

Rewire Your Heart

Connect, Heal & Transform through Mindful Relationship

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THRESHOLD - The Essential Ingredients of Psychotherapy

The following is a list of the fundamental qualities essential in a therapeutic relationship. I call them the **THRESHOLD** qualities. These are elements that must be present in your relationship with your therapist prior to being able to meaningfully address any other issues in therapy. The following are **THRESHOLD** qualities:

- T - Trust**
- H - Hopes for Therapy**
- R - Respect**
- E - Emotions**
- S - Safety**
- H - Holding Space**
- O - Ownership**
- L - Let Downs**
- D - Discussion**

It is important to remember that these qualities will evolve over time. Trust, for example, should deepen over your relationship and look different from the 1st session to the 12th session to the 100th session. However, some element of trust is essential throughout your relationship. If it is not present or does not deepen, mindful attention is needed. Take a few minutes to consider each of these elements as it pertains to your current relationship with your therapist. If you are not in therapy, imagine these elements in the context of a relationship you may hope to build with a future therapist or healer. It will be most helpful if you can devote 10 to 20 minutes per topic and write out your responses.

Trust. Do you trust your therapist? If not, it is difficult to make any real progress in therapy beyond addressing this issue. Without trust, you understandably maneuver to protect yourself from the very person you have chosen to help you. It becomes nearly impossible to draw on your therapist's support to bring healing, growth and balance into your life. If trusting your therapist is difficult for you, it would be valuable to explore this with him or her. Even if trust comes more easily, consider the following questions.

Is trusting others easy for you, or more difficult? Does your ability to trust depend on who the others are or how your relationship with them is structured? Are there nuances to how you trust? What actions on the parts of others make it easier for you to trust them, and what do you interpret their actions to mean?

Jordan initially had a hard time in therapy. She found it easier to trust others when they shared intimate details of their life with her, something her therapist was unwilling to do. It felt to her like they were at an impasse. Upon deeper exploration, she realized that when people share these details, she takes their sharing as an indication that they are



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direct and honest. Jordan realized she needed these qualities (directness and honesty) in every relationship. She was then able to explore with her therapist how they could determine if these qualities existed in their relationship, even if her therapist did not share details of his life with Jordan. Through this exploration, Jordan found her trust in her therapist increased significantly as she came to believe he truly cared for her and was open and honest about what he noticed happening between them.

What makes it harder for you to trust others? In what ways might your prior experiences trusting others impact your ability to trust now? How do you feel about your level of trust in your current therapeutic relationship? What topics and feelings are you completely comfortable trusting your therapist with? What are topics and feelings you feel less comfortable sharing?

Hopes for Therapy. What do you hope to gain from therapy? This can be as non-specific as wanting more support in your life, having a place to look mindfully at your choices, or continuing to grow and heal in the presence of another. Your hopes may also be more specific such as freeing yourself from addictive behaviors, drawing more or better friendships into your life or finding and sustaining a fulfilling romantic relationship.

Have you shared your hopes for therapy with your therapist? Are there any fears you have about being in therapy or the process of therapy? Have you shared these as well? What do you hope your life will look like when you are ready to end therapy? Are you able, from time to time, to revisit your hopes for therapy with your therapist? Hopes and goals in therapy need to be revised to keep them feeling alive, exciting and even slightly uncomfortable. This place of excitement and slight anxiety is your growth edge. If your therapy is feeling dull and rote, one possible reason is that you are not having the conversation you want to be having.

Respect. This is an important two-way street. As with trust, it is important for you to respect your therapist (or be able to speak about your lack of respect with him or her). However, even more important is that you feel respected, listened to, and cared for by your therapist and that you trust and respect yourself.

How does your therapist convey his or her care and respect for you? How is it for you to need help and ask for it? Can you do this and still feel empowered?

Therapy is a meeting of two experts. You are the expert in your experience of the world and on your current needs. Only you can discover your passions, what makes relationship meaningful to you, and what the meaning of your life is. Your therapist is an expert in facilitating change and growth and in helping you to find your answers to these essential questions. When therapy is conducted as a meeting of experts in a context of mutual respect, you can move towards deep meaning, connection and balance in your life.



