The Guide to Great Relationships

"The meeting of two personalities is like the contact of two chemical substances: if there is any reaction, both are transformed." —Carl Gustav Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*

One of the biggest mistakes we make in our relationships is to expect them to be easy or to stay strong without much focused effort. We meet someone amazing, hilarious, and fun to be around. They seem great and time with them is an effortless delight. At first, we think things will stay that way forever.

They never do. Problems always arise, and if we want to make a relationship work over the long haul, we can't expect to coast along without putting work in. Strengthening relationships and making progress in how we approach them takes effort. It means working on ourselves—our communication styles, our subconscious attitudes, our expectations, and our beliefs. A one- time effort isn't enough, either. Unless we're always working on our relationships, we risk backsliding and falling into old bad habits. Maybe you've seen couples that seem to manage their relationship effortlessly, always staying on good terms and never fighting. You can be almost certain that you're not seeing the work they put in behind the scenes. As much as we like to think about soul mates and lightning-flash attraction, most people in sustainable long- term relationships will tell you that actively choosing to be together is what makes a difference.

Yet for most people, the effort and energy required to make a relationship work are more than worthwhile. Overcoming conflict, resolving differences, and remaining committed throughout obstacles require us to learn a great deal about ourselves. The work we put into our relationships pays enormous dividends. At Farnam Street, we believe it's incredibly important to pay attention to the things that make life worth living. A lack of strong relationships in our lives is like putting a zero in a multiplicative equation: it negates everything else. Perhaps you've had the experience of meeting someone who seems to have it all in some senses but is miserable because their relationships don't work. We do ourselves a great disservice when we prioritize professional productivity or success too far above our relationships.

The *Harvard Study of Adult Development* began in 1938 and is still ongoing with the surviving subjects, all of whom were men who attended Harvard. The aim was to study their overall development over time, with the study later combining with one beginning in the 1940s that looked at less privileged men. From 75 years of research, director George Vaillant was able to conclude that men's relationships were the most important factor in their general well-being.

Men with strong intimate relationships experienced overwhelmingly better physical and mental health than those without. For instance, a man's happiness in their marriage at age 50 was a better indicator of their physical health than their cholesterol levels. While the Harvard Study looks at male relationships in general, not just romantic ones, and didn't include women, it highlights the value of connection. Relationships are essential for our survival.

Research suggests that the quality of our relationships matters more than the number of them that we have. Feeling emotionally lonely is harmful to physical and mental health, and we can still feel isolated with lots of people around us. What we need are relationships with people where we can share our vulnerabilities and know we will be supported. The stronger our relationships are, the more we benefit from them.

What each of us wants from our relationships can be varied. The individual traits we seek out in those we want to spend time with are as diverse as the humans on earth. But we think it safe to say that there are certain core elements of what all mindful people consider a good relationship. They are those that make us feel good, help us become a great version of ourselves, and accept us for who we are. Great relationships usually come with mutual trust, respect, and caring.

With all that in mind, we've compiled the following seven principles for having great relationships, Farnam Street style:

1. Make it a win-win relationship.
2. Opt for the most charitable interpretation of someone's words and actions.
3. Pay attention and be present.
4. Use active, generous listening.
5. You get what you give—and what you expect.
6. Stop trying to always be right.
7. Accept human nature as it is.

The best relationship principles are about self-improvement, not trying to manipulate or alter other people. This guide, then, will focus on how you can be a better partner or friend, not how to change people. When you go through the reflection questions throughout, try to think more about yourself and your actions, because that is where any improvement has to happen.

Please note that we've aimed to make this guide as inclusive as possible, covering traditional partnerships and friendships while leaving room for all sorts of relationships. This is a guide for how to improve your interactions with the people you love the most. We recognize that, nonetheless, some of the particulars might not reflect your own relationship experiences. We hope the principles may still be useful

for you. As always, bear in mind Bruce Lee's maxim from *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*: "Absorb what is useful, reject what is useless, and add what is essentially your own."

Before you start reading this guide, ask yourself the following questions:

1. What do I believe is most important for building strong relationships?
2. What do I feel tends to go wrong or be problematic in my relationships? Where are my weaknesses?
3. What do I feel tends to go right in my relationships? Where are my strengths?
4. What is currently my best relationship and why? What is my worst relationship?

