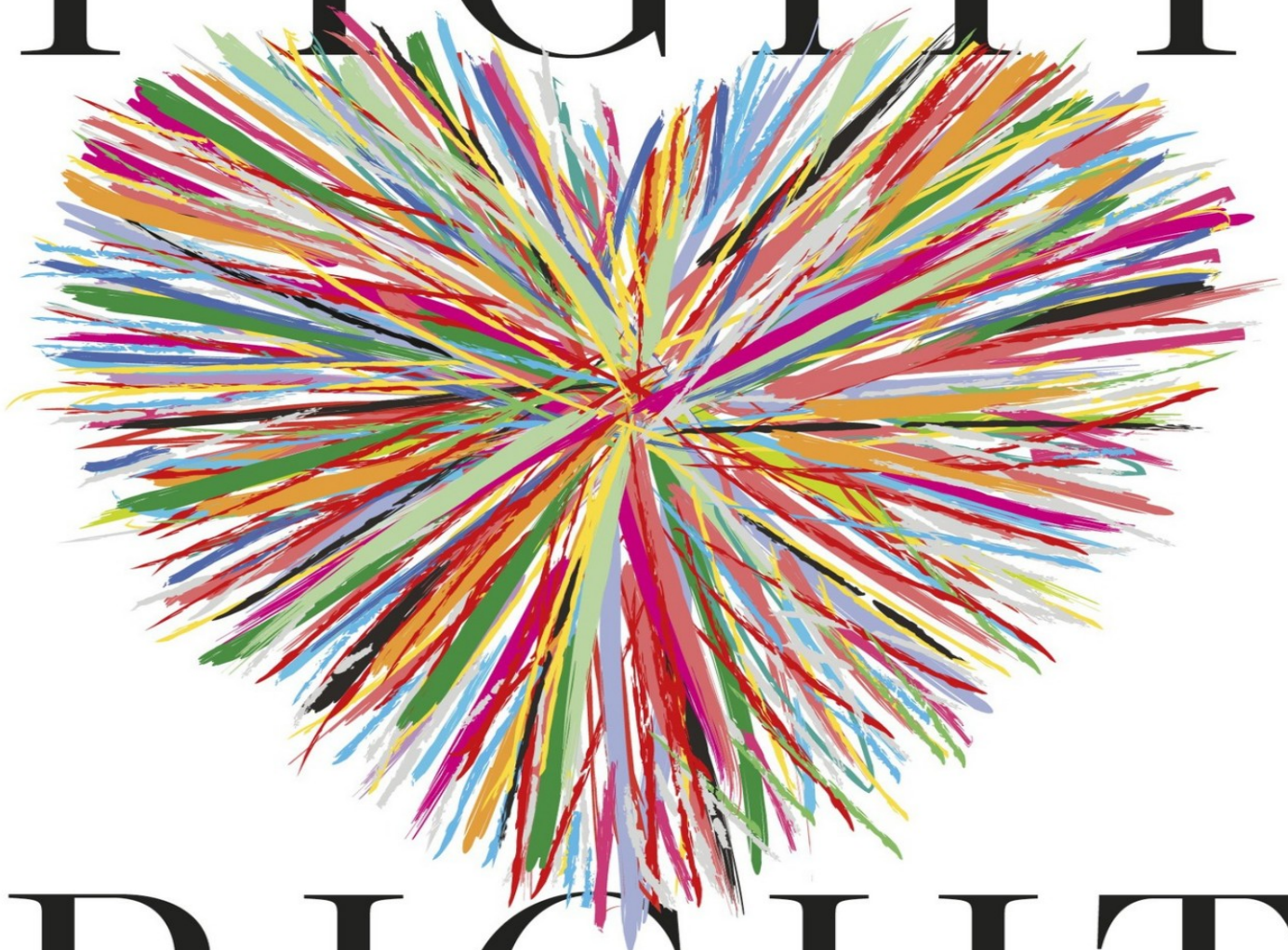
How Successful Couples Turn Conflict Into Connection

FIGHT RIGHT



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The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work and *Eight Dates*

Fight Right

How Successful Couples Turn Conflict Into Connection

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

What Are We Fighting For?

