BETTER HALF

The Fight *Underneath* the Fight

A field guide to the conversations that didn't go the way you wanted.

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What's inside.

It’s never about the dishes.

You had a fight about the dishes last week. Or about the credit card bill. Or about the in-laws. You both went in trying to talk about the surface thing. You both walked out frustrated by something else entirely, and you couldn’t quite name what.

Now it’s Tuesday and you’re still replaying it. In the shower. On the walk for coffee. At 2am when you should be sleeping. You’re scanning for the exact moment something changed. The micro-expression you caught but couldn’t read. The tone shift you noticed but couldn’t place. The five seconds where everything went sideways and you can’t tell whether you started it, they started it, or it started itself.

This is the most common failure mode in close relationships. Couples researchers call the stuck version of it gridlock: a perpetual problem that keeps repeating because the need underneath it never gets surfaced, named, and addressed. *At Better Half, we call it the fight underneath the fight.*

Whatever you’re currently fighting about is rarely the whole set of issues at play. Roughly two-thirds of the arguments long-term couples have are perpetual[1]: the same disagreements, returning for years, because the surface fight is interchangeable. What’s below the surface is what keeps boiling over into conflict: new topic, same architecture underneath.

The good news: the issues underneath can be investigated, diagnosed, and very often resolved. Not in the abstract, but in the specific conversation you keep having every week, hoping for a different result. Once you see what’s beneath the surface, you can finally shift the outcome of the recurrent fight.

This guide is a primer on how to dive underneath.

No one taught us to go diving.

School taught us to defend a position. To assemble a thesis. To win an argument by being right.

We can do algebra. We know meiosis from mitosis, and a metaphor from a simile.

But none of those skills can hold a conversation together when something hard happens between two people.

Relational intelligence (RQ) skills are weirdly specific. Reading the moment someone's attention left the room. Noticing the second defending the point became defending your whole self-worth. Catching a small bid for repair before it goes unmet and turns into resentment that's much harder to recover from.

Some people pick RQ up by osmosis. Plenty of us don't. And for some of us the gap is wider to start with: cues that other people seem to catch in real time have to be reconstructed after the fact, sometimes hours after. That isn't a character flaw. It also isn't permanent. It's a training gap – but the skills are real, and they can be practiced.

And here's the part that usually gets left out: when two people keep misreading each other, the easy story is that one of them is bad, wrong, or inconsiderate.

Research, however, points somewhere more interesting: a lot of miscommunication isn't a one-sided deficit. It's a two-way gap. People who process the world differently read each other less accurately in *both* directions, while people who share the same wiring – or are similarly neurotypical or neurodivergent – can read each other just fine.[5] The breakdown lives in the space between two distinct people and how they uniquely process the world, not inside one of them that's uniformly to blame.

That reframe changes the whole job. You're not a broken receiver trying to get fixed. You're translating across a processing gap – and so is the person across from you.

But it only takes one of you to change the outcome.

Because while it may take two to tango, it only takes one of you to lead the dance. And since you're here, we're guessing you're ready to decide the next move.

What you're actually defending.

So, what's the next move in the dance? To figure that out, we'll need to unpack how the dance goes and where the missteps have been up to this point.

In the context of RQ, we'll need to identify the patterns in your interaction – and the engine that drives all of them.

When someone close to you says you got something wrong, a very quick translation takes place underneath the words. Unconsciously, "*You got this one specific thing wrong"* quickly gets translated into "*you're bad at many things*." And "*you're bad at many things"* soon becomes "*you're bad overall*." And finally, the translation misstep that tanks the whole dance: "*you're bad overall"* becomes "*you are fundamentally flawed and unlovable."*

Most of that runs in under a second and you never see it. You just feel the heat come up, and before you know it, you're busy defending your worth as a person – or maybe they are, if they're in the "accused" seat. And neither of you is hearing what's actually at play.

