Thoughts on Extremes-Middle Completion Relationships

and

an Exploration of the Possible Problems of Both Completion and Sharing Relationships

Copyright 2015 Larry Moen, M.Ed LPC Uncommon Therapy [www.utherapy.net](http://www.utherapy.net)

**Extremes vs Middle Completion Relationships**

**A common form for completion relationships is that of one party controlling (able to initiate) choices at both extremes (positive and negative) while the other person controls choices in the middle range.**

The first person/entity is intense, seemingly powerful, and volatile. They display strong judgments and have “no middle ground.” They are good in a crisis and have vision, but also can have black moods and seek delusional good outcomes. The other person is “mild-mannered” and extremely stable, though limited. They see all the shades of gray. The other person soars, this person is “the wind beneath [their] wings.”

This kind of completion relationship occurs in many forms. Examples include many famous historical figures and their spouses, artists and patrons, 1950’s-style traditional US marriages, and many abusive adult-to-adult relationships.

**The key is that both persons have the same capacity – range of possible choices, but each has some reason to want to keep a large portion of these as unacceptable choices, as “not really me.”**

What might some reasons be? Beliefs such as “I must be exceptional.” “I cannot draw attention to myself.” “I’m incapable of doing intense or exceptional things – I’m a limited human being.” “People who are in the middle reject me, so I’ll reject them or being like them.” “If I don’t give 110% I’m a failure.”

Another reason has to do with power – sometimes we are given extreme choices by life but are uncomfortable or afraid of the power that comes with those. Cutting away those choices (choosing to have only middle-intensity choices) or cutting away middle choices and choosing to have only intense ones strips away the power actually available to me. The cost is either self-repression or a loss of stability.

Completion relationships allow growth or stability, and a full range of initiatable choices, but at the cost of dependency. Over time they also suffer from rigidity, as additional growth tends to make the middles-only person feel smaller, more repressed, and increasingly less relatively powerful, and the extremes-only person feel more powerfully unstable.

**Most completion relationships will ultimately fail because of these forces upon them, unless the original choice boundaries can be changed.**

Please see my article entitled XXXXX which explains ultimatums, one-upmanship, and other ways in which growth is managed in such relationships.

**Deciding who makes the decisions**

**Whether you want to make the decision or want the other person to do so, the criteria for who does make the decision is entirely based on the perceived intensity of the choice.**

In choice spectrums where one person has extremes and the other has middle, to gain control (be the one who makes the choices) each has to fight to define the situation as belonging in their own range of choices (if they want to choose) or in the other’s range of choices(if they want the other person to choose).

Thus, if BOTH want the choice the middle person will minimize the risk/reward, while the extreme person will exaggerate it. They might say “Gee, honey, this thing with the kids isn’t as bad as they’re saying – it’s just a phase.” “It’ll be just like cousin Jason – this is the first step to ruin. I know it looks small but it isn’t.”

If instead each person doesn’t want to make the choice, but to force it on their partner, the reverse will happen – extremes will minimize the risk, and middles will exaggerate it. That might sound something like this: “Hey, lots of kids set fires and come out of it just fine.” “You’ve got to ground her – it may be just taking a piece of candy, but she has to learn stealing is bad now or one day she could be skimming from some retiree’s pension fund – you’ve got to be harsh with this lesson.”

Please see my article entitled XXXXXXX for a description of techniques used to adjust the intensity balance of a particular form.

**Resistance to normal growth in Completion Relationships**

**In a completion-based relationship, when a person is able to make a true choice “out of their range” it will usually be perceived by the other person as an inappropriate inroad on their identity and balance of power in the relationship. It is highly likely to be perceived as a threat, rather than an opportunity to share.**

The threatened person will often seek to undercut the choice to reaffirm their own value in the relationship, and get the other person to back off from these choices. They may point out how much better they make such choices and/or ridicule the other person’s efforts or intent. In American culture, where women are predominately steered towards taking the middle-range choices and men the more extreme, much of the gender role enforcement is done by such ridicule – emphasizing how inept men are raising children, cooking, etc. and how inept women are dealing with dangerous situations and bigger problems.

