

# In Each Other's **CARE**

A Guide to the Most Common  
Relationship Conflicts and  
How to Work Through Them

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# Introduction

## Why We Are in Each Other's Care

PACT began with one simple shift in thinking: in couple therapy, partners are in each other's care and not simply in their own. The basis for this is psychobiological. The human primate is the only species we know of that excels at interactive regulation, particularly in close proximity. It's easier for us to read each other in the moment than it is to read ourselves.

Stan Tatkin

developer of A Psychobiological Approach to Couples Therapy® (PACT)

**T**he central concept of my work with couples is that human beings are, by nature, dependent creatures who group together, unite, for interdependent purposes. This book for couples bears that out. When we join a union, an alliance, a troupe, or a team, we should each share a common purpose, vision, and culture as equal investors in whatever that shared purpose, vision, and culture is to be. Only unions in which members are governed by autocrats, dictators, and slave owners must forego their interests for that of another.

The human primate is a selfish animal. Unless an individual has a mutual stake in a union with others, they will surely take advantage of opportunities to serve self-interests. That's not evil . . . it's human. Unless people orient toward being in each other's care, they will naturally revert to ideas of self-care to the exclusion of others and act accordingly. Our interdependency—having the same things to gain and the same things to lose—is our greatest guarantee of fair play, justice, and sensitivity to one another.

Get ready to examine the specific complaints I commonly hear in my couple clinics, particularly in the United States. In the course of this book, you and your partner will discover how arguments get triggered, why they keep happening, and what you really can do to get better at communicating what you want without the drama. Even the seemingly simple changes require a willingness from the both of you—open minds and hearts and a commitment to heal your relationship—as I offer my perspective as a couple therapist on injury and repair. If your goal is to work on preventing the blistering arguments that boil over and burn, you’ve opened the right book.

In my previous books, I wrote extensively about attachment, developmental neuroscience, and secure functioning. Think of this book as more of a hands-on repair manual. Unlike my other relationship books, this one gets into the common complaints partners level against each other. If you don’t find your exact complaint here, you’ll likely find one related or adjacent to it that will satisfy you. I’m excited about this project as it’s radically different from my earlier writings. Rather than reiterate what I’ve already said, this format allows you to look through specific areas of conflict that most couples will encounter at some point in time. You can read it from cover to cover, scan for what interests you, or use the index to find keywords that match your curiosities.

The complaints in section 2 contain various scenarios that I have heard in my couple clinic. I have been careful to mask gender, location, ethnicity, religion, race, and other identifiers that may distract from the focus of this book, which is two-person interdependent relationships that are romantically oriented. Therefore, we focus on the similarities between human primates and not their differences.

Although you will notice cultural references throughout this book, I believe a good amount of what you’ll read will apply to you regardless of your cultural heritage, ethnicity, race, gender identity, sexual orientation, or religion. Differences aside, complaints come in all sizes and shapes. Yet, within romantic partnerships, couples tend to share a limited variety of problems. Reassuring or not, that’s what I can tell you as a couple therapist from thirty thousand feet.

You might view your relationship troubles in terms of subject matter, such as money, timeliness, messiness, sexuality, and children—or other issues, such as conflicting interests, religious diversities, political disparities, financial quandaries, and stepfamily challenges. Details will vary, but I believe you will begin to see those details, like the complaints themselves, reappear and repeat in most if not all subjects.

If you're new to my work, I encourage you to read *Wired for Love* and/or *We Do* before embarking on this one, as both provide much of the background information you might need to make the best use of this book.

## An Important Note about Primary Partners

Secure functioning, a term used throughout this book, refers to any system where primary partners exist. Primary partners are not limited to twosomes but can include three or more adult individuals engaged in a committed relationship. Note that I say “adult individuals” to mean that primary partners do not include children or those unable to operate with full autonomy and ability to fully consent.

