



The Wise Brain Bulletin

News and Tools for Happiness, Love, and Wisdom

Volume 8,¹ (2/2014)

A Civil Tongue

© Rick Hanson, Jan Hanson, and Ricki Pollycove

Adapted from *Mother Nurture: A Mother's Guide to Health
in Body, Mind, and Intimate Relationships* (Penguin, 2002).

Editor's Note: Much research shows that relationships are built from interactions, and that interactions are built from individual back-and-forth exchanges. So what happens in these exchanges adds up over time to shape a relationship – for better or worse. Disagreements are natural in any relationship – with family, co-workers, and romantic partners – but these can wear down the relationship if they are not handled skillfully. Positive interactions – even (and perhaps especially) about disagreements – build up a relationship over time. This excerpt from Mother Nurture – which is about how to support the long-term health, well-being, and intimate relationships of a mother – uses a common disagreement between parents to illustrate unskillful and skillful ways to resolve an issue.

A point about context: The fact that we've drawn upon a statistically common situation for our illustration – a heterosexual marriage in which the mother stays home with young children – does not mean that we endorse this particular arrangement or think it is the only way to raise a family. Further, in our experience, we have seen similar issues between parents who are not married, in settings in which it is the father who stays home with the children, and in interactions between same-

Greetings

The Wise Brain Bulletin offers skillful means from brain science and contemplative practice – to nurture your brain for the benefit of yourself and everyone you touch.

The Bulletin is offered freely, and you are welcome to share it with others. Past issues are posted at <http://www.wisebrain.org/tools/wise-brain-bulletin>.

[Rick Hanson, PhD](#), edits the Bulletin. [Michelle Keane](#) is its managing editor, and it's designed and laid out by [Laurel Hanson](#).

To subscribe, go to <http://www.wisebrain.org/tools/wise-brain-bulletin>.

sex parents. More broadly, it's useful to generalize from the particulars of a specific interaction – such as the one we use for our example – to the general principles and practices that could help any interaction. Of course, what the other person does is beyond your control, but at least you can increase the odds of things going well – for both of you.

* * *

It is an amazing but true thing that practically the only people who ever say mean, insulting, wounding things to us are those of our own households.

Dorothea Dix

Sometimes talking about the simplest thing is like walking through a mine field. For example, imagine a father coming home from work to his wife who has been alone with their young child much of the day; they've grown so irritated with each other that this dialogue is fairly typical:

He: [walks through the door, sees some clutter, and mutters to himself] *What a mess.*

She: [stung at the criticism after having spent many selfless hours with their child] *There you go, always criticizing when you first get home.*

He: *You're so messy it drives me crazy.*

She: *I don't see you lifting a finger to help.*

He: [walks over and puts a toy on a shelf] *There, I helped. Now are you happy?*

She: [under her breath] *Such a jerk.*

He: *Well, there you go again, losing control. You can't talk without getting hysterical.*

She: *Your mother spoiled you rotten, but I don't have to take your crap.*

He: [yelling] *Once and for all, stop talking about my family. Or I've about had it!*

Thirty years of research have shown that the key to a loving and lasting relationship is how the partners interact with each other. Positive exchanges build up an emotional bank account of trust and warmth, and they make it easier to get through a conflict without losing your temper. In strong couples, positive interactions outnumber the negative ones by three or more to one.

An interaction is like a rally in tennis, and civility is what keeps the ball in bounds. Each time it is your turn to “hit the ball,” you have choices about how you hear what was said and how you respond. First, you could focus on the most useful or accurate aspect of the other person’s communication, which helps you see the best in him or her and feel more hopeful and calm. Or you can fixate on the parts that are exaggerated, inaccurate, or inflammatory, making you feel misunderstood, attacked, hurt, and angry. Second, you could send back the most constructive communication possible - given what came at you - which preserves your



dignity, puts you in a good light, and gives your partner something positive to work with. Or you can fire back with some nasty topspin, losing your cool, clouding the issues, and motivating him or her to retaliate in kind. In sum, you each can build on the positive, or go negative on the negative.

Besides feeling awful, negative interactions stress your body and deplete you further. An atmosphere of conflict between parents worries children, and it's a risk factor for them developing depression, anxiety, and behavior problems. Frequent quarrels also wear down relationship bonds. Every ugly, nasty little exchange makes each person more sensitive to the next one, the same way repeated chafing of the skin makes it increasingly tender to the touch, so even a light bump feels harshly abrasive. Then partners can trigger each other in runaway chain reactions. But civility interrupts the cycle of negativity, even if just one person does it.

Disagreements are natural in any relationship, and they usually increase after children. Civility does not prevent you from speaking your mind. It just helps you make your point better and be heard.

The test of a man or woman . . . is how they behave in a quarrel.

