


THE Hold Me  
*Tight*



WORKBOOK

A COUPLE'S GUIDE  
FOR A LIFETIME OF LOVE

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Dr. Sue Johnson

Author of the million-copy bestseller *Hold Me Tight*



THE  
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A COUPLE'S GUIDE FOR  
A LIFETIME OF LOVE

Dr. Sue Johnson



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**LITTLE,  
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## INTRODUCTION

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### *Your Love Can Make Sense Again*

Across human history, the consensus has generally been that romantic love is, and always will be, a mystery — something by its very nature unknowable. Perhaps because love seems so baffling and unruly, our culture appears to be losing all faith in the viability of stable romantic partnerships. Skepticism and pessimism regarding long-term love have always been with us. But now I think we can agree that those feelings have been compounded by a new kind of stress — one we’ve never known before now — the stress of the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath, a world in a state of flux.

The time of lockdown and recovery has affected relationships of all kinds. For some couples, it was a time of coming together, regrouping, and reconnection. For others, close confinement, uncertainty, and managing virtual work and school put a strain on already fragile bonds.

As a clinical psychologist, couples therapist, and relationship researcher, I have grown increasingly alarmed and frustrated by where we are and where we seem to be going. I attend conferences that are led by “gurus” who preach new and shiny ideas about how we work through and resolve issues in coupledness — yet none are rooted in science and biology. For the past forty-plus years, I’ve been in search of empirical evidence regarding the way we form attachments, what makes us feel secure, and how to bridge the gap of couples’ varying attachment needs and fears. I have always believed that love is exquisitely logical and understandable, adaptive and functional. Even

better, it is malleable, reparable, and durable. This belief in the science of love was what inspired me to create Emotionally Focused Therapy – EFT – which is at the center of my 2008 book, *Hold Me Tight: Seven Conversations for a Lifetime of Love*.

I realize that for couples in distressed love relationships, science is the last thing on their minds. It is not the path they think to take to return to their healthy state of secure attachment and bonding with one another. But to echo a popular recent catchphrase, we need to believe the science.

Consider the brain scan study done with psychologist Jim Coan from the University of Virginia: Women patients having an fMRI brain scan were told that when a little red light in the machine came on, they might receive a small electric shock – or they might not. As they anticipated this potential shock, their partners were prompted to hold their hands and speak words of compassion and love to them. Coan found that encouraging words and touch from a loved one completely changed how their brain responded to the threat of shock – and to the shock itself. Patients registered less stress and felt less pain.

Based on what this experiment and hundreds of other studies like it show, being bonded with a loved one acts as a buffer to pain and distress. So it is precisely this time in our history when romantic love should be more important than ever. The aftermath of the pandemic has led to an epidemic of loneliness, anxiety, and depression. Today, adult partnerships are often the only real human ties we can count on in our virtual and frenetically multitasking world. Moreover, we seem, in so many ways, to be working actively against our desire for love and commitment. Our society exalts emotional independence, and we're constantly exhorted to love ourselves first and foremost. It's a growing trend that worries me, and in the past few years, I've felt the call to offer couples an additional resource that can help them rediscover one another and strengthen their bond.

I also have become even more firm in my belief in EFT's universality, and how the research on its effectiveness proves that we are more alike than different. Over the decades, I've seen firsthand how EFT has helped couples,

no matter their race, ethnicity, faith, sexual orientation, gender identity, or political affiliation. I've heard from couples all around the world, from a tapestry of experiences and worldviews: from Muslim couples in Egypt to Evangelicals in the Southern U.S.; white, Black, cisgender, and queer. Whatever our differences, it's clear that every human being is wired for connection — we all share common needs to be seen, valued, and supported by others. Now more than ever, that's a truth we need to be reminded of.

## WHY A WORKBOOK? WHY NOW?

Context, practice, process. These are the ways we learn, teach, grow, and expand ourselves. Without these things, we just hear words, lectures are just moments of preachiness, and facts without stories are fast forgotten. In *Hold Me Tight* and my subsequent book *Love Sense*, I offered my lifetime of research, principles, and findings, along with case studies of dozens of couples who have benefited from EFT in their relationships. I combined and analyzed the clinical studies, laboratory experiments, and applied therapies of my own and of other scientists who have proven that love is our basic survival code — an essential task of our mammalian brain that compels us to read and respond to others. But just as a physical therapist would need to touch and prod your aching body to find out the source of your pain, EFT can only heal a distressed couple when their relationship can be touched and manipulated, tested and experienced. This workbook is based on my book *Hold Me Tight: Seven Conversations for a Lifetime of Love*, which has been translated into twenty-four languages and has sold more than one million copies. I also developed the Hold Me Tight® Relationship Education Program based on the book, which has also been translated into a variety of languages and is facilitated in many countries across countless cultures. Having been adapted for specific groups such as Christian couples, families with teens and with adult children, and couples facing cardiac disease, the

program is also now available in an online format. This workbook takes the Hold Me Tight® theories and shows you how to apply them to *your* specific relationship, to use on an everyday basis. You provide the context and I'll lead you through the practice and process.

