



LIVE Authentic

An Ellie Mental Health Magazine

November 2023

RELATIONSHIP EDITION

COMMUNICATION
TIPS FOR CONFLICT

OUR FAVORITE
COUPLES BOOKS

LOVE LANGUAGES
ARTICLE

A Note from Our *Founder and CEO*

We know that it can be easy to fall in love with another person, but then reality hits and we realize it's not easy to manage all of the aspects of a partnership. Relationships can challenge and trigger us in the most difficult ways, but they can also be the catalyst for personal growth and a place for belonging and companionship.

I have been a therapist for ten-plus years and working with couples has always been my favorite. As we were brainstorming the content for this magazine, we tried to think about what typically brings people to couple's therapy, and it often boils down to communication. For this reason, we asked our Ellie therapists for recommendations, tips, and articles on how couples can become better communicators and how they can overcome conflicts and challenges when they arise. We hope that the articles and tools that they have shared in this magazine inspire you and help you grow in your relationships, but remember that therapy is also there if you want to go a step further.

Erin Pash, LMFT
Founder and CEO of Ellie Mental Health

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CONVERSATION STARTERS FOR YOUR ROMANTIC LIFE (CASUAL DATING, IN A RELATIONSHIP OR MARRIED)

Do you want to connect more, have a more meaningful first date or learn something new and fun about your partner? Here are questions to introduce, reintroduce, connect more to or embrace a new level of relationship with your partner or potential partner!

Fill in the blank

What do you find most challenging in our relationship now that we are...?

- Married
- Parents
- Grandparents
- Empty nesters
- Exclusive
- In therapy
- Communicating better....
(The list goes on and on!)



Fill in the blank

What do you find most exciting about our relationship now that we are...?

- Married
- Parents
- Grandparents
- Empty nesters
- Exclusive
- In therapy
- Communicating better....



Question

What initially made you interested in me?



Question

When we are apart, what do you miss about me?



Question

What is one thing you wish that you could tell your younger self?



Question

What is one romantic thing you wish I did more?



Question

What is your favorite thing about our relationship?



Question

What is one fun thing you would like to do as a couple we have never done?



Question

What do you think is my love language? What do you think is your love language?



Communication Tips For Conflict

Allison Affolter, LMFT

As a couple's therapist at Ellie, I try to normalize throughout the therapy journey that conflict is part of relationships. Any time lives are merged, there's bound to be some disagreements. John and Julie Gottman, renowned couple's therapists and researchers, have spent decades studying couples and identifying most and least effective styles of communication when experiencing conflict (check out some of their books in the Therapist's Picks section of this issue!).

The Gottmans use a metaphor called "The Four Horsemen" to describe communication styles that can predict the end of a relationship. This article will address each of those communication styles, but also their "antidotes" to counteract that way of communicating and give examples for how to effectively navigate conflict.

1. Criticism

Criticism is different from offering a critique or voicing a complaint. Criticism is specifically about attacking parts of someone's character. Take a look at an example below:

Criticism: "You never spend enough time with me. All you care about at the end of the workday is looking at your phone. You're so selfish". This criticism is a direct attack on the partner's personality. Understandably, people become defensive when their character is attacked. It's okay to voice a complaint or critique about a specific issue in the relationship, though.

The antidote is using a gentle start-up, using "I feel" statements, and expressing a longing or desire for the relationship. Try this instead: "I feel alone and uncared for when we

don't spend enough time together. I value our 1:1 time and want to spend it connecting with you". This allows for the partner to address their emotions while expressing a desire to spend more time connecting with each other.

2. Contempt

Sarcasm, mocking, calling names, using body language such as an eye roll or scoffing, are all ways to show contempt towards someone. As a result, the partner on the receiving end feels worthless and despised. So what fuels contempt? Long-held negative thoughts that have likely been bubbling under the surface for a period of time. Through their research, John and Julie Gottman have found that contempt is the single greatest predictor of divorce. A zantidote for contempt is building a culture of appreciation. This means finding positive qualities within the partner and expressing fondness and appreciation for them.

An example: "I appreciate you taking out the trash and folding laundry for me. That has been really helpful lately". Even if it doesn't seem like a huge gesture, the partner may feel appreciated and be encouraged to engage in that behavior again.

