

UPPER LIMIT PATTERNS

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The Upper Limit Concept

Did you ever have a fight with your partner that seemed to come out of no-where? One minute you were feeling good about each other and the next minute you're in a conflict? We call this the "upper limit pattern". In close relationships, there is ultimately only one pattern you need to be aware of: We have an upper limit on how much love and positive energy we allow ourselves to experience. Too much love, joy, happiness, positive energy gets us high, and this trips the upper-limits switch, making us unconsciously come back down to a more familiar level. When WE push through our Upper Limit thermostat setting by making more money, experiencing more love, or drawing more positive attention to ourselves, we trip our Upper Limit switch. Deep inside our body we get a threat signal and a little voice might say, "You can't possibly feel this good" (or "make this much money" or "be this happy in love"). Unconsciously, we then do something to bring ourselves back down to the thermostat setting we're familiar with; or frequently even lower. Even if we do achieve a glorious new height, it is often short-lived.

The upper-limits pattern is especially evident as we open up to more love and energy in our relationships; we begin to flush old glitches out of the system. Our energy thermostat is not yet reset higher, and as we feel new levels of love and intimacy, sometimes this sets off alarms in us. Many of us unconsciously believe that we don't deserve to feel good and therefore create reasons not to feel good. We may also be getting messages from the culture around us that we shouldn't feel good (or be so expanded).

Before we go any further we want to remind you that – even if we don't say it, we see all of these behaviours as unconscious. We may say that people "choose" and we mean that this is an unconscious choice.

Our personal insight into ULP

We (Bob & Marlene) really understood this concept one day in 1996 when we were vacationing on the west coast of Canada. We had had an amazing few weeks and were walking around a beautiful point looking out over the Pacific Ocean. We were telling each other how lucky we were to be there and how much in love we were and within five minutes were locked in a huge argument.

The actual fight was "because" Bob did not get the camera out fast enough to take a picture of the two beautiful Pileated Woodpeckers that were right in front of us. Before we knew it we were caught in typical dramas of not feeling heard, valued, and appreciated.

Common Upper Limit behaviours:

Many things can happen once the upper limit switch has been flipped:

1. Arguments, control & power struggles, irritability, fault-finding; we may unconsciously create arguments to prevent ourselves from experiencing intimacy. Many people use arguments about sex or money to bring themselves down. They fall into drama and the adrenalin rush instead of intimacy. Much of the energy in relationships is drained in power struggles: who's right, who's wrong, and who's the biggest victim.
2. Withholds: we also limit positive energy by withholding significant communications. We get scared of being close, and instead of revealing that, we withdraw and swallow the communication. Or we may be reluctant to tell our partners how much they mean to us. Or we may think I can't tell my partner something. When we withdraw and withhold communication, then the other person starts to look unsafe to us: these withholds can be as small as I can't tell you that I stopped on the way home and bought a cup of coffee or as significant as I felt attracted to someone else.
3. Projection is another way of limiting positive energy. Projection happens when you attribute to others something that's true for you. The Taoist teacher, Lao-Tzu, tells the following story. "Once upon a time a man whose ax was missing suspected his neighbor's son. The boy walked like a thief, looked like a thief, and spoke like a thief. But the man found his ax while digging in the valley, and next time he saw his neighbor's son, he walked, looked, and spoke like any other child." A vast amount of energy can be liberated in relationships by dropping the habit of projection. A number of our clients frequently say to their partners, you seem angry. They may be withholding their own expression of anger and projecting it on to their partner. This is a great way of bringing themselves down to their familiar level.
4. Another thing that can trigger an upper limit is guilt – when we do something positive for ourselves we can feel guilty. Guilt happens because our positive feelings clash with our schemas; i.e. old beliefs about ourselves, others and the world. A client of ours knew that she would be leaving her old job soon. Her insurance coverage would end one month after she walked out the door. She needed knee replacement surgery. She had the sick leave required and her work could be covered by her colleagues. She was hesitating booking the surgery out of guilt.
5. Getting bored, sleepiness – A client came to us saying she was bored, and complained especially about boring and predictable sex. After she had sex with her husband, she judged it as "it's not good enough, it's the same old; maybe I'm interested in having other partners."
6. Worrying – "The Big Leap" is the best book we have read about the Upper Limit Pattern. The author, Gay Hendricks, who coined the phrase ULP, and has been our mentor for 8 years. In the book, he describes an incident when he caught

