'This book might change your life.' Arthur C. Brooks

HOW TO FEEL LOVED



The Five Mindsets That Help You Get More of What Matters Most

SONJA LYUBOMIRSKY
AND HARRY REIS

Cornerstone Press

HOW TO FEEL LOVED

Copyrighted Material

Also by Sonja Lyubomirsky

The How of Happiness: A New Approach to Getting the Life You Want

The Myths of Happiness: What Should Make You Happy, but Doesn't, What Shouldn't Make You Happy, but Does

Also by Harry Reis

Relationships, Well-Being and Behaviour: Selected Works of Harry T. Reis

Copyrighted Material

HOW TO FEEL LOVED

THE FIVE MINDSETS THAT GET YOU MORE OF WHAT MATTERS MOST

SONJA LYUBOMIRSKY
AND HARRY REIS

Copyrighted Material

Cornerstone Press

CORNERSTONE PRESS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Cornerstone Press is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com

Penguin Random House UK,
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW

penguin.co.uk



First published in the US by HarperCollins 2026
First published in the UK by Cornerstone Press 2026
001

Copyright © Sonja Lyubomirsky and Harry Reis, 2026

The moral right of the authors has been asserted

Penguin Random House values and supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes freedom of expression and supports a vibrant culture. Thank you for purchasing an authorised edition of this book and for respecting intellectual property laws by not reproducing, scanning or distributing any part of it by any means without permission. You are supporting authors and enabling Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for everyone. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems. In accordance with Article 4(3) of the DSM Directive 2019/790, Penguin Random House expressly reserves this work from the text and data mining exception.

Designed by Bonni Leon-Berman

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorised representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–1–529–95417–3

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future
for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made
from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.



Copyrighted Material

For Olivia, who makes me feel loved,
every moment and every day.

—*Sonja*

For Ellen and Lianna, who showed me what
it means to love and be loved.

—*Harry*

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

There is only one happiness in life, to love and be loved.

—*George Sand*

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

Contents

Introduction: Do You Want to Feel More Loved? 1

PART I: WHY FEELING LOVED MATTERS

1 Hardwired to Feel Loved 19

2 The Cost of Not Feeling Loved 32

3 Revisiting Popular Beliefs About What Makes You Feel Loved 52

PART II: A NEW PARADIGM

4 The Relationship Sea-Saw 75

PART III: PUTTING THE SEA-SAW INTO PRACTICE—THE FIVE MINDSETS

5 Sharing Mindset 97

6 Listening-to-Learn Mindset 124

7 Radical-Curiosity Mindset 155

8 Open-Heart Mindset 181

9 Multiplicity Mindset 221

Copyrighted Material

PART IV: APPLYING THE FIVE MINDSETS TO MODERN LIFE

10 Feeling Loved in Different Kinds of Relationships 245

11 What If One Size Doesn't Fit All? Diagnosing the Personal Qualities That Make Feeling Loved Easier or Harder 274

12 Can You Feel Loved by an AI Chatbot? How About a Throuple? And Other Questions for the New Age 291

Conclusion: Why All Five Mindsets Are Essential . . . and Why You Have to Go First 315

Epilogue 319

A Note from the Authors: The Five Mindsets Diagnostic 321

Acknowledgments 323

Notes 329

Index 381

Copyrighted Material

INTRODUCTION

Do You Want to Feel More Loved?

When Sonja Met Harry

Twenty years ago, Sonja was booked to speak about the science of happiness on a TV talk show with a popular host. It was only her second television appearance, and she was nervous. She'd spent several weeks emailing back and forth with the producers about the questions and her proposed responses. She's very conscientious and has a low tolerance for uncertainty, so this preparation eased her anxiety. Finally, it was happening. She flew to New York, had her makeup done, and waited in the greenroom for her turn, heart racing. Abruptly, a mere few minutes before she was to walk backstage, the senior producer burst in. "The host decided to go in a different direction," he said. [Translation: The host threw out the script we'd all worked so diligently on.] "When you go on, she is going to ask you this: 'Tell me the secret to happiness.'"

Being a happiness expert means being asked over and over again, "What is the secret to happiness?" Sonja has always dreaded that question. It's ridiculous, it's reductive, and it's restrictive. But mostly she has dreaded it because she has never had a solid, science-based answer that she could offer with any confidence.

There is no secret to happiness. But there are *huge* contributors *to happiness, and some of them are more powerful than others. Sonja resists being pinned down to just one. But if she were pressed to give an answer, she now has one.*

Copyrighted Material

She found it when she met one of the world's leading experts on the science of relationships, her coauthor, Harry. They were standing around

at a conference in Washington, DC, and she told him the story about the TV host. He said, "I don't know the secret to happiness either, but I do know people who are happy, and I know people who are unhappy, and I can tell you the main difference between them: Happy people feel loved."

The secret to happiness is feeling loved.

Harry also said, "Isn't it odd that happiness researchers and relationship researchers don't talk with each other?" So here we are.

Do you want to feel *more* loved? Or to feel loved more *often*?

For months, we had been asking this question—again and again—to anyone willing to listen. Not all were comfortable sharing, but those who did spoke with striking candor. The more we asked, the more it became clear that many people struggle with feeling truly loved. Some of our friends worried that the love they received was conditional—that if their family, friends, or partners saw their flaws too clearly, that love may disappear. Others understood, logically, that they *were* loved, yet they didn't always *feel* it, or at least not as often as they wished. Just as you can be beautiful without *feeling* beautiful, you can be loved without *feeling* loved. And some simply wanted to better understand what brings them the love they already feel.