George Bernard Shaw

How to Make a Conversation Go Badly

Let's look first at what went wrong in the interaction that opened this chapter – with the problematic language in italics, below – and then at how it could have gone better.

- Leading with the negative, making no emotional connection (*What a mess!*) – If the first statement is negative, the other person will feel jolted and attacked. There also needs to be some stage-setting that makes an emotional connection and finds out if this is a good time to talk.

- Over-statement (*There you go, always criticizing when you first get home.*) – A speaker makes it sound like *you do this entirely bad thing all the time in every way* with words like *always* or

never, or if he or she does not use qualifying, softening language such as *often*, *around bed-times*, or *when you're watching TV*.

- Blaming (*You're so messy it drives me crazy.*) - These attacks are shaming, hurtful, and just push the button for an angry defense. Blaming also assumes that the listener is the cause of the speaker's actions or experience, and that's just not true. We are each responsible for how our own brain or body reacts, not the other person.

- Counter-attack (*I don't see you lifting a finger to help.*) - This both escalates the conflict and introduces a new topic. When multiple topics swirl around in a murky soup, nothing gets accomplished.

- Reductio ad absurdum (*There, I helped. Now are you happy?*) - "Reducing to absurdity" deflates others by making their wish, complaint, or idea sound foolish. That's hurtful in itself, plus it's only a short step from *your view is ridiculous* to *YOU are ridiculous*.

- Insults (*Such a jerk.*) - Long after an argument is over, insults linger in the mind like emotional napalm, part glue and part gasoline, sticking and burning. Frequent insults are emotional abuse, a grinding assault on the other person's sense of worth.

- Character attacks (*You can't talk without getting hysterical.*) -



There's a world of difference between saying, *What you did was bad* and *You are bad*. When one person takes shots at the overall character of another, the target of the attack feels that his or her good parts are ignored or discounted, and is likely to fire back in kind.

- Side issues (*Your mother spoiled you rotten, but I don't have to take your crap.*) - These are distractions that shift the focus away from the real issue.
- Demands (*Leave my family out of this!*) - Every communication contains two messages: the explicit conceptual and emotional content, and an implicit statement about the relationship between the speaker and listener. We all have deep needs to feel both autonomous and connected in our relationships. When the implicit message threatens either need, that becomes the overriding issue. For example, any demand says implicitly, *I get to boss you around* and limit your autonomy. Most people fight back against attempts at dominance, which then turns up the heat and diverts attention from the explicit topic.
- Threats (*Or I've about had it!*) - Both the explicit meaning of a threat, that something bad could happen, and the implicit one, that *I get to intimidate you* are alarming. Threats crowd out other issues and foster threats in return, like: *Fine! Just see what your relationship with the kids is like if you do!*

How to Help a Conversation Go Well

The key to a good conversation is each person's purpose. For example, is it your intention to speak your truth clearly, find out what is really bugging your partner, discover what you need to do differently, and solve problems? Or is it to avoid responsibility, dump your feelings, look good, and win? In your heart, where do you truly want to be coming from?

When each person's intentions are positive, they find ways to connect and mend, rather than diverge and wound. A good conversation may start messy or heated, with a flurry of diverging volleys, but then one or both partners starts to settle down, and they converge on mutual understandings and practical solutions. Let's replay the dialogue above, but this time with each partner keeping a civil tongue:

- Start by connecting.

He: [Walks through the front door. Sees the mess, feels like grumbling, but thinks better of it. Takes a big breath. Picks up his daughter and jiggles her in his arms while she giggles and makes him laugh. Smiles at wife.] *How'd it go?* [They chat for a few minutes. He says something nice about what she did that day. There's a pause, and he takes the plunge.] *I don't want to hassle you, but could we talk about the clutter?*

Leading with connection sends the reassuring, implicit message that *we are together, you matter to me*. Whenever you can, start by joining with your partner, rather than detaching or distancing, through warmth, touch, showing interest or concern, or saying what you agree with from the outset. And see if you can keep that sense of connection going.

- Speak with accuracy and restraint.

She: [Warily, but with a touch of humor] *You're doing pretty well, this is the first time you've complained about that this week.*



You can usually take your time to think before you speak and avoid exaggerated or inflammatory language like, *You've abandoned your children*. You can explain how intensely you feel or how important something is to you by scaling it, as in: *On the 10-point scale of being mad, this is just a 3*. Imagining that the conversation is videotaped could help you avoid saying something that would make you wince later.

- Take responsibility.