**Completion-based relationships are based on need, not sharing.** Increasing available choices for one person makes the other person feel less needed – which is true. That can lead to panic over the loss of power and ability to cope that seems at risk. ALL changes in control of choices, however small, threaten the balance of power in the relationship; such changes will receive a strong defensive reaction regardless of their size.

To survive, the relationship needs to re-focus on sharing with each other rather than depending on each other. Since the underlying truth is that for the relationship to persist in the first place there must be equality or near-equality of real available choices, this implies that a true sharing of all choices is possible. If I am truly uncomfortable with extreme choices, I will not want to stay connected with someone who does them. If I cannot value middle choices, I will not stay connected to someone who always chooses them. **It is not that I don’t accept the choices themselves – what I don’t want to accept is the idea of me being the one making them. To grow into all of who I already am, I need to reclaim these as my choices.**

**Control aspects of Completion Relationships**

These relationships often come down to control and identity issues. Because sharing is rare, communication centers on expectations instead as to what each person is responsible for doing. Obligations build in, opening the door for resentments.

Anger focuses on two aspects: I needed a choice to happen that you are responsible for doing, and you 1) didn’t do it when I needed it or 2) didn’t do it in a way I liked or wanted. Essentially, I’m asking you to run a part of my life that I’m not willing to do (or see myself as unable to do), and – surprise of all surprises – you don’t do that the way I would. Since that is your role/value in the relationship I feel cheated, angry – and scared. **Without you I am incomplete, but with you I feel compromised.**

**The magic of finding someone who “completes” me gives way to the reality that we never can be complete if we try to have someone else living part of our life.** However, not seeing that, instead I feel like I’ve made a wrong choice. I may then look for another completion relationship that matches who I am now. This can, of course, lead to a pattern of relationships that work briefly and then fall apart.

**Loneliness in Completion Relationships**

Completion relationships can be surprisingly lonely for people. This is actually not so surprising, since **the only shared item is maintaining the relationship itself.** Hence the old lines of “My husband/wife doesn’t understand me. We seem to have nothing in common. I just want to be with someone who can really relate to my world.” This frequently leads to affairs, but can also lead to swings back and forth from completion relationships to sharing relationships and then back again.

Stable middle people are attracted to extreme people/entities/causes for completion and to other stable middle people for sharing. For an example from the old Western movies, the extreme gunfighter/sheriff shares understanding and comraderie (and perhaps other things) with the prostitute but marries/finds “balance and completion” with the (repressedly sexual/adventurous) virgin. The housewife shares with her peers but fantasizes how the men in romance novels would make her feel complete.

**Why completion relationships get less satisfying and more lonely over time**

Most completion relationships begin as hybrids – part of them act as sharing relationships and part act as completion elements. If the completion aspects start to grow, the normal way to balance out the changes is for one or both parties to need more choices – and since the existing completion choices are so strongly defended, the usual place for picking up choices will be to change the shared choices into singly-owned completion ones. As this process persists over time there are fewer and fewer areas that remain shared. Eventually all the shared choices can disappear, leaving both parties dependent on maintaining the relationship but unable to find any shared areas within it. Both need the relationship but feel alone inside it.

**How we develop a need for completion relationships**

Relationships based on “completion” are not inherently bad. We are all at times unwilling or unable to make or take the choices we need or want. We all have been trained in what choices we should take, and what choices are inappropriate for us (usually based on culture, genders, and socio-economic status). These are all ways in which we conform, survive, connect, and differentiate ourselves.

However, they are also not fixed parts of reality, but artificial constructs of it. There is a world of difference between saying “I could never lie about something like that” (not a true statement: it is a possible choice in the real world) versus saying “I would never choose to lie about that” (a more accurate statement) and then again versus saying “At this point in my life I can think of no circumstances in which I would choose to lie about that” (almost always the most accurate statement).

At any rate, for a variety of reasons we can have a legitimate need for a relationship which allows us to access choices we believe are unacceptable, but recognize as really possible for us. Total sharing within a relationship is most likely impossible, and certainly could at best be only momentarily achieved. One highly valuable aspect of relationships is that they allow us to explore and learn about choices we have thought unable for us to know or make. We learn and grow from interacting with other people who are different in small or large ways from us, but with whom we can learn common areas where we can share.

