

Beyond Fairy Tales

A Couple's Guide to Finding Clarity, Doing the Work,
and Building a Lasting Relationship



DR. MARK GREGORY KARRIS

Praise for Beyond Fairy Tales

"Karris offers an engaging, resource-rich book to bring life to stale or shaky relationships. In a practical, at-times humorous, and always-down-to earth style, he creates a roadmap for a rewarding journey towards love. You are certain to enrich yourself as a person and as a partner by reading this book!"

— **Lorrie Brubacher**, M.Ed., Director of the Carolina Center for Emotionally Focused Therapy, author of *Stepping into Emotionally Focused Therapy: Key Ingredients of Change*, 2nd ed. (2025)

"In this comprehensive, well-written, and inspiring guide to revitalizing connection between partners in an intimate relationship, Mark covers everything from romance to the operating manual for different attachment styles to personal well-being. I highly recommend this book for couples who are suffering and therapists who are helping them."

— **Polly Young-Eisendrath**, Ph.D., Author of *Love Between Equals* and *Dialogue Therapy for Couples and Real Dialogue for Opposing Sides*

"Wondering what good couples therapy looks like? This book beautifully illuminates the process and possibilities. Filled with sage, practical advice, and understanding, this book is a gift to couples everywhere."

— **Michelle Becker**, author of *Compassion for Couples: Building the Skills of Loving Connection*

“I want to offer my enthusiastic support for *Beyond Fairytales*. I find the straightforward language, fresh ideas and practical solutions to be ones from which **any** couple can benefit.”

— **David Mars**, Ph.D., Director of the Center for Transformative Therapy, Developer of Transformative Couples Therapy®

“*Beyond Fairy Tales* provides readers with a quenching gulp from the deep wisdom well of attachment theory. Mark expertly guides partners through difficult conversations and delivers the practical and innovative tools necessary to take their relationship to the next level.”

— **George Fallor**, LMFT, EFT trainer, president of the New York Center for Emotionally Focused Therapy (NYCEFT), and coauthor of *Emotionally Focused Family Therapy*

“It is extremely refreshing to have a guidebook for couples that addresses the real stressors and impossible expectations that modern-day couples face.” *And* “The step-by-step strategies and real-life examples in *“Beyond Fairy Tales”* provide a roadmap for couples to get to the root of issues and put a stop to the negative patterns.”

— **Jackie Wielick**, LMFT, Owner of Therapy by Jackie, PLLC, and **Jennine Estes Powell**, LMFT, Founder of Estes Therapy, Coauthors of *“Help for High Conflict Couples: Using Emotionally Focused Therapy and the Science of Attachment to Build Lasting Connection”*

“Karris’ humility and pragmatism, honed by years of experience as a couples’ therapist guides the reader in taking their relationship from distress to recovery.

— **Clare Rosoman**, author of *Repairing Attachment Injuries in Close Relationships: An Emotionally Focused Guide to Moving Beyond Betrayal* (2025)

“Beyond Fairy tales gives you the compassionate guidance and hope necessary to create lasting change.”

— **Shane Birkel**, Host of the *Couples Therapist Couch* podcast

“There are many books about relationships with practical pointers and some based on solid science, but very few that truly have both. This book does both and is a huge gift to our culture, which is often quite disoriented about what actually makes relationships work. *Beyond Fairy Tales*” is a difference-maker, and I am excited to see its impact on readers!”

— **Ryan Rana**, President and Founder of the Arkansas EFT Center, Co-host of the *Leading Edge in Emotionally Focused Therapy* podcast and *successinvulnerability.com*

“Beyond Fairy Tales is a playful and invigorating exploration for couples, offering a powerful resource to strengthen relationships. Karris provides fresh insights, empathetic compassion for the challenges couples face, and practical strategies for growing stronger together.”

— **Jim Thomas**, EFT Trainer Emeritus, Clinical Fellow, LMFT

Chapter 8

Unleashing Your Inner Cycle Slayer

“Little by little, they helped each other to stop their previously predictable interactions, to step off their well-worn path, to take some risks to engage in new interactions and thus create a new and positive relationship.”

— Veronica Kallos-Lilly and Jennifer Fitzgerald, *The Two of Us*

We can make a proactive pact to maintain and protect our sense of connection, love each other with an awareness of each other’s needs, set an intention to eliminate the Four Horsemen, and strive to communicate effectively. But let’s be real—sometimes, the negative cycle of communication will get the best of us. When the reactivity starts to rear its ugly head, we can join forces and tackle this cycle head-on, stopping it before it gains momentum and grows larger and, like a tornado, sweeps us up into its devastating effects.