He: [Knows the subject is charged, so he takes the time to say clearly how he feels] *I know Caitlin's a little mess machine and you're doing the best you can. It's just that, I feel stressed at work and the commute's getting worse, so when I walk through the door and the first thing I see is clutter, it really bothers me. Plus we've already talked about you picking up before I get home. When it's still a mess, I feel like you're not listening to me.*

When you talk about your own experience, using mainly “I-statements,” your partner understands you better and is less likely to feel attacked. No one can dispute your experience



The Wellspring Institute
for Neuroscience and Contemplative Wisdom

The Institute is a 501c3 non-profit corporation, and it publishes the Wise Brain Bulletin. The Wellspring Institute gathers, organizes, and freely offers information and methods – supported by brain science and the contemplative disciplines – for greater happiness, love, effectiveness, and wisdom. For more information about the Institute, please go to <http://www.wisebrain.org/wellspring-institute>.

If you enjoy receiving the Wise Brain Bulletin each month, please consider making a tax-deductible donation to the Wellspring Institute. Simply visit WiseBrain.org and click on the Donate button. We thank you.

(though the other person may not like it!), and it does not need to be justified or defended.

In general, try to practice the 80-20 rule: focus 80% on what you can do to make things go better and no more than 20% on what your partner needs to fix. You have great control over the former, but little influence over the latter. Realistically, if you want the relationship to change, you'll have to do some changing yourself.

- Stay on topic.

She: [Starts to get defensive and wants to shift the topic to how Caitlin was especially active that day but catches herself] *OK. Let's talk about this. But I want to start thinking about when Caitlin should begin preschool. Can we talk about that later tonight? She's getting so restless at home. I put one toy away and meanwhile she's taken out two others.*

Try to finish one issue before moving on to another. Sometimes it helps to set a time limit: *Let's do ten minutes on how I need to get the house straighter by the time you get here, and then ten minutes on how you need to come home on time.*

- Focus on what is accurate or useful in what the other person is saying.

He: [Thinks she's trying to justify herself by talking about Caitlin and starts to rebut that point, but he knows that would just veer away from the topic at hand plus get them fighting, so he stops himself] *You're right, Caitlin is getting real active. I know that makes it harder to straighten up, so let's definitely talk about preschool. But you have to admit it, when you're firmer with her about putting her toys away, she behaves better.*

When you can, begin your response with what you like or agree with about what your part-

ner has said. Emphasizing common ground conveys respect and moves you toward positive solutions.

- Keep your dignity.

She: [Liked the first part of what he said, but then he slipped in that last shot about her needing to be firmer with Caitlin. Feels her heart start to pound. Speaks with intensity but maintains self-control.] *Look, I really don't like hearing about how I ought to be firmer with Caitlin. You try spending day after day with a two-year-old. You just can't be firm every second. You don't have this role with our daughter - no criticism, just fact - so you have little idea about what it's truly like. Please don't be so free with your advice. I am actually quite firm with Caitlin, and you know people say she's well-behaved.*

You could recall someone who embodies an attitude of self-respect and uprightness in the face of provocation and imagine speaking in the same manner. You can talk in a way that makes you feel proud of yourself.



- Address concrete specifics.

He: [Resists the temptation to re-fight old quarrels about how firm to be with Caitlin, and he refocuses himself.] *OK, OK. I know you're pretty firm, though I wish you were 10% firmer. But that's not the issue. Here's my basic point. I don't really care about the rest of the house. I'd just like to be able to walk through the front door into a living room that is peaceful and orderly. And I thought we'd agreed you'd straighten up before I got home.*

Nothing can be done about a vague complaint or a global assault on someone's character. But you can solve well-defined problems. For example, you can clarify how much of a change you want, as the father did above with his "10%" comment.

- Concede points when you can.

She: [Still calming down from the "you're not firm enough" side-issue. Considers arguing with whether she needs to be "10% firmer," but thinks better of it.] *You're right, I did say I'd keep things cleaner. I didn't realize you only care about the living room. That's doable. But I have to tell you, I want more respect about how I do discipline Caitlin, and how hard it is to ride herd on her all day.*

If it is more important to you to discover what is true and what will work than it is to be right or to win a power struggle, you can be good-humored about conceding a point. Plus that's the fastest way to get you partner to stop bugging you about it. The true winner of an argument is the one who learns the most.

- Make requests, not demands, and agreements, not threats.

He: [Wants to fire back but has learned that the impulse to do so is actually a kind of big, flashing warning in his mind to PAUSE AND BUY SOME TIME until he has calmed down] *Hmmm. Let me think about that for a minute.* [Discreetly takes a few big breaths.

Thinks about whether he's gone overboard. Remembers that people do say that Caitlin is well-behaved for a two-year-old. Remembers the time he had Caitlin for most of a Saturday and how he had to loosen up on the rules. Looks at his wife and feels compassion for her, hassled on one side by her daughter and on the other by him.] *OK. Would this work: Picked-up living room, so-so rest of house, and we try your firmness level for a while?*

She: [Still irritated. But softened by his tone and partial giving in. Considers whether she

can actually keep the living room straight up to the time he gets home, and makes a counter-proposal.】 *Well, I like where you're going. But what if you're late and Caitlin leaves out some new stuff, and you yell at me about it.*

He: [Sees her basic point and doesn't get distracted by the exaggeration about yelling. Nods]

She: I can keep it clean between 6:00 and 6:30. If you get home later, bets are off. OK?