It is not then that a relationship with aspects of completion is bad, but that it can run the risk of becoming bad instead of helpful, stifling rather than full of growth, and about power struggles rather than about increasing the power of both participants.

**A clarifying side note:**

When we choose in the real world to do something outside of our range of accepted choices we often say a strange thing: “I know I did that, but it wasn’t really me.” Of course it was you. It just wasn’t your concept of who you are or should be. Most of us are much more than the self-concept we limit ourselves to. We define ourselves by the choices we make, and by the limits we put on our possible choices. But we must be careful to recognize that these limitations of possible choices are voluntary, rather than fixed. For a further discussion of this see my article on XXXXXXXX.

**Personal growth: the nemesis of Completion Relationships**

Completion relationships are also those most likely to have problems with personal growth. Personal growth for a middle-range person involves learning to be more comfortable with more intense (more extreme) choices. However, to do so means moving into the territory of choices “owned” by their partner. The partner’s power in the relationship is then reduced (they have fewer choices they control). As previously discussed, they usually will act to limit the middle-range person’s growth, causing conflict, frustration, and even abuse.

Alternately, they may give over these choices to the middles-only person, but compensate for that increase their partner’s power by adding on new, even more extreme, choices. They become more extreme, and, because they remain unstable, these extremes are both more dangerous and more dramatic, since the extremes are now further apart than previously. Sometimes the choices become so extreme as to be questionable as to their basis in reality. Examples are get-rich-quick schemes, horrid new behaviors, and the mixed love-hate of jealous rages.

For the person with extremes-only choices, personal growth comes not from being more extreme but by learning to be less extreme -- from becoming able to reclaim more of their middle-range choices. Again, and often coming as a surprise, this will create a relationship power shift and imbalance. The middle-range choices person will feel “smaller” in the relationship – less needed and less valued. They may act to keep the extreme person extreme, by causing instabilities and crises.

Another solution is for the middle person to “leap over” the range of extreme choices of their partner and start to have choices even more extreme than their partner’s. This takes the form of ultimatums and catastrophizing. The formerly “constrained and even-minded” person now is making extreme demands, characterizing things in an extreme black-and-white fashion which seems utterly against their character and unexpected. But it is not unexpected or mysterious if seem in terms of the mechanics of the system – these are the only available power-balancing choices that can be owned, the only way to regain the power equality.

The consequences of attempting personal growth **when sharing is not seen as an option** are forays into extreme choices which are quite unexpected since the area where choices are being gained or lost is typically in the middle level of intensity, not out at the extremes.

**Unreal choices: when the envelope you’re pushing no longer is an envelope**

Curiously, there are a range of “unreal” real choices that can develop. For those at the extremes, their extreme choices they perceive themselves as having often become highly unlikely/implausible real outcomes, not choices. These can be positive (I will win the lottery. My first novel will be a worldwide success. This investment will make me a millionaire.) and also negative (I am the worst person in the world. I have no redeeming values at all. Everything I do hurts others.) These are not real choices, in the sense that I cannot make these happen – they depend on factors outside my control verifying them, which hasn’t yet been done and may never happen. When I begin believing that I KNOW I have choices/control over something I don’t, I have moved into unreality.

**This is not limited to the extreme/intense choices.**  **I can also go into a kind of unreal neutrality.** I can cease to believe that I have any choices at all. This has many forms, the most obvious being depression and catatonia. A common and less obvious form is that of people who take on role-based choice patterns as their identity. Whether being a “Stepford Wife” or simply “the good little boy/girl/wife/husband/worker,” **the person is not there, only the role.** There are no independent choices; all the choices are proscribed, like lines in a play.

**Reclaiming choices you already have**

Reclaiming choices is an important concept here. To “complete” through another person implies that we already have the choice range they display, we just are blocked from making those choices directly ourselves. This can be because of fear, because we obtained those choices through some kind of trauma we don’t want to deal with, because we learned to identify ourselves only with a narrow set of choices, or for other reasons. At some level we know these are real choices for us, even if consciously we deny that,

Note that there are relationships where we connect with others to learn new choices, whatever intensity those choices may be. Parents, teachers, mentors, and those more experienced can all help us grow through developing new choices and discovering choices we previously did not see or did not believe possible. Love relationships almost always have these elements to them – we learn from each other.