If one of these feelings resonates with you—if there are times when you want to feel more loved—you're not alone. Human beings are social animals, driven by a deep need for connection and belonging, whose way of being is profoundly communal. As a result, one of the most important things that you likely want from your relationships—probably *the* most important thing—is to feel loved, appreciated, and understood. To feel that the people in your life truly get you, value you, and love you is what makes life worth living. This is what makes people happy. And this is the science-backed conclusion that Harry's career-long research program landed on.

Of course, not everyone is walking around feeling unloved. Many people do feel loved—but they're not always sure what they're doing right or how to make that feeling last. Others feel loved and want to feel it even more. (Love is like happiness—there's always room to feel more.) And then there's a pattern therapists know all too well:

Copyrighted Material

You're doing your best to love someone—your partner, a parent, a close friend—but that person never seems to *feel* loved, no matter what you do. This book will help you understand why that happens and how you can help bridge that gap.

Despite being frequently surrounded by others or constantly connected through devices, it's common to still grapple with not feeling loved, either not feeling loved as deeply, or as often, as one would like or not feeling loved for the right reasons. Despite sharing many fun activities with friends or experiencing passion with lovers, many people still don't feel loved in the way they want to feel loved. Furthermore, in order to feel more loved, many turn to strategies that seem intuitive and yet, as this book will argue, don't lead to the results they hope for.

As researchers who have spent our entire careers studying happiness and connection, respectively, we came together to write *How to Feel Loved* to explain why feeling loved can seem so difficult, eluding even one's most sincere efforts, and how to attain it. Drawing on a wealth of empirical studies, established psychological theory, personal stories, and ancient wisdom, we will challenge your preconceived notions and show you (1) how to *think differently* about the people you care about and (2) how to *approach differently* your next opportunity to feel loved.

In other words, we will show you how to embrace new mindsets and change your conversations.

What It's Like to Feel Loved

Think about the moments when you've felt truly loved. Maybe it was a quiet instant, when a friend remembered something deeply important to you without being prompted. Maybe it was the way a partner looked at you—really looked at you—when you were speaking, as though they were hanging on every word. Or maybe it was the way a mentor encouraged you at a pivotal moment, showing you that they saw something in you that you hadn't yet seen in yourself. These moments stand out because they make you feel deeply

Copyrighted Material

known, understood, and valued. You carry them with you long after they happen.

Are there times you've felt loved this way? And if not as often as you'd like—why?

What Not to Do

Consider this: You're on a first date where the other person is clearly eager to impress you. They talk animatedly about their latest promotion, their workout routine, the exotic places they've traveled—barely pausing for breath. You get the sense that they want you to like them, but something feels off. There's no back-and-forth, no real connection—just them, performing. By the end of the date, you realize that despite learning plenty about them, you don't actually feel closer to them. You didn't get a glimpse of their real thoughts, struggles, or quirks—only a polished highlight reel. And because they were so focused on impressing you, they never really saw you *either. The problem isn't that they lacked interesting qualities—they actually had lots of them. It's that they weren't truly sharing themselves in a meaningful way. Instead of inviting a sense of being known and loved, they were curating an image—leaving no space for you to be seen or known in return. Real connection depends on reciprocity—on a mutual willingness to reveal, to witness, and to engage. Without that, no amount of charm or achievement can bridge the emotional gap.*

This example offers a clue about how to start thinking differently: Feeling more loved is not about making yourself more lovable. It's not about trying to mold yourself into someone more interesting, better looking, funnier, smarter, wealthier, or more successful. It's not about getting the other person to think you're wonderful. It's not about trying to figure out what their love language is or what they want and forging yourself into that image. It's not about fixing yourself. It's not about emphasizing, exaggerating, or selectively showing the parts of you that you think the other person will approve of while hiding the less desirable parts.

Copyrighted Material

Yeah, we know: That's a lot of *not*s. In this book, we will show that doing all those things might (sometimes) lead you to be *admired* but won't lead you to *feel loved*.

There are a few reasons why. How can you truly feel loved when your loved ones only know the rosy side of you—more audition-tape than real-life? How can you truly feel loved when you worry that unveiling your raw, full, imperfect, innermost self might cost you their love and respect? How can you truly feel the love coming *from* them when your attention is focused on how you are coming across *to* them? How can you truly feel loved by them when you're not doing anything to help them feel loved by you?

Imagine the other person's love as a radiant sun shining on you. If it shines on and warms only the outer surface or only the parts that are unimportant or even untrue, you won't feel illuminated or warmed to your core. You can't and won't feel loved.

The Good News Starts with a Cliché

"*Just be yourself.*" It's a cliché we've all heard before, maybe even rolled our eyes at. But when you're in a relationship or friendship where you're not feeling as loved as you'd like to feel, what does that expression actually mean? We've suggested that many people aren't being themselves: Instead of showing themselves, they show off themselves. Yet herein lies both a paradox and a blessing. The paradox is that feeling loved is earned not through achieving perfection but through presenting more of your full self—your values, experiences, quirks, and dreams, even the small unpolished details of your daily life. Sharing your struggles and imperfections can build connection, too, but feeling loved isn't just about revealing your flawed, imperfect self—it's about revealing what truly matters to you.

To be clear, feeling loved doesn't hinge on oversharing or baring your soul to just anyone. It doesn't mean unloading your trials and tribulations in the first five minutes after meeting. It means selectively

Copyrighted Material

and progressively revealing parts of yourself in a way that fosters genuine connection.

The blessing is that showing your full self is fully within your control. In fact, it's a lot easier than contorting yourself into someone else's ideal image. Many people believe that in order to feel more loved, they must *persuade* others to love them more—as if they were trying to sell someone a new car. Years of empirical studies and observation suggest that this approach is ineffective. That's why our message is different: Feeling loved is more—much more—about *you* (and your mindset) than about trying to persuade the other person that you are worthy.

