitment back in your love life seems as likely as losing 15 pounds by Tuesday.

For many couples, including many I have coached, the initial dreams that brought them together — the Big Picture visions — tend to get lost amid the demands of day-to-day living. So what can you do to love well and live well together, beyond the basics of making a home, raising healthy children and earning a salary? Tune in to the Big Picture. Examine your relationship in the context of a broader vision. Then map out a shared vision of your future and work toward it together.

Yes, it takes some work, but developing a long-range plan through a deliberate process like the one that follows can do wonders for a healthy relationship, and reinvigorate a fading one.

YOUR RELATIONSHIP STYLE

No one "just knows" how to have a good relationship, and there isn't just one way to go about it. Before most couples see the Big Picture, they instinctively default to one of three styles of relating:

- **Traditional Style.** One person takes the lead and makes most decisions for the relationship. Sometimes they split up lead roles, with one making decisions inside the home while the other takes charge outside of it. Your parents or grandparents probably interacted this way. But for many people today, such inequalities make it difficult to feel true intimacy.
- **Merged Style.** Couples fuse their personalities rather than developing full individual identities. High school sweethearts who marry young (and older couples who have been together for decades) often relate this way. They sometimes finish each other's sentences and rarely disagree. But because they seemingly share a single personality, they tend not to develop as full, autonomous individuals.
- **Roommate Style.** Each partner makes decisions unilaterally, often without consulting the other. The expectation is that each person will adjust to whatever decisions are made by the other. Both partners may be wholly developed individuals, capable of intimate connections, but such connections tend to happen at random. Roommate style is an attempt at equality that sometimes works — but not always.

BIG PICTURE ESSENTIALS

Longitudinal studies have corroborated what many of us know instinctively: Developing and enjoying satisfying relationships is a fundamental measure of a fulfilling life. But nurturing and maintaining such a relationship can be challenging. That's led some couples to seek out a more gratifying alternative to traditional-style, merged-style or roommate-style relating.

An emerging fourth style of relating that many couples find appealing is what I call Big Picture partnering. It helps a couple deepen their appreciation for one another, have more fun together and keep their passionate spark alive and well, while also making clear headway toward both their individual and shared goals. Big Picture partnering is based on a set of practices and principles that help keep you and your partner feeling continuously connected and equipped to handle whatever stresses life happens to throw your way. The Big Picture methodology shows you how to:

1. Create and maintain positive feelings between you.
2. Talk together regularly, and take turns listening.
3. Regularly renew your commitment to one another — and to your relationship.
4. Resolve conflicts and create new options together through dialogue and imagination.
5. Make win-win decisions together.
6. Pull your weight in the partnership, no matter what your partner is doing.
7. Make and keep clear agreements with one another.
8. Remind yourselves that partnering is a joint effort.
9. Address any problem in your relationship *together* — whether it's "yours," "mine" or "ours."
10. Stay committed to the Big Picture partnering style over time.

SETTING YOUR SIGHTS

With a commitment to Big Picture partnering and the 10 Essentials supporting your relationship, you can set a course for the destination you most desire. The following exercise will help you and your partner put your heads together to develop your Big Picture vision:

- **TALK ABOUT WHAT YOU'VE CREATED** with your partner, the sum of your lives together. To get started, put a description of your current relationship down on paper, then compare notes with each other.
- **WRITE YOUR VISION** of your life together one year from now. Where will you live? How will you spend your time? What kind of people will be in your life? How will you feel? If you have kids, how will they influence your life? And most important, what will your relationship be like if it's thriving?
- **SHARE THIS VISION** with your partner. Take turns listening to each other and offering deep detail.
- **WORK TOGETHER** to write a vision statement that describes the future you want to create. You might even want to create a collage by snipping pictures from magazines and gluing them to a big piece of cardboard.
- **MAKE THREE LISTS** using your vision statement as a guideline: Envisioning the coming year, develop a list of your individual goals, your relationship goals and, if you have children, your family goals. For each one, detail the tasks you'd like to accomplish in the next year. Be realistic, but ambitious.
- **SHARE YOUR LISTS.** Spend time talking about the bigger vision you have for your life together and how these dreams and goals fit that vision. (If you hear things on your partner's list that differ from your own, keep an open mind.) Listen for your shared ideas and values, even if you are using different words to express them.

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- **MAKE A MASTER LIST** of the win-win goals you can believe in and work toward together. Bring your separate lists to the table and make a new combined list with “your goals,” “my goals,” “our mutual goals” and, if applicable, “our family goals” for the coming year.
- **CHOOSE TWO GOALS**, with your partner, from each category. Are they achievable? These are the goals you should prioritize and start working on. But don’t toss your master list: In the coming months, as you accomplish each goal, replace the completed one with another from your list.
- **BRAINSTORM SOME BABY STEPS** you are each willing to take, starting today, to achieve your goals together.
- **CHOOSE THREE ACTION STEPS**, related to each goal, that you can start this week: Agree to be accountable and to begin your action steps immediately. Some will be done individually; some will be done together.
- **TAKE TIME** — three to six months — to experiment and explore within this process. You’ll find that you love some outcomes, are indifferent about others and actually decide to abandon a few results as you test your dreams.
- **LOOK BACK AND FORWARD** every three or four months to reevaluate and refine your vision, goals and action steps. Set aside time together each month to assess where you are now, to review how far you’ve come and to choose your next steps toward your goals. Make this a celebration of your accomplishments (even the little ones), and reward yourselves by doing something special together.

As you work to share and realize your vision, **you’ll discover that the two of you become closer and closer.** What could be better than sharing your biggest dreams with the person you love the most?

ON YOUR WAY

You’ll know you are well on your way to achieving your Big Picture partnership when you are both sharing ideas, agreeing to try new things, experimenting and exploring ways to move toward your bigger dreams together. You’ll know you have a common vision when both of you are content with the words you use to describe it, and when you’re both finding satisfaction in the direction your life together is taking.

As you work to share and realize your vision, you’ll discover that the two of you become closer and closer. What could be better than sharing your biggest dreams with the person you love the most and building on those dreams together? Go ahead: Dare to be great, fulfill your mission and achieve your wildest dreams as a couple.

Jan Hoistad, PhD, is a licensed psychologist, coach and counselor working with individuals, couples and business teams for more than 25 years. She is author of *Big Picture Partnering: 16 Weeks to a Rock-Solid Relationship* (Twofold Publications, 2004) and the creator of *Living Your Dreams Together: Conversation Cards for Couples*.



RESOURCES

BOOKS

The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work by John M. Gottman and Nan Silver (Three Rivers Press, 2000)

Why Marriages Succeed or Fail: And How You Can Make Yours Last by John M. Gottman (Simon and Schuster, 1995)

Your Life as Art by Robert Fritz (Newfane Press, 2002)

Big Picture Partnering: 16 Weeks to a Rock-Solid Relationship by Jan Hoistad, PhD (Twofold Publications, 2004)

WEB

<http://marriage.rutgers.edu/about.htm> — The National Marriage Project at Rutgers University is a resource for relationship research, education and support.

www.smartmarriages.com — The Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education is a well-respected resource for relationship education that includes a national directory of educational resources for couples and an email newsletter.

www.bigpicturepartnering.com — Jan Hoistad’s Web site offers books and products including an e-newsletter, telephone coaching, online classes and workshop information.