

let love in

Deepen Your Intimate Relationship with Self-Love

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Let love in: Deepen Your Intimate Relationship with Self-Love

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Introduction

Are you entering a new relationship and longing for it to last? Are you still searching for love? Do you want to avoid repeating old mistakes and protect yourself from being hurt again? If so, welcome – this book will give you the tools to build a deeper, lasting love.

In our fast-paced consumerist culture, we can access superficial pleasures and distractions from everywhere and at any time, provided the Wi-Fi is strong enough. The pervasive availability of these constant “sugar rushes” undermines our motivation to face and work through uncomfortable emotions that arise in any romantic relationship. They also deprive us of the joy, growth, and satisfaction that only an intimate and loving relationship can bring. Since we live longer than previous generations, we are required to negotiate more romantic relationships across our lifespan as well as address feelings of hurt, shame, disappointment, anger, loss, and loneliness. However, our psychology appears to evolve in the opposite direction. We have shorter attention spans, we are less emotionally literate and less tolerant of discomfort, and thus more likely to break off a relationship simply because we did not know how to sustain it.

Our mainstream culture is indeed making it harder for us to make love last. We are conditioned to prioritise the pursuit of quick, short-lived highs and the perpetual optimisation of our bodies over and above a lasting sense of emotional peace, belonging, and acceptance of our natural imperfections. At the same time, we carry a deep hunger: to be seen, to belong, and to be loved for who we truly are. No technology or optimised appearance can satisfy this hunger. Only love can. Naturally, we look to a romantic partner to meet this need. Yet the ongoing epidemic of loneliness shows that our longing for love and belonging often goes unfulfilled, even in relationships, because this love must first begin within us.

Our romantic relationships have the potential to deeply fulfil us like few human experiences can, but they can also shake us to the core. Have you ever found the same issue emerging with a new partner, even though you believed you had left it behind with your ex? This phenomenon speaks to the heart of our dilemma: *if we do not consciously choose to evolve, we will inadvertently repeat our default patterns in love.* In other words: the lingering emotional issue from our last relationship that we did not address will likely come back to haunt us in the next. And rest assured that most of humanity needs a masterclass in love and relationships. We are in it together. We may have mastered our technical gadgets, but we surely have some catching up to do when it comes to our relationship skills. This book aims to offer you the

guidance you need to work with instead of against the challenging moments that occur in all romantic relationships.

To transform the emotions that arise within us, we need self-love. What might sound like a sentimental cliché is, in fact, a highly effective psychological tool that helps us cultivate greater contentment and maturity in life.

Loving myself means that I know myself enough to appreciate my gifts and strengths realistically without comparing myself to others.

Loving myself means that I have compassion for the parts in me that hold shame and pain, and that I accept my being human instead of trying to be perfect.

In other words, self-love refers to a conscious and kind relationship I cultivate with myself.¹

Self-love frees me from preoccupation with myself and thus allows me to genuinely love others.

Before we delve into our topic of how to level up your romantic relationships, let me confess something. I consider effective couple work to be the most complex form of psychotherapy. As a clinical psychologist and psychotherapist, I am used to treating individuals and their families who are affected by significant mental health issues. However, when I was first asked to support couples who struggled

with cheating, jealousy, and disagreeing on whether they wanted children or not; I was confronted with layers of unspoken emotions between the two that seemed immune to any intervention.

What made me doubt my effectiveness was my inability to grasp the most powerful force in the room: the energetic bond between the two people before me. This unnamed and invisible variable determined the outcome: whether the couple reconciled after an affair without addressing the underlying issues, or whether one partner continued to lie. It felt as though larger life lessons were at play – lessons each partner had to learn for themselves, beyond my place to interfere.