Once you can identify your negative cycle—whether it’s Blame and Bash; Fracture and Fortify; Wend, Whirl, and Withdraw; or Pull Back and Protest—it loses its element of surprise. The hope is that you and your partner can be “cycle slayers” and recognize the negative cycle as

the enemy with a life of its own.¹ Whether it continues to grow or dissipates depends on your ability to prevent it from gaining momentum. By standing together and addressing it early, you can stop the tornado before it builds into a destructive force. So get ready to unleash your inner cycle slayer because we're about to put it to work.

Keeping SANE: Stopping the Cycle Before it Gets Bigger

In Part Two, you took the crucial step of identifying the anatomy of your negative cycle. An important follow-up step is to give it a name. Naming your cycle externalizes it, transforming it into a separate entity you and your partner can team up against and conquer. After you've understood and named this pesky intruder and fully accepted that it's the real enemy of your relationship, you'll be better equipped to stop it in its tracks by launching the **SANE** approach:

- **See what is happening:** Be mindful that you are caught in the negative cycle.
- **Accept your part in the cycle:** Pause and acknowledge your role in the situation.
- **Name the cycle:** Identify and call out the negative pattern by name.
- **Engage toward healthy relating:** Take steps to engage in healthier, loving behaviors.

This approach helps us to notice the behaviors and recognize that the negative cycle is starting, accept our part in the cycle, call out the negative cycle with our partner, and make an effort to engage in healthier ways of relating. Let's look at an example.

Josh and Priscilla sat at their cozy dinner table, the aroma of a home-made meal filling the room. Despite the warm atmosphere, an underlying tension lingered, waiting to surface. Having anxious tendencies, Josh found it difficult to relax because he and Priscilla had to discuss their finances. These types of conversations triggered Priscilla's avoidant

tendencies, which often overwhelmed her. So, she preferred to steer clear of conflict but left those conversations with a lot of shame.

As they started eating, Josh hesitated but then brought up the topic weighing on his mind. “Priscilla, I’ve been thinking about our finances,” he began, trying to keep an even tone. “I feel like we need to figure out a way for you to contribute more.”

Priscilla’s shoulders tensed. She put down her fork and sighed. “Josh, you know I’m doing the best I can. I don’t make as much as you. I don’t have answers for you. What do you want from me?”

Josh’s rising anxiety and racing thoughts produced a harsh tone as he said, “But it’s not just about how much you make. It’s about finding ways to balance things better. I feel like I’m carrying most of the burden.”

Priscilla’s instinct was to retreat and avoid the confrontation. “I don’t know what more I can do,” she replied, her voice edging toward defensiveness. “I’m already stretched thin by paying off student loans, leaving me barely able to contribute what I do. Why do you always have to ruin a perfectly good meal?”

Now angered, Josh said, “Why do you always want to avoid real conversations? You never want to talk about budgeting or maybe getting another job. We need to figure it out . . . now!”

They were slipping into their familiar negative cycle. Josh’s anxiety and frustration led him to push harder, while Priscilla’s avoidant tendencies and feelings of being overwhelmed triggered her to want to withdraw. But as they were getting sucked into the negative cycle, Josh remembered the **SANE** approach from their therapy sessions.

- **See what is happening:** Josh took a deep breath and recognized the cycle they were in. He saw his own anxiety driving the conversation and Priscilla’s defensiveness building. He knew nothing good was going to result if they kept going.
- **Accept your part in the cycle:** He paused, acknowledging his role. “I’m sorry, Priscilla. I know I’m putting a lot of

pressure on you right now.” Priscilla looked up, surprised by his shift in tone. She felt a slight relief but remained cautious.

- **Name the cycle:** Josh continued, “I think we’re falling into the Penny Dreadful” (their agreed-upon name for the negative cycle that got the best of them, leaving them both feeling frustrated, hurt, and disconnected).
- **Engage toward healthy relating:** Josh, with a softer tone, said, “I get anxious about money, and I push you, wanting some kind of solution, which makes you feel attacked and want to pull away.”

Priscilla nodded slowly. “Yeah, and then I feel like I need to defend myself because I’m already trying so hard.”

Josh reached out and took Priscilla’s hand. “Let’s find a way to work on this together. I don’t want to make you feel bad. Maybe we can sit down another time and look at our budget together, see where we can adjust things without it feeling like a blame game.”

