

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR
OF *HOW TO DO THE WORK*

HOW TO BE THE **LOVE** YOU SEEK

BREAK CYCLES,
FIND PEACE + HEAL YOUR
RELATIONSHIPS

DR. NICOLE LEPERA

THE HOLISTIC PSYCHOLOGIST

How to Be the Love You Seek

Break Cycles, Find Peace +
Heal Your Relationships

Dr. Nicole LePera



HARPER WAVE

An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

Dedication

To my mom, and all those who have gone before,
may they rest in the infinite peace of love.

To all of us who remain, may we alchemize
our pain and heal our hearts.

Contents

Cover

Title Page

Dedication

Introduction: You Create Change

1. The Power of Your Relationships
2. Exploring Your Embodied Self
3. Understanding the Neurobiology of Trauma Bonds
4. Witnessing Your Conditioned Selves
5. Harnessing the Wisdom of Your Body
6. Creating Change Through Mind Consciousness
7. Unlocking the Power of Your Heart
8. Becoming the Love You Seek
9. Empowering Your Relationships
10. Reconnecting with the Collective

Epilogue: My Heart's Unexpected Truth

Acknowledgments

Notes

Index

About the Author

Praise

Also by Dr. Nicole LePera

Copyright

About the Publisher

Introduction

You Create Change

You're probably reading this book because there's a relationship in your life that's causing you stress. Whether it's with a romantic partner, parent, sibling, child, friend, or colleague, you'd like your dynamic with another person to change—and if you're like most of us, you'd like this change to happen as quickly as possible. Some of you may even be on the fence about continuing to work on a particular relationship, unsure if it's worth the effort or if repair is even possible. Others may be having difficulty finding or sustaining relationships, fearing a future of isolation or loneliness.

I get it. Over the course of a decade working as a clinical psychologist, I had many clients who deeply desired to find a lasting love, resolve repeated conflicts, or break dysfunctional habits. During sessions with individuals, couples, and families, I witnessed a similar pattern again and again: despite their best intentions and efforts, most people were unable to create or maintain the relationships they wanted, and many had grown frustrated and often resentful in the process.

The majority of my clients read relationship books and had, over time, tried all of the latest strategies and tools, hoping something, anything, would help. Many had heard about the concept of “love languages,” made popular by Dr. Gary Chapman's 1992 book *The Five Love Languages: The Secret to Love That Lasts*. Dr. Chapman's theory suggests that asking our partner to demonstrate their love in different ways—through physical touch, quality time together, gift giving, words of affirmation, or acts of service (like making the bed or cooking dinner)—can deepen our connection.

This larger approach of implementing external change—expecting others to adapt their behaviors to meet our needs—is a common thread in most relationship-based therapy. Though the practices and tools differ across therapists, books, and ideologies, in general, the core message is

generally the same: we must change ourselves in some ways to better meet another's needs and vice versa.

In theory, if you don't feel supported or connected in your relationship, asking the other person to modify their behavior probably sounds like a good plan. But when we take this approach in real life, it often backfires. We can't change others, and relying on them to change their ingrained relational patterns doesn't usually work, at least not for very long. Instead, seeking external change often increases the tension between people, causing reactivity or discontent, and perpetuating conflict or disconnection. It can actually be a recipe for a lifetime of resentment and contempt.

You might (rightly) be wondering, *So what am I supposed to do?* If expecting others to adapt who they are to better accommodate who we are doesn't work, then what does? For years, I asked this question, too.

Early in my adult life, I struggled to create the bonds I craved. Though I had numerous therapeutic tools at my disposal, I continued to feel dissatisfied in most of my relationships, despite my best efforts to increase my self-reflection, self-awareness, and communication. I felt constantly alone, even when surrounded by others, whether it was my family during holiday time, a group of friends who had gathered to celebrate my birthday, or a romantic partner on an intimate vacation. In those moments when I wanted (or even expected) to feel a deep connection, I often found myself feeling lonely and unloved. No matter what I said, how I said it, or what others did or tried to do for me, I still felt disconnected and alone. The more desperately I tried to get close to others, the farther away I felt and the deeper my ache grew.