Principle #1: Make it a win-win relationship

"To be fully seen by somebody, then, and be loved anyhow—this is a human offering that can border on miraculous." —Elizabeth Gilbert, *Committed*

Our relationships—all of them, not just romantic ones—fall into the following categories:

1. Win-win (both people benefit)
2. Win-lose (one person benefits, the other suffers)
3. Lose-lose (both people suffer)

Many of us are used to witnessing relationships that are win-lose or lose-lose. We see them depicted everywhere, as if they are the norm. It's no wonder we might absorb the belief that one or both people always come out of a relationship in a worse state than they were before— emotionally, physically, financially. Perhaps we've had experiences of being in relationships where we felt like the other person absorbed all of our energy and gave nothing in return. Or we've had a friend who asked for favors nonstop but was absent whenever we needed help. Sometimes we can forget what the point of close relationships even is, losing track of the fact that they're meant to be a source of happiness and fulfillment.

But it doesn't need to be this way. Only win-win relationships are truly able to last in the long term. We shouldn't tolerate a lopsided relationship wherein one person consistently takes advantage of the other. In the short term, it's natural for one person to take over providing support during a stressful time. But over the long haul, giving and taking needs to be balanced. If not, we create a temporary win-lose scenario that often devolves into a lose-lose one. Perpetual givers eventually get worn out and unable to give, or they withdraw altogether. After all, no one wants to feel used all of the time. Takers miss out too, failing to develop the skills they need to support the people they love. Focusing instead on trying to build a win-win relationship, where both parties feel valued, means that we get to enjoy the rich rewards offered by

positive long-term relationships. We tend to be more resilient in the face of challenges, live longer lives, and rate them as having more meaning.

To give an idea of how this might look in practice, in a win-win relationship you would make decisions cooperatively with a partner, discussing options until you reached a consensus that was beneficial for all. Neither partner would be seeking to get the other to agree on an option that would be detrimental to them. Neither would want to profit at the expense of the other. If one partner needed to compromise, they would do so willingly.

To be clear, chasing win-win relationships doesn't mean we should fall into the trap of playing the tit-for-tat game. Just because you remembered to buy milk doesn't mean your partner is obligated to do it next time. Just because you went with your partner to their coworker's boring birthday party doesn't mean they're obligated to come with you to an equally dull event. It doesn't mean treating everything as conditional.

Tit for tat is a downwards spiral. One partner might be feeling unwell for a while, so they're less able to do things for the other. If both partners are playing tit for tat, their partner might then stop doing anything for them. This continues until the relationship falls apart. One of the worst things we can do in a relationship is to become vindictive and seek revenge. Our instinct towards reciprocity can make us inclined to behave this way. If a partner upsets us, even unintentionally, we may want to upset them in return. This is a lose-lose relationship.

Reflection questions

1. Do you think you subconsciously expect relationships to fall into a category other than win-win? And how does that influence your behavior?
2. Think of a relationship in your life that is not win-win. What would you say prevents it from becoming that way on your part? What could you change?
3. Think of a relationship in your life that is win-win. What would you say keeps it that way on your part?
4. Try to think of an example of a win-win relationship and a win-lose/lose-lose relationship from popular culture.

Principle #2: Opt for the most charitable interpretation

"Mutual caring relationships require kindness and patience, tolerance, optimism, joy in the other's achievements, confidence in oneself, and the ability to give without undue thought of gain." —Fred Rogers, *You Are Special: Neighborly Wit and Wisdom from Mister Rogers*

It's a beautiful thing to behold when two people seem able to understand each other perfectly. Perhaps you've witnessed longtime couples or friends who appear to have

their own language and can communicate in inscrutable ways. As wonderful as this is when it happens, we can often make dangerous assumptions in relationships when we think we know a person *too* well.

Research suggests that people in relationships that do not last long are more likely to assume negative intent in their partner's actions. Those in stronger relationships opt for the most respectful interpretation. This means that, when a person does something infuriating or hurtful or otherwise unwanted, trying to interpret it in the most charitable way possible is the best course of action. Indeed, research by Sandra L. Murray and John G. Holmes, presented in their paper *A Leap of Faith? Positive Illusions in Romantic Relationships*, indicates that people in stable, satisfying relationships may view their partners in idealized ways, ignoring flaws and highlighting their good attributes.