They were perfectly matched in so many ways. She was a young lawyer (land use law) and so was he (media rights). They were both Midwest transplants to Seattle. They were busy and ambitious, and loved to pack their free time with new experiences. When they first met, they'd venture out someplace new every weekend. They hopped in the car and drove up to Vancouver for the weekend to wander the open-air market or pop in for some late-night sushi. They headed off into the mountains for an overnight camping trip. Or they grabbed last-minute tickets to a play. They both worked long hours but loved to be spontaneous in their time off.

There was just one tiny problem. She wanted a puppy. He didn't.

A year later, there was indeed a puppy—one that had grown into a big, happy, playful dog. But the marriage was ending. Divorce papers were signed. The two moved out of the house they'd bought together before they got married, the one they came home to the night of their wedding, still shaking the sparkly confetti the guests had tossed out of their hair and clothes, laughing. They split up all their furniture, books, pots and pans. She, of course, took the dog.

How did a *puppy* break up this marriage?

The fight started out simply: with a difference of opinion. He thought dogs were too much responsibility, too much work, too much commitment. You couldn't leave a dog home for very long—you couldn't even go away for the day. And dogs could get expensive. Didn't they want to use their extra money in other ways? Hadn't they talked about traveling?

But his job required frequent business trips, and he was gone a lot, leaving her alone in the house, where she worked long hours from home. She felt lonely, and when he was away overnight, she got spooked. They hadn't really been traveling like they'd once talked about—why *not* get a puppy, a buddy for her to keep her company? She imagined the dog accompanying them on weekend hikes, riding in the car with its head out the window. It was nice to picture them as a threesome: a couple with their dog.

They weren't getting anywhere. They just kept looping around inside the same argument, with no resolution. His concerns about time, money, and commitment seemed so overblown—if he would just *try* it, she was sure, he'd see it wasn't that much work! So, she decided: she would just get a puppy and give it to him as a gift. Once there was a real, live, adorable fuzzball in his lap, how could he resist? He'd come around.

He did not come around.

The conflict escalated. He was upset that she'd ignored him and done what she wanted to. She was upset that he continued to dig his heels in, even after she'd told him how important this was to her. To him, the puppy in the house was a constant reminder of how she'd completely disregarded how he felt and what was important to him. To her, his refusal to accept the dog felt like a rejection of her and her needs. Every little thing about the dog sparked a fight: Who would take him out. The vet bill. Having to add his food to the grocery list. Worse, they were fighting about other stuff now too—*more than they ever had before*.

She started to notice how little he did around the house. Okay, fine, she thought, she'd do most of the dog stuff—it had been her idea. But he seemed to leave the rest of the housework to her too. Either he didn't care, or he just expected it—is that what it would be like, she wondered, if they had a baby?

For his part, the way she brought stuff up grated on him. She never just asked for help. She'd say, "I guess I'm doing the dishes again tonight," and some little flash of anger inside him would make him snap, "Yeah, I guess so." Later, feeling bad, he'd try to do more—he'd put a few loads of laundry through, clean the bathroom—but she never noticed.

They were spending less and less time together. And one Friday afternoon, when he reminded her that he was going away for the weekend on a camping trip with an old high school buddy, she felt overwhelmed by anger and sadness.

"Oh, so you're just going to take off," she said, suddenly on the verge of tears, "and I can stay home with this dog you never wanted."

Blindsided, he blew up. "What is the matter with you?" he shouted. "I've had this trip planned for months! It has nothing to do with the stupid dog!"

There was fuel behind this fight, just under the surface, like underground oil feeding a fire: each of them had a hidden agenda.

His hidden agenda: he wanted freedom and adventure.

Her hidden agenda: she wanted a family.

But they barely acknowledged these deeper truths to themselves, much less to each other.

They retreated further and further from each other, each digging into his or her own separate foxhole, from which they lobbed accusations and criticisms like grenades. One day, she caught a bad cold and couldn't take the dog out—he had to do it. He was filled with resentment every time he had to stop doing something important to clip the leash on—he hadn't signed up for this! On another day, the puppy made his own sign of protest: he did his little dump right under the husband's desk, where he worked when he was home.

He said he wasn't cleaning it up.

She said she wasn't cleaning it up.

That tiny pile of poo marked the line nobody would cross—to cross it would be to admit defeat, to let the other side win.

