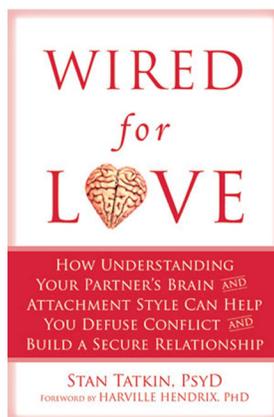


# Wired for Love

## Extended Preview

Introduction &  
Chapter One: The Couple Bubble

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# Introduction: Wired for Love

Look around you. We live in a highly complex world. The array of devices, machinery, technology, and processes that make it tick is mindboggling. Just within the lifetime of many still alive today, humanity has come to regard as commonplace travel to the far side of the planet, the instant replay of events around the globe, and the ability to speak to and see just about anyone anywhere at any time, among many other things. We enjoy the advantages these scientific advances have brought us, and we curse them when they break down. And of course they do break down at times. For this reason, we turn to guidebooks—everything from a car owner’s manual that shows how much to inflate your tires, to the instructions that show how much batter to load in your waffle maker. We may hate the thought of consulting a manual (or calling for technical support, except perhaps in a pinch), but can you really operate all these things successfully simply through intuition?

Relationships are complex, too. Yet we often attempt them with a minimum of guidance and support. I’m not suggesting you should follow a standard set of 1-2-3 steps in relating to your partner. Relationships will never come with manuals that automate the process. We aren’t robots. What works for one couple won’t necessarily work for another. But neither does it work to fly blind, as many couples do, and expect relationships to fall into place.

Hence the need for well-informed guidance that supports your relationship.

And what might be considered well-informed in this context? In fact, a large and fascinating body of scientific knowledge and theory with the potential to influence how partners relate to one another has been accruing in recent decades. This includes revolutionary work in the fields of neuroscience and neurobiology, psychophysiology, and psychology. I believe couples can

benefit from this wealth of research. You may find this idea intimidating, but don't worry: I'm not suggesting you need to quit your day job and go back to school. I think you'll find the basic theories quite straightforward when you hear them explained in lay language.

In short, it's my conviction that having a better understanding about how our brains function—in other words, how we're wired—puts us in a better position to make well-informed choices in our relationships. Scientific evidence suggests that, from a biological standpoint, we humans have been wired largely for purposes that are more warlike than loving in nature. That's the bad news. But the good news is that recent research suggests a variety of strategies and techniques are available to reverse this predisposition. We can, in effect, take steps to assure we are primarily wired for love. These strategies can help us create stable, loving relationships in which we are poised to effectively defuse conflict when it arises.

So why not make use of them? In the first three chapters of this book, I provide you with general principles, drawn from cutting-edge research, to help you understand what makes a relationship successful and work toward that with your partner. The chapters that follow expand on these principles in practical ways. For example, if you have a clear sense of your partner's relationship style based on the latest research, it will be easier for the two of you to work together and fix any problems that may arise. In essence, this book can serve as an owner's manual for understanding yourself, your partner, and your relationship.

Now, you may raise your eyebrows at the notion of an owner's manual. Your partner isn't property, after all. I couldn't agree more. However, I like this metaphor because it conveys the level of mutual responsibility and detailed knowledge of the relationship a couple needs to be successful. In fact, I would propose to you that all couples do in fact follow one or another set of rules and principles in their relationship. They may not be conscious of it, but they already have an owner's manual of sorts. Unfortunately, many couples have the wrong manual. And in the case of distressed couples, they *always* have it wrong.

In my work with couples, I've noticed that partners tend to form their own theories about the cause of their problems. They do this out of distress and despair, and out of their need to know why: "Why am I in pain?" "Why am I feeling threatened or unsafe?" "Why is this relationship not working out

as expected?” Partners work hard to come up with answers to such questions, and sometimes their answers provide an immediate sense of relief (“Now I know why this is happening”).

However, in the long run, these theories generally don’t work. They aren’t sufficiently accurate to help the relationship. They don’t stop the pain. They don’t alter our fundamental wiring. Ultimately, relying on such theories is one way of flying blind. In fact, at times, inaccurate theories further undermine a couple’s sense of security and happiness. More often than not, instead of ending the war between partners, grasping onto reasons and theories only creates more of a fortress. It only supplies more ammunition for the couple to throw at one another.