One Christmas, stuck in these unfulfilling yet familiar cycles, my relationship patterns became clearer to me. At the time, I was dating Sara, a relationship you'll read more about in [chapter 1](#). We had been together for several years and were living in a shared East Village apartment. Because we both went home to our respective families for Christmas Day, we had a tradition of celebrating the holiday together a few days early. That particular year, Sara had asked if we could hang out as a couple, just the two of us. That was a significant departure from our normal dynamic. Sara was a very social person, and our relationship for years had revolved around parties and group dinners. I was touched that she wanted to spend the day with me, and I hoped this special gesture would help deepen our bond.

That morning, we woke up in our decorated apartment, and I cooked us a special breakfast before we sat down to exchange gifts. I was thrilled

when I opened an envelope from Sara that included two tickets to see a Cirque du Soleil show—my favorite!—later that day. *She wants to spend more time alone with me! She remembered how much I like Cirque du Soleil! She loves me!* I thought. It was the ultimate romantic gesture. But as we got ready to leave, I started to feel the same gnawing sense of disconnection.

Several hours later, as I sat next to her in a dark, crowded theater, I didn't feel any differently; in fact, I felt even more alone than I had earlier in the day. We weren't speaking or making eye contact, and instead of feeling connected by some invisible band of love that I expected to flow silently between us, I felt as though I were sitting next to a stranger. To deal with the discomfort, I ordered a beer and continued to drink throughout the performance, hoping it would break down whatever wall existed between us.

At the time, I was in the second year of my clinical psychology program and seeing my own therapist. I was working on myself and becoming more self-aware—or so I thought—and communicating my learned insights to others. That only compounded my belief that the problem in my relationship with Sara must be *her* unwillingness or inability to connect.

The longer I stewed in my familiar loneliness and increasing feelings of disconnection, the more I began to think that maybe I had something to do with my unhappiness after all. As I had many times before with many other people, maybe I felt alone with Sara because, emotionally, I was alone. Though it pained me to recognize that I might be unknowingly creating my deepest suffering, it also sparked hope that, as the one responsible, I might also have the power to break these repeated cycles.

Like many of the relational patterns we repeat as adults, my emotional loneliness began when I was young, as a result of my earliest relationships within my family. In childhood, I never learned how to emotionally connect with anyone because no one around me was emotionally connected, either—they didn't learn how. In order to emotionally connect with another person, as I discovered years later, you have to be emotionally connected with yourself. And to be emotionally connected with yourself, you have to be able to authentically feel and express your emotions. Authentically expressing our emotions allows us to feel truly seen, known, and supported by others—core emotional needs we all share.

Because I continually held others responsible for my relationship problems and expected them to change for me, I couldn't see the role I was playing in my own unhappiness. I couldn't see how disconnected I was

from my own wants and needs. Though I was working to understand myself better, I wasn't fully aware of how I was showing up in my relationships. Like many of my clients, I expected others to tend to my emotions or make me feel better, without knowing how to do so myself. Believing that the "right" person would "just know" how to ease or take away my deep-rooted feelings of loneliness, I felt disappointed when they didn't, no matter what they did or who they were. Looking to others to meet my needs was sabotaging my relationship satisfaction, yet I continued to repeat the same behaviors, not just in my romantic partnerships but in all of my other relationships, too.

Slowly, as I started to see that I was the one constant in all my relationships, I began to realize that I could never really control what others would or wouldn't do, let alone how quickly, effectively, or comprehensively they could or would support my needs. And, I started to understand that expecting or demanding someone else to change who they were or how they authentically expressed themselves would only leave us both feeling unloved. To be loved for who we are is a universal human need—and one that I definitely didn't want to deny my loved ones.

What I hadn't been taught by my family or in my clinical training was that in order to change how we relate to others and experience our relationships, we have to first change how we relate to and experience ourselves. How we relate to and experience ourselves as adults is directly impacted by how others related to and experienced us in our earliest relationships. Whenever our care was unpredictable, inconsistent, or neglectful when we were young, we formed the core belief that we were unworthy of being cared for or getting our needs met. Feeling intrinsically unworthy, we then began to modify how we expressed ourselves and related to others. Over time, we started to show others only our "acceptable" parts by playing certain roles—what I call *conditioned selves* in this book—to protect ourselves and fit into our earliest environments. As adults, we're still driven by our deep-rooted fears of unworthiness and continue to repeat these habitual patterns within our relationships.