When they sold the house in the divorce, they had a cleaning service come in. The cleaners moved from room to room, washing away all the evidence of this couple's life together—their fingerprints and cooking spices, dust and left-behind papers—to make the space spotless for the prospective buyers who would be coming through, imagining themselves living there instead. And then they came to the desk.

Do you know what happens when you leave dog poop for a long time?

It turns into a hard, white lump.

Yes, the punchline of this story is…*mummified dog poop*. And we're sorry! But we're telling you this story because it's so universal: every couple has some small disagreement that won't go away, snowballs, and turns into a huge blockage. And it seems so trivial! It's easy to hear this story and think: What a terrible reason to break up a good marriage—over a *puppy*?

Well, the fight wasn't really about the puppy. Or the poop. The puppy represented major life philosophies for each person. When they fought about taking the dog out, or the vet bill, or who should perform the errand of shopping for dog food, they weren't really fighting about those things. They were fighting about their values, their dreams, their vision of what they wanted out of marriage and out of life. They were fighting about some really foundational stuff—stuff that would have been good for them to dig into and might even have saved their marriage if they had. But they never got there. They never really figured out what they were actually fighting about or how to talk to each other about it. Their fights became destructive, and eventually that strong relationship they'd once had splintered apart.

This was a long time ago, before John started his work studying couples. He didn't fully understand the depths of their conflict until much later, when his research taught him more about the science of relationships. In the end, he wasn't able to help them. They did unfortunately split up. But since then, we have helped thousands of other couples who were just as gridlocked, just as stuck, just as desperately out of sync.

In writing this book, we thought about that long-ago couple a lot. We wish we'd known then what we know now, with fifty years of research under

our belts. If we could go back in time, this is the book we would write for them.

We Need to Fix the Way We Fight

It's never been easy to partner up with someone for the long haul and gracefully navigate all the ups and downs that come with that kind of commitment. We've been working with couples for decades, and we'll tell you this: people have always sought help in this arena. But the last several years have been unusually excruciating for many of the couples we see.

Couples have been dealing with enormous levels of stress and intensity. For a long stretch of the COVID-19 pandemic, many people were homebound, or even if not, they were cut off from the normal routines, recreational outlets, and social connections that once sustained them. Boundaries between work and home dissolved as the bedroom became the workplace. We've long studied the ways couples carry stress home from work—now there was even less distance to carry it. It was all there, overlapping in the same space. Couples struggled to figure out finances, childcare, work schedules. Many clashed over how to handle pandemic safety recommendations. Was it necessary to fold family and friends into your bubble? Or was it not worth the risk? A spouse feeling desperate for community and connection partnered with one experiencing deep anxiety over exposure was often a recipe for destructive and polarizing conflict.

For many, the home, which may once have been a refuge, became a kind of crucible where every small issue was magnified and every hairline fracture split into a painful crack.

Data is still emerging from this period, but preliminary observations suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic drove couples to extremes: couples who were doing well pre-pandemic largely did all right. But couples who had some issues they were working on—and let's be real, that's a lot of us[1]—did

much worse. Fault lines in the relationship, which under normal circumstances might have been more easily repaired, became critical.

We may not even have a full picture of how much people are struggling. Researchers in this field often conduct surveys to assess marital satisfaction, but these surveys can be biased. When people are really having trouble, they hang up when the interviewer calls. They don't want to talk about it. So we may be missing information from couples in crisis.

For many of us, the last few years have been a period of turmoil and questioning. People have been reevaluating their priorities and how they allocate their time and resources. Couples may be wondering: Do we still share the same goals? Is all this friction a sign that we weren't meant to be together? Are we actually compatible?

But here's the thing. Pandemic or no pandemic, couples have always gone through these kinds of "pressure cooker" times. Times when things, for whatever reason, get especially hard. When every little thing seems to spark a fight. When the fights feel awful. When you say things you regret. When you wish you could have a do-over.

No matter what phase you and your partner are in, whether you're in a bad patch or a great patch, whether your love is young or decades old, there's one thing for sure: you don't want to leave any "poop under the desk" in your relationship.

No Conflict Is Not the Answer

Let's get one thing out of the way: We're not going to teach you how to *not* fight, ever. It might sound nice—a life with no conflict? Bliss! But it's probably not in your best interests. Intimacy inevitably creates conflict.