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Emotions. Are you sufficiently committed to healing and growth to tolerate the pain, fear, shame and emptiness that often arise along this path? As we move towards healing, often we come into closer contact with painful truths that can evoke feelings of loss, grief, fear, shame and abandonment.

What is your response to these difficult feelings? What do you need in your life and in your therapy to make it easier for you to experience them? How were different emotions handled in your family of origin? Were there any that were not allowed to be expressed? Can you feel a range of emotions with your therapist or do you tend to only show one or two of the following: anger, sadness, shame, pride, contentment?

Safety. Do you feel safe with your therapist? Is there adequate consistency for you from one week to the next in terms of where and how you meet? Feeling comfortable in your therapist's office and with your therapist is essential before you can be expected to address uncomfortable inner territory.

Once you feel safe externally, your therapist can become an important ally in making your journeys into difficult inner-terrain feel safer. Does your therapist invite you into your growth edge or into other hard territory? Can you feel him or her as a support for you in these difficult places? What feels supportive to you? Is there anything your therapist does that doesn't feel supportive? Can you feel angry, alone, sad or terrified with your therapist and share these feelings with him or her? Conversely, how is it to share feelings of pride or accomplishment with your therapist? Are you able to talk about what is working in your life?

Holding Space. Your therapist should be able to hold space for you to fill with what is meaningful and important to you. We are rarely given the chance to know who we are in the absence of external demands. The modern world increasingly pushes us into definitions of ourselves with little if any time for contemplation. We are consumers, students or professionals, addicts, parents, etc. and we are expected to behave accordingly. Our relationships also define us as we struggle to meet explicit and implicit requests from those around us. It can be a new and, possibly, uncomfortable experience to find what is meaningful to address in your life without needing to meet another's expectations.

Is there enough space in your therapy for you to explore what has meaning for you? Is it comfortable or uncomfortable for you to feel this space? How do you typically start each session—with a polite question about how your therapist's week was, with a long sigh, with silence? Are you able to feel your therapist with you even in the silences that arise between you or do you feel a void that needs to be filled quickly? What would it be like to tolerate five seconds more silence than you typically would?

Ownership. This, like respect, is a two-way street. Is your therapist able to take ownership for his or her part in co-creating your relationship? Does your therapist take



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responsibility for his or her part in any misunderstandings that arise between the two of you? On your part, do you take responsibility for what you choose to share with your therapist and what remains unspoken between you?

Often people have an easy time discussing certain things and are blocked from discussing others, as if there were an unspoken rule that certain things are beyond discussion even in therapy. There is no such rule. Consider if there are elements of your life outside therapy, i.e. sexuality or money, or certain feelings toward your therapist (erotic, deep need, anger) that you would never think to discuss. If raising these directly with your therapist seems unimaginable or highly difficult, consider sharing with your therapist the fact that there are certain general areas you feel the need to avoid. Only go into as much detail as is comfortable.

Let Downs. Are you able to tolerate being let down by your therapist? As your therapist is human, this is sure to happen if you remain in therapy for any period of time. If this feels beyond your ability to bear, could you raise your concern now with your therapist? Just talking about it may help to remove some of the pain and tension around being let down by someone you are counting on.

What would be the ways you can imagine your therapist most letting you down? What would your therapist letting you down mean about his or her feelings toward you? Have let downs already occurred? How have you handled your feelings of disappointment and/or anger? Were there other feelings which you experienced?

We often manage our feelings of disappointment in the same way we learned to handle them in prior relationships. Perhaps we make excuses for our therapist or decide that he or she is too fragile to know how we feel. Perhaps we rage at him or her in our heads, but say nothing in person. Perhaps we decide to leave therapy. There are many ways you, as a client, can decide it is better for both you and your therapist to not speak of your disappointment to your therapist. However, while disappointment is inevitable, how we handle it is not. See if you can commit now to telling your therapist the next time you feel let down by him or her. Your therapist should be able to listen to you, gain an understanding of your experience and react non-defensively.

Discussion. Can you discuss the **THRESHOLD** items with your therapist particularly when one or another of them needs attention? Is your therapist open to having discussions with you about how you are impacted by him or her?