Instead of assuming ill intent for a partner's one-off bad behavior, try to think of other explanations—maybe they misunderstood you, maybe they were tired, maybe they were distracted by conflict at work. When we communicate over text instead of face-to-face we miss out on the nuances of body language and tone of voice. When we isolate words from their larger emotional context, we may find it harder to be charitable in our interpretation of them.

We cause ourselves a lot of pain by becoming perturbed at actions that are the result of misunderstandings or mistakes. We can forget that assumptions are not facts. If we want to make things work with a partner, one of the best choices we can make is to be generous about their intentions. This doesn't mean we should ignore bad behavior if it happens. Rather than focusing on individual actions and events, we should consider people's behavior as a pattern. If a particular action differs from their baseline, it's likely an anomaly, not the start of a new pattern. Should the intent be uncertain, it won't benefit us to jump to the worst possible interpretation. That will only lead to needless anger and hurt, creating tension over a problem that might not exist.

Always assuming bad intent is ultimately a self-centered view. Not everything a partner or friend does is about you, and unless something serious is wrong with the relationship, the things that annoy or upset you are not intended to have that effect. We all have different communication styles. Some people work through problems by talking, whereas others need to process information internally before verbalizing. In addition, we all have fluctuating emotional states that can easily be perceived in multiple ways. Tiredness might seem like rudeness. Work stress might seem like boredom in a relationship. A simple mistake might seem like deliberate sabotage. Unless we know for sure, we should assume that the cause is, more often than not, innocent.

Hanlon's Razor is a useful mental model for relationships. It states, "Never attribute to malice that which can be adequately explained by incompetence." In other words: not everyone is out to get you all the time. As hard as it can be to do, wielding Hanlon's Razor can help us be much more empathetic in our relationships. We should remind ourselves that everyone makes mistakes. Assuming malicious intent in a partner or friend is likely to escalate any conflict. You probably don't feel good when someone thinks a mistake you've made was a deliberate affront. No one does. It's the fastest way to make someone feel like you don't trust them.

Sometimes, we can be the least charitable to the people we care about the most. The amount of time we spend around them makes their flaws and our incompatibilities hard to ignore. On top of that, we may feel more of a claim on their behavior, more of a right to expect a partner to change for our sake.

If you find yourself struggling to be charitable when your partner does something you view as negative, try keeping a diary where you record things they do that you like. Note down the times they make an effort to cheer you up or help you out. When you're having a hard time being positive, revisit the diary. It will help you see beyond the present moment to the bigger picture.

Reflection questions

1. Can you think of any situations where assuming malicious intent in a relationship led to worse outcomes?
2. Can you think of any situations where making charitable assumptions helped resolve problems in a relationship?
3. What particular phrase could you use as a reminder to be more charitable when a partner's behavior annoys or upsets you?
4. How could you incorporate writing down what you like about a partner as a regular habit?

Principle #3: Pay attention and be present

"I define connection as the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship." —Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection*

Imagine all the little moments, day by day, where your partner attempts to attract your attention. They walk through the door and make a throwaway comment about having had a bad day. You're sat on the couch and they lean over to show you a cute cat picture. You're eating dinner and they ask how you feel about what they cooked. Friends make bids for attention too. They send you a random funny text or like

something you posted on social media. At work, a good friend may loop by your desk with two cups of coffee.

These small moments may seem inconsequential, but they're actually what makes a relationship. In the 1980s, psychological researcher Dr. John Gottman and his collaborator Robert Levenson launched a research project at the University of Washington. The goal was to understand why some couples can sustain happy, satisfying relationships for a long time and others can't. Gottman uncovered a single factor that could predict with remarkable accuracy if a couple would stay together and be genuinely contented with each other's company.

When Gottman observed couples in his lab, he noticed that each partner would make periodic "bids" for attention—requests for their partner to connect with them and show interest in them. They might ask a question, make a comment inviting follow up, or point something out. The specifics didn't matter. Each bid was a way of asking if someone's partner cared about their presence. The other partner could respond by either turning towards them or turning away from them.

