

ESSENTIAL
CONVERSATIONS
FOR A LIFETIME
OF LOVE

Eight Dates

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*To everyone working
to create a more loving world,
one relationship at a time.*



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Welcome to Date Night

The Conversations That Matter

Every great love story is a never-ending conversation. From the first tentative questions we ask as we get to know one another, to the nail-biting discussions of trust and commitment, to the most profound heart-to-heart explorations of our love, our pain, and our dreams, it's the quality of our questions and our answers that allow us to continue learning and growing with one another through the years. And when conflict comes, as it inevitably does when we weave two lives together, it's our commitment to being curious rather than correct that allows us to turn toward instead of away from one another in the moments of disagreement. Whether you and your partner are talkative or quiet, the words that pass between you, as well as the expressions and gestures that accompany those words, will define and determine your relationship. A true love story isn't a fairy tale. It takes vulnerability and effort. The reward is that you love your partner more on your fiftieth anniversary than you did on your wedding night. You can stay in love forever.

It can seem as if the success or failure of a marriage or long-term relationship is no more certain than a coin toss. In the United States, we hear that more than half of all marriages end in divorce. In Portugal, the number is 70 percent. With second marriages in the US, the divorce rate rises to 65 percent, and for third marriages the divorce rate climbs to 75 percent. Those are bad odds. And those are just the folks who call it quits. What about the couples who stay together in a state of quiet desperation, discontent, and dullness? Before you throw your hands up in despair, know that there is also hope.

While the expectations for marriage and partnership have never been higher, and the challenges have never been greater, it isn't a coin toss. It's not chance. It's choice.

We now know what couples can do to improve the odds. For 40 years the Gottman Love Lab has been studying how to win at love. In the lab in Seattle we have obtained synchronized observational, self-report, and physiological data from couples, and we have analyzed our data using advanced mathematical methods. After observing thousands of couples, we now know the areas in a couple's life that cause the most struggle. We can tell you with confidence what separates the masters of relationship from the disasters. And we can lead you

through the eight essential conversations that will give you the best chance at creating your own *happily ever after*.

Successful long-term relationships are created through small words, small gestures, and small acts. A lifetime of love is created every single day you are together. Getting to know your partner doesn't end the minute you return the moving van and are sharing dresser-drawer space, or the minute you say "I do." It never ends. You can spend a lifetime being curious about the inner world of your partner, and being brave enough to share your own inner world, and never be done discovering all there is to know about each other. It's exciting. It's daunting. And it's one of the greatest life adventures you can take. Trust us, we know. We've been married a long time; more than 30 years for John and Julie, and more than 25 years for Doug and Rachel, and we're still discovering new things about each other, still surprising each other, and more in love than we've ever been. That doesn't mean our relationships are perfect. Sometimes we fight. Sometimes we're rude or insensitive. Perfection is not the price of love. Practice is. We practice how to express our love and how to receive our partner's love. Love is an action even more than a feeling. It requires intention and attention, a practice we call *attunement*.

And the big secret to creating a love that lasts and grows over time is simple. Make dedicated, nonnegotiable time for each other a priority, and never stop being curious about your partner. Don't assume you know who they are today, just because you went to bed with them the night before. In short, never stop asking questions. But ask the right kind of questions.

We are not talking about yes-or-no kinds of questions. The questions we are talking about are called "open-ended" questions. These questions are invitations whose answers aren't just a word or two. They are how you generate intimate conversations that let your partner share what is really on their mind and in their heart. These conversations will let you understand why your partner believes what they believe, does what they do, and is who they are. Open-ended questions lead to conversations that will make you fall in love, or help you decide to make a long-term commitment, or keep you in love with the person you have chosen to spend your life with. This book will show you how to have the conversations that lead to intimacy, to awareness, and to a deep and meaningful understanding of one another—the ways you're the same and the ways you're different. This is what will allow you to be a relationship master, and not a disaster. We've organized those conversations into the eight topics that matter most to relationships—trust and commitment, conflict, sex, money, family, fun and adventure, growth and spirituality, and dreams. We've structured these into eight

dates for you to go on, and provide step-by-step exercises and open-ended questions to ask one another on each date.

These dates are a template, and yes, we want you to go on all eight dates, but we also want you to make dating each other something that never ends. We want you to be 95 years old and still going on a date—even if it's just to the living room. We don't want you to ever stop exploring your partner and your relationship, your beliefs and your fears, and your hopes and dreams for the future.

We don't want you to ever stop talking with each other, and learning, and growing.

Decades of research show that the great relationships—the masters—are built on respect, empathy, and a profound understanding of each other. Relationships don't last without talk, even for the strong and silent type. This book will help you create your own love story by giving you the framework for the eight conversations you and your partner should have before you commit to each other, or once you've committed to each other, as well as throughout the years, whenever it is time to recommit. That might happen when you have a baby, when one of you loses a job, during a health crisis, or when the relationship has begun to feel stale. Because this is for sure: Happily ever after doesn't mean there are no challenges or conflict. You can't be in a relationship and not have conflict. Not if you're doing it right. Life always shows up with all its stresses and strains and crises, and how you manage these together can ultimately make or break you (which we'll explore more in the conflict date). Happily ever after simply means that both partners are known, valued, accepted for who they are and who they are becoming. The goal is to be able to love your partner more deeply each and every year you're together.

NEVER TOO EARLY OR TOO LATE

We wrote this book because very few couples receive guidance on how to create a lasting and loving relationship. We met and became friends as part of a relationship education think tank—a consortium of experts in the fields of science, psychology, and sexuality. It's clear that most couples don't get any training in relationships, and often they don't learn how to communicate with each other until they go to therapy, and that's often too late. We initially thought the book would be for couples who were just setting out on the path of committed relationship, but when we asked for volunteers—couples who would be willing to test these eight dates and conversations—we were surprised that couples at every stage of their relationship wanted to go on the eight dates.

Couples deciding whether to commit, couples who had just moved in together, recently engaged couples, and newlywed couples all loved the dates, but so did couples who had been married for years and who wanted to deepen an already great relationship or refresh a relationship that had lost some of its shine. Life takes its toll on all relationships as careers, children, and crises can pull us away from each other. The ideas behind these eight dates and the commitment to deep listening help us come back together.

If your relationship is new, and you're wondering if this person you're dating is "the one," we encourage you to take the time now to talk about the subjects that'll ultimately determine your happiness (or misery) later. And if they help you decide that you're not right for each other, you'll save yourselves years of heartache. Or these dates may help you understand your differences and prevent conflict down the road over "perpetual problems" and unchangeable differences. And if you're in a long-term relationship, these dates will help you have the conversations that'll strengthen your relationship and reduce conflict. They may even help you get to know each other all over again, and return to those times when you would stay up all night talking and couldn't wait to learn more about each other.

When it comes to romantic attraction, a recent study again revealed that there is nothing we can measure about two separate individuals that can predict if they'll like one another, or be romantically attracted to one another. This recent study, conducted by psychologist Samantha Joel of the University of Utah, measured over 100 variables such as self-esteem, goals, values, loneliness, what they wanted in a partner, and so on. Nothing predicted how they would feel after a short date.

This isn't new information. All the algorithms for matching people are mostly worthless. Why is that the case? Well, one explanation is offered by the classic German study by Claus Wedekind, called the T-shirt study. Women smelled T-shirts worn by various men for two days and picked the ones they thought smelled the best. Wedekind discovered that women preferred T-shirts of men who were the most genetically diverse from themselves on the major histocompatibility complex of the immune system. So, we're definitely not looking for our clone. We are, in fact, attracted to many kinds of people who are very different from ourselves. In a 2006 study conducted at the University of New Mexico of 48 couples, women in couples more genetically diverse from one another reported having a higher degree of sexual satisfaction, while those women with similar genes reported having more fantasies about other men and were also more likely to cheat. So, it turns out that all those algorithms for dating websites are no better than just pairing two strangers at random.

What's the alternative? The answer is that we discovered that once two people interact together we can actually predict if that relationship is destined to work out, or if it'll be a source of continual misery. So now we can offer you a set of eight guided conversations to have with a potential partner, and, based on your feelings about these conversations, we can suggest if this relationship will be fulfilling or not, and—if you're committed to this person—what work the two of you need to do to make your love last. As usual, we started with data. Couples volunteered to go on these dates and agreed to record their most intimate conversations and upload the recordings to a secure site. For the couples whose stories and conversations we share in this book, we have changed their identifying details and kept them anonymous. The conversations in this book are brave and vulnerable conversations, and we're grateful for those couples who agreed to record and share their most intimate discussions. The participants ranged in age from 21 to 67. Twenty-five percent of the couples were dating, 11 percent were in a committed relationship but not planning to marry, 32 percent were engaged or planning to marry, and 32 percent were married. We collected hundreds of hours of recordings from heterosexual and same-sex couples while they were on their dates, and we discussed the dates with many of them in follow-up webinar sessions.

We all want to have a relationship that's healthy and happy, intimate and passionate, and that lets us thrive as individuals, as a couple and, for many, eventually as a family. We want a partnership and a collaboration—to know that this other person will be there at our side for all that life brings—the good and the bad. It's never too early or too late to have these conversations. These conversations will deepen your understanding of one another, and the history and cultures you bring to your relationship.

The conversations we're going to be guiding you through aren't all going to be easy. Staying in love takes a level of vulnerability that isn't always comfortable. Some people have trouble talking about sex and intimacy. Others struggle to discuss growth and spirituality. Some find it difficult to discuss money matters. You might worry: Will the conversations lead to a fight? What if we don't understand each other's point of view? What if we have doubts about our differences? All of this is okay. We're going to teach you how to ask open-ended questions and really listen to each other's answers. We'll give you clear guidelines about how to make the conversations creative and not combative.

For newly committed couples, we want to emphasize that conflict will happen in any relationship, but if you avoid conflict now, you're guaranteed to have a lot more conflict later. The early part of a relationship, besides the fun and infatuation, is about establishing trust and a shared future. Inevitably there will

be bumps in the road as you try to navigate two different lives, two different childhoods, two different family histories. Listen and learn, share and invite. If you have an open heart and mind, your dates will go much better, and your life together will, too. As couples that have been married a long time, we know what it's like to face issues that are difficult to discuss, to fail to understand each other, even to question our marriages. This is all normal, and by bravely tackling these conversations head-on, you will enter into a marriage or relationship that's strong and resilient.

Here's the news flash: Differences are the norm. Ultimately, your differences can enrich the relationship if you can understand and accept them. As you have these conversations, remember that most couples are more dissimilar than similar. That's okay. It's not about finding your idealized mate, your other half, or your alter ego. Our partners don't always have to think like we think. That's what makes life interesting—it would be boring to be married to yourself. In fact, that's called being single.

Of course, many couples have core values that they share, but there are inevitably areas in which they're different. These differences attract us at first, and yet we can find ourselves in relationship trouble when we try to change these differences later. Learning to understand and accept the ways in which you're different is key to creating lasting connection and enduring love.

One of the great gifts of relationship and marriage—and there are many—is the ability to see the world through the eyes of another person, intimately, deeply, profoundly, in a way we're almost never able to do with another human being. If you approach the mystery that is your partner with curiosity, your relationship and your life will be immeasurably enriched.

THE SCIENCE OF LOVE

About 45 years ago, John and his colleague Robert Levenson created a small laboratory at Indiana University (and later at the University of Illinois, the University of Washington, UC Berkeley, and now the Gottman Institute in downtown Seattle). At the University of Washington, John's lab looked like a tiny studio apartment, but it was actually an innovative research facility devoted to uncovering the truth about marriage and divorce. Here are the fundamental research questions that John asked: Can we predict who will get divorced and who will stay married, happily or unhappily? And what actually makes relationships work well?

For one of the lab's major studies, 130 newlywed couples checked in to the apartment, dubbed forever after as "The Love Lab," so they could be studied around the clock as they went about their day doing exactly what they would be doing if they were home—eating, watching television, talking, listening to music, reading, cleaning, and so on. It was all perfectly normal except there were three cameras mounted to the apartment walls that tracked their every move, and each person wore a specially devised monitor that tracked their electrocardiogram physiology. Plus every time they went to the bathroom, a sample was taken to check the amount of stress hormones in their urine. John and his team of researchers studied each couple's body language, monitored their vital signs, and coded every facial expression (to a hundredth of a second). The morning after a night in the Love Lab, the team took blood from the couple to check their hormonal and immune functioning.

Another key part of their research in the lab was asking couples to tell the story of their relationship during a two-hour oral history interview. John asked how they first met and what their first impressions were of each other. Then he asked them what they recalled about dating, how their relationship progressed, and what they enjoyed doing together in the early stages of their relationship. He asked them to reflect on how their relationship had changed over the years. Hard times that they had been through were covered, too.

Looking back over the years, what moments stand out as the really hard times in your relationship?

What helped you stay together?

How did you get through these difficult times?

What are your ideas about how to get through difficult times?

Then he asked the couple to explain how their relationship is different now from when they first met, and other questions about how they chose to be together.

Of all the people in the world, what led you to decide that this was the person you wanted to marry (or commit to)?

Was it an easy decision or a difficult decision?

What was it like to fall in love?

He also asked about the wedding or commitment ceremony, the honeymoon, their first year together, what stood out as the really good times, and their idea of having fun together. He and his colleagues also explored the couple's beliefs about relationships. They asked them to think of a couple they knew who had a good relationship, and another couple whose relationship wasn't so good, and what was different about these two relationships.

How would you compare your relationship to each of these couples?

How are your parents' relationships similar and different from your own?

Then John asked them about the history of their relationship—its major turning points, ups and downs. Finally, he asked them about how much they currently knew about their partner's major worries, stresses, hopes, dreams, and aspirations.

How do you stay in touch with each other on a daily basis?

What are your routines for staying in emotional contact with one another?

Meanwhile, throughout these discussions researchers monitored each person's tone of voice, their words, their gestures, and their positive and negative emotions. Finally, John also asked each couple to discuss with each other a current conflict they were having in their relationship while he just watched.

It was painstaking, methodical, and thorough research. The final result was the ability to determine with 94 percent accuracy who would stay married and who would eventually divorce. (After these results were published, John and Julie received far fewer invitations to dinner.) Of the couples who stayed married, John was also able to predict the marriages that would be happy and those that would be unhappy. John and Robert followed these and hundreds of other Love Lab couples for decades, and in the end watched, recorded, and learned from over 3,000 relationships.

POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE

After a decade of analyzing the data from the Love Lab, John discovered that *one* set of variables determined whether a marriage would succeed or fail: Were the couples being positive or negative during the interview? There was very little gray area. Either they emphasized their good times together and minimized the bad times, or they emphasized their bad times together and minimized the good times. Either they emphasized their partner's positive traits and minimized their partner's more annoying characteristics, or they emphasized their partner's negative traits and minimized their partner's more positive characteristics.

What we've learned is that the couples who are most likely to have happy marriages show the following qualities and characteristics when they talk about their relationship:

FONDNESS, AFFECTION, ADMIRATION: Either verbally or nonverbally, the couple expresses positive affect (warmth, humor, affection); they emphasize the good times; they compliment their partner.

WE-NESS VERSUS SEPARATENESS: The couple emphasizes their ability to communicate well with each other and their mutual unity and togetherness. They use words like "we," "us," or "our" as opposed to a lot of "I," "me," "mine." They don't describe themselves as separate.

EXPANSIVENESS VERSUS WITHDRAWAL: The couple describes memories about their shared past vividly and distinctly, versus vaguely or more generally with an inability to recall details. They are positive and energetic talking about their relationship, versus lacking energy and enthusiasm in recalling their past. They express intimate information about themselves, rather than staying impersonal and guarded.

GLORIFYING THE STRUGGLE: In a relationship people build a whole life together, filled with values, purpose, and meaning. In "glorifying the struggle," the couple expresses pride that they have survived difficult times, versus expressing the hopelessness of their hard times. They emphasize their commitment to the relationship versus questioning whether they should really be with this partner. They are proud of their relationship versus being ashamed of it. They talk about their shared values, goals, and life philosophy. They have intentionally created a sense of shared meaning and purpose, even in the way they move through time together. And they create intentional traditions in their relationship for

connecting emotionally. We call these “rituals of connection.” Dates are an example of rituals of connection.

If a couple starts by expressing negativity toward each other in the interview, whether in words, facial expressions, or body language (cynicism, sarcasm, eye-rolling), then it signals that a negative switch has flipped, and it almost inevitably predicts a relationship that will decline over time. If the couple expresses disappointment in the relationship, feeling disillusioned, as if marriage isn’t what they thought it would be, or if they are depressed, hopeless, and bitter about their relationship, divorce is likely. Mind you, negative events and regrettable incidents are inevitable in all relationships. The positive switch is all about how couples positively *interpret* their negative events and their partner’s character, and whether in their minds on an everyday basis they *maximize* the positive and *minimize* the negative (in their partner and in their relationship).

What it boils down to is that an overall perceived negativity will quickly erode a relationship. And every successful marriage and relationship has, at its foundation, a deep and close friendship—partners who really know each other and are, at the heart of it, on the same side, part of the same team. This is why the conversations in this book matter. The words you choose matter. Your tone of voice matters. Even your facial expressions matter.

Of course we all get it wrong sometimes. We miscommunicate, and when we do we need to make repairs. Expecting no communication snafus in a relationship is like expecting a hole-in-one every time you hit a golf ball. Happy relationships aren’t relationships where there is no fighting. They are relationships where repairs are made after regrettable incidents happen—and where a couple connects with each other day to day. Happy couples are not so very different from unhappy couples; they are simply able to make repairs to their relationship easier and faster so they can get back to the joy of being together.

In the end, a big part of the success or failure of your relationship depends on the conversations you have with each other. We sent over three hundred couples on the dates in this book. They did the exercises, recorded their conversations, and shared their stories. New couples, celibate couples, same-sex couples, and long-term married couples all found that these conversations brought them closer and helped them see each other in new and exciting ways. They became better friends, and they fell in love all over again.

You can, too.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

The quality of our closest relationships, more than any other factor, determines our physical health, resistance to disease, and longevity. Satisfying close relationships also improve various dimensions of each partner's mental health. Happy marriages or long-term relationships can significantly reduce depression, anxiety disorders, addictions, and antisocial behavior, and reduce incidents of suicide. In addition, many studies have shown that ongoing unhappy relationships can damage the cognitive and emotional well-being of children, while happy relationships can strengthen children's school performance, peer relationships, and emotional intelligence. Clearly, your relationship matters in your own lives, in the lives of your children, and in your larger community.

John and Julie have conducted scientific and clinical research and have practiced couples therapy for decades. They have also done randomized clinical trials that show that the marital interaction patterns they've observed don't just go hand in hand with relationship results later. They cause them. They are still conducting this research today. Rachel is a medical doctor who counsels couples in her practice and sees firsthand the direct health impact of a good or bad relationship. She sees, too, that it is substantial. Doug has had the privilege of working on a number of books with visionary authors, including several with Rachel, on sexuality. Together, we're colleagues, friends, and four people deeply committed to the idea of creating love that lasts a lifetime. We want this in our own lives and yours.

It can be seen as an accomplishment to just make a relationship last. There are countless stories of couples white-knuckling their way through 30 or more years of marriage. But we ask, how do you make your relationship a true source of joy, growth, and love decade after decade? Together we bring almost a half-century of personal and professional knowledge, along with some hard-won wisdom about the conversations you must have to create a lifetime of love.

The work of being in a committed relationship is important. We all want to love and be loved. We all want to grow in our relationships. Experiencing all that our relationships have to offer means stepping outside our comfort zone. If you're willing to be honest about who you really are, and open-minded about who your partner is, your relationship will grow stronger. Your understanding of each other will be deeper. Your life together will be happier.

Your Date Night

We know that it's the small, positive things done often that make a true difference in relationships. Showing appreciation and affection for your partner regularly, talking together at the end of each day, giving each other a kiss hello and goodbye—these are all elements of a happy and healthy relationship. Your relationship is built out of these small and simple moments together each day; you should embrace them. But we also are asking you to set aside time once a week to have a planned date night—or date afternoon or morning.

Each chapter in this book will guide you through eight different dates that will strengthen your relationship, but date nights should be a permanent part of a lifetime of love and connection. The goal is to have a special date once a week, and make that a priority in your relationship.

For many busy couples, and especially once they have children, date nights often become random, freak acts of nature—when the twin fates of childcare and work schedules align to give them a respite from an endless “to-do” list. Date nights, however, shouldn't be haphazard occurrences that happen only when opportunity, finance, and laundry all reach some perfect and magical alignment in the universe. Date nights are planned. Date nights are prioritized. In many relationships and marriages, fun, play, and connecting with each other become the last items on the “to-do” list. This is a sure recipe for discontent and growing apart.

The plain and simple truth is—date nights make relationships.

WE MADE A PACT

Rachel and Doug have had date nights weekly since their very first date together 31 years ago. That first date was during final exam week in college. They knew right away they had to find a way to prioritize each other and what they knew was going to be a life-changing relationship. “We made a pact immediately,” Doug explains, “that every night we would meet at midnight, work done or not. I had five 20-page papers to write that week, and Rachel was studying for her all-important pre-med finals. But both of us were done each night before the clock struck midnight. I’ve never worked faster or better or with a bigger smile on my face.

“When we prioritized being together and gave our word to each other that our relationship would come first, everything else that took so much time and seemed to make it impossible to find the time for a date just seemed to contract and open up a window for being together. Even when Rachel was in medical residency working 110 hours a week, even when we had newborn twins, even when I was working two jobs and commuting five hours a day round-trip, we still found time for date night. It’s very unlikely we would have made it this far without date night.”

TOO OFTEN, DATE NIGHT BECOMES A RANDOM, FREAK ACT OF NATURE.

Rachel agrees, “We would not be together if not for date night. I knew I wanted to be married for a long time. So did Doug. And we somehow knew that date night was the key. The pact we made in college is still our pact today. We pay attention to the relationship. Sometimes that has meant date night is a date day or a date morning, but it’s always been our special time just to focus on each other. It hasn’t always been easy, but we always find a way. Date night has saved our ass on many occasions.”

For the purposes of this book, a date is a preplanned time where the two of you leave your work life and your work-in-the-home life, and spend a set amount of time focusing on each other, and really *talking and listening* to each other. A date worth having is not the two of you sitting on the couch watching television together, or going to a movie, or joining friends for a night of dancing. It’s a special time set aside for just the two of you to connect. Think of it as sacred time. Leave your electronics at home or turn them off and check only when the date is over. And think of each of these eight dates as your first date.

Plan them. Look forward to them. Get excited about them. You can go to a movie or meet up with friends, too, but the main event of a date night is just time to be together and to reconnect, to fall back in love and remind yourselves that there is more to your relationship than sharing a home or coparenting children. You remind yourselves that you are first and foremost friends and lovers.

TIME TO GET PERSONAL

John and Julie, who work together daily, often in intense conversation, debate, and close collaboration, particularly struggled with leaving their work behind on dates. “If you work together, it can be especially tricky to separate what is a date and what is not a date. And it’s tempting to talk about work when we go on dates,” Julie says. “We write together, we design workshops together, we discuss therapeutic interventions for couples together. We each passionately share our point of view. We’ve had to very consciously separate out the professional from the personal.”

One of John and Julie’s favorite dates is to go to a local café. They order the same thing every time. The waiters know them by name as well as their regular order of baked eggs, a baguette, and jam—actually a double order of their homemade jam. For Julie, the baguette is really a vehicle for delivering the jam. Within this familiar ritual, they have made the conscious agreement not to discuss their work. John says, “It’s our time to get personal, to ask open-ended questions, and to move away from our work-life. We hold hands across the table, we flirt, and we laugh.” It is this special time for communicating what’s in their hearts that makes going to this café a date.

“We save our work debates for after the café. And it can take practice, whether you work together or apart, to leave work behind and focus on the relationship during a date. But do it,” says Julie. “It makes all the difference in the world.”

DATE NIGHT OBSTACLES

Some readers might be thinking, this sounds great and in a perfect world date nights are doable, but who has the time, the money, or the childcare (if applicable), and so on. Regardless of the obstacles, date nights are always doable, even if it means getting a little creative in carving out your time together.

TIME: Life can feel so incredibly busy that the thought of finding time for yet one more obligation feels overwhelming. But a date night is more than an obligation—it's a commitment to your relationship and to your hopes for a happy marriage. It helps to carve out a specific and regular time each week and make this "appointment" a priority. Unless someone is in the emergency room, make date night a "no matter what" event. Set aside time like you would for a birthday, or church, or an anniversary, or any other special event you celebrate in your life together. Date nights should be sacred times to honor your relationship. Think of them as such, schedule them in your calendars for as much time as possible—even if it's just for an hour, suit up and show up, no matter what.

MONEY: Dates don't have to be expensive; in fact, they don't have to cost anything at all. Pack a picnic, go for a walk, sit in a park. There are endless ways to spend time together without breaking the bank. In each of the eight dates, we make suggestions about where best to go on your date depending on the topic of conversation. These are only suggestions. John and Julie used to have a cheap date by getting dressed up and going to the beautiful Hotel Sorrento in Seattle, and pretending that they were hotel guests. They would sit in the beautiful lobby in front of a fire and nurse one drink all evening. They would answer each other's open-ended questions for hours.

CHILDCARE: Childcare is often the stickler for couples who want to go on date nights but have young children at home. Childcare does not have to be expensive or stressful. At times, both John and Julie, and Doug and Rachel, would trade childcare with other couples, so both couples could enjoy date nights. If that's not possible, see if a trusted family member or close friend will help you in your quest to spend sacred time together. Look for inexpensive babysitters in your neighborhood, or ask your friends for recommendations. When their kids were young, Doug and Rachel routinely hired babysitters who could commit to multiple Saturday nights, so that they didn't have to scramble at the last minute to find childcare each week. Some parents worry about leaving their children with other people, but if you find a safe and reliable person to watch your

children, you're helping them learn that other people, besides their parents, are trustworthy and reliable. Children are incredibly resilient, and by showing your commitment to your relationship with your partner, you're nurturing your children by ensuring that they will be raised by parents in a healthy and stable relationship. Children feed off of the love in a marriage. Remember they are constantly modeling you, and you want them to see how you sustain a loving marriage.

See what makes the most sense in your life: Where there is a will there is always a way.

While we've given you location options for each date, we've also given you an option for having the date at home with some themed activities.

A FEW GUIDELINES

The most important guideline for this book and for the eight dates that follow is to have an open heart and mind, an attentive ear, and a true desire and curiosity to connect. It'll also help to prepare in advance.

READ A LITTLE: Read each chapter separately or together before the date. The beginning of each chapter explains why this topic is important to your relationship and what you need to know to make this a joyful part of a lasting relationship. We've also included a summary section in each chapter called "Speed Dating." Reread this section before your date. We don't think there is any substitute for reading the chapters, but if you're pressed for time, at the very least read this section. In the "Date Prep" section, we give you guidance for creating a fun and intimate date. The final section called "The Date" will guide you through the open-ended questions and also offer some activities you may want to try on your date. At the end of each chapter you'll find a statement that asks you to affirm your future together as a couple, specifically through the topic you've just discussed.