## WHAT TO EXPECT FROM EFT AND THIS WORKBOOK

Love relationships are not bargains; they are emotional bonds based on our innate need for safe and emotional connection. You can't bargain for compassion, for connection. These are not intellectual reactions; they are *emotional* responses. Emotionally Focused Therapy teaches couples to recognize their emotional rhythms and patterns in the dance of romantic love. Before we enter romantic relationships, this biological need for emotional attachment was satisfied (appropriately or not) by our parents. EFT is based on the notion that the attachment bond happens between adults, too. This was a breakthrough when it came to understanding partners' roles in their love relationships, and subsequently, their roles in the breakdown of the trust that is meant to bond them.

So forget what other therapies say to do, such as learning how to argue better, analyzing your childhood, making grand romantic gestures, or experimenting with new sexual positions. Instead, recognize and admit that you are emotionally attached to and dependent on your partner in much the same way that a child is dependent on a parent for nurturing, soothing, and protection. Partners need to pinpoint and share their vulnerabilities and needs in positive ways that lead to bonding moments. This is especially true given that your partner *will* trigger these vulnerabilities — we are all so fearful of rejection and abandonment. A successful couple must learn how to deal with these sensitivities in ways that build trust and intimacy.

EFT and the exercises in this workbook focus on creating and strengthening the emotional bond between partners by identifying and

transforming the key moments that foster a loving adult relationship: being open, attuned, and responsive to one another.

This workbook is for *all* couples — *all* partners seeking a lifetime of love in a partnership of their design. It is for people from all walks of life, of all lifestyles, because everyone on this planet has the same longing for connection.

Through exercises and discussions based on the seven conversations featured in *Hold Me Tight*, you will capture the defining moments in your love relationship and learn how to shape these moments to create a secure and lasting bond. *Hold Me Tight* is not required reading to be able to use this workbook. If you have read the book, you will find this additional material fortifying and the exercises novel. If you are diving right into the workbook without having read the book, rest assured that the exercises are supported by some foundational material and will be self-explanatory and fulfilling to complete.

THE GOALS AS YOU MOVE THROUGH THIS WORKBOOK ARE TO:

- Better understand romantic love — the pivotal moves and moments that define a relationship and can either lead to the mountaintop or take you down the rabbit hole.
- Better understand your partner's and your own emotional responses and needs.
- Be able to describe and control negative interactions and spirals that create pain and distance.
- Be able to shape positive moments of reaching and responding that create a secure bond.

While the success of EFT is enjoyed by couples practicing it together, it's important to understand attachment on an individual personal level, which is why you'll find some exercises designed to be done alone, some introspective, others meditative. You'll find true or false and fill-in-the-blank worksheets, journal prompts, checklists, and sample dialogues to help bring

your EFT experience to life. Relax with it and have fun. There are no right or wrong answers.

## SOME PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS ON HOW TO USE THIS WORKBOOK

You can choose to engage in the conversations in different ways. For example, you may want to do one conversation per day, one per week, or designate a weekend when you will be able to break from the day-to-day and commit to your introspection and to one another. I don't recommend cramming. One per week will give you an opportunity to get acquainted with the goals of each conversation and the methods within them, and to check in with yourself and one another without feeling pressured to move on. You may even feel that you need to spend some more time on a particular conversation.

The conversations are designed to be done in succession, so I do not recommend jumping around. However, you may want to alter the sequence or skip a conversation if you both do not think it's relevant to your relationship.

The preferred way to do the work is to do it together and share answers with one another. There may be times, however, when you wish to do some exercise by yourself. That is okay, too. As stated already, some exercises are purposely solo projects. You may want to photocopy or scan any pages that you want to do by yourself and place them in a binder for safekeeping.

For couples who are comfortable sharing, you may want to fill in the exercises using different colored pencils or alternate who answers first. You will find a rhythm that works for you. This should not be a tense experience. Consider it a journey of discovering yourself (perhaps for the first time) and rediscovering your relationship.

I know it can be hard to *begin* the work of love and loving. But what I know is this: The work is well worth it. Our need for others to come close when we call — to offer us safe haven — is absolute, but not absolutely given. We must work at it, and you have already begun by simply picking up this workbook and discussing together the role it can play in your relationship. It may not lead to a perfect love (because there is no such thing), but it will lead to a more present love — one that is secure, deep, and lasting.



