

Couple Recovery Map Card Deck Manual

Written and Designed by

Robert Navarra, Psy.D., M.A.C., Certified Gottman Therapist

in collaboration with

The Gottman Institute, Inc.

COUPLE RECOVERY MAP CARD DECKS

PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING INSTRUCTIONS BEFORE USING THE RECOVERY MAP CARD DECKS

Why Couples Need to Talk About Recovery

Dr. John Gottman's research indicates that a powerful predictor of relationship stability is whether partners feel understood by each other and are interested in learning about each other's world. It's as if the Masters of Relationship have developed a map of their partner's inner world of thoughts, feelings, ideas, and aspirations; a recognition and understanding of the things that are important to the partner.

My own research at the Mental Research Institute (MRI) in Palo Alto, California, led to creating the "Couple Recovery Development Approach" (CRDA), a theory to explain the changes and challenges couples face in recovery. It turns out that the CRDA closely aligns with and is consistent with the research-based Sound Relationship House (SRH) model developed by Julie Gottman, Ph.D. and John Gottman, Ph.D., which evolved from John's original research. While the CRDA model is a theory to explain the challenges and tasks in developing a successful couple recovery, the model lacked interventions. By blending these models the CRDA model now had interventions with adaptations from the SRH model aimed specifically for couples impacted by substance use and behavioral disorders. The Couple Recovery Map Card Decks is one of these interventions.

The goals in developing the Couple Recovery Map Card Decks are to help couples:

1. deepen understanding about how recovery fits into each partner's life individually and as a couple
2. learn about what's important to each partner and to "update" each other on how things are going
3. identify and address things that are going well and issues that need attention
4. talk about and manage a couple recovery that fits each individual's needs and the relationship needs

Wait, I'm Not the One with the Addiction: How Am I in Recovery?

For some couples the non-addicted partner may not identify with the term "being in recovery", but in fact, both partners and the relationship have been affected by the substance use or compulsive behavioral disorder and by recovery. For those that may not relate to the word recovery, consider the concept and perspective of your own "wellness" as the focus for these discussions. In the context of the Couples Recovery Map card Decks, the words recovery and wellness can be used interchangeably.

Therefore, it is very important for BOTH partners to share and understand the impact of recovery (or wellness) on each other and on the relationship, and to acknowledge and address individual and relationship needs going forward.

Why Couples Need to Talk Sooner Than Later

Active substance use and compulsive behavioral disorders are characterized by denial, blame, and minimization. Often described as “the elephant in the living room,” addiction is seen, but not talked about. Recovery begins when denial breaks down and when steps are taken to change life patterns in ways that support abstinence and healthy behavior. These individual changes usually represent major shifts not only in the person’s life, but also in their partner’s life and in the relationship.

Couples are often discouraged from talking to each other about recovery and how it impacts their relationship, especially in early recovery. Without guidelines, most couples simply don’t have a model for how to talk about recovery in a healthy way. Common recovery approaches stress individual recovery, but unfortunately do not account for the reality that recovery affects the relationship—and vice versa. At best, the couple relationship is perhaps acknowledged, but the idea of focusing on the relationship, especially in the first year of recovery, is seen as a threat to individual recovery. Regrettably, the effect of this approach is to make recovery the new elephant in the living room—the thing that couples know is there but can’t talk about.

It turns out that there is no empirical evidence supporting the position that couples work should be avoided in early recovery! In fact, research suggests just the opposite, that relationship health and wellness is one of the strongest predictors of successful long-term recovery.

How Does Couple Recovery Fit with Individual Recovery?

Couple recovery does not replace or minimize in any way the importance of individual recovery. A relational approach to recovery includes a strong emphasis on supporting each partner’s recovery, while at the same time accounts for addressing relationship needs.

Central to couple recovery is the belief that each person is responsible for their own recovery, but both partners are responsible for the relationship. While “codependency” is characterized by unhealthy (but understandable – no judgment here) adaptations to addiction, “interdependency” in relationships is healthy and is characterized by having good boundaries and the ability to discuss and support individual needs and relationship needs without blame and without either partner taking on all the responsibility.

We know from research that stable relationships are associated with better long-term recovery outcomes. Being able to talk to each other about what’s important to each partner provides opportunities for partners to understand each other’s needs, provide support, and create ways to integrate individual recovery needs and relationship needs.

C.A.R.E.—Couples Addiction Recovery Empowerment

A new recovery movement, Couple Addiction Recovery Empowerment (CARE), is a concept or approach in recovery that advocates addressing three recoveries concurrently: both individual recoveries, and the couple recovery. Recovery may be from a substance use or compulsive behavioral disorder. Central to the CARE concept is the position that each person is responsible for their own recovery, but both partners are responsible for the relationship. This concept is easily extended to apply to any serious medical or mental health issue that has “invaded” the relationship with partners addressing the reality of the impact of that disorder and the process of managing (recovering from) it, be it cancer, chronic pain, bipolar disorder, etc.

