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secure love



Create a relationship that lasts a lifetime

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JULIE MENANNO
THERAPIST AND FOUNDER OF THE SECURE RELATIONSHIP

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For my husband, Mario,
and my children:
John, Clare, Kate, Meg, Sophie, and Lizzie

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"Love is a constant process of tuning in, connecting, reading and misreading cues, disconnecting, repairing, and finding deeper connection. It's a dance of meeting and parting and finding each other again. Minute to minute and day to day."

Sue Johnson

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Introduction

i see you

i hear you

i'm safe

i'm on your team

i see you

i hear you



What does a healthy relationship look like?

Many of us have wondered this. But now I want you to forget this question forever. Instead, ask yourself: "What does a *securely attached* relationship *feel* like?"

If you don't know what a securely attached relationship is, much less what it feels like, that's okay. That's why we're here. By the end of this book, you will know about secure attachment, and more important, what it feels like to be in a relationship that is truly fulfilling. You will no longer have to wonder whether or not your relationship is working, because you will find the answers within yourself. If it's not working, you will learn what needs to change and how to go about

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changing it. If you're struggling in a relationship, you won't have to ask yourself, "Is it them or is it me? Or are we just incompatible?" You'll be able to make distinctions that are clear and that will provide you with the tools you need to create change.

On the deepest level, *all* humans have the same basic relationship requirements when it comes to enjoying a felt sense of safety and closeness with our loved ones. Underneath our different personalities and insecurities and desires, we all speak the same language and each of us can learn to work with our own wiring to achieve the relationship harmony we're yearning for, even if we haven't been able to find it on our own. This truth applies if you're single and seeking a relationship, in a relationship that has been struggling for years or decades, just out of a relationship and looking for answers, or somewhere in between.

If we all have the same relationship needs, why are love and romance so complicated? The truth is, they don't need to be. The problem is that we live in a world where it's rare for a person to be in touch with their greatest, yet most basic, needs. Most of us have never learned how to label our needs, and we've never learned to notice our needs on the bodily level on which they occur. Without that awareness and without those words, it's very difficult to accurately and authentically communicate your needs to someone else. And it's equally difficult to be responsive to the needs of your partner, even if you desperately want to be, if they can't tell you what they need with accuracy and authenticity.

For example, consider how many times a friend has asked you, "Do you feel emotionally validated in your relationship?" Probably never. But emotional validation (along with understanding) is arguably the single most important element of a truly satisfying relationship. And even if some enlightened soul *did* ask if you feel emotionally validated in your relationship, you might not know how to answer.

Feeling emotionally validated is an attachment need—it's one of a handful of essential attachment needs in a relationship. When explaining attachment needs, I find it useful to start with the phrase "to feel close to you, I need ___." For example, "to feel close to you I need to feel validated"; "to feel close to you, I need to know you appreciate me

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and see my efforts"; "to feel close to you, I need to know you respect and value me"; "to feel close to you, I need to know my needs matter to you"; or "to feel close to you, I need to know you're willing to share vulnerably with me." We'll talk more extensively about attachment needs later in the book, but for now it's important to know that each partner must have the *felt sense* of their attachment needs being met in order for their relationship to be close, fulfilling, and harmonious.

But what exactly is a "felt experience"? Think of it like this: You don't merely *know* you're hungry; you also *feel* hungry. Your brain and body work together: your body has a felt sensation and your brain calls it "hungry." From the time you learned to speak, you've been able to put words to your feelings of hunger because you were taught, time and again, to associate the word *hunger* with the feeling of hunger. Thus, you have no problem saying "I'm hungry," and from there formulating a plan to feel the opposite feeling: satiated. The same logic applies to attachment needs. If you were lucky enough to grow up with adults who were relatively emotionally savvy, they were able to recognize your felt sense of emotional pain associated with distress and help you learn to put words to the experience, just as they taught you how to connect hunger the *feeling* with hunger the *word.* They might have said, "Are your feelings hurt? Do you need to know I care about how you feel right now?" or "Do you feel misunderstood right now?" Somehow you would have received consistent messages that "your feelings are welcome here; your feelings make sense to me." If you didn't get this experience, you're not alone.