TALK A LOT: Take with you the list of open-ended questions for that particular date topic. These will serve as a guide and compass for your conversation. You may also want to each have a separate copy of the book and bring it with you on your date so you can share any surprises or things that particularly resonated with you from the exercises in each chapter that you'd like to discuss further with your partner. You can also download the exercises and open-ended questions from the website, workman.com/eightdates. On these dates you'll be talking about what matters most, and really connecting with your partner, so try to stay focused on the topics, exercises, and open-ended questions.

DRINK LITTLE (OR NOT AT ALL): Limit your alcohol or drug consumption on date night. While you may think that alcohol relaxes inhibitions, and it does, it also disinhibits aggression—not great for a date. Many couples increase their chances of having a fight when they drink. Try to have no more than the equivalent of one glass of wine on each date. You want to be coherent and truly present for the intimate conversations you're having. If you want your dates mostly to take place at restaurants, make sure they are places where you can not only speak to each other freely, but also hear each other clearly. If it seems distracting to have important conversations at night or while eating and drinking, then figure out another time that works for both of you. Consider the morning—if you're

morning people!—or even taking an hour or more off from work, if schedules permit.

KEEP A SENSE OF HUMOR: If you want the best for your relationship or you're concerned about your relationship, you're doing the right thing by having the conversations in this book. Yes, it's serious and important work, but we also want you to have fun. Find the moments of humor. Find the joy, even when it feels difficult. Don't forget why you fell in love with each other, and most important, don't forget to laugh.

The Four Skills of Intimate Conversation

The dates we are asking you to go on are ways to make time for each other, and also a space to have meaningful, intimate conversations. There's an art to listening, which we'll cover in the next section, and there's a set of skills and an art to having conversations that are both intimate and meaningful. These types of conversations come easier to some, and the skills listed below will help you express how you're feeling and also guide you in helping your partner express how they're feeling. The skills and suggestions below aren't steps to follow in every conversation, although you certainly could. They are to be used in beginning and continuing an intimate conversation.

Skill #1

PUT INTO WORDS WHAT YOU ARE FEELING TRY SAYING, I FEEL . . .

- ☐ Accepted
- ☐ Understood
- ☐ Rejected
- ☐ Misunderstood
- ☐ Appreciated
- ☐ Unappreciated
- ☐ Abandoned
- ☐ Connected
- ☐ Unaccepted
- ☐ Close to You
- ☐ Distant from You
- ☐ Afraid
- ☐ Baffled
- ☐ Neglected
- ☐ Comfortable
- ☐ Uncomfortable
- ☐ Affectionate
- ☐ Tense
- ☐ Betrayed
- ☐ Like You Don't Even Like Me ☐ Irritable
- ☐ Alienated
- ☐ Angry
- ☐ Agitated
- ☐ Alone
- ☐ Lonely
- ☐ Upset

- ☐ Alarmed
- ☐ Resentful
- ☐ Belittled
- ☐ Insulted
- ☐ Tired
- ☐ Depressed
- ☐ Appreciative of You
- ☐ Like a Failure
- ☐ Ashamed
- ☐ Righteously Indignant
- ☐ Apprehensive
- ☐ Shy
- ☐ Horny
- ☐ Romantic
- ☐ Unattractive
- ☐ Regretful
- ☐ Disgusted
- ☐ Happy
- ☐ Joyful
- ☐ Bored

Now talk about WHY you have these feelings. This might include a description of the events that led to the feeling, a story from your childhood, an observation, or an insight or revelation that you've had. Anything that draws a connection between the feeling and what you think caused the feeling.

Skill #2

ASK YOUR PARTNER OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS DURING AN INTIMATE CONVERSATION TRY ASKING QUESTIONS LIKE:

What are you feeling?

What else are you feeling?
What are your needs?
What do you really wish for?
How did this all happen?
What would you really like to say, and to whom?
What are the feelings you are afraid to even think about?
What mixed feelings do you have?
Are there parts of yourself that are in conflict?
What does this remind you of in your personal history?
What are your obligations (or duties) here?
What choice do you need to make?
What do your values tell you about all this?
Think of someone you really admire. What would he or she do and how would he or she view this situation?
Do these feelings and needs have any spiritual, moral, ethical, or religious meaning for you?
Who or what do you disapprove of?
How does this affect your identity, your idea of yourself?
How have you changed or how are you changing now, and how has that affected this situation?
What's your major reaction or complaint?
How do you wish things would be resolved now or in the future?
Pretend that you had only six more months to live. What would be most important to you then?
What are your goals?
What *should* you take responsibility for in this situation?

Skill #3

MAKE EXPLORATORY STATEMENTS TO HELP OPEN UP YOUR PARTNER'S FEELINGS AND NEEDS DURING AN INTIMATE CONVERSATION TRY SAYING ANY OF THESE EXPLORING STATEMENTS: TELL ME THE STORY ABOUT THIS SITUATION.

I want to know everything you're feeling.

Talk to me, I am listening.
Nothing is more important to me right now than listening to you.
We have lots of time to talk. Take all the time you need.
Tell me your major priorities here.
Tell me what you need right now.
Tell me what you think your choices are.
It's okay not to know what to do, but what's your guess?
You're being very clear. Go on.
Help me understand your feelings a little better here. Say more.
I think that you have already thought of some solutions. Tell me what they are.
Help me understand this situation from your point of view. What are the most important points for you?
Tell me what you're most concerned about.
Tell me more about how you are seeing this situation.
Talk about the decision you feel you have to make.

Skill #4

EXPRESS TOLERANCE, EMPATHY, AND UNDERSTANDING TOWARD YOUR PARTNER DURING AN INTIMATE CONVERSATION TRY MAKING EMPATHIC STATEMENTS LIKE THESE: YOU'RE MAKING TOTAL SENSE.

I understand how you feel.
You must feel so hopeless.
I feel the despair in you when you talk about this.
You're in a tough spot.
I can feel the pain you feel.
I'm on your side.
Oh, wow, that sounds terrible.
That must feel hurtful for you.
I support your position.
I totally agree with you.

You're feeling so trapped!
It sounds like you felt really disgusted!
You're in a lot of pain here. I can feel it.
That must have upset you.
That is very scary.
I would have also been disappointed by that.
That would have hurt my feelings also.
That would make me sad, too.
Wow! That must have hurt.
That must have been really frustrating.
No wonder you felt angry.
Okay, I think I get it. So what you're feeling is . . .
Tell me if I have this right. What you're saying is . . .
That would make me feel insecure.
That sounds frightening.

The Art of Listening

The questions provided for each of the eight dates are specific and open-ended, but these questions are only half of the equation. Listening is the all-important other half. It requires a special kind of listening. It's where we listen to understand, without judgment or defensiveness, or the desire to rebut. It is an accepting form of listening. Listening is an action; you have to commit to it. And you can't do that if you don't get out of your own head. If you stay inside yourself, the voice you hear will be your own, and not your loved one's.

BE ATTENTIVE: Put away your smartphone, your tablet, and any other gadgets. Turn them off, or at the very least, silence them. Show genuine interest and curiosity in what your partner is saying. Lean forward, make eye contact, and don't interrupt.

BE PRESENT: Conversation is about dialogue, so listening isn't about just pressing the pause button on your monologue. When you're present as a listener, you don't assume you know what your partner is going to say next, and while your partner is speaking, avoid thinking about what you will say next, or preparing your rebuttal. Instead, just LISTEN.

ASK QUESTIONS: If you don't understand something, ask questions and then listen to the answers. Remember it's open-ended questions that open the heart. Do ask exploratory questions that help you understand, such as, "Can you tell me more about that?" "Is there a story or memory related to that?" Also remember, this isn't an interrogation, it's a conversation.

TUNE IN: It's your job as a listener to tune in to your partner's feelings. Make sure you don't minimize your partner's feelings by dismissing them or trying to fix them. You don't have to make your partner feel better or cheer him or her up. Your only goal is simply to listen and to try to understand.

WITNESS: A big part of listening is witnessing. This means you listen so your partner doesn't feel so alone. A powerful way to witness and to "be there" for your partner is to repeat back in your own words what you have heard your partner saying, and thus communicate validation. For example, if your partner has just described a problem with a friend, you can say, "*Sounds like you're really upset with your friend and how she's been so demanding and judgmental. It makes total sense to me why you'd feel that way.*" You don't have to speak

like a therapist. You're just letting your partner know they've been heard. Funny thing is, our partner doesn't actually know what's going on in our head, despite the fact that we often think they should. Share that you've heard your partner.

AVOID JUDGMENT: Don't be critical and don't give advice unless your partner asks for it. In every conversation with our partner we want to communicate respect, understanding, and empathy. The conversations we're advocating for require a certain amount of vulnerability and openness, in which each partner feels safe and free to share their innermost thoughts, feelings, and fears with the other. Remember the goal in these conversations isn't to prove that you're right in your beliefs or that your partner is wrong. The goal is to understand the similarities and differences that you have and to create empathy for why you each see the world the way that you do.

MAGNIFY ACCEPTANCE: In these conversations you'll be going deeper into understanding one another, and that takes a high level of vulnerability. Try to understand what makes your partner tick, and work to accept the way your partner is, cherishing what you have, and building gratitude for one another.

Listening doesn't always come easy for us, but without listening, intimate conversation is impossible. There are questions you can ask as you listen to each other that'll help guide you on your dates and in your relationship. Eventually they'll become second nature. Here are some fail-safe questions that can help you understand your partner.

What are you feeling?

What do you need?

What are your choices?

How can I help?

What's your worst-case scenario in this situation?

What's your ideal dream for the situation?

If you find you're not understanding each other, but rather heading toward conflict, take a deep breath (counting to ten really does help because it calms down the emotional centers of the brain) or take a bathroom break. These dates aren't about processing disagreements or "working" on your areas of conflict. We have included a "Troubleshooting" section for each date with some do's and don'ts, so that you don't create conflict. If you find things are getting hot and heavy (and not in a good way), please see "Fight Fair and Repair," on page 81.

You can also find additional resources for addressing conflict or finding a therapist at the Gottman Institute website, gottman.com,

This is important work, and we know that by taking this journey together and having these eight conversations your friendship and your love will grow, and you'll begin your life together on sure footing. Getting started is 50 percent of the job, so your journey to a lifetime of love has already begun.

Speed Dating

Chapter Summary

There's no real shortcut to reading these beginning chapters to set yourself up for a successful eight dates, but if you're supposed to meet your partner in five minutes for your first date and are flipping through this last minute, at least read the sections called "A Few Guidelines" in "Your Date Night" and "The Art of Listening."

DATE



Lean on Me

TRUST & COMMITMENT

Ben and Leah met on campus at the University of Arizona. Every time he walked out of his Intro to Astronomy class, she was sitting on the steps outside waiting to go into her next class. He couldn't help but notice her. "She always had her head in a book. She never looked at me once. If she had, I would have said hello, but she was always reading. This went on for five weeks. I knew everything there was to know about the top of her head and her shoes, but that's it. I didn't even really know what she looked like or what color her eyes were, but she drew me in. The way she could focus, the way she was always there, it made me so curious about her. She became a regular part of my week, but she had no idea I even existed. I tried bumping into her once as I went down the steps, just a slight jostle, and even then she just mumbled 'it's okay' when I apologized, and didn't look up.

"I kept thinking about her. Not just on the days I had that class, but every day. Who was she? What was her name? What was she reading?"

One day Ben just decided enough was enough and when class let out, he sat down on the steps next to her.

"He sat really close, too close, like our shoulders were actually touching," said Leah. "I was reading Sartre for my philosophy class. It was dense. Philosophy is no joke and I was struggling. I was annoyed at first, and I lifted my head up and there he was with the biggest smile on his face, like we were long-lost friends or something."

Ben remembers the look on Leah's face. "I was just so happy to see her whole face and her big brown eyes, that I completely forgot I was a stranger to her. She wasn't a stranger to me, but she definitely looked annoyed at first."

Ben finally introduced himself and asked her what she was reading. "I didn't want to blow my chance to talk to her, so I kept asking her questions. I didn't really give her a chance to end the conversation. She doesn't have a rude bone in her body, lucky for me, so we talked for about twenty minutes until she had to go to class."

"For the rest of the semester, before every class, we talked for twenty minutes," said Leah. "Just talked. About everything. He never asked me out, he never asked for my number, he just sat on those steps and asked about my life. It was kind of weird now that I think about it. Finally I asked him out on a date. I think I shocked him."

"She definitely startled me, but of course I said yes, and here's the thing, I was already in love with her before our first date, before our first kiss, before anything physical."

“He was just steady. He was always there. Always smiling and asking me questions about my life. One day he noticed I was cold and he gave me his sweatshirt, and then didn’t ask for it back before he left. I can’t explain it, but that little thing made me trust him. He made me feel safe in this weird way I didn’t know I wanted to feel safe in. And it’s been that way ever since. We’ve been together now almost five years, we’re planning on getting married, and I don’t think I’ve ever trusted anyone more in my life. And it all has to do with those conversations on the steps. He always showed up for me and he still always shows up for me and he notices when I need something, even sometimes before I consciously know what I need. He’s my best friend and the love of my life.”

When Ben and Leah went on the Trust & Commitment Date, they discovered they had very different experiences of what commitment looked like in their families growing up. Leah explained that for her, trust is about feeling safe and about how attentive Ben is. “My parents were divorced and my mom was kind of a wreck emotionally. She didn’t really pay attention to me or interact. She was tired all the time. She didn’t have the bandwidth to take care of me emotionally. I was devastated when I didn’t make the cheerleading team, and she was nowhere to be found. It sounds minor, but it hurt. My dad wasn’t around either. Books were my comfort. I just lost myself in books. So I guess trust for me is about follow-through and paying attention. Do you do what you say you are going to do?”

Ben’s parents never divorced, but their commitment was all about their belief that God meant for them to be together. “They were together and our family was together, but I wouldn’t ever see them spending lots of alone time with each other. Everything revolved around the kids, and going to church, and their routine. I remember watching them not talking to each other, and thinking I’m never going to be like that. They were faithful sexually,” Ben added, “but I don’t know how committed they really were to each other as people if you know what I mean. I did see my dad checking out other women at times, and that was strange.”

BEN AND LEAH DISCOVERED THEY HAD VERY DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES OF WHAT COMMITMENT LOOKED LIKE.

Ben found it enlightening to go on the trust date. “I never knew about the cheerleading team, but it makes sense. I know how important it is that I show up

when I say I am going to, and once I had to break plans we had to go camping, and now her reaction makes sense to me.”

“I didn’t react well,” laughed Leah. “But we both realized after having this conversation how much more trust is about than just not cheating on each other, which is the simple way to think about commitment and trust. It’s just giving your word on something—whether it’s a big something or a little something—and being true to it.”

“And she never did give me my sweatshirt back.”

CHOOSING COMMITMENT

In a relationship, commitment is a choice we make every single day, over and over again. We choose it even when we are tired and overworked and stressed out. We choose it no matter what attractive person crosses our path. We also choose it every time our partner makes a bid for attention and we put down our book, or look away from the television, or up from our smartphone, or stop whatever it is we’re occupied with to acknowledge their importance in our life. This acknowledgement may call for just a smile or for a conversation, but whatever it calls for, we authentically try to deliver. When we make our relationship a priority by *showing* that it’s a priority, we build trust and demonstrate our loyalty far beyond any words we say in our wedding vows. What the Love Lab found is that it is the small, positive things done often that make the most difference and build that cocoon of trust and safety in our relationships.

So what does true commitment mean? The most obvious meaning is that we resist possibilities with other people. We’re faithful sexually and faithful emotionally to our partner. We maintain boundaries in our relationships outside the marriage. The late Dr. Shirley Glass, one of the world’s leading experts on infidelity, wrote a book entitled *Not “Just Friends.”* Her expertise really boils down to windows and walls. When you’re married or otherwise committed to a partner, ideally what you do is create a wall around the two of you with an open window between you.

This wall around the two of you separates you from others in terms of your deepest emotional and physical connections. What Dr. Glass found in her research is that when people, especially people who are unhappy in their relationships, start confiding in another person about their relationship, they are opening up a window to this outside person. And when they keep this new platonic or emotional relationship secret from their partner, they start building a wall between themselves and their primary partner. There can’t be walls between

you if you're going to have long-term and lasting trust, commitment, and loyalty. And windows to a close friend (whether of the opposite sex or the same sex) outside your relationship can quickly become doorways, and that's when affairs happen. It's not impossible to have friends like this, but you have to be aware of your boundaries, and it's a huge red flag if one of you starts keeping secrets from your partner about any new friendship. Then you are building a wall between you that disrupts your commitment to one another.

There is no question that committing to a person can be a terrifying prospect. It means putting all our eggs in one basket. There will be no one waiting in the wings if this relationship doesn't work out. There isn't a safety net. If things aren't going well, we go to no one else to complain. Instead we need to go directly to our partner to work things out. Also, if we're committed, we have given this person everything we have to offer. There's nothing left over for another lover. That's a risky decision, but it's essential. Without this level of commitment, love will not last.

Choosing commitment means accepting your partner exactly as he or she is, despite their flaws. It means never threatening to leave, even if at times you might want to. It also means caring about your partner's pain as much as—if not more than—your own. As John so aptly puts it, "If my wife is in pain, my world stops so I can listen to her." In a committed relationship, you will both stop the world to try to understand and ease each other's pain. This is partly why we get married, and this is partly why we love. We need each other and we need to be needed by each other. True commitment is choosing each other over and over again, because ultimately what makes relationships work is the decision to make them work.

There is one step that cascades toward all betrayals. It often happens when things aren't going well in the relationship. That step is making negative comparisons of our partner with other real or imagined alternative relationship partners. We call these "Negative Comps." Rather than nurturing gratitude for what we have with our partner, we nurture resentment for what's missing. When something is bothering us about our partner, rather than talking this over to get our needs met within the relationship, we fantasize about another relationship and how we might receive what is missing from our current relationship with this fantasy partner. These Negative Comps become a dangerous way of dealing with our negative feelings within the relationship.

JUMPING IN WITH TWO FEET

Many years ago, John had been working with a couple for several weeks. One night, when they showed up at their appointed time, the couple made it clear that they were “done.” John was the sixth therapist the couple had been to, and as far as they were concerned, therapy was failing and it was time to break up with John as their therapist, and perhaps time to break up with each other as well. John was surprised and sorry the couple had decided to quit—he had thought their case was going well and everyone was making progress.

“Could you do me a favor?” asked John. “Since you’ve already paid for this session, would you be willing to stay and help me understand why my therapy has failed for you? As a therapist, I have a commitment to myself to grow from my failures.”

The couple agreed to stay. John asked them what their week had been like.

“We had a huge argument . . .” the woman began, but then her husband interrupted her to continue the story.

“We went to a party and I was in the middle of a great conversation with a woman I met there, and then my wife taps me on the shoulder like she always does, and said she was tired and wanted to go home and go to bed.”

John nodded. He had heard this couple fight tooth and nail negotiating agreements between them. He was a successful businessman, while she was a therapist who had all but given up her practice to stay home with their children, and their struggle was always about time, money, and ultimately, who held the power to call the shots. John asked them to explain more about what happened at the party that led them to deciding to end therapy.

“Well,” the man said, “She was tired and wanted to leave, so on the car ride home I told her that I had found the woman at the party really attractive and had really enjoyed talking to her.” John didn’t respond as the man recalled that he told his wife that they never talked like that anymore, and he was turned on by the woman at the party because she was flirting with him and his wife hadn’t flirted with him in a long time.

“And what did you say to that?” John asked the woman.

“I got angry and told him to grow up and stop flirting with other women.”

“And what were you thinking?”

The woman paused for a moment and then said, “I was thinking that I wished I was with a more mature man, and that I could do better.”

It was at that moment that John understood why his therapy hadn’t worked, and why the couple had gone through five other therapists before coming to him. “You can go now,” he told the couple. “I know why therapy isn’t working. Thank you.”

The couple was stunned and just sat there. They asked John to tell them what he had learned from their argument that made things so clear to him.

“Well,” began John, “you guys were in love so you got engaged and had a wedding. You bought a house together and you had two children together. But there’s no commitment in your relationship. You’re always thinking maybe you can do better. You meet a woman at a party and while you’re having a good time talking and flirting, you’re comparing her to your wife and thinking you can do better. And when he complains to you, you also think you could do better with a more mature man. You’re not really committed.”

The husband began to protest, “Everything I do is for my family. I sacrifice every day. What do you mean I’m not committed?” The wife also voiced her protest about her own commitment being lacking. “I take care of everything at home, and I also have a stressful job.”

“Let me tell you the story of *Alice in Wonderland*,” said John. “Alice sees this very unusual rabbit go down a hole, and she jumps in with two feet. She has no idea what this journey is going to be and Wonderland isn’t really all that great a place—there’re scary things, challenging things, and things that are also interesting and fascinating. It’s an adventure, and Alice doesn’t know what’s in store for her, but she jumps in anyway. Alice doesn’t hesitate or think maybe a better rabbit will come along tomorrow. She feels in her heart that she’s embarking on a profound journey and that, despite the difficulties, it’s still magical and amazing. Alice doesn’t look back and doesn’t question the adventure she’s chosen. That’s commitment. You two never did that. You have the trappings of commitment and loyalty, but you go to a party and think someone else can meet your needs better. You don’t like each other’s behavior and think that means they’re not the one for you. When you negotiate with each other, it’s always from a point of self-interest, not mutual benefit. You haven’t built trust, or commitment, or a foundation of loyalty to each other because you’re not really in this relationship. That’s why no therapist can help you. You’re both still looking over your shoulder thinking the grass would be greener if you had followed some other rabbit down some other rabbit hole, into some different wonderland.”

The couple left somewhat stunned, and a few months later John called to check on them. They said that after leaving John’s office they had spent many nights talking about commitment and loyalty and what those words really meant to each of them. They had moved to another state and were seeing a new therapist who was helping them discover why they had never formed a really secure attachment to each other, or ever really talked about what their values and

expectations were surrounding trust, loyalty, and commitment. They sounded engaged and thoughtful, and John knew they now had a fighting chance.

DISCOVERING YOUR OWN WONDERLAND

There is going to come a point in your relationship when things get difficult—when the other person annoys you, or hurts your feelings, or lets you down. And in that dark moment when you're angry, sad, or disappointed, you may just wonder if you've chosen the right rabbit to follow down the right rabbit hole. You may even have a moment when you wonder or even believe that you could “do better” than the person who is in front of you at this moment annoying you, or hurting you, or letting you down. The fact is, couples that are truly committed to each other don't have one foot out the door. They have invested everything in this one relationship. All their eggs are in one basket. They don't threaten to leave when times get tough. And they don't spend time thinking that their ideal partner is still out there somewhere, and that that fantasy person will be easier to live with or more adept at meeting their needs than the very real, very human, very flawed person they chose to love, honor, and cherish. And it is worth stating again: If things aren't going well in their relationship, they voice their concerns to their partner instead of complaining about their partner to someone else.

Committing to a relationship requires a certain level of vulnerability that can be way more frightening than anything Alice ever encountered in Wonderland. Will she meet my needs? Will he really be there for me? Will she love me for who I am or try to change me? Will she criticize me to others? Will she betray me? Will he love me and care for me if I get sick? Will he leave me?

These are all very real fears we may have when we decide to commit to one person for a lifetime. When we fall in love we are often on our very best behavior. We lead with the healthiest side of ourselves. But as relationships progress, each person gets more real, more transparent, and therefore more vulnerable. None of us has it all together, and none of us is without our idiosyncrasies or insecurities no matter how together we may appear. And here's where the real magic comes in—the more honest we are, the more we can discover that our partner really loves us for who we are, and not the idealized version of us that shows up when we first begin to date. Vulnerability creates trust, and trust is the oxygen your relationship needs to breathe. Trust is also built over time, and over lots of conversations—like the ones Ben and Leah had, and the ones you'll have in this book. Trust is the backdrop to any relationship. It's an action word—both a verb and a noun. Trust happens in the little moments

when we show our partner we are there for them and they do the same for us. Trust is built in small moments of attuning to our partner, and listening like a friend and ally when our partner is experiencing a negative emotion—sadness, anger, disgust, or fear, even if those emotions are about us. In all of our decisions we're thinking of maximizing our partner's benefits as well as our own. Mutual trust rests in the belief that both of us are thinking for two. We aren't negotiating for the best deal for just ourselves. We're always considering the cost of any choice for our partner, too.

There are many ways people break trust in a relationship, but here are ten of the most common:

- Not showing up on time

- Not making their partner a priority

- Not being there when their partner is hurting or sick
- Not contributing to the well-being of the family (me rather than *we*)
- Not keeping promises

- Keeping secrets

- Lying

- Humiliating or putting down partner in public or private

- Committing an act of emotional or physical infidelity

- Being physically violent

Each and every day we're married or in a relationship, in every interaction, within every argument, lie these important questions: Do you cherish me?

- How important am I to you?

- Do I come first in your life?

- Will you take me for granted?

- Are you always looking around for someone better than me?

- Will you care when I'm upset with you, and listen to my concerns?

We demonstrate the answers to these questions in ways both big and small, and this builds our emotional investment and commitment and trust day in and day out. We show our partner every day that we cherish his or her positive qualities and minimize the importance of the negative qualities. If you discuss your values around trust and make a commitment together to respect those values with your actions, your relationship will flourish.

WHEN TRUST HAS BEEN BROKEN

If you break any of your agreements about trust, there are steps to fix what's been broken. These steps hold true for minor or major breaks, but you can't skip any of these steps.

- 1 Set a specific time and place to talk.
- 2 Each partner names the feelings he or she experienced during the incident or breach in trust, without blame or criticism.
- 3 The receiving partner listens without feedback or judgment.
- 4 Each person describes his or her point of view about what happened during the incident without blaming or criticizing their partner, while their partner only listens and tries to empathize. The listener shouldn't bring up their own point of view until it's their turn to speak.
- 5 Explain and examine any feelings that were triggered by the incident but that were originally felt long before this relationship. For example, one of you is a no-show for a dinner date, and that triggers a feeling of abandonment the other had from childhood or the rejection or infidelity in a past relationship.
- 6 Each partner assesses how they contributed to the incident and holds himself or herself accountable.
- 7 Each apologizes and accepts the other's apology.
- 8 You make a plan together to prevent this from happening again.

Each of the eight dates are experiments in vulnerability, and we *hope* that on this first date your conversation about what trust means to each of you will bring you not only closer together, but also closer to creating the relationship you both want for a lifetime.

CHERISHING

Commitment is actually built on thinking and then communicating to one's partner that he or she is precious, and not replaceable. In one's mind, as well as in communication, we build commitment by nurturing our gratitude in what we have with our partner. We think to ourselves that no one can hold a candle to our partner, and in our mind we magnify the positive qualities our partner has and we minimize the negative qualities. We think and communicate that no one out there—real or imagined—can compare with our partner.