Secure functioning can include consensual, ethical nonmonogamy of any kind, be it an open relationship, swinging, polyamorous relationship, or any other configuration that involves primaries who are engaged with secure-functioning principles of equal power and authority, parity, collaboration, cooperation, justice, fairness, and mutual sensitivity. Full stop.

This book is purposely written to be gender-neutral, and it focuses on a two-person system, also known as a dyadic system, of adults, be they gay, straight, nongendered, or trans. I want to make this abundantly clear to readers of various sensitivities regarding inclusion, as most relationship books do not make clear that relationships come in a great many forms and configurations and have since our species began.

This is a vital message to the reader as this book frequently mentions couples, obviously referring to a two-person system. I did not include examples of three-or-more-person systems in this book. However, those readers who are in ethical, consensual nonmonogamous relationships will be able to take principles of secure functioning and



apply them to a multiple-person system. Please enjoy the words here in the spirit with which they are intended and bend them to your particular situation, as I believe they will apply if you wish them to.

## Structure of Chapters

Since this is a repair manual, I have organized the chapters according to common complaints partners bring to couple sessions. Each chapter contains the following sections relating to its particular complaints:

- The Complaint in Action
- Why Does This Keep Happening?
- The Central Culprit: The Interaction
- Corrections
- Variations of This Complaint

You can also make liberal use of the book's back matter, including references and an index for searching ideas that may not be in the table of contents.



### The Complaint in Action

This section illustrates the dialogue between partners about the complaint. To simplify matters around gender identity, race, ethnicity, age, or other identifiers, partners are labeled as Partner A and Partner B. Some of the complaints may appear to describe one's education level, socio-economic status, or other identifier. Not all identifying elements are intentional.



### Why Does This Keep Happening?

Here I attempt to explain why this complaint repeats and can feel like an endless battle. My aim is to help you recognize this repetition when it occurs around similar complaints.



## The Central Culprit: The Interaction

In this important section, I break down the couple's interaction as presented in the "Complaint in Action" segment. My premise in this book is that unskilled interactions repeated and unrepaired during stressful moments are a principal cause of mutual dysregulation, dissatisfaction, threat inflammation, resentment, and avoidance in all relationships. How complaints become conflicts should interest everyone since the point of this book isn't really complaints, subject matters, or areas of importance. I have come to recognize—over many years of studying my own and other relationships—that microaggressions expressed and perceived during stressful interpersonal interactions are a leading cause of coregulatory dysfunction in couples and eventual relationship dissolution. Poor interactions, therefore, are a central culprit.



## Corrections

In this section, I clarify ways in which the interaction could go that would make it more successful. These corrections should serve as examples for all similar interactions when partners are under stress.



## Variations of This Complaint

I've attempted to cover as many variations of the complaint as possible without repeating or overstating a point. I welcome you to apply your own variations to the ones provided and use the same guiding principles. If I've missed yours, look at a similar complaint or see if your concern is addressed in other chapters.

## Secure Functioning Defined

*Secure functioning* is a social contract between two individuals of equal power and authority to remain fair, just, and sensitive at all times, while also remaining fully collaborative and cooperative. As such, secure-functioning individuals orient themselves toward a *two-person psychology*, whereby they are fully autonomous, differentiated people entering a relationship of interdependence—two people with a shared sense of purpose and vision for the

future and a shared stake in all things. Their main purpose is to survive and thrive as a couple and as individuals.

Secure-functioning partners are tied together and their fates are shared. They move in lockstep through a variety of means that ensure well-informed, good outcomes for both. Partners bargain, negotiate, reason, influence, and otherwise seduce each other to win-win results. They work together as a team, not as solo players.

These couples understand that they are in each other's care and not simply their own. The partners take care of each other and themselves at the same time, rarely sacrificing one for the other. Secure partners tend to put their relationship first above all other things because the relationship is an energy source for all other things. If the relationship is not in good order, nothing else functions well. The couple's oxygen masks go on first, then they tend to everybody else. They are in charge of each other and everyone else. Two bosses, two generals, two monarchs, two executives, two governors, two legislators, two enforcers, two leaders; neither of them is simply a passenger, follower, or domestic.