Playing these familiar roles disconnects us from our unique essence, or our individual way of being with others, inevitably leaving us to feel undervalued in our relationships. In order to authentically express ourselves with others, we need to feel safe and secure enough to do so. And in order to feel safe and secure, we first have to feel truly safe and secure in our own body. Many of us, however, can't actually access this sense of safety, because our body can't access it. With chronically unmet needs, our nervous system remains chronically stressed. We get stuck in

survival mode, physiologically unable to *feel* safe in the presence of others.

That realization opened my eyes. If I never felt truly safe in my own body, how could I be open to feeling safe enough to experience the moments of joy, ease, and connection that authentic love can provide? If I'm constantly focused on how I measure up to others or to society's standards, suppressing my authentic needs and desires in the process, how can anyone around me have the opportunity to connect with the real *me*? If I don't know and love *all* of me, how can I expect myself to allow someone else to know and love all of me?

I'm sharing my story with you because it's a common one. Regardless of the unique aspects of your story, few of us feel worthy or lovable on our own, without receiving another's validation or approval. As we did when we were children, we constantly look to others to make us feel safe and secure. We continue to suppress the parts of ourselves we once learned were shameful, confirming our deep-rooted fears that those parts are as unworthy as we were originally led to believe. Our stress level increases as we avoid, deny, or modify our authentic expression alongside our resentment toward others. Feeling overwhelmed, we often end up yelling at our loved ones when they don't ask about our day, avoiding difficult but important conversations with our family, or shutting down when our friends try to support us—common habits many of us have as we continue to reenact our childhood coping strategies, even if they only continue to cause us pain and suffering today.

When we reconnect with who we really are and our inherent worthiness, something beautiful happens—and not just to us. The more safe and secure we become in our own Self-expression, the more readily we can create safety and security for others to vulnerably and authentically express themselves, too. It wasn't until I became more connected to what I needed and wanted that I was able to truly *be* my authentic Self with others, allowing me to offer the love I thought I'd been giving them all along. And, to understand what I needed and wanted, I had to connect with my physical body, exploring how it felt in that moment.

As I began to reconnect with my physical body and feel more comfortable curiously exploring its sensations, I became better able to handle stressful or upsetting experiences and share my feelings rather than checking out or shutting down, as I'd done for years. Feeling more comfortable with my emotions and more confident in my growing ability to express myself, I found myself better able to tolerate the discomfort I felt when being emotionally vulnerable around others. Over time, I found

myself sharing more honestly with others, even with those I had just met. Opening myself up to my own emotional experiences in relationships allowed me to then be more present to, or to empathize with, the emotional experiences of another.

The reality was, I had to teach myself how to feel safe and secure enough in my own physical body to open my heart and be able to both give and receive the love I craved. Embarking on this life-changing journey has shown me how deep, fulfilling, and expansive love can be, and has taught me that the goal is not only to find love, but also to find and remove all the protective barriers that have been built against it. Love, I have learned, is not about showing up in any particular way but about embodying the feeling itself, offering others the support and opportunity to *be* themselves, exactly as they are.

In this book, I'll share the information and tools I've learned to help guide you on your own journey back to your heart. Throughout these pages, you'll discover how to reconnect with all of you: body, mind, and soul. You'll learn how to recognize the different conditioned selves you play in your relationships, how to identify and meet your needs, how to soothe overwhelming emotions, and ultimately how to reconnect with your heart's innate and limitless capacity to love. Your journey, and this book itself, is about healing your connection to and relationship with your own heart as much as it is about healing your connection to and relationship with the hearts of those around you. As you too will come to learn, it is not until we are connected to and in care of our own hearts that we can truly connect with and tend to the heart of another.

Reconnecting with the infinite wisdom and intuition that lives in your own heart will guide you to make choices that will bring you joy and fulfillment, both within and outside your relationships. Your journey will help you spread love to the spaces between and around you, granting you access to your deepest potential as individuals, partners, and families, and will ultimately benefit all of our shared communities. *Being* the love we seek is the greatest and most healing gift we can give to ourselves, those around us, and the world we all share.

Within your heart is the power to change your relationships, as well as the environment around you. It's the love that lives inside each of you that is the true source of all healing.

The Power of Your Relationships

Most of us view relationships as happening *to* us rather than *with* or even *because of* us. We “fall in love,” getting swept up in another person’s passion or power. We pick the wrong people over and over again, missing the “red flags” repeatedly, even if we think we know better. When a relationship falls apart or ends, we often blame the other person, believing that they were unwilling or incapable of making us happy.