As long as I could not grasp this energy, I felt I was falling short of my own professional standards in helping couples; so I avoided couple work. I also became aware that most couples were seeking help far too late. They had reached the point of no return when too much pain had been inflicted, or too much dissatisfaction had built up. A recent study involving several thousand German-speaking couples confirms this. Breakups were typically preceded by about two years of one partner feeling dissatisfied. If the dissatisfaction remained unaddressed, couples reached a “point of no return,” after which separation usually followed within months. Beyond this point, both partners were highly dissatisfied, making couple therapy unlikely to succeed.²

What I have come to understand in the decades since then is threefold:

1. Why two people form a romantic relationship, stay together, or separate is dependent on the strength of their bond, their compatibility, and the lessons they are to learn from and with each other. All of this feels to me like it is outside of our conscious control and – if I may say so – feels predestined.
2. Therefore, the only variable you can control as a person in the couple and thus as a therapist is to increase the level of consciousness and love for life, for self, and for another without clinging to an outcome.
3. Therapeutic work on a romantic relationship is only likely to stand a chance when problems have not yet become chronic, no matter how effective the therapeutic approach or the therapist.

This tells us that it would be wise for couples to seek professional help earlier, when only one partner experiences some dissatisfaction, instead of waiting until the dissatisfaction has built up. What would be even smarter is to prevent such dissatisfaction from arising by tending to your relationship and to yourself like you would tend to a garden.

I will guide you in nurturing love for yourself, your partner, and your relationship, so it can grow stronger in the long term. If you are between partners, you can use this book to

deepen your self-love and prepare to bring that strength into your next relationship.

And this is where my real superpower lies: in helping you to love yourself, including the parts you may dislike.

In 2008, I became involved in developing new psychological approaches that placed compassion for self and others at their centre. Within a few years, I was teaching hundreds of people worldwide and training others to teach. Since then, I have taught, trained, and supervised several thousand people face-to-face, and reached tens of thousands more through my programmes, meditations, and books.

What I have learnt from nearly 20 years of teaching self-compassion and self-love is that we all hold an immense, untapped potential for love and wisdom. This potential, grounded in more evolved emotions and mental states, helps us meet the messy feelings that surface in relationships: fear of rejection or abandonment, shame, jealousy, envy, anger, resentment, hurt, and grief.

Intimate relationships are where we are most often triggered – and where we have the greatest potential to grow. However disconnected or technocratic our culture becomes, our human need for intimate love remains unchanged. In fact, it may grow even stronger as a counterbalance to the influence of technology on our lives. As the psychologist Erich Fromm wrote in the 20th century, “Love is the only sane

and satisfactory answer to the problem of human existence.” To build resilient bonds, we need to strengthen our capacity for knowing, loving, and relating to ourselves – including the parts we would rather avoid. In the 21st century, each of us is called to invest in and master heart-based relating.

My work has now come full circle as I now focus all my expertise on couples again. Within this book, I invite you to do the inner work on shame, guilt, and anger that so often get triggered in relationships. These emotions are universal; they fuel unhealed wounds and need to be worked through in all of us. We cannot skip this step. If other methods have not helped you, it is likely because these underlying emotions have not yet been addressed. The guidance I offer is inside-out: by changing your inner state of being, you will naturally act differently in your own authentic way. This contrasts with outside-in guidance, which asks you to change your behaviour first in the hope that your inner state will follow. There is nothing wrong with outside-in methods if they work for you – but if they haven’t, it may be time to try the inside-out approach I share here.

This guidance is intended for couples who have good mental health, care about each other, and want to grow together in love, or for individuals looking for love again. The content focuses on monogamous heterosexual couples. Feel free to apply it as you see fit if you have a different sexual orientation or relationship structure.

This guidance is not intended for you if you have already reached the breaking point in your relationship, in that too much damage has already been inflicted, meaning that one of you has betrayed, abused, physically hurt, or abandoned the other in a way that has undermined basic trust and respect to an extreme extent. These topics are not covered.

This guidance is not intended for you if one of you suffers from substance abuse or a major mental illness, personality disorder, including severe trauma-related disorders. Let me explain why. In such cases, the exercises here may be destabilising. Individual psychotherapy is the best and safest way to work on emotional issues. This guidance for couples is not intended for you because you may require professional clinical treatment and couple or family support that fits within the context of the specific treatment approach.