Turning towards a bid meant showing interest and enthusiasm. Turning away meant not responding, giving an uninterested response, or outright dismissing the bid. As reported on his website, Gottman found that happy couples turned towards each other twenty times as much as unhappy ones. Among the newly married couples he studied, those who stayed married for at least six years turned towards each other almost ninety percent of the time. Those who stayed married for less than six years only turned towards each other one-third of the time. From these results, Dr Gottman could predict with near-perfect accuracy if a couple would stay together, simply from observing their responses to each other's bids. Each bid essentially asks the question: **do you care enough about me to pay attention to me?**

The quality of our relationships, all of them, has a lot to do with our ability to be present and to pay attention to the person we are with. The strongest couples Gottman studied knew they needed to put work into their relationship, which included making an effort to turn towards their partners as often as possible. We all need to feel like we are understood and appreciated. When we first start dating someone, we might be very focused on them every moment we're together. We forget about everything else and struggle to look away for a moment. Then, over time, we generally start paying less attention. Looking at text messages while a partner is talking or only giving a vague nod when they say something becomes more commonplace. While we can't expect ourselves to pay full attention all the time, our relationships fall apart if we're not present more often than not. No one wants to feel ignored or like they're boring.

Dr. Sue Johnson shared the following insightful analogy to illustrate this point on *The Knowledge Project*:

> *People think that conflict is the issue in distressed relationships. Conflict is the virus. The inflammation is emotional disconnection that you can't connect with this person. You can't get this person to respond to you. The person isn't responding to you, so emotionally you're alone. The person's in the room with you, but emotionally you're alone.*

When you turn toward someone you care about, you are connecting with them as a subject. You are saying, "I still care." This can be accomplished by small gestures like eye contact, asking a question, or giving a hug. Simple behaviors like these can go a long way to demonstrating that you are invested in the relationship.

Principles outweigh tactics. Small habits matter more than big goals. Paying attention to the little details of your most important relationships will dictate their ultimate strength.

Reflection questions

1. Think of a relationship in your life. How often would you say you turn towards the other person when they make a bid for attention? Make an estimate, then try keeping track of how often you turn towards your partner for a week.
2. How could you be more present and better able to pay attention when you're with friends or partners? Are there any habits you could incorporate?
3. Do you tend to focus on the little details or grand actions in relationships?

Principle #4: Use active, generous listening

"Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised or a little mistaken." —Jane Austen, *Emma*

Much of the relationship advice out there comes down to one thing: communicate better and more often. Yet this ignores the fact that many of us don't quite know what that entails. We might spend a lot of time talking to a partner without feeling that it gets much across. We might face constant miscommunications yet not be sure how to better convey what we mean. We might feel like a partner is trying to say something important, though we don't know if we're understanding them correctly. "Communicate more" isn't a panacea for all relationship woes. It doesn't help if you don't have a suitable framework for how to do that.

The key to better communication is to become a better listener. Sure, you also need to be able to convey your own feelings and needs. But that won't be enough if you're not truly listening to the people you care about. And if you become a better listener, they may well follow suit. After all, aren't we all more willing to listen to people we feel do the same for us?

"Ultimately the bond of all companionship, whether in marriage or in friendship, is conversation." —Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*

Active listening is a technique for becoming a better listener. Practiced carefully and applied consistently, it can strengthen your relationships. This requires treating listening as a skill that, when done well, is the result of knowledge and practice rather than an innate ability. When your partner or friend talks to you—whether they're airing a grievance, telling you about their day, or working through a serious decision—it's insufficient to simply hear their words. When we use active listening, we're less likely to make communication errors (such as misunderstanding someone's intent), and we make the other person feel like we care. Sheila Heen explained the difference listening makes to us on *The Knowledge Project*:

> *We assume that persuasion is about talking, when actually the most persuasive strategy that you can take is a listening strategy for a couple of reasons. Really good listening means you're learning a ton about not just what is under people's positions—you know, their interests, concerns, priorities, worries, anxieties—. . . but also you're changing the relationship.*
>
> *Then the third thing is that there is this dynamic called reciprocity. I'm sure you're familiar with it, right? Like, one of the strongest social dynamics is that you'll mirror back whatever you get. So if you attack me, I'm going to attack you back. But if you really listen to me, I'm much more likely to then be willing to really listen to you. So, you're enlisting that as a reciprocal sort of set of expectations of each other and how we're going to approach this problem.*

The first step in active listening is to ensure you have a genuine comprehension of what the other person is saying. There are always going to be communication barriers. Even if you know someone well, you are unlikely to understand everything they say. One way to become a better listener is to listen with the intention of summarizing what the other person is saying. This helps us to focus on their words, not on crafting a response. You can ask follow-up questions if something is unclear.