**To be healthy, though, these relationships are not based on mutual dependencies. The parent, teacher, etc. should not need the child, student, etc. in order to feel complete. When they do, some sort of abuse or neglect is often the result. Both abuse and neglect are powerful tools used to try to force others to be or do what we want.**

**Courtship as a predictor of relationship patterns**

The nature of our courtship can be a good indicator of the basis of the relationship. **If the predominant thoughts are “I feel so complete with them” or “I feel so much more intense (or grounded) when I’m with them,” there is a strong likelihood of a completion-based relationship developing.** If the comments run to “I like how I see myself when I am with them” or “I can’t believe someone like that would like me” the relationship could go either way. If the comments are “I love how much we can talk and share together” or “When we’re together we’re just both more grounded (or more able to do more exciting things)” then the likelihood is that a sharing relationship is under way.

**Problems with sharing relationships**

Just as completion relationships are not all bad, sharing relationships are not all good. **In sharing relationships the dangers are limited choices and inertia.**

Just as we can share in acceptable choices, we can also share in unaccepted choices. For example, two middles-only people or two extremes-only people can have a full sharing relationship but still have that be dysfunctional. **This is the problem of having limited choices.**

In this scenario, sections of real choices are unavailable for either person in the relationship to initiate. If circumstances require a choice that falls within the range of these unavailable choices, neither person can do it. The middles-only couple will under-react., the extremes-only couple will over-react, with consequences to either couple ranging from the uncomfortable to the devastating.

**While personal growth is the primary cause of the dissolution of completion-based relationships, external circumstances are the primary cause of sharing relationships disintegrating.** Here are some examples: “I really like how we shared together, but neither of us could handle our finances and that became a disaster – I had to get out.” “We had great sex and great discussions, but it just wasn’t enough somehow. We had to deal with the day to day of real life and we couldn’t.” “We had a great stable marriage, just solid, not a lot of fireworks, but then the accident happened and it all fell apart after that.”

**Inertia is a problem because the couple can become hyper-focused on the sharing in a small range of choices and never move beyond that. This can create a different kind of dependency, similar to an addiction. I need the high of the connection so much that I become willing to give up my choices in other parts of my life.** I am defining myself only in terms of shared choices, and have limited my personal power and ability to deal with reality.

**Unlimited choices, limited actions**

**The presupposition in all of this is, of course, that the healthiest course is to accept the full range of choices reality has confirmed to be available to us. This can be confusing,** because we’ve already said that our personality – our definition of who we are – is largely based on what we choose to do and what we limit ourselves from doing: the choices we make and those we don’t. How can we do this and still have a full range?

**The key here is that while we need to have a full range of available choices, we don’t ever need to choose them. We just have to be careful not to remove them as real and possible.** **We don’t have to act on a choice for it to give us power, we just have to be able TO act on the choice.**

Let’s look at this further: If I have **no choice but to be good** – then my actions are certainly less powerful than if I have plenty of choices to be bad, but choose to be good instead. I may in fact always choose to be good and never bad… but I just never forget that I could choose to be bad, that it isn’t impossible for me to do so.

For those like me who grew up with Christianity, things like the temptation of Christ come to mind – an unintelligible thing if he had no choice but to be good. “Not my will, but thine” is a continuous, powerful choice. And the comment “All things are possible to them that believe but not all things are prudent” would be a good summary of the concept here. **It is as much by what I choose not to do as it is by what I choose to do that I create my life and the person I am.**

**The nature, care and feeding of the common relationship affair**

Affairs are often attempts to balance out the flaws in **either kind** of relationships.

**In completion relationships**, the first category for affairs happen when a person becomes lonely and feels a great desire for someone to share with. These affairs are true adjuncts to the completion relationship – they do not threaten it. They only address the lack of sharing.

Traditionally since men in our culture are more often steered towards being the ones with intense/extreme choices, they often looked for women who are also intense/extreme and lacking middle choices., such as prostitutes. Women in these relationships were more apt to want to share with stable, even-keel non-intense men. Because such affairs center on less intense choices, they usually draw less attention. In more modern settings these stereotypes have broadened: women may have affairs by connecting with gay men, men may have affairs by connecting with co-workers. The underlying need for shared choices remains the same, as does the underlying need to continue on with the Completion Relationship, not abandon it.

