

RELATIONSHIP BOOT CAMP



Attention! On a mission to protect their marriage, one woman and her spouse enlist in a stay-in-love seminar. Their story will help you fight less and kiss more.

By Jenna McCarthy Photographs by John Dolan

I thrive on intense, immersive, change-your-life-in-48-hours types of experiences. Spa weekend? Definitely. Spinning marathon? Bring it on. The occasional crash diet? Guilty. (I know, I know—it's not exactly healthy.) So it's no surprise that I happily agreed to attend a three-day Relational Life Skills Seminar designed to improve the bond I share with my husband, Joe.

"Look around at the faces in this room," the leader begins, pausing for effect. There are about 60 of us squished into a giant circle, shivering from an excess of air-conditioning that permeates the hotel conference room. We oblige, probably because the majority of us have spent the equivalent of a mortgage payment (\$1,500 a couple) for this relationship boot camp. None of us knows exactly what we're in for. An emotional ass kicking? Touchy-feely group therapy? Unmannered mediation? "In three days, when I ask you to repeat this exercise," he says of the audience, full of furrowed eyebrows and folded arms, "you'll see something entirely different."

"He" is Terry Real, best-selling author and founder of the Relational Life Institute (it sounds a little Heaven's Gate-ish to me, too) in Arlington, Massachusetts. He's also a tough-talking relationship pro with a reputation for rescuing even the most damaged unions, but I don't know this yet. I haven't read his books, and truth be told, I'm here without a marital crisis to confront, simply to see if a mostly happy couple can benefit from 72 hours of intensive introspection and what I imagine will be far too much sharing.

Not that we don't have anything to divulge. Yes, Joe and I are content, but like anyone locked in holy matrimony for eight years, I'm not above admitting our partnership has issues. We have two preschool-aged daughters, and anyone who has children knows they are darling little crumb-covered breeding grounds for marital conflict. Sure, we agree on most of the deal-breaking stuff—money, sex, paper over plastic—but we're human. We have plenty of petty, frustrating spats (a recurring one: He "accidentally" calls me his mother's name when he's pissed, and I "accidentally" slam every cabinet door while muttering obscenities). And we can nag, name-call and nitpick with the best of them. So here we are.

"We've been to 22 therapists in 22 years," one woman I'll call Lisa announces by way of an introduction. (I've used real names only with permission; all others are pseudonyms.) "None of them did a thing. This is our last shot." Couple after couple present themselves with assessments that are equally blunt and bleak, and many of us are already reaching for tissue boxes stationed about the room. "This workshop is our 25th-anniversary gift to each other," a soft-spoken man tells us. Before the group gets too *verklemt*, he adds devilishly, "I wanted a flat-screen TV."

If this is relationship basic training, I am Private Benjamin. But instead of wondering, Where are the yachts and the condos? I'm thinking, Where are the couples like us? There are three—maybe four—I'd consider kindred spirits (i.e., not on the brink of breakup or sleeping in different ZIP codes), and it occurs to me that routine relationship maintenance is like broccoli for breakfast: possible but not common. Many couples seem to seek help only when they can't take it anymore, at which point they need a lot of soul searching (or a miracle) to begin to repair the damage.

Terry Real starts with a lecture on the principles of what he terms relational living. The core belief is all respect, all the time. "There's nothing you ever need to say or do that can't be said or done with respect," he insists. "You can defend yourself, but you must do it with kindness and without shaming your partner."

In the workshop setting, this is not always easy to do. One exercise asks each half of the couple to draft the core negative image of the other. "Your partner's CNI of you isn't really you," Real insists. "It's an exaggerated version of you at your worst." Somehow knowing it's "exaggerated" only slightly mitigates the pain of hearing that—at my lowest moments—Joe considers me "cold, controlling and manipulative." To his credit, Joe accepts my take on his evil twin—"nasty, withdrawn and passive-aggressive"—with a smirk and a nod. (See how passive-aggressive he can be?)

After each couple has painstakingly and privately ("No sharing!" Real demands) crafted these dreadful descriptions, we break into