himself worrying about his daughter while she was away at camp. “When I reached my Upper Limit of how much positive feeling I could handle, I created a series of unpleasant thoughts to deflate me. The thoughts I manufactured were guaranteed to make me return to a state I was more familiar with: not feeling so good. Worrying about children away from home is always a handy way to feel bad, but I knew that if I hadn’t pulled up those particular worry-thoughts, I would have used some other train of thought to dampen my mood.” Hendricks, *The Big Leap*, p. 6.

A sign that we’re worrying unnecessarily is when we’re worrying about something we have no control over. Worrying is useful only if it concerns a topic we can actually do something about, and if it leads to our taking positive action right away. When we love someone, we begin to miss them, and then we start thinking worry thoughts.

In the Woody Allen movie *Annie Hall* there is a scene that shows the Upper Limit pattern. Woody is running frantically around the bedroom, wringing his hands and trying to get his wife interested in his latest conspiracy theory about the Kennedy assassination. She finally gently suggests that maybe these obsessions of his are simply ways of avoiding intimacy with her. Finally he says, “You’re right.”

7. Negative thoughts these can be in the form of worry or guilt (as mentioned above) or critical thoughts about ourselves or our partners. Recently we had a client who noticed that she began to question whether her partner was really available. This was a common pattern with her, and she would end the relationship rather than take the next step of risking.
8. Breaking agreements – we’ve had more than one client who didn’t tell their partner about money they had spent, and/or didn’t pay taxes they had agreed to pay. As you can imagine, these broken agreements coming at a time when life was going well for them, brought up a lot of emotions for their partner. Even though the partner had only recently thought how great things were going, she felt tempted to end the relationship due to the broken agreement. Her own upper limit belief of not being able to trust the good time got triggered.
9. Addictive behaviour – A common behaviour in people who are trying to change addictive behaviour is to sabotage themselves by rewarding themselves with the behaviour they have been successfully avoiding. They may eat after dieting, skip the gym, or have “just one drink”. The slide into misery is enhanced when we add self-judgment and blame to our thinking.

Upper limit patterns can also show up through:

10. Losing things – after a high energy retreat, when people feel especially positive, invariably some people leave things behind.

11. Having an accident, hurting yourself – We have all heard of tragic stories of people hurting themselves on the way to the wedding; our clients were going on a long-awaited holiday to Spain and walk the Camino trail, when she broke her wrist.
12. Getting sick – Years ago, Bob frequently got sick on holidays. He realized that he was unconsciously thinking “if I’m going to relax and enjoy it, I’m going to get sick.”

These are not always upper limits but it can be useful to ask the question, “Is there anything I want to **prevent or protect** myself from; **punish** myself or someone else for; OR give **permission** for?”

What makes the ULP difficult to change:

One of the reasons that ULP patterns are hard to change is because they are not stored through logic, but in an emotional part of the brain called the amygdala, as opposed to a part of the brain that’s readily amenable to logical analysis or discourse. They are self-perpetuating, and very resistant to change.

Or as Gay Hendricks says, “the Upper Limit Problem cannot be solved in the usual way we solve problems: by gathering information or replacing one set of information with another. The Upper Limit Problem must be *dis*-solved, not solved. You dissolve it by shining a laserlike beam of awareness on its underpinnings – the false foundations that hold the Upper Limit Problem in place. When you shine the light of awareness on the under-pinnings, they disappear.” Hendricks, *the Big Leap*, p. 29

For example, under-pinnings might be expressed as fears like:

1. “I am fundamentally flawed in some way.”
2. “If I expand to my full success, it will cause me to end up being disloyal to my roots, to leave behind people from my past, and/or I will end up alone.”
3. “I can’t expand to my highest potential because I’d be an even bigger burden than I am now.”
4. “If I expanded to my full success, I would out-do or outshine someone and make him or her look bad.”
5. “Happiness is just bad or wrong, I need to suffer.”