Priscilla squeezed his hand, appreciating his effort to change the dynamic. “Okay. I can do that. I want to help and don’t want us to fight about this.”

They finished their dinner, appreciative that they didn’t allow Penny Dreadful to have the last word. The next evening, they sat down and approached the budget conversation as a team rather than adversaries. By using the **SANE** method—seeing what was happening, accepting their parts in the cycle, naming the negative pattern, and engaging in healthier behaviors—Josh and Priscilla managed to stop the negative cycle in its tracks and strengthen their connection. You and your partner can use the **SANE** approach when the negative cycle starts to rear its ugly head.

Slaying the Cycle Through a Healthy Time-Out

There are times in our relationships when it feels like we’re in full-blown code red. The negative cycle spins out of control, and just one more sharp criticism or defensive comment could tip us into chaos.

You'll know it when voices start climbing, your heart starts racing, frustration and anger are off the charts, and both of you are too overwhelmed to really hear each other. The words flying back and forth are like verbal daggers, and our muscles tense up as if we're bracing for a raging storm. What's needed now is a healthy time-out.

What I'm talking about is not as simple as just leaving the room and taking a long deep breath. That might work occasionally over a minor situational trigger that doesn't foment the negative cycle. The kind of time-out I'm talking about involves a six-step approach to slay the negative cycle once it's reared its ugly head.

Here are the steps to a healthy time-out:

Six Steps to a Healthy Time-Out

Step 1. Recognize the emotional and physiological alarm bells.

Identify when your emotions are taking over and signaling the need for a pause. Pay attention to these cues:

- **Increased heart rate:** Notice if your heart is pounding or racing.
- **Physical tension:** Be aware of clenched fists, a tight jaw, or stiff shoulders.
- **Rapid breathing:** Recognize shallow or fast breathing.
- **Negative thoughts:** Pay attention to spiraling or racing negative thoughts.
- **Withdrawal urge:** Feel the impulse to walk away or shut down emotionally.
- **Overwhelming sadness:** Notice if you experience a surge of tears or an urge to cry.
- **Intense anger:** Notice when anger is becoming overwhelming and difficult to control.

Step 2. Communicate the Need with Love

Go through the **SANE** steps. Then, gently express the need for a time-out, framing it as a step toward reconnection. Keep in mind that individuals with avoidant tendencies are more inclined to want to take time-outs. In contrast, those with anxious tendencies can find time-outs anxiety-provoking and may experience feelings of abandonment. Therefore, the person initiating the time-out must consider their partner's emotional needs and attachment style. Here are some ways you might communicate the need for a time-out:

- “I sense we’re both getting overwhelmed and caught in a negative cycle (or use the name you’ve given it). Please know that I love you. Can we take a pause to calm down and reconnect? I promise to come back and discuss these concerns with you.”
- “I care about you and want to be fully present, but right now, I’m feeling overwhelmed. Let’s take a break and revisit this conversation later.”
- “I care about resolving this with you, but I need a moment to gather my thoughts. Let’s take a time-out and try again shortly.”

Step 3. Set a Safe Time Frame

Agree on a specific, short duration for the time-out to ensure it’s a step toward healing. This is a crucial step, as it prevents stonewalling and withdrawal without a clear plan to reengage. By providing a specific time to resume the conversation, you can ease your partner’s nervous system, assuring them their concerns will be addressed:

- “Let’s take twenty minutes to cool down and then check back in.”
- “I need some time to calm myself. Can we revisit this in an hour?”

If you return and still find it difficult to discuss the issue calmly, consider these options:

- **Take another break:** Step away again to allow more time to cool down. “I know I said I would be back in twenty minutes, but I still don’t feel very calm. Give me another twenty, and I promise we can talk again.”
- **Schedule a follow-up:** Agree on a specific time, such as the next day, to revisit the discussion. “I know I said I’d be back in twenty minutes, but I still don’t feel very calm. Can we discuss this topic tomorrow at 8:00 am? Is that okay?”

Step 4. Self-Soothe and Reflect

During a time-out, it’s easy for the mind to ruminate and for negative narratives to keep looping. Use this time to calm your emotional storm and distressing thoughts. Engage in nurturing activities to restore your balance. When you feel ready, practice reflective empathy and consider the deeper needs and fears underlying the conflict between you both using any of these approaches:

- **Identifying your needs:** Consider what you need to feel safe and connected again.
- **Calming activities:** Engage in practices like deep breathing, meditation, or gentle yoga.
- **Physical exercise:** Take a walk or do some light exercise, ensuring you inform your partner when you’ll be back.
- **Expressive writing:** Write down your thoughts and feelings to release pent-up emotions, then discard the letter.
- **Emotional reflection:** Reflect on what emotions are being triggered and explore why.