He: Sounds like a plan. I'm tired of arguing, anyway!

• • • • •



Rick Hanson, Ph.D., is a neuropsychologist and New York Times best-selling author. His books include [*Hardwiring Happiness: The New Brain Science of Contentment, Calm, and Confidence*](#) (in 12 languages), [*Buddha's Brain: The Practical Neuroscience of Happiness, Love, and Wisdom*](#) (in 25 languages), [*Just One Thing: Developing a Buddha Brain One Simple Practice at a Time*](#) (in 13 languages), and [*Mother Nurture: A Mother's Guide to Health in Body, Mind, and Intimate Relationships*](#). Founder of the [Wellspring Institute for Neuroscience and Contemplative Wisdom](#) and on the Advisory Board of the [Greater Good Science Center at](#)

[UC Berkeley](#), he's been an invited speaker at Oxford, Stanford, and Harvard, and taught in meditation centers worldwide. A summa cum laude graduate of UCLA, his work has been featured on the BBC, NPR, CBC, FoxBusiness, Consumer Reports Health, U.S. News and World Report, and O Magazine and he has several [audio programs](#) with Sounds True. His weekly e-newsletter – [Just One Thing](#) – has over 100,000 subscribers, and also appears on Huffington Post, Psychology Today, and other major websites.

For more information, please see his [full profile](#) at www.RickHanson.net.

Jan Hanson, M.S., L.Ac. is an acupuncturist, nutritionist, and teacher. She co-authored [*Mother Nurture: A Mother's Guide to Health in Body, Mind, and Intimate Relationships*](#) (Penguin, 2002), and wrote the appendix on nutritional neurochemistry for [*Buddha's Brain: The Practical Neuroscience of Happiness, Love, and Wisdom*](#) (New Harbinger, 2009), as well as numerous articles on evidence-based approaches to complementary medicine. With a B.A. from UCLA and an M.S. from the Academy of Chinese Culture and Health Sciences, Jan has also trained extensively in clinical nutrition, laboratory assessment, and homeopathy.



For more information, please see www.janhealth.com.



Ricki Pollycove, M.D., M.H.S., received her B.A. in zoology and immunology with honors from the University of California at Berkeley. She continued at UC Berkeley for a master's in health sciences, followed by her M.D. and residency in obstetrics and gynecology at the University of California School of Medicine, San Francisco. She became board certified by the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology in 1984 and is on the clinical faculty at the University of California, San Francisco. Dr. Pollycove is the founding director

for Education and Program Development at the California Pacific Medical Center Breast Health Center, and a past chief of the Division of Gynecology there. She is a fellow of the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology, a member of the North American Menopause Society, American Society of Reproductive Medicine, the American Society of Breast Diseases, and past editor in chief of the San Francisco Medical Society Magazine. She appears regularly as a medical expert on television and radio, and is the women's health expert for MedicinePlanet.com. A mother for over eighteen years, she enjoys cooking, baking, and gardening with her daughter, Leah, with whom she also sings and plays viola.

Her most recent book is [*The Pocket Guide to BioIdentical Hormones*](#), (Penguin, 2010) and she also writes a [blog at Huffington Post](#).

For more information, please see Dr. Pollycove's website, <http://www.drerricki.com>.

Even In The Struggle

© [Tara Sophia Mohr](#)

Even in the struggle, you are loved.
You are being loved not in spite of the hardship, but through it.
The thing you see as wrenching, intolerable, life's attack on you,
is an expression of love.

There is the part of us that fears and protects and defends and expects,
and has a story of the way it's supposed to turn out.
That part clenches in fear, feels abandoned and cursed.

There is another part, resting at the floor of the well within, that
understands:
this is how I am being graced, called, refined, by fire.

The secret is, it's all love.
It's all doorways to truth.
It's all opportunity to merge with what is.

Most of us don't step through the doorframe.
We stay on the known side.
We fight the door, we fight the frame, we scream and hang on.

On the other side, you are one with the earth, like the mountain.
You hum with life, like the moss.
On the other side, you are more beautiful:
wholeness in your bones, wisdom in your gaze,
the sage-self and the surrendered heart alive.

The Building Blocks of Love: Co-Creating a Happy Relationship

© Carista Luminare and Lion Goodman

Most of us are somewhat confused about love. We yearn for love, and we need love. But what does healthy love look like? And how can we create it?