While you may not have words for what your attachment needs are on a conscious level, your nervous system, the most primitive part of who you are, knows *exactly* what they are, and your nervous system will have a strong physiological response when they've gone unmet—your body might tense up, your breath will quicken, your heart rate will increase. Conversely, when your attachment needs *are* met, your nervous system will feel warm and soothed (or at least an absence of tension), signaling to you that you are safe and secure. This is the good stuff.

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Through the lens of attachment theory, all relationship behaviors

are attempts to experience, maintain, gain, or regain closeness and security with our loved ones. In an environment of attachment insecurity, dysfunctional relationship behavior is a misguided attempt to get attachment needs met. When your needs are met, you feel safe, and that creates an environment of security in your relationship. Underlying every fight, argument, silent treatment, passive-aggressive comment, and attack is an unmet attachment need. You'll learn much more about these misguided attempts as you read this book—you'll begin to understand why your partner yells at you to try to draw you closer or shuts down during an argument in order to try to protect the relationship. I'm not excusing or condoning these behaviors, but understanding them through the lens of attachment is the key to finding better ways to achieve the same goals.

There's much more, however, to this work than knowing about how attachment problems affect your relationship. *Secure Love* is ultimately a book about learning to do what you need to do to create a healthier relationship. This is a couples therapy book, designed to walk partners through the work I do in my practice with couples. Can you benefit from this material if you aren't in a relationship? Absolutely. The material is universal. If you aren't in a relationship, you can use this information to understand how your childhood attachment experiences have shown up in past relationships and/or how they might show up in future relationships. You can use this information to improve your relationship with yourself. After all, self-relationship and self-care are every bit as much of a part of relationship health with a partner as they are a part of self-work. You can use this information as a guide to know more about what you want out of a future partner, and how to give a future partner your best self. Whether you're in a relationship or not, think of this as a relationship instruction manual, and the instructions are written through the lens of attachment theory. After all, *all* relationships are under the influence of attachment energy at some level, and this book is written for anyone who wants to learn how to connect.

If you grew up having a *felt sense* of your needs being met by your parents or caregivers, as an adult you've likely gravitated to people in

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the world who know how to meet your needs, and you know how to meet theirs. You do this without even having to think about it. Your nervous system tells you what feels good, and you are free to trust yourself. You have a secure attachment, and you find yourself in relationships that are also securely attached. For those of you who fall into this category, this book will give you more specific details about why you are securely attached, and how to foster even more fulfillment in your relationship. Secure attachment is on a spectrum—no couple has a perfect relationship, and sometimes life stressors come along that make it hard for partners to fully show up for each other, which can impact their attachment bond. My belief is that the more information you have about how relationships work, the more prepared you'll be to navigate the inevitable challenges, and we *all* have room to grow.

If, on the other hand, you grew up in a home where most of the time you didn't feel responded to when in need, that there wasn't space for your feelings, or you felt devalued, unseen, unheard, misunderstood, shamed, invalidated, and/or like your needs were put on the back burner, you likely find relationships that may feel good at first, but eventually devolve into varying degrees of distress. In this case, you have an insecure attachment, and together with your insecurely attached partner (most people with insecure attachments pair up with other insecurely attached partners) you find yourself in a relationship that is stuck. You're probably acutely aware of how painful this type of relationship can be, especially when it comes to conflict and communication breakdowns. At the same time, you might have little sense of what the secure alternative actually feels like. Believe me, you are not alone. Statistically speaking, at least 50 percent of the population has an insecure attachment.

The good news is that if you are insecurely attached, you don't have to spend the rest of your life this way—triggered, distressed, and confused in your relationship, with an overactive nervous system. You also don't have to shut down your innate desire to connect, be close, and get your very human attachment needs met. This book will help you understand what type of insecure attachment you have, why and how

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it came to be, and how to move into a secure relationship with yourself and your partner. You no longer have to feel lonely even when you're not alone, or that you're broken. You can find a relationship that is nurturing and bonding. I know this to be true because every day I help couples go through this transformation.

