

Help, I'm *Stuck!*

Relationship Stuck & How To Get Unstuck

By Joe Rich, M.S.W., R.S.W.

SECTION I: INTRODUCTION

This is about **being Relationship stuck**.

Stuck in a way of thinking and doing.
Stuck with an unpleasant set of feelings.
Stuck in a going nowhere spot.
Stuck is a place, a feeling & a problem.

Stuck is about feeling tired and hopeless and powerless.

Stuck is how the partner of the alcoholic feels.

Stuck is how the young adult who is UNHAPPILY engaged to be married feels for years to come.

Stuck is how people who are unhappy and dissatisfied but unable to see alternatives or possible strategies for change may feel.

Stuck is how the partner who has tried everything to get their spouse to engage in some kind of emotional or physical intimacy may feel when nothing changes.

Stuck is how the man in the go nowhere job that he hates (but *needs*) will feel all day on most days.

ARE YOU STUCK?

Try this to begin:

My relationship with _____ (e.g. My husband? My wife? My mother? My sister?) is stuck because:

Experiencing yourself as **stuck** in a relationship is different than seeing a relationship that generally is good but is **stuck** in some way.

Both need to be addressed by you, and ultimately by both of you. This may be most helpful for those who are in a relationship that is satisfying in some ways but stuck in one or more ways that causes some stress or distress. Those stuck in relationships may need to dig deeper but could use this as a way to look at coping and developing strategies. As always, if you can't get unstuck on your own, consider getting professional help when you feel ready for change. This is to help you make some attempts on your own.

RELATIONSHIP TYPES

It may be helpful to look at relationships as either one of these TYPES:

TYPE I
Relationship of Choice

friend
boyfriend/girlfriend
neighbour
colleague
common law partner
spouse

TYPE II
Relationship of Birth

parent
child
sibling
aunt/uncle
grandparent/grandchild

**IF YOU ARE STUCK, WHICH TYPE OF RELATIONSHIP IS IT?
TYPE I OR TYPE II?**

Relationships of Choice and Relationships of Birth may present similar issues. However, either type will generally present different options for getting unstuck. For example, there's a drastic difference (both in terms of problems of stuck and getting unstuck) between a father or brother (Type II) who never listens and/or ignores you and a husband or wife (Type I) who never listens and/or ignores you.

STUCK IS A TWO FOR ONE SALE, BUT NO BARGAIN!

If you are stuck, then it is likely that one problem has now become two.

First you have the original problem. After some time and effort to solve the problem you start to realize you are stuck in it. Now you add the problem of stuck, and all of the issues it brings up, to the original problem.

Two for one - not always such a great deal.

These two problems now need to be sequenced in the relationship. Which do we tackle first?

Getting unstuck is now your first problem to solve. The original problem will need to be addressed while you are solving “stuck”, or after you are unstuck. More work, possibly more results!

SECTION II: SUGGESTIONS

SOME OF THE THINGS YOU CAN DO WHEN YOU THINK YOU MIGHT BE STUCK OR YOU ARE EXPERIENCING THE

FEELINGS OF BEING A RELATIONSHIP STUCK

If you've been able to identify yourself and your relationship with someone close to you as stuck, now's the time to think about solving the problem of stuck.

Here are some things you may want to consider as you aim to get unstuck.

Hope they are helpful!

1. DON'T KEEP CHANGING THE OIL

When we're stuck we often get an idea of how we can get unstuck. The problem is, it is our only idea and we frequently keep doing it or trying it over and over again. If you can, stop trying and doing the same things to get unstuck.

Try thinking about this: If your car stalls on the side of the road and you think it's because the oil needs changing, you change the oil once. If, after the oil change, the car stalls 50 yards ahead, you don't change the oil again! You try and think of something else that may be wrong or that you can change. You take another look at the problem. This works in relationships too. If you keep trying to change the oil over and over again, instead of taking another look, solution by solution, your life will simply start and stop every 50 yards.

This starting and stopping at stuck can be very tiring, frustrating and disempowering. Some people are even able to see the pattern of this when they think about themselves in this dilemma.

Change the oil once. If it doesn't get unstuck, think again. Look for alternatives. Start by looking under the hood, but remember everything

is not always under the hood!

2. KNOW WHEN TO HOLD, KNOW WHEN TO FOLD

Thinking that the part of the relationship that you see as stuck is the hand you are dealt (and therefore stuck with!) will not do you any good. This is like a card game. If you hold the hand you are dealt for too long you will be unhappily stuck, left with the choice to hold or to fold.

Stop yourself from making the promise to yourself that you will stick it out or “just hang on” until whatever you’re solving or attempting to change or improve is successful. This could be choosing stuck as a long-term state of being.