What can help:

We ask people to ask themselves “What happened just before this?” or “Why is this is happening **right now**?” (with the focus on “right now” rather than “why is this happening?”)

In our 1996 example, Marlene realized that just before the fight, and just after telling Bob how much she loved him, she had had the thought that this was too good to be true. This is one of her upper limit clues.

Meanwhile, Bob had started to feel tight and constricted and tried to hold on to the positive feeling. This is one of his upper limit clues; when he feels good he starts to want to have more and his expectations go up. These two clues are a common pattern for us. We recognized that our holiday arguments would often be preceded by Marlene with a thought of this won't last and by Bob with a thought of I want more.

When Bob wants more and Marlene is thinking that this is too good to be true, it is only a step away from Bob demanding more and Marlene hearing that she is not good enough. We realized that we had had this fight over and over. It had happened on every holiday we had ever been on; part way through the holiday we had had some wonderful laughs, eaten great food, had good sex, and Bob started to think he wanted more and simultaneously Marlene started to think it couldn't last. Invariably the holiday would degenerate into a fight where Marlene would be saying, "see, I knew I could never meet your needs" and Bob would be saying "but all I want is more."

For example, the couple who had the Sunday fight pattern, was able to see that she approached the day with a suggestion which had a hint of entitlement (I never get to do something creative) and a belief that her needs would never get met. He heard her suggestion from a place of subjugation (I have no choice, I have to do as she says) and he would resist any suggestion from that place. Recognizing these beliefs (which we explore using schema therapy) and seeing themselves as both trapped in the same trap allowed them to be allies against the problem.

For the client who was bored, the basic shift was into appreciation. She was also able to recognize her own fear of change and to take responsibility for initiating and asking for what she wanted.

The client who had broken agreements noticed his resistance to revealing, and started monitoring his impulse to withhold and intentionally reveal. In the meantime, he also recognized his belief that he was defective/flawed and basically unlovable and discovered in his family of origin mixed message (e.g. be a good citizen and don't declare taxable items).

The client who constantly screwed up when he was in charge of date night – we explored her moving closer to him. He realized that while he wanted her closeness, he feared her closeness.

Specific suggestions to deal with worry:

When you have a worry thought, ask yourself, "Is it a real possibility?" And if it is, "Is there any action I can take right now to make a positive difference?"

For example, if I am worrying about leaving the stove on, and I am still close enough to home to check, I can ask myself if it is a real possibility that the stove is on, and/or I can check.

But even something like worrying about leaving the stove on can be a part of an upper limit pattern. If you consistently double check the stove before you walk out and then notice yourself worrying about the stove it is more likely that you are unconsciously using your worry thoughts so that you won't feel good.

It may then be helpful to ask yourself a third question, "What positive thoughts might be available if I wasn't worrying about this? What positive thing am I not seeing?"

Pre-emptive Upper Limit (PULP)

Another pattern we became aware of is one we now call a pre-emptive upper limit or PULP. We (Bob & Marlene) used to argue frequently on Friday nights, at the beginning of a weekend where there was a potential for leisure and fun. The argument could be about anything, but the ultimate outcome was invariably the same; we would not have the leisure and fun that we thought we were going to have. The argument would prevent us from having good times and intimacy. We learned to claim the result as our unconscious desire. And then we learned to shift this pattern.

We are happy to tell you that we don't fall into this pattern any more.

Important first Steps:

Ask yourself the following questions:

1. Am I willing to increase the amount of time every day that I feel good inside?
2. Am I willing to increase the amount of time that my whole life goes well?
3. Am I willing to feel good and have my life go well all the time?
4. Am I willing to take the Big Leap to your ultimate level of success in love, money, and creative contribution?