When I decided to become a therapist, I adamantly did not want to work with couples. After earning my master's degree, I was enjoying working with individuals, but to earn my full licensure, I needed clinical hours with couples. So I scheduled my first session and felt a little (okay, a lot) demoralized; I didn't realize how hard couples therapy is, how many moving parts there are to manage. The upside to my demoralization was that I felt challenged, and I thrive on challenge. Within a week of that first session, I flew from Los Angeles, where I lived at the time, to Bozeman, Montana, which happened to be hosting the earliest available, entry-level training for Emotion-Focused Therapy for Couples (EFT), a type of therapy created by Dr. Sue Johnson that uses attachment theory to help couples grow toward secure attachment.

While the training was the first step of many more years and hundreds of hours of additional training, individual supervision, and clinical experience, I returned to LA with a passion for the work because I saw the power and incredible results of applying attachment theory to a relationship, and giving couples the tools and words to create emotional safety. During my first couples session after the training, I witnessed the bonding effect that attachment work can have on a couple, even in only one hour. I realized how gratifying it was when a couple leaves my office feeling closer and safer with each other than they did when they came through the door. Working with relationships through the lens of attachment makes this possible.

After returning home from that first EFT training, I stopped accepting individuals as new clients and officially became all couples, all the time.

What I love about EFT is that it's as much about self-healing as it is about relationship healing. I also appreciate that by working with couples, instead of sending my clients home to partners who aren't on the same growth trajectory, as is the case with individual work, I get to

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send them home with each other, as a couple with a shared experience, a deeper connection, and solid communication skills.

The journey that couples and I take during their course of therapy is similar to the trajectory we'll go through together in *Secure Love*. I first want to know about each partner's attachment history. I'm especially interested in learning about their childhood attachment relationships. Part 1 of *Secure Love* is meant to mirror this part of the process, so that you and your partner can better understand, through the lens of attachment, what each of you have brought to the relationship from your pasts. To make this process even more relatable for you, I've included many case studies from the real couples I've worked with (the stories of the couples and individuals I write about are authentic, though names and most identifying details have been changed, and some examples represent composites).

In Part 2 we're going to learn about how each of your pasts, plus your present reality, come together to take on repetitive, patterned, negative cycles of communication. We'll dig into what negative cycles of communication are, how they work, and how to spot yours. Then we'll look at how to prevent and interrupt your negative cycles, and how to repair from them when they do happen. I'll offer you the tools to create attachment-friendly environments, the kind of environments that will reduce your conflict, create unbreakable bonds, and help you find solutions to your problems.

In Part 3 we'll address some real-world issues that can interact with the negative communication cycle and exacerbate it or perhaps throw a wrench in your conflict-resolution intentions. We'll cover some universal issues, like sex, as well as some unique challenges, such as trauma and addictions. I'll provide you with insight and guidance for how to course-correct if you're not seeing results, and, finally, I'm going to give you some very specific scripts to set up hard conversations for success.

Deep into my couples therapy career, I decided to create an Instagram account because I wanted to share the tools I was giving my clients with a wider audience. With "The Secure Relationship," I offer information that every couple can use, whether or not they are in therapy,

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covering topics like "are you emotionally available?" "responding to your partner's reaches for connection," and "when I'm sorry might not be enough." I've included similar graphics and easy-to-use scripts in this book to help you digest this advice readily. If my social media posts are quick hits into these topics, this book is the deep dive, but just as simple to put into action.

By the end of this book, you will not *know* you're in a better relationship; rather, you will have learned to find, recognize, and re-create moments of connection, safety, and security. You will have learned how to make this experience the undercurrent in your relationship, so that it exists whether the two of you are on a romantic vacation together, working through a difficult problem, or even when you're simply going about daily life not thinking about the relationship at all. You will also have grown within yourself, so you feel safe and comfortable in your own skin, and you can bring that comfort into all your relationships. This is the root of true connection. This is secure love.