Instead of this, you can tell yourself you will do your best with the situation. Tell yourself what the plan is. For example,

I will try three more things to make something happen and to get unstuck. All 3 things will all be different attempts to create change. After that, I’m done. I will leave it at stuck and put my energies elsewhere. At some point I will tell myself that I have done my best and that is it, finished, done.

Or,

I will try to get unstuck for a specific period of time (X number of months/days/years) and then that is it. If it is still stuck for me at the end of this pre-assigned period I will have to use my energies elsewhere. Once I have this plan and series of dates in place I will inform all those involved (once), not as an ultimatum, but solely for information purposes.

(For the boyfriend/girlfriend relationship (Relationship of Choice) we affectionately call this “the expiry date” (stamped by you on their rear end) and for Relationships of Birth we call this “reaching for acceptance and restructuring”.)

This is not quitting or **A** folding@too soon. It is a plan. It is not choosing stuck. It is knowing when to hold, and when to fold.

3. IS THIS STUCK MINE??

Sometimes in relationships where things are stuck we think that it is either our own fault (*I can't seem to get us unstuck*) or at best, it is both of our faults that we are stuck. The thought that **A** we@are stuck because **A** you@ (not me!) are stuck (and not willing or able to get unstuck) doesn't strike us until we have used up a lot of time and energy on our own, working at getting us unstuck.

When faced with relationship stuck, everyone needs to stop and try to figure out if the stuck in their relationship belongs to them personally, to both members of the relationship, or to the other person. This is different than blaming. This is looking at how we use our energy in this relationship to create positive change.

This kind of relationship stuck is common in parent / child relationships where the parent feels stuck.

For example, some parents spend countless hours agonizing over:

What can I do to get her to talk to me? I'm her parent. I've tried everything.

At times the answer may be to keep trying. However, at times it may be necessary to stop and realize that the other person, in this case the child, may be unwilling to talk right now and that this is why you are stuck. You may need to realize that you are only in this stuck place as a result of their interest or disinterest in talking. If you see this you may stop trying so hard and conserve some energy. Within a short while, you may notice that all of a sudden one day they start talking. At this point you will suddenly realize that you were not stuck, *they were!*

The stuck could have been a need for time to think on their own, to feel more independent and separate from you, or to bring their life back to you in a fashion they felt good about. Ultimately this means that you really were never stuck and that once they got unstuck (i.e. they decided **AOkay I will talk@**) you still had energy left on reserve to interact in an unstuck way. As the parent, you just felt stuck, turns out you weren't, *they were.*
It happens.

4. THIS IS MY LOT IN LIFE

Stuck can be like an enemy that defeats strong and capable people. Sometimes you may decide to choose stuck by thinking that this is some master plan, something too big to fight, a thing easier to settle for and tell yourself you should accept. This is when stuck is usually the larger of the problems and the original dilemmas or issues you started working at are now second to this problem.

If this is the case, try to reorganize back to a place in the relationship where you may have been unstuck, where feeling free to run your own

life was a priority. From there, you'll be more able to reflect on the original problem that got you stuck. Use thoughts of this time to remind yourself of what you could have done then and how you can still do some of those things (in a refined way) in the present. Remember to aim for less stuck feelings and to be hopeful that you can work towards a place called No More Stuck Feelings, regardless of how other issues work themselves out.

It may be helpful to realize that for some people this kind of choosing stuck (by saying things like this is my lot in life) usually is a form of relationship denial or avoidance on either or both of their parts.

5. CHANGE THE FORMULA

I call it the formula, but I mean the way you think. People have a way of thinking or acting that is like a formula. When it doesn't work, it can be difficult for them to accept this (i.e. feels like failure) and to re-think the situation. Most of us, in any problem we try to solve (stuck or otherwise) need to develop new formulas when the old ones don't work. Like the commercials say, we need the new and improved formula. The new formula is almost always better for us because it generally includes all of our experiences to date. It may prove more effective and useful than the old (and tired!) formula. After all, wasn't it that old formula that kept getting us stuck?!

For example, a well-known formula might be in the shape of a saying.

If life gives you lemons, make lemonade.

Now, to change the formula, someone might say,
*If life gives you lemons, say, ANo thank you. I don't make
lemonade. It's not my job.@*

If someone who feels stuck says,
*I like the really outgoing guys. I don't want someone boring,
but why do I keep picking the losers?*

Well, change the formula and get unstuck.
*I am not going out with anyone I would have gone out with if I
had been at this party a year ago.*

Now let's see what happens. Better? That remains to be seen.