Step 5. Return with Vulnerability

When you come back together, approach the conversation with open-

ness and a willingness to share your deeper feelings and more tempered thoughts. Remember that prioritizing the relationship's well-being is wiser than focusing on the need to be right. Take turns to cross the bridge into each other's experiences using this approach:

- Listen empathetically to your partner's feelings and needs.
- Share what you discovered about your emotions, thoughts, and needs during the break.
- Discuss what you can agree on.
- Articulate, in a nondefensive manner, where you differ.

Step 6. Aim for a Felt Sense of Reconnection

Ensure that the reconnection focuses on understanding and supporting each other by doing the following:

- Emphasize the goal of emotional connection and safety.
- Validate each other's emotions and express empathy.
- Take responsibility for your actions and apologize, if it feels right to do so.
- Work together to address the underlying emotional needs or problems.

We can stop the negative cycle before it escalates. Yes, change is hard—really, really hard. Yet, with enough awareness and practice, we can increase what couples expert Mona Fishbane calls “free won’t,” a subset of free will.² Fishbane states, “While much of our behavior is automatic and unconscious, conscious processes allow us to override our impulses and make behavioral choices that are in keeping with our ideals. And with enough practice, our conscious goals may themselves become automatic.”³ With enough practice, we can thwart the negative cycle and engage the **SANE** method and a healthy time-out with greater ease. While one person can learn and apply these principles and practices to make a difference in their relationship, the chances of success skyrocket when both partners jump on board.

Slaying the Cycle Through Healing Conversations

When the events in a relationship burrow into us like a stubborn splinter festering under the skin, and the slightest touch sets off pain and sends us spinning into our negative cycles, we're usually facing attachment injuries. These are the unwelcome baggage we can't seem to offload, the grievances that pop up in unrelated arguments, turning every minor conflict into a battleground of past hurts. Couples experts Jennine Estes Powell and Jacqueline Wielick describe it perfectly: "Think of lime juice: If it is squirted on a scar, it is painless. However, if you still have an open wound, the lime juice stings badly. Like the lime juice, an unresolved attachment injury from the past causes serious pain in the present, no matter how long ago the injury occurred."⁴ If you find yourself revisiting the same old wounds and feeling that same raw pain, like lime juice on an open cut, you're likely grappling with attachment injuries.

Attachment injuries are a form of relational trauma. They are like a blindsided sucker punch to your mind and body, leaving you reeling and wondering, "What the heck just happened?!" It's the kind of jarring experience that overloads your nervous system, making it impossible to fully process in one day. This kind of injury messes with your beliefs about yourself, your partner, and the world around you, leaving you struggling to make sense of it all.

I meet with many folks who believe their partners should just get over it. "It happened so long ago; why are you still holding on to this? I already apologized." This kind of comment is completely invalidating and doesn't take into account that their partner *doesn't want* to react this way either. Do you think a partner chooses to react so strongly to what happened that it affects their mood, increases their stress, and makes them feel miserable? No way. The attachment injury lives in the body and has a life of its own, often beyond conscious control, as the following example illustrates.

Ananya and Arjun had been eagerly awaiting the arrival of their first child. The joy of welcoming their baby girl was immense, but the weeks following the birth were challenging. Ananya, who had anxious tendencies, struggled with postpartum depression, feeling overwhelmed and

alone. Despite needing support, she felt that Arjun, who had avoidant tendencies, was emotionally distant.

Arjun, on the other hand, was also dealing with a lot. His mother, who had dementia, required constant care, and he felt torn between his responsibilities at home and his duty to his mother. In traditional Indian culture, caring for elderly parents is often seen as a primary duty, which added to Arjun's sense of obligation. He spent long hours with his mom, frequently leaving Ananya alone to cope with the newborn. Arjun believed he was doing his best by fulfilling his familial duties, but Ananya saw it differently. She felt abandoned and thought Arjun cared more about his mom than her and their baby.