Yet people often behave in ways that work against feeling loved: They hide their deepest thoughts, emotions, flaws, and past misbehaviors because they are afraid of what others might think, or they fear being embarrassed or exploited. This tendency is so widespread that it directly ties to two of the most common deathbed regrets: "I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself" and "I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings." Yet, as we described above, paradoxically, the more you hide your innermost self and the less of yourself you reveal to others, the harder it is to feel truly loved and valued by the significant people in your life. This is a principle strongly supported not only by anecdotal evidence but also by relationship science. (If you've seen the television series *Ted Lasso*, where characters form deep bonds only after they reveal their insecurities and imperfections, you'll know what we mean. Or consider classic literature, such as *Pride and Prejudice*, where love becomes possible only after characters let go of their pride, masks, and mistaken impressions to reveal their more authentic selves.)

Moreover, when you focus on how you are coming across to others, your attention is drawn to what *you* are doing—for instance, trying to say just the right thing, while doing your best to make sure your shortcomings are hidden, so that you are seen as witty or attractive or brilliant. Ironically, this approach to relationships puts your attention in exactly the wrong place. As we explain later, you'll make the best impression when you focus your attention on the other person.

Copyrighted Material

It's worth noting that unveiling the complexity of your multifaceted

"true" self will almost always leave you feeling vulnerable because you are exhibiting your true colors and risking losing the other person's regard. However, vulnerability is not the goal; it is simply a necessary preliminary step. Ironically, showing weakness will make room for you to feel genuinely loved because you'll finally be confident that the other person is appreciating and loving the real you. (Otherwise, whatever love or admiration they express will ring hollow.) To paraphrase Nobel Prize winner André Gide: It is better to be known for what you are than to be loved for what you are not. Humility and authenticity and a caring interest in others create the conditions for you to feel fully *known*.

Approach Your Next Conversation Differently: The Relationship Sea-Saw

"You Get What You Give"

—title of song by New Radicals

In summary, then, three things have to happen for you to feel loved:

1. You have to **share** the complexity of your full, multifaceted self—both your strengths and your contradictions—with the other person. (No, this isn't as simple as saying, "Let me tell you everything.")
2. The other person has to **notice** what you've shared.
3. The other person has to **care** about what you've shared.

How do you increase the chances that the other person will *notice* and *care*? The answer is simple—you go first! That means you first need to notice and care—to show curiosity—about *their* multifaceted self. It may seem counterintuitive initially, but in order to create a context for sharing more of yourself, you need to focus not on yourself but

Copyrighted Material

on your conversation partner. You encourage them to notice and care about your full self by first noticing and caring about *their* full self. To feel loved by them, you begin by making them feel loved by you.

This step begins a back-and-forth process that we call the Relationship Sea-Saw, and we devote a whole chapter to it (chapter 4). Here's a preview: Imagine yourself and the person you wish to feel more loved by sitting on a seesaw submerged under water (hence, the deliberate spelling of *Sea-Saw*). Only parts of your multilayered selves are visible above the surface—these are the aspects you feel safe to share, the parts that the other person sees and loves when they tell you that they love you.

However, consider what happens when you give the other person your undivided attention—when you approach them with curiosity, listen deeply to their response, and bring to the interaction genuine warmth and an appreciation for their multidimensional self. By doing so, you help lift their self a bit higher out of the water, making more of their true self visible. When they feel truly seen, valued, and accepted—not just for their best qualities but for their whole richly textured self—they will also feel more *loved* by you than ever before.

Continuing with this metaphor, by pressing down, you are placing the full weight of your attention on the other person, lifting them up. As the focus shifts to them, your own self becomes temporarily more submerged. Essentially, you're holding them up and providing them support. You're creating the conditions that make it possible for them to open up, to be fully known, and to feel safe in revealing more of who they truly are.

Importantly, this step of lifting the other person higher isn't a sacrifice—it's simply a stage in a cycle. When the other person experiences the security of being deeply understood and accepted, they're likely to reciprocate. They, too, may express curiosity in you and listen to you more attentively and warmly, embracing your full complexity with an open heart. In doing so, they help lift more of your full self above the surface, enabling more of *you* to be seen, understood, and valued. In this way, the act of truly knowing and loving someone else becomes the very thing that opens the door for *you* to feel truly

Copyrighted Material

known and loved in return. It's a virtuous cycle of connection: The more connection is experienced, the more love, as well as the greater curiosity about and care for each other, is felt.

This reciprocal Relationship Sea-Saw is the cornerstone of feeling loved. When you express *genuine* interest in another person—not just going through the motions but truly listening, engaging with curiosity, and appreciating their many sides—you create mutual understanding and trust. And in doing so, you invite them to reciprocate. When someone feels deeply seen, valued, and understood by you, they become more willing, motivated, and even eager to do the same for you.

By contrast, even if someone initially wants to love you, if you don't help *them* feel loved by you, they may not be fully willing, motivated, or enthusiastic to listen curiously, nonjudgmentally, and warmly to you—and to see and know you. But when you help them feel loved, they will instinctively hold space for you to open up—lift your heart—a bit more and a bit more and a bit more. In these ways, the Relationship Sea-Saw empowers you to lift, then be lifted, and then lift again and be lifted again.

The Relationship Sea-Saw represents a new paradigm for how to think about relationships—and especially for how to think about your next conversation. Turn to chapter 4 to learn more.