Stuck? Absolutely not. Something new is about to begin.

Unstuck.

6. BE YOUR OWN BEST FRIEND

This can be a really helpful exercise when you get yourself in a jam....

You're stuck. Ask yourself:

If my best friend were totally honest with me and told me this story (the real story) about being stuck at this point in their relationship, what would I tell them to do? Would I tell them to keep trying the same thing over and over again? Would I tell them to move on?

You're stuck. Try this:

Sit yourself in a chair at one end of a table or a desk and tell your story of **stuck** to the empty chair at the other side of the table or desk. Yes, it needs to be out loud! Then, go to the other side of the table, sit in the empty chair you've been talking to and go ahead and give yourself some good advice on how to get unstuck. If you can force yourself to do this, this is generally the most open & honest advice you will ever receive. This is being your own best friend.

Go ahead. Be your own best friend. Take your own advice. Be an expert on you. You know yourself best.

7. USE WHAT YOU ALREADY OWN

Chances are that you may already have some of the skills, experiences and confidence necessary to figure this out and to create some kind of change to get things unstuck. No need to always reinvent the wheel or always look outside yourself for help.

When you have a moment to look at the stuck in your relationship, try and take a moment and look back in your own life.

See if you can think of a time when you were stuck?

Ask yourself what you did then?

What worked? What didn't?

What would you do in the same way and what would you do differently?

Are there regrets you now carry and don't want to re-create?

Inspire yourself to grow and learn by putting the last time you were stuck next to this one and by moving forward, building a bigger repertoire of **A**getting unstuck skills@.

It's likely we'll all be stuck again at some point. See this as a chance to get better at **A**being unstuck@ and you may be less afraid to speak, act, risk, and achieve.

Sometimes fear holds us back and sometimes it pushes us along.

8. FIND INSPIRATION

Look for inspiration to become unstuck and to create momentum (or to break inertia) for you to begin to unstick yourself and the relationship stuck you are tired of. Look around! Find things like:

Movies

Role Models

Heroes and Heroines

Stories and Allegories

Books (like Chicken Soup For the Soul(s))

Sayings

Songs

Prayers, meditations and affirmations

that will inspire and support unstuck.

Be careful here. There may be sayings that are supporting keeping you stuck or that help you to be complacent and to conclude that this is as good as it gets! Those are not good enough! You can do better! Find new ones. Ask your friends. Go to stores, bookstores, libraries, places where people tell inspirational tales. Find inspiration. It can really help.

Yes, they work.

One day at a time.

No time like the present.

You -ll regret the things you didn't do more than the ones you did.

Deciding to make a decision is a good decision.

I think, therefore I am.

To thine own self be true.

Find it. Hang it on your fridge. Put it in your wallet. Tape it to your bathroom mirror. Hide it on your desk. Get grounded. Get inspired. Get unstuck.

9. FIGURE OUT AND FIX AND FIGURE OUT AGAIN

If you're stuck, in all likelihood you've been so busy trying to fix things or something in the relationship that you may need to stop and figure things out again.

Revisiting the act of figuring out can be well worth the trouble. Tell yourself that *Today I'll use the time I was going to give to fixing this towards figuring it out.* You may find that the last time you figured it out you began fixing it in one way, maybe when you figure it out this time, things will be different when you take another look.

10. BUILD A SHELTER TO DIVIDE AND CONQUER

You're stuck. Find a safe place that is quiet and retreat to that spot. Make it a place to think clearly and to feel.

When you are there, divide up your feelings and your thoughts into two separate categories. Separate them. Over time, stuck usually messes these two up so we become unsure of what we feel and what we think. You need to know what you think, and to know how you feel. In stuck, what you think is really an important part of getting to unstuck. Just feeling is generally not enough.**

****Just a quick word of feeling advice...**

Don't let fear, guilt or anger be in charge of your life. If you let them drive your life, they usually crash you into something at some point. They should be in the feeling column if you find they are present. Feel them. Acknowledge them. Validate them. Consider them. Don't let them be in charge. For example, just being angry about being stuck is of little use when

there is no figuring out (thinking), especially when change is necessary.

Now, use this shelter to get a plan together to get unstuck. *The I=It Gettin=Unstuck Plan.*

Go off and begin your work. Come back to this Ashelter@regularly. Keep in mind its function is to help you keep yourself on track to becoming unstuck and to safely make decisions based on thoughts and feelings.

11. SOMETIMES STUCK IS ABOUT UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS OF YOURSELF, THIS RELATIONSHIP OR THE OTHER PERSON.