I’ve noticed partners’ theories almost always are pro-self, not pro-relationship. For instance, one partner says, “We argue because he doesn’t like the same things I like.” Another says, “She’s so inconsiderate; no wonder I feel hurt.” Or “This relationship isn’t working because he’s not the person I married.” In each case, the focus is on the individual coming up with the theory. One of the most important discoveries a couple can make is that it is possible to shift into a pro-relationship stance. Theories from this stance sound more like the following: “We have problems sticking to our agreements,” or “We do things that hurt one another.” To make this shift, partners must be willing to throw out their old theories and consider new ones. They must be willing to rewire.

Personally, I learned some of this the hard way.

For many years, my specialty as a psychotherapist was working with individuals suffering from personality disorders. I became interested in the early prevention of such disorders. As my practice began to focus more on adult couples, I found myself wanting to identify, earlier in the therapy, ways to prevent their problems, too.

Around this time, one of the great shocks of my life came to pass. My first wife and I divorced. During the period that followed, my need to understand why my marriage had failed led to a creative obsession, spurring me to more closely investigate the science behind relationships. I sensed that my fellow therapists and I must be missing something, something more we could do to help couples in distress. And could do earlier in their relationship. I might not have been able to salvage my marriage, but I could try harder to prevent failure for others...and for myself in the future.

Ultimately, I came up with several key areas of research I believed could point toward the difference between success and failure in relationships. I'm not speaking of research I conducted; these were the fields of study I mentioned earlier that have witnessed enormous leaps forward in the past few decades. The more I studied the latest findings and observed how they played out daily in my office, the more lights flashed in my mind. I realized this valuable knowledge wasn't being properly synthesized for and focused on adult couples. Therapists working with couples had not begun to connect the disparate dots of various sciences. They were a bit like technical support people working with out-of-date manuals. Their advice only went so far. I became convinced the most important thing I could do with my time and energy was to find the connections between these areas of research and put them to practical clinical use.

One of these areas is the field of neuroscience, the study of the human brain. This, I discovered, provides a physiological basis for understanding our strengths and weaknesses, including those that drive our relationships. For example, I am utterly stupid when it comes to math, an ability managed by many parts of the brain, such as the intraparietal sulcus. Fortunately, my work doesn't depend on math, nor do my relationships with my wife and daughter. But my ability to read faces, emotional tone, and social cues (managed by the brain's right hemisphere) is a different matter. If I were weak in that area, I would be out of a job and maybe even a marriage (again). As we will see in chapter 2, some parts of our brain predispose us to first and foremost seek security. This can wreak havoc on a relationship if we don't learn to use the more evolved parts of the brain to override this wiring and exert control over the primitive parts.

A second area of research is attachment theory, which explains our biological need to attach to or bond with others, starting with our earliest relationships. Our early experiences form an instructional blueprint that is stored in body memory and becomes part of our basic relational wiring—our sense of safety and security. In a nutshell, some individuals are fundamentally secure in their relationships, while others are insecure. Insecurity can lead us to remain distant from a partner or to harbor ambivalence about relating. However insecurity manifests, as we will see in chapter 3, it has insidious effects on a relationship if we don't try to rewire the dysfunctional tendencies acquired early in life.

The third area of research I found fascinating and helpful was the biology of human arousal. When you hear of arousal, you may immediately think of sexual arousal. But I am referring here to a more general sense of arousal: our moment-to-moment ability to manage our energy, alertness, and readiness to engage. In the context of couples, research in this area suggests how we as partners can manage one another's highs and lows. We don't have to remain at the mercy of each other's runaway moods and feelings. Rather, as competent managers of our partners, we can become expert at moving, shifting, motivating, influencing, soothing, and inspiring one another.

Each of these areas of research informs this book. In the past ten years, I have synthesized these ideas and integrated them into my therapy practice. I call this work a *psychobiological* approach. Along the way, I realized this approach isn't of value just to couples seeking therapy; everyone who is in or is planning to be in, or even hoping to be in, a relationship can benefit.

And I have been a prime beneficiary. All the hard work I did paved the way for my current marriage, in which I discovered, and have for the first time been able to enjoy, a secure, functioning family. This relationship became the gold standard by which I could test and measure the principles described in this book.

As I mentioned, many couples seek reasons for their problems. Yet the theories and reasons they come up with generally are false. The approach I am offering can, I believe, make the difference. In a nutshell, I'll help you harness the power of your brain and your partner's brain for love instead of war, in a scientifically supported way. In this book, I present ten key principles that show you how to avoid common pitfalls that deter or undermine so many relationships. These principles are:

- ♥ Creating a couple bubble allows partners to keep each other safe and secure.
- ♥ Partners can make love and avoid war when the security-seeking parts of the brain are put at ease.
- ♥ Partners relate to one another primarily as anchors (securely attached), islands (insecurely avoidant), or waves (insecurely ambivalent).