Our confusion leads to all sorts of unconscious and irrational behavior, uncomfortable feelings, and reactivity in our relationships. It can impact our ability to make or keep commitments. It can result in anxiety or withdrawal, even abandonment and betrayal. Confusion about love creates a lot of unhappiness.

What we yearn for is something very particular. It's often missing in our closest relationships. We've wanted this simple feeling since we were born: it's the feeling of secure, dependable love.

Deep inside, you know how love *ought to feel*. Infants innately know what love feels like: an upset baby gets picked up, held close to her mother's or father's body, and soothed with gentle touch, a soft voice, and eyes that are warm and caring. We have a neurological need to be comforted in this safe and tender way. To the infant, this feeling *is* love.

When children get this kind of safety and predictable care, they form a secure attachment bond with their primary caregiver. When they don't, they develop what the psychological literature calls "adverse developmental effects."

This field of research, called *attachment theory*, grew out of hundreds of studies beginning in the 1950's with pioneers such as John Bowlby, Mary Ainsworth, and many others. In the past decade, the field has been popularized and brought into practical application by Sue Johnson (*Hold Me Tight*), Stan Tatkin (*Wired for Love*), Dan Siegel (*Parenting from the Inside*

Out), and others. These clinicians and researchers have shown how our childhood bonding pattern extends into, and shapes, our adult relationships.

What has become clear, through decades of research on attachment in both children and adults, is that we never outgrow this need to feel safe and secure in our relationships. We are designed to be deeply connected to someone we trust. All of us, whether infant, child, or adult, want to have our needs and feelings heard, and cared for, by someone who makes us a priority.

We've found that many of the most mindful, conscious, and personally transformed people we know still have significant problems in their primary relationship. Mindfulness practices do not, apparently, automatically transform an individual's ability to interact lovingly with their romantic partner. When we get triggered, mindful centeredness flies right out the window.



The ability to self-regulate is a crucial life skill, yet relationships require co-regulation, which is a different skill altogether. Living alone is one solution – there’s no one around to trigger you. Couples and families, on the other hand, are forced into close quarters with others who can easily feel like threats to their vulnerable primitives. You can “pet your lizard” to soothe your primitive brain and quiet your fears, but what do you do when your partner’s lizard brain feels cornered, and attacks?

Our exploration and work are centered on these issues. We’ve taken attachment theory and combined it with our understanding of prenatal psychology, trauma healing, and spiritual transformation. We call the resulting comprehensive patterns *LoveStyles*, and the commitment to rewire each other toward secure relationship the *Healing LoveStyle*.

The Landmines of Our Inner Landscape

We each have reactive landmines planted deep in our subconscious mind, and our partner’s behavior can easily trigger them. If you sense a potential threat (such as your spouse getting upset or angry with you), your amygdala might shift from feeling safe and secure (the “green zone”) into the highly alert and cautious state (the “yellow zone”). The landmine is now armed – it is hypersensitive to any additional threat. Any small slight, such as a false accusation or an unkind word, can trip it. When that happens, your neurology goes reactive. Real danger requires an immediate response. Your amygdala enters the red “Danger! zone” and you may snap into behaviors that you’ll feel embarrassed by, or later regret. Your primitive brain has hijacked your ability to practice mindfulness. In fact, you’ve “lost your mind” – or at least your ability to consciously self-regulate.

In an ideal world, at moments like this, you can depend on your partner to provide you with reassurance and care. *“It’s okay, honey. You’re safe, I’m here, and I’ve got you. Come on over here and get a big hug.”* This soothes your frightened inner child, and your amygdala can de-escalate and relax. Safely embraced, your limbic system quiets from emergency red to cautious yellow, and eventually it settles back into the calm green zone of safety. *“It’s okay, the danger has passed. I’m loved.”*

Rick Hanson points out in *Hardwiring Happiness* that we have three fundamental needs: 1) to feel safe, 2) to feel fulfilled, and 3) to feel connected in a reliable way. To create a secure love

bond, you need all three experiences from your partner. We call them the “Three Prime Directives” of relationship.

Flourishing in the Green Zone

Like children who have supportive and loving parents, we flourish when we’re held securely by our primary love source. Senior citizens who stay married live longer than singles seniors,¹ and interviews with seniors who have been married for decades show that in general, they live happier lives, and are more content, than those who live alone.² This data suggests that we are at our best when we’re rooted in a reliable, loving, long-term relationship.

This kind of secure, co-regulating relationship doesn’t have to be romantic or sexual. Sustainable mutual support can be developed with a friend or family member. Couples who are fortunate enough to have both – deep trust and deep passion – are especially blessed.

This may be striking news for high achievers and spiritual seekers who believe that their independence and self-sufficiency are among their greatest strengths. At our core, we are relational creatures. Like other troop animals, we need others around us to feel safe, and to be safe. Many people who avoid intimacy are doing so as a result of their early childhood bonding pattern, where they felt insecure in their connection with their caregivers, rather than feeling more secure.

