Philippa Perry

The Book You Want Everyone You Love* To Read

Sane and sage advice to help you navigate all of your most important relationships

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*and maybe a few you don't



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‘Philippa Perry is a superwoman.’
Chris Evans

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Philippa Perry, artist and psychotherapist, is an agony aunt for *Observer Magazine*, a freelance writer, and a TV and radio presenter. Her No. 1 *Sunday Times* bestselling book *The Book You Wish Your Parents Had Read* was published in 2019 and has been translated into over forty languages. She has written two other books: *Couch Fiction* and *How to Stay Sane*. Lady Perry lives in London with her husband, Sir Grayson, and their cat, The Honourable Kevin.

Also by Philippa Perry

How to Stay Sane

The Book You Wish Your Parents Had Read
(and Your Children Will be Glad That You Did)

Couch Fiction

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This book is dedicated to all the people brave enough to write in to me at the *Observer*

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Contents

Introduction 1

1. HOW WE LOVE 7

Building strong and meaningful connections with others and self

Why we crave connection 8 — Sometimes relationships feel hard 15 — How we form bonds 20 — Two different ways of being friends 24 — The myth of perfect 28 — The fear of forever 32 — Obsession isn't love 34 — A relationship is more than sex 38 — The power of surrender 42 — Maintaining a strong sense of self 49

2. HOW WE ARGUE 57

Coping with conflict in our personal and professional lives

Argument #1: Thinking, feeling, doing 58 — Argument #2: It's not me, it's you 62 — Argument #3: Goodie vs baddie 67 — Argument #4: Facts vs feelings 74 — Argument #5: The Karpman Drama Triangle 77 — Argument #6: Conflict avoidant 83 — Argument #7: When impulse takes over 88 — Aim

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for assertive 92 — Over and out 95 — Rupture and repair 99

3. HOW WE CHANGE 107

Navigating the new, for better or worse

How to get unstuck 108 — Change can be liberating 114 — How to change old habits 121 — With change comes loss 128 — Accepting ageing 135 — Coping with grief 142

4. HOW WE FIND CONTENTMENT 149

Discovering inner peace, fulfilment and meaning

Managing stress and anxiety 149 — Overcoming your inner critic 157 — Scapegoating 163 — How to process trauma 172 — Finding fulfilment 179 — Our search for meaning 186

Epilogue 197

Acknowledgements 201

Index 203

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Introduction

I have worked as a psychotherapist for many years, and I have always thought it was a shame that psychotherapists tend to mostly talk about theories among themselves, behind closed doors. I feel so enthusiastic about how helpful these principles can be to people. From all the dilemmas and questions I get sent, I build up a picture of what people want to know about how to live their lives, and attempt to come up with some answers. So, my mission has been to bring these concepts and ideas into the wider world, and in my writing, I aim to share that wisdom in easily digestible chunks in the hope that more people can benefit from it.

This book is a culmination of many of the answers to questions that people have come to me with over the years, from my work as a therapist and an advice columnist, from talks and events, and from everyday interactions. I love your questions, because from your questions I learn where people have gaps. Although each person is unique, and the questions I get asked are usually very specific, I find that there are patterns and commonalities in those gaps and we can apply some generalised wisdom and techniques to them. Each question has taught me something and, maybe, I have occasionally helped you to have your own 'aha' moments too.

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As children, we all develop belief systems and adaptations that help us cope in our early environment. Often we might not even be aware that we are operating out of these systems, making decisions and treating people according to these initial ways of seeing the world. As we grow older, meet new people and experience more of the world, these belief systems and responses might no longer serve us in the way they did when we were young, and instead keep us stuck in old patterns of thought and behaviour. What I hope this book will do is help you understand your own early adaptations and belief systems, and be more aware of where they are serving you and where they may need updating. Think of self-awareness as knowing where you are on a map: if you don't know your starting point you won't be able to figure out how to get to where you want to go. It's important that we learn how we react to the world, how we get angry, how we make assumptions about other people and how we talk to ourselves, because until we know what we are doing and how we're doing it, we won't know what we need to change.