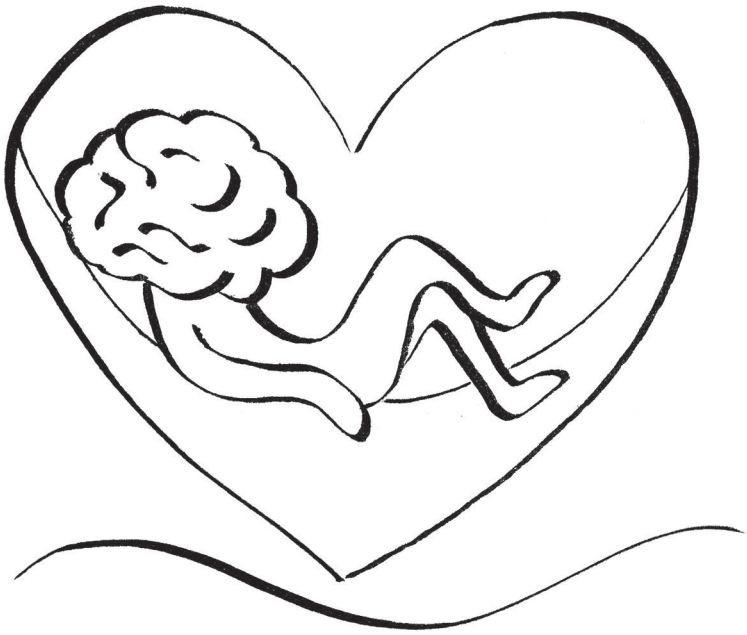
Everything I share with you here is grounded either in current research – including social psychology, attachment theory, emotion regulation, and parts work – or in ancient wisdom teachings. More importantly, it has been tried and tested both in my own life and with the many people I have supported over 20 years as a psychotherapist and self-compassion teacher.

At the age of 46, I am happily partnered with three step-children. Looking back on my history of romantic relationships is easy now, as I no longer feel shame or resentment.

I can clearly see each phase as an important stepping stone in learning to love myself more and in committing to experiencing a higher love time and again. My faith and inner hard work continue to be rewarded.

Whatever question you have, the answer is always to let love in. I will show you what that means and how to do it in practical terms. This book is intended for you to take it in slowly, chapter by chapter, following along important stages in a relationship. You will notice that I repeat key ideas and exercises so that your heart learns as you read. I trust that you can discern what applies to you and what supports you and what does not.

I am honoured to be your guide on this most rewarding journey, which starts with getting out of your mind and into your heart.



Get Out Of Your Mind And Into Your Heart

Where Relationship Advice Falls Short

Standard tips for improving your relationship, which you have likely come across before, include:

- ~ Communicate openly about needs, emotions, and boundaries.
- ~ Actively listen to each other.
- ~ Show empathy and compassion.
- ~ Show physical affection and non-sexual touch.
- ~ Spend quality time together doing fun, playful, and adventurous things.

Such behavioural recommendations are essentially saying, “Just do what you are not doing.” If you can implement them easily, then nothing was blocking you; all you needed was a reminder of how to nurture your relationship.

does not relate back to any experience in your lifetime, not even in your early years, then it is likely inherited from your parents, grandparents, or the wider community or nation you were a part of when growing up. Shame is sneaky to detect and takes a lot of courage to turn towards and transform with love. The overwhelming urge to sweep all shameful experiences and memories under the rug and to keep them there is human. Whatever has been festering under these rugs in our ancestors' minds and hearts gets passed on to the next generation. When it comes to intimate love relationships, we can discover taboos around sexual orientation, sexuality, marriage, and having children, often tied to a specific culture, tradition, or religion. Whenever we discover ancestral shame in us, we have a great opportunity to finally liberate ourselves and hopefully the next generation from this unnecessary burden.

You Are More Than Your Relationship History

Do any of these statements sound familiar to you?