Imagine you're catching up with a close friend over coffee. You've been feeling a little distant from them lately, so you're hoping for a real conversation, one where you both walk away feeling a little more connected. At first, though, the chat stays surface-level—weekend plans, parenting updates, funny anecdotes. Then, your friend shares something more personal: a recent struggle with self-doubt at work. This is your moment to engage the Sea-Saw. Instead of jumping in with your own similar experience or offering quick reassurance, you lean in, ask thoughtful questions, and really listen. You show them, through your curiosity and care, that they are safe to open up further. As they do, something shifts—you can almost feel them lifting on the Sea-Saw, revealing more of their true self.

Copyrighted Material

Later, when they turn the focus back to you and ask how you're doing, it feels different. More natural. More meaningful. And because you made

them feel seen and understood, they are now fully present, ready to do the same for you. You begin to share—not just the polished version of your life but your real thoughts and feelings. And just like that, the Sea-Saw tilts back in your direction. By first making space for them, you've created the conditions for a reciprocal exchange of openness and connection—one that leaves you both feeling more known, valued, and loved.

How to Know and to Be Known: Five Mindsets That Will Help You Think About Your Next Conversation Differently

Each person's life is lived as a series of conversations.

—*Deborah Tannen,* You Just Don't Understand

The Relationship Sea-Saw metaphor captures how the process of feeling loved unfolds, but to operate the Sea-Saw together with someone you wish to feel more loved by, you'll need to adjust your mindsets about both sides of the equation:

- **seeking to truly *know* the other**—by showing curiosity in them and listening to them with acceptance and an open heart (which invites *them* to open up)
- **inviting yourself to *be known***—by opening up (which invites *them* to reciprocate with curiosity, listening, acceptance, and warmth)

Only by embracing both perspectives can you create the reciprocal flow that lifts each of you higher.

Here's a point we can't stress enough: This isn't a step-by-step manual where you follow three simple rules and magically feel more loved. Instead, this book offers a mental shift in how you approach connection with the people who matter most. Accordingly, the heart of our book is reserved for describing five essential mindsets: (1) Sharing, (2) Listening to Learn, (3) Radical Curiosity, (4) Open Heart, and

Copyrighted Material

(5) Multiplicity. Think of a mindset as a lens through which you see the other person, engage with them, and show up for them. Mindsets can be turned on and off, like a switch: They are under your control.

Sharing Mindset

The Sharing mindset encourages you to open up about your experiences and private thoughts, as well as your failings and insecurities, in a way that is *thoughtful, selective, incremental, and intentional*—choosing *whom* to share with, *how much* to share, *when* to share, *where* to share, *how* to share, and *why* to share. Consider the paradox of vulnerability, which highlights how revealing one's authentic self, despite fears of judgment or rejection, is essential to creating true intimacy. Drawing on relationship science, we'll give you a strategy for overcoming common barriers to self-disclosure, such as fear of negative evaluation and the impostor syndrome, and shift your focus from *finding* chemistry to *building* it.

Listening-to-Learn Mindset

As you already know, feeling loved doesn't start with sharing—it starts with listening. Specifically, it begins by rotating the process a full 180 degrees—and creating the conditions that help others feel loved by *you*. In other words, you cannot share and become fully known without also striving to fully know the other person. You accomplish this by giving them your undivided attention, patiently and fully attuning to them, and listening to what they have to say. The easiest way to begin is to embrace what we call the Listening-to-Learn mindset. To practice it, you should approach your next conversation by thinking of yourself as a listener, not a speaker—that is, listen and ask questions that clarify and yield insights about the other person's story, and do it as if you'll be quizzed on their story tomorrow.

Radical-Curiosity Mindset

It's possible to practice the tools of great listening without being genuinely interested and intrigued. Taking listening to the next level requires you to leverage as much enthusiastic—even radical—curiosity as you can muster. Both advice bloggers and psychological scientists have come

Copyrighted Material

to the same conclusion: It's critical to show strong, genuine interest and curiosity in the other person. Radical curiosity extends beyond learning the surface facts about the other person or focusing only on the most interesting or impressive parts of their story. It involves digging deeper—excavating not only their fears and flaws but also their deeply held beliefs, their eccentricities, their creative outlets, and the small details that shape their world—to truly understand what it's like to live inside their skin. By displaying this radical, enthusiastic curiosity, you encourage, empower, and hold space for your conversation partner to unfurl *their* true self.

Open-Heart Mindset

No matter how skilled you are at listening or how deeply curious you may be, if your heart is closed off, you won't help your conversation partner feel truly loved. Fundamentally, the Open-Heart mindset entails expressing genuine care and concern for their well-being, much as would a lifelong best friend—though in a broader, more fundamental way of seeing and supporting them. Embracing the Open-Heart mindset means more than just offering kindness and compassion (although it begins there); it's about truly believing in the other person and their potential. Think of Michelangelo, the Italian Renaissance artist, who is said to have had the ability to see a figure trapped in a block of stone and carve away until that figure was released and came to life. Similarly, adopting the Open-Heart mindset means seeing the best in others and helping them grow into that version of themselves, with solicitude and prosocial intent—whether through tangible acts of assistance or through encouragement and validation that strengthens their confidence and resolve.

Multiplicity Mindset

In some respects, the Multiplicity mindset may be the most challenging one to fully embrace. This mindset holds particular significance not only when you are listening to the other person's vulnerable disclosures but also when you are making vulnerable disclosures yourself. All too often, people think about others in absolute, one-dimensional

Copyrighted Material

terms: *This person is outgoing, but that person is obnoxious*. But people are many things: Alongside their difficulties and regrets are their virtues and generosities of soul. The Multiplicity mindset welcomes revelations of another person's complex and multifarious self and responds not by rushing to judgment but with acceptance, empathy, flexibility, and charitable attributions. All these responses come more naturally when you acknowledge the many varied facets that describe all humans.