Ananya's isolation grew as Arjun failed to check in on her as much as she needed. She longed for him to ask how she was feeling, to offer comfort and support, but he seemed preoccupied with his mother's care. The emotional distance between them widened, and Ananya felt profoundly betrayed. In Indian culture, the extended family plays a significant role, and Ananya felt additional pressure to navigate her relationship with Arjun's mother, which further strained her.

As a result of this relational trauma, Ananya began to have strong reactions. Minor disagreements triggered intense emotions, leading to arguments that spiraled out of control. Her anxious tendencies heightened her sensitivity to any signs of neglect. She'd often confront Arjun about perceived slights, even in unrelated situations, which pushed Arjun further away, propelled by his avoidant tendencies to withdraw from conflict.

Ananya needed Arjun to be her partner and support system. Instead, she felt like a single parent. She wanted him to be present during important rituals and family gatherings, which were crucial in their culture, but his avoidant tendencies led him to withdraw even more. Their cultural expectations and their personal attachment styles clashed, making it even harder for them to connect during this challenging time. The unresolved attachment injuries festered, affecting their interactions and deepening the emotional chasm between them. How would they bridge the deep divide between them?

To effectively address and heal attachment injuries, we need to

confront them directly. Ignoring these deep-seated wounds won't make them disappear; instead, it allows them to fester and negatively impact our relationships. Thankfully, we can use research-based steps to heal these injuries and restore the fractured bonds.⁵ Based on that research, I've created steps for conversations that help you both heal from relational injuries. Note that each step indicates which partner does the communicating in that step.

Eight Essential Steps to Healing Conversations

Step 1. Create a Safe Space (both partners)

A. Set the scene: Find a comfortable, private place where both of you feel safe to talk openly. This could be a quiet room at home, a peaceful spot in a park, or any location where you both feel relaxed and undisturbed. Turn off gadgets to minimize distractions.

B. Establish ground rules: Agree to listen to each other without interrupting or judging. This is about understanding, not blaming. Set specific guidelines such as taking turns to speak, using "I" statements to express feelings, and avoiding accusatory language.

C. Agree upon a structure: Recognize that both of you may have attachment injuries. Agree on who will share first and who will be the primary listener. Focus on addressing one injury at a time to avoid feeling overwhelmed.

D. Set an intention: Before you start, take a moment to breathe and set an intention to communicate effectively and engage in empathetic listening. This helps create a mindful and compassionate atmosphere for your discussion.

Step 2. Recognize and Describe the Injury (*hurt partner*)

What happened? Identify the specific incident or series of events that left you feeling hurt. It might involve betrayal, abandonment, or a moment where one of you felt wounded. When sharing with your partner, be precise about the details of the events as you understand them.

Step 3. Share Your Feelings (*hurt partner*)

While you may have already shared a general overview of the event, now open up about the specific feelings you experienced. Were you angry, sad, fearful, hurt, betrayed, frustrated, or lonely? Explain how the event impacted you emotionally and affected your trust and security in the relationship. Be honest and vulnerable, sharing your deepest feelings and fears.

Examples:

“I was outraged and felt seriously betrayed when I found out you lied to me. It shattered my sense of security in our relationship, and I’m scared it will happen again.”

- “Your absence during a time I needed you most left me feeling incredibly lonely and sad. It felt like you didn’t care about what I was going through, and that’s made it hard for me to rely on you.”
- “When your family disrespected me at the dinner table, and you didn’t say anything to defend me, I felt humiliated and unsupported. It felt like you didn’t value me or our relationship enough to stand up for me. That moment has left me feeling hurt and vulnerable, and it’s been hard for me to feel secure around your family since then.”
- “When I discovered the affair, I felt utterly devastated and betrayed. It was like my whole world fell apart.”

[**Note to the listening partner:** *Really* listen. Your job is to understand your partner’s pain and show that you care about their feelings. Avoid interrupting or defending yourself. If you find yourself thinking, “Well, that’s not how it happened,” pause and return to your intention of listening to your partner. Feel into their pain. Imagine what it must have been like for them.]

Step 4. Express Your Deeper Needs (*hurt partner*)

Talk about your deeper needs and fears behind the hurt. It's not just about the event itself and the feelings it elicited, but what it meant for your sense of trust, security, and connection. Discuss the underlying issues and emotional needs that were triggered.

Examples:

- “When you didn’t show up, I felt like I couldn’t rely on you. I felt scared and alone. I need to know that I can rely on you to be there when you say you will.”
- “When you didn’t defend me in front of your family, I felt unimportant and unsupported. I need to know that you have my back and that I matter to you.”
- “When you forgot our anniversary, I felt neglected and unappreciated. I need to know that our relationship is important to you and that you cherish our special moments.”
- “When you had the affair, it shattered my trust. I felt worthless. I need to understand why it happened and to feel reassured that it won’t happen again so I can feel secure in our relationship.”