It’s often difficult to recognize the active role we play in our relationships, including the fact that we may instinctively choose certain people for specific reasons. Many of us “fall in love” with someone not because they’ve awakened our heart’s desire, but rather because that person satisfies unconscious needs we’re not even aware we have. And most of us unconsciously choose to surround ourselves with people who enable us to reenact familiar interpersonal habits and patterns from our earliest relationships.

We often feel powerless in our relationships because we spend most of our time and energy focusing on the things we can’t control: other people. Though you may currently feel helpless or hopeless to change your relationships, it’s empowering to realize that you can, in fact, have agency. We all can. We can all find and create healthy and happy relationships. We can all *be* the love we seek, regardless of what others are doing or what’s happening around us.

MY ROLE IN MY RELATIONSHIPS

Until my early thirties, I often felt powerless and passive in my romantic relationships. I jumped from partner to partner, blaming each one for the dissatisfaction I inevitably felt and believing that I could remedy the situation by finding someone who was a “better match” for me. That

pattern started when I was sixteen years old and started dating Billy. He was my first romantic relationship, and I was in love—or so I thought.

As in any typical teen romance, we spent most of our time together on the weekends watching TV, hanging out with friends, and going to movies. My family knew about Billy and were supportive of us spending time together. Even so, I never talked about him with my family, only grumbling a short response if my mom or sister happened to ask about him or complaining if he had recently done something to upset me. I didn't talk about our relationship in detail with my friends, either, not because I didn't like him or have strong feelings for him; quite the opposite, I thought I was *in love* with him. But in my family, we didn't share our feelings unless we were upset or worried about something. And I continued that pattern, feeling comfortable talking (or really complaining) about Billy only if he'd hurt or bothered me.

A year and a half into our relationship, Billy and I broke up. I was devastated. One reason was that we were going to go to different colleges the following fall, two universities that were separated by thirteen hours of interstate highway. But another reason was that I was, in Billy's words, "emotionally unavailable," a description that has stuck with me to this day. At the time, I was shocked: I didn't feel emotionally unavailable. I felt very loving toward Billy. From a young age, I had always prided myself on worrying about others and being a good, caring person.

A year into college, I was surprised to find myself attracted to the possibility of dating women. Suddenly I saw the whole Billy incident in a completely different light. *Of course I was emotionally unavailable!* I thought. *I'm gay!* I met my first girlfriend, Katie, while playing sports. We had the same friends and the same interests, and we spent a lot of time together at practice, traveling to games, and going out with our teammates. That was the basis of our connection: proximity and similarity. We spent most of our time together doing various activities, but I had the nagging feeling that something was missing. Though I desired a deeper connection, I shared very little of my emotional world with her—or anyone else. The truth was, I wasn't actually open or available for emotional connection. Unaware of how I was contributing to our disconnection and without feeling the spark I was looking for, we broke up after a year and a half together, and I started seeing Sofia.

Sofia and I dated on and off for the rest of college, eventually both choosing to move to the same city after graduation. She was different from Katie in many ways, but our co-created dynamic would still allow me to keep myself emotionally distant in order to avoid any deep or authentic

emotional connection. I knew it, too. Or rather, my subconscious mind—the part of our brain that drives all our instinctual, automatic thoughts, feelings, and reactions—knew it. This deeply embedded part of our psyche is where we store all our memories, even those we can't explicitly recall, along with our suppressed feelings, childhood pain, and core beliefs.

Sofia had been raised by an emotionally reactive mother who had frequently exploded at her when she was young, yelling and screaming or criticizing and cutting her down. Soon into my relationship with her, Sofia started treating me the same way, yelling when she didn't agree with what I said or did and calling me names or judging me when she disliked aspects of my appearance. Knowing some of what had happened during her childhood, I justified her behavior by telling myself that she didn't mean what she said or how she treated me, that she was just acting out old childhood wounds. And though that was true, I found it incredibly difficult to set boundaries or limits around what I would tolerate with her. Unable to stand my ground or communicate my hurt and upset feelings, I began to notice a growing sense of resentment toward her.

I continued to blame Sofia for my unhappiness without realizing what was really wrong—that I was deeply upset with myself for explaining away my pain and making excuses for her hurtful behavior.