Claire:

I have been stuck in a loveless marriage for 15 years. I blame myself for getting married in the first place. I felt such huge pressure back then, as I was the last of my girlfriends to get married. I honestly believed that I had to do it or risk losing my friends and feeling like a failure. Now I can't even think about divorce. I feel everyone's judgement on me, so I'd rather stay.

Mike:

I feel like a failure for my marriage ending, even though I know it was inevitable and probably for the best. And don't get me started on the guilt I feel toward my children; what an awful role model I must be. I'm even saving money now so they can pay for therapy later to fix the relationship issues I've surely caused.

Jenny:

No relationship I've had has lasted longer than two years. I'm trying my best, but I just can't seem to get anyone to stay. Maybe I'm not capable of having a real relationship. Even my parents, who've been married for 40 years, are starting to wonder if something's wrong with me, and I'm beginning to think they might be right.

Lisa:

I've put all my effort into online dating, it feels like I've been on a hundred dates. I'm jaded and exhausted. Trying to open up to strangers and bring my A-game every time, only to be ghosted again? I feel like I'm constantly being evaluated and compared, instead of just being loved for who I am. I can't take this anymore. It's disheartening. I think I'll stop looking and just stay single.

In my mind, Claire, Mike, Jenny, and Lisa represent many people under 60 who have lived through major societal changes that have made relationships far more volatile. Yet we continue to judge ourselves by the standards of older generations. We fail to recognise the wider context we're living in and instead turn all the blame inward. "There must be something wrong with me" seems to be the only plausible conclusion.

For many of us in the modern day, it's harder to find and keep love. This can wear us down and make us want to give up.

It is not our personal fault.

Divorces, separations, single households, single parenting, cohabiting without getting married, recoupling, and combined patchwork families have increasingly become the norm for Generation X and beyond compared to their parents' or grandparents'. Ongoing urbanization and a need for greater mobility for work have led to the erosion of local social networks and structures. The sense of separateness that we, as individuals, experience is continuing to grow, acknowledged publicly as an epidemic of loneliness.

Relationships are no longer "for life" and instead constitute chapters in our lives. This, in turn, puts more pressure on our relational skills in order to end, to find, to re-enter, to

build, to repair, to maintain relationships, and to be at ease with being alone.

It is not our fault. If all under 60s measure themselves against the Golden-Jubilee-till-death-do-us-part marriage of their grandparents, we are all doomed to fail miserably.

Even if romantic love is central to our identity and fulfilment in life, we must define ourselves through being more than our relationship history. If we reduce our identity and sense of self to any one activity, pursuit, or life goal, it is a recipe for unhappiness.

Our great-grandparents and grandparents often had to get married to be socially accepted; they had no or little choice. We, by contrast, are spoilt for choice in how we want to live our lives. This freedom requires us to consciously choose love and to work at it and to accept that each person is free to choose too. This freedom explains in part why relationships and partners change. We are invited to grow into our authentic selves and develop a deeper trust in ourselves and in life because we can no longer rely on something like the contract of a marriage. Yet this very freedom has also given rise to a new kind of pressure – the digital marketplace now promises fail-safe strategies for finding love, often through rigid rulebooks that tell us how to act, rather than encouraging us to simply be who we are.

What does research tell us about what people actually find attractive in others? Studies repeatedly confirm what common sense would suggest: being emotionally stable, responsive, kind, funny, and open to new experiences is considered attractive by most people.⁹ Practising self-love helps us cultivate these qualities from the inside out. Research also shows that what draws partners to each other is similarity in values, preferences, character, and shared goals – and that’s something you can’t manufacture. Either you align in those areas or you don’t. So, if you’re single and looking, focus on increasing your self-love and self-compassion to become an even more attractive person from the inside out – and trust that there are people out there to whom you’ll feel physically drawn who also share your values and goals.

I invite you to honour your unique personal journey and the love chapters you’ve had on the way. I suspect you are the first in your lineage to have this kind of journey, one that comes with more personal responsibility, options, and choices.