3. Defensiveness

Defensiveness is usually the response to criticism, especially if it feels like an attack. In general, each person contributes to issues within the relationship. Instead of making excuses and blaming only the other person, it's important to take accountability and responsibility. Statements like, "I see what you're saying", "I was in the wrong" or "you're right about that, I was overreacting" all show that someone is taking responsibility for their part and accepting their partner's influence.

4. Stonewalling

Stonewalling is usually a response to contempt. This happens when the listening partner withdraws from the conversation, usually shutting down or stopping responses. This way of communicating evolves over time when the other three horsemen above are present. If someone is stonewalling, it means they're becoming overwhelmed with emotions and the safest option for them is to shut down. The antidote to stonewalling is physiological self-soothing a.k.a. finding ways to calm down so nothing is said or done in the heat of the moment that may be regretted later. How should someone go about this? Usually, the first step is knowing what it feels like in the body when becoming emotionally flooded. Think of the physical symptoms; heart-racing, sweaty palms, shaking, feeling hot, etc. Then, it's important to listen to those signals and engage in self-soothing activities to allow the body time to return to its baseline. A body scan, grounding exercise or progressive muscle relaxation can all be helpful here. Even going for a run, walk or taking a time-out from the conversation could benefit the individuals in the relationship. Then, when both partners are ready, they can re-engage in the conversation again, but from a different emotional headspace.

I hope going through these communication styles were helpful to see where missteps can happen. There won't ever be a relationship that doesn't have conflict, so use some of these and notice the impact it has on your relationships!

Building Strong and Lasting Relationships:

Top 10 Relationship Books

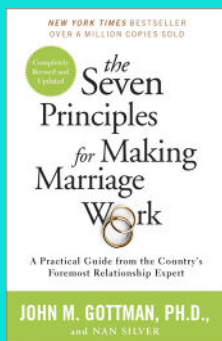
By Miranda Barker, LICSW

Everyone knows that relationships can be tough at times. There are plenty of self-help books out there that promise to improve communication or decrease conflict, but how do you know which books you can trust? I recently surveyed numerous therapists all over the country at Ellie Mental Health, and they shared their go-to relationship books.

So whether you are casually dating, recently married, or well into a long-term partnership, check out these books and tips that our therapists recommend to their clients (and even to their own partners!).

Foundations of Healthy Relationships

These are the most-recommended books that our therapists shared! The following books go in-depth about what makes up a good foundation for relationships and how to improve (or recover) your bond.



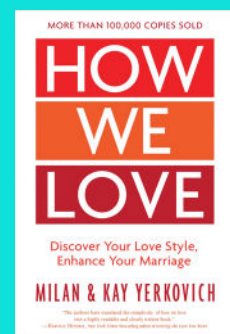
The 7 Principles of Making Marriage Work
John Gottman



What Makes Love Last
John Gottman and Nan Silver



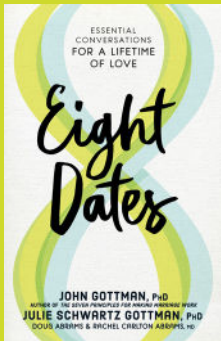
Rekindling Desire
Barry and Emily McCarthy



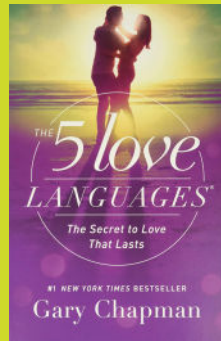
How We Love
Milan Yerkovich and Kay Yerkovich

How to be a better communicator

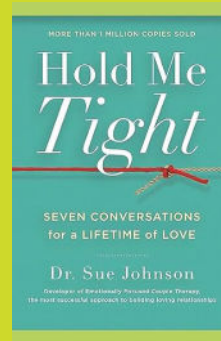
Good communication is the backbone to any healthy relationship. When you have open and honest communication, you build trust, strengthen your emotional connection, and create the space where both partners can be themselves without fear of judgment. It's the tool that helps you weather the storms, resolve conflicts, and celebrate your successes together. Whether you're just starting a new chapter in your love story or looking to deepen an existing bond, get ready to discover why good communication is the backbone of any happy partnership with these books.