And here's the trap: you think you're defending your point. You're not. You're defending the version of yourself you want them to see and appreciate. The argument about the dishes is the move that started the dance. The thing underneath – the engine of the dance – is a self-image protecting itself from feeling like a consummate failure.[6]

This is why being right so rarely ends the fight. Because it doesn't matter who is right anymore, since the other person can't hear it anyway. Winning the point doesn't repair the thing that felt threatened, which is usually someone's egoic self-concept. And the person across from you is doing the exact same thing on their side of the table, which is how two reasonable people both dig in over something neither of them really cares about.

Because in this fight where *this one specific thing* became *you are flawed and unlovable* in someone's head, the ego is fighting for survival. It's fight-or-flight now, and that's no place from which to think creatively, constructively, and collaboratively.

Naming this egoic fight-or-flight response to a misperceived challenge about someone's self-worth is most of the work. The goal isn't to drop your guard and lose. It's to catch the second the conversation stopped being about the topic of the fight and started being about protecting the whole self. But you can't choose better moves when you don't know the dance.

The fight underneath the fight is almost always this one: not you against them, but you against the part of you that is afraid that being wrong means being flawed and unlovable.

Four ways conversations come apart.

At this point in the fight, when the ego is fighting for survival, a few moves usually show up.

Several decades of relationship research, most of it from John and Julie Gottman's work, converge on a list of four reactions that show up repeatedly in conversations that come apart – plus one move that distinguishes couples who repair from couples who drift.

Some of these will sound exactly like you. Some will sound exactly like the person you keep replaying a conversation with. The point of naming them isn't to assign blame. It's to surface something you've been doing or receiving without being fully aware of it.

If you're someone who likes to know the names of things, this section is for you. Naming the pattern is the first move toward being able to step out of it.

Criticism.

Attacking the person instead of the behavior. *"You never listen"* instead of *"I felt unheard when you scrolled while I was telling you about my day."* The first is the generalizing kind that focuses on the other person's *actions*: the "*you always"* and "*you never*." Focusing on the other person's actions tends to land like a verdict on someone's whole identity.

If you're the one doing the accusing, the work-around is the second sentence above: *lead with how it felt for you, not what they did.* For example: "*I felt [emotion] when [specific thing happened]."* Never what they did, but what you felt when a specific thing happened. That keeps the complaint about your subjective experience, not an accidental referendum on their whole character, and helps you both step out of egoic fight-or-flight.

Or, if you're on the receiving end of criticism, notice it and *step into curiosity instead of defending your self-worth*. For example: *"What are you feeling right now? What do you want me to understand about this? How can I support you? What would you like me to do differently?"*

Again, only one of you is needed to choose the move that shifts the whole dance, regardless of who is pointing the finger or who feels blamed.

Contempt.

The eye-roll. The sarcastic edge. The universalizing put-down. *"You're a disappointment." "Of course you forgot."* Contempt is the single strongest predictor of relationship dissolution in the Gottman research.[2] It's also the most casually thrown about, which is why it gets missed.

Instead of contempt, *offer words of care that help the other person feel safe in this moment*. A simple *"I care about this – and about you – so please know you're safe and I'm just here to figure out this one specific thing"* can change the whole scenario.

And if you're the one acting with contempt, remove the "you" statements from your next few moves. Focus on how you feel, and communicate that.

Defensiveness.

Counter-attack or victim posture in response to a complaint. The *"well if you hadn't..."* deflection that shifts the attention from one person to the other. The *"I can't do anything right by you"* that makes the fight about *everything* instead of this one specific thing. Defensiveness ends the conversation without addressing the topic, which is why the topic keeps coming back.

The countermove to defensiveness is curiosity: *"I don't understand, but I want to. Help me see through your perspective. Walk me through it. I'm not going anywhere, and I want to make sure I fully hear your point of view – because it matters to me."*

If the other person is being defensive while you're trying to communicate, notice it and remind them that they matter. That their value is not in question. That this isn't about whether they are lovable or not. Content doesn't matter right now. Who is right doesn't matter right now. Only safety does. Make sure they hear that first – your care, your reassurance – and have a chance to realize they aren't the target of a firing squad. You can always come back to the content of the conflict later – but not when either of you is on the defensive, so help each other feel safe and valued first.

When the ego stops feeling threatened, the ears can begin to hear.