After Sofia and I broke up for the final time, I met a woman named Sara, whom I dated for the next four years. Sara was a happy-go-lucky person who liked to party and have a good time, subconsciously drawing me to her: with Sara, there were always so many events and experiences to distract attention away from any negative feelings. Since she always seemed so carefree, I felt ashamed when I felt anything other than easygoing and untroubled. I started partying with her and joining her in her calendar of near-constant social outings. Attempting to soothe the growing pain and emptiness I felt in absence of a deeper emotional connection, my subconscious continued to rely on its old, ingrained habits as I stayed busy and used substances to distract myself. Though Sara never expressed displeasure with our relationship, she was frequently mean when she drank, which was often. Just as I had done with Sofia, though, I rationalized Sara's behavior by telling myself that she had just had too much to drink or didn't really mean what she was saying or doing. In those moments, I continued to suppress my emotions to try to calm or please her, putting her feelings before my own. As the months turned into years together, I began to feel the same resentment that I had felt with Sofia. Once again, I blamed Sara for not giving me enough attention and not caring about my feelings. Eventually the relationship ended.

After Sara and I broke up, I moved into a three-bedroom apartment with a roommate named Vivienne, who was older than me. Immediately, Vivienne seemed more mature than the other women I had known, and we quickly became friends and then lovers. I was attracted to her independence and emotional self-sufficiency, and we quickly bonded over similar tastes and common interests. Over time, we started sharing our worries and fears with each other deepening our connection.

Like Sofia, Vivienne had grown up in a stressful and unstable home, and she had moved out on her own when she was still a teenager. Priding herself on never needing anyone she insisted from the onset of our relationship that she wasn't the "marrying type." So, when she started talking about marrying me a few years later, I felt extremely special: *She doesn't want to marry, but she wants to marry me!* I gushed privately. We hopped a flight to Connecticut, where our same-sex partnership was legal at the time, and within a year, we moved back to my hometown as a married couple.

Shortly after we moved, my perspective on romantic relationships began to shift. Having just graduated with a doctorate in psychology from the New School for Social Research, I started to work toward my licensing hours, the hands-on training all psychologists need to complete before they can practice privately. The training was full-time and intense. For two years, I attended individual and group sessions in psychoanalysis, a branch of psychology that examines the different ways our unconscious mind drives our thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and relationship dynamics.

Suddenly I found myself immersed in a percolator of self-analysis and evaluation. During individual sessions, I began to explore my subconscious thoughts and feelings—something I had never done before—and spent group sessions evaluating how I interacted with the other students in the class. Within weeks, I realized that there was an immense emotional rift between Vivienne and me; we never talked about our deeper feelings or actual relationship dynamics, but now there I was, discussing both with total strangers. I started to think that I wasn't happy in the marriage and that the relationship didn't provide the emotional connection I so deeply craved.

In our new city, we didn't have as big a circle of friends as we'd had before, which narrowed our world to just the two of us. Without the distractions of social outings, the dynamics of our relationship became more evident, coming to the surface like air bubbles escaping from someone underwater who's held their breath far too long.

I started to regularly complain to Vivienne that I didn't feel connected

and didn't think our relationship had the emotional depth I wanted and needed. I blamed her for being too independent and told her that she was the reason we couldn't connect on a deeper level, which sent us into cycles of heated conflict. Looking back on it all now, I cringe. Just as in my prior relationships, I failed to recognize the role I was playing in keeping our relationship on an unsatisfyingly superficial level. Because I was so largely detached from my emotions, I couldn't honor my emotions. I didn't even know what my emotions were.

As I became unhappier, Vivienne began to fight harder for our marriage. Her determination frightened me, and when I realized that I wanted a divorce, I was petrified: for the first time in my life, I felt a strong desire that directly opposed the wishes of someone I deeply cared for. I struggled for months to find a way to ask her for a divorce, trying instead to push her away with my actions. When I finally voiced my true feelings, I felt terrified and empowered at the same time: it was the first time in any relationship that I had prioritized my own desires over someone else's.

My divorce marked the first time I began to see the active role I was playing in creating the relationship dynamics that didn't serve me or those around me. On the surface, my subconscious habits of ignoring my needs, suppressing my feelings, and putting others' wants or needs before my own had led me to believe that I was a "good" and "selfless" person. But those habits weren't making me or anyone else happy. In reality, because I hardly ever expressed my true feelings, many of which I didn't even allow myself to have, I only increased my emotional distance from others. Putting others before myself wasn't selfless; it was self-abandonment. Deeply unsatisfied, I often felt agitated or upset, and I began to pick fights and cause arguments about daily issues, which had increased the feelings of resentment between Vivienne and me.