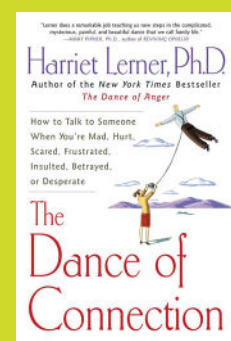
Eight Dates
John Gottman



The Five Love Languages
Gary Chapman



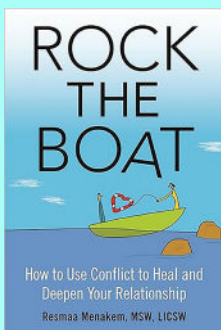
Hold Me Tight
Dr. Susan Johnson



The Dance of Connection
Harriet Lerner

Strategies to overcome challenges together or improve conflict in your relationship

Do you feel like you're stuck in a conflict loop with your partner or dealing with the same challenges over and over? These books provide helpful tools around conflict resolution and improve communication together. Plus, #10 includes couples activities that can build deeper and stronger connections.



Rock the Boat Resmaa Menakem, LICSW



Freaking the \$#@% for Couples
Erin Pash, LMFT



Supporting Your Partner Through *Mental Health Challenges*

Navigating relationships, especially when one person faces mental health challenges, can feel like charting unfamiliar territory. Whether it's anxiety, depression, or another challenge, it not only tests the individual who is struggling but also the strength and resilience of the relationship. However, experiencing mental health issues doesn't mean you and your partner can't have a healthy relationship.

Educate Yourself

The first step towards understanding is often knowledge. Dive into credible resources or attend workshops about your partner's specific mental health condition. Learn the warning signs and how to best support them during this time. When you comprehend the nuances of their struggles, it not only tells them that you care but also equips you with the patience and compassion required to navigate the challenging moments. NAMI offers great classes and workshops for families!

Provide a Safe Space

Mental health issues can be accompanied by the weight of stigma, shame, and isolation. Creating a safe, non-judgmental space for your partner to express themselves can be invaluable. This doesn't mean you should become their therapist, but being an empathetic listener can make a big difference. Sometimes, all one needs is the assurance that they're not alone in their battle.

Seek Help

While love is a powerful healer, professional help often plays a critical role in managing mental health issues. Encourage your partner to seek therapy or psychiatric assistance if they haven't already. And don't underestimate the power of couples counseling. It provides a platform to address not only individual challenges but also the dynamics of how those challenges play out within the relationship.

Don't forget to take care of yourself

When in a relationship, it's easy to lose track of yourself – including your likes, preferences, and needs. While relationships can be a source of comfort and an anchor during difficult times, it's vital to remember that each person in the relationship has a responsibility toward their own mental well-being. Ignoring your own needs can ultimately lead to exhaustion, resentment, and disconnect.

Remember that taking care of yourself isn't a sign of selfishness. For a relationship to flourish, both individuals need to be at their best. Prioritizing your self-care and seeking help for any lingering mental health issues or challenges you're facing ensures you bring the best version of yourself into the relationship.

This means ensuring you get enough personal time, honoring your boundaries, and taking time to focus on yourself. Also, don't lose track of the hobbies and activities you love that help you to reduce stress. While there is a certain level of sacrifice that comes with a committed relationship, you don't need to give up painting, hiking, yoga, reading, or other activities that ground and rejuvenate you.

And when things get tough and you feel like you're losing control over your emotions or overall mental well-being, don't hesitate to seek help. Have family and friends outside your relationship you can turn to, and consider seeking professional support.

Tips for Navigating *The Holidays*

The holiday season is undoubtedly a magical time of year, filled with warmth, joy, and cherished traditions (queue the lightly falling snow). Yet, amidst the twinkling lights and festive cheer, it's easy to get caught up in the whirlwind of obligations, and it can be especially stressful when you throw a partnership or in-laws into the mix. Here are some tips from our therapists for navigating "the most wonderful time of the year."

Prioritize What Matters

One of our therapists, Devin Schallert-Thomas, MA suggests walking through this activity with your partner: Lay out each family holiday (Thanksgiving, Kwanza, Hannukah, Diwali, Christmas, Easter, 4th of July, etc) and pick the important items/events around that holiday for each family system and for each partner. For example, if Partner A has a tradition of watching the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade with their family, but Partner B has a tradition of going Black Friday shopping at 3AM on Friday, then maybe it can look like going to Partner A's family in the morning/afternoon, and staying the night at partner's B family's house later.