The next step in active listening is to ensure we retain what the other person says. Listening with the intent of summarizing helps with this. It requires that we suppress our egos enough to prioritize focusing on their words over our response.

Next, we need to respond (of course—otherwise it wouldn't be much of a conversation). To show active listening, a response should show comprehension of what a partner said before. It must take into account other factors, like their body language and what they might be indirectly saying.

In order to communicate well with a partner, it's essential to overcome conversational narcissism—that is, always bringing the topic back to yourself. There's nothing wrong with talking about yourself, and doing it too little can prove equally uncomfortable. We just need to ensure it's not all the time and that we express an interest in a partner's words most of the time. A partner won't know we're using active listening if our responses don't reflect that reality. Celeste Headlee explained to us on *The Knowledge Project* that a good conversation should be a game of catch:

> *You know, a good conversation—and I say this in the book also—the best model for a good conversation is a friendly game of catch. There's a number of reasons for that. The most obvious is that in a game of catch you can't throw more than you catch. It's a perfectly even balance between throwing and catching, just as a conversation should be an even balance between talking and listening. . . . Another really important reason for the game of catch is that when you're playing catch with someone, if it's a friendly game, you're thinking about the other person's success. You're trying to throw the ball in a way where they can catch it and throw it back to you. You're not pegging it down the field, because it's not fun anymore if you do that.*
>
> *So, in a game of catch, you are literally not only thinking about how well you throw, but you're setting the other person up for success as well. That's what a conversation should do also. You should be thinking not just about what you're saying but the other person, what they're saying. Are you asking them questions? Are you keeping them engaged? Is it interactive? You should be thinking about the other person.*

Part of why paying attention during communication is so important is that our words should not always be interpreted literally. People do not always say what they mean, and there is a lot of unintentional miscommunication in this world. Plus, words come in a package of tones and body language that add context to how they should be interpreted. In romantic relationships, particularly, the inability to pick up on subtle clues can create a rift in communication. The better we know someone, the more we can make inferences about what they say. But you're not a mind reader. You can never be sure you know what your partner is thinking or feeling. Nor can you expect them to be sure about what you're thinking or feeling if you haven't told them clearly and explicitly.

Reflection questions

1. What would you say your biggest struggle in communicating with others is?
2. How often do you feel that someone is truly listening to you? How often do you truly listen to them?
3. How does it make you feel when someone clearly isn't listening to you?

4. Can you think of any problems in your relationships, past or present, that were the result of poor communication? How could active listening have minimized or avoided these?

Principle #5: You get what you give—and what you expect

"Truth is, everybody is going to hurt you; you just gotta find the ones worth suffering for." —Attributed to Bob Marley

The Pygmalion Effect is a psychological phenomenon wherein high expectations lead to high performance. In simpler terms, it means that sometimes people are as good as we expect them to be. In relationships, the expectations you have of a person have a major influence on how they behave. The way you expect them to treat you will influence the way they do indeed end up treating you. If you have high expectations for your partner or friend—as long as they're not unreasonable—they're likely to live up to them. In general, not having negative expectations can be as important than purely having positive expectations. The key is to not make them unrealistic, or people tend to just not try to meet them.

As Josh Kaufman writes on his website, personalmba.com: "This effect explains why our relationships are usually self-fulfilling prophecies. Once you set expectations for somebody, that person will tend to live up to that expectation, whether it's good or bad."

One way we set ourselves up for failure in relationships is by carrying too much baggage from past partners. For instance, if an ex did something very hurtful, and we can't stop worrying that our current partner will do the same. We get paranoid and expect the worst. The result is a destructive self-fulfilling prophecy. When low expectations lead to worse performance, it's known as the Golem Effect. Our assumptions can become reality. For instance, imagine someone who is terrified their romantic partner might cheat on them. Instead of working on their own insecurity, they become constantly suspicious. They check up on their partner all the time and always assume the worst. The partner feels offended by the lack of trust, and the suspicion prompts them to think about cheating more than they would otherwise. In the end, they get so frustrated that they do become unfaithful. The partner might then feel their behavior was warranted and continue it in future relationships.

"There is a relationship between trustworthiness and willingness to trust." —Emily Nagoski, *The Knowledge Project*

"Expectations" can be a tricky word, and it needs a bit more unpacking. There is a difference between expecting someone to act trustworthy and expecting someone to do all the cleaning up. One way to evaluate an expectation is to consider if you have the

same one of yourself. Do you give people the respect that you expect to receive? Do you support them the way you expect to be supported?

At what point do you accept certain foibles, accepting people for their fundamentals? No one is ever going to knock it out of the park on everything, so how do you choose where to expect high? When considering what we expect from those we are close to, we must be careful that our expectations inspire and not limit. We want to expect people to be the best versions of themselves, not make them feel like they have to be someone else entirely.

One final thing about expectations: you have to tell people when they've met them. That kind of feedback is critical, because no one wants to feel like a failure all the time.

Reflection questions

1. Can you think of a time in a relationship when you had low expectations for a partner and they met them? Or vice versa?
2. Conversely, can you think of a time when a partner's expectations of you influenced your behavior?
3. In your relationship or in future relationships, how can you make an effort to use the Pygmalion Effect to strengthen the union?

Principle #6: Stop trying to always be right

"Peace is not a piece of paper but a way of dealing with conflict when it arises." —Roger Fisher

Arguments are inevitable in any relationship. Trying to avoid them altogether can mean that points of contention fester until they become irresolvable. But just because arguments are inevitable doesn't mean they need to be hurtful. It is possible to disagree in a mature, reasoned way. Gottman found that in addition to the importance of turning towards bids for attention, analyzing how couples fought was a strong predictor of their relationship's long-term health. Tough conversations, carried out correctly, make relationships stronger, not weaker.

What matters in an argument with a partner is the goal. Are we seeking to reach the best possible outcome for both parties? Are we looking to solve the problem in a mutually beneficial way? Or are we aiming to prove the other person wrong, to make them feel bad or guilty? Gottman found that couples who stayed together long term tended to fight constructively.

They avoided personal attacks and focused on finding solutions. They sought to de-escalate tensions and avoided signs of contempt. They didn't begin the argument with excessive anger.

Sometimes winning an argument can be a Pyrrhic victory if it comes at the expense of wider damage to the relationship. The point of disagreeing with a partner is not to bolster and uplift your own ego. The point should be reaching a good outcome for everyone. Whether you're right or wrong is irrelevant. Two people can be in conflict and both be right. On *The Knowledge Project* Johnson described a common situation in relationships:

> *If you dance with somebody, they're going to step on your feet. They're going to go left when you expect them to go right. It's just the way it is. The point is, in a good relationship, you can recognize what's happened, and you can tune in and you can repair it.*

In a relationship, you're in this together. You're not in opposition to each other. You're not competing. When arguments happen, remember you don't need to be right. One of our key Farnam Street principles is to possess thoughtful opinions, held loosely. In a disagreement with a partner, be willing to be wrong. Be open to changing your mind. Be comfortable holding competing views in mind. Maybe you think your partner's annoyance at you for, say, being late for a date seems unreasonable to you—but that doesn't prevent you from being empathetic towards why they feel that way or willing to avoid the same in the future.

When we find ourselves in conflict with someone, we often get defensive and overly emotional, and we double down on our initial position without room for compromise. To avoid this response, you need to try not to attack the other person into adopting your view. Even if you don't agree with their perspective, you can see things through their eyes.

Reflection questions

1. How committed are you to being right? Do you find it hard to admit when you are wrong?
2. Can you think of an instance where wanting to be right negatively impacted a relationship? How about a time when admitting you were wrong helped a relationship?
3. What steps can you take to fight constructively in the future? Are you aware of any bad habits you fall into in fights that prevent a constructive outcome?