Stonewalling.

Going quiet. Looking at the phone. Leaving the room mid-sentence. Escaping into a video game. One-word answers.

Stonewalling can look like calm disdain from the outside. From the inside – for the person doing the stonewalling – it's usually overwhelm. But the other person thinks you don't care and don't even want to.

Which means the move isn't to push the issue harder, but to give the other person time and space to self-regulate out of overwhelm so they can hear you again. And if you're the one feeling overwhelmed and stonewalling, you can learn to ask for a timeout. *Asking for permission to step away, making your needs known, and giving them a sense of what they can expect while you're coming back into balance helps them feel safe while you take care of yourself.*

And the big one: failure to repair.

Sometimes one person tries to de-escalate. They apologize. They reach across. They say, *"I didn't mean it that way."*

That, all by itself, is already an attempt at repair. It's now up to the other person to step into curiosity and receive the attempt at repair, for example by saying, *"Ok, I believe you. What did you mean?"*

Or, the repair attempt can go a step deeper. For example, *"I didn't mean it that way, and I'd like to say it differently. But first, I'm sorry that how I said that hurt you. Are you ok?"*

That's a very advanced move, and it's called *attunement and coregulation*: a continuous, dynamic process of noticing the other person's state and helping regulate their stress response by offering connection and a sense of calm. We'll come back to this very important move later, but for now, let's focus on what happens when it doesn't work.

A person attempts repair by offering attunement or coregulation. The other person might receive the bid well and move into repair with you. Or, they're too heated and stuck in the other four moves, and the repair attempt fails.

When repair bids consistently go unmet, that's a pattern of its own. It's the one that quietly does the most damage, because it teaches both people that trying isn't worth it.

Couples who stay together over decades aren't the ones who never fight. They're the ones who *get good at welcoming each other's attempts at repair*.[3]

Emotional triage.

Let's assume neither of you is skilled enough just yet to notice these five moves quickly enough to do something about it and change the outcome.

Don't worry! Noticing and choosing a better move is absolutely a learnable skill. And the first step is learning to do emotional triage.

If you or the other person is too activated, no amount of content, argumentation, or reasoning is going to get you the outcome you want. The argument can be perfectly rational and still go nowhere while the nervous system is offline.

Couples therapists have a name for this state: diffuse physiological arousal. Heart rate over 100. Adrenaline. Tunnel vision.[4] In this state, the prefrontal cortex – the brain's command center for executive functions, responsible for complex decision-making and behavioral regulation – takes a back seat. You will hear hostility in neutral tones. You will misinterpret closed eyes as contempt. You will say things you don't mean.

When someone's nervous system is overloaded, it is the job of whoever is less activated and more regulated to perform emotional triage.

Of course, you can always decline to. You can say to yourself, *"It's not my job to do someone else's emotional labor."* Or, *"They're the one who needs to learn to manage their emotions."*

Fair. Fine. But is that getting you the result you want? If it is, keep doing it! The relationship isn't likely to improve and the fight underneath the fight will keep resurfacing, but you're free to decide not to do the extra work. That's a perfectly valid and sovereign position to hold.

However, since you're reading this, let's assume you're interested in learning better RQ skills. Remember two to tango but only one to lead the dance?

This is the part where you get to choose to lead – and to learn.

The term "emotional triage" is borrowed from battlefield medicine. Triage is the practice of deciding, in a crisis with scarce resources, who most needs treatment first. Right or wrong doesn't enter the decision. Only need, urgency, and likelihood of a good outcome, which is the survival for the greatest possible number of patients.

Applied in the context of RQ, emotional triage asks the question: who, right now, in this interaction, is the most activated, the least regulated, and the most urgently in need of a way back to safety?

Not who's right or wrong in the activated state. Because, again, the content is not what matters during triage – whether on the battlefield or in a relationship. And it's not about who started it.

The only thing that matters in triage is: who needs to be eased out of fight-or-flight first. Sometimes that's both of you, separately. And only one of you needs to call the timeout. Most often, one party has more emotional resources at any given moment. This can fluctuate, and good partnerships learn to share the work of emotional triage equitably. But that's for more advanced RQ practice.