Now turn the tables and apply the Multiplicity mindset—along with the Open-Heart mindset—to yourself. Viewing yourself as complex and multifaceted helps you treat yourself with sensitivity and a warm heart (much as a kind friend might), or with what psychologists call *self-compassion*. In these ways, the Multiplicity mindset helps you appreciate that no single attribute (good or bad) needs to define you—this mindset encourages you to feel forgivable, and makes it easier to share more of your full self and receive your partner's appreciation.

Applying the Mindsets

Each of the five mindsets represents a critical tool for engaging the Relationship Sea-Saw. When you express curiosity in your conversation partner—and listen thoughtfully, compassionately, and encouragingly when they open up—you set in motion cycles of mutual openness, understanding, connectedness, and responsiveness that create moments of feeling loved. Thus, by leveraging these five mindsets, you become more positive, more proactive, and more effective at obtaining the results you want. Again, the good news is that the power to feel loved resides within you, not within your partner. Specifically, you have control over three critical pieces: (1) the appropriate person—that is, *by whom* you wish to feel more loved (whether it be a colleague, friend, family member, or romantic partner); (2) *when, what, and how* you choose to show authentic interest in and respond to this person's full, vulnerable self; and (3) *when, what, and how* you choose to show your own full, vulnerable self to them.

Copyrighted Material

We're certainly not suggesting that you inhabit these mindsets all the time or with everyone you meet—selectivity is critical to making

them work. Rather, regard them as tools to help you lay the foundation for a relationship in which you can feel connected and loved. It won't happen overnight—feeling connected and loved is built by accumulating meaningful experiences over time. When the Relationship Sea-Saw operates successfully, both you and your conversation partner will respond to each other's ideas, revelations, and distinctive personalities in ways that lead both of you to feel more and more loved. But if the other person fails to take advantage of the opportunity to truly listen to and see the real you, if they don't lift you on the Sea-Saw, it may be a signal that either they are not an appropriate partner or the timing isn't ideal. Throughout this book, and especially in chapter 10, we discuss the importance of being discerning about your Sea-Saw partner.

Don't Change Yourself—Change the Conversation

According to our surveys, the reason some people don't feel as loved as they want or as much as they think they "deserve" is because they believe they're fundamentally unlovable. They suspect that if the person who is trying to love them ever discovered who they truly are inside—rather than the idealized or polished version they have presented to the outside world—that person will love them less or love them differently. Others do feel loved—at least in some of their relationships—but would welcome more love in their lives.

If you don't feel loved enough, we have a profound and empowering message for you: Feeling loved is not out of your control. For some, it will require a radical shift in how you orient toward conversations with loved ones. For others, it will simply call for more practice of that muscle that enables you to deeply know another person and become deeply known by them.

We've been conducting behavioral-science research since the Richard Nixon and George H. W. Bush administrations, respectively. We've won awards for our research on happiness (Sonja) and close

Copyrighted Material

relationships (Harry). Over the years, drawing from different perspectives, we've both come to the same conclusion: People feel happiest in moments when they believe that others understand and respect them for who they truly are—for their deepest, unvarnished self.

This book is our attempt to bring together well-being science and relationship science in a way that no one has quite done before. By putting our heads together, we offer a new perspective on the ingredients that make life worth living. *How to Feel Loved* presents these insights, backed by a feast of cutting-edge empirical research. What we offer is less a self-help instruction manual and more a new way of seeing and relating.

Because the secret to feeling more loved is not about changing yourself or about changing the other person—it's about changing the conversation.

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

PART I

Why Feeling Loved Matters

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

1

Hardwired to Feel Loved

You're gazing out the window, bracing for the long, stressful day ahead.

"Here, Elena."

Without asking, your sister hands you a cup of tea just the way you like it—cardamom, cinnamon, and the right amount of honey. She doesn't make a fuss; she just knows. And in that small unspoken act, you feel loved. Not because of grand declarations or dramatic gestures, but because someone sees you, remembers you, and cares about the details that make you, you.

Feeling loved often happens in quiet moments like that one.

Or this one:

He didn't say, "Let me know if you need anything." He just showed up.

When Kayla's father died, the texts and emails flooded in. But it was her best friend, Mateo, who knocked on her door the next morning, holding a bag of groceries and a soft blanket. "You don't have to talk," he said. "I'm just here." And he was. Sitting with her in silence. Making sure she ate. Letting her be messy, exhausted, and utterly unfiltered—without the need to put on a brave face. Mateo had seen Kayla at her best and at her lowest, and he stayed.

And sometimes people feel most loved when they feel truly understood:

When Ravi got the promotion he'd worked toward for a decade, he expected to feel on top of the world. He celebrated with his colleagues, accepted the congratulations, and smiled through it all. But that night, when he sat across from his wife, Maya, she studied his face.

"You're not as happy as you thought you'd be," she said softly.

Copyrighted Material

His throat tightened. "No," he admitted. "I thought this would make me feel . . . enough."

Maya reached for his hand. "You already are."

She knew. Not because he had ever voiced that exact thought to her, but because she had witnessed every part of him—his drive, his self-doubt, the way he sometimes mistook achievement for worth. And that's why, right there, he felt loved. Not because his wife was celebrating his successes, but because she knew his struggles, his fears, and even the things he rarely admitted to himself.

Perhaps one of these stories brings to mind a time when you felt the same. Or perhaps it reminds you of a person with whom you similarly experienced feeling loved. Now consider our colleague Vivian's story.

I remember sitting across from a friend I'd known for years—someone I had confided in, supported, and shared countless memories with. We were at a quiet coffee shop, the kind of place where people linger over half-empty mugs, wrapped in conversation. Outside, the rain tapped against the windows.