We’ve been socialized into believing that being independent means being mature. More than half of adults in America are single, and one out of seven live alone. This accounts for 28% of all households in the U.S., and more than 40% in some cities.³ It’s a grand social experiment, and we don’t yet know the consequences. What we do know is there is a lot of unhappiness among singles, and also among couples who don’t feel secure in their relationship.

1 <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2012.00983.x/abstract>

2 <http://legacyproject.human.cornell.edu/>

3 “Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Living Alone,” Eric Klinenberg, Penguin Books, 2013.

The Nature of Love

The essential nature of healthy love is simple: it is generous, reliable and caring. It feels like a nourishing connection you can rest in. You feel comfortable revealing your deepest needs and your highest aspirations. You know you can expose your True Self, including your fears and your magnificence. The message your body-mind feels is, *“I trust that you care for all of me.”*

When two people commit to creating an enduring, long-term relationship, and to being co-regulation partners, a deep hunger is satisfied. Each person makes their partner’s well being a top priority. The feeling of being solidly connected to another person changes the brain. Something settles within us. We feel that we’re home, protected from the dangers of the world. We call this the *Healing LoveStyle*.

There is a simple science, and a practical art, to experiencing this kind of dependable and passionate love – both in and out of the bedroom. It’s possible to rewire the two brains in



a relationship from insecure attachment to secure love. It only requires that both people share the goal, and commit to practicing care for the other's three primary needs: safety, contentment and style of connection.

Since we all have conditioning from the past (our "landmines"), both partners also commit to healing and re-wiring their reactive patterns over time, together as a team. The results are more than worth the effort. They include mutual security, rich passion, and expanding joy. And for those who desire it, more and better sex.

We've seen swift and radical improvements whenever two people make this commitment to rewiring toward secure attachment. It's never too late to begin.

The Building Blocks of Love

It's nearly impossible to build a solid relationship on the shaky foundation of anxiety or fear. The building blocks of love provide a solid foundation to build a healthy, happy, and sustainable relationship.

First, get to know your LoveStyle™. Your childhood attachment style, or bonding pattern, was formed out of your early experience with your parents (or primary caregivers). You developed strategies to deal with the presence, or absence, of love and care. These strategies were later reinforced, or modified, through your other relationships – with family members, friends, lovers, and others. In a broad sense, we call this your LoveStyle. When you examine your pattern and deepen your understanding of the various styles, you can grow beyond the one you inherited or adopted.

We can easily observe that children express their natural exuberance, enthusiasm, and joyful creativity when they feel safe and secure. When something frightens a child, her limbic fire alarm goes off. She runs back to Mom, seeking safety and immediate attention. If she gets picked up, held, and comforted, her limbic system quiets. She relaxes back into a comfortable "*I'm safe*" state, and she can return to her play. This optimal mother-child bond builds the child's ability to feel safe in herself, and she grows in her ability to self-regulate and become more independent.

This vital transmission from parent to child enhances a child's intelligence, health, and self-worth. When sustained over time, the *Secure LoveStyle* is formed. Adults with this style are usually stable in their relationships, and they make and keep close relationships easily and for the long term. They are great friends to have!

The Insecure LoveStyles

Unfortunately, few of us got secure love consistently. Your parents taught you, by how they treated you, what love *is*, and what love *feels like*. It's likely that they were never trained in ideal parenting skills. Their parents didn't show *them* what healthy love looks like, either. Most parents have a pile of difficulties to deal with: a household to manage, one or two jobs, other children to care for, exhaustion and overwhelm, and a less-than-perfect marriage. Your parents weren't able to offer you the safe harbor you needed.

If either of your parents were absent much of the time, you may have learned that love feels like rejection or abandonment. If they were busy, you may have learned that love feels erratic, and unpredictable: "Love" is that anxious feeling. If you couldn't count on anyone



to care for you, you may have withdrawn into yourself and learned to become self-sufficient.

This wide range of bonding patterns and strategies are collectively called “insecure attachment.” And of course, most people seek out adult partners that make them feel “just like home,” so attachment patterns commonly get repeated, over and over, in our adult relationships.

Insecurely attached children form strategies for dealing with the uncomfortable feelings produced by the lack of safety and consistent care. For some, the strategy is focused outward, on the caregiver: “*Do you love me? Will my needs be met? What do I have to do to get cared for?*” We call this the *Insecure-Anxious LoveStyle*.

Adults with this style often pursue their partner to get the connection and love they need. They can escalate in tone or energy when triggered, and demand to have their needs attended to. They may get aggressive or even punishing with words or actions if they don’t get what they want.