On the other hand, betrayal is nurtured by communicating to one's partner that he or she is lacking certain qualities we simply cannot do without, and therefore is highly replaceable. In one's mind, as well in communication, we build betrayal by nurturing our resentment for what is missing in our partner. We think to ourselves that many people can easily hold a candle to our partner, and in our mind we magnify the negative qualities our partner has and we minimize the positive qualities. We think and communicate that other people out there—real or imagined—can easily compare with, and even outdo, our partner.

On the next page are 99 ways you can cherish your partner (there are actually a million ways, but that would be a very long book).

Exercise

HOW MUCH DO YOU ACTUALLY CHERISH YOUR PARTNER?

Instructions: Imagine a life-sized cutout portrait of your partner. Now imagine covering the portrait with sticky notes that tell the story of all you've accomplished and enjoyed together. It can be all the fun times, the comforts, the small silly things, the dreams, the frustrations that you've conquered. Just consider your whole story and what living this life together so far has given you.

Now read the prompts below. Each one is a reason to communicate that you cherish your partner. They are simple yes-or-no answers and there are so many of them for a reason. Thinking about ways to cherish your partner will give power to your connection. Also, we listed so many because it's not likely that each and every one will resonate for you—but for the ones that *do* resonate (hopefully a lot of them!), make a commitment to tell your partner that you cherish this quality in them. Don't be like the Swedish farmer who loved his wife so much that one day he almost told her. Create a ritual time—maybe once a week—for cherishing your partner out loud. If you'd like to download and print these exercises go to workman.com/eightdates.

I TOLD YOU THAT I CHERISH YOU BECAUSE

1 We have played together and had fun together.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

2 We have laughed together easily.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

3 We have traveled well together.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

4 No one in the world can replace you.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

5 We have been able to comfort each other.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

6 We have worked out our finances with each other.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

7 We have learned to truly trust each other.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

8 You have supported a personal dream of mine.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

9 You have been a great provider.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

10 We had some great adventures together.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

11 We have had some great road trips.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

12 We have enjoyed learning together.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

13 You know me well.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

14 I love the way you experience nature.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

15 We enjoyed singing together.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

16 We have done things together that I could never have done with anyone else.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

17 You have been trustworthy.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

18 We have helped heal each other after experiencing a loss or setback.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

19 We parented a child together.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

20 You are worth more to me than riches and jewels.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

21 You have been loyal.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

22 I love how spontaneous you can be.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

23 You have taught me a lot.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

24 You accept me in spite of my faults.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

25 You have understood some of my personal goals.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

26 We played music so well together.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

27 I respect your wisdom.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

28 We have been a great team.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

29 I love the way you welcome guests.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

30 I love how organized and efficient you can be.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

31 We enjoyed listening to the same music together.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

32 I admire so many of your skills.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

33 You have loved or helped some of my relatives.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

34 I admire how brave you have been at times.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

35 I respect your values.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

36 You understand my sense of humor.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

37 You have taken my side against someone who attacked me.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

38 We enjoy sex together.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

39 You always look great.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

40 I really appreciate the times when you have covered for me when I have been down.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

41 I can really count on you when the chips are down.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

42 We loved a pet together.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

43 We fell in love with each other.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

44 You can make me feel safe.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

45 We loved a child together.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

46 You are a kind person.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

47 You have forgiven me.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

48 We helped a friend in need together.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

49 I love how romantic you are.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

50 You are actually attracted to me.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

51 I love your mind.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

52 You are generous.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

53 We have worked out some major conflicts between us.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

54 We took care of a relative together.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

55 I respect the way you treated a friend.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

56 I felt loved and cared for by you.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

57 I love the way you look in the shower.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

58 You helped build a home of solace and peace.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

59 You are a thoughtful person.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

60 We developed similar ethical values together.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

61 You loved my mother.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

62 You have comforted me when I was afraid.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

63 We have had some really romantic trips and dates.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

64 Our values and beliefs have meshed.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

65 I respect your intelligence.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

66 You have supported me against enemies I have had.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

67 I love the way you have at times really listened to me.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

68 You are a great parent.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

69 When I was sick you took care of me.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

70 When I most doubted myself, you were in my corner.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

71 You have supported my own personal goals.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

72 I love the fact that you are not arrogant.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

73 You have stood up for me when someone criticized me in public.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

74 We gave birth to a child together.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

75 We created a home together.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

76 We had many of the same goals in life.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

77 I appreciate the fact that you are not a snob.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

78 I am very attracted to you.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

79 We have been together for so long.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

80 We worked together to create community.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

81 I am grateful that I can feel proud of you.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

82 We have overcome adversity together.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

83 I appreciate the fact that I can really be myself with you.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

84 You've always supported my own development.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

85 I love how nice you are to strangers.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

86 I really cherish the way you have helped me grieve.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

87 I really appreciate that we have worshipped or prayed together.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

88 I feel confident that we can get through any turmoil together.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

89 I appreciate that I can always talk to you when I feel down.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

90 I love how honest you have been.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

91 I respect that fact that you work very hard.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

92 I love the fact that you can laugh at yourself.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

93 We have celebrated successes together.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

94 You are one of my best friends.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

95 I love that you are not at all phony.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

96 There have been times when I have felt lost and you helped me find my way.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

97 I love our spiritual connection.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

98 You have been strong at times when I have felt very weak.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

99 I feel that we can be proud of what we have built together in life.

☐ YES ☐ NO ☐ TELL PARTNER

Speed Dating

Chapter Summary

- »» Trust is cherishing each other and showing your partner that you can be counted on.
- »» Everyday commitment, which is what trust is comprised of, means:
 - ~ You invest emotionally everything you have in this relationship.
 - ~ You choose to resist possibilities with other people that will break trust in your marriage and you maintain boundaries with all relationships outside your marriage for the same reason.
 - ~ If things are not going well, you give voice to your feelings and needs to your partner, rather than complaining to someone else.
 - ~ You accept your partner as he or she is, despite flaws.
 - ~ You cherish what you have and nurture gratitude.
 - ~ You never threaten to leave the relationship.
 - ~ You care about your partner's pain as much or even more than your own.
- »» People break trust in a relationship by:
 - ~ Not making their partner a priority
 - ~ Not keeping promises
 - ~ Not being there when their partner is hurting or sick ~ Lying, having secrets, infidelity
- »» These are the important questions we ask of each other when it comes to trust, loyalty, and commitment:
 - ~ Can I trust you?
 - ~ Will you be there for me if I need you?

- ~ Will you be faithful to me?
- ~ Will you be there if I'm hurting?
- ~ How important am I to you?

The Date: TRUST & COMMITMENT

CONVERSATION TOPIC

»»» What does trust and commitment look like in our relationship? How can we make each other feel safe? What are our agreements about trust and commitment?

PREPARATION

»»» Read this chapter and note any parts that particularly resonate for you. Define what trust and commitment mean to you. Think about what trust and commitment looked like in your family of origin. Name the little ways you and your partner show commitment to each other.

SUGGESTIONS

»»» One partner can coordinate this date. You can decide who will be trusted to make the arrangements for this particular date or you can flip a coin. You can choose to surprise your partner with the location of this date, asking them to “trust you.” If you really want to take it to the next level you can blindfold your partner on the walk or car ride to your chosen location.

LOCATION

»»» Find an elevated location with a great view. This could be a tall building, a bridge, a hill, *etc.* Ideally there will be a bench or other comfortable spot where you and your partner can sit while talking through the open-ended questions. If possible, make this first date location somewhere that is meaningful to your love story. If it were Ben and Leah, they might have a date at the top of the steps where they met. Make it a beautiful or peaceful place. Wherever you decide to have this first date, make sure that whoever is making the plans picks a place that is private and quiet enough for you to have an honest conversation. This is a vulnerable topic and you want to feel safe enough to share openly.

AT-HOME DATE: If you’ve decided to have this date at home, here is an idea: You can take turns being blindfolded while the other person guides you around the house. It’s a great opportunity to practice clear communications

(“you’re about to go through a doorway,” “take a step up here”) and practicing care for the partner being guided, and trust in the partner doing the guiding.

BRING

You should bring an open mind and be prepared to discuss any thoughts that came up around trust and commitment while reading this chapter and doing the exercise.

Please also read through the troubleshooting guide below before you have this conversation. Trust can be an especially triggering conversation, and there are some ground rules to agree on before you begin.

TROUBLESHOOTING

- ››› Stay open-minded to your partner.
- ››› Avoid turning your conversation into blaming or making accusations about past trust breaches between you. Don’t minimize fears.
- ››› Ask your partner questions about why their beliefs about trust and commitment are important and meaningful to them.
- ››› Be honest about your needs.
- ››› Avoid trying to force your partner to believe what you believe when it comes to trust, loyalty, and commitment.
- ››› See your differences as opportunities to learn more about each other and create a shared value system for trust and commitment.
- ››› Avoid criticizing or judging.

OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS FOR YOUR DATE CONVERSATION

Ask each other the following questions. (We’ve suggested language for these questions, but please feel free to ask the questions in a way that is natural and best for you and your relationship.) For the research couples who went on these dates, all chose to use these questions as written here, but feel free to add your own: ›››How did your parents show their commitment to each other? How did they show a lack of commitment to each other? In your mind, what do these things in your family history mean for the two of us?

- »»» What does trust mean to you?
- »»» Can you describe a time where you didn't feel you trusted me, and what I could have done to fix the situation?
- »»» What do you need from me in order for you to trust me even more?
- »»» What do you need from me to show that I am committed to this relationship?
- »»» What areas do you think we need to work on to build trust between us?
- »»» How are we similar and how are we different when it comes to trust and commitment? How can we accept these differences?

AFFIRMING OUR FUTURE TOGETHER

Take turns reading this affirmation out loud to each other. Maintain eye contact while reciting.



I commit to choosing you each and every day and to showing you that our relationship is a priority. I also commit to having seven more dates and conversations.

DATE



Agree to Disagree

ADDRESSING CONFLICT

Wesley and Marie had lived together for two years before deciding to get married. When they decided to discuss conflict, they were just beginning their second year of marriage and liked to say they were still in their honeymoon phase. “We never argue. We never fight. We’re each other’s best friend, and I can’t think of a single thing we’ve ever fought over,” said Marie. They gained insight into conflict on this date.

This state of marital peacefulness that passes for “bliss” that Marie describes is actually just the quietness that results from avoiding conflict. Conflict happens. And one of the great marriage myths is that if you never fight or discuss difficult and uncomfortable issues, then that means you have a “good” relationship. When you get married it’s not just two people who are joining together, it’s also your different habits, personalities, belief systems, and quirks joining together. All of these things can make for quite a wild party, and if you enter into any long-term relationship thinking that the hallmark of its success is a lack of conflict, you’re setting yourself up for disappointment and failure.

The couple did have one conflict they seemed to struggle over. Wesley liked to have the television on while he fell asleep. Marie didn’t. She preferred silence and could go to sleep quickly if the television was off, but found herself night after night staying awake until Wesley fell asleep, then turning off the TV so she could sleep. Marie had brought it up on occasion, but never really shared exactly how much it really bothered her. But when her job changed and she had to get up earlier, she found herself more and more annoyed with what she began to see as Wesley’s selfish ways. She would lie awake at night thinking about how she paid half the mortgage, and she had bought their new bed with him, and how she felt like a visitor in his world. Her anger grew and her resentment built, and still she said nothing. Eventually, Marie started wondering if she had made the right decision in marrying Wesley. Was she just going to have to be the one who sacrificed and compromised, while he got his way every time? Was this how the next 60 years of her life were going to be?

Wesley started thinking that Marie was getting more and more snappy and impatient. One of the reasons he had married her was because she was the kindest person he had ever met, and always greeted him with a smile. He loved making her laugh, but more and more his banter and humor were met with silence. He had no idea what was bothering her, and when he asked her if anything was wrong she would tell him everything was fine. Wesley wondered if he had made a mistake. He wondered who this stone-faced woman was in front of him, and where the happy, beautiful woman he had married had gone.

Eventually Wesley confronted Marie, demanding to know what was wrong and why she was treating him so badly. Marie was shocked. In her mind, he was the one treating her badly. He was the selfish one. Marie finally told him what had been bothering her for so long, and then she burst into tears, saying, “I guess it’s over for us.”

Wesley was dumbfounded. He told her that growing up with a single mom who worked two jobs, he was alone most of the time and the television was all he had. “One time, our house was broken into and the television was stolen. I was devastated. It was my only comfort at night and with the TV gone, I had nothing. It was horrible. Lonely and horrible.”

Marie had never heard this story, and her heart cracked open for the little boy her husband had once been.

“But why would you think it’s over between us?” Wesley asked. “It’s just a television, we can figure something out.”

As it turned out, Marie never fought with Wesley because she was afraid of all conflict. Growing up, she never heard her parents fight but whenever things got difficult, her mom would gather up Marie and her brother and sister and leave the house to check into a hotel. It didn’t matter if it was the middle of the night, or they had school the next day, her mom would hurry them all into the car and drive away to the nearest hotel where she would act like they were on vacation. They swam in the pool, ordered room service, and then returned home after a few days where no one spoke about why they had left or why they had returned. The only time Marie ever heard her parents yelling was right before they told her they were getting divorced. Later on, when Marie was in high school, and her mother was single and dating, her mom would break up with a boyfriend by changing their home phone number. Marie hadn’t realized it, but she had internalized the idea that all conflict was to be avoided and if there ever was a fight, it meant the relationship was over.

Sharing these stories was a relationship game changer for Wesley and Marie. For Marie, having a disagreement and being able to talk about it was nothing short of miraculous. Not only did it not end their relationship, she felt closer to him than ever because they had both shared these childhood stories. “Our relationship has gone to the next level. It feels more real,” says Marie. “I almost look forward to our conflicts now, because we always seem to come out of them understanding something new about each other and it brings us closer and closer. I don’t go looking for fights, but I don’t run away from them anymore either. I love that feeling when we get through a hard time together. That’s what a relationship is all about. Even when we disagree, we’re still on the same team, trying to find a way to understand each other and work it out.” As for the

television issue—they have a remote now with a timer that will turn the television off after 20 minutes.

For most of the couples that went on this date, like Wesley and Marie, they used it as a way to examine their differences and work toward understanding and acceptance of these differences. Listening to each other's stories is a powerful way to navigate disagreements.

MANAGING CONFLICT

It may seem odd to have a conversation about conflict, but the best time to discuss how you're going to manage conflict is not while you are in the middle of a heated argument. The important thing to know is that relationship conflict is natural, and it serves a purpose. What is the purpose of conflict? Does conflict even have a goal? Many people think that conflict is pointless and harmful. Not true. Conflict is necessary because we inevitably run into speed bumps in our ability to love one another, and when we hit one of these speed bumps we need to slow down and proceed with care.

Mutual understanding: This is the healthiest and most productive goal of all conflict.

That may surprise you. The goal of conflict is not to win or to convince the other person that you're right or even to be the same. In creating compromise we have to understand each other's core needs on the issue we're discussing, as well as each other's areas of flexibility. However, the goal is not to become identical, it's to understand each other.

As Marie and Wesley found out, managing conflict helps us love each other better over time, understand each other at a deeper level, and renew our commitment to the relationship. None of us are perfect communicators, not even those of us who are marriage therapists or have been married for decades.

Here's another headline: *Our research has shown that most relational conflict is not resolvable.* Each relationship comes with a set of problems because each person is unique and different from others, and some set of problems is going to be there no matter who the other partner might be. Time and time again we hear of couples divorcing because of their problems, and then remarrying only to find they have similar or new problems in the new relationship.

Many of our problems travel with us, reincarnating in each relationship, until eventually we learn to recognize them for what they are and manage them appropriately. A big source of trouble is the misconception that our problems are all solvable. Our research has shown that 69 percent of the time, when couples talk about that one thing that they always argue about, it's what we call a

perpetual problem. It's not going to be resolved. Relationships work to the extent that you have a set of perpetual problems that you can learn to live with. And the great gift is that within these conflicts, within these perpetual problems that you can't ever seem to resolve, lie the greatest opportunities for growth and intimacy. When you discover what lies beneath those problems, you uncover something that is at the core of your partner's belief system or personality. Obviously there are conflicts that can be deal breakers as we mentioned in the introduction—one of you wants children and the other doesn't, one refuses treatment for a substance abuse problem or addiction, domestic violence—but for the most part, problems are either perpetual problems (they can't be solved and will never be solved) or they're solvable problems.

SOLVABLE PROBLEMS: These are situational problems. You argue about housework, who picks up the kids on Fridays, or where to go on vacation. The conflict is about the topic, and there is no deeper meaning behind the position. He leaves the toilet seat up, she hates sitting down on the cold rim because it's been left up. It's an annoyance, but there's no deeper meaning to why he leaves it up and she wants it down. With solvable problems, there is a solution and this solution can be sustained. You share the housework, split time picking up kids, each choose a vacation spot, *etc.* Solvable doesn't mean without work. It takes effort and action to keep the agreements you make with each other for the solvable problems.

PERPETUAL PROBLEMS: These are problems that center on fundamental differences you have in your personalities or lifestyle preferences. These are the problems that you return to over and over again. These could be differences in basic needs, punctuality, organization, amount of time spent alone or together, differences in how to celebrate Christmas, or how to relate to in-laws. Even how you choose to exercise can be a fundamental difference if he likes to take a leisurely stroll around the neighborhood, and she believes a gym membership is a must in order to be healthy. You can't "solve" your personality or preferred lifestyle differences, nor should you try. Recognizing a perpetual problem for what it is leads to accepting and valuing how each of you is different. At the core of managing conflict, especially when it comes to a perpetual problem, is accepting your partner for who they are. When you accept what you can't change, you accept each other. Accept your partner for who they are, and they'll do the same. Celebrate and learn from your differences.

A WORD ABOUT GRIDLOCK

Nobody likes gridlock, that feeling of being stuck and going nowhere. This can happen when you end up going round after round in conflict over a perpetual problem. You'll know your perpetual problem has become gridlocked when you have the same conversation and arguments over and over again with no progress. The discussion leaves one or both of you feeling frustrated, hurt, or rejected. You end up seeing your partner as the enemy. Marie started vilifying Wesley in her head, and his going to sleep with the television on became a symbol of his extreme selfishness in all areas. If you find that the two of you get more and more polarized, more extreme, and more uncompromising, you're gridlocked. Eventually this will lead to emotional distance between the two of you, and this is the real relationship killer—not anger, or arguments, or conflict in general—but the distance you let it create between you. We'll discuss gridlocked conflict more in our last chapter on fulfilling each other's dreams. Because within every gridlocked conflict, there is a longing and a dream in each person's position about this issue, a dream buried under the surface ready to be uncovered. Conflict can bring you closer, if you choose to approach it as a way to know your partner more. If you genuinely seek understanding of your partner's position, you can create deeper intimacy and a stronger relationship, through any disagreement. When your partner expresses anger, instead of acting defensive and attacking back, try asking yourself, or even asking your partner, what does he or she need, what is the unmet desire or hope that hasn't yet been met. Through any argument, if you can communicate that you love and accept your partner, even if you deeply disagree with them, your relationship and marriage can not only survive but also thrive. Couples who have been married for decades have learned to see their partner's shortcomings, quirks, and personality differences as more amusing than frustrating. When we truly love someone, we love all of them, and accept them just as they are.

FIGHT FAIR AND REPAIR

Out of the many couples who did the exercise that follows, went on this date, and asked each other the open-ended questions, only one had a fight. That's right: Discussing conflict led to conflict, but only for one of the couples. If it happens to you on this date, or on any of the dates, it's really okay. Fights are going to happen in any relationship—it's inevitable and it's healthy—but research shows that couples who are genuinely happy in their marriage or relationship handle their conflicts in gentle, positive ways. They listen to their

partner's perspective, they seek to understand their partner, and they work together to find a compromise that works for both.

This is easy to read in a book, but sometimes we say and do things that damage our partner. We forget about seeking understanding, and we give a 20-minute diatribe on why we're right and they're wrong. We get defensive, we criticize, we show contempt, and we turn away at the very moment we should be turning toward each other. We call these *regrettable incidents*—our nice term for a fight, and “master couples” know how to minimize the damage from words said in the heat of an argument. In John and Julie's research they divided their couples into “masters” and “disasters.” Master couples stayed together happily. Disaster couples split up, or stayed together unhappily. When it came to conflict, the masters always knew how to repair the damage done during a regrettable incident.

Below is a process of repair for when regrettable incidents happen, and this should be part of your system for managing conflict in your relationship. Processing a fight means talking about what happened during the fight, without jumping back into the ring with your boxing gloves on. It's the fight recap, where you figure out how to make this particular matchup go better in the future. The goal here is not to once again argue for your reality or prove that you're right and they're wrong; it's to understand what reality looks like to the other person. Both of you are right in your own feelings and perceptions, and you're capable of looking at the situation through your partner's eyes.

STEP 1: Each person takes a turn to talk about what they were **feeling** during the fight: Were you feeling sad, angry, worried, lonely, ashamed, unappreciated, defensive, or any other emotions and feelings? Perhaps you were feeling out of control or confused.

STEP 2: Each person should talk about how they saw the situation and their perspective about what actually happened in the argument. Keep in mind that you may have two very different realities of what happened, but both are right. Avoid contesting who remembers it better. **Validate** each other's realities. Validating doesn't mean agreeing. It means being able to complete a sentence like, “From your point of view it makes sense to me that you would have these feelings and needs. I get it.” If you think it would be helpful, review the “Art of Listening” at the beginning of this book. Communicate to your partner that you understand some of their perspective. Only talk about the feelings and needs you had. Use “I” statements. Don't tell your partner what they did or didn't do. As much as possible, avoid pointing your finger at your partner and blaming. It's

better to say “I heard you saying . . .” than to say “You said . . .” The former phrasing makes it clear that it’s your perspective, not necessarily the facts. There’s no immaculate perception.

STEP 3: Triggers. In some regrettable incidents (not all) there are reasons that the conflict has escalated. We call these “triggers.” They are old, *enduring vulnerabilities* that occurred before this relationship began and have left emotional scars that can get activated. When you feel triggered, search your memory for a point in your history or childhood when you had a similar set of feelings. Triggers never go away, they endure.

Instructions. If you feel triggered, tell your partner the story of what happened in your past, so your partner can understand your own particular sensitivities and why this is a trigger for you. If you are the partner, express understanding and empathy as your partner describes the incident and the connection. Examples of trigger emotions that may help you connect a feeling to an incident:

- ››› A time when I felt judged.
- ››› A time when I felt excluded.
- ››› A time when I felt humiliated and disrespected.
- ››› A time when I felt abandoned.
- ››› A time when I felt powerless.
- ››› A time when I was bullied.
- ››› A time when I felt alone.
- ››› A time when I felt out of control.
- ››› A time when I felt belittled.
- ››› A time when I felt very unsafe.
- ››› A time when I was assaulted and attacked.

STEP 4: Accept responsibility and own up to your part in the fight. Perhaps you’ve been overly stressed or preoccupied, or you haven’t made time for your partner, or you haven’t been a good listener. What can you own up to in how you contributed to the argument? It’s important to avoid blame here. We discovered in our research that taking responsibility—even for a small part of the problem

in communication—presents the opportunity for great repair. It's highly effective.

STEP 5: Discuss how you both might **do things differently** the next time. What's one way your partner can make it better if this type of incident happens again? What's one way you can make it better? Create a plan together to minimize hurt feelings and avoid an incident in the future.

Exercise

WE ALL HAVE ISSUES

We have created a list of 25 topics that could represent fundamental differences in your personalities that could create conflict, or fundamental differences in your lifestyle needs that may also be a source of conflict. Lifestyle needs are basic to your identity, and to who you are as a person.

This exercise is an opportunity to get to know each other in new ways, and to be curious about what your potential sources of conflict might be during your relationship. Look over each item. Pick the top three to five that jump out at you. Write down how you feel about each of the issues you selected. Do you feel it's a significant conflict right now? Do you think it will be a source of conflict in the future? You're going to discuss these on your date, so take some time to consider the topic. Some couples chose to explore every topic and wrote down how they felt about every area. Do what seems reasonable for you.

Remember that you're ultimately seeking an understanding of your partner's interior world, and creating shared meaning together. If punctuality is important to your partner, and you think punctual is arriving no more than an hour late, discuss why it's so important or not so important to each other. There's usually a story underneath every strong emotion. Be ready to tell each other your stories and seek the understanding that'll help you manage your conflicts skillfully and with compassion.

As you think about what you need, keep it positive—what you *do* need as opposed to what you *don't* need or want. Also, try to make that positive need as specific as you can so it's like a recipe for success with you. For example, "I would like you to respect me" isn't as good as, "I would like you to turn off your electronic devices at dinner so we can just talk to each other."

EXPLORE AND BE READY TO DISCUSS.

»»» How are we the same and how are we different?

»»» How can we accommodate and accept the differences between us?

»»» Are there differences we cannot accept?

- 1 **Differences in neatness and organization.** One person may be neat and organized, while the other is more disorganized and doesn't mind a bit of mess.
- 2 **Differences in punctuality.** One person is always on time or early, and the other is more casual about time, and often late.
- 3 **Differences in doing tasks and getting things done.** One person may be a multitasker, doing lots of things at the same time, and the other likes to focus on one thing at a time.
- 4 **Differences in emotionality.** One person is very emotionally expressive and the other is not so expressive. One person might value exploring one's emotions more than the other, who believes more in action than introspection about feelings.
- 5 **Differences in wanting time together versus time apart and alone.** One person wants more time alone than the other, who wants more time together. These reflect basic differences in wanting autonomy versus interdependence.
- 6 **Differences in optimal sexual frequency.** One person wants sex more often than the other.
- 7 **Differences in talking about your sex life.** One partner wants to talk about your sex life and be able to make it better over time, while the other person prefers to have this area of your life kept spontaneous and unexamined.
- 8 **Differences in finances.** One person is much more financially conservative, a worrier and a planner, while the other wants to spend a lot more than the other, and has a philosophy of living for the moment.
- 9 **Differences in adventure.** One person is adventurous and willing to take some risks when venturing into the unknown, but the other person is more cautious and risk-averse, and wants any adventure to be worked out in advance so that it's mostly planned and predictable.
- 10 **Differences with respect to relatives.** One person wants more independence from relatives, and the other wants more closeness and connection.
- 11 **Differences in how to approach household chores and childcare.** One person wants an equal division of labor, while the other doesn't agree with this principle, or feels it's unrealistic.

- 12 Differences in how to discuss disagreements.** One person wants to be able to fight openly and be as emotionally expressive as possible, while the other may require a more logical, calm, and rational approach to conflict, without much emotionality.
- 13 Differences in expressing anger.** One person is comfortable expressing or receiving anger, wants the freedom to express anger, and tends to get over anger easily. The other person sees anger as potentially destructive and disrespectful and wants anger to be mostly eliminated from your interactions, and may be more likely to take anger personally, or even hold grudges.
- 14 Differences in how to raise and discipline children.** One person tends to be stricter with children and believes that it's essential for children to be respectful, while the other person emphasizes empathy and understanding of children and thinks children should have freedom and be emotionally close to their parents.
- 15 Differences in how to deal with sadness.** One person prefers to ignore moments of sadness or despair, to problem-solve and "get on with life" using action, while the other wants to be able to talk about sadness and be listened to empathetically.
- 16 Differences in preferred activity level.** One person prefers to be very active, while the other prefers calmer and less active forms of recreation.
- 17 Differences in socializing.** One person is more extroverted and gregarious, and gets energized by being with people, while the other person finds being with people an effort and is energized by solitude.
- 18 Differences in influence/power.** One person prefers to be more dominant in any decision making you might face, while the other prefers equality in power.
- 19 Differences in ambition and the importance of work.** One person is far more ambitious and oriented toward work and success, while the other focuses more on quality of family life and fun with the partner.
- 20 Differences with respect to religion and spirituality.** One person values spiritual activities or religious values more than the other.
- 21 Differences with respect to drugs and alcohol.** One person is far more tolerant of the use of recreational drugs and alcohol than the other.

