

ON AIR



SAFE PEOPLE

John Townsend  
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HANDLING DIFFICULT PEOPLE

**W**ant your spouse to start helping around the house? Or need help with a friend who's about to marry a felon? A boss who doesn't pull his weight but gets the credit? A family member with bipolar disorder who won't seek treatment? Or maybe you've been depressed for a year and are wondering whether you'll ever be anything more than what you are right now.

Whatever questions you have related to relationships, personal growth or leadership, John Townsend '74 has probably heard something similar and offered advice. A psychologist and leadership coach based in Newport Beach, Calif., he runs a private practice and co-founded Cloud-Townsend Resources with Henry Cloud. They're the co-hosts of the nationally syndicated talk show *New Life Live*, which airs daily in 180 markets to 3 million listeners; and they've written or co-written more than 20 books—selling more than 5 million copies—such as *Boundaries: When to Say Yes, When to Say No to Take Control of Your Life*; *Handling Difficult People*; and *Leadership Beyond Reason: How Great Leaders Succeed by Harnessing the Power of Their Values, Feelings and Intuition*. They also speak at national and international conferences on relationships, leadership, emotional issues and spirituality.

Cloud and Townsend met during their doctoral studies in clinical psychology at Biola University's Rosemead School of Psychology in California. After graduating in 1984, they partnered to found and run a chain of 35 mental health treatment facilities on the West Coast, including six in-patient psychiatric hospital programs. They moved full time into speaking, writing and consulting in the mid-1990s. Today, they operate several programs based on their books and research, including leadership coaching and weekend boot camps focused on boundaries and developing better relationships. They also use their Web site, [www.cloudtownsend.com](http://www.cloudtownsend.com), to solicit and answer questions from people seeking advice and information.

Townsend spoke with *NC State* about relationships, leadership and his work.

**Why psychology?** [At NC State] I was a college student trying to find my way, figuring out what my major would be, transitioning out of living at home with my parents, handling dating. I took some psychology courses that helped me to understand myself better. From my experience, I found that if you understand yourself at a deeper level, your life is better and the lives of the people around you are better. And I've always been really moved by the capacity of people who really want to grow and change, to do the hard work, to have better lives and to face the things they need to face. It's inspiring to work with those people at a deep and meaningful level and to see observable changes that are lifelong. I think people not only have a great ability to change but to be transformed into a totally different person. I've seen that happen often.

## How Do I Fix My Spouse?

Popular author, radio host and general purveyor of advice John Townsend '74 answers that question a lot. Here, he answers ours.

INTERVIEW BY CHERRY CRAYTON '01, '03 MED

ILLUSTRATION BY CAITLIN KUHWALD

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**Why has your partnership with Cloud worked?** We are both what you might call paradigm thinkers. We're both attracted to the big picture about what helps people. We didn't want to learn just a couple of techniques; we wanted to go deeper into what's the DNA of being a person. We spent a lot of time studying that and talking about [it] to each other. The second thing was our faith; we both believe that the spiritual life is very important to the emotional and psychological life. The third is that we have always been really good friends and have supported each other individually as well as in the partnership.

**What makes your approach different from other types of treatment?** [We] developed an approach to human functioning when we were doing our Ph.D. programs. The approach had two distinctive features. One is that it took a holistic view of why people suffer from issues such as depression, anxieties and drug addictions. Not only did we look at the behaviors troubling people and the emotions troubling people, but also the internal character issues that were driving them. So the approach had a great deal of focus on the deeper levels, such as the ability to develop relationships, to be honest and to have the ability to set boundaries and to deal with perfectionism and shame. The idea was that if you make sure you're addressing those internal issues, symptoms like depression, anxiety and drug addiction will be resolved faster because often the internal was what was driving those issues in the first place.

The second distinctive feature was the spiritual component. I was raised in a Christian family in Wilson, and I've always had those values, but I entered into my faith on a deeper level when I entered NC State and got involved with some on-campus ministries and some small groups. I really began to learn a lot, and I found that the spiritual heart of us is very important to deal with when people are having troubling emotions and relationships. That's something I discovered in myself, and later in my professional life, when I applied those ideas to people I was treating, I saw positive results.

**What led you to discover that was true for yourself?** I entered counseling for myself [during graduate school]. I wanted to be all I could be, and I wanted to be a whole person inside. I knew that I was experiencing relationship difficulties and emotional struggles, and I wanted to deal with them. [Entering counseling] and being involved in a healthy church with supportive friends was the game-changer. Seeing the value of these, having people who cared about me and having a person with a lot of depth and expertise walk with me through my own fears, my own conflicts and my own losses and show me how to deal with those—that was foundational in helping me learn how to help other people.

**What do you need to grow as a person and to be healthy?** The most important thing is character. I define character as that set of abilities you need to meet the demands of life, including relationship demands, work demands, financial demands and so forth.

So character is what you need to be able to pull off life and to have the tools to have a successful life. There are four character capacities—if we learn these—that can help people go a long way to resolving depression, or lead them to have a good marriage and a good career. One, you have the ability to connect with other people. That means you're able to trust and be vulnerable with safe people. The second thing is to have your own voice and opinions and to set boundaries where you need to. Another is to be able to address the realities of life, such as failures, loss, conflict—and to be able to deal with those things and not beat yourself up and go into a perfectionist cycle or to live out of shame. Instead, you need to let go of your demands to be perfect. And another capacity is to learn how to function as an adult. Meaning, find your talents and passions and dreams and what you're good at and what you enjoy. It also means to get training in those things and learn how to invest in life and in a career that's fulfilling to you. I've found that in my own life and in the lives of people that I've worked with. If you concentrate on those capacities and this definition of character, not only are emotional and relational struggles more readily resolved, but you also can better meet your goals in life. It helps you move not only from struggling to good, but from good to great.