At the time, I couldn't see my own role in these repeated conflicts because my relationship habits had been ingrained in my subconscious since childhood; they were part of my instinctual way of relating to or interacting and connecting with others. I had developed and relied on those habits in my very first relationships: the ones I'd had with my family.

YOUR EARLIEST RELATIONSHIPS SHAPE YOUR FUTURE

From the outside looking in, you might think I had grown up in a happy and close family. I would have told you the same when I was a child, as well as for most of my adult life. I always had enough to eat; I was

encouraged to excel in school and sports; and I didn't experience any physical or sexual abuse. But as I've since learned, the absence of obvious abuse doesn't negate the possibility of emotional neglect and related attachment trauma.

As a child, I was surrounded by stress and illness. My older sister experienced life-threatening health crises in her childhood, and for years my mom suffered her own chronic health and pain issues, which were never openly acknowledged in my family. Similarly, we didn't talk about our feelings, whether we were happy or sad, or directly confront one another if we felt hurt or angry. We were relatively happy after all, right? Why would we ever need to discuss or confront anything?

Instead of connecting on an emotional level, I bonded with my parents and sister through stress and anxiety. Over and over again, when another health crisis or daily stress arose, our focus as a family would align in shared worry until the issue resolved. Everyone would run to care for the "urgent" needs of the stressed, sick, or otherwise upset family member, regularly neglecting their own needs in the process.

Exposed to the consistent repetition of those patterns, I learned over time that my needs and feelings weren't as important as the needs and feelings of those around me. While I *knew* my family loved and cared for me, I never truly *felt* that love or consideration in an emotional sense. When I got upset, as all children do, I needed to be listened to and emotionally soothed or comforted. Since my parents' attention was usually unavailable and consumed by the current crisis, I began to limit how much I shared with them, fearing that I would add to the family's already overwhelming stress level. Eventually, I learned not to acknowledge having needs at all—or at least, I tried not to show my vulnerability in order to avoid the possibility of feeling disappointed if no one was there to support me. To keep myself safe, I became detached, suppressing my feelings and walling myself off from my emotional world. Those coping strategies became my defensive shield, which I instinctively used to try to protect myself from feeling hurt in relationships for years to come.

My story is, of course, my own, and yours will be different. Regardless of our unique individual journeys, our earliest attachments impact the habits we bring into our adult relationships, especially our romantic ones. Although these habits rarely serve our best interests today, they feel familiar, comfortable, and therefore safe. Because these habits are stored in our subconscious mind and repeated automatically on a daily basis, they are often difficult for us to observe, and we often struggle to consciously see the active role we play in our relationships.

We can learn, however, how to witness our conditioning and create new habits that will better meet the needs we have today. As we come to see and understand that our conditioning is a remnant of our past experiences, we can relieve ourselves of the shame we may feel as a result of our often dysfunctional relational habits. When we recognize and accept the active role we play, we can harness our ability and power to change our relationship dynamics. Because, ultimately, we will need to change the way we show up in our relationships if we want those relationships to change.

After I realized that the common thread in all my dysfunctional relationship patterns was *me*, I empowered myself to begin to shift my dynamics with others. I started to see how I only felt comfortable when I sacrificed my needs in order to avoid the discomfort I felt when disappointing others. I didn't have or set clear boundaries—or any boundaries at all. Disconnected from my authentic needs and desires and constantly overstepping my limits, I ended up feeling emotionally distant and resentful while I continued to hold others responsible, always leaving relationships in search of a more “perfect” partner. Unaware of my own subconscious habits, I blamed others for our relational issues and expected them to change without addressing my own role in creating my continued circumstances.

Only when I started to more honestly witness myself did my relationships begin to evolve. I realized that finding or maintaining healthy relationships would mean making myself emotionally healthy, too. I'd have to do something that felt very uncomfortable at first. I'd have to learn how to honor my own needs and desires by creating new boundaries with others and learning how to be patient and compassionate with myself along the way.