Perspectives on Self-Care

Be careful with all self-help methods (including those presented in this Bulletin), which are no substitute for working with a licensed healthcare practitioner. People vary, and what works for someone else may not be a good fit for you. When you try something, start slowly and carefully, and stop immediately if it feels bad or makes things worse.

Other children develop an inward-focused strategy: “*I can’t count on anyone else. I’ll just take care of myself.*” This forms what we term the *Insecure-Avoidant LoveStyle*. Adults with this style withdraw from conflict when things go badly. They may go into their head, or dive into their work, or leave to be alone to center themselves. Their chief complaint is often that their partner doesn’t listen to or value their feelings or thoughts. They may feel invaded or overwhelmed by the anxiety of their partner.

People of this type can find it easier to be alone than in a relationship. They are highly self-sufficient, and enjoy time alone. Their best relationship may be with God, or a pet, or with their work. Our society rewards people of this type, who don’t mind working long hours, and don’t need much supervision.

Some children suffer from emotional or physical neglect, abandonment or abuse. If these psychological wounds are left untreated and unhealed, they may grow into adults who unconsciously re-create traumatic dynamics with their partners. The result may be vicious fighting or processing cycles that never seem to resolve. We call this the *Traumatic LoveStyle*. Others call it Traumatic Attachment. People with this style usually require professional support to heal. (More information is available in our article, “[Sudden Reaction Syndrome](#).”)

Many of us are hybrids, having tendencies or traits of two or more LoveStyles. (With two different parents, it’s likely that we learned two different strategies.) Our LoveStyle patterns often get expressed in our other relationships: with our children, our friends, and even our professional colleagues. When your LoveStyle clashes with another person’s LoveStyle, you may find that you’re unusually reactive in their presence.

Combining all of these factors, we have a perfect formula for chaos and unhappiness in our primary relationship. No wonder we’re so confused about love! If this resonates with you, just remember: you’re part of a very large club, called the human race.

How We Can Heal Each Other

All of us have subconscious, unhealed patterns that hijack us unexpectedly from time to time. We can't expect perfection from ourselves or from each other. Over time, our brains can rewire toward healthy, secure bonding. All it takes is a partner who also wants to create healthy love. The goal is to move from “mostly insecure” to “mostly secure” love. Attachment specialists consider “secure” to mean *80% or more* positive interactions that keep the limbic system in the green zone.

When two people intentionally choose to transition from insecure to secure bonding, and commit to creating a healthy relationship together, they are engaging in what we call the *Healing LoveStyle*. There are four essential steps to learn and practice:

1. Learn to understand and self-manage your own limbic triggers.
2. Learn to communicate your true needs, in real time, as best as you can.
3. Commit to care for their partner's needs (and limbic system) with equal regard.
4. Behaviors that cause insecurity are seen as opportunities to help each other practice secure bonding.



Consistent practice can eventually shift your brain toward secure attachment. This is a relationship mindfulness practice. We've learned from our work with couples that predictable love creates the happiness we longed for as children, and continue to long for. As adults, we can create it consciously.

Practice Loving Your Partner Their Way

Each LoveStyle type has a particular way they prefer to be loved. Learning to soothe your partner's limbic system is the single best way we've found to renew and sustain love.

In general, this is what people with each LoveStyle need from their partner:

Secure types, who are confident in their love, need less reassurance than Insecure types. They feel at ease with giving and receiving love in real time. Like everyone else, they need positive interactions that remind them that they are loved, appreciated, and cherished.

Insecure-Anxious types often feel fearful and uncertain. They're afraid of being abandoned. They need consistent connection and reassurance from their partner. If their partner needs space, they need to know when they can expect to be re-connected. Their partner informs them, *"I'm going to take a walk so I can re-center myself. I'll be back in 15 minutes."*

Insecure-Avoidant types often fear being flooded or invaded, so they need space, understanding, and patience from their partner. If their partner sees them getting overwhelmed, they can say, *"Take the time you need to integrate that, and then let's re-connect."*

Insecure-Traumatized types fear a repeat of their original trauma, and they trigger easily when something mimics their traumatic past. They need lots of reassurance that they are safe, and that this moment is not like their past. Their partner says, *"I'm here with you now, and I'm not going away. You're safe, and I love you. This is now. It's not the past."*

When you understand the specific "love requirements" of your partner, you can offer them what they need (rather than what you need). This creates a foundation of security you can both count on. When you feel comfortable communicating your needs to one another, knowing you will be cared for, your limbic system is quiet, and your heart can open.

The Sex Chat

Secure love is also an important foundation for hot sex! When you feel anxious, insecure, or afraid, it's almost impossible to feel turned on – or be open to desire (your own, or your partner's). An amygdala in the red zone shuts down the flow of passion. Both romantic love and sexual love are tied to our feelings of safety, trust and being cared for. Care is a great sensual lubricant. Add a dash of feeling cherished, and sparks will fly. Feeling sexually inspired and fulfilled is a natural outcome of the care we express for each other.