For months I had felt a growing distance between us, though I couldn't quite name why. That night I decided to be honest. I told him I missed the way we used to talk, that something felt different, and I wondered if I had done something wrong. I tried to sound casual, not wanting to sound needy, but my voice cracked just a little at the end.

He looked at me, stirred his coffee, and shrugged.

"I don't know, Vivian," he said. "I guess I've just been busy."

That was it. No reassurance, no curiosity, no follow-up question. Just . . . indifference. Maybe I hadn't shared enough of what had been weighing on me. Maybe he hadn't noticed, or maybe he hadn't wanted to ask. Either way, the conversation ended before it ever really began.

I nodded, pretending that answer was enough. But inside, something in me sank—a heavy feeling, like I had been reaching for something solid that wasn't there. I had thought that if I just tried hard enough, showed up enough, cared enough, I would be met with warmth. Instead, we sat there, side by side, yet the space between us felt vast.

Copyrighted Material

We finished our coffees, exchanged small talk, and said goodbye. I

walked home by myself, feeling lonelier than if I had been alone the whole evening.

We (Sonja and Harry) have both known what it's like to feel deeply understood and loved—and what it's like to feel unseen and unloved. You might recognize parts of yourself in any of the stories above, at different moments in time or in different relationships. When was the last time you truly felt loved? When was the last time you knew you *were* loved but couldn't quite feel it? This book is about creating the conditions to experience the kind of love that Elena, Kayla, and Ravi felt—and understanding what to do when you find yourself in a moment like Vivian's.

But before we explore how to approach conversations in ways that will open the door for you and your partners to feel loved, we need to take a step back and ask: What exactly do we mean by *love* and *feeling loved*?

More Than a Feeling: What *Is* Love?

Love is one of the most versatile words in the English language. People use it to describe their feelings about a romantic partner, their children, sleeping in on a lazy Saturday, their favorite music, the city they live in, or even mint chocolate chip ice cream. None of these examples, however, reflect what people mean when they say they want to *feel* loved. That's the kind of love this book is about—the kind that happens *between* people.

What does that kind of love look like? It takes on many shapes. Yet for most, the word *love* is most commonly associated with romantic relationships. So let's begin there. Relationship scientists who study couples have long distinguished between two major types of love: passionate (the "hot" kind) and companionate (the "warm" kind).

Copyrighted Material

- **Passionate love**, often called *romantic love* or *limerence*, feels all-consuming, intense, urgent, and exhilarating. It often comes

with deep longing, excitement, and physiological arousal—racing heartbeat, butterflies in the stomach, and an emotional preoccupation with the beloved—as well as lust, if it's also a sexual relationship. Passionate love may fuel the early stages of a romance, but over time, its intensity often wanes.

- **Companionate love**, on the other hand, is steadier, characterized by warmth, trust, emotional intimacy, and a deep sense of commitment. Rather than igniting like a spark, it grows over time and can sustain long-term partnerships. Notably, companionate love is used to describe nonromantic relationships as well, with its deep attachment and mutual care reinforcing bonds between family, colleagues, and friends.

It's striking that many languages use one word, *love*, to describe these two very disparate experiences. Yet even though a single word is used, love is not a singular experience—it comes in many different forms. The particular kind of love that we write about in this book is broader than either of these definitions. It's best described like this:

> Love is a powerful and embodied feeling of deep affection, caring, and warmth for others when your life, activities, or goals are gratifyingly intertwined with theirs. It is the sense that another person makes a difference in your life—that they matter.

As you can tell from this definition, not all relationships involve love, nor would it be desirable if they did. We focus here on those special relationships in your life where love is present, as we define it above. Psychologists call these *communal relationships*, and they can be found within many different kinds of connections. In a communal relationship, people are responsive to each other's needs and are concerned about each other's well-being. Relationships vary in the degree to which they are communal, such that some relationships—for example, between romantic partners, best friends, and parents and children—are strongly communal, whereas others show communal features but less robustly so.

Copyrighted Material

Although the above definition may evoke love as a grand emotion, it doesn't have to be. Love isn't only about profound, life-changing bonds—it can also be found in a friend who gets you, a colleague who shares a deep intellectual connection, or a neighbor who always checks in. Thus, it bears repeating that love is not limited to romantic partners—it is felt in friendships, family bonds, workplace connections, and shared social or religious communities. Both the heat of passionate love and the warmth of companionate love, along with the many other ways that love manifests in people's lives, are explored in this book (and particularly in chapter 10).

Before we go any further, it's crucial to highlight something important. Most research on love focuses on the love people *feel for others*. That's why our definition of love, drawn from the literature on relationship science, does too. But this book flips the script. It's not about how much love you *feel* for someone else. It's about how much love you *feel coming to you*.

Love in a Moment

Now let's add a twist to this idea: You can feel loved within a communal relationship, and you can feel loved continuously for weeks, months, or even a lifetime. But you can also feel loved—whether in a communal relationship, in a noncommunal one, or even by a stranger—for a moment. Is that really possible? If you're skeptical, try to recall a time that you felt loved during a brief but meaningful experience—perhaps sitting in a pew, attending a ceremony, or listening to a speech? While singing or enjoying a song? In the presence of a valued community or in the company of the divine? While joining hands in a protest? While listening or being listened to? Such moments can be spontaneous and serendipitous—they can happen anywhere and at any time. They often involve words, but sometimes just a meaningful glance, or touch, or even collective silence can communicate love. It's possible that sometimes you might even overlook such brief but potentially meaningful opportunities to feel loved.