When people first come to therapy, quite often they just want to talk about other people. What I tell them is that we can't do anything about other people, but we do have the power to control ourselves. Many of us don't understand we have that power: we can change how we react and how we respond. We can change our priorities, our belief systems, our habitual responses. Change takes time and new habits take a while to build up. But we can

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experiment with change, knowing that we have so much more power over our life than we realise. In particular, we have power over our own mind and where we want it to go. Even when we are at our most powerless, we still have the ability to choose how we think, how we organise our body and how we relate to others. When I talk of organising the body I mean being aware of where in our body we are holding tension or where we may be collapsed. For example, if you take your awareness to your jaw, are the muscles lax or tense? If you move your awareness to your breath, are you breathing deeply or shallower?

Sometimes we might ask ourselves the wrong questions. We are forever asking, 'Why?' because we are meaning-making creatures and we crave narrative. 'Why did so-and-so break up with me?' 'Why is my child misbehaving?' 'Why do I feel so unhappy?' The emotional charge is all wrapped up in *why* – because we love stories and we love explanations. But asking yourself *why* is never usually very useful; the solution is normally in the *how*. What I'm interested in is *how* you are making yourself feel the way you're feeling: how you love, argue, change and find contentment. That's why this book is structured in four 'How' sections. These are separated out and we may think of them as individual issues, but they are all interconnected.

Being a psychotherapist has taught me that people grow in their own way and in their own time, in an environment where they can be themselves and where they are allowed to experiment with who they *can* be – as

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opposed to someone, or themselves, telling them who they *should* be. So my approach is along these lines. My definition of good advice is having someone put into words something that you have always known but haven't articulated yet. No one is always right. I'm not always right. And if you come across someone who thinks they are, there should be an alarm bell ringing for you, because the always-righters somehow have to make us into the always-wrongers – and that is not a nice place to be.

If I had to give you one piece of starting advice, it would be from that doyenne of self-help, Dr Susan Jeffers, who said: 'You are good enough exactly as you are, and who you are is a powerful and loving human being who is learning and growing every step of the way.' In other words, you are acceptable just as you are, right now. When things work for us, we might not know how they are working for us, and it can be helpful to know that too. We can give ourselves such a hard time. This is not unusual. Every week I'm told 'I'm no good at relationships', 'I'm a terrible friend', 'I'm not a clever person', 'I'm too shy' . . . you get the picture. We don't need to judge ourselves like this. Yes, we have all made mistakes, but we are not our mistakes. We learn from them so we can go on to make new mistakes. We have a fantasy of what we want and need, and when we achieve our dream, the reality possibly teaches us it was a mistake. So we correct that mistake and learn from it, and then we go on to make another decision, it works for a while and then, after a time, we need to make another adjustment. It's

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not over until it's over and, until then, we can keep hoping, keep trying and keep experimenting. When we find ourselves making a finite judgement about ourselves, when we put on that metaphorical black cap and bang the gavel and condemn ourselves, we don't do ourselves, or other people, any favours. Suspending judgement is nearly always a good idea. We all have a lot in common. We are all vulnerable human beings having to learn that there is more strength in owning our vulnerability than in clinging to a superficial mask of false strength.

Finally, I hope you'll read this book in order to enjoy it. It may sound trivial but to enjoy yourself in life should be something we prioritise. If, as well as enjoying it, it resonates and you think 'YES' and things fall into place, even just a little, then that's great. Obviously that's what I hope I'll achieve in this book. But your experience will tell you whether I've been successful or not.

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1. *How We Love*

Building strong and meaningful connections with others and self

In Western society, we've come to believe that it's important to be independent. Stories of supposedly self-made entrepreneurs and stereotypes of the 'modern independent woman' are everywhere. But I believe we are never truly independent: we rely on other people for just about every aspect of our life, from harvesting our food and getting it into the shops, to supplying us with running water and building the houses we inhabit. It's a false construct to believe there is such a thing as complete independence. And just as we need other people to supply us with drinking water, we also need other people for company – even if some of us have tried to train ourselves out of this need.

As humans, unlike some other animals, we are not developed when we are born. We develop in relationship with our earliest caregivers – our sense of self, our identity, our needs and personality traits are shaped based on how we were cared for. The psychoanalyst and paediatrician Donald Winnicott said: 'There's no such thing as a baby, there's only a baby and a mother.' This makes us into creatures that need connection all our lives to feel like we are part of the wider world. Usually, that

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connection is with people, but we can also connect with ideas, places and objects.