Table of Contents

1. Speaker and Listener Guidelines for Using Recovery Map Card Decks

Roles are defined in a speaker and listener format for sharing thoughts, questions, and needs as related to both individual and couple recovery.

2. My Recovery - My Wellness Card Deck Instructions

Using the My Recovery - My Wellness Card Deck, partners select cards that reflect something about their own recovery and wellness that they feel is important for the partner to know.

3. Your Recovery - Your Wellness Card Deck Instructions

Using the Your Recovery – Your Wellness Card Deck, partners select questions to ask their partner to better understand and support what’s happening in their partner’s world of recovery and wellness.

4. Couple Recovery Card Deck Instructions

Using the Couple Recovery Card Deck, the couple selects cards to discuss how each partner feels recovery has affected the relationship, and to acknowledge changes that have taken place since starting recovery—including what has improved and what has been a challenge.

5. Rituals of Connection Card Deck Instructions

Using the Developing Rituals of Connection Card Deck, partners select cards that can be used to create a dialogue for talking about and (re)establishing rituals in their relationship. Rituals are defined as activities couples create that bring meaning and predictability to the relationship. Rituals hold relationships and family life together through shared meaning and feelings of belonging that create cohesiveness to couple and family identity.

1. Speaker and Listener Guidelines for Using Recovery Map Card Decks

Instructions: Use the following guidelines for the Recovery Map card decks that define the speaker and listener roles. It is important to try to stay in these roles until the speaker feels understood, and then switch roles with the listener becoming the speaker.

Speaker Guidelines

Share only what you are comfortable sharing. See if you can identify at least one or more feelings you have about what you are sharing. The key is to focus on yourself, not your partner, describe your thoughts, feelings, and needs.

In disclosure, there are different levels of sharing of details and specifics. It is appropriate to limit disclosure to what feels comfortable.

For example, if you share about something you are struggling with, try to identify what's happening for you and how you feel about it. For example, "I am nervous about tomorrow's office party and how I might exit if I feel uncomfortable about the drinking part." If you are not comfortable talking about the specific content, you could say "I am thinking through how to handle a situation differently."

If you share something positive about what is happening in your recovery, you could identify what positive thing happened and how you felt about it. For example, "I had a good meeting tonight. Several people spoke about struggles with perfectionism, and I see how I too really raise the bar for myself and put pressure on myself to not accept my imperfections. It helped to focus on the idea of progress, not perfection." Sharing less, for example, could sound something like this: "I had a good meeting this evening, several things people said really hit home."

Finally, while there are different levels of sharing, there are also different reasons. You may simply want to update your partner on what's happening, or you may have a need or a request for your partner. For example:

1. "I just want you to listen and understand and know what's going on with me."
2. If you want something from your partner beyond just listening, you could say: "I would like help with (specific request)" or, "I would like to (name what you want to have happen)." For example, "Somebody shared stuff tonight that hit close to home. I would like a bit of time alone to just decompress. Thanks."

The listener should decide if the request is neutral, helpful, or harmful to his/her own recovery – wellness.

Listener Guidelines

Take this opportunity to deepen empathy and **just listen** to what your partner is saying. Try not to interrupt or add your own thoughts and feelings. The goal is to empathize and validate your partner's thoughts, feelings, and needs. This is the gold standard in communication!

Empathy: You communicate to your partner that you understand what your partner is expressing and feeling, **and that you care**.

Empathy has several steps:

- Listen to what partner is feeling, not just saying– **focus on emotions**
- Put yourself in your partner's shoes, imagining what this emotional experience is like for your partner. Suspend your own thoughts and feelings for the moment, the focus should be on your partner.
- Communicate **what** you understand your partner is feeling (emotions) and **why** your partner feels that way (content).

Validation: You communicate that you understand and accept without judgement your partner's feelings and that it makes sense to you given your partner's perspective. The bottom line: Convey, "You have a right to have these feelings."

Validation has several steps:

- Accept and respect that this is your partner's experience based on your partner's perceptions, feelings, history, biology, and emotional makeup (psychology).
- Actively communicate your understanding and acceptance that this is how the speaker feels and sees things.
- Encourage additional communication. If the speaker starts to get upset with your response, then the odds are the speaker isn't feeling validated.

Neither empathy nor validation has to do with placating, agreeing, liking, disliking, or determining if something is "true" (from your perspective). Every feeling is valid, based on the person's perceptions, beliefs, and history. Continued dialogue may change that perception or belief, but in healthy relationships partners need to be able to express their true thoughts and feelings at the time.