Take another couple we worked with. According to these two, they didn't fight at all. This couple tended to avoid hot-button issues—they didn't want to hurt feelings or get embroiled in a tough discussion. What was the point, they figured, when such discussions never seemed to end with any kind of

solution to the problem? To them, it seemed better to just skirt around issues that they probably wouldn't be able to solve anyway and avoid all the stress and drama.

Seems reasonable. But by the time they were in our office, sitting side by side on the couch, we saw that emotionally they were miles apart. Yes, they'd been polite to each other—there were no raised voices in that household. There were no slammed doors, no snapping in frustration, no small pile of dog poo petrifying under a desk. But they'd also, at some point, lost track of each other.

When they came to see us, we had them do an activity together that we often do with couples, where each person takes stock of what they know about their partner. Questions such as: *Who are your partner's best friends? What are some stresses your partner is facing right now? What are some of your partner's life dreams?* And so on.

As they each went down the list, it quickly became clear: they could barely answer any of them. And in a facilitated conversation, tensions and resentment slowly leaked out. At one point, the husband confessed something that had been bothering him for months but that he hadn't raised with his wife: that she'd gotten in the habit of going out for drinks with a work friend every Friday evening after work instead of coming straight home. It bothered him because they themselves hadn't gone out on any kind of date in…well, he couldn't remember the last time.

She was shocked. "But I asked you if you'd mind and you said 'no'!" she said. "Why didn't you just tell me?"

"Well," he replied, "I didn't want to fight."

Conflict is a natural part of every human relationship. And it's a *necessary* part of every human relationship. We tend to equate low levels of conflict with happiness, but that just isn't true. The absence of conflict doesn't indicate a strong relationship—in fact, it can lead to exactly the opposite.

A study run by the Divorce Mediation Research Project found that the vast majority of couples who divorced (80 percent) described growing apart

and losing a feeling of closeness as some of the main reasons for their split.[2] And our own research has found that couples can have happy, long-lasting unions across multiple types of "conflict styles." It's not *whether* there's conflict in your relationship that makes it or breaks it. Even the happiest couples fight. It's *how you do it*.[3]

Conflict is connection. It's how we figure out who we are, what we want, who our partners are and who they are becoming, and what *they* want. It's how we bridge our differences and find our similarities, our points of connection. The problem is, we haven't been taught how to do it right. We don't get "Fighting 101" in high school, before we launch into our first relationships. We go in blind. Our beliefs about and approach to conflict come from our childhood, our upbringing and culture, and our past relationships, and they shape the way we fight in ways we may not even be aware of. No matter how many relationships we might have had, or how many years we've been partnered, many of us are still feeling our way, trying to figure it out as we go—and we make a lot of mistakes.

> We stew on resentments for far too long before bringing up a problem.
>
> We start harshly, with criticism.
>
> We don't know how to self-soothe, and we get overwhelmed and flooded with emotion.
>
> We get defensive.
>
> We don't stop to figure out what the fight is really about.
>
> We miss or reject the attempts our partners make to repair and meet in the middle.

> We can't seem to compromise without feeling that we've given up too much.
>
> We apologize too fast because we just want the fight to be over.

And here's a huge one: we ignore past fights—or, as we like to call them, "regrettable incidents." We don't talk about them, heal from them, or learn from them, we just *move on*.

The end result: we hurt each other. We end up wounded by our conflicts and further apart from our partners than we were before. Or, afraid of being wounded, we avoid conflict entirely, and that gap grows even wider.

We're doing conflict all wrong, and we urgently need an intervention.

Uncovering the Science of Helping People "Fight Right"

We've been studying the science of love for a while now—five decades! John as a researcher and, originally, a mathematician; Julie as a practicing clinician. Our life's work has been developing interventions for couples who love each other and want to make it work but need real tools to keep their relationship thriving and on the right track. Often, it's not the relationship itself that's the problem—it's that you simply haven't been given the tools you need. Every relationship is distinct, its own unique, unrepeatable chemistry project of love and attraction, conflict and connection, personalities and pasts that mix, collide, and create something new. Our relationship is not exactly like yours or any other. But we've discovered that there *are* universal interventions that work across the board. And what we most want is to get these out into the world. We all need them.