If one element of these **THRESHOLD** qualities feels missing or like it isn't evolving and deepening with time, this does not necessarily mean that the therapeutic relationship isn't right. It is however an invitation to raise the issue directly with your therapist and to explore your hopes, perceptions, assumptions and prior experiences around that quality. There are two possibilities that may be at work here (1) the client – therapist pairing you



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are in may not be the right fit or (2) through discussion, you and your therapist may be able to meet the challenge and move forward having deepened your relationship by facing and overcoming a potential block. You can't know which is at play until you risk conveying your experience to your therapist and allowing you both a chance to meet in a new way and heal any misunderstanding, distance or disappointment. It is in these rifts and repairs that much of the work of therapy is done.

Resources:

Michael Kahn, *Between Therapist and Client: The New Relationship* (New York: W. H. Freeman and Company, 1991).

Julia Landis, *Heart to Heart Talk: A Client's Guide to Transformation in Psychotherapy* (Salt Lake City: Adarsa Books, Inc., 2002).

David Wallin, *Attachment in Psychotherapy* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2007).

Week __ Date ____ Processing Your Therapy Session

What are you aware of as you sit to write this? (emotions, thoughts, body sensations, needs, memories, etc.) You may find it helpful to turn the page over, draw a gingerbread man shape, and then draw in any bodily sensations you notice. Pay attention to intensity, location, color and change in the sensation/emotion as you bring attention to it.

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| Do any THRESHOLD Elements stand out about this session? | Impressions regarding the session – what lingers with you? What was helpful/not? What feelings/images come to you regarding the session? |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Trust | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Hopes | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Respect | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Emotions | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Safety | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Holding Space | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Ownership | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Let Downs | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Discussion | |
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| Is there anything you chose not to (fully) share with your therapist? | Explore what you want/need now from your therapist (or from others or yourself). How do you feel about your therapist in this moment? |
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| What written here might you not yet want to tell your therapist? Why? | What do you imagine is your therapist's experience of the session? What do you suppose/hope/fear your therapist feels about you now? |
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Week __

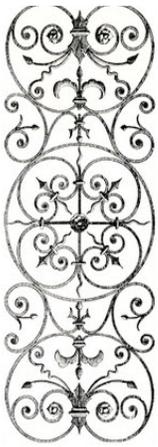
Processing Your Week

| For each day, record what you are aware of as you sit to write: thoughts, emotions, sensations your experience in relationship, feelings about therapy/ your therapist, and anything you want to note for yourself or to share. | Note week to week recurring themes in your process |
|---|--|
| Day 1 | |
| Day 2 | |
| Day 3 | |

Week __

Processing Your Week

| For each day, record what you are aware of as you sit to write: thoughts, emotions, sensations your experience in relationship, feelings about therapy/ your therapist, and anything you want to note for yourself or to share. | Notes to bring into therapy – experiences, dreams, questions, etc. |
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| Day 4 | |
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Explaining & Exploring the Mindful Therapy Journal

The Mindful Therapy Journal is intended to support you in your efforts to heal and transform in psychotherapy by bringing mindfulness to your therapy sessions. It can be difficult to tune into both our experience of ourselves and our experience of another at the same time. The journal is designed to allow us to even further slow down the process of therapy, so that you can attend to any part of your experience which you may have overlooked in the therapy session itself. The journal is to be used as a companion to weekly meetings with your therapist in individual therapy.

The Journal Basics. Each week of the journal is divided into two parts. One section is dedicated to processing your therapy session. You should fill this out as soon as possible after therapy and add to it as insights come up over the week. Should you or your therapist need to miss a session on one or more of the weeks, in place of processing the therapy session, note your feelings about not being in therapy that week. The other section contains six daily spaces for the six days on which you do not have a therapy session. Finally, there is one blank page at the end of each week, intended to give you more space for any given part of your weekly process to spill over. Both of these sections invite you to pause in your day and notice feelings, thoughts and assumptions that are with you in the moment. Because our feelings change from moment to moment, it is perfectly natural that some of your responses will be at odds with others. You may find yourself anticipating therapy one day and then dreading it the next. Both feelings would be true for you, and both need space to be fully explored.