Step 5. Show Empathy, Check In, and Take Responsibility (*what the partner who did the hurting must do*)

A. Empathize: As the partner whose actions hurt the other, try to genuinely understand and feel the other’s pain. Show that you truly grasp the depth of their hurt and that it matters to you.

Examples:

- “I can see how much it hurt you when I didn’t show up. It pains me to know you felt so scared and alone. I’m really sorry for contributing to your pain.”

- “When you say that you felt unsupported when I didn’t defend you, I realize how that left you feeling unimportant. I understand now how crucial it is for you to feel I have your back.”
- “I can only imagine how devastated and betrayed you felt when you found out about the affair. I see how profoundly it has affected you, causing pain and shaking the foundation of our relationship. I am deeply sorry that you’re enduring this kind of hurt, and I regret the suffering it has brought into your life.”
- “I understand that you felt dismissed and unloved when I didn’t acknowledge your feelings during our argument. I take full responsibility for my invalidating actions. I realize now how crucial it is for you to feel heard and valued.”

B. Check in: Now that you have empathized with the hurt partner, check in to ensure that you truly understand the heart of your partner’s pain. This step is crucial for validating the hurt partner’s feelings and ensuring effective communication.

Examples:

- “I want to make sure I’m really understanding you. Do you feel I’m getting to the heart of your pain?”
- “Can you tell me if there’s anything I’ve missed or if there’s more you need me to understand about how you felt?”
- “I hope I’m hearing you correctly. Is there anything else you want to share to better help me understand your feelings?”
- “Please let me know if there’s more about how you’re feeling that I need to understand. I want to make sure I’m fully here for you.”

If the injured partner states that you understand their pain, proceed to step C below. If not, ask for clarification. After they share more, reflect back what they say and repeat Step A (Empathize).

C. Own up: Acknowledge your actions and their impact. Apologize sincerely, showing that you understand how your actions contributed to your partner's hurt. Avoid justifying your actions and focus on validating your partner's feelings.

Examples:

- “I am so sorry for not being there when you needed me. I understand now how my absence left you feeling abandoned and hurt.”
- “I apologize for not defending you in front of my family. I see how that led to you feeling unsupported and unimportant, and it was wrong of me not to stand up for you.”
- “I am deeply sorry for having the affair. I understand that my betrayal shattered your trust and left you feeling worthless. It pains me to see you hurt, and I take full responsibility for the choices I made that have brought us to this point.”
- “I apologize for ignoring your feelings during our argument. I understand that it left you feeling dismissed and unloved, and I regret that you felt that way.”

Step 6. Reassure and Reach Out (for the partner whose actions led to the hurt)

A. Reassure: The hurt partner needs reassurance that their feelings matter and that you are committed to making things right. Provide verbal affirmations and consistent, caring actions to rebuild trust.

Examples:

- “Your feelings are really important to me, and I’m committed to making things right between us.”
- “I understand how much this hurt you, and I want you to know that I’m here for you and will do everything I can to rebuild your trust.”

- “I value our relationship deeply and will work hard to ensure you feel safe and supported.”
- “Your pain matters to me, and I am dedicated to changing my behavior and showing you that you can rely on me.”

B. Reach out: Ask what your partner needs to be comforted in the moment.

Examples:

- “What can I do right now to help you feel more comfortable and supported?”
- “Is there something specific you need from me to feel reassured and cared for?”
- “How can I show you in this moment that I am here for you and genuinely care about your feelings?”
- “Please tell me what you need from me right now to feel more at ease and comforted.”

Step 7. Respond with Appreciation and Honesty (*what the hurt partner must do*)

A. Privilege the positive: Let your partner know that you are thankful for their compassionate presence and for listening to your concerns. Highlighting the positive aspects of the interaction helps reinforce the behavior and encourages continued empathy and understanding. Acknowledge the effort your partner is making to mend the relationship, which can help build a foundation of trust and healing.

Examples:

- “Thank you for really listening to me and being here for me. It means a lot to feel heard and understood.”
- “I appreciate you taking the time to understand my feelings

and showing that you care. It helps me feel more connected to you.”