## BEFORE THE CONVERSATIONS

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### *Our Emotional Responses and the Language of Attachment*

*Love* may be the most used and the most potent word in every language spoken around the world. It is the pinnacle of evolution, the most compelling survival mechanism of the human species. Not because it induces us to mate and reproduce, but because love drives us to bond emotionally with a precious few others who offer us refuge from the storms of life. Love is our bulwark, designed to provide emotional protection so we can cope with the ups and downs of existence.

This is the drive to emotionally attach — to find someone to whom we can say, “Hold me tight.” Emotional connection, a felt sense of closeness, is biologically coded as a safety cue in our genes, brains, and bodies. It is as basic to life, health, and happiness as the drives for food, shelter, or sex. We need emotional attachments with a few irreplaceable others to be physically and mentally healthy — to survive. Secure connection to a loved one is empowering. It anchors us in feelings of safety and security. Science from all fields tells us very clearly that we are not only social animals, but animals who need a special kind of close connection with others. It’s not just whether or not we have close relationships in our lives — the quality of these relationships matters, too. Negative relationships undermine our health. When we are disconnected emotionally from our partners, we don’t feel emotionally safe. In a secure bond, we are accessible and responsive. Secure

attachment and bonding make us feel safe, while insecure attachment makes us afraid. Just as connection and protection act as signals that tell us we are safe, isolation and emotional separation from our partners are danger cues.

We all experience fear when we have disagreements or arguments with our partner. But for those of us with secure bonds, it is a momentary blip. The fear is quickly and easily tamped down as we realize that there is no real threat or that our partner will reassure us if we ask. For those of us with weaker or fraying bonds, the fear can be overwhelming. We are swamped by what neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp calls *primal panic*. Then we generally do one of two things: We either become *demanding* and clingy in an effort to draw comfort and reassurance from our partner, or we *withdraw* and detach in an attempt to soothe and protect ourselves. No matter the exact words, what we're really saying in those reactions is, "Notice me. Be with me. I need you," or "I won't let you hurt me. I will chill out, try to stay in control."

The exercises in this section will help you discover not just your level of fear of losing trust and attachment, that safe and emotional connection we are wired to seek, but also the manner in which you act out in the face of what you feel is threatening your bond. This is an important step to undergo before the conversations begin, because before you can communicate effectively with your partner and your partner with you, it is necessary to find clarity within oneself regarding your own attachment language in the form of your needs, patterns, and behaviors. Only then can accountability come into play, a key driver to hearing and answering with compassion one another's calls for attention and connection. When you know how to speak the language of attachment, you can give clear messages about what you need and how much you care.

## DEMAND AND WITHDRAW: IDENTIFYING YOUR PRIMAL PANIC

Attachment theory teaches us that our loved one is our shelter in life. When that person is emotionally unavailable or unresponsive, we face being out in the cold, alone and helpless. We are assailed by emotions — anger, sadness, hurt, and, above all, fear. This is not surprising when we remember that fear is our built-in alarm system; the bells go off when our survival is threatened. Losing connection with our loved one jeopardizes our sense of security, triggering the amygdala, the part of the brain that senses fear. We don't think; we feel, we act. At this point, two responses typically occur: We *demand* or we *withdraw*.

The strategies for dealing with the fear of losing connection are unconscious, and they might work, at least in the beginning. But as distressed partners resort to them more and more, they set up vicious spirals of insecurity that only push them further and further apart. More and more interactions occur in which neither partner feels safe, both become defensive, and each is left assuming the very worst about one another and their relationship. It's a dance, a delicate one, in which we step together in sync or step on one another's toes in a choreography of panic and fear. How we each emotionally respond — demand, withdraw, or any combination of the two — indicates to us how beautiful (or not) our dance is.

Before we can name the dance you are in together, see if you can identify your individual steps using this introspective journal exercise.

### **LET'S GET INTROSPECTIVE: Journal Exercise**

Our fears are wired into our brains. Everyone has them. Can you pinpoint or identify your fears? Listen to the feelings you have, and find, at the core, any fear or anxiety that involves being rejected or abandoned by your partner. To help you get in touch with your internal experience, here are a few of the common feelings or qualities of

demanders and withdrawers. Check off the ones you resonate with.

DEMANDERS OFTEN FEEL:

- Frightened of their aloneness; scared they're not wanted
- Afraid of being abandoned
- Frightened of their feelings of hurt
- Scared of being invisible

WITHDRAWERS OFTEN FEEL:

- Frightened of rejection
- Scared of their experience of disappointing their partner — coming up short
- Afraid of failure
- Overwhelmed
- Numbed or frozen with fear
- Afraid of being judged or criticized

Reflect on what scares you most.

PARTNER 1: