

I Want This to
Work

AN INCLUSIVE GUIDE
TO NAVIGATING THE MOST
DIFFICULT RELATIONSHIP ISSUES
WE FACE IN THE MODERN AGE

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Introduction

just really want this to work,” Raquel says to me. For more than a decade Raquel and Alberto have been navigating the challenges of the modern relationship. They both hoped for a relationship that would help them reach their goals, create meaning, and be a source of romance and love. As they’ve navigated the stress of the outside world, parenting, and their career ambitions, they’ve lost themselves and, in many ways, their relationship. Their relationship has been burdened with stress, overwhelm, and hurtful experiences that haven’t been resolved. Add on top of that the time and energy suck of technology: they both feel disappointed by how much more time they spend on their devices than with each other.

They know they love each other, but can love overcome the anger and resentment? They wonder, *Is my partner there for me? Do they respect me? Will they respond to my needs? And Can I still be here for myself? Can I respect myself? Can I respond to my own needs?*

Navigating the modern relationship can be fulfilling and meaningful. In our new relationship style, we aren’t just meeting each other’s basic and utilitarian needs—we want more. With that, though, comes a complex renegotiating of what a committed

partnership looks like. In the past, relationships were formed for parental, financial, or religious reasons, but couples now are seeking relationships that provide them emotional depth and act as containers for personal growth and support. When people in their twenties were surveyed about what's most important in a relationship, 94 percent of them said they want a spouse that is their soul mate first and foremost.¹ Our roles in relationships are less defined than they were in the past, our lives are more complex and busy, and we want more from our relationships than we ever have before. This leads me to believe that more than ever we need to learn to be exceptional communicators. This takes a mix of understanding the issues we are facing, having awareness of ourselves, and knowing the skills that help our messages to be received.

Raquel and Alberto, like most people, hope that through the process of working on their relationship they can build something that addresses the reality of life while still fulfilling the need of building something connected and meaningful—a relationship that rests on a foundation of respect, responsiveness, and reliability.

Like most committed relationships, Raquel's partnership with Alberto started from a place of hope, love, and excitement. Isn't that the truth for most people who choose to commit to each other? We certainly don't go into a relationship thinking that one day we might end up unhappy. Looking back, she realizes that many things didn't feel quite right, even in the beginning. Of course, hindsight is always 20/20, and Raquel can see that she ignored some problems in order to keep her relationship going. She has felt it necessary to be quiet about a lot of the issues just to keep the peace.

Over the years it has become more difficult for Raquel to pretend that it's all okay—that she doesn't have needs, or that she hasn't missed out on goals or that she doesn't feel lonely. She has spent a long time feeling unhappy in this relationship, and Raquel is ready for it to change. She really wants it to work, but not by being the only one to put in the work. Raquel hopes that within her partnership, she can find a way to cocreate a relationship with more mutuality—more respect for each other, more reliability between them, and more responsiveness to each other's needs. A relationship that supports the individual growth of each partner while fostering relational security between them.

Like Raquel, many of us live within relationships that at best feel inadequate and at worst feel unbearable. We stay in them because we get caught up in the concept of “making it work.” Unfortunately, these relationships don’t honor our needs, feelings, experiences, goals, and dreams. They become a catalyst for loss of the self, when really they should be a catalyst for growth.

LET’S LOOK AT LOVE

I define modern love as the act of honoring BOTH people in a relationship. It is not love if you do not honor the self, and it is not love if you do not honor the other.

Many people believe that the only way we can get our relationships to “work” is to abandon, minimize, lose, or betray important aspects of the self. We do this by shapeshifting, making ourselves small, agreeing in order to keep the peace, and ignoring personal needs, boundaries, and desires. By putting up with harmful communication. By taking on the burdens of another as if they were our own. By enabling. By being codependent. All of this leads to a sense of self-loss.

Sadly, self-loss and relational loss are two sides of the same coin: we betray or abandon those we love the most when there is nothing left within us. Rather than being open and transparent, we communicate without respect for ourselves or our partner. Or, more commonly, our conversations start to focus on who is “right” and who is “wrong,” and as a result we don’t communicate at all. We lack respect for each other, and we start to wonder if we even have respect for ourselves.

I have met with so many couples who say, “I want this to work,” and they mean it. But they don’t know where to start. Sometimes, trying to “make it work” leads to “fusion,” which is when our decisions, actions, and feelings of self-worth depend on what our partner thinks or how we predict our partner will react. Fusion is a form of self-loss. At the other end of the spectrum, to preserve our sense of self, we may disengage from our partner, emotionally cutting ourselves off from the relationship.

When couples say, “I want this to work,” they are often frustrated that the only way they know how to make it work is to avoid conflict or enter it unfairly, and the only way to do that is to harm themselves or to harm the other person. This book will teach you another way—one that creates connection, respect, and resolve for both of you.

IT'S ABOUT US

Plenty of studies have shown that strong relationships are the greatest predictor of happiness and life satisfaction. Some of the fantasies we have about relationships making us happy do actually hold up in reality.

For example, social connection, in particular the ability to confide in another person and be with loved ones, was found to be the strongest protective factor for depression.² Another study that followed people for more than seventy years produced data that shows the most important choice you can make for your happiness is to invest in your closest relationships.³

The loss of a relationship can lead to emotional, social, and economic distress.⁴ People often experience the emotional distress as dysphoria, a less severe form of depression.⁵ Research has also shown that isolation impairs sleep, mental functioning, and physical well-being.⁶

On the other hand, we know that staying in a relationship that asks us to lose ourselves in order to make it work is also problematic. Self-loss can lead to decreased self-esteem, decreased possibilities for intimacy, and vulnerability to depression.⁷

Ultimately, both self-loss and relationship loss can lead to dysphoria. It's no wonder that it's hard to decide, "Should I stay, or should I go?"

SHOWING UP

Many of us have been raised on the binary: either totally enmeshed in relationships or completely independent and autonomous. We say we want to be in relationships, but we don't think or behave relationally. We may ignore things that are problems for our partner, or we may sacrifice ourselves for their desires. Relational thinking requires you to examine how to show up fully as yourself while helping your partner to do the same. This is a new way of seeing relationships, and it takes fresh awareness, a shift in mindset, and skills that many of us were not taught. As we build relational and self-awareness, we can begin to shift the way we think so that we can open ourselves to the possibility of a different relationship. And as we do this, we need to practice building integral skills for relationship health.

First, we need to build skills that help us to honor the self, like identifying our needs, practicing self-compassion, speaking up, and

setting boundaries. Then, we need to build interactional skills that support communication, self-soothing, repair, connection, and relational growth. You'll learn these skills in this book.

When couples are guided toward being relationally focused, they find that they feel a much more meaningful connection, one that supports the life goals of each partner and that creates something new and purposeful between them.

Sometimes in working toward more authentic connection, however, couples also discover that their particular relationship isn't going to have the capacity to honor each partner. Sometimes they learn that the relationship truly isn't going to work. Recognition of that is not a failure. Rather, it's a success in healthy relating and radical honesty.

A NEW WAY

More than a decade ago, I started following my path toward becoming a couples therapist. Since then, I have worked with hundreds of couples for thousands of hours. I've found that so many of the people I work with could have really beautiful relationships if they developed the skills I was lucky enough to have learned in school. In this book, I am going to share the lessons I learned in my master's in couples and family therapy program, my thousands of hours of clinical experience with couples and individuals working on relationship problems, my certification as a Gottman Method couples therapist, and my own experiences within relationships, particularly as a wife and mother. My hope is that these lessons can change your life the way they changed mine and lead you toward a romantic partnership that honors you deeply.

I have come to feel strongly that people must learn how to make their relationships work in a new way: a way in which love means honoring you and honoring me. In this book, you are going to learn how to create a relationship that does just that—one that is *interdependent*. We'll start by identifying the most common reasons why relationships don't work (chapter 1) and looking at interdependence, the key to making them work (chapter 2).

Then, in part 2, I'll take you on the same journey I take with my clients who come to me for couples therapy. You'll start by identifying the current challenges and unproductive parts of your

relationship (chapter 3). You'll examine how these problems came to be (chapter 4). Then, I'll guide you to look within for the patterns, triggers, and other blocks that might be getting in the way of authentic connection (chapter 5). Next, I'll teach you the skills to build boundaries so that you can feel safe enough to let the other person in (chapter 6). Then, we will explore how to move into creating a healthier mindset about your partner and your relationship (chapter 7). In chapter 8, you will learn the communication skills necessary to manage really tough conversations, and in chapter 9, I'll walk you through having those conversations. In chapter 10, we will talk about how to repair past hurts so you can see the path forward.

Finally, in part 3, you will have a plan for the way forward along with the skills and knowledge to see the process through.

Each chapter has exercises and activities designed to help you build awareness, come up with action steps, and become more connected. You will see "Reflection" prompts throughout the book, and I recommend dedicating a journal to this work. By doing the journal prompts, you'll deepen your understanding of the topics we explore and learn how to apply them to your own life. Feel free to doodle and draw, if that works for you. This is your journey, for your relationship.

Throughout the book there are sections titled "Talk About It." There, I offer conversation prompts so that you can use this book as a way to get closer to your partner through meaningful conversation. Make no mistake, talking about some of the topics in this book can be challenging. But by bringing it up, you are taking the important step of changing your patterns. In fact, you cannot make a relationship "work" on your own. Your partner will need to be an active participant, and utilizing the guided conversations can help you both to start on a path toward better understanding, problem solving, and building a future together. As you "talk about it," here are some things to keep in mind:

- Start by telling your partner that you're reading this book.
- It's okay to dive into just one question in a conversation. Allow yourself to take time to rest and digest before tackling the next one, if that feels right to you.

- Honor your partner’s perspective, even if you don’t agree.
- Give yourself grace and space to grow. These conversations won’t ever be perfect, *and* they can improve over time. Give your partner this space to grow and to get it right over time, too.
- If things get heated, before you spit fire, take a deep breath instead.
- Take breaks when the conversation is not working. It’s okay to go to bed angry.
- Remember the real reason you are reading this book: to get things to work in your relationship. That’s going to mean that you have to do things in a new way, and sometimes that can be really hard. But the end goal is worth it.

tips for being a **good speaker**

- Pick a good time—moments of low stress with few distractions.
- Ask for consent—“Is now a good time to chat?”
- Pay attention to your approach. Are you using body language, tone of voice, or anything else that might be sensed as threatening?
- Talk about your own thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Do not talk about what you assume your partner’s to be.
- Pay attention to how long you are talking so you don’t lose your listener.
- Be clear about what you hope to get from the conversation: “All I want is a listening ear,” “I would love for us to problem solve together,” etc.

tips for being a good listener

- Listen with a goal of understanding your partner better than you do.
- Pay attention not only to what they are saying but what they are feeling.
- Avoid interrupting.
- Withhold your own agenda. It will be your turn later.
- Demonstrate empathy and compassion.
- Validate them by letting them know that what you are hearing makes sense.
- Summarize what you heard and ask if you got it right before moving on.

Lastly, in the appendix I have provided you with ready-made scripts to help you through the most common conversations that I see people have in my office. Use these templates to help you learn the flow and structure of effective communication with your partner.

Let's get started! But first, I want you to make this agreement with yourself: "I want to make this work, but it won't be at my expense or my partner's. I am ready to show up bravely. I am ready to be transparent. I am ready to love—in a way that honors us both."

A NOTE ON ABUSE

Many of us are in relationships that are unsatisfying, frustrating, sad, distanced, or highly conflictual. However, if these feelings are accompanied by fear, that is a sign you are in an abusive relationship. If you find yourself afraid to speak up, ask for what you need, or do what you need to do because you are worried you will be harmed, then you are likely being controlled through fear.