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PART ONE



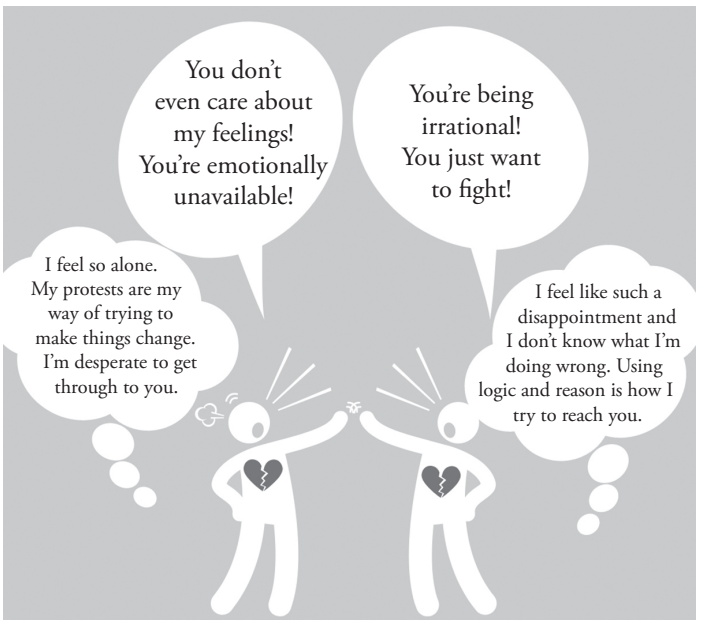
Understanding Your Needs

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CHAPTER 1

The Problem Beneath the Problem



"The problem is not the problem."

Hi, I'm glad you're home," Jen says to her husband, Andrew, as he walks in the door and puts his keys on the table to greet her. "But you put your keys on the table again. I've asked you a hundred times to put them on the hook. That's why we call it the 'key hook.' "

"Really?" Andrew responds. "I just walked in the door. I almost always put them on the hook. You really need to bring this up the second I get home?"

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"Almost always? Hardly. More like 'never,' " Jen says. "It might be a

small thing to you, but to me it's a big deal. I'm the only one who picks things up around here."

You may have heard the phrase "The problem is not the problem" before, especially if you've been in therapy. When partners are fighting—whether they're arguing over money, parenting, where to live, in-laws, sex, or taking out the trash—the conflict is almost never about the issue at hand. Don't get me wrong, issues at hand are important. The trash does need to be taken out, bills do need to get paid, kids do need to be parented, and overall fairness does matter. The bigger problem, however, is what's blocking all of the issues at hand from being worked through in a way that doesn't harm the relationship bond. Only when the bigger problem is addressed can the issues at hand be worked through. The *bigger* problem, the problem underneath the problem, is almost always one of communication, which we see here in a typical argument between this couple, Andrew and Jen.

But it often doesn't stop here:

"Give me a break, Jen," Andrew sighs. "It doesn't matter how much I do, you'll find something to complain about. What about last weekend when I cleaned out the garage? And now I'm in trouble over a key hook?"

"Why do you have to turn everything back on me?" Jen asks, getting more agitated. "Why can't you just own the fact that you don't care about the keys? Or about what I want?"

"Because you're being irrational!" Andrew blurts out.

Jen is infuriated. "Why can't you be more like my sister's husband? He actually supports her!" At this point, Andrew, sensing the escalation, switches gears. "Fine, here, I'll put the keys on the hook. Now can we just move on?"

Jen isn't buying it. She tells Andrew he's patronizing her.

"I give up," Andrew says. "There's no making you happy when you're in one of these moods." Andrew leaves the room, leaving Jen fuming on her own.

