

WE DO

*SAYING YES
TO A
RELATIONSHIP
OF DEPTH, TRUE
CONNECTION,
AND ENDURING
LOVE*

STAN TATKIN

PSYD, MFT



sounds true
BOULDER, COLORADO

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	Why Should You “We Do?”	1
CHAPTER 1	The Secret to a Successful Marriage	9
CHAPTER 2	How Strong Is Your Couple Bubble?	23
CHAPTER 3	Managing Your Negative Brain	49
CHAPTER 4	The Troublesome Triad: Memory, Perception, and Communication	61
CHAPTER 5	What Are Your Styles of Relating?	75
CHAPTER 6	How Well Do You Know Each Other?	113
CHAPTER 7	Deal Breakers	135
CHAPTER 8	Sex!	151
CHAPTER 9	How Well Do You Fight?	181
CHAPTER 10	What Does the Future Hold?	201
	Acknowledgments	209
	Notes	211
	About the Author	215

1

THE SECRET TO A SUCCESSFUL MARRIAGE

As I wait at the altar for my radiant bride, Tracey, I ponder our love, the richness of this moment, and the long journey that got me to this point. Tracey, the statuesque blonde I first met in junior high school science class and crushed on (through high school), was about to commit to sharing her life with me. Around the time I was reintroduced to Tracey, I was still a member of the walking wounded. My first marriage had ended in divorce, triggering all kinds of questions and self-doubt. I kept asking myself, Why did this happen to me? Was it me? Was it her? Did we start out with enough in common? Did we grow apart? If we had done something differently, would our marriage have survived? And if so, what? The “us” question never occurred to me, even though how we functioned as a couple was more important than anything we did or didn’t do as individuals. As Tracey nears the altar and I get ready to say “I do” for a second time, I know this time it’s different—very different—because this time instead of “I do” both of us are saying “We do.”

WE DO IS DIFFERENT FROM I DO

I’ve spent years discovering what makes marriage work, and I will share what I’ve learned with you in this book so your marriage starts on solid ground. After working with couples for decades, I know that when

faced with conflict, differing priorities, and communication problems, you need to have the skills to repair or strengthen your bond. This isn't a book on "you do" or "I do" but rather an opportunity for both partners to focus on "we do." *We* become experts on each other and *we* know just how to handle each other without using fear, threat, or guilt. *We* use attraction to get what we want, prevent what we don't want, and create win-win results. *We* take care of business quickly and efficiently in a manner that's good for both of us. *We* move together happily or we don't move until we make it such.

All successful long-term relationships are what I call *secure-functioning* relationships. They're reliable, dependable, trustworthy, reciprocal, and most definitely respectful. Through secure functioning we form healthy attachments with one another. You and your partner take care of each other in ways that ensure that you both feel safe, secure, protected, accepted, and loved at all times. Secure functioning can be observed all over the world, across socioeconomic strata, and among those with varying physical and mental health issues. It's a set of principles and decisions between two individuals based on survival and begins with the idea that we have each other's back. Only secure-functioning relationships predict well-being and contentment because they operate according to principles of fairness, justice, and sensitivity.

Let me quickly define these terms as We Do concepts. *Fairness* is experienced in partnerships where there's balance, mutuality, and equality. Unfairness might be that I indulged in something at your cost. *Justice* is recompense for that behavior. I make amends, repair, or right the wrong. *Sensitivity* is my awareness of and care for you and your sensibilities, vulnerabilities, and experience of me. In other words, sensitivity refers to my holding you in mind as I speak and act.

All couples, if together long enough, will suffer the vicissitudes of life's fortunes and misfortunes. Even the most solid couple will be tested over time with unforeseen losses, challenges, and frustrations. Think of it this way: the mark of a good couple is how much load bearing the partnership can take without crumbling. In my experience, what determines the success or failure of a romantic relationship isn't common issues such as money, time, messiness, sex, or kids, nor is it about common interests, personality, or differences in age. In other words, it isn't the content of

the stressors that causes a relationship to crumble but how we engage with those stressors as a couple. How we work with each other, listen to each other, and calm each other is what matters most.

A secure-functioning relationship:

- provides safety and security
- requires co-management (a.k.a. coregulation) of emotional states
- is collaborative and cooperative
- means accepting each other “as is”
- includes proper management of thirds
- sets the stage for personal growth and well-being
- exists due to shared principles of purpose and vision

Safety and Security

Beyond happiness, beyond joy, beyond sharing good times and bad, the main purpose for pair-bonding (other than procreation) is survival—the need to feel safe and secure in the world. We have a mutual need to survive in an unpredictable world. I realize this may sound alarmist, but it’s also reality. Your environment contains predators, which, though unlikely to kill you, pose outside threats.

A couple represents the smallest unit of a society. The two of you are a survival team. Like patrol car partners, your lives depend on each other. You’re on the beat together. You protect each other *from* each other and from everyone and everything else. If partners don’t understand that their principal function is to keep each other safe from each other and from the outside world, they will trivialize the meaning of their partnership and lessen the likelihood of creating a strong, interdependent relationship.

THREAT

It's important at this juncture to differentiate between big *T* and small *t* threats. Exposure to violence, life threat, or physical abuse of any kind, including sexual, is of the big *T* kind. If you experience any big *T* threat in your current relationship, **GET OUT NOW!** Seek help immediately and forget about this book until you're safe.

If you have been a victim of physical or sexual abuse or life threat, your partner must be informed and must be deemed an appropriate healing partner for you. More on this important topic later.

Small *t* threat is what we all experience with strangers and nonstrangers alike. It could be your partner turning away from you as you talk about important matters, or it could be the tone of your voice that reminds your partner of dismissiveness or derision. In other words, small *t* threat can be perceived through the face, eyes, body, voice, touch, words, and phrases, all without any malicious intent.

Co-management of Emotional States

Imagine you and your partner are standing on a flat board without guardrails in the middle of some large body of water. As waves roll in and the breeze blows, the two of you must balance this board or you will both fall over. It's definitely hard work to do on a daily basis, yet you have little choice. Where one goes, so goes the other. This, in essence, is co-management of emotional states (a.k.a. coregulation).

A couple's ability to operate as a coregulatory team determines the success or failure of that relationship and is fundamental to relationship safety, security, and longevity. You're now a two-person system with interdependent nervous systems, wiring together like entangled ivy. These two nervous systems represent coregulatory team members that depend on each other for co-managing all emotional states.

One of the concerns when coregulating states is how quickly and effectively each partner co-manages distress and circumvents sustained

experiences of threat. A couple who repeatedly induces too much perceived threat will eventually alter each other's biology to become increasingly sensitive to cues *perceived* as menacing. This will eventually increase the rate of errors when appraising each other's thoughts, feelings, and intentions.

Tracey and I have become competent caregivers and handlers of each other. Wow—that sounds bad, as if we're animal handlers or business managers. Okay, consider this: As soon as we understand a child's internal struggle, we can be more loving and exacting with our own behavior. Feeling as if we're experts in what we do and who we do it with makes us happier, more attuned, and more loving. In contrast, without proper coregulation, we may feel persecuted, angry, anxious, and distancing.

As a couple therapist, I find coregulation somewhat mystifying. It's nearly impossible to predict which couples will be good at it, and many couples seem to struggle. Yet I've witnessed great coregulators, young and old, sane and insane, new to marriage and veterans of marriage. The good news is that the two of you, if good coregulators, can repair and correct old, unresolved fears and concerns more quickly and effectively than any therapist can do.

Collaboration and Cooperation

Remember in preschool when you were taught how to cooperate and collaborate with other children? As you will come to understand, secure-functioning partners operate in that fashion as adults. They behave in a truly mutual fashion. You will be a team, having each other's back—cooperative and collaborative. You can think of your secure-functioning relationship as a ship that allows partners to travel together to all corners of the inner and outer world, through place and time, as representatives of what's possible when people work well and play well together. The general spirit of cooperation and collaboration infuses a secure-functioning relationship with trust and dispenses of the need to track every deed. If a partner has a difficult time trusting anyone, perhaps a secure-functioning relationship isn't for them. The same goes for the person who believes it's good to be king or queen; that is, someone who is reluctant to share the load.

Most often these noncollaborative relationships are relics of older models whereby partners witnessed this kind of inequity. In some earlier American models of marriage, divisions of labor were clearly drawn by traditional lines: the husband went to work, and the wife took care of the household, including everyone in it. Few people voiced complaints because everyone seemed on board. Things have changed in many ways. Traditional notions will likely be rejected by at least one partner.

One of the greatest hallmarks of secure functioning is collaboration. Partners who don't collaborate often live separate lives, engage in a dictatorship, or live codependently. Will you collaborate on finances? Housework? Planning vacations? Collaboration doesn't mean that you do everything jointly. It means that you make decisions collectively, even the ones where you decide which ones you must make together.

Acceptance of Each Other As Is

If we did an autopsy on all failed relationships, the number of couples where at least one of the partners was ambivalent—either not all in or waiting for their partner to change—would be very high. There's nothing more pernicious to the safety and security of a primary romantic relationship than a closeted ambivalent partner. If you don't or can't accept your partner as they are right now, without cherry-picking the parts you like, you're in trouble already. Nobody signs up for marriage because they want to be changed by their partner. It doesn't work. Ever. Go all in or go home. Marriage and commitment can only work if we accept each other wholeheartedly.

We live in a culture where no choice is permanent. There's always more than one option. We remain on the fence. It feeds a fantasy of perfection. If we just hold out long enough, that more perfect [fill in the blank] will appear. There *is* no perfect! There's no ideal partner either. There's only the *good enough* partner who is perfectly imperfect. If your partner is willing to do secure functioning with you—and I mean, they're really on board—then that partner *is* perfect for *you*! But you both must take each other as is or not at all. All people are difficult and annoying—that includes you! No matter what it is you don't like about your partner, remember that you're no picnic either.

Proper Management of Thirds

A *third* is anything, anyone, or any activity that's other than the two of you. Thirds can be people, pets, or things, including work, hobbies, or substances. Proper management of thirds means partners protect each other from family members, friends, ex-partners, and so forth, and don't let other activities threaten their safety and security. Both partners are good stewards of what we will call their *couple bubble* (stay tuned). Secure-functioning partners jealously guard their resources and their primary relationship (primacy) from outside bids for attention or competing elements that would threaten one or the other partner. Mismanagement includes throwing your partner under a bus and failing to protect them from thirds. This happens all too often as the following example demonstrates.

Martha and David, both in their midtwenties, were to be married in three months. David, an African American, met Martha, a young woman of German descent, at a community theater production. Martha's father, a domineering figure, openly disapproved of David because of his career choice: a working television actor. Her father's disdain for David also appeared to be race related. The father, a wealthy, deeply conservative businessperson, wanted Martha to marry someone with a better pedigree (read: white, and not an actor). Martha's mother was silent on this matter, which, to David, meant she endorsed her husband's sentiments. Instead of protecting David from her parents, Martha put him in harm's way by asking him to "make nice" with her father. Despite the fact that David was becoming increasingly uncomfortable in her father's presence, Martha kept insisting that David try to make things right with Dad. She defended her father's rude behavior by saying, "I've always been his little princess. He's just trying to protect me." Martha seemed blind to her father's feelings about her black fiancé. She believed that her father wanted stability for her, something an actor couldn't provide. But David knew when he was being judged for his race.

Martha never understood that she was mismanaging thirds right from the start, sacrificing David to please her father. Mismanaging thirds injures at least one partner, but chronic mismanagement often destroys the relationship. It's experienced as a betrayal of the couple's primacy, but it's also tantamount to a deal breaker if one partner fails to see it as a problem.

Setting the Stage for Personal Growth and Well-Being

When your relationship exhibits consistently high levels of secure functioning, you and your partner automatically increase the resources you're able to use for personal development, mutual physical and mental health, and protection from each other and the outside world. You become more resilient as individuals and as a couple, able to manage the slings and arrows of life and its unknowns. You become better people, parents, neighbors, and citizens. Your creativity and productivity are likely to advance along with a greater sense of fearlessness to deal with your particular dragons. This may begin to sound like snake oil, and that I'm prescribing secure functioning for all that ails you—even baldness, old age, poverty, and so forth. I consider myself secure functioning, yet I'm still bald and my aging face continues to melt before me every morning I look in the mirror. No, it's not snake oil, and it's not a unicorn either.

Your personal growth depends on your relationship remaining safe and secure at all times, because if either of you feel the least bit unsafe, untrusting, or insecure, you won't have the internal resources for personal growth. Instead, your mind and body will be preoccupied by doubt and threat. Without a secure-functioning relationship, your creativity, work efficiency, likability, strength, and courage to slay dragons will be greatly compromised. Further, your physical health depends on secure functioning with your partner. Being alone and not having someone upon whom to depend and trust (with your life) is very bad for your health. But so is being in a threat-filled, insecure love relationship.

Shared Principles of Purpose and Vision

Secure-functioning partners are equals and held to mutually agreed-upon principles of governance. Without a common purpose that serves *both* partners, the default will be . . . what? How are the two of you going to govern—each other and everyone else? How are you going to protect yourselves from each other and from those outside your partnership?

Priorities

Before I go any further, let me speak to the question of priorities in the secure-functioning world. We all operate according to priorities from highest to lowest. But I'm not referring to tasks or organizational management. I'm asking you to think about and answer these questions: What's your highest priority going forward? Where are you pointing? What's your vision for yourself and your partner? For instance, is your highest priority your work or career? Is it your children (if you have any)? Is it to have a family of your own? Is it self-development, freedom, or other self-interests? Or is your highest priority your relationship, your partner? Clarity—yours and your partner's—is vital to your happiness and your partnership.

Secure functioning doesn't mean that your relationship with your partner must come first, but it *does* mean that you must know what your highest priority *is* so you don't set yourself up for big problems. (I believe, personally, that relationships do best when they come first.) Both you *and* your partner must be clear on priorities and you must agree, otherwise there *will* be trouble. Your highest priority will predict the decisions you both make down the line. However, it's critical that the two of you absolutely agree on this matter and be able to argue why and how it serves both a personal and a mutual good. In other words, why is this a good idea for “*me and you?*” If you can't clarify your highest priority, mutually agree, and be able to explain why it's a good priority for you and your partner, then you're *not* secure functioning. Make sense?

I suggest that your highest priority should be the relationship. As secure-functioning partners who put the relationship first, you elevate yourselves to a higher purpose. You serve the relationship and the relationship provides you both with safety, security, and absolute trust, from which you both benefit. When you take fears, doubts, distrust, and insecurities off the table, you can be there to comfort, soothe, excite, reassure, ego boost, and anything else necessary for surviving and thriving. Everyone and everything depends on you feeling safe and secure together. If you have children, they will depend on the two of you to remain in love, be good caregivers to each other, and be good examples of how a love relationship works.

What they see and learn from you will determine how they go forward in life with their own relationships.

EXERCISE

What's Your Shared Vision for Your Relationship?

Having a shared vision for your collaboration is an important first step in creating a secure-functioning relationship. One way to create a shared vision is to sit with your partner and talk through what each of you envisions in a happy marriage and long-term partnership. Each of you make a list of what the guiding principles of this relationship should be. Whatever you list, you must be willing to do for your partner. No double standards unless you agree to a double standard. For instance, you want your partner to always be chivalrous and open doors for you, and you have *agreed* on the fact that this effort is made by only one of you.

Here are some questions to get you started; provide specifics when possible:

- What's our highest priority? Relationship? Work? Independence?
- How do we handle distress with each other?
- How do we settle our differences?
- How do we make important decisions?
- How do we get each other to do things we may not want to do?
- How do we handle competing or intruding people, things, tasks? Think exes, parents, friends, work, hobbies, drugs or alcohol, and so forth.