An example of an empathic and validating response would be to say something like this:

1. **"So you are feeling:** (upset, happy, fearful, confused, excited, etc.)
2. **about** (name the specific events, people, circumstances related to feeling),
3. **because** (express the reason, motivation, belief, you hear that explains the speaker's feelings)
4. **"and I can understand** why you feel this way" or "That makes sense."

1, 2, 3 above reflects empathy. 4 supports validation

2. My Recovery - My Wellness Card Deck Instructions

Instructions: The goal of this exercise is to share something about your own recovery or wellness that you think is important for your partner to understand.

Use the “Speaker Listener Guidelines” to help with sharing and listening.

Speaker Role:

Sit facing each other, with the speaker holding the “My Recovery - My Wellness” card deck. Thumb through the deck until you find several cards that contain something you want to share to help your partner understand something about your recovery (or wellness) experience. You can modify ideas from the card deck or share something relevant to you that may not be in the deck. You can include what you feel is going well and/or share something about some of the struggles you may be having. **This conversation is about you and your recovery, not about the relationship or relationship recovery.**

Listener Role:

The partner’s job is to just listen and try to understand. You can ask questions to clarify and to help you understand. **Do not express approval or disapproval, or problem-solve, or offer your opinion.** This is about listening and taking in what your partner is saying.”

Remember these are the speaker’s experiences, feelings and needs. Respond simply with an accepting presence and an indication that you hear and understand. *You don’t have to fix, change, or take responsibility for what you hear.*

After 15 minutes (or an agreed upon amount of time) trade speaker and listener roles.

3. Your Recovery – Your Wellness Card Deck

Instructions: The goal for the following exercise is to help partners learn to talk about recovery and to clarify and understand each other’s positions, thoughts, and feelings.

Sit facing each other, with the speaker holding the “Your Recovery - Your Wellness” card deck. Thumb through the deck until you find several cards that contain something you want to ask your partner about their recovery - wellness. Ask any additional questions to deepen your understanding of his or her perspective. If your partner is uncomfortable with the question or with providing more detail, respect that limit and move on, or pick another question. **Always respect the partner’s limits and comfort level.**

Use the “Speaker Listener Guidelines” to help with sharing and listening.

Listener Role:

Sit facing each other, with the listener holding the Your Recovery - Your Wellness Card Deck. Thumb through the deck until you find several cards that contain something you want to ask your partner to deepen your understanding of your partner’s recovery - wellness experience. You can modify ideas from the card deck or ask something relevant to you that may not be in the deck. Be respectful of your partner’s option to pass on the question or to limit or modify the question. Think of this as an interview not a two-way conversation. **The focus is on understanding your partner’s perspective . Avoid questions or answers that may lead to anything that relates to the relationship or relationship recovery.**

Remember, these are the speaker’s experiences, feelings and needs. Respond simply with an accepting presence and an indication that you hear and understand. *You don’t have to fix, change, or take responsibility for what you hear.*

Speaker Role:

Only answer questions you are comfortable and willing to talk about. You may pass on or modify any question, or stating, “I’ll pass on that one”, or “That is all I want to say about this for now”. Help your partner understand what you think is important for your partner to know about your thoughts and feelings about recovery - wellness.

After 15 minutes (or an agreed upon amount of time) trade speaker and listener roles.

4. Couple Recovery Card Deck Instructions

Instructions: The goal for this exercise is to help couples talk about recovery so that it doesn't become the new "elephant in the living room." This intervention provides a tool for partners to identify and address the impact of recovery on the relationship.

Using the "Couple Recovery" card deck, split the deck in half and each of you look through your half of the cards. From there, choose several cards that you would be interested in talking about with your partner.

Share with each other the cards you picked, then decide which **one** card you both agree to talk about. Each partner must agree with the suggested question. **If either partner is uncomfortable or prefers another question, go through the cards until you can select one card both of you are willing to talk about.**

Use the "Speaker Listener Guidelines" to help with sharing and listening.

In this exercise couples learn to create a dialogue to discuss their couple recovery. Questions vary but have a theme related to, "How are we doing? What changes are taking place in our relationship since beginning recovery and what do we need to talk about related to these changes?"

This exercise tends to work best initially if partners stick with the speaker – listener structure. While it may be tempting at first to move into problem-solving, try to stay with sharing and listening. Suspend your own position and thoughts when in the listening role. The goal is to help each other to feel safe in expressing feelings and perspectives. Over time, these questions may create more of a dialogue and an exchange of thoughts and feelings leading to action or changes.