It's been fifty years since John, along with his research partner, Robert Levenson, ran his first studies on couples, applying the scientific method, for the first time, to love. It's been three decades since we (John and Julie)

started working together, launching our "Love Lab" on the campus of the University of Washington in Seattle, where we ourselves met and fell in love. Like all couples, we too had to figure out our own conflict culture as we combined lives, married, and became parents. We had to work through the fights that started wrong, the ones that came out of nowhere, the ones that we seemed to have repeatedly about the same topics. And we did figure it out—we've gotten pretty good at fighting! We've found that you *can* fight with kindness, with love, and with peace at the end. But we had an edge: we had the Love Lab data.

Over three thousand couples have passed through the Love Lab, where our goal as researchers is to get as granular as possible about what specific behaviors lead to lasting love and happiness. We've had couples come in and stay for a weekend in a comfy, Airbnb-like apartment where we videotape their interactions and analyze them, then follow them for years, even decades, to track the status of their relationship as well as their happiness and satisfaction. And because it's so important to the health of a relationship, we've zeroed in on conflict and how partners interact before, during, and after fights. In one study, we had couples come in, sit down, and talk about one of their points of conflict, something they hadn't resolved yet. We recorded the interaction so that we could analyze those tapes down to the one one-hundredth of a second. We coded every gesture, sigh, smile, and pause; we coded body language, tone of voice. Nothing was too small or insignificant. We had participants hooked up to biofeedback devices so we could simultaneously track heart rate and breathing, those physiological markers that can tell us so much about how and why a conflict unfolds the way it does.

We did this with straight couples, gay and lesbian couples, couples with children and without, wealthy couples and couples in poverty, couples that came from various demographics across race and culture. And then, after getting this incredibly deep and thorough picture of each couple's interaction during one moment in time, we brought these couples back, year after year, and had them do it all again. Would they change? Would they stay together?

Would the union be a happy one? And when it came to conflict, we urgently wanted to know: Why were some couples broken apart by their conflicts? And how did others find peace? So, what did we find out?

We found that by observing and coding behaviors, we were able to predict, with over 90 percent accuracy, which couples would stay together,[4] even through ups and downs, and overall feel satisfied with their union (we called these the "masters" of love), and which would divorce, split, or stay together unhappily (the relationships that unfortunately turned out to be "disasters").

We found that the first *three minutes* of a fight can predict the status of the relationship six years later.[5]

We found that couples needed to hit a certain ratio of positive to negative interactions during conflict in order to stay in love for the long haul—and that *outside* of conflict, that ratio jumped even higher.[6]

We found that during conflict, couples who exhibited four key behaviors we call "the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" (criticism, contempt, stonewalling, and defensiveness) were likely to split an average of five years post-wedding.[7]

But we also found that "no conflict" wasn't the answer—because there was another wave of divorces, about a decade after that five-year mark. These couples did not have the Four Horsemen. What they had was nothing. No major conflict, sure. But also no humor. No question asking. No interest in one another.

We found that the masters of love didn't avoid conflict. But they had a certain interactive skill set that allowed them to go into conflict as a collaboration, not a war; and when someone got hurt (as can happen to the best of us in conflict), they knew how to repair.[8]

We found all this—and a *lot* more. And we're going to lay it all out for you in this book. We're going to start by talking about the context for our conflicts—the "setting" for them, if you will—which basically boils down to everything that leads up to a fight, starting with how we were raised, the culture we came from, and our meta-emotions, or "feelings about feelings,"

which shape our relationships in surprising ways. We'll talk about how the casual, day-to-day interactions with our partners set us up for certain dynamics within conflict. We'll talk about how mystifying it can be to figure out what we're *really* fighting about below the surface (in other words, you're not fighting about a puppy!). And then we'll take you through five fights that show clearly where we go wrong during conflict and how to do it right instead. Because we also found that people could turn relationships around—fight right, love better, and connect more deeply—when they were given practical, science-based interventions to use in conflict.

