

Putting the I before We: Practical relationship advice for the 21st century.

BOOK REVIEW

Aiken, J. (2005). *U-Turn: Putting You Back Into Your Relationship*. Auckland: Penguin Books. ISBN: 9780143020202

by Aaron Jarden

John Aiken is a registered clinical psychologist with a private practice in Auckland and experience as a psychologist within forensic services, hospitals, business corporations and the emergency services. He specialises in relationships, anxiety, depression, burnout, trauma, sports performance and self-esteem issues. When I met him six years ago, he struck me as a down-to-earth kind of guy, passionate about his work, and full of common sense and practical suggestions. His book, *U-turn: Putting You Back Into Your Relationship*, is a book that such a person would write. This is a book from a relationship expert for people who have significant problems in their intimate relationships and want to make them work. It is “a book for people who lose themselves in relationships”.

The fundamental point this book makes is that people ought to put themselves and their needs first in order to get the relationships they want. As Aiken points out, “it’s a simple philosophy. If you want to enjoy a healthy relationship, then you have to be able to meet your own needs”. *U-turn* aims to teach people how they can put themselves first and make their own needs a priority in order to obtain and sustain the relationships they desire:

...the bottom line is that you’re bad at making relationships work. You’ve been doing this all your life and it’s become a frustrating cycle that never seems to change. The root cause of this is simple. You can’t put yourself first, and therefore you can’t get the relationship you want.

...people tell me that they feel disillusioned and unhappy about their relationships because they’ve given up their own needs and focused on keeping their partners happy. In short, they’ve put others first – themselves last.

U-turn can be broken into two main sections. The first section (chapters 1 to 7) is broadly aimed at understanding why people “lose themselves” in relationships and then getting them ready and motivated to make changes. Beginning with why people lose themselves, Aiken outlines some of the more common causes and influences that prevent a person from obtaining the relationships that s/he desires. He examines the different psychological characteristics (i.e., thoughts, feelings and behaviours) that define those people who give themselves away in relationships, including how they came to be this type of person (such as by

upbringing). Next he assesses a person's motivation to change, because "if you're in enough pain, chances are you're ready [for change]". Following this assessment, techniques for solving key problems in relationships are described. These techniques are divided in the categories of dating, being in a relationship, and breaking up and moving on. The aim of each technique is to break old patterns and teach people how to change so that they can get the relationships they want.

One particularly novel aspect of *U-turn* is Aiken's suggestion that in order to be in the best position to "obtain" an ideal relationship, one first needs to put in place "four pillars of wellbeing". The aim is to introduce a pillar each week, over four weeks. Pillar one is *physical activity*, and here it is recommended that the person engage in thirty minutes of good quality physical activity at least three times a week. Examples include walking, biking, swimming, or going to a gym. Pillar two is *social activity*, and here the goal is to initiate a social activity on a weekly basis. Examples include having coffee with friends, inviting friends over for dinner, and going to a movie. Pillar three is *self activity*, and here it is recommended that one prioritise time for oneself and do activities that are of direct personal benefit. Examples include taking a bath, reading, watching a movie and having a haircut. Pillar four is *emotional wellbeing*, and here people examine how they feel about events and others in their lives and take action on the basis of their feelings rather than of their rational minds. With the instigation of each pillar, people are encouraged to record their accomplishments and how they felt afterward. With the four pillars in place and better care being taken of their needs, people will be in a better position to meet the needs of others, including a partner in a relationship).

The second main section of this book (chapter 8) is aimed at finding a relationship that works and targeting particular relationship problems and patterns. Here Aiken writes of being attracted to bad types, wanting to stay single (and the lengths people go to), fear of rejection, and being a perfectionist. He then moves on to describe specific challenges that can arise when in a relationship. These include dealing with a co-dependent relationship, an angry partner, a commitment-phobe, a poor communicator, a fitness junkie, a workaholic, a jealous partner, a drama queen/king, dealing with overinvolved or disinterested in-laws, problem ex-partners, infidelity and sexual problems. In each of these sections, Aiken firstly provides a case study of someone with such problem, explains the problem and its potential origins, and then provides 'steps to change' to solve *the* problem. Lastly, he provides advice in regards to getting out of a bad relationship and how to let go of past relationships. *U-turn* finishes with two chapters (chapters 9 and 10) which focus on maintaining change and relationship happiness. In these, Aiken discusses the utility of evaluating change and how to keep developed skills in place.

The main strengths and distinct advantages of this book are its writing style and theoretical underpinnings. In regards to Aiken's writing style, having trawled through the relationship counselling

literature, I was surprised to find that this tends to be either overly academic and thus of little practical utility to busy clinicians or clients or over-simplistic in a pop-psychology/self-help kind of way. This then is one of the strengths of this book: it is pitched at a level somewhere in-between and is thus appropriate for both clinicians and clients. The style is practical, candid, hard-hitting and written in the first person; as if you were in the chair opposite. As Aiken mentions:

I decided to write a relationship book that was direct, client focused and understandable – without the elaborate terms and jargon used by so many practitioners to explain basic human behaviour. Put simply, I describe the problem, tell you how to fix it, and how to maintain it.

For example, my favourite line from this is book is: “the only way to get change is to do things differently” – obvious, simple, elegant, but in most cases, needing mention!

In regards to its theoretical underpinnings, interventions are empirically based. Unlike much of the relationship literature, *U-turn* is based on psychological research and the cognitive-behavioural flavour is easy to detect. For example, Aiken frequently cites many of the leading players and texts in the field: A. Beck (1976), J. Beck, J (1995), Briere, (2002), Dattilio & Padesky (1990), Epstein & Baucom (2002), Greenberger & Padesky (1995), Kaplan (1974), Young (1990). It is also based on insights offered by clients over the years, and this, I assume, is where the ‘four pillars’ approach was developed, as well as the numerous case studies.

In summary, read this book! It simplifies relationships, challenges people to take a good look at themselves and their relationships, and provides a blueprint for change. Three words spring to mind when I reflect on this book: practical, accessible, and succinct.

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