- “Your willingness to hear me out and empathize with my pain is very important to me. Thank you for making the effort to support me.”
- “I’m grateful for your patience and effort in being present with me during this conversation. It shows me that you’re committed to our relationship.”

B. Be honest in love: If you still feel raw and cannot fully trust, extend appreciation while expressing your mixed feelings. Acknowledge the part of you that can take in what they said and the hurt part that finds it difficult. If you feel hopeful, share that as well.

Examples:

- “I appreciate you really trying to hear me. There’s a part of me that’s still struggling to trust completely. But there’s also a part of me that feels reassured.”
- “Thank you for your understanding and empathy. I want to believe in your commitment to change, but part of me is still hurt and finding it hard to trust. At the same time, I can feel some hope.”
- “I’m grateful for your apology and efforts to make things right. While I still need time to heal and fully trust again, I do feel a sense of hope.”
- “Your words mean a lot to me, but a part of me is still guarded and finding it hard to believe completely. However, I also feel some comfort and appreciate your patience as I work through these feelings.”

Step 8. Reinforce Your Progress (*both partners*)

- **Celebrate wins:** Acknowledge the progress you’ve made. Remem-

ber, healing takes time, so celebrate small victories along the way. Recognize and appreciate each other's efforts and improvements.

- **Keep connecting:** Continue having these open, honest conversations regularly to reinforce the healing that has taken place.

Ananya and Arjun's Healing Conversation

Let's pick back up with Ananya and Arjun and explore how they engaged in a healing conversation in this way.

One evening, Ananya and Arjun found a quiet, comfortable place to talk. They chose their living room, turning off their phones and other gadgets to minimize distractions. Ananya lit some candles and placed a couple of cushions on the floor to make the environment more inviting.

Ananya began, "I know this is new for us. Thank you for taking the time to have this conversation. I know talking about conflict can be challenging for us. Let's agree to really listen to each other without interrupting or judging. We should take turns to speak and use 'I' statements to express our feelings."

Arjun nodded. "I agree. This is hard for me, but you are worth it. Let's set an intention to work through this issue. I am ready to be present."

Ananya started by pinpointing specific incidents that triggered profound hurt. She described feeling abandoned when Arjun spent long hours caring for his mother and not checking in on her during her postpartum depression.

Arjun listened intently, realizing the gravity of her feelings. He noticed some anxiety in his chest, yet took deep breaths and continued to listen.

Ananya's voice wavered as she recalled those lonely days and nights. "I was really angry and felt betrayed when you spent so much time with your mother but didn't check in on me. It shattered my sense of security in our relationship, and I'm scared that if I am in times of need, you will not be there for me again. When I needed you most, your absence brought on a lot of sadness and loneliness. It felt like you didn't care

about what I was going through, and that's made it hard for me to rely on you."

Arjun focused on understanding Ananya's pain, imagining what it must have been like for her. He avoided interrupting or defending himself, showing genuine empathy.

They then dug deeper to talk about the underlying issues and emotional needs. Ananya expressed her fear of being unsupported and her need for reliable companionship. "When you didn't show up, I felt like I couldn't rely on you. I felt scared and alone. When you didn't defend me in front of your family, I felt unimportant and unsupported. I need to know that you have my back and that I matter to you."

Arjun nodded, understanding how these events had deeply shaken Ananya's sense of security and connection. He absorbed her words, letting them settle. "I see now how much it hurt you when I didn't show up the way you needed. You must have felt so scared and alone. When you tell me you felt unsupported when I didn't defend you, I've come to a deeper realization of how that left you feeling unimportant." With tears in his eyes, he said, "I understand now how crucial it is for you to feel that I have your back. I will do better."

He then checked in to ensure he truly understood the heart of Ananya's pain. "I want to make sure I'm really understanding you. Do you feel that I'm getting to the heart of your pain? Do you feel like I am present with you?"

Ananya nodded, feeling that Arjun was genuinely trying to understand her. "Yes, you are."

Arjun took responsibility for his actions. "I'm truly sorry for not being there when you needed me. I now understand how my absence brought up feelings of abandonment and sadness. I can see why you feel betrayed and unloved because of what I did."

Arjun provided verbal affirmations and consistent, caring actions to rebuild trust. He looked intently into Ananya's eyes and said, "Your feelings are really important to me, and I am committed to making things right between us. I understand how much this hurt you, and I want you to know I'm here for you and will do everything I can to rebuild your trust."

He then asked Ananya what she needed to be comforted in the moment. “What can I do right now to help you feel more comfortable and supported?”