- ~ How many significant love chapters have you had in your life?
- ~ What chapter are you in right now, or transitioning out of or into?
- ~ See if you can distil the lessons you learnt from each of these chapters and see the continuity of these lessons across your life span. If you like, get out a

notebook and draw a horizontal line to mark your life until now and map those key chapters, including periods of being single, mourning the loss of a relationship, and opening to the possibility of love again.

- ~ Who else are you besides being a lover? A wife or husband, a boyfriend or girlfriend?
- ~ Map other significant chapters in your life, perhaps in a different colour, parallel to the relationship and love chapters.
- ~ See yourself move and grow in other roles across your life. Honour these different and possibly interweaving threads that make up your identity. Honour your committing and re-committing to love time and again, even if your faith left you at times.

What we have learnt

- Behaviourally-focused relationship advice fails to address the underlying issues that feed discontentment in relationships.
- Challenging emotions like shame, blame and resentment make us feel even more disconnected from each other. They need to be tended to by each individual for any meaningful and lasting transformation to occur.

- To regain emotional intimacy with each other, we need to develop emotional intimacy with ourselves first.
- This starts with recognizing what our shame points are and how we hide them from ourselves and from our partner. Shame signals to us that we are worried about being rejected for being seen as unworthy, inadequate, or bad.
- Instead of seeing yourself through judgemental eyes, begin to see yourself through kind eyes that acknowledge your humanity.
- As you feel calmer and kinder, you step out of this subjugation by the dominant other in your mind and make up your own mind about yourself. This inner emancipation allows you to step out of any power dynamics that may have been operating inside of you due to early, collective, or even ancestral influences.
- As you step more into your wise and kind self-leadership, you realize that you are so much more than the parts that you might feel ashamed of and so much more than your relationship history.
- Let love into the places in you that hold shame.



Lean Into Your Longing

If You Choose Love, Your Assignment Is to Master Love

What Is Love? by Haddaway was at the top of the charts when I was a teenager and deeply in love with my first boyfriend – heart wide open and going all in, with no holding back.

About two years later, I was lying in bed feeling physically sick with my hair falling out because I had been dumped. My mother was sitting at my bedside, furious at my now ex-boyfriend for causing me such heartache and the much more obvious hair loss!

Eventually, I got angry at him, too. I remember needing to close my heart to protect myself from being hurt like that again. This loss felt too shocking and disruptive.

The song *The First Cut Is the Deepest* by Cat Stevens describes the intensity of that first wound on our young and naïve hearts. It's understandable that some of us would want to

Picture your love as a gentle, strong and steady fire in your heart and vow to protect it and use it wisely.

What we have learnt

- If you tend to overgive, you will probably get resentful towards your partner eventually.
- To step out of it, you must wake up to the loss of life energy.
- If you allow yourself to let love in without guilt, you discover how you need to be loved.
- By tending to the unmet needs that drive your overgiving, you can relax and set boundaries without fear. It frees you up to find out who you are responsible for and who you want to share your precious heart energy with.
- In doing so, you start to put yourself first and invite in mutually nurturing relationships.



Getting Up Real Close

Closeness Creates Friction

With increasing closeness comes the potential for friction. Conflict in a relationship is inevitable. Whatever the cause – residual tension from work, personality differences, or other stressful life events – conflicts are nothing to be afraid of when we know how to fight right, as psychologists Julie and John Gottman say.⁹³ The biggest myth is that not having any conflict is a sign of a successful relationship. Even a couple with an avoidant conflict style will still voice their feelings and differences to each other. They might agree to disagree and leave it at that instead of raising their voices. Avoiding any form of disagreement typically causes more disconnection in the longer term. When you sweep things under the rug for a long time, you might eventually snap at your partner, causing a destructive argument, or you might stop caring about your partner. A study of newlyweds found that couples were more likely to be happy in the long term when the woman was assertive enough to bring up issues early on in the marriage, compared to newlyweds who had