I'm guessing you can relate to some version of this conflict, even if

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the arguments in your relationship are about something entirely different. Andrew and Jen's conversation started out about the keys but in a matter of minutes spiraled into a heart-wrenching battle of emotional weapons and protections, including blame, shame, defensiveness, criticism, and deflection. The episode ended in a silence more deafening than the actual fight. Andrew and Jen may not even remember what started the fight in the first place. What they do remember is how they felt: angry, disconnected, lonely, unappreciated, unseen.

Throughout the evening Andrew and Jen remain disconnected. The next day, when they've each cooled off enough that the immediate tension has lessened, they miss each other and try to move forward. They go through the motions, and although the keys are in the right place, cracks of resentment have appeared in the couple's otherwise solid bond. Still, they don't want to revisit the conversation for fear of another blowup. The fight is over, but the conflict is not resolved.

This episode, or some variation of it, is surprisingly common among couples. Yet, when you're in it, it's easy to feel like you're the only one—that your relationship is doomed; that something must be wrong with you. I'm here to tell you, that's not the case. I see clients in situations like these all the time. You are not alone.

Maybe this type of interaction describes your past instead of your present . . . you used to fight, but you got tired and gave up. Instead of arguing, you and your partner just coexist in the same space. You live in a chronic state of emotional disconnect, punctuated by periods of higher tension. It might seem different than Jen and Andrew on the surface—instead of yelling about the misplaced keys, you are silently resigned to putting them back yourself—but couples in this "coexisting" state are also lost in their conflict. The difference is that instead of addressing their problems with escalation, they disengage. The results, however, are the same: real issues don't get resolved, resentment builds, and connection suffers.

These two situations—constant escalating conflict or persistent disengagement—are what usually drive couples to seek out my help.

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By the time they're sitting on the couch across from me, the relationship has gotten so bad that they assume they're just incompatible.

The good news is that most of the time, incompatibility isn't the issue at all. Instead, it's about using communication to create attachment-friendly environments and secure attachments. What Andrew and Jen need, what so many couples need, is a way to better reach each other.

The *Real* Problem

Millions of couples are stuck in cycles like Jen and Andrew's. You don't have to share their circumstances—a traditional American heterosexual relationship—to relate to their predicament. Maybe you're in a heterosexual relationship, but you live in India, or Germany, or Argentina, and your relationship has a different cultural flavor than most of the examples in this book. Maybe you're an LGBTQ+ couple. Or maybe there's no way to define you other than as two humans in a relationship who love each other and want to make it work. Every example you will read in this book is specific but is also universal. We all have our own problems and our own circumstances, but no matter if you're gay or straight, in a first marriage, third marriage, or you've never been married, these dynamics will affect you. The truth is, your exact circumstances matter far less than your emotional state.

Couples like Jen and Andrew might fight about parenting, bicker about finances, or disengage completely because they feel so far apart. Some couples read books, learn to use "I-statements," and set better boundaries in an effort to address the problem. Those strategies occasionally work as temporary Band-Aids, but the truth is, we can't permanently fix the surface arguments until we get to the root issue. And that issue, almost always, is attachment insecurity.

Attachment, at its most basic, is the quality of our bond with the core figures in our lives, and it comes alive during each and every interaction. People who are attached, or *attachment bonded*, depend on each other for emotional support. In practical terms, this means, for ex-

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ample, that they know they're seen and understood, they know they're appreciated and valued, they know they can access support when they need it. The most powerful attachment bonds exist between either parents and young children or romantic partners, because these are the people we depend on most in a lifetime. In romantic relationships, where attachment bonds are reciprocal (versus parent-child relationships, where the parent is responsible for the child but not the other way around), the bond is strongest when each party's *attachment needs* are being met. We'll do a more thorough exploration into attachment needs in the next chapter, but globally speaking, this means partners can reach and respond to each other's emotional bids for comfort and connection, and can navigate and resolve conflict with emotional safety. They can give and receive love, and when things get hard, they fight fair. All of this leaves them feeling confident in their connection, and secure in their attachment.