- 22 Differences in independence.** One person feels a greater need to be independent versus interconnected than the other.
- 23 Differences in excitement.** One person feels a greater need to have life be exciting or adventurous than the other.
- 24 Differences in fidelity.** There are major differences in how loyal sexually or romantically you want to be, or have been, to each other.
- 25 Differences in having fun.** One person tends to be serious and doesn't think much about the concept of "having fun," while the other is more playful and less serious.

Speed Dating

Chapter Summary

Conflict happens in every relationship and marriage, and it's a myth that in a happy relationship you'll get along all the time.

››› Relationship conflict is an opportunity to get to know your partner better and to develop deeper intimacy as you talk about and work through your differences.

››› There are two types of conflict:

- ~ Solvable problems are situational and about the topic. There isn't usually a deeper meaning to the conflict or a person's position.
- ~ Perpetual problems are fundamental differences in your personalities or lifestyle needs. All couples have perpetual problems, and these account for 69 percent of conflicts. Perpetual problems can become gridlocked problems, and when partners feel criticized, rejected, or unaccepted by the other partner, this can be a sign you've entered into gridlock.

››› Approach your differences with curiosity rather than correctness. Have a genuine desire to understand the stories that are underneath the issues.

The Date: ADDRESSING CONFLICT

CONVERSATION TOPIC

»» How do we manage conflict? How are we the same and how are we different? How do we accommodate and accept the differences between us?

PREPARATION

»» Review the topics and your answers from the issues exercise. Reflect on what you read in this chapter and any ideas it sparked about how you've managed conflict and how you would like to manage conflict in the future.

LOCATION

»» The partner that didn't plan the first date will plan this one. For this date, it's best to go to a place where you can speak privately. Find a location that is peaceful to both of you, or a place where you have had a great time together in the past.

SUGGESTIONS

»» A picnic in a favorite park, or a beach, or even in your own backyard. If you have this conversation over a meal at a restaurant, make sure you have plenty of time and privacy. An afternoon date may be preferable to an evening date, so that no one is too tired or low on energy.

AT-HOME DATE: You may also choose to have this date while on a walk together around the neighborhood. Even if you get stuck in your conversation, you're still moving. And even if you disagree, you're still headed in the same direction together. Hold hands while walking and while talking about something that is or was difficult between you. See how it feels to hold on to each other while discussing how you manage conflict.

BRING

»» You should bring the differences you chose in the exercise, and be prepared to read or openly listen to your partner's answers and discuss.

TROUBLESHOOTING

TROUBLESHOOTING

- »» Don't make your partner the bad guy. There is no winner in a healthy conflict; there is only understanding and resolution or acceptance.
- »» Communicate a fundamental acceptance of your partner's personality, regardless of how you're different.
- »» Don't avoid conflict. Avoiding conflict breeds emotional distance.
- »» Don't criticize or judge your partner, or believe that their viewpoint is wrong and yours is right. Both of your perspectives are valid.
- »» When regrettable incidents happen, use the four steps to process and repair your fight.
- »» Love your partner for who they are, as they are.
- »» Recognize when a problem is solvable and when it's not. Not all conflict can, or needs to, be resolved.

OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS FOR YOUR DATE CONVERSATION

Discuss each item you chose from the issues exercise. Some of the couples that went on this date chose to explore every issue. Take turns as both speaker and listener. When it's your turn to listen, ask each other the following three questions for any topics you both see as a source of conflict or difference between you.

- 1 What is the story of how this issue is important to you?
- 2 Is there a story behind this issue related to your own personal history or your family growing up?
- 3 Is there a deeper purpose or goal for you in your position on this issue?

OTHER OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS ABOUT CONFLICT:

- 1 How was conflict handled in your family growing up?
- 2 How do you feel about anger? How was it expressed in your family growing up?

- 3 How can I best support you when you're feeling angry?
- 4 How do you like to make up after a disagreement?
- 5 What do you *now* understand about your partner that you didn't before this exercise?

AFFIRMING OUR FUTURE TOGETHER

Take turns reading this affirmation out loud to each other. Maintain eye contact while reciting.



I commit to accepting you completely and embracing our differences. When we have conflict, I'll seek to understand your feelings and point of view about the issue, and will manage our conflict as skillfully as possible. When regrettable incidents happen, I'll seek to repair the damage through the process we have discussed.

DATE



Let's Get It On

SEX & INTIMACY

“I’ll admit it, we did the sex date first!”

Katya and Ethan have been married for almost a year, and both work long hours at the same tech company. “You don’t usually think of engineers and computer science people as particularly sexy,” said Katya, “but I love talking about sex! There’s nothing that I’m uncomfortable talking about. I’m like my grandmother that way. She will just as easily discuss blow jobs as she will where she’s going on her next cruise. I always thought that was totally normal, until I met Ethan.”

To say Ethan grew up in a more conservative home than Katya would be an understatement. “When I was about seventeen, we had *the talk*,” he said. “It was super awkward, and my dad just kind of asked me if I knew about protection and that was it. You could tell he was uncomfortable and that made me uncomfortable. I was a virgin until I was twenty-one. My parents didn’t talk about sex. I mean the only signs that my parents were sexual in any way was the fact that there was me and my two brothers. Other than that, whatever they did sexually they did in the bedroom and they did it quietly. We had a really small house. I don’t think I ever even saw them make out, I mean, an occasional peck here and there, but no real passion.”

For Katya, the sex date was a way to get them to open up about what they both liked and didn’t like in their lovemaking. “It gave us a good framework to have a real talk. Because there were specific questions written by someone else who doesn’t know us, it allowed us to make them our own—and it let us get really personal.”

When Katya and Ethan first started dating, they had instant chemistry. “It was off the charts,” said Katya, “It kind of startled me, because he was this real studious kind of guy. Super nerdy, which I think is sexy, and we went on a hike and the whole time I just wanted to jump him. The attraction was so strong I wasn’t even listening to him—I don’t think he even knew it—and it scared me a little because I had never felt that way before.”

“I knew it,” said Ethan. “You were practically drooling on me.”

“That attraction actually made me wait longer than I had before to have sex. I knew he was a game changer. We waited a month, but that felt like a long time because we were together almost every day. I knew that he was someone who was going to change my life—not just someone I was dating or a boyfriend or a lover—he was the real deal. I loved that month of anticipation. It was like one long big tease, and when we did finally have sex . . . kapok! It was everything.”

“I don’t like to think about all the guys she didn’t wait with. Katya is way more sexually experienced than I am, and that was hard for me at first. I always

wondered if she wanted me to do things to her that I didn't even know about. I don't watch porn. I've never read a sex book. It's not my most confident area. If sex were coding, I would become an expert easily, but it's not. Women were kind of mysterious to me. Katya is still mysterious to me."

"Me, or my vagina?"

"Both!" Ethan laughed. "You see, that's what I'm talking about. You are way more open in how you talk and I love it. It helps me be more open and feel more comfortable. I think my dad would pass out if you said the word *vagina* to him. Literally drop to the floor."

"It's kind of this weird role reversal, because there's a stereotype that women are the innocent virgins and the man guides them sexually, but I love that you've let me teach you and show you what I like. I know it's hard for you to tell me what you like or don't like, but I want to know what turns you on the most."

"It all turns me on."

"That's easy to say, but I really want to know specifically. I really want us to be able to talk about anything sexually. I have no idea if you have any fantasies. I would totally love to act out a fantasy you have. Seriously. Anything."

"Anything?"

"Anything!"

Grace and Mia are a same-sex unmarried couple who have been together for a little over a year, and were deciding whether to move in together when they went on the Sex & Intimacy date. "We both work seventy hours a week sometimes, so on nights we spend together we just fall asleep rather than make love. But we're working on it," said Grace. "I mean we used to have sex like three or four times a week, but now we cuddle a lot and pass out."

"Is that a problem for you?" asked Mia.

"I think as long as we're having sex at least once a week, I'm okay. I'm going to try to work only fifty hours a week. What about you?"

"If we go two weeks without sex," laughed Mia, "we're going to need to talk."

"I'm going to talk to you, too, if we go that long."

Grace and Mia were comfortable and playful talking about what they like and don't like sexually. "We try lots of new positions and angles when we make love," said Mia. "It's fun. I like it when we are slow and sensual, and really connected. That makes me feel loved. That and when you tell me you love me. I feel the most loved when you are telling me and showing me."

Both Mia and Grace expressed concern about the frequency of sex, and Grace expressed concern about the creativity of their sex life. "Sometimes it's like we

just do the same old routine, and I'd like to try new things."

"Like what?"

"Like combining yoga and sex. Or even acro-yoga, where you hang upside down. I want to see if we can add more spirituality into our lovemaking. Work with energy. That really interests me."

"I didn't know you wanted to do that."

"We're both pretty flexible, so I think it would be fun. And if we fall on our faces doing acro-yoga sex, at least we tried!"

"It will definitely make a good story!"

Matthew and Erin have a nine-month-old baby, and have been married for three years and together for nine. "It's hard to find the energy, or the time," says Erin. "I miss how spontaneous we used to be with sex. I loved that one time at the beach on vacation."

"That was pretty public, even though we were in the water," said Matthew. "I don't know if anyone even knew what we were doing, but that made it more exciting."

"It was amazing," said Erin.

Matthew responded, "I guess I want to know how I can help you feel more spontaneous. That's what having a baby does—here I am trying to plan our spontaneity. But I know you're tired and the baby demands a lot of your time and attention and energy."

Erin asked, "So do you feel neglected?"

"Not neglected," replied Matthew, "because I know what we signed up for in becoming parents, and I know it won't be forever, but I do miss having more intimate time together."

"I miss it, too. It's just with nursing—sometimes I don't want anything or anyone to touch me, especially my breasts. And I'm not that confident yet with my body. But I don't want us to lose that intimacy. Sometimes it's just nice to be held and, you know, comforted. That's sexy time for me right now. We waited so long to have this baby, and now I'm tired a lot of the time. I should have had a baby at twenty-four, not thirty-four!"

"You're gorgeous to me, and I will try to help you more, so you can be more rested."

"And have more sex?" laughed Erin.

Matthew replied, "Well, yeah, I won't complain if that happens."

"It helps to talk about how things have changed. Sometimes I worry about it, and I wonder if you're going to leave me for some younger woman who isn't tired all the time and can have sex four times a day."

“Seriously?” said Matthew.

Erin replied, “Yes, but part of it’s hormonal.”

“I can go without sex, but I still want to feel connected as a couple and not just as parents. I want to kiss and flirt with you. I want you to tell me how sexy and handsome I am to you. I would never leave you for a younger woman who could have sex four times a day. I promise.”

“She’d probably be a total bitch, anyway.”

“Probably,” said Matthew

Erin thought about it for a moment. “So what if we just make it a point to make each other feel more loved during the day, when there’s no pressure to have sex or not have sex; it will help me not feel so stressed about whether I’m letting you down in that area. Maybe like just a text message here and there, so I start feeling less like a milking machine and more like the Erin on the beach.”

“I can sext you so hard!” laughed Matthew.

“Ooh! See, it’s working already.”

For all the couples that shared their sex date conversations with us, humor was a big part of the discussion. Talking about sex doesn’t have to be uncomfortable or awkward or serious. Approach this conversation and date with lightness and honesty. One engaged couple that had chosen to be celibate until marriage laughed throughout the conversation, but still found it enlightening to talk about sex before they had actually had sex. “It was fun. We just applied it to the things we had done sexually with each other. We’re celibate and virgins, but we’re not monks or anything. Laughing about sex makes it less serious and less stressful. And it was a good way to get the conversation going even before we get married. The one thing we had no idea about was how frequently we are going to want to have sex. Like, we have no idea what’s really normal in that area for us.”

FINDING YOUR NORMAL

We all wonder about other couples. How much sex are they having? How does our sex life compare? What if sex isn’t that big a deal to us? Or what if we’ve chosen to be celibate? If we’re not having sex very often, or if the sex drops off, does that mean our relationship is doomed? What about fantasy and role-play? Oral sex? Anal sex? And how much sex is “normal” in a long-term relationship?

What’s normal is whatever works for you and your partner. According to a comprehensive University of Chicago study, 80 percent of married couples have sex a few times a month or more, with 32 percent of those reporting having sex two to three times per week, and 48 percent reporting having sex a few times per

month. It's a myth that sex is or should be deeply romantic, with lit candles, soft music, and hours of leisurely lovemaking. Real couples may occasionally have sex for a long time, or they may have quickies more often. There may be fantasy and role-play, sex toys, and even some things you couldn't imagine your best friends doing. Normal is whatever you both are comfortable with, and normal will change often throughout the life of your relationship—as you have children, as you age, as you deal with medical issues. It's all a normal part of human sexuality, and it's all okay. To begin your relationship or marriage saying we're going to have sex every single day is a setup for failure. Life shows up, and nothing is a greater measure of just how life is showing up than your sexuality.

We all want to keep our relationship passionate and connected, and there are ways to both create and destroy your connection that all take place out of the bedroom. What's most important is not to let sex become the last item on a very long to-do list, the final obligation you turn to when you're both exhausted. There are concrete ways to ensure you have a great sex life.

In a study of 70,000 responses from 24 different countries, Christianne Northrup, Pepper Schwartz, and James Witte, in their book, *The Normal Bar*, reported the results of their extensive survey about love and sex. Couples who have a great sex life:

- ››› Say “I love you” to their partners every day, and mean it
- ››› Buy one another surprise romantic gifts
- ››› Compliment their partner often
- ››› Have romantic vacations
- ››› Give one another back rubs
- ››› Kiss one another passionately for no reason at all (85 percent who love sex also kiss passionately)
- ››› Show affection publicly (hold hands, caress, kiss)
- ››› Cuddle with one another every day (only 6 percent of the non-cuddlers had a great sex life)
- ››› Have a romantic date once a week that may include dressing up, dinner out, massage, and lovemaking
- ››› Make sex a priority and talk to one another about sex comfortably
- ››› Are open to a variety of sexual activities

»» Turn toward bids for emotional connection

Furthermore, the more couples do these things, the better their sex life is. The champion countries were Spain and Italy. The bottom line: Great sex is not rocket science. It's very doable, but you have to be able to talk about it and you have to make it a priority in your relationship.

SEX AFTER PARENTHOOD

A study done on dual-career couples by the UCLA Sloane Center for Everyday Life of Families found that couples with young children tended to spend very little time with one another. Much like Matthew and Erin, these couples were alone together in a typical evening only 10 percent of the time. Typically dads were in rooms alone, while mom was alone with the kids. One researcher in this study told us that the dual-career couples talked to one another an average of 35 minutes a week, and most of that talk was about errands. Therefore, many couples eventually stop doing the romantic things with one another that sustain a loving relationship. They stop having fun. They stop making time for playfulness. They stop having romantic getaways or romantic dates. They stop having adventures together. They stop doing all the things that sustain passion and a lively romantic life. Instead, their lives become an infinite list of errands, and life becomes drudgery.

None of that is necessary, especially when kids arrive. The greatest gift a couple can give their kids is a loving relationship they can model and grow within. The children are nurtured by the love between the parents as much as by the love they receive directly.

TALKING ABOUT SEX

This date is all about discussing your sex life, and creating your own rituals of connection. To do that, however, you need to be able to talk about sex. Research shows that couples who can talk openly about sex have more sex, and the women in these relationships have more orgasms. Talking about sex is a win-win for couples. Even with the knowledge that just talking about sex creates more sex (and more satisfying sex), it can still be difficult. Only a minority of couples can speak openly and freely about sex. But this is a skill you can learn and get more and more comfortable with. The important thing when you're talking about sex with your partner is to focus on what you like and what feels good. "I like it when you touch me here. . . . It feels so good when you do . . ."

This is especially important for women to feel comfortable doing, because research shows that men need and want some guidance. Men want to bring their partner pleasure, they want to satisfy them sexually, and they want some direction.

Another key point to talking about what's working and not working in your sex life is to discuss it outside the bedroom. Stopping things in the middle of the action to offer constructive criticism is not going to go over well, for either of you. One couple we know like to do what they call "sex review" after the fact. This usually happens the next morning over coffee, or even while they're out running errands. "We talk about what we liked. What we want to try the next time we make love. New moves and things that were surprising. Anything, really. Sex review is a way to keep things sexy even when we're not doing sexy things."

This particular couple used a lot of humor to discuss what was working and good for each of them in their sex life. These discussions were always positive, and there was never a "bad" review. They talked about only what they liked. All of the conversations in this book ask you to be honest, open, and vulnerable with your partner and this can and will feel uncomfortable, but discussing sex can bring that vulnerability to an entirely different level. Often it can seem easier to be naked physically rather than naked emotionally, but if you want to create a relationship or marriage that goes the distance, you're going to have to bare it all.

INITIATING SEX

Research shows that over 70 percent of people (both men and women) use indirect strategies to ask for sex. A direct method would be, "Hey, sweetheart, let's make love." "I want sex." "Do you want sex?" But only 30 percent of couples, married or otherwise, use this direct approach. Most people will indicate they want to make love with a touch, a cuddle, or a kiss, and they will do so in what we call a face-saving way. Meaning they will go in for a kiss or a cuddle, see what the response is, and proceed accordingly. It's a way to test the waters and avoid getting rejected. Nobody likes rejection, especially when they are going in hot, looking for some sexy-time. As relationships mature, the bids for affection and sex will get more direct. And that's a good thing, because there's less chance for misunderstanding and hurt feelings to arise when we're direct and loving—and sexy.

In general, there are some differences between men and women when it comes to asking for sex. We say "in general" because there are exceptions to

every rule. We also want to acknowledge that we have cited the research available on gay and lesbian couples, but almost none exists on transgender couples, which limits much of our citations to research on heterosexual, cisgender couples. We are hoping this will change in the future.

THINKING ABOUT SEX: Men think about sex more than women. Fifty-four percent of men compared to 19 percent of women think about sex every day or several times a day.

FREQUENCY: In our research of couples' sex lives, we found that ideally men want sex four to five times a week, and women one to two times.

FANTASIES: Men have more explicit sexual fantasies and women have more romantic fantasies.

MASTURBATION: Adolescent males masturbate more than adolescent females, and this difference continues into adulthood.

PREREQUISITES FOR SEX: Men in general like to have sex to feel emotionally connected, and women need to feel emotionally connected to have sex. Almost 90 percent of the couples we interviewed agreed with that last sentence. We refer to this as women having more prerequisites for sex than men do. Women's prerequisites aren't always limited to emotional closeness; sometimes they are about feeling exhausted, distracted, not rested, or not good about herself or her body. Interestingly, the data shows that gay men have the most sex of any type of couple—*two* people with the fewest prerequisites—and lesbians have the least sex of any type of couple—*two* people with the most prerequisites. Sexual desire for women is a barometer for how the rest of her world is going. If she's not rested, or happy, or healthy, or feeling supported and loved, she's not going to feel like having sex.

SAYING YES: Despite women having more prerequisites for sex, women agree to sex at the same rate that men do. Psychologists Sandra Byers and Larry Heinlein had men and women keep records of their sex lives, and found that both men and women say yes to sex about 75 percent of the time. So regardless of who is initiating—and in their study men initiated sex more often than women—the positive response percentage is the same. Isn't that an amazing figure, given how much all of us fear rejection? There's no need to feel so worried!

ACCEPTING THE NO: If your partner doesn't want to have sex, the most important thing is to not take it personally. In happy couples, there is no anger or defensiveness if one partner isn't in the mood. According to our research, each

of you isn't going to be in the mood 25 percent of the time that your partner is in the mood. Finding a way to handle the "no" is critical to the success of your relationship. Find ways to be affectionate and be together, even if sex has been taken off the table. Those couples who have mastered acceptance of the no, actually end up having sex more than couples where one partner gets upset when the other one isn't in the mood. A great way to respond to no is realizing that "no" does not have to end connection. Then one can say, "Thanks for telling me you're not in the mood. What are you in the mood for? Do you feel like taking a walk? Watching TV? Cuddling? Just talking? Or would you like time alone?" It's important not to punish one's partner for saying no. Don't sulk or whine. It's especially hard for men to hear "no," because research shows that being wanted sexually is essential to a man's sense of his masculinity. There's even been a study showing that men would prefer to get fired from their job rather than have their partner not want them sexually. If there is a lack of physical affection, flirting, and intimate connection apart from sex, your sex life will suffer. If there's emotional distance or intense conflict, like we discussed in the previous chapter, your sex life will suffer. If there's a lack of physical or emotional safety, or if one of you doesn't feel appreciated, it can affect both the quality and quantity of your sex life. Checking in on your partner's interior world will help your sex life flourish.

KEEPING IT PASSIONATE

There's one simple way to keep the passion flowing in your relationship—kiss. Kiss a lot. Kiss often. Kiss each time you leave each other, and each time you see each other again after being apart. And we're not talking about a peck on the lips like you would give your grandmother; we recommend a juicy, 6-second kiss that would make your grandmother—or anyone else watching the two of you—blush. When you kiss passionately, you set off a chemical cascade of hormones and neurotransmitters that release dopamine and increase oxytocin, both of which make you feel good. Really good. If you really mean it when you kiss, your blood vessels will dilate, your brain will receive extra oxygen, your pupils will dilate, and your cheeks will flush. Lips are our body's most exposed erogenous zone and are associated with a disproportionately large part of the brain. The brain literally lights up with a good kiss, and kissing activates 5 out of 12 cranial nerves. More important, though, for those 6 seconds when you leave each other and when you return to each other, you are disconnecting from the world outside and reconnecting with your partner and the world you are creating

together. In just 6 seconds you tell each other that you matter, and you choose each other all over again.

As we mentioned above, the largest study of love on the planet, with 70,000 people in 24 countries, found that in all great relationships, kissing passionately for no reason at all was one universal key to a great sex life. Sheril Kirshenbaum, in her book *The Science of Kissing*, cites a ten-year German study that found that men who kissed their wives before leaving for work lived five years longer and earned 20 percent more than men who “left without a peck goodbye.”

Another key way to keep passion flowing is to express your fondness and affection and appreciation of each other verbally. You can’t just *think* positive things about your partner, you need to *verbalize* them to your partner. Appreciate their efforts, their attractiveness, their intelligence, their work, their skills, their sense of humor, and whatever else about them you love and admire. The Love Lab found that successful relationships have a 20 to 1 ratio of positive to negative in all their everyday interactions in the apartment lab. This means for every one time you roll your eyes at something your partner says or does, you need to counteract this with 20 positive responses and reactions. When they want your attention, you give it to them. You ask how each other’s day went while making eye contact, you talk about the things that are stressing them out, you listen to them, and you empathize with their struggles. Every time you’re together there is an opportunity to learn more about each other and become closer. When you are apart, send love texts, or flirt with each other over the phone or by email. Let your partner know you are thinking about them and loving them. These little acts and stolen moments of connection—the kind that happen outside the bedroom—are exactly what will keep the passion in your relationship alive far more than any wild tricks you might try out behind closed doors. Take time to date each other, to get to know each other day in and day out, and create your own rituals for connection. Making love to each other is something you do with your minds and your hearts—whether the body is involved or not. And trust us when we say, these types of loving gestures and romantic rituals will make your desire for each other grow over the years.

KISSING PASSIONATELY FOR NO REASON AT ALL IS ONE UNIVERSAL KEY TO A GREAT SEX LIFE.

Speed Dating

Chapter Summary

- »» Romantic, intimate rituals for connection keep a relationship happy and passionate.
- »» Couples who can talk openly about sex have more sex, and the women have more orgasms.
- »» Talking about sex is difficult for the majority of couples, but it gets easier and more comfortable over time and the more you do it.
- »» The best time to talk about sex is not when you are making love, but outside the bedroom. Sex review!
- »» Tell your partner what you like and what feels good, not what they're doing wrong.
- »» Eighty percent of married couples have sex a few times a month or more. Whatever frequency is comfortable for the two of you is normal.
- »» Married couples have more sex than couples who are dating or living together.
- »» The top sex and passion killers in a relationship are:
 - ~ Lack of physical affection, flirting, intimate connection apart from sex
 - ~ Vital to-do things left undone
 - ~ Emotional distance and intense conflict
 - ~ Lack of safety, either emotional or physical
 - ~ Exhaustion and stress
 - ~ Feeling unappreciated

The Date: SEX & INTIMACY

CONVERSATION TOPIC

»»» Exploring and discussing romance, sex, and physical intimacy.

PREPARATION

»»» Reflect on what you read in this chapter and any ideas it sparked about what you want sex and passion to look like in your relationship or marriage. What rituals for connection might you create? If sex is hard for you to talk about, be prepared to say so and explore why it's hard. There is no right or wrong way to talk about sex. It starts with being brave enough to say whatever's on your mind.

LOCATION

»»» For this date you will have a candlelit dinner somewhere. It could be in your favorite romantic restaurant or a public place where you can be very private—such as a cove in a beach or a hidden corner of a public garden. The theme is intimacy, sex, and romance. Is there a place that's especially romantic and intimate for you and your partner? You could also do something physical to get into your body before the date, such as a dance class, a yoga class, or a session of stretching together.

SUGGESTIONS

»»» We suggest that you make this date as romantic and seductive as possible. If you're going out, dress in a way that your partner finds sexy. If you don't know what way this is—ask him or her. You may even decide to let the other person pick your clothes for this “sex” date. For this conversation, you'll want to be in your body. As you focus on discussing physical intimacy with your partner, tune into your physical experience as well. Midway through the questions, stop and check in with your body and your partner. Is your heart beating quickly? Is your breathing slow or fast? Are you turned on? Slowly scan from the tip of your toes up to the crown of your head, checking in with each body part.

AT-HOME DATE: If you're going to have this date at home, arrange to have the place to yourselves and have the date naked, in bed. Or naked in the living room. If you have a beautiful yard or garden, have the date in the garden (but probably clothed).

BRING

»» You should bring an open mind and a willingness to be vulnerable with your partner. Adopt a “YES, AND . . .” attitude instead of a “YES, BUT . . .” attitude toward your partner's ideas. Yes, and . . . means that you accept everything your partner says as true for them, and in the spirit of improvisation (which is where *Yes, and . . .* comes from) you add to the conversation and understanding between you. *Yes, but . . .* negates whatever it is they're sharing. If talking about sex doesn't come easily for you, you may wish to write down your thoughts about this chapter ahead of time and read them to your partner.