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- ♥ Partners who are experts on one another know how to please and soothe each other.
- ♥ Partners with busy lives should create and use bedtime and morning rituals, as well as reunion rituals, to stay connected.
- ♥ Partners should serve as the primary go-to people for one another.
- ♥ Partners should prevent each other from being a third wheel when relating to outsiders.
- ♥ Partners who want to stay together must learn to fight well.
- ♥ Partners can rekindle their love at any time through eye contact.
- ♥ Partners can minimize each other's stress and optimize each other's health.

These principles are based on the latest science, but let me stress again: you don't have to grasp the technicalities of the science to understand these principles. I have done that for you. In fact, I've done my best to make them fun and enjoyable. I promise not to put you to sleep with scientific jargon. As I said, life is complex enough already. If there is a hallmark for this age, perhaps it will be our ability to take the complex findings of scientific research and apply them smoothly and effectively in our everyday lives, to better understand ourselves and to love more fully.

Each chapter includes exercises to help you apply the principle discussed therein. You can do most of the exercises on your own, or you and your partner can do them together. Actually, there is a certain irony here. An important premise of this book is that happy couples share a high degree of closeness and togetherness. Yet most people tend to read books—even books about relationships—on their own. So I encourage you to buck this trend. Share what is in this book with your partner. You will get even more out of it.

## CHAPTER 1

# The Couple Bubble: How You Can Keep Each Other Safe and Secure

**W**ho among us doesn't want to feel loved? Finally to be able to be ourselves just as we are, to feel cherished, cared for, and protected—this has been the pursuit of humans since the beginning of recorded time. We are social animals. We depend on other people. We need other people.

Some of us have parents or siblings or cousins or other family members to give us respite. Some of us turn to friends or colleagues. Some of us turn to drugs and alcohol or other substances or activities that make us feel alive, wanted, satisfied, relieved, or calmed. Some of us turn to personal growth seminars, or even seek psychological treatment. Some of us turn to our work or focus on hobbies. One way or another—through wholesome, healthy means or less-than-savory means—we seek our safe zone.

This longing for a safe zone is one reason we pair up. However, partners—whether in a romantic relationship or committed friendship—often fail to use each other as advocates and allies against all hostile forces. They don't see the opportunities to make a home for one another; to create a safe place in which to relax and feel accepted, wanted, protected, and cared for. I see this frequently in couples who seek therapy. Often it is the very reason they seek professional help.

## THE RELATIONSHIP COMES FIRST

Jenny and Bradley were on the brink of break-up. Neither wanted to end the relationship, but bad things kept happening, and each blamed the other. They had started dating as freshmen, and they were now about to graduate from college. Both wanted to get married and have a family.

Jenny's family resided on the East Coast near the college. She enjoyed close ties with them, particularly her mother, with whom she spoke daily. Bradley hailed from the West Coast, where his family lived. Because of the distance, he made only one trip annually, each time inviting Jenny. She often felt neglected during these trips, despite the fact that she adored Bradley's father. Bradley liked to attend parties and engage with his friends in a way that left Jenny to fend alone against advances from other men and what she considered dull conversations with their dates. Bradley never seemed to notice Jenny's discontent during these events, but certainly felt the sting of her angry withdrawal afterward.

Their conversations would go something like this:

"You always do this!" she says. "You bring me to these things and then leave me standing there as if I don't exist. I don't know why you bother to invite me!"

Bradley's response is defensive. "I'm sick and tired of having this conversation. You're being ridiculous. I didn't do anything wrong!"

To make her case, Jenny brings up Bradley's friend, Tommy, who she says has been inappropriate with her. "He gets drunk and comes on to me, and you don't even notice. I don't feel protected by you at all."

Bradley's response, again, is dismissive. "He's just playing around."

These conversations usually ended with Jenny going off to sulk and Bradley feeling punished. Nor did things go better when the situation was reversed. Jenny often visited her family, and expected Bradley to join her. He complained she disappeared with her mother and sisters, forcing him to "hang" with her father, with whom he had little in common. When the couple were alone, their conversations about this sounded similar in many ways to the previous one:

"I can't stand coming here," Bradley complains.

"Why?" Jenny sounds surprised.

“You keep sticking me with your father. I feel like a worm because he thinks I’m not good enough for you, and at dinner you act like you agree with him!” Bradley’s voice rises in anger.