Copyrighted Material

When we asked survey respondents to recall a time they felt truly loved (more on the survey later), we expected to hear about profound

moments—deep connections, life-changing experiences, and major family milestones. And, sure enough, we did. People described feeling loved when friends stayed by their bedside during an illness, when loved ones threw them a surprise birthday celebration, or when they held their child for the first time. But surprisingly, many experiences of feeling loved occurred not in response to grand gestures but during smaller, everyday moments, such as when someone was attentive, considerate, or supportive, echoing Elena's story from the beginning of the chapter. For example:

- "I feel most loved when my partner makes my morning coffee just the way I like it."
- "They remembered the exact book I wanted and got it for me 'just because.'"

These small everyday moments of feeling loved are far from trivial. In a set of studies conducted in Canada and China, researchers asked university students to recall a time that someone close to them made them feel loved. Simply reflecting on feeling loved had powerful ripple effects on memories and judgments—for example, it led participants to view their relationship with that person as more satisfying, made them more willing to support that person during stressful times, and even increased their willingness to forgive that person for past mistakes (like lying).

As we noted earlier, love—especially the passionate kind—is often described as a big, fierce, lasting emotion, frequently tied to a long-term bond. Emotion scientists, however, have shown that love sometimes comes in "momentary surges." You might feel loved during one moment in everyday life and not the next. In her book *Love 2.0*, Barbara Fredrickson labels these moments with the lovely name "positivity resonance," describing them as being typically characterized by:

- **shared positive emotion**—you laugh together or experience a feeling of mutual gratitude

Copyrighted Material

- **biobehavioral synchrony**—your heart rate, breathing, or even neural activity aligns
- **mutual care**—you are invested in each other's happiness

Furthermore, Fredrickson and her colleagues have shown that frequent moments of love are associated with health benefits (e.g., lower levels of inflammation, stronger cardiovascular functioning, and even longer life), relationship benefits (e.g., longer marriages and more generosity), and improved well-being overall, including less loneliness and greater resilience and satisfaction. Parallel moments experienced at work—what behavioral scientists call "high-quality connections"—have also been found to produce increased well-being, psychological safety, and resilience, while enhancing physical health, belonging, and productivity.

The Neurobiology of Love

Part of the story of love is biological. For centuries, poets and philosophers have located love in the heart—which is why one uses a heart emoji to communicate love when texting. But, in fact, the most important organ for experiencing love is the brain. This is a topic where the distinction between passionate love and companionate love matters a great deal.

Let's start with passion. During the early stages of romantic love, the brain releases dopamine—the neurotransmitter associated with reward and pleasure—contributing to feelings of euphoria and excitement. Brain-scanning studies have shown that feelings of intense romantic love activate regions of the brain rich in dopamine receptors, such as the ventral tegmental area and the caudate nucleus. For example, in one study, participants viewed photos of either a romantic partner or a familiar but emotionally neutral person while in an fMRI scanner. Only when looking at their partner's face was there activation in these dopamine-sensitive regions. Notably, these same brain regions are also involved in the abuse of addictive substances such as cocaine—which would seem to lend scientific weight to the metaphor in the title to Roxy Music's song "Love Is the Drug."

Copyrighted Material

These neural underpinnings help explain many of the intense feelings and behaviors associated with passionate love: the elation of being near the loved one, a powerful desire for their presence, a rush of longing when seeing or thinking about them, occasional obsessive cravings for connection, and even signs of withdrawal when they're absent. Although these feelings often mellow as romantic relationships stabilize over time, brief moments of passion can still trigger similar, albeit somewhat muted, activation of the dopamine receptors in the brain.

By contrast, companionate love has been consistently linked to the neuropeptide oxytocin—sometimes referred to as the *cuddle hormone*. Secreted by the pituitary gland at the base of the brain, oxytocin stimulates feelings of love, trust, and attachment, as well as reduces anxiety and stress. Some of the earliest studies of oxytocin compared two genetically similar species of voles that notably differ in their social behavior: monogamous prairie voles, who typically pair bond for life, and polygamous montane voles, who are less socially affiliative. Interestingly, relative to montane voles, prairie voles have more oxytocin receptors in the brain's reward system, which makes them more likely to respond when given a dose of oxytocin. Thus, researchers have found that when prairie voles are injected with oxytocin, they show a strong preference to cohabit with a familiar partner rather than a stranger.

In humans, oxytocin has demonstrated a range of effects, all linked to caring and trust. For example, mothers with higher levels of plasma oxytocin after childbirth show stronger maternal bonding behaviors—such as gazing, vocalizing, affectionately touching, and frequently checking on their infants. Similarly, fathers administered a dose of intranasal oxytocin become more behaviorally affectionate when interacting with their five-month-olds. Among romantic couples, higher levels of oxytocin have been associated with more frequent hugging and lower physiological reactions to stress. In other studies, oxytocin has increased the ability to read others' emotions and produced greater levels of trust in economic games. (Sometimes, however, oxytocin leads people to favor friends and family over strangers or dissimilar others.) Perhaps most compelling is the find-

Copyrighted Material

ing that orgasm stimulates the production of oxytocin—offering a biological explanation for the "warm glow of connection" many people feel after sex.

In sum, this and other research has led scientists to propose a broad role for oxytocin in social behavior and bonding—namely, that it's responsible for increasing people's sensitivity to social cues while simultaneously enhancing their desire to affiliate and connect across a wide variety of relationships.

That the story of love is situated in the human brain should come as no surprise. The brain is where most evolutionarily significant behaviors are regulated, and, as we explore in more detail next, love plays a central role in many of them—from procreation and parental care to the functioning of romantic bonds, families, kin networks, and group alliances. As you consider the behaviors explored in the chapters ahead, it may be useful to remember their neural underpinnings.