Romantic attachment does not exist in a vacuum, because both you and your partner came to your relationship with baggage from your childhood and impactful adult (or teen) romantic relationships. Nobody escapes it; it's just a matter of degree. Not all the baggage is inherently negative; it just is what it is—baggage. We enter relationships with varying levels of trust of others and of ourselves, met or unmet attachment needs from childhood, communication patterns, self-beliefs, ways of managing our emotions, and learned behaviors. We also attract, more or less, our same level of growth, even when it shows up very differently. Attachment insecurity is on a spectrum and, while there are always exceptions, the degree to which someone has an insecure attachment is likely the degree to which their partner will also have an insecure attachment. But feeling secure in your attachment isn't *only* about your current relationship—your past will always affect your present.

When arguments escalate in the way that Jen and Andrew's did, what couples are really battling is an *insecure attachment.* They are expressing how much they need each other and how devastating it is to be lost, disconnected, and alone. They use surface content—keys, bills,

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parenting, and so on—as code to talk about the fears and unmet needs that they can't effectively express. Then, to shield against the pain of not getting what they need, partners put up "protective stances"—loud protests, walking away, shutting down—to stave off vulnerability and pain at all costs. But here's the problem: by protecting themselves from pain, they're also blocking connection.

With all that in mind, consider Jen and Andrew's fight in a new way.

Andrew comes home excited to spend the evening with Jen. When Jen scolds him about the keys, he feels deflated, as if he got it wrong again. As a child, Andrew could never "get it right" for his mom, so Jen is hitting a wound. Andrew's body gets tense. His subconscious monologue says, "Maybe if I can convince Jen I'm not the bad guy, I won't have to stand here feeling like she sees me as a failure yet again, which will leave me questioning my worthiness in the relationship." And so, to avoid that painful place, he defends himself.

But Jen is also excited to see Andrew. She came home early from work to pick up the house so they could relax together. Being organized is part of her self-care. Jen knows Andrew doesn't share her same standards, but it's important for her to feel supported in small ways. She's not asking for much, she tells herself. When she sees the keys hit the table, her own childhood wound—feeling unseen, unsupported, not responded to—flares. She says to herself, "I've tried so hard to get him to hear me. He knows how important this is to me, so he must just not care." Jen feels desperate to get Andrew to see what's really happening so that he'll reassure her.

Jen and Andrew go back and forth, trying to reach each other. Jen needs to know she's cared for and to have her feelings validated. Andrew needs to know that not only does she see him as worthy, but that she trusts his love and care for her are real. Yet no matter how hard they try, they can't reach each other. They are stuck in their protective stances, battling for something that feels like life or death in the moment: attachment security. They are looking for a seemingly simple message: "I'm loved, I'm understood, I'll be responded to when I reach

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for you, I'm getting it right." Instead they push each other away and reinforce each other's attachment fears.

Eventually Jen and Andrew make up, or at least move on, but the damage to their attachment bond is done and they don't know how to repair it. The same conflict will resurface in the same pattern, indefinitely, until they learn how to stay connected during conflict.

I want you to imagine you're having a conversation with a partner—current, former, or even future. You're talking about a stressful situation at work. After explaining the problem, your partner tells you you're seeing it all wrong—that you should just be grateful to have a job in the first place. You try to protest, but they accuse you of being oversensitive to feedback.

How do you feel? Unseen? Frustrated? Confused? Maybe all of the above.

Now what do you notice happening inside of you? Most people feel a tightening, maybe in their chest or throat. Some report feeling still or caught off guard. This is the felt experience of an attachment rupture. When enough of these ruptures happen in a relationship, when they create a climate of overall unsupportiveness, when they don't get repaired along the way, they reinforce an already insecure attachment.

Some of you reading this book are struggling with more serious issues than where to put the keys: infidelity, chronic physical or mental illness, blended-family issues, military deployment, addictions, extended family concerns, just to name a few. I can't change that reality for you, but what I can do—and what I hope we'll do here together—is help you find a way to buffer your relationship from the negative impact of these external stressors. Why is secure attachment *especially* important when life is throwing curveballs? Because the connection and support that partners derive from a securely attached relationship helps them feel more confident, competent, and resilient. If you want to heal from past wounds and transgressions, I'd like to help you understand what that process looks like. The events themselves might continue to be difficult, but the relationship doesn't have to be. In fact, your relationship

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can be a source of strength and support as you weather the challenges of life. You and your partner can learn to face the world as a team.