“Shhh,” Jenny replies. “Don’t yell.”

Bradley stops himself, pursing his lips and dropping his head. “I don’t get it,” he says in a lowered voice.

“Get what?”

“Why you invite me. I just feel bad here,” he says, without raising his head to look at her.

Jenny softens and moves toward him with a loving gesture. “My family loves you,” she says. “I hear that all the time from Mom and my sisters. Dad likes you, too, he’s just...like that.”

Bradley’s face snaps into view, reddened, with tears in his eyes. “That’s baloney! If your family ‘loves me,’” he says with finger quotations, “why don’t I hear it from them? If your dad is so loving, why don’t *you* sit with him, and let me hang with your mom?”

“Now you’re being ridiculous,” Jenny replies as she heads for the door. “Just forget it!”

“And you know what else?” Bradley continues in hopes of her hearing. “You’re just like your dad. You put me down right in front of everyone.”

Jenny leaves the room, slamming the door behind her.

When we enter into a relationship, we want to matter to our partner, to be visible and important. As in the case of Jenny and Bradley, we may not know how to achieve this, but we want it so much that it shapes much of what we do and say to one another. We want to know our efforts are noticed and appreciated. We want to know our relationship is regarded as important by our partner and will not be relegated to second or third place because of a competing person, task, or thing.

It hasn’t always been this way. If we compare today’s love relationships with the relationships of old, we might be gravely disappointed. In centuries past, rarely did couples get together simply because they loved one another. Marriages were arranged for political, religious, and economic purposes. Husbands and wives stayed together to provide security for their family. At the same time, duty and obligation—for both partners—served a male-advantaged social contract. Safety and security came at an emotional price. Yet no one complained, because nobody expected anything different.

In our modern Western culture, marriage for love tends to be the norm. We expect to be swept off our feet or to feel whole and completed or to believe we've met our soul mate. And we expect this profound connection to sustain our relationship. Nothing seems more important. However, these feelings and ideals often exact a price if we as partners are unable to provide one another with a satisfying level of security. The truth is, even if a couple does experience a profound connection, this represents only the beginning of their relationship. What ultimately counts in the life of the couple is what happens after their courtship, love affair, or infatuation phase. What counts is their ability to be there for one another, no matter what.

Consider another couple, Greta and Bram, both thirty. When they married a year ago, they rented an apartment in the city, where Greta was securely employed as a school teacher. Bram's family lived in a nearby rural town, and he commuted to work in the family agricultural business.

Each year, Greta was required to attend a gala fundraiser for her school. It was not the type of event that ordinarily suited Bram, who preferred dungarees to dress shirts, ties, and jackets. He also tended to feel shy and even a bit tongue tied, especially in gatherings with folks he didn't know. Greta, on the other hand, moved well in large circles of strangers. Despite their differences, however, Bram prepared himself for an evening with Greta on his arm.

Their conversation as they dressed went something like this:

"It's not you, you know," Bram says with a concerned look on his face, while on his third attempt to make a proper tie. "I just don't like being with all these people I don't know."

"I know," Greta replies, staring straight ahead as she applies her eyeliner. "I appreciate your willingness to come anyway. The moment you want to leave, we'll go. Okay?"

"Okay," says Bram, as he finally gets the tie right.

After she parks their car, Greta turns to Bram and switches on the overhead light. "How do I look?" she asks, puckering her lips.

"Beautiful as usual," Bram replies with a lingering gaze into her eyes.

She scans his eyes in return, and a moment passes as they enjoy a mutual gale of excitement. "Let's make a plan," she says softly. "You'll keep me on your arm when we go in, and I'll probably see some people I know. Don't leave me, okay? I want to introduce you."

“Okay,” Bram responds with an anxious smile. “What if I have to go to the bathroom?” he quips.

“You may go without me,” Greta quickly responds in kind, “but after that, I expect you to get your handsome butt back to your beautiful wife.”

They share a smile and kiss. “This job is important,” Greta says as they get out of the car, “but not as important as you are to me.”

As you can see, Jenny and Bradley and Greta and Bram have very different ways of handling situations as a couple. It’s probably obvious which relationship works better, feels better, and deserves to be held up as exemplary. But let’s look at both couples in greater detail and see if we can understand why they function as they do, and how they came to be as they are.