AS you ask these questions, notice any place in your body that feels constricted. Now bring breath and gentle movement to the places in your body where you felt some constriction.

In order to solve the Upper Limit Patterns you need to:

1. Expand your capacity to give and receive love
2. Raise your thermostat setting for happiness and positive energy (this is not linear, it happens a little bit at a time and there are frequent dips)
3. Shorten the time gap between the ULP & restoring positive energy
4. Expand the length of time between one ULP & the next

How to deal with an Upper Limit:

1. Increase your upper limit a little bit at a time. Don't try to go from your usual level to feeling good all the time; that is a recipe for failure. And don't blame yourself or someone else for reaching your upper limit, we all have them. Our job is to become aware of them.
2. Take plenty of time and space off from the relationship. A close relationship is powerfully transformative, and you need lots of rest time to integrate the learnings from it. Go for a walk, sit under a tree, look at the stars, take a bath. Relationships need both times of closeness and independence. Find ways to ask for separate time without creating conflict or drama to get it.
3. Pay attention to what is going on in your body and describe it. Move the constricted places in your body in gentle ways.
4. Breathe by yourself or together. Slow your breathing down; deepen it. If you notice yourself caught in fight-or-flight breathing exhale fully and wait a few seconds and then allow the breath to come in on its own. Most people will automatically take a deeper breath.
5. Accept it as it is. Say to yourself "Today is Friday" (or whatever day it is) and notice how you accept that. Then bring that same sense of acceptance to whatever is going on.
6. Meditate by yourself or together. Look at each other; hold each other's gaze but drop the words. For a great program which includes a couples meditation practice go to www.marleneandbob.com/links.htm and get the Relationship Catalyst program.
7. Let the other person (and yourself) go through complete feeling cycles. If the other person is sad, support them in crying to completion. If the other person is angry, support them in expressing their anger. Don't try to help them feel better – help them feel more, without judgment.
8. Give yourself plenty of non-sexual intimate touch. Sex is great, of course, but many people do not give enough attention to non-sexual touch. Humans need touch in large quantities. Oxytocin (the cuddle drug) is released during eye-gazing, hugging and pleasant physical touch. A number of sources say that a hug needs to be at least 20 seconds long to release oxytocin.
9. After periods of intense intimacy, get grounded in a positive way (many people ground themselves by getting sick, or having an accident, or an argument). Some good ways of grounding: a massage, a walk, dancing, completing important communications, cleaning up your desk, exercise until you sweat.
10. Have a pillowfight or play with your aggressive energy in safe ways like wrestling, putting your palms together and pushing.

11. Have at least three friends who will call you on your act, gently remind you that you create your own reality, remind you to breathe, and open up to love once again.
12. When you notice symptoms (e.g. irritability, fault-finding, boredom, sleepiness, feeling less, messing up) ask yourself “what might cause this issue to come up at **this time?**”
13. When you notice a criticism or irritability coming up, imagine the irritability as an early warning signal; instead of blaming take a few breaths and let yourself feel.

Useful questions to ponder:

1. What thoughts, emotions, body sensations and patterns occur after a period where things are working smoothly?
2. What are my most common upper limit behaviours?
3. How long can I typically stay in a state of love and positive energy before I reach my upper limit?
4. How can I make friends with my upper limit patterns? Create an action step for yourself:

As Marianne Williamson said:

Our Deepest Fear(Quoted by Nelson Mandela in his 1994 inaugural speech)

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.
It is our light, not our darkness, that frightens us.
We ask ourselves, “Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous,
talented, and fabulous?
Actually who are you not to be?
You are a child of God.
Your playing small doesn’t serve the world.
There’s nothing enlightened about shrinking
so that other people won’t feel insecure around you.
We were born to make manifest the
glory of God that is within us.
It is not just in some of us: it’s in everyone.
And as we let our light shine, we unconsciously
give others the permission to do the same.
As we are liberated from our own fear,
Our presence automatically liberates others.