TROUBLESHOOTING

- »» Be as specific as you can about what you like sexually—try not to be vague. Say what you like, not what you don't like.
- »» Don't compare your sexual experiences with your partner to any other partner.
- »» If you don't know what your partner is referring to when your partner describes sex, or a sexual act, ask.
- »» Use any words that are comfortable for you to openly talk about anatomy and sexual activity.
- »» Be open-minded to whatever turns your partner on, and do not judge them for any fantasies they may have.
- »» If your partner isn't in the mood to have sex at the end of the date, be accepting, loving, and caring. Never get mad when sex is refused.

OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS FOR YOUR DATE CONVERSATION

You'll each take turns asking and answering these questions.

- 1 Think about all the times we've had sex. What are some of your favorites? What about that time made it your favorite?

- 2 What turns you on?
- 3 How can I enhance our passion?
- 4 What's your favorite way for me to let you know I want to have sex?
- 5 Where and how do you like to be touched?
- 6 What's your favorite time to make love and why? What's your favorite position?
- 7 Is there something sexually you've always wanted to try, but have never asked? How often would you like to have sex?
- 8 What can I do to make our sex life better?

AFFIRMING OUR FUTURE TOGETHER

Take turns reading this affirmation out loud to each other. Maintain eye contact while reciting.



I commit to creating our own romantic rituals for connection, and creating more passion outside of the bedroom by expressing my affection and love for you. I commit to having a 6-second kiss every time we say goodbye or hello to each other for the next week. I commit to discussing, exploring, and renewing our sexual relationship.

DATE



The Cost of Love

WORK & MONEY

Adam and Trevor have been married for a little over two years, but have been living together for five. They looked forward to going on the money date, because money has been an issue between them since they first began dating. Adam likes to plan for the future and for a rainy day, and is almost fanatical about having a minimum of six-months' worth of rent and bills socked away in case of emergency. Trevor believes any extra money should be spent on fun and recreation and experiences that will last a lifetime. "Life is short," said Trevor. "You might not be here tomorrow, so why wait. I don't want a bucket list. I have a do-it-now list."

The conflicts over money seemed fairly easy to resolve in their first couple of years together. They saved half of what Adam wanted to save every month, and spent the other half on what Trevor wanted—exciting weekends away together and trying new things like paddleboarding and zip-lining. But when Adam received a small inheritance, their minor disagreement over money turned into a major fight. "It was extra money, above the budget, so I wanted to put all of it right into savings," said Adam. "But Trevor wanted to travel. We'd always dreamed of going to Southeast Asia, but we didn't have the money for that kind of a trip. Especially because we are both freelancers, so it wasn't only the cost of the trip, but the cost of our missed hours at work."

"It was a gift," says Trevor. "It was a chance to do something we always dreamed of doing. I couldn't make him see my point of view. Plus it was his inheritance, so I felt like I could only argue to a point."

"He was really upset," says Adam. "It was big. As far as I was concerned it was our money—we share everything—but I couldn't really understand why he didn't see it as a chance for us to get ahead for once and have a bigger cushion if we needed it. I wanted to travel, too, but I couldn't see taking all that time off work. It felt risky to me."

Everything changed when they started to explore what money actually meant to each other. Trevor's dad had died very young, at the age of 35. "My parents talked about taking us on lots of travel adventures, but the trips were always off in some magical future. *Someday* we would go to Disneyland. *Someday* we would go to Hawaii. And when my dad died, all those magical adventures died with him. *Someday* never happened. When you're on your deathbed, you're never going to regret the memories you've created with the people you love—you're only going to regret what you didn't do."

Adam's parents never saved. "My dad lost his job and we were in bad shape. He had nothing to fall back on—no savings whatsoever. We got by, but not being able to provide for his family crushed him. My sister and I both started

working really young, at twelve and fourteen, doing whatever we could for money just to help pay the rent and get food. It was hard. He ended up getting a great job and doing really well, but I was really resentful of him early on because they had nothing saved to tide us through. Now he always asks me if I'm saving, and what my backup plan is if I lose my job. He really put that fear in me. This inheritance from my grandmother really means a lot, and I want to put it to good use."

Once Adam and Trevor understood what money actually represented for each of them, and understood their very different family histories with spending and saving, the conflict over the inheritance ended. Even though Adam offered to go on the trip to Southeast Asia, Trevor suggested they put only 10 percent toward the trip and try to find ways to travel on a budget. "Once I heard about his dad losing his job, I understood where he was coming from. It wasn't about me. It was about how he grew up, and I wouldn't have felt right if we had spent all the money on a big trip. A little of it is okay with me. I think we're going to have a better balance with the money issue going forward."

Whether your bank account is robust or you're living paycheck to paycheck, money is one of the top five reasons couples fight. Research on a sample of 4,574 couples shows that, of all the issues married couples fight about, financial arguments were the single best predictor of divorce. The other four issues that couples get into conflict over the most? Sex, in-laws, alcohol or drug use, and parenting.

Unless you have an unlimited trust fund, work can't be separated from the conversation about money. Many of the couples who went on these eight dates worked long hours at their jobs or spent long hours at school. Time and money and work were issues that permeated many of the conversations—especially the dates around commitment, family, play and fun, and dreams.

For most couples, the arguments around money tend to fall into three distinct categories: different perceptions of financial inequality, different perceptions of what it means to have financial well-being, and different perceptions about the nature of how they argue about money. Of all the three, the nature of the arguments was the best predictor of whether a couple would break up. What this means is that conflicts over finances don't need to be a "make or break" issue. What matters most is how a couple talks about their financial disagreements.

Couples need to avoid the dichotomy of characterizing one another in terms of the two most common stereotypes: the Spender and the Saver.

The Spender sees himself or herself as wisely using money to live a happy life, one with comfort, well-being, generosity, health, and fun for the entire

family. In stereotyping the Spender, the Saver uses terms like frivolous, thoughtless, impulsive, lavish, wasteful, extravagant, or self-indulgent.

The Saver sees himself or herself as practical, conservative, wise, and stoic. The Saver values money as accomplishment, security, success, power, freedom from worry, an investment in the future, and a future legacy. In stereotyping the Saver, the Spender uses terms like miserly, cold, mean, stingy, selfish, cheap, cynical, and a hoarder who doesn't know how to enjoy pleasure.

The truth is we're all savers and spenders at different times, and stereotypes rarely help us come to any understanding about what money means to our partner that helps us in navigating money conflicts as they arise. Whether or not you're married, the conflict money creates isn't about numbers—it's about what money means. Money buys pleasure, and it also buys security. Balancing the two can be work for any couple, and ultimately the goal is to balance the freedom and empowerment money represents with the security and trust it also signifies.

Each partner comes to the relationship with their own history and relationship with money and their own set of feelings connected to money. We all have a legacy about money—a story that is handed down from generation to generation about what money has meant to our family.

WORKING HARD FOR THE MONEY

Work can take up nearly as much of our time, energy, and ability to commit as our relationship. In fact, work can often be the “third party” in a relationship. Having a conversation about your commitment to work and making money is just as important as your discussion about what commitment means in your relationship or marriage. Our relationship demands our time, and our work demands our time. It is a myth that to have a good marriage you have to choose one or the other. You don't. The problem comes when our commitment to work and to our partner are in conflict, so how we find a way to satisfy both commitments is fundamental to the success of our relationship.

Obviously if one or both of you is working 60, 80, or even 100 hours a week this won't leave much time or energy to spend on the relationship. It's a simple numbers game. And as the saying goes, no one, on their deathbed, says “I wish I spent more time at the office.” If one of you is working incredibly long hours, is overly stressed and pressured by career demands, or is willing to sacrifice the relationship in the name of ambition or pursuit of money, this isn't sustainable or conducive to a happy marriage. Long hours at work can pull people apart, leave little time for connection, and create loneliness in the relationship.

John and Julie go on a honeymoon every year. It is a ritual they have created to celebrate and honor their union—a way to show that their relationship is still important enough to merit time away from careers, family, friends, and obligations as it was when they first got married. It's not always easy. They have busy clinical practices, demanding research, and some years, books to write and deadlines to meet. At age 71, John decided to pursue a work dream—writing a book for therapists summarizing his 15 years of using mathematical equations and the laws of physics to understand love. It was an ambitious project, to say the least, and John loved every second of it.

Growing up in a one-bedroom apartment with five people, John developed an amazing ability to focus and block out everything around him while he worked. When he's working with such intensity, you could be in the same room as him, calling out his name, and he wouldn't hear you. It's a skill that helped him survive in a crowded home growing up, helped him obtain his PhD, and allowed him to spend hours intensely studying the micromannerisms and expressions of couples in the Love Lab. For this particular book, John was driven and on a mission. And this mission was overriding everything else in his life—including Julie.

Preparing to leave on their fourteenth annual honeymoon, John packed his mathematical equations and his physics books, including stacks of research papers, graphs, and complicated formulas. All of which went into the suitcase. He was obsessed. He was focused. This was his work, and it was a priority for him. He had already been intensely working on this book for the last year.

On their first five days away, John worked on the book 16 hours a day. He was in mathematical heaven. On their fifth night, they pulled up to their favorite Italian restaurant, with soft lighting and a piano player crooning away in the corner. John read over the menu and then asked Julie what she wanted to eat. She meant to say, "fettuccini Alfredo" but instead burst into tears. John was stupefied. Why was she crying? And that's when Julie poured out all her misery about this last year, including the last five days. The honeymoon was supposed to be their special time to reconnect and celebrate their love, and John had ignored her the entire time. His drive to turn his research into a book had taken over everything, including their honeymoon.

Julie's tears shook John out of his intense and one-pointed focus. Yes, he loved his work, and wanted to further his career with this book for other therapists, but he realized at that moment, he had to balance it with his love for Julie.

John working 16 hours a day on his book during their annual honeymoon was in conflict with the commitment he and Julie had made to spend this time

connecting to one another. Even though he was a marriage expert, it took Julie's tears for John to realize just how far out of balance his priorities had gotten. His book was a work dream of his, but in that moment he had to acknowledge that his long hours of research and writing, while beneficial to him, weren't beneficial to his relationship.

At that particular time.

Julie wasn't asking him to give up something that was meaningful to him forever, she wasn't telling him to choose between the book and her; she was just asking that he give it up for their honeymoon week.

If you or your partner is starting a business, for example, it'll take time and commitment and long hours, but as long as you are transparent about the commitment you're making to your work and financial future, and you discuss it and make agreements with your partner ahead of time, it doesn't have to be a deal breaker. And the long hours are not going to last forever. Obviously, unless we are independently wealthy, we all need to work to survive. Bills have to be paid. Food, clothing, and shelter are necessities. Yes, work means money, but it can also mean personal fulfillment, accomplishment, and even purpose, meaning, and passion in life. These things also matter.

SHARING THE LOAD

In the 1950s, this conversation about work and money was uncommon. The man was the breadwinner who donned his coat and hat and left the house for the office every morning. Careers were kept for a lifetime—the same job from hire to retire. He made the money. He had the power. In a marriage, the woman stayed at home and took care of the house, the children, the cooking, and the cleaning. The media strongly suggested that women greet their husbands at the door at the end of the day, looking lovely, with a cocktail in her hand for her hardworking man.

It's not 1950.

Everything has changed, and these traditional roles have been in flux for decades. Women work and parent, and men work and parent. Fathers now more commonly stay home with the children, and sometimes mothers still do as well. Even more commonly, both spouses work. Household chores, ideally, are shared. Nurturing is shared. Money and power are shared.

Even people's fond memories of the 1950s are flawed, as Stephanie Coontz pointed out in her book *The Way We Never Were*. Back then, married women were often depressed and anxious, feeling unfulfilled without feeling entitled to their own dreams, without financial freedom, dominated by their husbands, and

taking medications to control their sadness and anger. Women and men who were unmarried, gay or lesbian, or in alternative relationships were often left out of the cultural story altogether.

Today, women ages 25 to 32 begin their careers more educated than their male counterparts. Thirty-eight percent of women joining the workforce have at least a four-year college degree compared to 31 percent of men in the same age group. In fact, in 2015 in the United States, women made up more than half (51 percent) of the technical and professional workforce. And according to Pew Research, the percentage of women who consider having a high-paying career “one of the most important things in their lives” is greater than the percentage of men in the same age group. Sixty-six percent of women rate a career as high on their list of priorities, compared to 59 percent of men. The same research study also reveals that both men and women rate having a successful marriage as more important than a successful career. Love, it seems, trumps work no matter what decade we’re living in. The good news is that people don’t have to choose between work and a relationship. In fact, research shows that if you’re happy in your marriage you’re more likely to be happier in your job. The reverse is also true, job satisfaction can predict marital satisfaction, but researchers found this link to be weaker.

There is one type of work that reliably causes conflict for couples—unpaid work. Couples fight more about the division of labor in the household—dishes, cleaning, laundry—than they do about outside or paid jobs. In fact, another Pew Research study in 2007 showed that after faithfulness and a good sex life, sharing household chores was listed as the most important element of a successful marriage. Adequate income, good housing, shared religious beliefs, shared interests, and children all came below sharing household chores.

If you hired someone to do the work of maintaining a household, especially if you have children, the cost would be approximately \$90,000 a year. This is what a “traditional” at-home spouse would get paid today to clean the house, be a personal shopper and personal assistant, run errands, and take care of the children. It’s a lot of money, and it’s a lot of work. Either you pay someone to do this or someone in the relationship has to take on these jobs. According to Time Use data from 1965 through 2011, the amount of time men and women spend on paid work, unpaid work, and child care (where applicable) are roughly equal; 59 hours a week for men on average, 58 hours a week for women. In 1965, men spent an average of 6.5 hours a week on unpaid work such as housework and child care. In 2011, men spent an average of 17 hours a week on unpaid work. In contrast, women used to spend an average of 32 hours a week on housework alone, and that number (thanks to the men sharing the load) had fallen to 18

hours a week in 2011. The roles of men and women in relation to work are converging, and in the twenty-first century there is no right or wrong way to divide the labor—it's whatever works for the two of you. In the era of the collaborative marriage, where you're part of a team, you'll need to decide together what works for your relationship and your life. And know that this will change once you have children, and it'll change as you switch careers, and as you work together to support each other's dreams. Work is about so much more than a paycheck, and your views about what work and money mean will evolve over a lifetime.

TIME IS MONEY

Work and the pursuit of money will mean different things at different times in your life, and finding the right balance can be difficult. There will be both costs and benefits to the relationship, depending on the work choices each of you makes. If you enter into a long-term relationship or marriage thinking that you and your partner will always leave work at 5 p.m. every day, ready to go out, or cook dinner, or hit the gym, or take a class together, or have a deep discussion—you're setting yourself up for disappointment. Sometimes work demands will feel like there's been a hostile takeover of your free time and your relationship, and you need to make sure your relationship is solid enough to handle these times.

While Rachel was in her medical residency, she and Doug had very little time together. The hours were long and brutal, she was sleep-deprived, and it seemed as if they never saw each other except for their weekly date night. Doug supported Rachel's work dream of becoming a physician, but not being able to connect and spend time together had driven a wedge between them. They were both feeling dissatisfied and started arguing more during the brief time they saw each other. While they kept up with scheduling a date night, during it they both felt frustrated and alone. "I remember one date night in particular, because we never made it out of the parking lot of the apartment complex we were living in," remembered Rachel. "We just sat in the car, side by side, and I just felt exhausted, numb, and kind of lost. I was working so hard, *for us*, but somehow in the middle of my grueling residency, we had lost that us. All that was left was work, and I turned to Doug and said, 'I'm afraid we're not going to make it.' I think we were both equally shocked when I said the words out loud."

It was this moment of vulnerability and honesty that allowed both of them to drop their frustration. They sat in the car and wept at the idea of not having each

other and losing everything they had together. That possibility was devastating, and in the middle of the parking lot, Rachel had an epiphany.

“I realized my marriage was the most important thing to me, and if it came down to making a choice, I would give up medicine, and do something else for work.”

For Rachel, her priorities became clear in the midst of crisis. Instead of giving up medicine, she ended up telling her residency supervisor that she needed a month off because being on call 24/7 was causing her marriage to fall apart. During that month, she and Doug made a list of what their priorities would be in their life and in their marriage. First on their list came their health and spiritual well-being. Next came their marriage. Then family, and then work and money. These were important, but Rachel and Doug realized that for them, these priorities were last on their list. Every couple should come to an agreement about priorities, but each couple will be unique. You and your partner should talk about your own priorities and what you value.

MANAGING TIME

The complaint that one partner works too much is a common one. Great marriages require that each person gives their time and energy to the other partner. Whether you're the spouse who's overworking or the spouse who's complaining about the overwork, it helps to have a conversation that explores both points of view. Often our identity, our purpose, and our self-worth can get tied into “what we do” and this compels us to work long hours. But consistent long hours come at a price, and like Doug and Rachel, you both may start to feel emotionally disconnected and this puts your relationship at risk. If your time together is compromised because of one or the other's work schedule, ask each other the following questions:

For the partner working long hours:

- ››› What does your work mean to you?
- ››› What pleasure or satisfaction does work bring to you?
- ››› What need does working fulfill in your life?
- ››› How would you spend your day if money was no object and you didn't have to work?

For the partner who is frustrated by the long hours:

- »»» What does your partner's absence mean to you?
- »»» What do you miss about your partner when he or she is gone so much?
- »»» What are you longing for in terms of emotional, physical, intellectual, or spiritual connection with your partner?

Whenever long work hours become an issue in your relationship, the guided questions above will help you come to understanding rather than conflict. How we choose to spend our time affects our relationship. Spend some time reflecting on your average 24-hour day. Make a pie chart and map out your hours for a typical day. How much time is spent working apart from each other (paid work outside the home), and how many hours are spent working together (unpaid work in the home)? How many hours are spent connecting in the relationship? How many with family (if applicable)? How much time is spent alone? Now make a second pie chart and write down your *ideal time* for each of these areas. If, for example, you'd like to spend three hours a day connecting, and two hours a day solo, and the reality is you spend about one hour for both—then you know what areas you need to work on and what your priorities are. If you set your priorities for your time together at the beginning of your relationship, this shared value of your time can be a guidepost. You have a goal you've created together, and a metric to see when the balance has shifted in ways that aren't in alignment with what you've both decided is important to your relationship.

THE REAL VALUE OF MONEY

Our own personal history with money can affect our relationships in surprising ways. It's important to explore what your family legacy is about money, generosity, power, and wealth. What emotional history and thoughts do you have about being poor, about being dependent and independent, about being strong and being weak, about philanthropy, civic responsibility, luxury, and pride of accomplishment? When two people with two separate histories with money get together, they must face the challenge of merging those two histories—or deal with the consequences of not addressing them.

The first step is to understand your own history.

The second step is to understand your partner's history.

HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH?

A Jewish scripture called the Talmud says a rich person is one who has enough. But “enough money” is a relative term. Whether you’re scrimping to get by, or you have so much money you can’t spend it fast enough, money can be a significant source of conflict for couples. So what is enough money? Obviously couples have money problems when they live beyond their means, go into the relationship with one partner having significant debt, keep financial secrets from each other, or aren’t working as a team in meeting their financial goals. Everyone has short-term goals—make the rent or mortgage, pay the household bills. Many couples also have long-term goals. Budgeting together is a great way to come up with a plan to meet both your day-to-day and longer-term financial obligations and desires. Each of you is one half of a financial team, but each of you can also have very different views, as did Trevor and Adam, about how much money is enough. This is because money has different symbolic meanings.

In our research with heterosexual couples, we’ve found that there can be profound differences between men and women when it comes to money. Women don’t typically save money, and more than 58 percent of women born between 1946 and 1964 (baby boomers) have saved less than \$10,000 in retirement accounts. It’s estimated that between one-third and two-thirds of women now aged 25 to 55 will be impoverished when they are 70 years old. This is an astonishing statistic. And for many women, having “enough” money can mean many different things. Women often equate “enough” money with love, respect, and security. “Enough” money is also equated with acceptability, attractiveness, and strength.

Typically for men, there is interplay between money and power. (This can also be true for women, but is more common in men, according to our research.) When asked, men equate money with being competent, responsible, and a provider. “Enough” money is often equated with strength, independence, maturity, competition, social power, and winning. The bottom line is that money has meaning, beyond the expenses and the budgets and the arithmetic involved with saving and spending. The goal is to find out what money means to you, and understand what money means to your partner.

Exercise

MY FAMILY HISTORY WITH MONEY

Complete the questionnaire below, separately and before your date. Then discuss your responses.

READ EACH QUESTION AND ANSWER IT HONESTLY.

- »»» What did your maternal and paternal grandparents do for a living?
- »»» How well off were your grandparents?
- »»» What did your parents do for a living?
- »»» How well off were your parents?
- »»» What were your parents' attitudes about money? How did you view these parental ideas as a child?
- »»» Did your parents feel comfortable spending money? How did you view these attitudes about money as a child?
- »»» Did your parents save money or invest? How did you view these attitudes about money as a child?
- »»» Did your family take family vacations or travel together when you were growing up? How did you view these vacations as a child? Was money discussed?
- »»» Did your family entertain? How did you view this as a child?
- »»» Did your family engage in philanthropy or charitable activities?
- »»» As a child did you have an allowance? How did you view this as a child?
- »»» What is your own work history?
- »»» What does money mean to you personally and why?
- »»» Did your parents celebrate your birthdays? Did you feel special?
- »»» Did you have a birthday cake? Did that fact matter to you as a child?

»»» How did your parents show you that they were proud of you? Or didn't they?

»»» Did you get presents at holidays? Did that fact matter to you as a child?

»»» What did your parents teach you about money? How do you feel about those teachings now?

»»» What did your family's history teach you about money? What's your attitude now?

»»» What were your family's values about money? What did you agree with and what did you disagree with?

»»» What is your most painful money memory? Tell the story of that memory to your partner.

»»» What is your happiest or best money memory? Tell the story of that memory to your partner.

Exercise

WHAT ENOUGH MONEY MEANS TO ME

Both you and your partner should complete the questionnaire below separately. Then be prepared to discuss your responses.

Read each item and circle the correct alternative that fits your point of view for each item, with the following key:

5 = Strongly Agree **4** = Agree **3** = Neither Agree nor Disagree **2** = Disagree **1** = Strongly Disagree

For me, having enough money means having power.

5 4 3 2 1

For me, having enough money means being independent.

5 4 3 2 1

For me, having enough money means being strong.

5 4 3 2 1

For me, enough money means not having to rely on anyone else.

5 4 3 2 1

For me, enough money means being responsible.

5 4 3 2 1

For me, enough money means being able to relax and not worry.

5 4 3 2 1

For me, enough money means being able to have time to do what I like.

5 4 3 2 1

For me, enough money means being able to have luxury.

5 4 3 2 1

For me, enough money means being able to create.

5 4 3 2 1

For me, enough money means being able to give some of it to other people.

5 4 3 2 1

For me, having enough money means love, caring, and affection.

5 4 3 2 1

For me, having enough money means safety, security, and stability.

5 4 3 2 1

For me, having enough money means feeling competent.

5 4 3 2 1

For me, having enough money means having control.

5 4 3 2 1

For me, having enough money allows me to feel positive self-esteem.

5 4 3 2 1

For me, having enough money means being acceptable to myself and others.

5 4 3 2 1

For me, having enough money means a reward for a lot of effort.

5 4 3 2 1

For me, having enough money means being a successful adult.

5 4 3 2 1

For me, having enough money means avoiding stress.

5 4 3 2 1

For me, having enough money means deserved self-indulgence.

5 4 3 2 1

For me, having enough money means feeling respected.

5 4 3 2 1

For me, having enough money means taking responsibility as an adult.

5 4 3 2 1

For me, having enough money has meant greater sexual opportunity.

5 4 3 2 1

For me, having enough money means great freedom.

5 4 3 2 1

For me, having enough money means I can have companionship.

5 4 3 2 1

For me, having enough money means feeling rich and comfortable.

5 4 3 2 1

For me, having enough money means filling a void in my life.

5 4 3 2 1

For me, having enough money means I can be happy.

5 4 3 2 1

The conflicts around money are best navigated when you understand the ways your history with money are the same, and the ways they're different. What to each of you constitutes having enough? With this quiz, you can delve deep into understanding what money means to your partner. Think about how you each contribute to the greater wealth of your relationship, whether that is time, work around the house, or financially. It's never too early to understand your partner's relationship and history with money, and it's never too late either. For a lifetime of love, and less conflict, express gratitude for what you have, what you each contribute, and what you are building together. Different meanings drive different relationships to money. There are ways to make your money attitudes compatible. It's worth the effort in discussion now to avoid the disagreements over how you spend and save your hard-earned cash.

Speed Dating

Chapter Summary

- ››› Money is one of the top five issues that cause conflict in couples.
- ››› Stereotyping one half of a couple as the Saver and the other as the Spender isn't helpful. Each of you has a family history and values that were instilled in you. Your work is to understand each other, not to define each other or to have the same values.
- ››› Work is the other big commitment in your life, besides your marriage and family.
- ››› Work and the pursuit of money can be the “third party” in a relationship—demanding your time and energy. Balancing your relationship and your work is fundamental to the success of your marriage.
- ››› Money issues aren't about dollars and cents; they are about what money means to each partner in a relationship.
- ››› Couples report that sharing household tasks is the most important element of a successful marriage, after fidelity and a good sex life.
- ››› If one of you is under enormous pressure and stress from work, and working long hours, this can create loneliness and a lack of emotional connection in the relationship. It pulls people apart.
- ››› Discovering what money means to both of you will go a long way in resolving the conflicts you may have around money.
- ››› Cultivate gratitude for what you have, and the contribution each of you makes to the relationship.



The Date: WORK & MONEY

CONVERSATION TOPIC

»» How do we each bring value to the relationship? What is our history with work and money and what does having enough money mean to each of us?

PREPARATION

»» Read this chapter, and prior to the date, think of three things that you appreciate about your partner's paid and/or unpaid contribution to the wealth of the relationship or family. You will share these three things at the beginning of your date. Complete the "My Family History with Money" questionnaire. Complete the "What Money Means to Me" questionnaire. Be prepared to discuss both.

LOCATION

»» This date should cost nothing or as little as possible. If your income has increased in the time you've been in your relationship, do something similar to what you did when you had less money. If you choose to go to a restaurant, make it one that you love but also one where you feel financially comfortable ordering anything on the menu.

SUGGESTIONS

»» Consider going to a five-star hotel to sit in the lobby to have your conversation. You should go to any place that makes you feel comfortable, wealthy, or rich in some way, however you define those things. Be creative. You can make yourselves a picnic and head to the park with a blanket.

AT-HOME DATE: Discuss the questions over lunch at home from your favorite take-out restaurant. Dress thoughtfully. Use the good china. Pamper yourselves with at-home luxury.

BRING

››› You should bring the answers to the two exercises in this chapter so you can compare and discuss. Be prepared to share your financial stories, and your separate histories and values around work and money and what they mean to you.

TROUBLESHOOTING

››› Remember that this topic isn't about budgeting or spending or anything to do with numbers. It's about understanding what money means to each of you and committing to discussing money and work honestly.

››› Refrain from judging your partner's values about money—there is no right or wrong way to think about or handle money.