Processing Your Therapy Session. There are seven distinct areas on the page dedicated to processing your therapy session.

(1) Notice what you are aware of as you sit to write. This can be anything that you feel, think, experience, need, etc. as you are actually sitting pen in hand. The purpose of this section is to ground you in your current experience, whatever it may be. The remaining six sections ask you to turn your attention to your most recent therapy session and your therapist. Hopefully, no more than a few hours will have elapsed between the session and your sitting down to process it. You can then return to this section over the week to expand your responses as you gain further clarity around your reactions to the therapy session.

(2) After grounding yourself in your present experience, the next item is to record your impressions of the therapy session. Start with what is most memorable or with your

· If you would like to supplement couple's therapy, *Hold Me Tight* by Sue Johnson is an excellent resource.

strongest feeling. Are there any visual snapshots of the session, phrases or emotions that linger with you? Was there anything you found particularly helpful or unhelpful? Are there any feelings, bodily sensations, images or memories that come to you as you reflect on the session? These may directly relate to you and your therapist or be something else entirely that offers itself up as a way of describing the experience without words.

(3) Next, notice how you are feeling now about the session. Is there anything you are wanting or needing from your therapist or another person in this moment? How do you feel about your therapist? Has this changed in any way since before the session?

(4) Then, turn your attention to letting yourself imagine the session from your therapist's point of view. What do you believe was his or her experience of the session. How do you think your therapist feels about you? Has this changed since prior to this session? What do you hope your therapist thinks and feels about you? What do you fear she may think or feel about you? This is not to take care of your therapist, but to gain insight into how you are structured to anticipate how people experience you when you behave in certain ways. It may be helpful at times to check in with your therapist about these imaginings to see if your therapist did experience you in the way you imagined.

(5) At some point as you process each therapy session, you should look at the **THRESHOLD** elements (for a fuller description, please see the article on the appointments page). **THRESHOLD** elements are the fundamental qualities essential in a therapeutic relationship. These are elements that must be present in your relationship with your therapist prior to being able to meaningfully address any other issues in therapy. The **THRESHOLD** elements are:

T - Trust
H - Hopes for Therapy
R - Respect
E - Emotions
S - Safety
H - Holding Space
O - Ownership
L - Let Downs
D - Discussion

Trust refers to the level of trust you feel towards your therapist. Your **hopes for therapy** are the goals you have for your healing and growth. **Respect** is the respect you feel from your therapist and that you are able to offer yourself. **Emotions** are the emotions that may be hard to experience (sadness, anger and also pride and contentment) and yet must be encountered on the path towards healing. **Safety** is whether and how your therapist makes it feel safe to move into difficult inner-terrain. **Holding space** refers to your therapist allowing you the room to determine what is important to you absent input from others. **Ownership** refers to both parties taking ownership for their actions and responsibilities in the therapeutic relationship. **Let downs** are the inevitable disappointments that will happen because your therapist is human and how the two of you manage these disappointments. Finally, **discussion** is the glue that holds everything together. As long as there is room to discuss these elements, or the absence of these elements, there is the possibility to improve the alliance between you and your therapist and to discover how you impact each other.

It may be possible that none of these elements are in the forefront of your therapy in a given moment. Still take a few minutes each week to remind yourself of these elements and to notice any change, however small. Because they are critical to therapy, any movement is worth noting.

(6) Notice if there was anything you had intended to share with your therapist this session and then opted not to. You may also have begun to talk about something and then only touched on part of it or spoken in generalities. If there was anything you saw yourself leaving out of the session, note it and see if you have a sense of why you did not bring it in.

(7) Finally, look at all of what you have written about the therapy session and notice if there is anything on the page that you would feel uncomfortable sharing with your therapist. If such items are present, take a few minutes to get a sense of what about them makes them difficult to share. Whether you ultimately choose to share them or not remains entirely up to you.