When kids are involved in this partnership, it can get difficult to maneuver around the kids' temperament or expecting it to shift yearly based on kiddos age and developmental needs (maybe Junie has to take a nap from 1-3pm or else she is a nightmare for everyone). For this reason, perhaps this year looks different and you'll need to re-evaluate plans next year (yes, it's totally fine for this to change from year to year!).

"Ask the people you love what their favorite parts of the holidays are and just focus on those parts. You don't need to live a Hallmark movie or do all the things to have a meaningful holiday." – Emily Coler-Hanson, LMFT

Reflect on or ask your partner these questions:

- What were your favorite parts of the holidays growing up?
- What's important to you about this season?
- What are your priorities when you see your loved ones?
- What are your least favorite parts of the holidays?
- What events or traditions would you be sad or disappointed about if we missed?

Set Expectations

There are tons of expectations around the holiday season (gift-giving, travel, gatherings-- just to name a few). It's important to make plans and decide on boundaries, and then communicate them ahead of time with your partner, in-laws, or family.

Letisha Harris, a mental health practitioner, shares: Be okay with saying no when you cannot do something (without feeling guilty!). This might look like being choosy around which events you will attend, deciding ahead of time how long you're spending with family, or only going to get-togethers during certain weekends or days. This might also look like getting a hotel if traveling out of town for family to gain a quiet place to relax after holiday activities. Make a plan together and then stick with it.

Don't Neglect Your Physical or Mental Health

Between running around to different parties and having the kids home from school for weeks at a time, it can be harder to prioritize your own health during this time. Spending time outside, going to the gym, practicing meditation, and maintaining some normal sleep habits will greatly increase your stress tolerance and decrease your irritability.

"When my husband and I are visiting family, we always make a point to connect alone every day, even if it's just for a moment. This might look like taking the dog for a walk together or going to get coffee one morning, but we find this is helpful to get on the same page, get outside, and to take a break from busyness or family drama." – Miranda Barker, LICSW

The holidays can be a difficult time for people for a variety of reasons, and it can often be hard to find support or cope by yourself. This time of year can be a great time to meet with a therapist for a mental health check-in or to help navigate some of these concerns.

Bonus Tip:

"I recommend making a bingo board for all the potential annoyances, discussions, or interactions. Create it beforehand and then identify self-care/coping strategies to utilize or treat yourself to based on how many boxes of the bingo board you checked. If you got 'em all checked, you know your family/others well and you already have a pre-planned strategy of how to care for yourself! It also can bring some humor to the experience! Highly recommend sharing or collaborating with a partner, sibling or friend." – Anna King, LICSW

Feeling like we just touched the tip of the iceberg on this topic? Check out our whole podcast episode about navigating the holidays with family here:





Love Me In *My Language*

Letisha Harris, MA

Many people are familiar with the idea of “love languages.” This is something that Gary Chapman wrote about in his book *The Five Love Languages*, and it’s something that many couples’ therapists regularly discuss with clients.

Finding your love language can help to expand your relationship and take your marriage, romantic life, or dating relationship to another level. Let’s dive into what these love languages are, and some practical ideas for how to connect with your partner’s love languages.

5 Love Languages:

Words Of Affirmation

Communication and words are the focus this love language. This might look like using encouraging words, being honest and loving in your communication, and saying things to make your partner feel good (things that you mean, of course!).

Ways words of affirmation can be used in everyday:

sending an unexpected note, back and forth text messages throughout the day, compliments, bragging to others about your spouse, and leaving letters for the other partner.

Things to say:

- “You did a great job with the kids today”
- “You always make the best meals”
- “You looked great today.”

Clues that this is your partner’s love language:

A partner looking for validation, approval or compliments is most often communicating their need for words of affirmation (i.e. Does this outfit look okay? How do you like the food?).

Quality Time

If you have this love language, you value one-on-one time and attention. This looks like turning off your phones, removing distractions, and engaging in meaningful time together.

Date ideas: A picnic, an evening stroll, cooking a meal together, watching a movie together, a drive just the two of you, or even an overnight or weekend getaway. Remember that the time spent is more important than the cost of the activity (i.e. doing a target run together might end up being more meaningful than an expensive gift). Quick tip: if this is your partner’s love language, then the act of YOU planning the date night for them is important!