## AUTONOMY VERSUS MUTUALITY

Implicit in Jenny’s and Bradley’s narrative is a belief that each should stand independent of the other and should not expect to be looked after. We could say their model is one of autonomy. That is, they see themselves as individuals first, and as a couple second. When push comes to shove, they prioritize their personal needs over their needs as a couple. If you questioned them about this, they might reply that they value their independence, or that they are “their own person” and don’t let the other one boss them around.

However, it’s not quite that simple. Yes, each expects the other to behave in an autonomous fashion, but in reality, this is the case only when it suits his or her own purpose. When either finds that the proverbial shoe is now on the other foot, he or she feels dismissed, dropped, and unimportant. This couple’s sense of independence works especially poorly in situations in which they depend on one another to feel important and protected. They are unaware of this problem when they think they’re maintaining their so-called autonomy, but painfully aware when they feel they are the victim of neglect.

I think it’s fair to say the autonomy implied by Jenny’s and Bradley’s behavior is not really autonomy at all. Rather, they are living according to an “If it’s good for me, you should be all right with it” type of agreement. As a result, they continually play out situations wherein they each fail to remember the other person. Their underlying message is “You do your thing and I’ll do

my thing.” Sounds mutual, doesn’t it? Yet it is anything but mutual because it requires that the other partner be okay *or else*, and it condones the partners readily throwing one another under the bus. This brand of autonomy doesn’t reflect true independence, but rather a fear of dependency. Instead of representing strength, it can represent weakness.

In contrast, Bram and Greta each appear to know something about how the other thinks and feels, and each cares about that. We can say their model is one of mutuality. It is based on sharing and mutual respect. Neither expects the other to be different from who he or she is, and both use this shared knowledge as a way to protect one another in private as well as public settings. For example, Greta anticipates Bram’s discomfort and addresses it in a way that protects his dignity. She acts as if she needs him, though she knows he is the needier one in this situation. Neither Bram nor Greta is poised to throw the other under the bus. It is as if they maintain a protective bubble around themselves.

The *couple bubble* is a term I like to use to describe the mutually constructed membrane, cocoon, or womb that holds a couple together and protects each partner from outside elements. A couple bubble is an intimate environment that the partners create and sustain together and that implicitly guarantees such things as:

- ♥ “I will never leave you.”
- ♥ “I will never frighten you purposely.”
- ♥ “When you are in distress, I will relieve you, even if I’m the one who is causing the distress.”
- ♥ “Our relationship is more important than my need to be right, your performance, your appearance, what other people think or want, or any other competing value.”
- ♥ “You will be the first to hear about anything and not the second, third, or fourth person I tell.”

I say “implicitly,” but couples can and often do make explicit agreements around any or all of the elements that constitute the couple bubble.

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## EXERCISE: HOW CLOSE ARE YOU?

The feeling of closeness is subjective; that is, how close you feel to your partner and how safe you feel both take place within you. You may feel very close to your partner, but he or she isn't likely to know how you feel unless you say so. And the same goes for how your partner feels about you.

Now, discover some of the ways you offer closeness to your partner.

1. In the previous section, I listed some guarantees couples give one another—for example, saying, “I will never leave you.” What such guarantees have you given to your partner?
  2. What guarantees would you like to give?
  3. What guarantees would you like to receive?
  4. You don't need to receive a guarantee from your partner before you offer one. Look for moments when you can express your feelings of closeness and promise safety.
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## HOW COUPLES COME TO VALUE AUTONOMY OVER MUTUALITY

Alongside our modern Western emphasis on autonomy, we see increasing evidence of loneliness inside and outside of marriages; a rising incidence of violence and alienation; and divorce rates that, while they may be decreasing, remain well above ideal. Like Jenny and Bradley, couples in distress too often turn to solutions that can be summed up by “You do your thing and I'll do my thing” or “You take care of yourself and I'll take care of myself.” We hear pop psychology pronouncements such as “I'm not ready to be in a relationship” and “You have to love yourself before anyone can love you.”

Is any of this true? Is it really possible to love yourself before someone ever loves you?

Think about it. How could this be true? If it were true, babies would come into this world already self-loving or self-hating. And we know they don't. In fact, human beings don't start by thinking anything about themselves, good or bad. We learn to love ourselves precisely *because* we have experienced being loved by someone. We learn to take care of ourselves because somebody has taken care of us. Our self-worth and self-esteem also develop because of other people.