**Why don't some people change?** I think there are several reasons. One reason would be that they feel hopeless, and they decide the best they can do in life is to just go day by day, too discouraged to make changes. A second reason is because they're afraid. They're afraid of the feelings they might feel and of going back into their past, which is what you have to do to grow and heal, and they have fears of strong emotions and memories. They're even afraid of upsetting people in their lives if they change. That keeps them stuck. Also, some people don't have the right resources. They don't know how to find a good counselor, coach or mentor, or a good small group. So they're all by themselves and isolated. That never works for us, ultimately. And lastly, for some percentage of the population, they believe that their struggles are all the fault of others. They think if they just pick the right people, everything will be OK. They don't think they have a problem inside their skin. Until you know that part of the reason you struggle in your life is inside your skin, you don't have a whole lot of hope.

**What do you get asked most?** How can you fix my spouse? (He laughs.)

**And your answer?** I'll say, "Well, first tell me what they're doing that bothers you." After they tell me whatever that is, then I'll say, "I'll show you how to influence them in the best way possible to be a more loving and responsible person. I also want you to look at yourself and what's contributing to the problem to some extent and to take ownership. Maybe you're blaming or somehow making that person feel like a little girl or boy. If you take ownership for your part and help them take ownership of their part, you've got a better chance at having a very rich relationship."

**What are the keys to having rich and healthy relationships?** You've got to have good players to make good relationships. You can be connected to a very toxic person, and you can

work all day to build a great relationship, but it won't be great because the two basic ingredients—that is, the two people—aren't great. You've got to pick the right people. If you pick people who are warm and empathetic while at the same time honest and direct and also growing, you're going to have some good relationships. And if the people you're in a relationship with aren't into connection and growth, try to live out those values with them and show them that life is better for them when just one of you is growing. That often helps recruit someone into changing for the better.

**What are the biggest mistakes people make in their relationships?** One I see a lot is ignoring a character problem in someone because of something else you want from the relationship. For example, maybe you want someone who has a lot of confidence and drive because you're timid. Because you want that, you ignore that the person is controlling. Or, maybe you want someone who is warm and kind, but you ignore the fact that they're passive and irresponsible. You need to look at the good and the bad aspects of that person—not just going after the good and hoping the bad will go away, because it won't go away unless there is some work involved.

**Have you noticed any changes in the problems people come to you about?** When I started there tended to be more of what I'd call internal issues, like guilt and depression. Now there seem to be a higher percentage of behavior problems, like addiction and substance abuse. So I've noticed a shift from internal struggle to external struggle.

**Why did that happen?** One reason is that family structures are changing. The family dynamics are less cohesive, less consistently warm and less consistently structured. That, along with the divorce rate, cultural messages about morality, substance problems and violence issues. The kids of these families grow up to be parents but without the essential tools they need to be functioning adults themselves.

**What led you to expand into leadership development over the past 10 years?** Leaders are people, too, with their own dreams and struggles. I know a lot of leaders as friends and as clients, and I saw how much pressure they're under, especially these days, and finding a way to support them—from executives to people who are business owners—and help them guide organizations so they can be the leaders our culture needs them to be.

**What are the qualities of effective leaders?** One is the development of those major character capacities. That creates a healthy person and supports their leadership work. But in addition to that, they have the ability to influence others in healthy ways to perform at high levels. Leadership is a combination of character as well as how you can bring outcomes in other people so they are working harder, are more inspired and a better fit for their job. My mantra when I work with leaders is if you work on the inside of yourself, you'll have results on the outside; if you grow personally, you'll have better

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performance, reach your goal, have increased market sector—you'll be successful in however your organization is successful. And I've found that to be true. If you're growing personally and you're trying to inspire and connect with people at a level that helps them perform better, you'll be an effective leader. It applies to both work and home life. You may not have a leadership capacity the same way at home, but we certainly want to influence our spouse and our children to be better people.

**What's the best advice you've ever received?** One, your life will be determined by what you value. Values are the architecture for life, so land on some great values to live by. Two, we need each other; staying connected with others can't be overestimated. And the third is that the worst thing in life is to die with unrealized potential. So always shoot higher than you think you can because you never know what you can achieve.

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**When have you done that?** Many times. Once, in the beginning of my career, a friend who was an editor at a publishing house called me and said, "It seems like you've been learning a lot about people with your counseling and speaking. Are you interested in writing a book?" I had no idea how to write a book. I was just clueless. But within a year there was a book. I also never thought I'd be able to run a health company that helped a lot of people, but I started the process, worked day by day and got a lot of supportive people around me. Within six months, it was a health company. Lots of support and day-by-day work always pays off.

**Why is it so important to be connected to others?** I believe that we all need fuel in our life like a car needs fuel. For people, the fuel of life is relationship. With relationships, we receive support, encouragement, comfort when we struggle, wisdom, confrontation, truth. Without it, we're left with only our resources, and just like a car without any gasoline breaks down, so do we.

**How do you stay sane and healthy?** (He laughs.) You're making an assumption there! I think, in today's world, being isolated is the worst thing you can do. So I take a lot of initiative in staying in contact with my family and the people I have close relationships with, and I take a lot of effort in never being without support and care and the people who know me. The people [who] know me best know what's going on with me. That's a great support and keeps me grounded. My faith and spiritual life are also very important. My wife [Barbi] and I raised our kids [Ricky and Benny] in a healthy church, and I have found that to have a significant positive factor in how our life has gone. I also spend a lot of time self-scrutinizing and trying to grow in areas that I need to grow in. I try to never become complacent.

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