Secure functioning assumes symmetry, conditionality, and terms for unionizing. Two strangers coming together for purposes beyond feelings and emotions, physical attraction, or other fleeting factors beyond human control. Their terms are measurable, and their behavior is guided by agreed-upon principles that govern both of them.

*Principles of governance* contain actionable behaviors and attitudes that ensure mutual protection of safety and security, love and affection, growth and potential, health and well-being, and any other good they both can envision. These principles are mutual justifications for limiting and pushing each other as partners to do the right thing (as agreed upon) when the right thing is the hardest thing to do.

Compared to insecure-functioning partners, secure-functioning partners get things done. They work out big life problems and little daily frustrations quickly and keep interpersonal stress to an absolute minimum. They are happier—more adaptive, flexible, creative, friendly, and healthy. They even look younger due to reduced allostatic load (Brooks 2012; Entringer and Epel 2020; Guidi et al 2021; Saxbe et al 2020).

## Agreements and Guardrails

Agreements are to secure-functioning relationships what beams and supports are to a house structure. Without agreements—which are based on shared interests—a relationship, like a house, won't hold up. The better the agreements, the stronger the structure in good weather and bad. In order to make a pact or agreement, both parties have to articulate their personal reasons for getting on board. It must be good for both parties or the agreement is worthless.

All free unions consist of what we must do and what we must never do—so say we all. In couples it's simpler because it's so say we both. An agreement is a guardrail, or something I further define below as a shared principle of governance; that is, a way to govern each other whenever necessary.

Agreements can inhibit behavior or produce behavior, depending on the purpose or principle the couple wants installed. Where are we going to set the bar for this or that purpose or shared vision? Say that we never want to threaten to end the relationship and we both agree, after much discussion, that it is in our mutual best interest to abstain from using that cudgel to correct behavior or get what we want. Threatening the relationship has too many downsides. It creates an existential crisis, for one. For another, it threatens abandonment, so it becomes a whip that frightens and bullies another into submission and therefore leads to resentment, threat memory, and other bad consequences that will blow back and forth. And it has terrible downstream effects that make repair difficult. So, we decide to take that option off the table, which means we'll have to correct behavior in some other way.

In order for this to work, both parties must agree that threatening to end the relationship is to be avoided, and both must have personal stakes in its prevention. If either is unsure or still thinks it can or should be used if deemed necessary, the agreement should be nullified. It will be impossible to enforce.

Here's another example. Why be monogamous or polyamorous or have an open relationship? I don't personally care if partners agree fully with any of these arrangements. But they *must* agree and agree properly. Whatever their preference, partners must have both personal and mutual

reasons for making the social contract. Both partners must be thoughtful, thorough, and honest. Each must consider conditions, long-term effects, downsides, and upsides. The agreement—all agreements—must be explicit, declarative, and without any room for misinterpretation or ambiguity.

Keep in mind that a couple's cocreated culture, structure, and guardrails maintain ease, peace, well-being, and safety. The sculpting of these lifesaving features requires full collaboration and cooperation by both parties. Cooperation will only occur if partners have a personal stake in the agreements they make.

If an agreement serves only one party, it won't work. It must serve both partners' interests to a high degree, or it's a waste of time and effort and enforcement *will* fail.

My wife, Tracey, and I choose monogamy. I have a personal reason to be monogamous. I decided that I want to experience one person deeply. Same with my career. I decided I wanted to study couples exclusively. Previously, my interests were too scattered. I found late in life that focusing on *one* thing allowed me to intensify both my understanding of myself and that "one thing." Chasing novelty proved both exhausting and fruitless. I learned to find novelty in the familiar, the extraordinary in the ordinary.