A second category of affairs focuses on making a substitution – I still need someone for completion, but the range of such choices has grown too large. I want to return to having more sharing in the middle range intensities. My affairs are a search for a new completion relationship that is less restricted than my current one has become. (Note: the odds are that the new relationship will repeat the old pattern over time).

A third category are reversals. I’m tired of being the extremes-only (or middles-only) person and I’m looking to make a complete swap – someone who will take over my old role/range so I can take on what I’ve been missing. My affair is an attempt to test out this possibility – can I become/regain the stable one or the wild and crazy one with someone else? Or, alternately, can I play out this role with an affair that is, in fact, a SECOND completion relationship which works in opposition to the first?

**Sharing relationships can lead to affairs also.**

These often take the form of finding a second relationship where I share with them both of us “acting in the unaccepted parts of me.” Powerful politicians have sex with movie stars, with whom they can share the mutually unacceptable to the real me choices of being not famous, not talented, and not responsible to others. Nice stable people in nice stable relationships have flings with “totally inappropriate” persons.

Usually sharing relationship affairs relate to feelings of the relationship being too limited in its range (even if intense), too vulnerable, or arise from circumstances where the primary relationship partners cannot make a necessary choice. “I love my spouse but our lives are just so humdrum… I want a little excitement, if only for a little while.” “I love sharing with my partner, but they couldn’t make this happen for me and you can.“ “My partner is wonderful, but I need someone who can handle day to day life., because I can’t.” “I’m tired of all the intensity we share – I just want to have someone I can share normal little things with.”

Sharing relationship affairs are often more conflicted than completion relationship affairs, because they focus on the inadequacy of BOTH parties rather than on the problem being centered on the other person alone.

**Affairs often are with non-human partners**

OK, we are not talking bestiality here – or not only, anyway. The point is that **we traditionally think of affairs as happening with other people, but anything that works the same way in terms of choice ranges can substitute.**

In a completion relationship, the key is that the person seeking out the affair must gain the choice range he/she is missing through something or someone outside of their control – I am not making the choice myself, I’m connecting to something else that makes the choice for me. What else does this?

For the middle-range folks extreme religions or causes, obligations that require extreme measures, extreme roles that I take which are “not really me,” extreme behaviors I get into when I am “out of control” due to an addiction or other cause, or allying with others who have only a win-lose outlook (professional sports teams) – any of these can work.

For the extreme-range folks, just the opposite, of course: situations which require non-intense choices they are forced to make (but again, are not really “who they are”), bureaucracies, taking on boring jobs, doing activities without real value (such as computer gaming) – these all can be effective.

In sharing relationships, non-human partners can include religions or political systems that dictate exactly how to respond to extreme choices, “owning” these choices. It could also include a devotion to animals or causes dealing with people identified as unable to be more than average, or where the highest goal is to bring them up to some moderate intensity of rewards or abilities. Clearly not all people involved in such religions or causes are involved in something dysfunctional, these are just examples of some possibilities. The key factor is whether there is a sharing component or this feels like “not really me” or “not really them” is doing this.

More on this at a later date.

**Typical conflicts in Completion and Sharing Relationships**

Typical conflicts are as follows:

In Completion Relationships these include:

* power and control,
* defining whose choice it is,
* ownership,
* fear of intimacy/sharing (seen as a depletion of self-value and self-power),
* belief that one’s own personal growth harms others or diminishes them,
* over-focus on relationship goals versus personal goals,
* mind-reading

In Sharing Relationships these include:

* competition,
* defining who makes the impossible choices,
* arguments about choice-lacking areas (finances, careers, etc.)
* resistance to changing interests

All these are guides or markers that point back to the type of problem and thus to its solution.

**Healthy relationships**

Healthy relationships have a balance of sharing and completion elements, and flow from one to the other. Completion elements help us to grow outward, and also to fill in the inner gaps of any missing less intense choices that de-stabilize us. Sharing elements allow us to find companionship and add depth to our thoughts, feelings, and experiences. A healthy relationship thus includes separation as well as togetherness, and differences as well as commonalities.

You have permission to be unusual. And to be the same.

Copyright 2015 Larry Moen, M.Ed LPC Uncommon Therapy www.utherapy.net