The only thing to know right now is this: the person with the most resources at the moment a fight goes haywire and the dance collapses into any of the five moves mentioned above is the one responsible for performing emotional triage.

The move is to pause, consider which one of you is the most resourced at the moment, stop the content of the conflict, and tend to the other's state by helping them back to safety.

How to tend and help after emotional triage? That's next!

Attunement and coregulation.

You've done the triage. You've worked out who's the most activated and who has a little more in the tank right now. So what do you actually do with that? You attune – and you help the other person coregulate.

Attunement is the skill of sensing what's happening inside the other person, and letting them feel that you sense it. Not agreeing with their position. Not fixing their problem. Just accurately feeling-with them, so that they feel felt. You're attuning to the feeling underneath, not the content on the surface – the fear, the hurt, the overwhelm, whatever is actually driving the moves. And the message your tone, your face, and your pace are sending is simple: *I'm here, I'm with you, and I get it.*

Coregulation is what attunement makes possible. It's two nervous systems borrowing steadiness from each other – the same way a parent's calm settles an upset child. We never outgrow the need for it.[9] But here's the catch: you can only offer a feeling of calm when you actually feel yourself. So coregulation always starts with you. Before you do anything else, regulate yourself: slow your own breath, drop your own shoulders, unclench your own jaw. A nervous system that's still in fight-or-flight can't offer anyone safety.

And almost all of this gets conveyed through how you behave and carry yourself, not what you say. It's in the energetics, as well as your tone, pace, breath, and facial expressions. You can say all the right things in a sharp, fast voice and the other person's body will still hear a threat and stay braced. Get the how right, and the what finally has somewhere safe to land.

Once you've decided you're the one with the resources to lead, here are a few concrete moves:

Lead with your calm, not your point. Your regulated nervous system is the actual intervention here – the words are secondary. Slow down. Soften. Drop your voice a little below theirs. You're not trying to win the moment; you're trying to make it safe enough that a real conversation becomes possible again.

Name what you see, gently. Putting a feeling into words – theirs or your own – measurably takes the edge off it.[8] You're not diagnosing them or announcing how they feel. You're offering a guess and leaving room to be corrected:

> *"You seem really overwhelmed right now – and honestly, that makes sense. We don't have to solve anything this second."*

Match them first, then lead. Don't leap straight to serene – a too-soothing voice laid over someone's panic reads as condescending, not calming. Meet them where they are for a beat so they feel met, then bring the intensity down a notch at a time and let them follow you out. You're setting a pace, not issuing a command.

Offer the pause – and promise the return. When one of you needs to step away, the move is to make leaving feel like safety, not abandonment. Not *"I'm done with this conversation."* Not *"you're being crazy."* Something that reassures them:

> *"I want to keep talking about this. I don't think either of us can do it justice right now. Can we pick this back up in twenty minutes?"*

Then name when you'll be back – twenty minutes, after dinner, tomorrow morning – and actually come back. The return is the part that makes the pause safe. A pause with no promised return is just stonewalling with better manners.

Ask what helps instead of guessing. People are soothed by very different things – closeness comforts one person and smothers another – and that gap is even wider when the two of you are wired differently. So don't assume you already know. Ask, and make it easy to answer:

> *"What would help right now – do you want me closer, or do you want a little space? Tell me how to be here for you."*

None of the moves that come next – curiosity, repair, actually solving the thing – will land until you've done this part. Attunement and coregulation are what bring both nervous systems back online, so that there's someone home to talk to. Until then, you're simply lending the other person your steadiness until they can find their own footing again. That isn't losing the dance. It's how you lead it.

Curiosity over defensiveness.

The reason it's hard to see what's bubbling underneath the surface in real time is that almost everyone, in a hard conversation, defaults to defensiveness. Defending the position. Defending the self. Defending the choice. The energy goes into proving the case in an attempt to protect an ego that's mistakenly fighting for survival. Which leaves little energy and resources to notice and process what's actually happening.