Things to say:

- “Let’s do that together.”
- “Want to come with me?”

Clues that this is your partner’s love language:

They might invite you to do an activity or make suggestions of things to do together (although keep in mind that quality time is needed in any relationship). come watch a movie with me, come take a walk with me, sit down and talk with

me or let's cook dinner tonight. A partner will communicate their need for quality time often time by asking for more attention and or seeking to be in their partners space more often than desiring to be alone.

Physical Touch

No, we don't just mean sex. Most often people who feel loved in this way need to be touched often throughout the day. To them, non-verbal body language is comforting and shows that you are present.

Ways physical touch can be used throughout the day: giving partner a massage, cuddling up on the couch and watching a movie, kisses, unexpected hugs, holding hands while in the car or taking a walk, or just being physically close.

Things to say:

- "Come sit next to me."
- "Do you need a hug?"
- "I love being close to you."

Clues that this is your partner's love language:

This one is probably easy to identify—your partner enjoys being close to you and often wants to hold hands or needs to be touched or held when they are sad or upset. Physical touch love language is one that seeks to have touch as a primary connection.

Acts Of Service

This means doing kind or helpful things for your partner. Someone with this love language often feels the desire to help ease the load from their partner. However keep in mind that their biggest pet peeve is probably lack of follow-through.

Loving a partner with this love language may look like: Doing a project together, making them breakfast, surprising your partner with a clean house, setting goals together, giving them the opportunity to get some self-care, or going out of your way to help with something they're dreading (like taking the car in to get its oil changed).

Things to say:

- "Is there anything you need help with right now?"
- "How can I lighten your load?"
- "Let me do that for you."

Clues that this is your partner's love language:

They might be asking for help with various things or talking about the need for breaks and feeling burnt out.

Receiving Gifts

If your love language is receiving gifts, it makes you feel loved to know that your partner thought of you and purchased or made it with you in mind. The key to this is thoughtfulness. For example, my mother-in-law once heard me make a comment about a favorite Christmas

album and the following year she got me the record—I was floored that she remembered what I had said a whole year later.

Loving a partner with this love language might look like: a thoughtful present, making birthdays or anniversaries special, surprise "just because" gifts, or even a favorite snack from the store. Remember, the love a person feels comes from the thoughtfulness of the gift not simply the gift or monetary value. Keep in mind that one of the worst things you could probably do is forget a special occasion or seem unenthusiastic about a gift.

Things to say:

- "This made me think of you."
- "I remembered you said how much you love [insert thing here]."

Clues that this is your partner's love language:

There are several ways one can communicate their love language is receiving gifts. They give gifts, they speak about how important some gift they received was to them, the reminisce about a gift and what it meant to them, and they will say things like I just love when you get me my favorite candy or flowers just because it makes me feel loved.

Conclusion

Hot tip: Not only do love languages apply to couples or romantic relationships, but it also applies to parent/child relationships and your relationship with yourself. Gary Chapman has books about those relationships and how to recognize love languages within those relationships as well.

Look inside

A book by Ellie's founder

How to keep from freaking-out on your partner.

Step 1: Find a jar (one for each person in the relationship).

Step 2: Put in in an obvious place (like your dresser or in your closet).

Step 3: Every day, write down your grievances and complaints about your significant other – but don't share them just yet.

Step 4: Put 'em in the jar.

Step 5: At the end of the week, take a look at them. If they still bother you, discuss them with your partner.



Goal: We're pretty critical of our partners in the moment, especially when we're dealing with day-to-day demands. Your criticisms are real to you and they need a place to go: however, if they're always going in your partner's ear, they can tear at your relationship. Usually when we write our complaints down and look at again with a little time, we realize how small some of the things actually are. Toss the complaints that no longer matter. Share those that do.

Let's talk a little about therapy...

Therapy is helpful for every person who's ever existed. Therapy sure beats the alternative of keeping everything in, feeling bummed out and turning into an angry person who blows flames out of his head whenever anyone says "hi."

Having difficulty in your relationship is a normal part of human existence. Research published in 2018 revealed.

75% of couples who did couples therapy felt they were better off after counseling.

65% reported "significant" improvement in their relationship after counseling.

Pretty good numbers, right?



**Looking for support?
Find your local clinic
here.**