Why Humans Crave Feeling Loved

> No [person] is an island.
>
> —*John Donne*

If you've picked up this book, chances are you want to feel more loved—or perhaps, deep down, you recognize how much of your happiness is tied to feeling loved. But why is this need so fundamental? This may sound like a bold claim, but the answer lies in your biology, your psychology, and the very essence of what it means to be human. One seminal idea came not from a lab experiment but from a conversation at a beachside conference.

A Need to Belong

In the 1980s, in springtime, a group of psychological scientists gathered for a small conference at Nags Head, a thin stretch of island off the coast of North Carolina, to explore pressing research questions

Copyrighted Material

about human behavior. One of these meetings centered around anxiety, and several scholars argued that the root of human anxiety was the fear of death. Roy Baumeister, our colleague and good friend, sat in the audience, skeptical. Most people, he thought, don't spend their days pondering their mortality. What preoccupies them, what keeps them up at night, are social fears—being rejected, excluded, ignored, made fun of, left behind, unloved.

Baumeister wasn't alone in this thinking. His late-night conversations with fellow psychologist Mark Leary sparked an idea for a paper that would reshape the field. In 1995, they published "The Need to Belong," a landmark work arguing that human beings evolved with a fundamental drive to form lasting social bonds. Throughout history, survival and thriving in harsh environments depended on finding mates and forming alliances to secure food, protection, exploration, and care (see the long-running reality show *Survivor* for a vivid illustration).

Fast-forward two hundred thousand years, and even today, as psychologist Esther Perel famously put it, "the quality of your relationships determines the quality of your life." In other words, humans are profoundly social creatures who are evolutionarily programmed to value belonging to tribes and to derive happiness from connecting, building bonds within communities, and falling in love with other humans.

Baumeister and Leary put it more formally: Humans are evolutionarily designed to form strong, enduring attachments with others and to resist their dissolution. Across cultures and historical eras, from cradle to grave, people are strongly motivated to cooperate, to fit in, and to feel accepted, included, and cared for. And when attachments are threatened, the consequences ripple through physical health, psychological adjustment, and overall well-being. (Interestingly, while many nonhuman species—parrots, elephants, dolphins—also bond in social groups, humans are the only species to reflect consciously on their social standing, asking questions such as *Does this group value me?* and *Do I feel loved?*)

Copyrighted Material

Furthermore, the need to belong isn't just about emotional support and social standing—it's also about reproduction. Access to potential

mates, cooperative child-rearing, and the successful raising of offspring to maturity all depend on social bonds. Evolution favored individuals who were embedded in networks of mutual support—not just romantic partners but extended kin and community. In short, it really does take a village of relational cooperation.

A Need to Feel Loved

Why does this matter? Because the need to belong is deeply intertwined with the need to feel loved. When defined broadly, they are more or less the same thing. Relationship scientists describe the feeling of being loved in terms of the internal sensations of safety and security. In other words, when you feel loved, you feel *at home*—you feel *safe*. You feel *secure* when you have a place to belong. By contrast, when you don't feel loved, you question whether you belong, feeling lost and worried about acceptance. Hence, feeling loved isn't just comforting—it's critical. It's the mental and emotional glue that keeps you connected with your caregivers and your social group, even during difficult times. It also reinforces your sense of belonging within your larger community or tribe. In many ways, feeling loved can be seen as the ultimate barometer of evolutionary fitness—a signal that one is socially connected and supported.

We would go so far as to postulate that humans wouldn't have survived as a species without feeling loved, because feeling loved is grounded in a process that's deeply embedded in the most ancient parts of your mammalian brain. And that process is one of the most important influences on survival and reproduction—the key elements of human evolution.

Our need to belong explains why feeling lonely and unloved can be so painful. In ancestral times, not having mates or friends you could rely on could mean the difference between life and death. Today, the same situation just *feels* as if you're dying inside. Neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp, for instance, has shown that the brain processes separation from a loved one as a threat to survival, underscoring why social disconnection can feel profoundly difficult—if not unbearable.

Copyrighted Material

Another piece of the puzzle that explains why social disconnection

can feel so difficult comes from Social Baseline theory. Taking the Need to Belong theory a step further, James Coan and his colleagues proposed that human connection—feeling loved—is not just emotionally rewarding, but a built-in default state. In other words, feeling loved is so important because it serves as *baseline* (a necessary foundation or "default setting") for optimal human functioning—the ultimate starting point for effective action and happiness. The implication of this theory is that when you feel close and connected to a relational partner, you are ready to share the load of living in a dangerous world. You take up each other's burdens that weigh you down. When you have strong bonds with others, you perceive fewer threats (you feel *safer*), and your brain literally requires less metabolic energy to respond to threats and ordeals, showing reduced neural activity in response to danger and muting your body's stress response. For instance, in one classic study, women administered an electric shock found it less painful when they were holding their spouse's hand, but not the hand of a stranger. In simple terms, love lightens the cognitive and emotional load of everyday life.

This isn't just a theory—it's a process that plays out in real relationships: Feeling loved doesn't just provide a personal benefit; it provides a resource for the people around you. In a series of studies conducted across four different countries, a research team that included Harry found that as long as *one* partner in a dating or married couple felt loved, both partners were less likely to react with hostility or blame—whether in an argument with each other or while parenting their child. In a sense, feeling loved creates a buffer, making relationships more resilient.

Where This Leads Us

If there's one takeaway we hope you remember from this chapter, it's this: Feeling loved isn't a luxury—it's what human beings are built for. Across disciplines, from neuroscience to relationship science, research and theory reveal that feeling loved calms the nervous system, strengthens connections, builds resilience, and reminds you that you belong. The Jersey Shore rocker Southside Johnny echoes this point

Copyrighted Material