When our daughter was a little girl, she said something once that clarified our mission for us, as we thought about how and why we were doing the work we were doing with couples. She was asking us about our work at the Love Lab—maybe she was irritated that we were going to be gone for a weekend, running a couples' retreat, when she would have preferred we stay home and take her for a ferry ride and an ice cream cone. In any case, she pressed us on what *exactly* we were doing out there with all this "love science." We explained that we'd been working to isolate the most powerful interventions couples could do to stay in love and stay happy—if that's what they wanted—so we could share them with people. We told her that a lot of couples—ourselves included, at certain points—go through a time where they just can't seem to get along.

"What do you think happens," we asked her, "if mommies and daddies are fighting all the time?"

"Well," she said, "I guess there are no rainbows in the house."

We were both quiet. *No rainbows in the house*. This little four-year-old had just articulated the perfect way to think about the mission of our work. Storms will come—they inevitably do. But in the aftermath, there can be something beautiful. But you only get to the rainbow by going through a storm.

Conflict Is a Human Constant

We've written a lot about love: what makes it, what breaks it, what keeps it alive. But recently, we've felt an urgent push to home in on *how we do conflict*. One of the big reasons is that our conflicts aren't going anywhere. The data tells us that whatever you're fighting about, you'll very likely always be fighting about. Overwhelmingly, the conflicts we have with our partners are not fleeting, situational, or easily fixable—they are *perpetual*.

There are two basic types of fights that couples have: **solvable** and **perpetual**. Your solvable fights are the ones that have some kind of solution. They are fixable. Let's say you're feeling put upon because you always have to load the dishwasher after your partner makes a mess preparing dinner. You and your partner might fight about this once you finally reach your boiling point (side note: talking about these types of things *before* you hit critical mass is definitely something we'll be talking about!), but in the end you can probably find a solution of some kind: you'll swap dinner prep and cleanup, or he'll do the cleanup too while you take care of other household tasks that need doing. It's a logistical problem, one that can be figured out once everybody has a cool head.

Perpetual fights are different. These are the issues that don't go away. These are the things we end up fighting about time and time again, because they tap into some of the deeper differences between us: differences in personalities, priorities, values, and beliefs. And no matter how perfect someone is for you, *these are always going to be there*. We don't fall in love with our clones. In fact, we're often drawn to people who are very different from us in certain ways: people who don't replicate us but complement us.

It comes down to this: the vast majority of our problems—69 percent, to be precise—are perpetual, not solvable. That's a lot! That means that most of the time, whatever you and your partner are fighting about is not going to have a simple solution or any easy fix. And of these perpetual fights, 16 percent become gridlocked: the partners go round after round on the same topics, not only not getting anywhere, but causing more hurt, anger, and

distance. And this is why fixing the way we fight is such an urgent issue. *How we fight* is, as we've said, how we communicate and connect. But (and we feel comfortable saying this, because of the sheer number of couples we've studied and tracked over the years) *we are doing it wrong*. We're rushing in, wounding each other, missing opportunities, and then repeating the cycle again, the next time we fight about the same old thing.

This particular moment in human history also demands a different approach to conflict. Couples are more in distress now, in the COVID era, than ever before. Rates of domestic violence are up: in our international study with over forty thousand couples, we found that in couples seeking therapy, *60 percent* were experiencing some degree of domestic violence. And there were other concerning statistics. In these couples, we found high rates of anxiety (27 percent), depression (46 percent), and suicidality (29 percent). Almost a third of all couples were struggling with issues surrounding substance abuse. And 35 percent were dealing with the fallout of an affair.[9]

Our world seems to become more and more uncertain, and so often, we end up taking out our stress and anxiety on the people closest to us. When we fight with a partner, we aren't fighting in a vacuum. The world gets in. By the time we arrive at a point of conflict with a partner, we're often already carrying so much—our emotional bandwidth is short, we're cognitively overloaded, and that shrinks our capacity to be gentle with each other. We carry the residue of the day with us when we interact—the worries and the pressures that we've experienced and that weigh on us in ways we might not be aware of. And beyond the walls of our homes, conflict abounds. It proliferates in the virtual world, where the format of the interaction makes true understanding vanishingly rare. Our world has never been as polarized.

We are at a critical point in human history—a point where across the board, in every arena, we need to learn to set aside our defenses, open up, and fight for peace and understanding. This starts within the four walls of the home. Our romantic partnerships are the building blocks of our larger communities. They have ripple effects on our children, our friendships and