UNDERSTANDING HOW EARLY CHILDHOOD TRAUMA AFFECTS YOU

The truth is, when it comes to our relationships, we repeat what we experienced or learned. So if we grew up in a stressful or chaotic environment, didn't witness healthy habits, or were emotionally neglected or ignored, we repeat the same dynamic as adults in our relationships with others. Even though we may not be aware of it, our past, especially our attachments with our parent-figures, is wired into our mind and body, where it drives us to instinctively seek out and re-create the same kind of relationships as adults. These are our *trauma bonds*, our conditioned patterns of relating to others in a way that mirrors or reenacts our earliest

attachments with parent-figures.

Before we dive deeper, it'll be helpful to define a few concepts that we'll explore throughout this book.

Let's start with the term *trauma*. When most people hear the word, they often immediately think of the suffering an individual might experience in the wake of a catastrophic or violent event, like a natural disaster, war, rape, incest, or abuse.

Though trauma is certainly caused by all these incidents, it also results from any stress that exceeds our ability to emotionally process the experience causing continued dysregulation to our body's nervous system. This includes the overwhelming stress that occurs when we don't have the things we need to feel safe and secure, including emotional support. When we don't consistently feel safe and secure or when we fear that those whom we rely on for our survival won't consistently be available to us, we experience a lack of certainty and control. This activates our body's stress circuit, otherwise known as the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis (we'll talk more about that [here](#))¹, which impacts our body's ability to cope with our current circumstances.

Continual shaming of our emotions, denial of our experiences or reality, or emotional abandonment or neglect can all activate our body's stress circuit and create traumatic emotional overwhelm. This impact can occur in a single moment (which is often the case in some of the events listed above), or it can accumulate slowly over time, building up inside us, often without our conscious knowledge. When we aren't able to process our emotional responses, they become imprinted in our mind and body, staying with us and ultimately influencing our thoughts, feelings, and reactions for years to come.

In addition to the stress we experience within our homes, the environmental stress of systemic, cultural, or collective trauma affects a large majority of us keeping us disconnected from the supportive relationships we need for emotional safety and security. Collective trauma occurs when a single event or series of events—such as a natural disaster, financial insecurity, war, colonization/systemic inequities, gender/cultural oppression, or pandemics—create a lack of safety for a group of people, a community, a country, or the greater world. Collective trauma impacts the way people relate to themselves and others, affecting everyone differently, based on our conditioning and intergenerationally modeled coping skills.

Just as we all have unique emotional experiences, we all have different reactive patterns and learned coping strategies based on our specific childhood conditioning, even if we can't consciously recall what happened

to us as children. If you've ever participated in traditional therapy or read about behavioral science, you're likely familiar with the concept of *conditioning*, the process by which the beliefs, behaviors, and habits that we learn through a repetition of experiences are stored in our subconscious mind, where they drive our automatic reactions, impulses, and motivations.

Though we can certainly create new habits by making new choices and having new experiences as adults, most of our conditioning occurs when we're young children and dependent on our relationships with our parent-figures. The term *parent-figures* that you'll see throughout this book refers to the people who were primarily responsible for meeting our physical and emotional needs as young children. For most of us, our parent-figures were our biological mother, father, or both, although the term can include grandparents, stepparents, foster parents, siblings, nurses, professional caregivers, or any other primary caretakers in childhood.

As children, no matter who our parent-figures were or whether we think we had a "good" or "bad" relationship with them, we instinctively looked to them for guidance, absorbing information about ourselves and our world. From them, we learned how to express (or suppress) our emotions, how to feel about and treat our body, how to fit in or be socially accepted (i.e., what behaviors were right and wrong), and how to relate to and interact with others. We learned those habits and beliefs by observing those around us, as well as by mirroring what they did.

All young children imitate their parent-figures. You've likely seen this if you've ever watched an infant smile or stick out their tongue in response to their mother or father doing the same. Similarly, young children copy most of what they see their parent-figures do. If our parent-figures shamed or stifled their own emotions, we may have learned to do the same thing. If they criticized their bodies or the physical features of others, we may have learned to criticize or shame these aspects of ourselves. If they reacted to a stressful or upsetting situation by yelling and screaming, we may do the same. If they coped with stressful or upsetting experiences by shutting down and ignoring others, we may have learned to similarly emotionally detach.

To learn how to navigate our emotional world, we first need to feel safe and secure enough to express what we're really thinking and feeling to those around us. Our ability to do this as adults is highly influenced by how we regularly felt in our earliest relationships. The concept of *attachment theory*, which was first developed by the psychoanalyst John Bowlby in 1952, explains that the safety and security of our relationship