If you don't agree with what I'm suggesting, check it out for yourself. Think of a time when you were young and your parents didn't believe in you in some way. Were you still able to believe in yourself? Maybe you were. But if so, how did you do it? From where or from whom did you get your belief? Or think of an ex-romantic partner who didn't believe in you or trust you. Were you able to believe in or trust yourself nonetheless? From where did you get that belief and trust? In each of these cases, chances are very good that if you did believe in yourself, that belief originated with somebody important to you. This is how we come to be as we are: all our prior interactions and relationships have shaped the person we are today.

Many couples who come together these days share various ideals about love relationships, yet their prior experiences of love don't match up with their ideals. That's a problem, because nitty-gritty personal history always trumps ideals. This is just the way we're wired. If, for example, we didn't witness devotion in our parents' marriage, we won't have positive role models for loving to draw upon in our own adult relationships. If we never saw mutual care, sensitivity, and repair in our parents' marriage, those values likely will elude us.

Our two couples clearly illustrate this principle. Neither Bradley nor Jenny is doing anything radically different from what he or she experienced as a child. For instance, Jenny's mother often abandoned Jenny's father in social situations, just as Jenny now abandons Bradley. Jenny never experienced her parents as loving or close. To the contrary, they often used the children in their arguments. Jenny's mother complained to her father about his going off to be with his pals at the bar and leaving her to fend for herself. Bradley's parents often were too busy doing their own thing to spend much time with their kids. His mother was known to drive his father out of the house with her criticism, something Bradley also resents whenever he becomes Jenny's target of harsh judgment.

Neither Bram nor Greta consider their parents perfect, but both felt as children that their parents loved and respected one another. Both have childhood memories of their parents apologizing to one another and fixing without much delay any hurt feelings that arose between them. Greta's mother was quite skilled at handling Greta's father, who sometimes got rather grumpy and difficult. Because she had learned from her mother how to respond to him—in the best way, mind you—Greta was never afraid to approach her father. Despite his irascible nature, she knew her father was devoted to her mother's happiness and well-being.

Bram had a similar experience, though in reverse. His mother was high strung, which sometimes caused problems outside the home. His father, on the other hand, was rather low-key and had no difficulty responding to his mother in the best way. Bram's father loved his mother's liveliness and spunkiness; his mother loved the father's calmness and unflappability. When I speak about responding to a partner “in the best way,” I mean in a way that works well for and feels good to both individuals.

## WHY PAIR UP?

You might be wondering whether the kind of commitment I'm suggesting is one you want to make. In fact, this raises the question, why pair up at all?

There is nothing inherently better about coupling than about being single. This book is not about which is better, a single lifestyle or a coupled lifestyle. I know plenty of perfectly happy singles who neither feel the need to avoid coupling nor weep about being uncoupled. These individuals are fine with their lives either way: if a relationship happens to develop, that would be great, and if not, that would be dandy as well. Moreover, research on the relative merits of relationships has failed to yield firm conclusions one way or the other. Some data—including statistics popularized by authors Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher in their book *The Case for Marriage* (2000)—suggest that married people are happier and healthier than are nonmarried people. However, others—including Alois Stutzer and Bruno Frey (2003) in Germany and Richard Lucas and Andrew Clark (2006) in the US—have reported that people who get married tend to be happier in the first place than people who

don't marry. Janice Kiecolt-Glaser and her colleagues (2005) found unhappily married folks to be more prone to illness than are happily single folks.

One obvious reason people pair up is for procreation. This instinct is embedded in our DNA to ensure the survival of our species. However, pairing up for this purpose doesn't necessarily translate into the need for a long-term, committed relationship. There's certainly no proof, at least as far as our species is concerned, that monogamy is nature's mandate. I find it interesting that some mammals, such as wolves and prairie voles, do pair up for life. In fact, neurobiologists studying voles report that prairie voles (who bond with a partner for life) and meadow voles (who do not bond for life) have identifiable genetic differences. It is possible scientists one day will identify human genes that explain why we do or don't decide to pair up.

In the meantime, to understand the purpose of pairing up with another human being, we can think about what happens to a baby. Ideally, all babies have a parent or other caregiver who puts their relationship before all other matters. The baby feels loved and secure, and the adult also enjoys the feeling of being loved and of being with and caring for the baby. The two are in it together. We call this a *primary attachment relationship*, because the baby and caregiver are bonded, or attached, to one another. You could say this is a "baby bubble"—much like the couple bubble, only occurring during infancy.

This baby bubble sets the stage for enjoyable relationships with others later in life. If at an early age we experienced security and a love we could trust, we carry this with us. As adults, we are able to form new primary attachment relationships. We feel capable of being strong and loving and secure. On the other hand, if at an early age our relationships with caregivers were less than secure, and the caregiver did not seem to value being with us over all other matters, we are likely to be fearful or worried about entering into or being in relationships. (We will talk in more depth about attachment in the next chapter.)