It is important to note as you fill out this section week by week that there may be times when nothing arises that is different from the prior week. Change has its own sense of time and a slower pace is to be expected at times. However, if you experience long periods of time with little if any shifts in your experience of your therapist and your sessions, you may want to explore this. While it is possible to have months with no change in your experience, there is also the possibility that shifts in your experience are occurring but cannot enter your conscious awareness given your current structure or the structure of your therapeutic alliance.

Processing Your Week. Each day you do not have a therapy session take as few as five minutes to note how you are feeling, your current thought process, any noteworthy experiences in your life, any memories that have arisen, any thoughts or feelings about therapy and your therapist, and anything else you want to note for yourself or to bring into therapy. There are two additional areas included in the weekly process section in addition to the six daily records. The first will ask you to examine longer-term trends. This is a good area to note your ongoing reaction to being in therapy and to the process of journaling. It is natural to feel that keeping the journal is tedious at times and at other times to feel it is helpful. The second area is a column where you may list out items you want to remember for your next therapy session. This list may include dreams, memories, noteworthy experiences, questions for your therapist, scheduling and other business items, etc.

Daring to Share. Sharing what you record in the journal with your therapist may feel like a risk. If you choose to take this leap, your therapist will hopefully be there to catch you, and you will feel understood and accepted. It is in taking these small leaps, expecting the worst and, in reality, experiencing something other than our worst fears, that we slowly rewire our hearts and minds to change what we expect from others and to give ourselves more permission to act in different ways in the world. However, it is important to notice and respect the fears or shame that you may feel. If these feelings are greater than minimal, you may want to start by discussing the fear or shame you are experiencing with your therapist, prior to edging towards the underlying content. Sharing the fear or shame you feel is just another way of working moment by moment with what is true and present between you and your therapist. It's far better to be with what is most true for you than to push through to underlying content and ignore a large part of your experience.

There is always the possibility that after sharing, you will feel missed by your therapist, or worse, judged, hurt or dismissed. Julia Landis, in her book *Heart to Heart Talk*, states: “If you choose to open up to your therapist about things you hold sacred and wind up feeling misunderstood or judged, you will face yet another challenge: you will have to explore this feeling with your therapist. This exploration will help you decide whether or not you are working with the right person.”ⁱ

Particularly if you are thinking of leaving therapy, it may be worthwhile to share with your therapist the possibility of your terminating and your reasons for wanting to leave as early as possible, even if this feels scary or unproductive. You always have the ability to leave, but you may miss learning something about you and your views of relationship if you leave without fully sharing your process. Susan had been in therapy for three years and sensed she was ready to explore her painful childhood on another level—she wanted to experience the feelings it evoked, not just talk about it. She raised her hopes with her therapist and shared an image of herself sitting on the cellar steps, looking up at her therapist who remained above ground, peering down at her. Her therapist responded curtly that it was up to Susan to choose how vulnerable she wanted to be each session.

Susan felt shut down and unable to explore what was happening between them that made it harder for her to be vulnerable. She was angry and frustrated and lost her appetite for therapy, but she said none of this. Instead, she decided (mostly unconsciously) to take care of her therapist, as she had taken care of her parents throughout her childhood. She staged a two-month ending to her therapy where she appreciated her therapist and demonstrated repeatedly how much she had healed and how fundamentally okay she felt. As in her childhood, her feelings of rage and disappointment were stuffed far beneath the surface. The story Susan had repeated over and over about how anger and sadness must be hidden in relationship played out yet again without her therapist knowing or ever being given the chance to take ownership for her actions and to participate differently. Had Susan risked sharing her hard feelings with her therapist, or even that she was leaving because something felt wrong, together they may have been able to construct a different outcome to the story, one that would have provided Susan with a different template for relationship.

It is also possible, that if Susan had shared these feelings, her therapist may have further disappointed her. If once you have shared your experience with your therapist, your thoughts and feelings regarding your therapy have not changed, trust yourself and find a therapeutic alliance that can fully support you in your desire to heal, connect and grow. Not all therapists are able to have this type of conversation, and some therapist/client pairings are mismatches. Julia Landis states: “If you sense that a therapeutic alliance is not possible for you with your current practitioner and you choose to discontinue with her and pursue other options, you grow through honoring the voice of discrimination that is nascent in all of us.”ⁱⁱ

How the journal works. This journal is intended to offer you a practical method to begin to heal and transform by turning your attention to your experience in your therapy session to help uncover the many opportunities for healing in each session. To change our implicit assumptions about us, others and the world around us, we need (1) to be mindful of how we feel and what we notice moment by moment and (2) to fully experience what arises in the presence of another to undo any aloneness and to allow for new ways of being with ourselves and others to arise.