In relationships, people have expectations of others. At times those expectations are based on what they would like, what they think they should be getting in return, or what they think the husband, wife, son, daughter, grandparent, etc. should do based on what they have seen in other families or their own. Sometimes expectations are not met even after repeated efforts to get them established and met. Sometimes expectations are a sign of endless hope.

Some relationships are stuck because one person has a Reasonable@ expectation of the other person but can't see it is not going to be met by the other person. This is not necessarily because that other person doesn't want to meet it, but it may be because the other person can't meet it. They can't meet it because they are unable to, or because if they do meet it, it will compromise some other important thing in their life.

To maintain a relationship where expectations are not met and you don't want to see your relationship as stuck forever, the best one can get may be that either:

The other person says:

“I don't think I can meet that expectation but I will try (and you will have to measure my trying rather than the outcome of my efforts as success or failure)”

OR,

You are able to say:

“This is what I expect. I see it may not happen for me. I will need to think about this, alter (not lower) my expectations and proceed in a different (yet less satisfying) way to see how I can make this relationship work for me and you.”

Expectations in relationships are very important. This could easily be explored in every relationship. In many ways the negotiation of expectations in relationships is one of the corner stones to relationships that work, and those that don't. In the case of relationship stuck, expectations could easily play a role.

SECTION III: DAVE AND ANNE: AN EVERYDAY EXAMPLE OF STUCK

ANNE AND DAVE: STUCK & STILL IN LOVE

Here's an example to illustrate some of the things you may have read. I have chosen something safe, normal and typical to today's heterosexual couple, and very much a place of **stuck** for both Anne and her husband Dave and I'm sure countless others.

Anne and Dave are a fairly young couple with 2 small kids. Everyone loves everyone but Anne is unhappy, Dave becomes unhappy and everyone feels stuck.

From Anne's perspective, her husband Dave will not come home and be with the family for dinner at the end of the work day. The children are small and he is away all day. Dave comes home in the middle of bedtime. Anne is angry about this **every night of the week**. Anne is mad, speaks up and takes action, but Dave does not change his coming home behaviour. Anne feels stuck, Dave does too.

Anne's original problem is that she has **no sense of family** from Monday to Friday and is tired of being taken advantage of and put in this position for wanting this.

Anne is now a **nag**. Dave is tired of this. Things can get quite hot if they start this argument (**not again....**).

In addition to fighting with Dave, Anne has tried a number of things to

get unstuck including (to name a few) :

Talking to Dave after the kids are in bed (still a good plan)

Not talking to him (including the silent treatment, a family of origin specialty she watched her own mom use with some results)

No sex

Lots of sex (Happy Dave, still home at bedtime and not for family dinner...)

Yelling at him (gets her a night or two if it is really loud)

Walking out when he arrives home (You know.. *Your turn... blah , blah.....*) which really doesn't get more family time and seems counter productive after the fact

Calling him at the office to Aguilt@him home (including putting the 3 year old on the phone to plead her /their mother/child Awe miss daddy@ case)

Telling him her feelings.

He still doesn't come home. She can't let go of this wish, dream, reasonable expectation.

Dave says:

A You don't understand..... I need the job..... Going out after work is part of the job..... No one goes home early..... We can't afford for me to be fired..... You don't understand..... I work hard.... The kids are happy when I'm there on the weekends..... You've made this up because you are unhappy with your life..... Your friend puts these ideas in your head..... You want me to just do whatever you say like your dad does with your mother.....@

They're stuck. Anne feels stuck. Dave feels stuck.

Originally, the coming home at bedtime was the problem. Now they have two problems:

1. Both are tired of going over the Acome home early/late conflict/problem@

And

2. Both are tired of being stuck in the AAnne is demanding (nag? bitch? stuck where she promised she would never be?) while Dave feels misunderstood & nagged" dilemma.

A place of no change and hopelessly and constantly going over the same ground.

We're spinning our wheels.

Not this again.

I've tried everything.

This is simple. Come home on time.

This is simple, stop complaining, I earn a good living.

Will you leave it alone.

That's not fair of you to say that I never.....

I resent you saying that I always.....

Not this again!

WHAT TO DO? For Anne and Dave

WHAT ANNE CAN DO TO GET UNSTUCK

In Anne's situation a number of things could help her feel less stuck and get the couple unstuck.®

She could:

1. Decide to try 3 more ideas to try and create some change for her and Dave. After these three ideas she could tell herself that she has tried her best to convince Dave but that he will only do this when he wants to.

2. She could look at how little success she has had and consider altering her expectations. She could begin to expect Dave home during bedtime and accept that she will need to find other ways with Dave to create the sense of family that she would like to have with him. This would make her less angry at dinner too. This would not give her exactly what she wants but could get her unstuck and looking at new alternatives (including getting her unstuck from her anger).