As we mature, physical and emotional safety becomes more important to our sexuality than the raging hormones of our youth. When we feel protected, we can let down our guard and be vulnerable. We open to the flow of love. Intimacy and sex are best when both partners feel playful and affectionate. It's the kind of sex we all want, and it comes when we can let go of our defenses and be totally present with our partner.



Extending the Happiness

Co-creating happiness and intimacy with your partner requires mindfulness, wisdom, and practice. Rewiring your brain for secure relationship takes time – and it's more than worth the investment.

Now imagine extending this practice to everyone in your life, whether they are a lover, a child, a colleague, or a stranger. If we commit to care for the primal part of the brains of others, and we embrace them with our love, we offer them an oasis in the desert of life. This creates peace and happiness in those we meet. Let us learn to do so – and practice, practice, practice.

• • • • •



Carista Luminare, Ph.D. and **Lion Goodman** are co-founders of Luminary Leadership Institute, a consulting firm dedicated to bringing leaders of businesses and organizations into alignment with their highest virtues and their True Self. They are co-creators of [Confused about Love?](#) coaching services and training programs.

They are currently writing a book on *The Building Blocks of Love*. They offer a free assessment, the [LoveStyle Profile Quiz](#), a customized ten-page report to help you understand your unique LoveStyle, which is an excellent first step in learning how to deliberately rewire your brain for healthy love. Visit www.ConfusedAboutLove.com and click on the LoveStyle Profile tab.

Carista has 30 years experience as a consultant, counselor and coach to executives, entrepreneurs, individuals and organizations. She has developed a comprehensive holistic parenting methodology and LLI's leading-edge evolutionary leadership program. In her private healing practice, she integrates her lifelong research on childhood attachment and adult relationship dynamics. Carista is the author of the groundbreaking book, *Parenting Begins Before Conception*.

Lion has 35 years experience as an executive coach, counselor, and healer. He has served more than 400 C-suite executives, business owners, and change agents around the world. He created *The Belief Closet Process*, a proprietary methodology for shifting beliefs at the core of the psyche, which he teaches to coaches and therapists around the world. He is the author of three books: *Creating on Purpose*; *Transform Your Beliefs*; and *Menlightenment*.

Skillful Means

[Your Skillful Means](#), sponsored by the Wellspring Institute, is designed to be a comprehensive resource for people interested in personal growth, overcoming inner obstacles, being helpful to others, and expanding consciousness. It includes instructions in everything from common psychological tools for dealing with negative self talk, to physical exercises for opening the body and clearing the mind, to meditation techniques for clarifying inner experience and connecting to deeper aspects of awareness, and much more.

Gottman's Marriage Tips

Purpose / Effects

Following these tips can help strengthen marriages and help them to better weather the inevitable problems all relationships face.

Method

Summary

Marriage requires work, affection, conscious thought, and a positive environment.

Long Version

1. *Seek help early.* Instead of waiting the average time of six years before looking for outside assistance, seek help as soon as a problem makes itself known.
2. *Edit yourself.* Honesty is important, but making every single critical or negative thought known just hurts your partner.
3. *Soften your "start up."* When a problem comes up, instead of beginning with an angry confrontation, bring up your concerns gently and with care.
4. *Accept influence.* Both parties need to be able to accept and change feelings and

plans due to the influence of the other party, but this is especially important to remember in the case of the husband accepting his wife's influence (as women are more likely to accept male influence due to the culture at large).

5. *Have high standards.* Don't tolerate bad behavior until it reaches a breaking point. Hold yourselves and one another to the highest reasonable standard.

6. *Learn to repair and/or exit the argument.* If an argument isn't getting anywhere, change the subject, make a humorous or caring remark to lighten the mood, establish a common ground, and back down when necessary. If an argument is especially heated, agree to take a 20-minute recess to cool down and then re-approach the situation with more level heads.

7. *Focus on the bright side.* Cultivate a positive climate rather than a negative one in your marriage. Continually say kind and loving things to your partner and about your relationship...these affirmations will only become more true with time.

History

Dr. John Gottman has studied what makes marriages succeed or fail since 1973; using his insight he has been able to tell with over 90% accuracy the future of a marriage. These marriage tips have been gleaned from years of research.

Notes

You can take a relationship quiz on Dr. Gottman's website [here](#) and test your own relationship's strength. You'll find a video of Dr. Gottman talking about the "magic relationship ratio" at <http://youtu.be/Xw9SE315GtA>.

See Also

[Emotional Journaling](#)

[Self-Advocacy](#)

External Links

[The Gottman Institute](#)

Fare Well

May you and all beings be happy, loving, and wise.