››› Never minimize the stress of your partner's work.

››› When it comes to work in the home, be honest about what you do and don't do, and don't compare or measure your work against your partner's.

››› Allow yourself to dream about money.

››› Focus on all you have rather than what you don't have; don't focus on past money mistakes.

››› When your partner shares their dreams about money, don't disagree with them or dismiss their dreams. As with all dreams our partner shares, we need to listen and affirm and ask questions when we don't understand.

OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS FOR YOUR DATE CONVERSATION

››› Share three things you appreciate about your partner's contribution to the wealth of the relationship (paid or unpaid work).

››› Discuss your answers from the two questionnaires.

››› Discuss what you have that you are grateful for.

››› How do you feel about work now?

››› How do you imagine your work changing in the future?

››› What is your biggest fear around money?

››› What do you need to feel safe talking about how you spend money or how you make money?

»» On a scale from 1 to 10 (1 = never and 10 = always), how often do you think about money? How can I help you feel secure when you are worried about money?

»» What are your hopes and dreams about money?

AFFIRMING OUR FUTURE TOGETHER

Take turns reading this affirmation out loud to each other. Maintain eye contact while reciting.



I commit to respecting your values around money and work, and working together toward a shared financial goal.

DATE



Room to Grow

FAMILY

"It's hard to talk about family life when you don't really know how it's going to be. Everyone knows family is the most important thing—but whether that's just you and your partner, or your friends are like family, or you have kids—it's hard to say. I want a child," said Jamal, "but only one. The world's overpopulated as it is, and I don't know what my ideal family is other than to be the opposite of the one I grew up in."

Jamal and Luciana are engaged and planning to marry in the next year. They both grew up in large families, and want to have children, but they disagree on how many children they want to have. "One is too lonely," countered Luciana, "and two is just so cookie-cutter normal. I think three is perfect, it's a big family without being too big."

Jamal has strong feelings about having only one child. "In my family, there was never enough attention to go around. With five kids, my parents were always in crisis mode. They loved us, but I think with so many children their parenting was always about logistics and basic survival. We spent time together—mostly because there was never enough money for any of us to do anything outside the house—but it wasn't what I would call quality time. Both my parents worked, and I think my mom worked even longer hours than my dad. They were always exhausted. I seriously don't know why they had so many children."

Luciana grew up with three siblings, and her mom didn't work outside the home. "She was pretty traditional in that way. Almost overly involved in our school and social lives, but she loved being a mom. We always had dinner together, and we had this big master calendar in the kitchen where she tracked all our activities and sports schedules. I swear she could have been a CEO—she was that good at managing people. She never seemed stressed out, or like she was missing out on something in her own life. Even now that we're all out of the house, she volunteers all the time and teaches at the YMCA. She just loves kids. I think she would have had ten children if my dad had been up for it. But they always emphasized our independence. From the time we could walk they were preparing us to be on our own. I had friends in college who didn't even know how to do laundry, or cook an egg. It was crazy. I want to pursue my career, but I think it's possible to give your kids lots of time and attention and also do work you love. You just need one of those giant wall calendars."

For Jamal and Luciana, agreeing that they both want children is the make-or-break issue. "I couldn't be with someone who didn't want any children," said Luciana, "but I'm okay with disagreeing on the number. Neither of us has any idea what the demands will really be on our lives—we know life will change

dramatically and be crazy in ways we can't even predict—so while I think three is my ideal now, I may very well change my mind when the reality sets in.”

They both agree, however, on the qualities and values they'd like to instill in their future children. “I want our child to be a hard worker,” said Jamal. “I want him or her to be kind and selfless and not greedy or spoiled.”

Luciana wants them to have big education goals. “Master's degrees and even beyond. I want to raise them so that they value education and learning.”

Jamal looked dubious. “That's going to be a lot of money if we have three. Unless we can make two of them not value education. Can you do that as parents? All that education is another reason to have one child!”

Luciana laughed. “I want them to have your sense of humor. And be outgoing like you are. You have really good social skills. I want them to be comfortable around different groups of people. I'm really shy and kind of introverted. You are really good at including everyone, and I want them to be like that.”

Jamal wants them to have Luciana's can-do attitude. “She never gives up. She's so persistent about going after what she wants. I want that for our child, or children, since she probably won't give up on us having three.”

Jamal and Luciana's ability to compromise and use humor as they discuss how many children they might have is a good indicator that this is not likely to be a big source of conflict for them. They are open and flexible and truly understand each other's perspective. We want you to approach the topic of family with the same humor and flexibility. Family means different things to different people. And the singular definition of family as a like-minded husband and wife, with two children and a white picket fence is as outdated as pagers, VCRs, and calling the operator for information. Today's family is ethnically, politically, sexually, and religiously diverse. Families can consist of biological children, stepchildren, adopted children, foster children, no children, or your husband's best friend who still acts like a child. There are also more families with same-sex or trans parents. Family may just be you and your partner, or it could include your extended family, your pet, and your close friends. Family can be defined as wherever and with whomever you feel love, belonging, and a sense of home.

However you define family now or in the future is up to you and your partner. What's most important is that you talk about what family means and what you both want your family to look like and be like. And if children are part of the life plan, it's best to enter that future with some understanding and discussion of how the love you share with each other—your primary relationship—is going to expand and include the love you share with others. Discussing this now will save you a lot of heartache later on.

As we mentioned earlier, if one of you wants children and one doesn't, this can be a deal breaker for a relationship. If you get married thinking that you can get your partner to change their mind on this issue somewhere down the line, you're setting yourself up for disaster. Discussing whether you want children is important, as is discussing how many children you each imagine in your ideal family scenario. If one of you thinks a family consists of one child, and the other is imagining triple bunk beds in each room to fit your baseball-team-sized roster of offspring, that's going to be a problem if you never confront it.

We have been blessed with children, and they're the loves of our lives. They're also a lot of work. And a lot of money. Statistics show that for a child born in the United States in 2015, it costs an average of \$233,610 to raise that child through age 17. This is if you're a middle-income family, averaging approximately \$60,000 to \$100,000 a year in income. If together you make over \$105,000, then your average cost to raise a child to age 17 is an astonishing \$407,820. Now multiply this amount by the number of children you want to have. And this is without any of the costs of college being factored in. Some countries are better about providing their young people with a college education without causing the child or their family to go into debt, but in the United States, the cost of a private-school university degree, including tuition, housing, food, and books, can be as much as \$80,000 a year. That is \$320,000 in after-tax dollars per child.

STAY AHEAD OF THE CURVE

When we, the authors, think about having children, we think about sacrifice and about love. When you welcome a child into your relationship you experience selflessness and a love that is profound. There aren't adequate words to describe falling in love with your child. Falling in love with your partner is one thing, but the kind of falling in love that happens the first time you hold your newborn baby is like being hit with a meteor. There's no doubt that children need, demand, and deserve your love, time, and attention, but this shouldn't be at the expense of your primary relationship with each other.

Celebrity couple Giuliana and Bill Rancic said in an interview with US Weekly magazine, "We put our marriage first and our child second." This sound bite was big news and provoked debate in the media about whether the two were "good" parents. What didn't make the headlines was the rest of the content around the headline:

We're husband and wife but we're also best friends. It's funny because a lot of people, when they have kids, they put the baby first and the marriage second. That works for some people. For us, I find, we put our marriage first and our child second, because the best thing we can do for him is have a strong marriage.

This debate about who should come first when partners have children is not unique to the Rancics. Ayelet Waldman has faced public ire since her essay "Truly, Madly, Guiltily" appeared in the *New York Times* over a decade ago. In it she confessed (guiltily) that she loved her husband more than her children. She also said that if she lost one of her children, she could go on as long as she had her husband (the novelist Michael Chabon). In the essay, she laments that in her "Mommy and Me" group, she is the outlier when it comes to still being focused on her husband and maintaining an active sex life after having children. "Why, of all the women in the room, am I the only one who has not made the erotic transition a good mother is supposed to make? Why am I the only one incapable of placing her children at the center of her passionate universe?"

The uproar over her 2005 essay continues today. She still stands by it. "If you focus all of your emotional passion on your children and you neglect the relationship that brought that family into existence . . . eventually, things can go really, really wrong. I have not been a perfect mother, but giving my children a sense of security in their parents' relationship is something that I feel really proud of," she says.

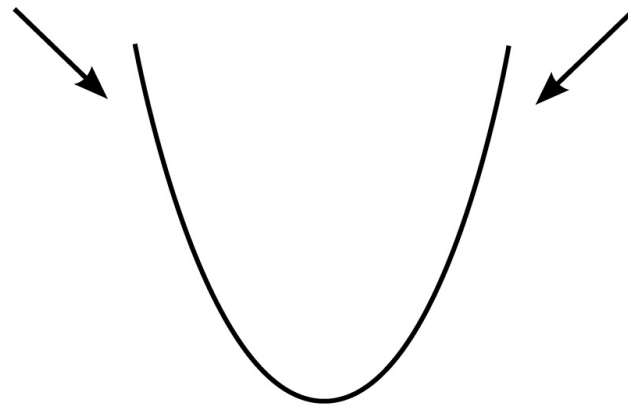
Waldman knows what many of us who have older children know. Eventually, if everything goes according to plan, those children will leave the house. And when it's just the two of you once again, your relationship is going to be lacking if you haven't maintained your intimacy or your connection.

As it turns out, the Rancics and Ayelet Waldman and Michael Chabon aren't selfish or crazy; they are just ahead of the curve—the U-shaped curve.

Sociologist Ernest Burgess was one of the first people to study married couples. In the 1930s he wanted to develop a scientific measure to predict the success rate of marriages. In his longitudinal study of married couples, he found that beginning with newlyweds, and as you went further along the married life spectrum, marital satisfaction was a U-shaped curve. Marital satisfaction began plummeting after the wedding and then took a big downward dive when the first child arrived—taking bigger nosedives with every subsequent child. If the couple didn't divorce while at the bottom, then marital satisfaction began increasing when the youngest child left home. This wasn't just true for the early part of the twentieth century. This is the norm.

SATISFACTION FIRST MARRIED

SATISFACTION LATER LIFE



KIDS LEAVING HOME

John Gottman's own longitudinal newlywed study found that for those couples who have a child within an average of four years after getting married, 67 percent have a precipitous drop in marital happiness in the first three years of the baby's life. Measuring videos of conflict, with observers blind to whether or not the couple had children, the couples with children showed an increase in hostility and conflict. But a third of all couples who became parents didn't have a drop in relationship happiness, so John chose to look closely at both sets of couples three months after the wedding. Was there some difference he could see prior to the baby being born that could predict which group the couple would be in post-baby? What John found out in his longitudinal study of heterosexual couples was that the men who were more respectful to their wives, and more accepting of their wife's influence or opinions, were more likely not to have a drop in marital satisfaction after children are born.

IF YOU WANT TO HAVE CHILDREN AND YOU WANT TO STAY HAPPY, THEN YOU BOTH MUST HAVE TWO MAIN GOALS.

These same men were also dramatically different while their wives were pregnant. They're involved, they talk to the baby, they compliment their partner, telling her she's beautiful and wise about how she's caring for their baby in utero. John and Julie were able to reverse this drop in marital happiness for 77 percent of couples in a two-day workshop, which became their book *And Baby Makes Three*.

If you've decided to have children and you want to stay away from the bottom of the U-shaped curve, then you both need to have two main goals.

- 1 Both partners should work to stay involved during the pregnancy and birth of children. Both should be involved as equally as possible with the new baby, whether they are same sex or heterosexual couples. In heterosexual couples, studies show that dad's involvement matters greatly, and the secret to keeping dad involved with the baby is a good relationship with mom. If there is low conflict and continued sex, then dad will stay involved with the baby, and the couple is more likely to maintain marital happiness.
- 2 The second most important thing is for the two of you to maintain intimacy and connection. You need to make your relationship a priority. If you don't, you will fall to the bottom of the curve and not get out for 18 years, if you don't divorce first. To maintain intimacy you need to talk to each other about your stresses, make time to connect (date nights!), and avoid defensiveness, criticism, contempt, and shutting down or withdrawing from each other. Review the chapters on conflict and sex if in doubt.

SLEEP AND SEX

Some of the biggest fears around having children is that it will be the end of your sex life, there will be no more time for romance, for travel, for ambition, and your marriage and career will both suffer. These things happen. As we've discussed, they happen in about two-thirds of all marriages. Recall that we reviewed the fact that scientists from UCLA's Center for Everyday Lives of Families (CELf) spent four years studying the lives of young families—parents in their 30s with children. Couples spent about 10 percent of every night before bed in the same room; mostly they were apart attending to various child, home, and work matters. Most of couples' conversations were about errands and other things that needed to get done. If you choose to have a family, it's imperative to continue to carve out special time to focus on each other, to continue to have a satisfying sex life, and to continue to build rituals for connection and intimacy. The greatest gift for a child is a loving relationship between parents. This is the foundation that he or she will build on for a lifetime.

Speed Dating

Chapter Summary

- ››› The definition of family is diverse and can include children, adopted children, foster children, no children, pets, friends, or your extended family.
- ››› The decision to have children or not can be a deal breaker. Be very honest and open about your wishes to have children and how many you envision. Don't enter into a marriage thinking you can convince your spouse to have children or not have children later on.
- ››› The average cost to raise a child born in 2015 is \$233,610. This doesn't include college.
- ››› Your primary relationship is your relationship to each other.
- ››› Approximately two-thirds of couples have a sharp drop in marital satisfaction shortly after a child is born, and this drop gets deeper with each subsequent child.
- ››› To avoid this drop in marital happiness, fathers need to be involved in the pregnancy, the birth, and caring for the baby, and conflict needs to be low and you need to maintain your sexual relationship.

The Date: FAMILY

CONVERSATION TOPIC

»»» What does creating a family mean to each of us? Do we want children? How do we define family for our relationship?

PREPARATION

»»» Reflect on what you read in this chapter and any ideas it sparked about what family means to you and what you would like family to look like in your relationship.

LOCATION

»»» A park or playground, an amusement park, or anywhere else where children and families gather. Find a quiet spot where you can see the family activities, but can still focus on each other and your conversation (and some parks and playgrounds don't allow you in them if you don't have a child with you). If you prefer to have conversation over dinner out, choose a family-friendly restaurant.

SUGGESTIONS

»»» Ideally you'll have children and families in your line of vision during this date. It'll either serve as inspiration for the family you'd like to create with each other, or as inspiration to recommit to whatever birth control you have chosen.

AT-HOME DATE: Each of you makes your favorite childhood dish—for example, tater tots, macaroni and cheese, or breakfast for dinner. Share a meal together, and bring a photo of yourself as a child to share with your partner.

BRING

»»» Your ideas about what kind of family you'd like to have, as well as your ideas for making your relationship a priority if you choose to have children.

TROUBLESHOOTING

TROUBLESHOOTING

- »» Stay open-minded to your partner's views about family.
- »» Be honest about your desire to have children or not have children.
- »» Don't criticize your partner's family—whether it's in-laws or siblings or best friends who are considered family.
- »» If you already have children, appreciate your partner for their support as a coparent.
- »» Express your own values and needs from your partner in terms of family, and never criticize their values, needs, or parenting style if you have children.

OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS FOR YOUR DATE CONVERSATION

Ask each other the following questions:

- 1 What does your ideal family look like? Just us? Us and friends and relatives? If you want children, how many children would you like to have?
- 2 What are the ways in which your parents did or did not appear to maintain their closeness, love, and romance after having children?

FOR COUPLES PLANNING ON HAVING CHILDREN:

- 1 What problems do you think we might have maintaining our intimacy in our future family?
- 2 What do you think you will love about being parents together?
- 3 What characteristics or qualities of mine would you like our child to have?

FOR COUPLES NOT PLANNING ON HAVING CHILDREN OR WHOSE CHILDREN ARE GROWN:

- 1 How are we going to create a sense of family?
- 2 Who do you consider our closest family (this can be friends or relatives)? What do you want to do to deepen our relationship with our family or closest friends?

AFFIRMING OUR FUTURE TOGETHER

Take turns reading this affirmation out loud to each other. Maintain eye contact while reciting.



I commit to creating a loving family. If we do have children, I commit to avoiding destructive conflict and continuing to make our relationship a priority.

DATE



Play with Me

FUN & ADVENTURE

Our lives and relationships are better, brighter, and more fun when we remember to play, when we inject some adventure. When is the last time you and your partner tried something new together? When was the last time the two of you went on an adventure? When was the last time you laughed together? Acted silly? If you can't remember, then you are in some serious need of a play infusion. Play is a necessary and vital part of our relationships. Plain and simple—couples who play together, stay together.

One of the big myths in relationships is that you need to have similar ideas about what constitutes fun and adventure to have a successful relationship. Of course it's fine if you do, but it doesn't matter if you don't. The most important thing is to find all of the ways you can to play together and support each other in your separate adventures.

For many couples, play and fun is often the first thing to go in a relationship and the last thing to get done on the “to do” list. Long hours of work, family demands, and stress can suck the fun right out of a relationship. University of Denver psychology professor and codirector of the Center for Marital and Family Studies Howard Markman says, “The correlation between fun and marital happiness is high and significant. The more you invest in fun and friendship and being there for your partner, the happier the relationship will get over time.” Markman and his codirector, Scott Stanley, began a long-term study of over 300 Denver couples in 1996 using a questionnaire based on a “fun and friendship scale” the two developed. Although the study hasn't yet been published, the findings are clear—couples who play, laugh, and make a “game” out of daily life are happier couples.

Shared fun, shared activities, and shared laughter all contribute to a stronger, happier, and healthier relationship. Psychologist Arthur Aron of the State University of New York at Stony Brook studied couples to see how participating in new activities would affect how each partner experienced the relationship. The more novel and arousing activities (not that kind of arousing), the happier the couples said they were with their relationship. The joy that people had having new experiences rubbed off on their feelings about their partner. If they were having fun with their partner, their partner must be fun. The bottom line is that play isn't a luxury or an indulgence, but a necessity for a successful, happy relationship.

Play isn't just about being with each other, it's about connecting with each other. When we play together as couples, we're developing our trust and intimacy. Just as play is how children learn to cooperate, play also creates cooperation in adult relationships. Whether you're flying a kite, taking a hike, or

playing a board game—when you play together you’re creating shared meaning and shared fun, and this in turn deepens the intimacy and connection you have with each other.

Dr. Stuart Brown, founder of the National Institute for Play, says that play is “an absorbing, apparently purposeless activity that provides enjoyment and a suspension of self-consciousness and sense of time.” Brown believes that “nothing lights up the brain like play” and that “we are designed to play throughout our whole lives, not just as children.”

So what does this mean in terms of our relationships and our quest for happily ever after? Brown says, “Play refreshes a long-term adult-adult relationship; some of the hallmarks of its refreshing, oxygenating action are: humor, the enjoyment of novelty, the capacity to share a lighthearted sense of the world’s ironies, and the enjoyment of mutual storytelling. These playful communications and interactions, when nourished, produce a climate for easy connection and a more rewarding relationship—true intimacy.”

Finding ways to play together as often as possible will help your relationship thrive, and making play a priority will help to create a relationship that is full of joy and happiness.

LAUGHTER IS THE BEST MEDICINE

The emotional essence of play is laughter. You can play while you’re doing the dishes. You can play when you’re mowing the lawn. You can even play while you’re “working” on your relationship. Play is spontaneous. Play is joyful. Play is an attitude. Play is about friendship. Play is also a way of being in the world.

When you were first dating, you probably made lots of time for play. Dates were new and exciting and adventurous. You built a friendship and a romance on a foundation of play. This doesn’t have to end once you dive into a “serious” or long-term relationship. In fact, this is the time when you have to make an even more consistent and concerted effort to incorporate play into your everyday lives and into the fabric of your relationship.

“Everything was exciting at first,” said Kim, a newly engaged woman in her twenties. “We planned all these fun things to do together when we were dating. Surfing and amusement parks and concerts and baseball games. Now we’re living together and planning our wedding, and it feels like we just watch television or go to a movie when we have some free time together. We don’t make the same effort to do new things. I’m worried we will end up like one of those couples who sit in restaurants, year after year, with absolutely nothing new or interesting to say to each other.”

Kim's concern is a common fear. It may even be hardwired, as our brain seems to need play and adventure for our optimal health and well-being. The adventure or seeking system is a driving force in all mammals. The seeking system in animals is what drives a squirrel to sniff out a nut, or compels all animals to search their environment for the resources they need to survive. Humans also have a seeking system, and this system is about exploration and, ultimately, curiosity. Animals may seek and forage for food, or a mate, but humans are highly developed. We seek new experiences, new understanding, and new meaning. And we seek the reward and pleasure that comes from these new experiences

When you feel pleasure, excitement, or euphoria, the neural network called the Reward System is at work in your brain. This brain circuit includes the neurons of the ventral tegmental, the basal ganglia, the prefrontal cortex, and the nucleus accumbens. This system is also involved with learning, with motivation, and with our quest for the new and exciting in life. Dopamine is the chief neurotransmitter in the Reward System. If your brain gets flooded with enough dopamine, you feel euphoric and as if something wonderful is about to happen. Whether your favorite sports team wins, someone you love kisses you, or your boss praises your work, the pleasure you experience is the rush of dopamine stimulating your brain's Reward System. When you experience something pleasantly new and unfamiliar, your brain gets a big fat dopamine-infused prize. It feels good. It drives us.

In relationships, the issue comes when two partners get this brain-prize in different ways. Julie can't sit on the couch and read books on physics and satisfy the seeking system of her brain. John can. John's brain (the brain of a man who can easily think of ten ways you can die at a picnic) will not get the same rush of pleasure that Julie gets from skiing at breakneck speeds down a mountain.

There are even some scientific studies showing that some people may have a genetic variant in their dopamine system that causes them to seek out riskier behavior and activities. These can range from heli-skiing to big-wave surfing to drug addiction. Cynthia Thomson, a researcher at the University of British Columbia, has identified what she calls the "Daredevil Gene." This gene may limit the amount of dopamine that's released for some people, causing them to seek higher and more extreme levels of adventure to get the same reward.

BASE CAMP

Imagine you have been together for a couple of decades. Now imagine your partner walking into the calm, quiet, beautiful home you've built together over

the years. You're expecting your partner to discuss what's for dinner, or perhaps some plans you're making for the weekend, but instead, your partner announces that she has decided she needs to climb Mount Everest before she turns 50, and she's turning 50 very soon.

This is what happened to John approximately 16 years ago. Julie announced she needed to take a group of women to Mount Everest Base Camp and maybe higher. It was going to be the adventure of a lifetime, and the fulfillment of a lifelong dream. John listened to Julie speak about how incredibly important this trip was to her, and responded as the enlightened husband and marriage professional he was. "Have you completely lost your mind?"

"At first I thought she was a reckless nut who had to be kept in check. I didn't say it out loud. I am a marriage therapist, after all, and I knew better. My second thought was what if she died? I was panicked and I was scared. I shared my fears with her."

Luckily for John, Julie had been married to him long enough to know how best to respond to his panic and worry. She listened to him, acknowledged his fears, and reassured him as best she could. She went over the itinerary, the training program, the safety precautions, the costs, and all the little details, in hopes his worry would lessen. In the end, John finally agreed to her plan, provided she take a satellite phone with her and call him every day or two.

Julie embarked on a yearlong training program, climbing steep stairways all over Seattle while wearing a 40-pound backpack.

John notes, "She even asked if I wanted to go to Kathmandu with her. I pass out from altitude sickness on a ladder, and I knew you couldn't order room service while trekking up Everest, so I declined," recalls John. "She started interviewing Sherpas. I met them and thought they were all dangerous sleazebags who just wanted to sleep with the women. But still, I worked on accepting the fact that she was going on this trip. Finally, the big day came and she went. My major contribution was to save all my whining for when she returned."

"In the end," John continues, "I had to face the fact that this woman, the love of my life, is very different from me. She is an athlete, an explorer, and a true adventurer. Adventure for me is studying quantum mechanics and differential equations from the safety of my chair. Julie was a downhill skiing racer in college—going fifty miles an hour downhill. My God, why would anyone want to do that? But she wanted to partially climb Everest, and she's my girl, so I had to understand what it meant to her and support her.

"I will never forget the look on her face in the photograph that was taken of her on Kala Patthar, a peak next to Everest, at 18,600 feet. That picture of Julie

on Everest is the face of dopamine in action. I have the photo framed and up on our wall at home, because I have never seen her look happier. Ever.”

While John and Julie don’t find their mutual fun in extreme sports, they do find it in swimming, in adventures that don’t require insurance, in finding new places to kayak, and in traveling together to amazing destinations around the globe. They have learned to verbally share their disparate interests, while sharing together the play and fun that works for both of them.

FINDING COMMON GROUND

The key isn’t to force your partner to seek play and adventure in the same way that you do; in fact, the hard wiring of his or her brain may make this virtually impossible. This fundamental need to seek out the new, to be challenged, and to experience surprise is a part of each of us. It resides deep in our primitive brains and never leaves us no matter how old we get. Each and every one of us longs for excitement and that overwhelming sense that something wonderful is about to happen.

For a couple, play and adventure is all about learning together, growing together, exploring together, and supporting the natural curiosity you both have. Adventure always involves the unknown, and as such, there is a hint of danger to it. Some people can tolerate more danger than others. Explore the ways you’re the same, explore the ways you’re different, and find your common ground. John and Julie found their common adventure is ocean kayaking in their Seaward double, an activity they both love to do.

“I love the water,” says John. “Julie likes to be active. I’m never going to climb mountains, but we found a place where her love of extreme sports and my general fear of anything more strenuous than reading could intersect. Kayaking. We put our kayak in the water, we push away from shore, and we escape from the demands of life and work and family. This type of play is a release for us. And more importantly, we found a place where our different styles of play could meet. It has brought us closer over the years. Every time we go kayaking, we are connecting. We have to trust each other on the water. Depend on each other. We face the challenges of the sport together, and this fires us up. It invigorates us individually and as a couple. Kayaking is our special time together away from the world. We laugh. We talk. We sing. We feel totally safe. We’ve never criticized each other while paddling. In the beginning we paddled around in circles and just laughed. We created a new shared experience and that has helped us to remain in love year after year of marriage.”

WE CREATED A NEW SHARED EXPERIENCE AND THAT HELPED US TO REMAIN IN LOVE YEAR AFTER YEAR OF MARRIAGE.

The need for adventure is universal, but the ways in which we seek that newness will be different. Not better, not worse. Not right, not wrong. Just different. For some couples an adventure is taking a cooking class when you've never cooked before in your life. Or taking an art class when you've only ever drawn stick figures. Adventure doesn't have to happen on far-off mountaintops or at the risk of life and limb. At its core, it's simply seeking what is new and different. It is anything that pushes you outside of your comfort zone, giving you that dopamine-induced thrill.

THE HONEYMOON FROM HELL

Doug and Rachel have made adventure an integral part of their relationship from the start. Unlike John and Julie, they have a very similar sense of adventure, which isn't necessarily a good thing. They both crave thrills and have had to spend a small fortune on insurance. On their honeymoon they had many near-death experiences, which made their vows of "until death do us part" seem potentially a little too prophetic.