## WE COME FIRST

Obviously we can't change what happened when we were infants. However, if those early influences are affecting how we feel about relationships now, if they hinder our ability to form the kinds of bonds we want in our lives now,

we can work toward resolving them. For some couples, therapy is helpful to achieve this kind of rewiring. Other couples are able to discuss and work on their issues together, with minimal external input.

Let's look at what it takes to create a couple bubble in which you as partners keep one another safe and secure.

## MAKING THE PACT

The couple bubble is an agreement to put the relationship before anything and everything else. It means putting your partner's well-being, self-esteem, and distress relief first. And it means your partner does the same for you. You both agree to do it for each other. Therefore, you say to each other, "*We* come first." In this way, you cement your relationship. It is like making a pact or taking a vow, or like reinforcing a vow you already took with one another.

Sometimes people say, "I don't want to commit until I can be sure this thing that worries me about you won't be a problem." I have heard variations of this from both men and women in my years as a couples therapist. Popular deal breakers include religion, money, kids, time, and sexuality. There's no better way to scare off a potential partner than to suggest he or she is inadequate with respect to any of these, or to insist that partner prove himself or herself before security is assured. This kind of approach is doomed to failure.

Partners entering into a couple bubble agreement have to buy into it and own it to fully appreciate it. They have to be in all the way. When partners don't honor the couple bubble and complain they aren't being well cared for, often the reason is that they get exactly what they paid for. Pay for part of something, and you get part of something. Now, you might argue, "Stan, how can you say I must buy him or her in order to know whether he or she is good enough?" My answer is that if he or she is so far from good enough, then he or she shouldn't even be a contender. However, this isn't usually the case. Mostly, I see partners who have carefully and thoughtfully chosen one another, but fear the problems that arise after getting to know one another better will become deal breakers. Typically, these problems involve the positive features each chose in the other person, which they now realize also contain annoying elements. For example, you may adore his sense of humor,

but now dislike that he cracks jokes when you want him to be serious. Or you may admire her musical talent, but be annoyed when she wants to practice the piano instead of walk with you.

Sometimes partners in this situation want to bargain: “Can I just take you with the parts I like, and we’ll agree to hold the rest?”

Sorry. This isn’t a burger joint, where you get to hold the pickles and lettuce. You want it and you buy it as is, or you move on. I realize this might sound harsh. But I have said as much to couples. And generally they respond by taking stock of the situation. They recognize the toll their ambivalence is taking on the relationship. Then they are able to move clearly in one direction or the other.

## ARE WE READY?

I’m not suggesting you try to create a couple bubble prematurely. Sometimes couples find a bubble has been created at the very start of their relationship, with no effort on their parts. A good example of this occurs in *West Side Story* when the star-crossed lovers, Tony and Maria, arrive at the dance. Their newly discovered love is represented as a spotlight on them, while everyone else fades into the background. Of course, we’ll never know what would have happened if tragedy hadn’t cut short their love affair. Chances are they would have had to work to maintain their couple bubble.

It is important to remember that the casual dating and courtship phases are different from a relationship that’s moving toward or has become imbued with a sense of permanence. In the beginning of a relationship, we are besotted and captivated by the blissful hopefulness and mutual admiration we feel. Our brains are awash in *dopamine* and *noradrenaline*, two chemicals that greatly enhance excitement, focus, and attention. When we leave each other’s orbit, our brains wrestle with diminished *serotonin*, a chemical that often calms anxiety and obsession. We find ourselves thinking, “When will I see him again?” or “Should I call her tomorrow?” and other thoughts that keep us connected to this one among billions of fishies in the social sea.

Of course, this shared lovefest obscures the fact that we don’t really yet know each other well. In the moment, who cares, right? We are a bit like a rocket that is launched with sufficient acceleration to make it to the edge of

outer space, but would have to jettison its booster and engage a more enduring accelerant to go farther. In a new relationship, we're just excited to be aiming for the stars, and assume we'll figure everything out when we get there. But if we want the relationship to stand a chance of reaching its destination, this is precisely when we need to figure it out.

## HOLDING TO IT

The couple bubble is a pact between partners in which the *quid pro quo* is to burden one another with the tasks of devotion and caring for the other's safety, security, and well-being. This mutual burden determines the degree of shared gratitude and valuation you both can experience. If you think about it, when the going gets tough, the couple bubble is all you can really count on to hold your relationship together.