If you've spent a lot of your life being told your read of a situation was wrong, defensiveness is a survival mode. Investigation feels like risk. The ego starts yelling, "What if they find out you're really worthless? What if they discover how flawed you really are?"

Curiosity is the move that breaks the loop. Not curiosity as a personality trait. Curiosity as a specific cognitive operation that shifts the focus of the fight from, *"Who is to blame?"* to *"What's actually happening for the other person that I'm missing?"*

If you notice someone starts protecting who they are as a person or what they bring to the table in the relationship – or even that you're the one to blame, that's defensiveness.

Here's your chance to step into curiosity instead of pointlessly focusing on the content of the fight – which is content they can't even hear right now, anyway. Moves you can try:

"Help me understand what's happening for you right now."

"I want to understand what you need."

"Bring me into your worldview. I'm listening."

"You're safe. But I'm confused. Help me out here."

When you first begin to train yourself to step out of defensiveness into curiosity, it will feel profoundly uncomfortable. Curiosity costs more in the moment than staying defensive. But it pays dividends in mutual understanding. And it gets easier as it becomes a habit and a practiced response.

When self-worth gets in the way.

If you find that you're the one most often being defensive whenever conflict comes up, the single best thing you can do is build up your self-worth and learn to love yourself. This is a massive undertaking, and it's the single biggest wound many of us carry.

It's also the biggest blocker to enjoying secure, healthy relationships with other people. There is no way around this.

When a person's self-concept is fragile, anything that other people say that in any way contradicts what you say or do tends to get mistranslated as, *"You are unlovable, you do everything wrong, you can never do anything right, and you're fundamentally flawed."*

But other people will always have perspectives that differ from yours. That's a non-negotiable fact of life. *Learning to hold difference without interpreting self-worth into the disagreement will transform your relationships.*[7]

This work – learning to love oneself – is incredibly hard, and is somewhat beyond RQ training, because *RQ is about what happens between people, while self-love is an individual journey*. We sincerely recommend working on self-love with a therapist you trust rather than going it alone.

Without addressing this deep-seated issue rooted in a fragile self-concept and a lack of self-love, the ego will run rampant and the ears will never correctly hear what other people are trying to communicate. Few people will feel safe telling you what's really going on, and relationships will crumble, as long as the ego continues to perceive feedback or challenges as attacks on self-worth. So long as the ego demands to be defended, the person will fail to notice what's underneath the surface for others.

And since people all want to feel heard and understood, *an ego that's perpetually fighting for survival and validation ensures no one feels safe enough around it to state how they really feel*.

Repair.

Most of the repair that matters and works well happens after the conversation is over and both parties are feeling more balanced, regulated, and ready to risk trying again.

The return after a timeout. The second message. The *"I've been thinking about what you said."* The willingness to come back to something instead of letting it fester.

First, what repair is not. It is not admitting defeat. It is not conceding the argument. It is not telling the other person they were right when you don't believe they were. Repair is closer to coregulation than capitulation. It is the move toward, after the move away.

What it requires is acknowledgment that something between you mattered. "*I heard you. I see what you were trying to say. Here's the part of it I'm still sitting with."* That is a complete repair, even if neither person has changed their point of view. Because it opens the space for regulated discussion from a place of safety instead of activation.

What it sounds like in the wild:

> *"That came out harder than I meant."*
>
> *"I want to come back to what you said earlier."*
>
> *"I don't want this one to sit between us overnight."*

The exact phrasing varies. The signature is softness with structure.

The hard work of building a resilient relationship is mostly about building a track record of repair. The big rupture stories aren't actually all that interesting, because it's usually the same five moves we already covered. The interesting work is in whether the small issues get tended to before they accumulate into irreparable resentments.

If this is the move you're worst at, you're in a large and competent company. Apology was not on the syllabus either.

One question, several times.

Pick a conversation that didn't go the way you wanted. Recent enough that you can still feel it. Maybe the one you've been replaying.

Sit with this question for sixty seconds before you do anything else with the rest of your day:

> *What were they trying to communicate that I may have failed to hear?*

Not what they said. What they *might have been* trying to say. Not the dishes. The thing underneath the dishes.