Rachel and Doug decided to spend their honeymoon visiting a friend and traveling around recently war-torn Guatemala. The country wasn't at war when they visited, but they did hear many stories about death squads that made them wonder if maybe they should have gone to Hawaii or on a cruise like most newlyweds. They also didn't have much money, with Rachel still in medical school and Doug in his first job out of college.

On one adventure they decided to climb to the top of a nearby volcano, which happily didn't erupt, but turned out to be a grueling, near vertical hike up and a slippery mudslide down. After the many-mile, high altitude hike, Rachel collapsed into the canoe, and only Doug's desire to demonstrate his manhood to his new bride compelled him to get his rubbery arms to paddle them back across the vast lake to their lodging.

On another occasion, they decided to ride horses through the jungle, which resulted in a death-defying gallop through low-hanging vines and tree branches with spikes. Finally, there was the river spelunking adventure, during which they had to carry lit candles in their mouths as they swam through the icy river water into the depths of a dark cave. At the end, after an hour swim, the candles now all doused, they were told to jump into the pitch-dark blackness, assured that a

pool of water was waiting twenty feet below. It was one of the scariest leaps of faith. They decided it was sort of like marriage itself, held hands, and jumped.

After their honeymoon, the challenges of married life seemed rather manageable. They approach their marriage like an exciting mountain they want to climb, and they constantly seek out new experiences and adventures. Adventure and novelty have always added an element of excitement to their relationship and have helped them to see their whole life together as an adventure. Not every adventure has resulted in a near-death experience, but they've felt that meeting new challenges or having new experiences has helped to keep the spark of passion alive. "There is something about facing a challenge together that binds you closely and prevents you from taking each other for granted," Doug says.

THE CHRISTIE BRINKLEY PHENOMENON

Feeling bound together after facing a challenge or engaging in a dangerous experience isn't specific to Doug and Rachel. Research shows that the physiological response to fear is, in some ways, similar to the physiological response to arousal. Sweaty palms, racing heartbeat, or any other symptoms of fear and anxiety can be misattributed to sexual attraction. You don't have to risk life and limb to feel charged in your relationship—try a roller coaster ride, or a scary movie, or any other activity that inspires fear in you or your partner—and see how much closer you feel after the experience.

We've all read stories of people falling in love after surviving a natural disaster or a plane crash. Think of supermodel Christie Brinkley, who survived a helicopter crash with a handsome man who was not her husband. Shortly after surviving the heli-skiing crash atop a mountain in Colorado, she declared she was in love with the handsome man and left her marriage. Her whirlwind marriage to her fellow survivor lasted a mere seven months.

Scientists know that the part of the brain where we experience fear—the right amygdala—is linked to the part of the brain where we experience sexual arousal. (So, you may be thinking, that's why teenagers like to go to horror movies.) The two are so closely linked together that even Billy Joel didn't stand a chance when his wife crashed onto a mountaintop with another man. There is also a hormonal factor at play when we embark on a new or exciting adventure: a little cocktail of dopamine, norepinephrine, and phenylethylamine (PEA). PEA is the chemical cocktail that results in the natural high you feel when you fall in love. It's what makes you capable of staying up all night talking instead of sleeping. PEA levels are also increased by high-intensity activities like skydiving (also by

taking certain drugs and consuming large quantities of chocolate). Often we will lament the loss of those lovestruck days and nights when our energy for each other had no limit, but our bodies develop a tolerance for the effects of PEA (much like it does to caffeine and other substances) that is often mistaken for the end of love. It's not. And by committing to understanding our need for adventure and continued exploration with our partners, we can reactivate the hormonal love cocktail at any time.

ADVENTURING TOGETHER

Our sense of adventure, and need for play, never goes away. It may go dormant or into hibernation, but it is still a fundamental human need that's always there just waiting to be acknowledged.

As partners you can ask yourself these simple questions to figure out whether your relationship is suffering from a lack of adventure:

- ››› When was the last time you felt excited or curious while you were with your partner?
- ››› When was the last time you did something new together?
- ››› When was the last time you had the feeling that something wonderful was about to happen?

One indication that adventure is lacking is when one or both of you are seeking substitutions for the dopamine response and end up feeding the need for play and adventure (dopamine) with sugar, chocolate, junk food and, for some, alcohol, prescription drugs, and other mind-altering substances, whether legal or illegal.

In relationships where there's no shared adventure or no adventure of any kind, there's a kind of deadness and lack of vitality that sets in. The relationship becomes a series of tasks. It becomes mundane. There's no surprise and you lose the spark that play and adventure naturally bring into the relationship.

There are many ways to have adventures together. A small adventure somewhere new and unknown can be a microcosm of the adventure of life. Go out in the world together and explore the unknown—whether that's walking through a new neighborhood, trying a new type of food at a restaurant, traveling anywhere (even nearby), making new friends, talking to random strangers, turning off your cell phone for a day, or deciding to take a hip-hop class together. Newness is the key, so shake up your routines, try something different, and explore what play and adventure mean to both of you.

Adventuring doesn't have to cost money, involve exotic locations, or put you in grave danger. Look at the world with new eyes and a new curiosity. Who knows what you'll discover?

Julie loves to climb mountains. John likes to study math equations. Luckily for them, there is no correlation between couples having common interests and relationship happiness. What this means is, you don't have to play in the same ways to be a happy couple or to keep the fun alive in your relationship. But you both still have to play. And share your solo play with each other in the form of pictures, stories, and discussing how it made you feel. You can have opposite interests when it comes to play and adventure, and still have a relationship that grows and thrives. But find the places, as John and Julie did with kayaking, where your play and adventure intersect.

Think about how each of you likes to play. If you haven't played in a while, or nothing comes to mind, think back to when you played as a child. What was the most fun you had while playing? What type of play did you do that made you feel the most alive and the happiest? Now when was the last time you did that, or something similar to that? What about your partner?

When you're thinking about building a career, or planning a wedding, or starting a family, it may feel odd to think about playing in similar ways. But as we've said, playing is important throughout our lives. Play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith has written over 50 books on what play means in our lives as children and as adults. Sutton-Smith says, "The opposite of play is not work—it's depression." When our lives are infused with play, we're able to see the absurd in the serious and find excitement in the mundane.

A relationship without play is a relationship without humor, without flirting, without games, and without fantasy. We all need humor, laughter, and play. Romance is play. Banter is play. Taking a walk is play. You don't have to join a sports league or carve out large amounts of free time in your week. You just have to bring a spirit of play into whatever you are doing. Play needs to be a priority. Don't make the mistake of thinking that after all the work is done, then you will play together. It won't happen. If it feels foreign at first, then schedule play into your weekly list of tasks to accomplish. Need to get the grocery shopping done? Make a game of it with your partner. Paying the monthly bills? See how flirtatious you can be with each other while writing out those checks. Your happiness individually and as a couple doesn't consist of not having bad experiences, it's about constantly generating good experiences. Remember the all-important ratio of positive to negative experiences during nonconflict interaction: 20 positive experiences for every negative one. Play is also how we do that. None of us wants to end up on the wrong side of the divorce statistics,

and as Stuart Brown says, when you “take play out of the mix, a relationship becomes a survival endurance contest.” Doesn’t sound very romantic, does it? Playfulness is as necessary a quality as fidelity to keep your relationship vital and thriving.

Exercise

FOR THE FUN OF IT

Read through the list before your date. Circle all the items in the list that represent a starting point for how you'd like to play or have adventure with your partner, and then star the top three that you would like to do first. For the truly adventurous, you can use the list as a weekly suggestion for something new and try them all. We've also left some blank lines so you can fill in your own ideas of play.

- »» Take a hike or long walk together
- »» Take a drive this weekend to somewhere we've both wanted to explore
- »» Plan a picnic
- »» Play a board game or card game together
- »» Choose and learn a new video game together
- »» Shop for cars, antiques, new clothes—whatever passion you share
- »» Plan a meal together and invite friends over
- »» Cook a dish from a new cuisine together
- »» Choose a new restaurant to explore or cuisine to try
- »» Play catch
- »» Learn a new language together (or at least a few phrases)
- »» Speak in foreign accents while doing just about anything
- »» Go bicycling or rent a bicycle for two
- »» Go roller-skating or ice-skating
- »» Rent Segways
- »» Row a boat or canoe or kayak together
- »» Go to a bookstore and explore books in a section we don't usually read
- »» Go visit wildlife: bird-watching, whale watching, the local zoo, or the aquarium

- ››› Learn a new sport together
- ››› Go see a live performance: play, improv, musical, stand-up comedy, circus, dance—whatever sounds fun
- ››› Take a performance class together, like improv, acting, singing, or stand-up comedy
- ››› Read a joke book together. Read a book of poems together. Or alternate reading one joke and one poem.
- ››› Go dancing
- ››› Go fishing
- ››› Go to a concert or any live music
- ››› Create a playlist of the music from when we met and dance or listen to it together
- ››› Work out together
- ››› Get tickets to our favorite sports event and cheer together
- ››› Go to a spa and enjoy being together in the hot tub or sauna
- ››› Play music together
- ››› Sing loudly together to music we both know
- ››› Go to an art gallery or museum
- ››› Pretend we are spies while out at the mall or in town
- ››› Go wine tasting or beer tasting or chocolate tasting
- ››› Climb a hill, mountain, or friendly tree
- ››› Tell stories about the most embarrassing or entertaining episodes of our lives
- ››› Go to a climbing gym
- ››› Go to a trampoline gym
- ››› Go to a theme park or amusement park
- ››› Play in the water together: swimming, water skiing, riding waves, paddleboarding, sailing

- ››› Make a date to meet somewhere and pretend we don't know each other and are meeting for the first time. Flirt, and try to seduce each other
- ››› Color, draw, or paint together
- ››› Make something together, such as crafts, pottery, model airplanes, clothing, costumes, woodwork
- ››› Throw an impromptu party and invite everyone who's available at the moment
- ››› Do yoga together or take a couples' yoga class
- ››› Learn couples' massage
- ››› Go for a walk in a new neighborhood
- ››› Write a love letter to each other with our nondominant hand
- ››› Ride the local bus system around our town rather than drive
- ››› Stay up all night
- ››› Turn off all electronic devices for the entire day
- ››› Take an art class
- ››› Take a cooking class
- ››› Take a dance class
- ››› Ask a couple you don't know very well to go on a double date
- ››› Strike up a conversation together with strangers sitting near you in a restaurant, on a park bench, or on the subway
- ››› Play in the mud
- ››› Scuba dive or go cage diving with sharks
- ››› Go bungee jumping
- ››› Go hiking, camping, or backpacking
- ››› Travel to an exotic country
- ››› Do anything you've always wanted to do, but were afraid to try
- ››› _____
- ››› _____



Speed Dating

Chapter Summary

- ››› Play and adventure are vital components of a successful and joyful relationship.
- ››› We're designed to play throughout our entire lives.
- ››› Often we put play last on the to-do list.
- ››› Play and adventure are about laughter and novelty.
- ››› The need for adventure is hardwired into our brains and is part of the brain's "Reward System."
- ››› When we experience new things we get a pleasurable rush of the neurotransmitter dopamine.
- ››› Some people need to engage in more extreme or even dangerous adventures to get the same dopamine rush as others.
- ››› It's okay if you and your partner have different ideas about what constitutes play and adventure. The key is for you to respect each other's sense of adventure and what it means to that partner.
- ››› If you can't remember the last time you felt excited and curious with your partner, or had the feeling something exciting was about to happen, you're suffering from a lack of play and adventure.
- ››› Make playing together a priority, and bring a spirit of play to anything you do together.
- ››› Playing together creates trust, intimacy, and deep connection. Couples who play together, stay together.

The Date: FUN & ADVENTURE

CONVERSATION TOPIC

»» How do we each like to have fun? What is the role of play and adventure in our lives?

PREPARATION

»» Think about how you like to play and what adventures you'd like to have. Reflect on what you read in this chapter and any ideas it sparked about what play and adventure look like to you, and whether your needs for play and adventure are being met. How would you like to play with your partner in the future? What shared adventures can you have? Be curious about your own answers and those of your partner. You may just surprise yourself and find a little surge of dopamine reward from just the idea of playing and adventuring together in new ways.

LOCATION

»» Somewhere you've never been before or a familiar place used in a new way. Try the park, the beach, on a rooftop, in your backyard, or swap apartments with a friend. Consider climbing a tree and having your entire date and conversation sitting out on a limb. Make the entire date happen in the bathtub or another body of water. Follow a random car and have your date take place wherever that car ends up. Feel free to come up with your own adventurous location. Be spontaneous and be curious about what might happen. Try having your date at an atypical time for a date—early morning, middle of the night, when you both should be at work. This date should be all about newness and excitement. Be creative. Be spontaneous.

SUGGESTION

»» You can look up hidden locations near you at [AtlasObscura.com](https://atlasobscura.com) and explore one of them with your partner as you talk through the questions. You can also explore Geocaches near you—a kind of adult treasure hunt game—by logging into geocache.com and finding hidden treasure boxes near you through GPS coordinates.

AT-HOME DATE: Pick a beautiful location in or near your home. Create a scavenger hunt for your partner to find the location or simply leave them a note telling them where to meet you. Have a surprise picnic waiting for them when they find you.

BRING

»» You should bring the list and the items you circled as well as the top three things you'd like to do first. Be prepared to discuss with each other the items you circled and the ways that you'd like to play, or the things you would consider fun. Look for the items that you both circled. These are the activities where your play and adventure interests intersect. If there's no overlap, remember that part of play and adventure is stepping into the unknown. Which of the items that your partner thinks would be fun and playful are you willing to try?

TROUBLESHOOTING

- »» Stay open-minded to your partner's ideas for play and adventure.
- »» Remember that adventure involves the unknown and pressing against your comfort zone. Don't minimize fears, but try not to give in to them either.
- »» Ask your partner questions about why their ideas about play and adventure are important and meaningful to them.
- »» Don't try to force your partner to do what you want to do or adventure in the way you want to adventure.
- »» Listen for the excitement as your partner describes the adventures they want to have.
- »» Don't criticize or judge your partner for playing differently.
- »» Take a leap of faith and embrace the unknown.

OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS FOR YOUR DATE CONVERSATION

After discussing and reviewing your lists, ask each other the following questions:

- »» What does adventure/play mean to you?

- »» How did you like to play when you were a child?
- »» What's the most fun you've had playing in the last few years?
- »» How do you think we could have more fun?
- »» Share with me an adventure story from the past.
- »» What's the most recent adventurous thing you did?
- »» What are you most excited about or looking forward to right now?
- »» What's a one-day adventure you could imagine us having together?
- »» What adventures do you want to have before you die?

AFFIRMING OUR FUTURE TOGETHER

Take turns reading this affirmation out loud to each other. Maintain eye contact while reciting.



I commit to playing and having an adventure together in the following three ways in the next two weeks, and to making play a part of our daily lives together going forward:

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____

DATE



Something to Believe In

GROWTH & SPIRITUALITY

"We met really young," said Erica. "Jake was eighteen and I was sixteen. Everyone said there was no way we'd stay together. 'Nobody stays with their first love, it never works out.' I can't even tell you how many times I've heard that." Today Jake and Erica are 32 and 30.

"I've been with her almost half of my life. I was a punk when she met me. Cocky on the outside, but totally insecure on the inside. I am a totally different person now," added Jake, "and she's stuck by my side through it all."

"You're not totally different," countered Erica. "You've changed a lot, of course, but the person you've grown into is the person I saw underneath all that cockiness."

Jake and Erica have been married for six years. "We are like old young people," said Erica. "We've been through it all. I can't even imagine what the rest of our lives are going to be like, but I think going through such profound changes early on means we're not going to be shocked later when one of us wants to do something crazy or becomes a monk or takes off to travel the world alone."

"We aren't the same people we were when we first started dating, and we know we're not going to be the same people five years from now," added Jake. "It's exciting to see who we are becoming—to support each other as we change and grow. We are in this constant process of getting to know ourselves and getting to know each other all over again."

When Erica met Jake he was the quintessential "bad boy." "He had a juvenile record. He hated authority. He was sort of this lost boy in a way, and he was so angry at the world. He wasn't like anyone I had ever dated, and of course, my parents hated him and tried to keep us apart but that only made him more interesting. They love him now, but they took a long time to come around. Years and years. Now my dad calls him for advice. It's crazy how all our relationships change when we change."

Jake is ten years sober, after struggling with alcohol and recreational drugs. "I had to look at myself. I had to find some purpose and meaning in my life because all I had was anger and alcohol and marijuana. When I let go of all of that I didn't know who I was. I went to therapy and 12-Step Meetings. I got a higher power—which isn't God, but is God-like, I guess. I'm spiritual. I started meditating and praying, but I like to think of it as talking to the Universe and listening to the Universe. It really doesn't matter whether that's God or not. It only matters that I have a higher power and what I call a higher self. Underneath

all that cockiness, I was afraid of life. If Erica hadn't given me an ultimatum of sorts when I turned 21, I probably would have missed out on a lot that life has to offer. I definitely would have missed out on being with her, and my work with at-risk boys would never have been something I would have pursued. I wasn't the type of person to mentor anybody. I can genuinely say that I'm a spiritual person—and my work is meaningful service to others. That was definitely not the person she first started dating.”

Erica says it was hard at first, trusting the newly sober Jake. “I wasn't sure who was the real person. Was he the sober, thoughtful, introspective guy who was always helping other people? Or was he the cocky guy who was always out of control and only living in the moment? I fell in love with both of these Jakes.” said Erica. “He changed so much from 21 to 25 that I started wondering if he would outgrow me. He really inspired me to look at what mattered in my life and my work. We had so many conversations about how we wanted to live this one life we are given, and it brought us so much closer. When we got married, we had a friend perform the ceremony, and we promised to always embrace the other person exactly as they were. It's like our mission statement and it really gives us permission to try new things, to test different ways we identify ourselves. I started meditating because of Jake. I even went on a ten-day silent meditation retreat, not talking, writing, or even reading for ten days. I had to confront all the busy thoughts in my head, all my own insecurities and self-doubt. It was amazing. I decided to give up my job in marketing—a job I had just been pretending to love because it was with a big tech company. It meant giving up a lot of money. I decided to pursue art. I started painting. And Jake just went along with it because it was important to me. We moved into a studio apartment. We gave up cable. We changed so many things and we talked about it every step of the way. I feel like we are such a force together, and there's nothing either of us couldn't do or change into that the other person wouldn't support. It makes our life interesting. We don't want to have children, so it's just going to be us exploring this crazy life and everything it can mean.”

“It's profound,” said Jake. “There's no other way to explain it. Life and spirituality and growing and changing have become this exciting adventure for us.”

“Best life ever,” added Erica. “We don't have money, but I don't think money could ever come close to touching what we have. We have meaning. And that's everything.”

Amazing things happen in relationships when a couple can grow and change and accommodate the growth of the other person. The sum is greater than the parts, and relationships can be more than just two individuals coming together—

they can be stories of transformation and great contribution and meaning in the world.

CREATING SHARED MEANING

In every relationship, like in life, the only constant is change. The key is how each person in the relationship accommodates the growth of the other partner. People grow in relationships by encountering a different mind than their own. A partner doesn't see the world in the same way and doesn't have the same needs. There is no doubt that spiritual change, or change of any kind, can be a source of conflict in relationships. But in relationships, conflict is the way that we grow, and we need to welcome conflict as a way of learning how to love each other better and how to understand this person with a very different mind than our own. When we get to that understanding, we have both individual growth and relationship growth.

Here's the key takeaway for a love that lasts a lifetime.

The goal isn't to try to make the other person be like you. The goal is to learn from them and to benefit from the ways you're different.

Life can be a struggle. Relationships can be a struggle.

You create meaning when you meet each inevitable struggle in life together, and move and grow through its adversity.

When you create meaning out of the struggle, you stay together.

Research on married couples shows that if a couple holds their relationship as sacred, then they have a better relationship. Along these same lines, another study also showed that when people felt that the sex between them was sacred or it was sanctified by their religion as sacred, then they had more sex, better sex, and longer lasting sex, plus they had higher marital satisfaction.

It's interesting to note that a difference in religious beliefs isn't a huge cause of marital conflict. According to Pew Research, shared religious belief is less important than shared interests, good sex, and division of household labor. The more shared meaning you can find or create in your relationship, the deeper, richer, and more rewarding your relationship will be.

So how do you create meaning in your relationship? How do you hold your relationship as sacred? We do this by creating shared meaning and by creating our own rituals for connection.

The rituals you create in your lives together are important and will keep you connected. One of the rituals we hope you'll create is, of course, a date night every week. You can also create mini-rituals for when you part from each other and return to each other—like the 6-second kiss. Think about ways you can

celebrate the triumphs in life both minor and major. What will be special for the two of you? Think about ways you can create rituals around loss, setback, bad luck, fatigue. How can you best support each other? Think about community rituals with friends and rituals for birthdays and other celebrations. There is almost no end to the ways in which you can create shared meaning to connect as a couple. Be creative and be authentic to what is most meaningful for each other. Sharing about your day can be a ritual for connection. Gently try to uncover what is stressing the other person out, or making them fearful. Creating a safe space to share your interior world with each other is a ritual for connection. Every moment you're together, and even when you're not, you have an opportunity to honor all that is sacred in your relationship—however you define it.

GROWING AND CHANGING

You accommodate growth and change in a relationship by making it safe for your partner to share the unfamiliar and by being truly curious about the growth they're experiencing. When individuals grow, relationships grow. When individuals transform, relationships transform.

Exercise:

SHARED MEANING QUESTIONNAIRE

To get a sense of how well you and your partner create a sense of shared meaning in your lives together, answer the following True or False questions. If a question doesn't apply to you (a question involving family or children when you don't have children, or a question involving living together and you don't live together) simply skip it, modify it to your particular situation (dinnertime with just the two of you), or keep it in mind for future discussion.

YOUR RITUALS OF CONNECTION

»»» We see eye to eye about rituals for family dinnertime in our home.

☐ T ☐ F

»»» Holiday meals (like Thanksgiving, Christmas, Passover) are very special and happy times for us (or we both hate them).

☐ T ☐ F

»»» End-of-the-workday reunions in our home are generally special times.

☐ T ☐ F

»»» We see eye to eye about the role of TV in our home.

☐ T ☐ F

»»» Bedtime is generally a good time for being close.

☐ T ☐ F

»»» During the weekends we do things that we enjoy and value, both together and separately.

☐ T ☐ F

»»» We have similar intentions and desires about entertaining in our home (having friends over, parties, and so on).

☐ T ☐ F

»»» We both value, or both dislike, special celebrations (like birthdays, anniversaries, family reunions).

☐ T ☐ F

»»» When I get sick, I feel taken care of and loved by my partner.

☐ T ☐ F

»»» I really look forward to and enjoy our vacations and the travel we do together.

☐ T ☐ F

»»» Spending our morning time together is special to us.

☐ T ☐ F

»»» When we do errands together, we generally have a good time.

☐ T ☐ F

»»» We have unique and specific ways of becoming renewed and refreshed together when we are burned out or fatigued.

☐ T ☐ F

After answering the questions above, especially if you had very few “True” answers, please create your own rituals of connection by discussing the following questions.

»»» When we eat dinner together, how can we make our dinnertime special for us? What is the meaning of dinnertime? What was dinnertime like in each of our families growing up?

»»» How should we part at the beginning of each day? What was this like in our families growing up? What should our reunions be like?

»»» What should getting ready for bed be like for us? What was it like in our families growing up?

»»» What do weekends mean for each of us? What were they like in our families growing up? How can we make them more meaningful?

»»» What were vacations like in our families growing up? How do we want our vacations to feel?

»»» Pick a special holiday. What is the true meaning of this holiday to us? How should it be celebrated this year? How was it celebrated in each of our families growing up?

»» How do we each get refreshed and renewed? What makes these rituals meaningful for us?

»» What rituals do we have when someone is sick? What was it like in our families growing up? What would we like it to be in our family?

Exercise

SHARED GOALS QUESTIONNAIRE

Both of you have goals for yourself and for your relationship. Goals can be indicators of how you might change. Goals can be practical, or deeply spiritual. Goals can sometimes cross over into life dreams, which we'll discuss in the next chapter. For now, you're going to explore the meaning of goals in your individual lives and in your relationship. Please answer the following True or False questions. If a question doesn't apply to you, skip it, modify it to your particular situation, or keep it in mind for future discussion.

YOUR GOALS

››› We share many of the same goals in our life together.

☐ T ☐ F

››› If I were to look back on my life in very old age, I think I would see that our paths had meshed very well.

☐ T ☐ F

››› My partner values my accomplishments.

☐ T ☐ F

››› My partner honors the personal goals I have that are unrelated to our relationship.

☐ T ☐ F

››› We share many of the same goals for others who are important to us (children, relatives, friends, and community).

☐ T ☐ F

››› We have very similar financial goals.

☐ T ☐ F

››› We tend to have compatible worries about potential financial disasters.

☐ T ☐ F

››› Our life dreams tend to be similar or compatible.

☐ T ☐ F

››› Our hopes and aspirations, as individuals and together, for our children, for our life in general, and for our old age, are compatible.

☐ T ☐ F

››› Even when they are different, we have been able to find a way to honor our life dreams.

☐ T ☐ F

After answering the questions above, especially if you had very few “True” answers, please explore your goals and their meanings by discussing the following questions.

››› Write your own eulogy. What would you like it to say? What qualities or accomplishments would you most like to be remembered for at the time of your death?

››› What goals do you have in life, for yourself, for your partner, for your children (if you have children)? What do you want to accomplish in the next five to ten years?

››› We often fill our time with things that demand immediate attention—putting out fires, so to speak. But what are the important things in your life that are truly great sources of energy and pleasure that you really need to block out time for, the important things that keep getting postponed or crowded out?

››› What is the role of spirituality or religion in your lives? What was this role in your families growing up? What would you like it to be now or in the future?

As individuals, you will grow and change over the course of your relationship. Your individual beliefs and practices about spirituality and religion aren’t as important as viewing your relationship and the rituals and goals you create together as sacred, spiritual, and meaningful.

Speed Dating

Chapter Summary

- »» The only constant in a relationship is change.
- »» The key is how each person in the relationship accommodates the growth of the other partner.
- »» Amazing things happen in relationships when a couple can change and grow and accommodate the growth of the other person.
- »» Relationships can be more than just two individuals coming together—they can be stories of transformation and great contribution and meaning in the world.
- »» When you create meaning out of the struggles you face together, you stay together.
- »» Research shows that if a couple holds their relationship as sacred, then they have a better relationship.
- »» When individuals grow, relationships grow. When individuals transform, relationships transform.
- »» Creating shared meaning and rituals of connection are a way to make a spiritual practice in your relationship.

The Date: GROWTH & SPIRITUALITY

CONVERSATION TOPIC

»» How have we each grown and changed in the relationship? What does spirituality mean to each of us and how do we express it?