When I think back to my past psychotherapy clients, whatever their presenting problem was, I found that the root of their issue was nearly always grounded in their relationships: how their past relationships had affected their belief systems, or their relationship with themselves, or how they were stuck in their relationships with others. I decided to begin this book with how we connect with others because it is the most important part of our lives. As people are dying, they will tell you that the most significant thing that remains in their life are their relationships, and these are usually relationships to other people.

Because we're complicated and all come from slightly different cultures – and by that I include general habits, family dynamics, languages, ways of doing things – relationships can be tricky. We all have different belief systems and ways of cooperating with each other. Finding a way through so that your relationships work for you and for the people around you might be essential, but it certainly isn't straightforward. That's what I hope this chapter will help you with.

Why we crave connection

Feeling connected to others is a part of being human. We need connection not only to other people but also to

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ideas, objects and our environment. We want to feel a part of something – whether that comes from meaningful conversations, small talk at the bus stop, reading a book or watching something on the television. This is partly why we are addicted to our phones: they give us a sense of connection that releases low levels of dopamine (the 'feel-good' hormone).

However, if the only type of connection we have is via a screen, there is a chance we may begin to feel depressed, as we need more active ways of connecting, where there is mutual impact between us and another person. If we are under-connected our mental health suffers. We want people in our lives who make us feel good, and we need people who support our current view of ourselves to confirm our identity. Connection matters because the people in our life are like mirrors in which we see ourselves. How others respond to us works as a sort of system of checks and balances for our mental health.

That said, there is also a danger in being over-connected. To explain this, there is a useful analogy that describes the human body being covered in hooks. If we have no hooks out, then no one else can connect with us and we can't connect with anyone, leading us to feel isolated and alone. But if *all* our hooks are out, then we're connected to everyone and everything all of the time, and those individual connections stop having meaning or significance. We're jumping from person to person, idea to idea, and struggle to hold on to one in a meaningful way. Make a connection with everything and you'll discover

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that eventually you're not making a connection with anything. We've all met someone who is scattered and their attention is all over the place, who is difficult to follow or engage with properly, because you always feel like you don't have their full focus. This is what is known as manic behaviour. It's fine to be manic sometimes – and for many it can be a route to creativity – but it's an unsustainable state to be in long term.

As with many things, there is a balance to be found. If we have a few hooks out – not all of them, but some – we can hook into who we care about and what we're interested in, and we can make sense of it. We can use our spare time to do what we find satisfying, be open to new people entering our life and take the time to assess their values and whether they align with ours. It is a good idea to have people around us who make us feel positive about ourselves. People who, if they do challenge us, do so in a way that makes us feel enlightened rather than worse, and who are on our side.

Everyday Wisdom

Everyone needs to feel that they belong, maybe to a family, a project, a community, or to another person. We are creatures of connection, and we deny this at our peril.

In any group of people – any school, workplace, social group or large family – subgroups naturally form. This isn't a bad thing or a good thing, it's just normal human

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behaviour. Getting closer to a person or a couple of people means a subgroup forms and finding a place within a group can be formative for our sense of identity and belonging. The dynamics of groups means that not only do we mirror those around us to build a sense of who we *are*, but we also contrast with those outside of our group to determine who we are *not*.

That is why being part of groups is so important, and why it can feel difficult if we find ourselves left out. A woman wrote to me because she struggled with this balance and found herself unable to initiate friendships with people beyond her husband and child, and the friends her husband had made.

> I am a 32-year-old mum of a happy baby. I love him and I'm enjoying being on maternity leave. My husband is a lovely man who adores being a dad.
>
> We have nice friends, but they are friends my husband has made. I go to the baby groups and I chat to people, but how do you actually make friends with someone? I was hoping our antenatal group would be a good place to make new friends, but it is a bit cliquey – it felt like being back in school. It felt competitive and we don't have much money for all the baby accessories, activities and classes. We went to a barbecue at one mum's house and it was a mansion and I'm embarrassed that our house is rented and small.
>
> People have commented in the past that they don't know me, or it's a shame they never got to know me. At

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