The first answer you land on is probably wrong. The fourth one usually isn't. So *keep asking yourself the question until you have a theory of their perspective, not yours*.

The reason the first answer is usually wrong is that the first answer is almost always a strategy, not a need. "*They wanted me to do the dishes"* is a strategy. Underneath every strategy is something more basic that a hundred different strategies could meet: to feel like they matter. To be trusted. To not carry it alone. To rest. To be chosen. To know you're on their side.

Strategies are up for debate. Needs are far less subjective. Two people fighting over whose turn it was (strategy) are rarely in conflict about the real thing underneath, which is usually some version of, "*I don't want to feel like I'm in this by myself"* (subjective need).

So when you sit with the question, don't stop at what they wanted you to *do.* That's a strategy, and it may not be the right one. That's for you to discuss and decide together.

Keep going until you arrive at what they were *reaching for.* A quick tell that you've gone deep enough: a real need doesn't have another person inside it. "*They needed me to listen"* still points across the table at another person, which in this example happens to be you. That's not deep enough.

"*They simply needed to feel heard"* is usually closer to the actual thing. Keep going until the other person – you, they, someone else entirely – drops out of the sentence.

Keep this one page.

Everything in this guide, for the moment you need it and don't have time for the full reread.

TRIAGE: When the other person is too activated to think but you have more resources.

Stop the content. Tend to their state. Attune and coregulate. Help them feel safe again until they're able to hear and process.

> *"Hey, it's ok! You're safe. I'm not going anywhere, and you're important to me. Let's take a breath first. Let's do it together."*

TIMEOUT: When you're the one too activated to think and feeling overwhelmed.

Ask for permission and let the other person opt-in. Tell them what to expect, for how long, and when you'll be ready again. Ensure they know you're not abandoning, just pausing.

> *"I want to keep talking about this. And I care about you and this topic. But I don't think either of us can do it justice right now. Can we pick this back up in twenty minutes?"*

Or a day. Or even a week! Then actually pick it back up. And during the break, don't rehearse your case. The timeout only works if you stop.

FEELINGS, NOT ACTIONS: When you need to name a complaint without lighting the fuse.

Lead with how something felt for you, not what they did. Focus on your subjective experience, not their actions.

> *"I felt [emotion] when [specific thing happened]."*

LEAN INTO CURIOSITY: When mutual understanding matters more than winning.

This is the biggest unlock. Your ego is not on trial. Your value is not in question. No one can take away your self-worth. Only your ego wants you to believe it's under threat. Tell it, *"Thank you, but I'm safe. I don't need you right now. I am trying to hear the other person and you're making it really loud in here."*

Then actually turn to the other person and say:

> *"Help me understand what's happening for you right now. Bring me in. I'm here for it."*

This gets easier with practice and becomes a habit.

REPAIR: When they reach for you and you can feel yourself shutting them out.

Receiving the repair is the move that distinguishes couples that last from couples that come apart.

> *"I heard you. Here's the part I'm still sitting with. Are you open to talk?"*

ONE QUESTION: Ask it four times.

Strategies are up for debate. Needs are far less subjective. Imagine what the unmet or uncommunicated need might have been.

> *"What were they trying to communicate that I may have failed to hear?"*

Keep going until the answer has no other person in it.

Your co-pilot for deeper connection.

We know this is a lot. Reading a 20-page guide to how to dive underneath is one thing; actually doing the diving is something else entirely.

It takes time, practice, and even financial resources that many people don't have.

But putting in the reps is essential. And since RQ is a skill, not an innate trait, it responds to practice – just like muscles after exercise.

Better Half is where the practice finds its relational dojo: we're building a product that helps people learn RQ skills for deeper, more resilient relationships.

Here's how it works: we help you investigate the conversations that didn't go the way you wanted, in real time, by asking you one focused question at a time: What actually happened? What else was at play? Then, we guide you into noticing and naming potential missed cues and underlying dynamics, and point at one concrete thing you might try differently to bring you back into connection.

What Better Half won't do: Tell you you're right when you're not. Roleplay the other person. Reduce a hard conversation to a validation session. Better Half only works if you walk away with a sharper view of what happened, not a fuzzier one.