I'm not saying that all couples should stay together at all costs. I don't believe that. Some challenges are too much to overcome. And sometimes, the problem actually *is* the problem. Partners can have disagreements that are true deal-breakers; disagreements where there is no room for compromise. They love each other, but one wants children, the other doesn't; one wants to live in the city, the other wants to stay off the grid; one can't get over a past affair, the other says it's time to move on. Sometimes there is real incompatibility, or the wounds are too great for trust to ever rebuild. We'll talk later about what to do in these instances, but for now I just want to validate that some couples do face insurmountable challenges.

When all outside circumstances are equal, however, some couples will make it while others may not. So what are the surviving and thriving couples doing differently? Multiple factors are at play, but what's certain is that these couples know how to avoid negative communication cycles like the one that plagued Andrew and Jen. That alone dramatically increases their odds. Because no single event takes down a relationship. Negative communication cycles, on the other hand, absolutely do.

Secure Love

Let's revisit that same exercise, the one where you tell your partner about a stressful work problem. Imagine now that as you talk, you can tell your partner is really hearing you. As you speak they reassure you that your feelings are valid and reasonable.

How do you feel? Probably cared for and understood; seen and valued.

What do you notice in your body? When I'm doing speaking engagements and I ask audience members to do this exercise, I get a lot of similar answers: a warm feeling, an ease of tension, a lightening of

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the shoulders. Sit with your body for a minute. Imagine your partner's loving face as you talk. Notice what happens inside you. This is the felt experience of a secure attachment.

Relationship satisfaction is intrinsically linked to secure attachment. Partners who are securely attached are reliable sources of intimacy, support, and comfort. During conflict, securely attached partners are less negative and reactive. They are able to hold positive images of each other even in the face of distress, and show more warmth and affection than insecure couples. Even their facial expressions are less hostile, and they have more confidence they'll get through the conflict without harming their bond. While *all* couples experience conflict, securely attached couples do so less often because they're less likely to experience missteps as rejections.

Couples with secure attachments aren't perfect, because no couple is perfect. What I've found in my work is that couples who have a secure attachment are able to draw on the health of their relationship to find ways to meet each other when they don't see eye to eye. Each partner takes responsibility for relationship closeness and being easy to love. They take the time to work on their relationship, but they also spend plenty of time just *being* with each other. Securely attached partners recognize that perfect doesn't exist and so they aspire to something realistic—which is its own version of perfect.

How Do We Get There?

Some of you are in relationships where you feel close and connected most of the time, but when you bump up against hard topics there are explosive fights. Some of you are in relationships with a constant underscore of tension, punctuated by moments of intensity. Some of you don't fight often, but you feel more disconnected than you'd like. And still others of you have your own versions of dysfunction. Regardless of the circumstances, the solution is the same: begin communicating with each other, verbally and nonverbally, in the ways we'll cover in this

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book. By putting the tools into practice, you can learn to find the connection and harmony you've been looking for *and* begin to solve your "issues at hand" with greater ease.

To do this, we must minimize what's not working in your relationship and build up what will. In the chapters to come, we'll examine how each partner's attachment style is showing up in your relationship. We'll consider the attachment issues from your childhood that might be getting in the way of your relationship today. We'll replace old, ineffective behaviors with new productive ones, and all the while build up emotional closeness. We'll learn to communicate from a place of emotional vulnerability (sharing feelings such as sadness, fear, and shame), instead of from a place of emotional reactivity. If the word *vulnerability* makes you uncomfortable, know that it doesn't mean opening up in an inauthentic way. Nor is it a sign of weakness; in fact, vulnerability takes strength and bravery, though some people might think it poses a threat to their identity. For example, many men are raised to believe that expressing vulnerability will threaten their sense of masculinity, but this couldn't be further from the truth. Vulnerability is simply about being authentic and whole and can accompany—and even enhance—all different types of personalities and identifications. We can also choose when and where to be vulnerable. Some situations, like performing surgery or negotiating with a salesperson, don't lend themselves to emotional vulnerability. Sometimes it makes sense to temporarily put emotions to the side, or to use your poker face. But to experience successful relationships, vulnerability is a must.