3. Anne could ask Dave to sit down with her and to hear what it is that is really upsetting to her (the real issue of needing and wanting a

sense of family and the real issue of feeling taken advantage of) and see if he could hear this. Maybe they could problem solve this without repeatedly going over the issue of what time he arrives home on week nights.

4. Anne needs to pull over and re-think this whole thing.

Anne could try and find a place of safety to:

- decide what she thinks

- figure out what she feels

- see if the old formula of **A**If he comes home at dinner then I can have what I want@ can be re-thought. Perhaps a new formula like **A**If I figure out when Dave is available & accessible then I can find the sense of family I want with him@. Having Dave available and accessible at a time when he isn't feeling forced, coerced or pressured would be pleasant for Anne and Dave. This may not be when she wants it, but it will be how she would like it to happen.

This could be a good path to begin to progress along. This could be unstuck and all kinds of things may transpire in this **A**new way@.

- figure out if this is about a stuck in Dave's life with little or nothing to really do with her and what she needs, wants or expects.

5. Anne could look around herself in her life and try and find inspiration to help her cope with the experience she is having with Dave. She needs to find things that will ease the pain of what she experiences as disappointment with Dave and that could help her gain a new or different perspective on her life with Dave or, to help her refocus on the positive aspects of her current life.

6. Anne could ask: **A**Is this stuck mine?@ In all likelihood she would answer: **A**No, it belongs to both of us.@ In which case she should get back to Dave after she has done a bit of work on it.

HEY, HOW ABOUT WHAT DAVE CAN DO TO GET UNSTUCK??

1. Dave needs to get out of the stuck of seeing Anne in a particular role. His formula is that **A**If I keep playing along then sooner or later you'll stop or give up@. Dave needs a new formula like **A**If I tell Anne that this is the time I am coming home then maybe we could find other ways, times, or means of giving both of us a sense of family@. Or, he could ask her, **A**Is it possible for me to come home during bedtime and us to stop calling it late and for you to let me know how I could enhance your feelings of 'appreciated' rather than leaving things at you feeling 'taken advantage of'?"

2. Dave needs to look at his expectations of Anne as the mom at home and check in with her around what he expects (or has come to expect) and where these expectations came from. Then Dave needs to check in with Anne and let her know that he brings things to this too. Dave may find that his **A**late@ and his stuck in this arrival time and therefore his stuck in this argument with Anne at home has something to do with why he feels the need to stay at work until he gets the work **A**ok@ to go home.

3. Dave needs to set up a time and place to think about this. Anne's current lifestyle probably leaves her thinking more about family than Dave's current lifestyle. Somewhere between work and home may make sense. Some of this looks like it is about Anne but Dave will likely re-figure this out as an issue of balancing work and family life. This all gets old (like the formulas) and Dave is getting stuck in a whole bunch of places.

4. Dave needs to find role models and inspirations for himself as a dad, a husband, and as a provider for his family. Clearly Anne's father is not a role model or an inspiration for him, but the search can go well

beyond just his dad or Anne's. If Dave begins the search (lots of places to look) he should begin to find a saying, an inspiration, a role model or mentor that can help him redirect who he is in the marriage and who he wants to be. What time he gets home is likely second to all of this but may have helped him get to this thinking. If he looks far enough, even Ann Landers will tell him: No one on their deathbed ever said **I wish I had spent more time at the office** (and that's only for the price of a newspaper!).

5. Dave could ask: **Is this stuck mine?** In all likelihood he would answer: **No, it belongs to both Anne and I.** In which case he should get back to Anne once he has done some work on his own.

SECTION IV: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This has been about relationship stuck. If you are in a relationship in which you are stuck, then I hope that this is useful in helping you to get on the road to unstuck. Once you begin to experience unstuck, hopefully the feelings of frustration, anger, helplessness and hopelessness that cloud our judgement when we are stuck will lift and feelings of hope and optimism will begin to lead the way.

Onward. Upward. Forward. Moving right along..... Unstuck. Once you're there, whatever problem you started with might seem a great deal more **solvable** than ever before.

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SUMMARY OF SUGGESTIONS

- 1. Don't keep changing the oil**
- 2. Know when to hold, know when to fold**
- 3. Is this stuck mine??**
- 4. This is my lot in life**

5. Change the formula

6. Be your own best friend

7. Use what you already own

8. Find inspiration

9. Figure out and fix and figure out again

10. Build a shelter to divide and conquer

11. Sometimes stuck is about unrealistic expectations of yourself, this relationship or the other person

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