Decide how long you would like to spend addressing this issue

**When people talk, listen completely.
Most people never listen.
—Ernest Hemingway**

5. Rituals of Connection Card Deck Instructions

In the book “The Relationship Cure” (p. 221) John Gottman says rituals are like routines in that they are repeated over and over, becoming predictable. Everyone knows what to expect and what’s expected of them. The big difference between rituals and routines is that rituals have symbolic meaning and are important to relationships and family life as a way to connect and bond with each other and with larger communities. Rituals help couples stay connected despite conflict, providing anchors to ground relationships with things they can count on.

Substance use and compulsive behavioral disorders are highly ritualized: “It’s 5:00 and time for happy hour.” Some couples will have formed bonds around drinking or drugging with each other, specific friends, or extended family. New rituals that support recovery and provide emotional and relationship stability not only replace the rituals surrounding use, but serve to develop ways to reconnect and spend time together in meaningful ways.

These rituals of connection can be done simply and do not have to be time consuming. Informal rituals like sharing over a cup of tea and asking how the day has gone, may only take 10-15 minutes. Formal rituals are celebrations like holidays, birthdays, sobriety birthdays, and anniversaries.

Like routines, a ritual of connection needs to be thought out and planned. When will it happen? How often? Where? Who will initiate it? How will it unfold? How will it end?

Instructions

Use the “Rituals of Connection” card deck. Split it in half, and each of you look through your half of the cards. Each partner chooses several ritual of connection cards that you would like to work on with your partner. Share your choices with each other, then of those pick **one** to work on now. Use the following questions to discuss and decide the details of how you would like to do this ritual together.

Use the “Speaker Listener Guidelines” to help with sharing and listening.

Questions for Exploration

- What’s meaningful about this for you?
- When will this be done?
- How often will it be done?
- How long should it last each time?
- Who will initiate it?
-
- How will it end?
- How can we integrate this into our lives so we can count on it?
- Who will do what in this ritual?
- What will happen next?

About Dr. Robert Navarra

Robert Navarra, Psy.D., M.F.T., M.A.C., is an author, researcher, Master Certified Gottman Therapist, Consultant, Speaker, and Trainer. He has worked in the addiction recovery field for over 25 years. He holds an Advanced Drug and Alcohol Certification and a national certification as a Master Addiction Counselor (MAC) and a Recovery to Practice (RTP) certification, both awarded by the National Association of Addiction Professionals (NAADAC). Dr. Navarra is a Research Scientist with the Gottman Institute, founded by Drs. John and Julie Gottman. Additionally, he is a Senior Research Fellow at Mental Research Institute in Palo Alto, California where he co-founded the Center for Couples in Recovery and developed the Couples Recovery Development Approach (CRDA). He is former Clinical Director of Sequoia Center (previously called Sequoia Alcohol & Drug Recovery Center). He is also a Lecturer at Santa Clara University where he teaches graduate classes in addiction and in Gottman Couples Therapy. Dr. Navarra maintains a private practice in San Carlos, California.

Publication credits include:

Navarra, R. J. (2002). *Couples in recovery from alcoholism: Long-term and developmental processes*. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from Dissertation Abstracts International (63-02B 3042888)

Navarra, R. J. (2007). Family response to adults and alcohol. *Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly*, 25(1-2), 85-104.

Navarra, R. J. (2009). Alcoholism and drug addiction co-morbidity. In J. M. Gottman & J. S. Gottman, *Level 2 Training: Assessment, Intervention, and Co-Morbidities Training Manual*. Gottman Institute. Inc.

Navarra, R. J. & Gottman, J. M., (2011) Gottman Method Therapy: From theory to practice. In Carson, D. K. & Casado-Kehoe, M., (Eds.), *Case studies in couple therapy: Theory-based approaches* (pp. 331-343). New York, NY: Routledge.

Navarra, R. J., & Gottman, J. M. (in press). Sound relationship house theory in Gottman method couples therapy. In Lebow, J., Chamber, A., and Breunlin, D. (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Couple and Family Therapy*, (in press).

Navarra, R. J., & Gottman, J. M. (in press). Bids and turning toward in Gottman method couples therapy. In Lebow, J., Chamber, A., and Breunlin, D. (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Couple and Family Therapy*, (in press).

Navarra, R. J., & Gottman, J. M. Trust in Gottman method couples therapy. In Lebow, J., Chamber, A., and Breunlin, D. (Eds.) *Encyclopedia of Couple and Family Therapy*, in press).

Navarra, R. J., Gottman, J. M., & Gottman, J. S. (2016). Sound relationship house theory and marriage education: In Ponzetti, J. (Ed.), *Evidence-based approaches to relationship and marriage education*, (pp. 93-107). New York, NY: Routledge.

For more information about
The Gottman Institute's workshops, research and products, please visit

www.gottman.com

or call **206-523-9042**