Principle #7: Accept human nature as it is

"*The deepest principle in human nature is the craving to be appreciated.*" —William James

So many of the problems we all face in every area of our lives come down to a refusal to accept the world as it is. We get too caught up in thinking about how things *should* be and ignore what's right in front of us. For our relationships to be strong, we need to both understand human nature and be willing to act in harmony with it—both for ourselves and for our partners.

There are certain inevitabilities in almost any relationship. No matter how well matched you and your partner or friend are, there will always be areas, however small, where you are incompatible. There will be disagreements and conflict at times. Outside problems will encroach on and strain the relationship. You will inevitably let each other down once in a while. Understanding what makes us tick as humans can help you repair small fractures in your relationships.

One near-universal human trait is our natural bonding tendency; we have an innate drive to form deep, reliable connections with those around us. We all want to feel like we matter to someone. When we are born, we are extremely vulnerable. We cannot survive on our own, and thus we need to bond with caregivers in order to have even our most basic needs met. How we experience vulnerability in these early stages of our lives has a lot to do with how we tune into vulnerability as we grow up. Johnson elaborated on this further for *The Knowledge Project*:

> *So I think people who've experienced a safe connection with a parent have a big advantage. Research says they are more likely to have friends in high school. They're more likely to have better—be better friends themselves, and they're more likely to be empathetic with any person they're dating. . . . Well, of course they are, because they have a model. They know what a good relationship looks like. They know what it feels like to be vulnerable with somebody and have that person respond.*

People who love us aren't usually trying to make our lives difficult. Sometimes they get in our way as a bid for attention, to seek confirmation that they matter to us. When we practice all of the behaviors we discuss in this guide, such as active listening and being present, we demonstrate to those we love that we care. As Johnson summarizes, "You show yourself, you're open and accessible, and you take risks with each other, and when one of you takes risks, the other one responds." In doing so, we strengthen the bonds we have with each other, creating a secure space for our interactions.

Don't assume that just by being human you automatically know and understand everything about human nature. A lot of what we understand about each other is based on cultural myths, stereotypes, and biases. How can we get better at understanding human nature? Try studying practical philosophy. Read classic books and biographies that explore human nature. Learn about evolutionary biology to grasp

the instincts and behaviors that are coded into our DNA. Even studying our close evolutionary cousins, like bonobos, can teach us a great deal. Develop your understanding of human nature so you can work with the world and not against it.

Reflection questions

1. Are there any aspects of human nature you find hard to accept in yourself or a partner?
2. Where can you make provisions for aspects of your nature that can be problematic in relationships?
3. What sources might you turn to in order to learn more about human nature?

Learn more

Our podcast guests have taught us a lot about relationships. Check out these episodes:

- *"The couples who sustain a strong sexual connection have two things in common. One, they are friends. They have a strong friendship with trust at the foundation of their relationship. And two, they prioritize sex. They decide, they choose it. They believe that it matters for the quality of their relationship that they set aside all the other stuff they're doing."* —**Episode 66** with sex educator Dr. Emily Nagoski
- *"Listen to yourself and listen to when you feel safe and when dancing with someone is easy and makes you feel good, and when you can be vulnerable for a moment and that person tunes in and cares about your vulnerability. That's the person to go with."* —**Episode 62** with researcher and psychologist Dr. Sue Johnson
- *"But if you really listen to me, I'm much more likely to then be willing to really listen to you."* —**Episode 57** with author and lecturer Sheila Heen
- *"To listen well, it's not just enough to hear what they're saying, but to consider it. That's something that we rarely do."* —**Episode 51** with speaker and author Celeste Headlee

And if you're after a deeper dive, we've recommended a number of great books over the years that include insights that can help in your relationships, including the following:

- *Overwhelmed: Work, Love, and Play When No One Has the Time*
- *Mindwise: How We Understand What Others Think, Believe, Feel, and Want*
- *Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect*
- *Three Marriages: Reimagining Work, Self and Relationship*
- *The Mathematics of Love: Patterns, Proofs, and the Search for the Ultimate Equation*
- *Hold Me Tight: Seven Conversations for a Lifetime of Love*
- *We Need to Talk: How to Have Conversations That Matter*
- *The Love Secret: The Revolutionary New Science of Romantic Relationships*

- *30 Lessons for Loving: Advice from the Wisest Americans on Love, Relationships, and Marriage*