Real relationship change takes place in two ways. The first is a top-down approach, where we change *behavior* in order to improve the *climate* of the relationship. This is the focus of many common forms of couples therapy. Couples are instructed to say and do things in new ways, and by making these changes, they create safety and shift the underlying health of the relationship. The other approach is bottom-up, in which we work directly on attachment gunk underlying the behav-

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iors, in hopes that by healing what's underneath, the behavior will shift on its own.

Which is better? Neither. We need both.

If you both engage only in a top-down approach, without diving into the underlying conflicts, deeper bonding and healing probably won't happen, and new behaviors might feel forced. But there is a middle ground between fighting and disengagement, and secure attachment lies in this middle ground. When you complement the behavioral work with deeper work intended to help you both understand *why* you go into protective stances and *empathize* with the feelings motivating those stances, you can approach the argument and one another with more openness. In other words, the behavioral work prevents damage; the attachment work builds bonds; and bonds build resilience.

I will walk you through both approaches, giving specific advice on what not to do in your relationship and what to do instead.

Before we can start, we need to "buy the reframe," as we say in emotion-focused therapy. Change can't happen until you reframe your relationship: your partner is not the enemy. Instead, your negative communication cycle is the enemy. Destructive words and behaviors are the enemy. For relationship change to happen, we need to move away from the idea that partners are enemies who must protect themselves from each other. Once you accept this reframe, you can start to see how even the relationship behaviors that look the most vicious on the outside are in fact cries for security and closeness. Then the magic can begin.

One final note: though interpersonal relationships obviously involve more than one participant, I can't understate the importance of focusing on your own self-growth when it comes to relationship improvement. All of our beliefs about what we can expect from other people are based on past experiences, and these experiences can cause us to react to our partners not as who they really are in the present moment, but as who we assume them to be according to our attachment understandings and personal history. This doesn't always serve your relationship well, so it stands to reason that addressing these self-patterns is a crucial

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part of relationship healing. But remember, it's not all-or-nothing: you brought your strengths to the relationship, too. One of those strengths is that you're willing to read this book, which means you have a desire to grow. Use your strengths to your advantage and work on the rest.

I offer you now the same note that I always end a couple's first therapy session with: "As we proceed, keep in mind that I'm not going to try to convince you to stay in your relationship. That's not my job. My job is to look underneath the surface, diagnose the attachment issues at play, and help couples communicate in a way that is mutually respectful and emotionally safe. When the communication is cleaned up, then and only then can we know what else might be getting in the way."

Once you learn to communicate with your partner in a healthy way, you can observe and experience your relationship from a place of clarity and be far more likely to be able to work through your differences.

I'll end this chapter with a question most of you are asking: How long does it take? The answer to this question depends on the couple. Not only does each couple start this work at a different place, but so does each partner. All relationships can grow. What it takes is access to helpful information, commitment to working on it, and practice. So when you think about how long it will take to see results, which is a legitimate question to ask, think about the following factors: one, if your relationship feels good 10 percent of the time, and that number goes up to 20 percent, that is growth. What I've found is that if you keep doing what you're doing, some growth will usually lead to more growth. Two, growth is never linear; instead, growth happens as a positive trend with peaks and valleys—two steps forward, one step back. Three, each partner will likely grow at different rates. And lastly, when you're putting the right elements into the relationship, especially at the beginning, you might not see results even when the results are there. Think of it like planting seeds. Try not to let this demoralize you and maintain your confidence that what you're doing is healthy, even if it's not readily apparent. You're committing to positive change for yourself and your relationship.

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