If you are undergoing either physical, psychological/emotional, financial, or sexual abuse, before utilizing the tools in this book, you should talk to a therapist trained in supporting people experiencing domestic abuse. A specialist can help you better understand how your abuser might respond to your attempts to change and assist you in creating a plan to stay safe. If you need support, you can start by calling the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE and looking up counselors in your area. At the end of this book you will find resources as well as a list of signs to look for.

While the tools in this book might not be helpful in changing an abusive dynamic, they still might be of use to you—giving you a deeper understanding of yourself and insight into what to look for in healthy relational dynamics. This book might also validate that what you have experienced is wrong by showing you what is healthy and right. So many people who have experienced abuse doubt their own perception of abusive dynamics.

If you believe you are the abuser in the relationship, that acknowledgment is an important first step. While learning the tools in this book might help you recognize healthier relational dynamics, it will not override chronic abusive behavior. Those who abuse often have their own history of being abused, witnessing abuse, experiencing trauma, or struggling to find coping mechanisms for challenging mental health issues. While repeating what you yourself have experienced is understandable, the abuse of others is never justifiable. It will take deep healing work and personal accountability for you to become safe for your partner. You can start this process by searching for therapists in your own area who can help you on your healing journey.

Part One

ASSESS

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CHAPTER 1

Why It's Not Working

W

hen I was little, all I wanted to do when I grew up was fall in love. It's true. I might have said I wanted to be a teacher or a lawyer or a writer, but really I just saw those as conduits toward meeting the perfect mate. I spent my life preparing for love. I played out fairly realistic scenes of romance with my dolls, I watched movies based on romantic love, I dreamed up fantasies of how we'd meet—in an airport, on the way to class, at the grocery store. Eventually I settled for the likelihood we'd meet at a bar.

To me, love was everything. I couldn't wait until it found me. And then it did. Twice. Once at a bar. And, again, at a bar. I was right. In those relationships, I had no idea what I was doing. So to make them work, I adjusted myself to seem more easygoing than I really was, more palatable—to fit the other person's vision of an ideal mate.

It didn't work, either time. In fact, I left each relationship feeling more lost, confused, and alone than before. But I am stubborn, and I wasn't going to give up on my childhood dream. There had to be something to this love thing. If I wasn't going to fall in love, I decided, I might as well study it. So for many years now, I've read research, taken classes, and worked with hundreds of couples in order to figure out what this love thing is all about.

Relationships are a
series of moments
in which we decide
whether to honor
the self or diminish it.

Then, my dream came true when I met my husband on Tinder. We both swiped right sometime around midnight a few days before Valentine's Day. Kind of romantic, right? But this time, I entered into the relationship equipped with the tools I needed to show up authentically, to communicate clearly, and to build something truly special with another person.

I didn't lose myself this time. In fact, I expanded. And I want that for you, too.

Our relationships are a series of moments in which we decide: *Do I honor myself here? Do I honor my partner?* Ideally, we honor both. But the ideal often isn't the reality. When a relationship is not working, it's likely we have a history of not being able to (or of choosing not to) honor the self or the other in the relationship.

Because of past hurts, lack of communication skills, or unhelpful relationship templates, we might make the choice to honor the other but not the self. We make ourselves smaller or quieter. We agree to things outside of our values, our dreams, or our desires. We become more palatable and more easygoing. We do all of this in hopes that we can keep the peace or keep the relationship.

Perhaps we do it in small ways, like saying we like certain foods or agreeing to go out past our bedtime. At other times, we do it in much more pivotal ways, like changing our value system or biting our tongue mid-conflict at our own expense. We convince ourselves that it is no big deal if we agree to something we don't really like "just this one time." We tell ourselves that it's okay "for now," that "one day" we will ask for our needs to be met, our boundaries to be respected. On that far-off "one day," we think we will get that respect or that responsiveness or that reliability that we deserve.