They don't teach this stuff in school. But it's what matters in the end.

And in a loud, confusing world that keeps asking more of us, we can all use a little help with the *most complicated puzzles in existence: other people*.

And while we're at it, we know tech hasn't always felt like it's on humanity's side.

Too often, we're left even more polarized, angry, and glued to our phones.

We built Better Half because *technology should be part of the solution, not add to the problem*. And we've got some powerful ideas about how.

For now, we just ask that you give us a shot.

We're actively testing the product right now, and letting people in slowly, in waves. If any of the patterns in this guide sounded uncomfortably familiar, welcome. You're in good company.

Want to try it? Add your name to the waitlist.

Join the waitlist →

Where we got our facts.

A few of the claims in this guide point at specific research. Here's where each came from, in case you want to read further.

1. The Gottmans' research finds roughly 69% of conflicts in long-term couples are "perpetual problems": recurring disagreements anchored in enduring personality and lifestyle differences. The "six fights" framing is colloquial; the underlying finding is the perpetual-conflict percentage. Gottman, J. M. & Silver, N. *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work.* Crown, 1999.

2. Contempt is the single strongest behavioral predictor of relationship dissolution across the Gottmans' longitudinal studies of married couples. Gottman, J. M. & Levenson, R. W. "The timing of divorce: Predicting when a couple will divorce over a 14-year period." *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 62(3), 737–745 (2000).

3. Acceptance of repair attempts during conflict is one of the clearest distinguishing patterns between couples who maintain long-term partnerships and those who dissolve. Gottman, J. M. *The Marriage Clinic: A Scientifically Based Marital Therapy.* W. W. Norton, 1999.

4. "Diffuse physiological arousal" comes from Gottman and Levenson's research on autonomic-nervous-system activation during marital conflict. The heart-rate-over-100 threshold is a working heuristic for the flooded state in which productive conversation becomes very difficult. Gottman, J. M. & Levenson, R. W. "Marital processes predictive of later dissolution: Behavior, physiology, and health." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 63(2), 221–233 (1992).

5. The "two-way gap" framing is the *double empathy problem* (Milton, D. "On the ontological status of autism: the 'double empathy problem.'" *Disability & Society*, 27(6), 2012) and its empirical support (Crompton, C. J. et al. "Autistic peer-to-peer information transfer is highly effective." *Autism*, 24(7), 1704–1712, 2020), which found rapport and information transfer break down specifically in mixed-neurotype pairs, not within them.

6. The idea that we defend a self-image instead of updating it draws on research on self-justification and cognitive dissonance (Tavris, C. & Aronson, E. *Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me).* Harcourt, 2007) and the distinction between guilt ("I did something bad") and shame ("I am bad") in Brené Brown's work. The split-second "translation" from *you're wrong* to *you're unlovable* describes the felt experience, not a claim about brain wiring.

7. That you can hold a difference of opinion without it becoming a verdict on your worth tracks Kristin Neff's research on self-compassion, self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness, as distinct from contingent self-esteem (Neff, K. "Self-compassion: An alternative conceptualization of a healthy attitude toward oneself." *Self and Identity*, 2(2), 2003).

8. Putting a feeling into words reduces its intensity: affect labeling dampens activity in the brain's threat centers (Lieberman, M. D. et al. "Putting feelings into words: Affect labeling disrupts amygdala activity in response to affective stimuli." *Psychological Science*, 18(5), 421–428, 2007) – the finding behind Dan Siegel's "name it to tame it." The practices are well-grounded; we've set aside the more contested neurobiological models sometimes attached to them.

9. Coregulation – two nervous systems steadying each other – and attunement ("feeling felt") draw on developmental research into caregiver–infant interaction (Stern, D. N. *The Interpersonal World of the Infant*, 1985; Tronick, E. *The Power of Discord*, 2020; and Siegel, D.). The capacity carries into adult relationships. We treat the practices – matching tone, pace, and breath – as well-grounded, and set aside the more contested neurobiological models sometimes invoked to explain them.