This doesn't mean you won't make mistakes along the way or accidentally hurt each other. It doesn't mean you can never make a decision that puts yourself before the relationship, nor that you absolutely never should. These things will happen, no matter what. However, it does mean you will hold each other to your fundamental agreement: "We come first."

Then, when either one of you makes a mistake, the other will give a gentle reminder: "Hey, I thought this is what we agreed to do for each other." The transgressing partner can say, "Oh yeah, my bad," and quickly fix the situation.

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## EXERCISE: THE BUBBLE TROUBLE METER

After you and your partner have entered into a couple bubble agreement, the next step is to monitor it. Although an agreement has been made, maintaining the bubble is a process. It's ongoing. You could say the bubble assumes a life of its own. And as such, you should periodically take its pulse.

In this exercise, you will develop a bubble trouble meter. By that I mean you will identify the signs that tell you your couple bubble is not providing the safety and security it was designed to provide.

1. Over the next week, observe the level of closeness you feel between yourself and your partner. Of course, closeness naturally will undergo a

certain degree of ebb and flow. What you want to do is be on the lookout for times when the ebb is serious enough to warrant sounding an alarm.

2. Pay special attention to those moments of trouble. What happens? What are you feeling, and what is your partner feeling? What kinds of things do you say to each other? For example, you might notice that you go off and leave your partner alone at such times. This then is a sign for your meter.
  3. Make a list of the specific signs you identify. Share these with your partner. Discuss how you can recreate your bubble, and strengthen it to prevent further stressful incidents. Remember: the bubble protects you both! It's yours, so keep it clean and polished every day.
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In later chapters, we will look in more detail at how to maintain your couple bubble.

## FIRST GUIDING PRINCIPLE

The first principle of this book is that *creating a couple bubble allows partners to keep each other safe and secure*. Together, you and your partner can create and maintain your bubble. You agree do things for one another that no other person would be willing to do, at least not without getting paid. In fact—and this is important, so listen up—anyone who offers with no strings attached to do what partners must do for each other most definitely *wants* something from you (e.g., sex, money, commitment). If you're in a committed relationship and someone else seems willing to fill in for your partner, watch out! As the saying goes, there's no such thing as a free lunch.

So, the couple bubble is something you work on together. But also keep in mind that you are responsible for your end of the deal. You keep it up because you believe in the principle, not merely because your partner is or isn't willing to do the same. It works only when both partners operate on a principled level and not on the level of "You go first."

Here are some supporting principles to guide you:

1. Devote yourself to your partner's sense of safety and security and not simply to your idea about what that should be. What may make you feel safe and secure may not be what your partner requires from you. Your job is to know what matters to your partner and how to make him or her feel safe and secure.
2. Don't pop the bubble. Because the couple bubble has as its foundation a fundamental, implicit, and absolute sense of safety and security, neither of you should have to worry that the bubble is going to pop. Acting in an ambivalent manner, or taking a stance that is partly in and partly out of the relationship, undermines the security you have created. If this is allowed to persist, one or both of you will be forced into an auditioning position and you will lose all the benefits of the bubble you have so carefully constructed.
3. Make sure the bubble is mutually maintained and honored. Note, this is not codependency. *Codependent* partners live through or for each other, while ignoring their own needs and wants, thus leading to resentment and other emotional distress. In contrast, when partners form a couple bubble, both agree on the principles and comport themselves accordingly. For example, I can say my partner should be available to me whenever I need, but I must make myself available too, without expecting him or her to go first. Then, if my partner doesn't comply with our agreed-upon principles, we have some talking to do. If either of us continues to renege on our principles, one of us surely will be fired.
4. Plan to use your couple bubble. It provides a safe place in which you and your partner can always ask each other for help, rely on one another, and share your vulnerabilities. It is your primary means of support and protection. For example, whenever you and your partner go into social situations, especially ones involving difficult people, you can make a plan ahead of time that insures you will both be protected by your bubble. As Greta and Bram did, work together so you can figuratively hold hands throughout the event. By holding hands I mean remaining in contact with one another, tracking one another, and

being available at a moment's notice. Rely on eye contact, physical contact, whispering, hand signals, smoke signals—whatever! Conspire together about how you will address difficult people. Perhaps you will literally hold hands or sit next to one another in their presence. We'll further discuss how to protect your couple bubble in chapter 7. In the meantime, remember that splitting up to deal with difficult people or situations leaves you vulnerable. Together, you can be truly formidable.