PREPARATION

»» Think about what growth, change, and spirituality mean in your life. If you haven't already, answer the True or False questionnaires and the questions about rituals of connection and your goals. Reflect on what you read in this chapter and any ideas it sparked about what spirituality or religion look like to you. Think about the rituals you have or wish you had in your relationship. Think about how you each have changed over time. Think about the ways in which you have transformed individually and think about the ways your own transformation has changed the relationship.

LOCATION

»» For this date you'll go to a place that feels beautiful and sacred to both of you. It can be indoors or outdoors. It can be at your place of worship—outside of a temple, mosque, synagogue, or a church you attend. Think about having your date conversation at a local Zen center or other spiritual site near you.

SUGGESTION

»» The goal is to honor your partner in some way. One way is with a tribute. This could be done by a video celebration, or even a little representation of your love that you create in your home or yard. Start with a favorite photo of them. Collect a few objects that remind you of your partner and arrange them around the photo. Be thoughtful with what you collect. Let it be things that represent shared meaning between you.

AT-HOME DATE: If you choose to create tributes for each other, have your date in front of these tributes. Begin with five minutes of silence. If you are experienced meditators, you can meditate. If you pray, begin with five minutes of prayer. Think of this date as sacred and meaningful.

BRING

»» You should bring the questionnaires and the answers to the questions about rituals and goals from the chapter. Be prepared to discuss with each other your answers to the True or False questions.

TROUBLESHOOTING

»» Be humble and be curious about your partner's idea about what growth and spirituality look like for them.

»» Keep an open mind and refrain from judging your partner.

»» Ask questions before assuming you understand.

»» If you feel threatened or frightened by what your partner is saying, let your partner know you're concerned rather than making the partner stop because you're afraid.

»» Remember there is no right or wrong, and always put happiness and understanding above being right.

OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS FOR YOUR DATE CONVERSATION

After discussing and reviewing your exercises, ask each other the following questions:

»» In your childhood, how did your family honor the sacred, or did they not, and how did that make you feel? Were they religious, and if so, how did they practice?

»» What do you consider sacred? And why?

»» What carries you through your most difficult times?

»» How do you find a sense of peace in yourself? What is your source of peace?

- »» How have you changed in your spirituality or religious beliefs over the course of your life?
- »» How do you feel you have grown the most? In what areas?
- »» What decade did you grow the most in and how did you change?
- »» What spiritual beliefs do you want to pass on to our kids (if you have them or plan on having them)?
- »» How can I support you in your own personal journey?
- »» How do you feel about intentionally trying to evolve within yourself or doing things to develop in terms of your personal growth?

AFFIRMING OUR FUTURE TOGETHER

Take turns reading this affirmation out loud to each other. Maintain eye contact while reciting.



I commit to growing and learning together and seeking shared meaning within our relationship. I also commit to creating three shared rituals for connection as listed below:

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____

DATE

»»₈««

A Lifetime of Love

DREAMS

Keisha and Alex find it hard to talk about their dreams. “How do we separate dreams from work? Sure, I’d love to be an artist,” said Alex, “but bills need to be paid. How many artists can support a family? How many people can really make a living from pursuing their dreams? I find the whole topic kind of uncomfortable.”

Keisha pushed back a little in the discussion. “But you can’t just give up on your dreams. If I know you want to be an artist, then I can help you find time to do art. I can do more of the errands myself on Sundays, and you can paint. If I don’t know that’s your dream, how can I support you? Maybe we start small. You show your art at a coffee shop or something. I could write up little blurbs about each painting.”

“I could maybe take a couple of hours every Sunday morning. I might totally suck at it. I haven’t painted in years.”

“If it means something to you, I want to support you, ” said Keisha. “We’re a team.”

“What about you? What’s your dream?”

“I don’t know.” Keisha thought about it for a few minutes. “I guess I’d like to visit Machu Picchu someday. That’s always been a dream of mine. Something really calls to me about that place. And I’d like to do something competitive again. I haven’t been on a team since high school and I used to be such an athlete. Maybe join a recreation league for soccer. That’s kind of a dream of mine along with being in that kind of shape again. It’s just hard to find the time when we work such long hours.”

“See,” said Alex. “Work is a dream killer.”

“Well, no one is going to pay me to get in shape or play soccer. But let’s find a way to spend some time pursuing our dreams. It’s kind of exciting to think about.”

As we discussed earlier, there’s no doubt that work takes up a major amount of time and energy, and if you’re living paycheck to paycheck, or digging out from under student loans, or pursuing a demanding career, it’s easy to put aside bigger dreams you have for your life. We make a commitment to our partners and we make commitments to our job, and making a commitment to pursue a dream can seem like one too many commitments to juggle.

But dreams are important. Your own dreams. Your partner’s dreams. And the dreams you have together. Dreaming together, and supporting each other in pursuing individual dreams, is just as critical for your relationship as trust, commitment, and sex.

The year following their disastrous annual honeymoon trip when John worked 16 hours a day, John and Julie set out once again for another July honeymoon. This time John left all the books behind. Instead they kayaked and focused on each other, and were intentional about discussing their life and their dreams. They asked each other how they could honor the other person's dreams. They listened. They took notes.

Even though they live together and they work together, they still had things to learn and questions to ask each other.

How do you see your work changing in the future?

What do you find exciting about life right now?

What are your biggest worries about the future?

How do you think we could have more fun in our life?

What things are you missing in your life?

Continuing to ask these questions, year after year, honeymoon after honeymoon, is how they come to have such a satisfying and long-term marriage. It's what this book is about, and it is the heart of what they have learned both professionally and personally: that engaging in these questions is the secret ingredient in creating a lifetime of love. John asking Julie about her dreams led to her sharing her dream of going to Mount Everest. Julie asking John about his dreams led to him sharing his wish to run a research institute, and the two of them together building the Relationship Research Institute. Julie added to John's dream by saying she dreamed of helping couples in distress around the world, and in turn, helping their children. That dream became the Gottman Institute.

Every year they imagine and reimagine their future.

Dreaming together is one of the most profound acts you can do in a relationship with each other. And honoring your partner's dreams is a potent way to express your care for someone, because it shows a profound love. Yes, you're loyal to each other, but can you also be loyal to what is most sacred and important to the other person? When each partner honors and supports the other's dreams, everything else in the relationship gets easier, because each person feels supported in being and becoming who they need and want to be.

Everyone has a life dream or a life purpose, and you have to be intentional about not sacrificing those dreams and that purpose to your daily task list, your work, your family, or even your relationship.

Right now, for Alex, his dream is to pursue his painting, and to someday make a living from his art. Whether that happens or not, only time will tell. What

matters most is Keisha supporting him in that dream, even if it makes her worry about how they will pay the bills or how they will raise a family.

TAKING TURNS

Doug and Rachel were wildly in love—the crazy, infatuated, stay up all night just staring at each other love. Their relationship was new. They couldn't stand to be apart. And then Doug dropped a bombshell. "I want to go to Israel for a year. It's really important to me, I have this need to explore my roots."

Rachel was surprised but told him that if that was what he needed to do, then of course he should go. "There was no way I was going to get in the way of something that was so important to him. A year is a really long time when a relationship is new. But I knew it was his dream. I knew it wasn't about me."

The time apart was hard, but when he returned and told her his new dream of going to New York and climbing the corporate publishing ladder, she was just beginning medical school 3,000 miles away from New York. "At that point," says Doug, "we had to talk about both of our dreams, because they were leading us very far apart geographically and I was afraid they would lead us to being apart emotionally as well."

Doug decided to give up on New York and move to where Rachel was going to school, and become the primary care parent and cut back on his own work. "Ultimately, we decided that our relationship, its potential, was the most important dream for both of us."

Thirty-one years later, Rachel says that honoring her dreams is the number one, rock-star way that Doug makes her feel loved in their relationship. "What we've learned," she says, "is that you can be in a relationship and each person can make all his or her dreams come true. But you can't do it all at the same time. We've learned to take turns and we've learned to support each other no matter what."

When Rachel wanted to have another child and ended up giving birth to twins, Doug was willing to work two jobs and commute several hours each day to support her dream of family (her mother also moved in with them for six months to help with twin infant care). When Doug wanted to leave the corporate publishing company where he was working so he could start his own literary agency to help visionaries create a wiser, healthier, and more just world, Rachel supported him, even though there was no model of what such a literary agency would look like, and they had no idea whether it would succeed. Rachel was willing to work extra hours at a "Doc in the Box" urgent care clinic so Doug could pursue his dream until his agency was up and running.

When Rachel wanted to leave her stable job and dependable salary to start her own clinic, Doug supported her—another risky undertaking for them financially. When she eventually closed that clinic because it was too big and too unwieldy, he didn't encourage her to go back to seeing patients every ten minutes at a traditional medical clinic, because he knew it would break her heart and damage her soul. Instead he encouraged her to try again, and she did. Wiser and savvier, she created a thriving medical practice that feeds her soul.

When Doug wanted to fulfill a lifelong dream of writing a novel, Rachel supported him, even when it meant he would stay up late and get up early to write. Even though it took weekends away from the family. They decided what the bare minimum was they could live on while they each pursued their dreams, because they knew that fulfilling their dreams was more important than having a big house or an impressive car. Doug and Rachel have always felt that their number one job in their marriage, even more than getting their own needs met, was supporting the other one to give their gifts to the world and contribute in whatever way they were called to contribute. In short, they took turns, and they sacrificed, and they supported each other to fulfill their own personal dreams and the collective dreams they felt drawn to contribute to.

Everyone makes sacrifices, but you can't surrender your dreams. You can't suppress them. That can lead to bitterness, resentment, and loss of passion and desire, and create enormous distance in a relationship. As partners we must help each other find a way to channel and pursue our dreams, whether vocationally or recreationally. This keeps passion and juice and aliveness in each partner and in the relationship.

And nobody wants a partner who is only half alive. The goal is to be in a relationship and still hold on to your dreams. Pursue your dreams. And share your dreams with your partner.

BECOME A DREAM TEAM

Your partner has dreams you don't know about, and the truth is that some of our deepest dreams are rooted in childhood. The dreams you and your partner have can be what we call "deep" dreams. The most common we have worked with are listed in the exercise that follows.

Each of your "deep" dreams is important and beautiful, and needs to be shared with your partner. If your dream is travel and adventure, and your partner's dream is a spiritual journey, your dreams might be aligned (a trip together to Jerusalem or India or some other sacred place), or they may be in conflict. The most important and critical takeaway about dreams is not to hide

them. If your dream is to become more powerful, share that with your partner. If your dream is to build something important, talk about it with your partner.

When we hide our dreams, both big and small, we hide the most important parts of ourselves. We block intimacy and connection. A dream is something you long for, and if you don't share that longing, or even allow your partner to know about that longing, conflict will happen. The dream doesn't go away when we suppress it. It is within us, and it will rear its head as conflict, often difficult—what we call gridlocked—conflict. The best way to avoid this type of conflict is to be open and honest about all your dreams, both big and small. And to respect and honor your partner's dreams, even when they're different from your own. If your partner dreams of climbing Everest, don't talk about how much time and money it'll cost. Be curious about why they have that dream. Ask them what that dream means to them. Ask them how they will feel when they fulfill that dream. There is a story within every dream you have and within every dream your partner has. Listen to each other's stories.

Dream together.

Imagine together.

Together you can make every impossible dream possible.

The world needs you to realize your dreams. In our dreams we find our greatest joy and discover the unique gifts we have to share with the world.

Exercise

DREAM LEVELS

Read through the list of deep dreams to see if they relate to your own deeply held dreams, or inspire you to think of a dream you have or perhaps spark a dream you have forgotten about.

- 1 Circle the dreams on the list that are dreams you have or write in some of your own in the spaces provided. Be prepared to share this list with your partner on your date.
- 2 In the circle diagram on page 210, name a dream (or up to three dreams) you have and put it in the center circle (Dream #1). This should be the dream that matters the most to you. In the middle circle (Dream #2) write a dream you have that matters, but isn't as important to you. In the outer circle (Dream #3) write down a dream that would be great to fulfill, but is more a "take it or leave it" kind of dream. Circle three dreams below that are most important to you.

»»» To have more freedom

»»» To experience peace

»»» To experience unity with nature

»»» To explore who I am

»»» To go on great adventures

»»» To undertake a spiritual journey

»»» To fight for justice

»»» To create honor

»»» To heal my past

»»» To be a healer of others

»»» To create a family

»»» To fulfill my potential

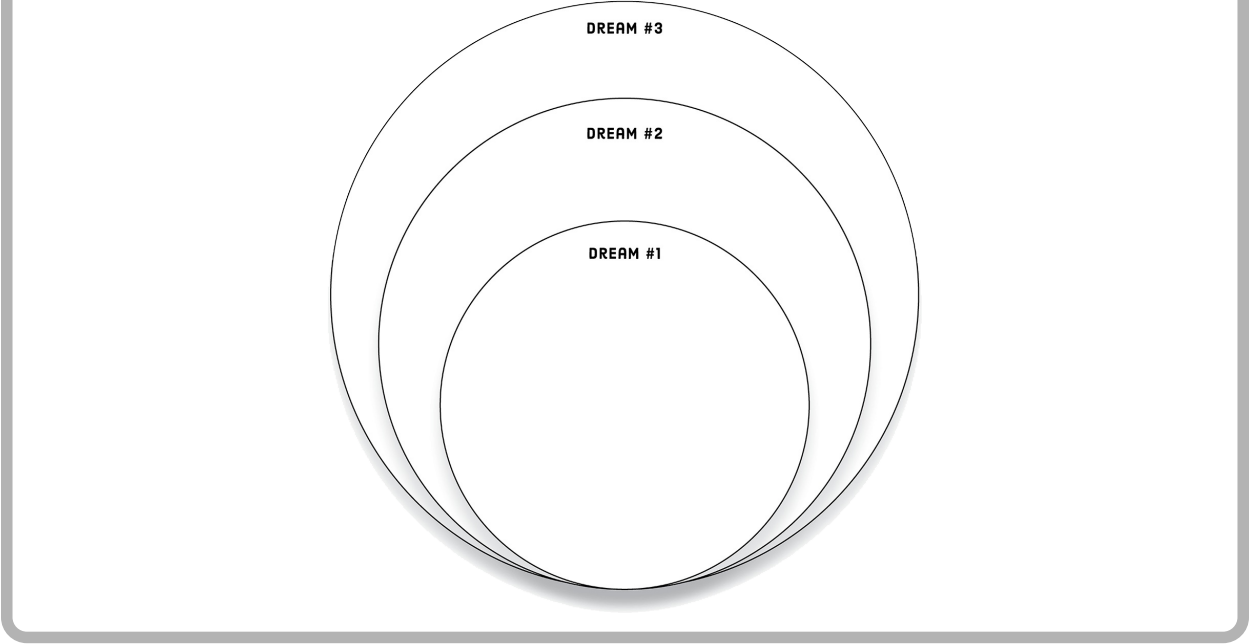
- »»» To be powerful and influential
- »»» To age gracefully
- »»» To explore my creative side
- »»» To help others
- »»» To develop mastery
- »»» To explore an old part of myself I have lost
- »»» To conquer a fear
- »»» To have a sense of order
- »»» To be more productive
- »»» To be able to truly relax
- »»» To reflect on my life
- »»» To finish something important
- »»» To explore the physical side of myself or become an athlete
- »»» To compete and win
- »»» To travel the world
- »»» To make amends or ask God or another person for forgiveness
- »»» To build something important
- »»» To end a chapter in my life—say goodbye to something

»»»

»»»

»»»

»»»



Speed Dating

Chapter Summary

- ››› Honoring each other's dreams is the secret ingredient to creating love for a lifetime.
- ››› Your relationship is one dream you have for your life, but each of you has other dreams that are important to you as individuals.
- ››› You can make all of each other's dreams come true, but that rarely happens at the same time. Sacrifices may need to be made.
- ››› Honoring your partner's dreams is a potent way to show your love for them.
- ››› When dreams are honored, everything else in the relationship gets easier.
- ››› Everyone has a life dream or life purpose.
- ››› Nobody should sacrifice that dream or purpose for the relationship.
- ››› You can't honor each other's dreams if you don't share them with each other.

The Date: DREAMS

CONVERSATION TOPIC

»»» What are our deepest dreams? How do we help each other fulfill dreams? How do we dream together?

PREPARATION

»»» Reflect on what you read in this chapter and any ideas it sparked about what honoring each other's dreams means to you. Complete the exercise and be prepared to bring your circles with three dreams listed in them to the date. Write down the dreams you're drawn to and be prepared to tell the story behind each of your dreams and share how it will feel to you to fulfill each dream.

LOCATION

»»» Find a place that inspires you and inspires your dreams. Have your date at dawn or at sunset where you can see the horizon. Anywhere with a beautiful view. Find a place that is inspiring or aspirational in some way.

SUGGESTION

»»» If there is a place that is important to a dream you share (buying a house in a particular neighborhood or opening a bakery in a certain commercial district), then go to this place that is a part of your dreams for your date.

AT-HOME OPTION: Have the conversation on a blanket under the stars on your rooftop or in your backyard. Make a wish on a star as you discuss each dream.

BRING

»»» You should bring your completed exercise and three dreams written in the circles. If you want you can bring a piece of paper and pen and draw your own circles and write in your dreams. Be prepared to discuss both exercises. Bring an open mind and heart.

TRoubleshooting

TROUBLESHOOTING

- »» Refrain from contradicting your partner's dream; do not say it will never happen, question it, or belittle it.
- »» Don't immediately jump into practicalities until you fully understand the dream, because there's no faster way to kill it or cause your partner to close up. It may be impractical but don't say it.
- »» Remember that you can't know the future or what's possible.
- »» Do ask big questions to understand your partner's dream, including anything in their childhood that has given birth to this dream.
- »» Ask for the underlying meaning to any dream.

OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS FOR YOUR DATE CONVERSATION

After discussing your exercise, ask each other the following questions:

- »» Did you have any dreams for yourself when you were a child?
- »» Do you think your parents fulfilled their dreams?
- »» Did your parents support you in fulfilling your childhood dreams?
- »» Why is the dream in your innermost circle so important to you?
- »» Does it relate to your childhood or history in some way? How so?
- »» Is there an underlying purpose for your fulfilling your dream?
- »» How would you feel if this dream was fulfilled? If it wasn't?
- »» Tell me more about your other two dreams.

AFFIRMING OUR FUTURE TOGETHER

Take turns reading this affirmation out loud to each other. Maintain eye contact while reciting.



I commit to fully exploring and understanding your dreams and to doing one thing to support one of your dreams in the next six months.

CONCLUSION



Cherish Each Other

These eight conversations are only the beginning. These topics are the most important ones for your relationship—whether you’re considering a future together, or have been together for a long time—but there is no limit to the topics you’ll discuss, the understanding you’ll gain, or the love that you’ll grow over a lifetime. You want to keep your relationship always growing and evolving. You can never know all there is to know about a person, and this is what makes it exciting.

Your relationship is a great adventure. Treat it as such. Be curious. Be vulnerable. Be willing to venture outside your comfort zone. Learn to listen. Be brave enough to talk. Share your hopes, your fears, and your dreams.

We started this book with trust and we’re going to end it with trust as well. It is absolutely central to the success and failure of all relationships. Couples whose relationships are successful feel safe with each other. Trust is what allows you to be vulnerable. Increasing the degree of trust (friendship, showing up, keeping your word) improves your relationship. You don’t have to be similar in every way for your love to last; most couples are more dissimilar than similar. But you do have to be brave enough to be vulnerable. A lifetime of love is made up of the small moments and interactions you have with each other.

Make them count.

Don’t part in the morning without knowing one interesting thing that will happen in your partner’s day. Kiss each other goodbye. Kiss each other hello. Play together. Take time to talk about your day with each other. Know what is stressing your partner out. Know what they are looking forward to. Honor each other’s dreams.

As we’ve said, couples who are happiest in their relationships express positivity. Couples whose love lasts have a ratio of 5 to 1 positive to negative interactions during a fight or conflict. When they are just hanging out, they have a ratio of 20 to 1 positive to negative interactions. That means for every negative thing you say to each other, you have 20 positive things to say or do.

In other words, cherish each other.

The best way to cherish each other is to make your relationship a priority. Give it time, give it attention, and be intentional about the life you’re creating with each other. Go on these eight dates, and then go on 800 more.

For Ben and Leah, who were in the first date chapter, the conversations they had over the course of these dates changed their relationship profoundly.

YOU HAVE TO BE BRAVE ENOUGH NOT TO HIDE PARTS OF YOURSELF.

“Yes, we were already planning to marry, but the conversations we had brought us closer than I ever could have imagined possible,” said Leah. “The fact that he was willing to take the time—that he wanted to take the time—to share all these stories about trust and money and dreams and family meant the world to me. I feel like we created in months what some people take years to create. A foundation. A sense of really being on each other’s side and supporting each other through everything that’s to come that we have no idea about. It’s exciting. I’m more in love with him than I’ve ever been. All of these dates have been an adventure, and it’s like we’re on this big journey now to understand each other, to get to know each other as deeply as possible. The love we have for each other is different now. More real. More solid, if that makes sense. I hope we have dates like this forever.”

Many of the couples who went on these dates shared their surprise at how much closer they felt to one another after every conversation. Their love deepened. And they felt a new excitement about being on this journey together.

Being in a loving relationship is one of the greatest adventures we have known.

We can’t tell you exactly what will happen in your relationship, but we know that if you commit to exploring these eight topics and commit to understanding all the ways you’re different and actually embracing those differences, you’ll be surprised at what you can create. You’re writing your own love story every time you turn toward each other. Every time you offer comfort. Every time you really listen. Each and every time you put your partner’s interests above your own.

Remember the love you create together will not just benefit you and your relationship, it will be a blessing for others. If you have children, your relationship is a legacy for them. Your love will influence how they love their own partners someday, and how your grandchildren love their partners. The love you create now will go on for generations.

Your love will also be a role model for other couples. Our marriages and families are nothing less than the very building blocks of our society. When our relationships are happy and healthy, so is our society. You can take the skills you’ve learned in this book—how to ask questions that matter, how to listen, and how to understand and embrace differences—and use them in your relationships

with friends, with extended family, with coworkers, and even with strangers. We all have so much to learn about one another.

We wrote this book to help you, but we also wrote it so you can help others. So few get any kind of training or guidance in how to do the most important thing we do in our life—love the people who are closest to us. Please share this book with anyone who is trying to create or re-create their relationship. Whether they become a master or a disaster doesn't just affect them, it affects their children, it affects their community, and it affects our world. Thank you for reading this book, for doing the hard and luminous work of love, and for contributing to a more loving future for all.

Everyone deserves a lifetime of love.

APPENDIX



More Open-Ended Questions

Hopefully you make weekly dates a ritual over the lifetime of your relationship. The following are extra questions you can ask each other on future dates. This is just a sampling, and the point is you should never stop being curious about your partner, never stop falling in love, and never stop asking each other questions that matter. Please go to workman.com/eightdates for additional date night resources.

- »»» What do you want your life to be like, say, three years from now?
- »»» How do you see your work changing in the future?
- »»» How do you feel about our physical home? Are there any architectural changes you'd like to make?
- »»» What do you think your life would be like if you lived 100 years from now?
- »»» How would you compare yourself as a mother or father to your own mother or father?
- »»» What kind of person do you think our child(ren) will become? Any fears? Any hopes?
- »»» How do you feel about work now?
- »»» Which decade of your life would you like to redo, and why?
- »»» How are you feeling now about being a mother or father?
- »»» If you could go back into your life and change one thing, what would it be, and why?
- »»» What do you find exciting in life right now?
- »»» If you could wake up tomorrow with three new skills, what would they be, and why?
- »»» What are your biggest worries about the future?

- ››› Who are your best allies and close friends right now? How have they or you changed?
- ››› What were the highlights and lowlights of your adolescence?
- ››› If you could live during any other period in history, when would you choose to live, and why?
- ››› If you could choose any other career or vocation, what would it be, and why?
- ››› If you could change one characteristic about yourself, what would it be, and why?
- ››› How have you changed in the last year?
- ››› If you could live one other person's life, whose life would you choose, and why?
- ››› What are some of your life dreams now?
- ››› What goals do you have for our family?
- ››› If you could look like anyone else in the world, who would you pick, and why?
- ››› What kind of year has this been for you? Highlights? Lowlights?
- ››› Tell me the story of your proudest moment.
- ››› If you could be a superstar in any sport, what sport would you choose, and why?
- ››› How have you changed over the years as a mother or father?
- ››› How have you changed over the years as a daughter or son?
- ››› How have you changed over the years as a sister or brother?
- ››› What relative of yours have you felt closest to, and why?
- ››› Who has been the most difficult person in your life?
- ››› If you could be the richest man or woman in the world, what would you do with your money?

- »» If you could change into any animal for 24 hours, which animal would it be, and why?
- »» Who was your childhood hero, or heroes?
- »» If you could live the rest of your life in any other country, which one would it be, and why?
- »» If you could be a genius in any art form, music, dance, whatever, which talent would you choose, and why?

Bonus Date Night Exercise Cherishing Your Partner

This is a bonus exercise you can do as an add-on for any of the dates, or a fun framework for a special date night just for cherishing each other.

Using the list below, check all the qualities that apply to your partner and think of an example when your partner displayed that characteristic. Then say to yourself, “I am really lucky to be with my partner.” On your next date, go through your list, give the example, and thank your partner for having that positive quality.

WHAT I REALLY CHERISH ABOUT YOU IS THAT YOU ARE SO:

(Remember to give an example for each of these on the list.) >>>Active >>>

Adaptable >>>Adventurous >>>Ambitious >>>Appreciative >>>Artistic >>>

Authentic >>>Aware

>>>Balanced >>>Bold

>>>Brave

>>>Calm

>>>Capable >>>Caring >>>Cheerful >>>Clever >>>Compassionate >>>

Confident >>>Conscientious >>>Considerate >>>Courageous >>>Creative

>>>Curious >>>Daring >>>Dedicated >>>Dependable >>>Determined >>>

Devoted >>>Easygoing >>>Empathetic >>>Enduring >>>Ethical >>>Fair

>>>Feisty >>>Flexible >>>Forgiving >>>Friendly >>>Fun

>>>Generous >>>Gentle >>>Happy

>>>Hardworking >>>Healthy >>>Helpful >>>Honest >>>Humble >>>

Humorous >>>Insightful >>>Intelligent >>>Interesting >>>Intuitive >>>Kind

>>>Knowledgeable >>>Loyal

>>>Mellow >>>Musical >>>Neat

>>>Nurturing >>>Observant >>>Open-minded >>>Optimistic >>>Organized

>>>Patient >>>Peaceful >>>Perceptive >>>Persevering >>>Practical >>>

Principled >>>Quick-witted >>>Quiet

>>>Rational >>>Reliable >>>Resilient >>>Resourceful >>>Respectful >>>

Responsible >>>Self-confident >>>Sensitive >>>Sincere >>>Smart

››› Sociable ››› Spiritual ››› Stable ››› Strong ››› Supportive ››› Thoughtful
››› Tolerant ››› Trusting ››› Trustworthy ››› Truthful ››› Understanding
››› Unselfish ››› Warm

››› Wise

››› Witty

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This questionnaire first appeared in John Gottman’s book, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, Three Rivers Press, 1999.

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