Mine was a personal pursuit of depth over coverage, discipline over impulse, and profound appreciation of the tricks my mind constantly plays to convince me I must run from or to something because the present moment may seem unsatisfactory. I know my mind is constantly comparing and contrasting, is always aware of what's missing and what I don't have, and my own fears and negativism relentlessly seek relief. Like everyone else, I'm addicted to my own thinking and feeling and can easily get trapped in my own mental movie. Don't get me wrong; I still do very stupid things, but far fewer as I become more purpose centered.

Nonmonogamy wouldn't work for me, not because I could get caught or because it would hurt Tracey or because someone else said it was wrong, but because I would let *myself* down if I broke the agreement. I would no longer be who I said I was. I would betray myself.

To violate the agreement would be to self-harm. *And*, it would violate my vow to keep Tracey safe and secure.

I use my own example here as a demonstration of what I mean by personal stake. I make agreements that serve my own interests as well as my partner's. A purpose or principle is, for me, different from a rule or law. The latter is usually created by a small or very large group and leads to a *dominant end*—such as to obey the law, to serve God, or to be loyal to a group or cause. Serving a principle or purpose is more personal and often leads to a relative end, which is more painstakingly considered and reflected upon than absolute (Kohlberg and Ryncarz 1990).

When making agreements, be certain the two of you first look to where you agree. Partners too often focus on where they disagree and how they are different from each other. That is a mistake. Find where you agree first and then work your way down.

For instance, do we both want to feel loved, valued, wanted, cherished, chosen, appreciated, respected? If the answer is yes, then go further. How often do we want to feel that way? Perhaps it's every day. Good. How do we wish to be treated in order to feel those things? (Feelings are never guaranteed, by the way.) We're different people so we may want to be treated differently. No problem. That can be arranged.

Now, under what conditions should these actions take place? Remember, we are constructing a purpose-centered, action-oriented vision for cocreating an experience for us both. Be careful when discussing conditions. If the conditions are feeling-centered, your results will suffer. Therefore, the answer to the question of whether we do these things that lead to the other's experience of feeling loved, valued, wanted, cherished, chosen, appreciated, and respected every day regardless of how we feel should be yes. If it isn't, the agreement is not purpose-centered.

When purpose-centered, we focus on what must be done whether or not we feel like it. Why? Because we've decided it is the best thing we can do even when the best thing is the hardest to do. That's awesome! That's setting the bar high, and you will now get the best. Pay to play, remember? Pay to play. Set the bar low and you will get exactly what you paid for.

Consider the following for each of your purpose-centered agreements:

- Where do you both agree? If you get stuck, move up a level to where you can agree (i.e., “I want apples, and you want oranges, but we both want fruit”).
- What are your and your partner’s personal and mutual reasons for wanting this? You both must have them (i.e., you both need to be pointing in the same direction), or it won’t work.
- “Why do you want this for yourself?” Clarify the want fully when asking each other this question.
- How do you want to manifest it behaviorally? Only purpose and behavior protect and produce feeling and experience, not the other way around.
- What are the conditions under which these behaviors must happen? Do not use feelings or state of mind as a condition.
- What, if any, downsides are there to this agreement?
- What, if any, bad downstream effects could occur as a result of this agreement?
- If either of you should fail to follow through on the agreement, what guardrails will you put in place to enforce it so that the agreement holds? My recommendation for a guardrail is a prompt, reminder, or cue if either partner should forget or misstep. The forgetful or mistepping partner *must* immediately apologize, yield, and cooperate without delay, defense, or explanation. This *will* work, but only if the other fully cooperates.

The stakes are very high. Impulsive, reflexive, or forgetful misbehavior is okay. However, pushback or resistance when cued or prompted is a serious matter as it represents a breach of trust and is evidence that this partner will not be governed by their own or anyone else’s principles. That amounts to a fatal error in judgment and therefore is insecure functioning to a T. This now becomes a safety issue.