Ananya replied, “Just being here and listening to me is already helping.”

Ananya acknowledged Arjun’s efforts and presence. “Thank you for really listening to me and being here for me. It means a lot to feel heard and understood.”

She expressed her mixed feelings honestly. “I appreciate everything you’ve said, and a part of me still struggles to trust completely. But there’s also a big part of me that feels reassured.”

With tears in their eyes, they embraced each other. “We’ve come a long way,” Arjun said, “and I’m committed to continuing these conversations and doing so as long as it takes.”

By embracing these steps, like Ananya and Arjun, you and your partner can embark on the delicate journey of mending your past wounds. Together, you can begin to craft a relationship that feels like a sanctuary filled with the warmth of love and the security you both long for. Make a heartfelt promise to keep the lines of communication open, understanding that healing is not a final destination but a continuous voyage. Each step can bring you closer, not just to each other, but to a deeper understanding of yourselves, serving as a beautiful testament to the power of vulnerability and the resilience of the human heart.

You Are a Cycle Slayer

After reading all the examples of how to master this cycle-slaying stuff, you might be thinking, ‘This is fairy-tale nonsense. Do people really talk to each other like this?’ I get it. It can sound like a foreign language, and who has time to learn a new one? I admit, these communication and cycle-slaying skills can be challenging to put into practice. But you can do it. You might need to tweak the language to make it sound more like you, and that’s okay. As long as you capture the essence and stay true to the heart of the steps—the cost of admission—the reward of admission—a secure relationship—will be well worth it.

Perpetual conflict drains the soul, while unresolved dragons of fire-breathing trauma can scorch the heart. Wide chasms between us and our partners echo with stark loneliness. Yet we are love-sick cycle-slayers, warriors of the heart who battle for peace and harmony, never surrendering, fighting for love as long as even the faintest embers still burn.

To those readers who feel a heaviness in their chest, knowing your partner isn't fully on board with finding clarity, doing the work, and building a lasting relationship—I see you. Truly, I do. It's exhausting to feel like you're shouldering all the effort, while your partner seems to be in la-la land, stuck in anger, being defensive, or simply indifferent. Yet, pushing past our pain, striving to be the healthiest version of ourselves, and loving to the best of our ability—while still being assertive and setting boundaries when needed—is noble. We can only control ourselves. And sometimes, even if our partners aren't on the healthy love train, our actions can still shift the relational dynamic. That's where hope lies. Each moment offers the potential for something new to happen.

Chapter Eight Wrap-Up

Recognizing and naming our corrosive negative cycles, then using strategies like the **SANE** approach and healthy time-outs, can stop them in their tracks before they escalate. Additionally, engaging in the Eight Essential Steps to Healing Conversations can be crucial when there are ruptures or attachment injuries that need repair. It's about owning your part in the dance, working together to engage in healthier behaviors, and turning conflicts into chances for growth and connection.

Incorporating these practices into your daily life takes commitment and effort from both partners. It's about doing the work. It's about those small, consistent efforts to understand, support, and love each other in ways that hit home. By doing so, you can create a positive cycle of connectivity that not only counters the negative cycle but also strengthens the foundation of your relationship, helping it thrive even when the going gets tough.

Key Takeaways

1. Name the Cycle: Externalizing the negative cycle by naming it helps you and your partner team up against it, making it feel like a separate entity to conquer together.

2. Use the SANE Approach: Using the SANE method (See what is happening, Accept your part in the cycle, Name the cycle, Engage toward healthy relating) empowers you and your partner to identify and interrupt negative cycles, fostering healthier interactions.

3. Take Healthy Time-Outs: Recognizing emotional and physiological signs of distress allows you and your partner to take constructive time-outs, using breaks to calm down and prepare for a more productive conversation later.

4. Self-Soothe and Reflect: During time-outs, engaging in self-soothing activities and reflecting on your emotions and needs helps prepare you to return to the conversation with greater clarity and empathy.

5. Heal Attachment Injuries: Addressing deep-seated attachment injuries through open, empathetic conversations is an important step in healing relational trauma, rebuilding trust, and strengthening emotional bonds in your relationship.

6. Embrace Cycle-Slaying Skills: While mastering effective communication and cycle-slaying techniques may feel challenging and unnatural initially, adapting these skills to fit your unique style is essential for creating and maintaining a secure and harmonious relationship. Overcoming perpetual conflict and trauma is worth the effort, as it leads to deeper connection and emotional resilience.