When we begin to reflect on our moment-by-moment experience in a therapy session (and in general), we can uncover unconscious assumptions and beliefs that, over time, have been hardwired into us as implicit memories. Once we see our patterns, if we are in a relationship where we trust the other, we can then experiment and incorporate different ways of relating that break with our internalized rules about relationship and may serve us better. Experimenting can be done in any relationship, but within a therapeutic relationship your therapist has the experience and the desire to support you in your growth and healing. He or she has agreed to be in a relationship where your needs take precedence. This provides a heightened level of security while you experiment with different ways of relating. Your relationship with your therapist should be able to absorb any bumps that result from new and possibly awkward attempts to act differently.

These experiments and their surprising outcomes (e.g. you don't leave when I get mad at you?) work to slowly replace old implicit memories with new ones. When we work moment-by-moment in the therapeutic relationship, we engage the limbic (emotional) brain and can experience transformation in relationshipⁱⁱⁱ. Our limbic brain governs how we relate to others emotionally, and no matter what our cortex understands about the process, change cannot occur until we create new pathways within our limbic brain to allow for different possibilities in relationship.^{iv} Ultimately this transformation can spread beyond the therapy room and can lead to more fulfillment in many aspects of your life outside of therapy.^v

A practice that improves with time. Often when we first seek to access our deeper feelings and assumptions about being in relationship, they are elusive, and appear only after the fact, if at all. Over time, if we stay with the practice, the time lag gets shorter and shorter until we begin to share, in real time with another human being, how he or she is impacting us. For now, this likely seems elusive. You may be aware of very little of how you are impacted by your therapist. In addition, the idea of focusing on your therapist and the relationship between you may seem novel or even shocking or counterintuitive. That's ok. This journal is intended as a bridge—it is a way, a place, and a guide to note reactions to the process of therapy, to your therapist, and to your experience in general, so that you can bring them in to session the following week and discuss what feels relevant to you. You can, and should, continue to do all that you do now in therapy and add in whatever may feel right as you allow yourself to explore using the therapeutic relationship itself as a means to heal and grow.

Using this journal over time will assist you in becoming more mindful of your thoughts, feelings and assumptions about your therapist and the relationship the two of you co-create. If you share these thoughts and feelings with your therapist, you will be working in real time on understanding your needs in relationship, how you express yourself, what dependence feels like to you, and a myriad of other relational issues. Your therapist has been trained in having precisely these conversations, and should be able to hear your concerns and take them seriously, but not defensively, so that the two of you can look deeply into your past and present experience, create a new experience together and, bit by bit, rewire your heart.

Go at your own pace. One important caveat is to only share what you are ready to share with your therapist. Do not let my words here or your words in the journal push you into places you do not want to be. You have an internal wisdom and know better what you need than anyone else. If you consistently find yourself unable to share certain responses, check in with yourself to see if you might want to at least discuss your reluctance to talk about a certain topic, without discussing the underlying details. If you are not open to this

discussion, be curious with yourself as to why, but allow the process to remain unspoken until the point you feel ready to open more fully. Respecting your pace gives you an opportunity to work on recognizing and meeting your own needs in relationship. This is a critical element of being able to build fulfilling relationships and is every bit as important as noticing and sharing your reactions.

ⁱ Juila Landis, *Heart to Heart Talk: A Client's Guide to Transformation in Psychotherapy*, Salt Lake City: Adarsa Books, Inc., 2002, p.8.

ⁱⁱ Landis, 2002 p. 5.

ⁱⁱⁱ Thomas Lewis M.D., Fari Amini, M.D., Richard Lannon, M.D., *A General Theory of Love*, New York: Random House, 2001.

^{iv} Lewis et al, 2001.

^v Lewis et al, 2001.